



# Peasant Movements in India Then and Now

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India is an agricultural country. Agricultural production has been the means of the live of the Indian people since ages. In ancient and medieval India, states formed and abolished because of agricultural production. The rich agricultural production situation attracted many invaders to attack on India. Agricultural revenue was the main source of income for the states in India. In ancient and medieval India, states became powerful due to the revenue collection. But, during medieval period, tax revenue collection was not oppressive. Therefore, peasants' movement did not appear till medieval period. But, the arrival of European companies, brought new revenue collecting pattern. Their objective was to get more benefits because the foundation of those companies was done for doing business. The British East India Company of England conquered India by politically as well as economically. It imposed high taxes on the peasants and interfered in their social, political, economic and religious matters. Because of these reasons, the peasant movements emerged in India.

## INTRODUCTION

Peasant movements are the movements which are done by the peasants because of agrarian reasons. Ideology of class conflict also plays an important role in peasant movements. *Karl Marx* considers the peasantry to be passive, while *Lenin*, *Fanon* and *Mao* have placed

peasantry at the centre of the revolution. *Dipankar Gupta* argues about the two kinds of agrarian movements in independence.

First, those agrarian movements which are done by the poor agriculture labourers and marginal farmers, and these kinds of movements are known as peasants movement. Second, those agrarian movements which are done by the owners of the land and these are known as farmers movement. The first type of agrarian movements are led by political parties and farmers' associations such as Kisan Sabha, Communist Party of India (CPI), Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI- M), Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) (CPI-ML) etc. The second type of agrarian movements are led by farmers' groups such as, Bharatiya Kisan Union which is active in west UP, Punjab, Haryana; the Shetkari Shangathan in Maharashtra and Rajya Ryota Sangha in Karnataka. The basic difference between these two groups of parties is that the first group of party works for the poor peasants, and the second group of the party, works for the landholders.

## IDEOLOGY OF PEASANT MOVEMENTS IN INDIA

Peasant movement is a kind of social movement, therefore, by and large, peasant



movements have same reasons and ideologies which play their role in other social movements.

There is a phenomenal difference between peasant movements then and now. In colonial India, peasant movements were largely against the British Empire or the states under princely rule often involving often some combination of “zamindar, sahuakar, sarkar (landlord, usurer and state)”. The protests would be against the rise in revenue rates and other kinds of obligations that elites might demand, such as begar or forced labour without remuneration in cash or kind, oppressive cesses and repayment of loans with high-interest rates.

Peasant mobilisations were not uncommon in Mughal India but they had greatly escalated in British India, particularly against the sophisticated colonial apparatus, including revenue settlement and forest reports and their respective bureaucracies.

The colonial bureaucracy was primarily a revenue bureaucracy, hence the appellation “collector” who was then tagged with other roles. The institution of the Indian railways facilitated the deep penetration of the state and market, the extraction and movement of agrarian produce would become a mode of colonial control over the “wild”.

At present the unprecedented protests by the Indian peasantry against the three new laws that allegedly is favouring the interests of big business in agriculture win support and solidarity from across the country and take on a historically new dimension.

The winter of discontent descended on Delhi in late November. Braving water cannons in the dead of winter, and abuses, taunts, trolls, blatant misinformation and even the outright condescension of a patronising government, they

marched on until they were stopped at the gates of the national capital.

The protests by peasants across the country, which have escalated gradually since June, when the Central Government invoked a set of ordinances that were later legislated. These have snowballed into a massive tidal wave of anger. Along the way the scope of the movement widened, pulling in support from an ever-growing range of Indian citizens. Retired bureaucrats, youths, scientists, workers in both organised and unorganised sectors, and even sportspersons have expressed solidarity with the agitating farmers and provided material support to the agitation that has captured the imagination and the hearts and minds of Indians in a manner not seen in decades.

It is beyond doubt that the ongoing protests are the largest-ever mobilisation of the peasantry in independent India. Properly understood, one must count not just those peasants at Delhi’s borders but also those who have been on the streets in villages, towns and State capitals across the country—from solidarity protests in Kerala to the mobilisation of peasants in many other States. Indeed, comparisons have been made with the siege of Delhi 32 years ago by peasants led by Mahendra Singh Tikait’s Bharatiya Kisan Union. That comparison is not valid for several reasons.

The ongoing protests are very different from that of 1988; the only common factor between then and now is that this time the government desperately tried to rope in Mahendra Singh’s son, Rakesh Tikait, in a ham-handed attempt to split the ranks of the agitating peasants. It failed because even the younger Tikait did not wish to be seen as a backstabber.

The first striking difference between then and now is that the earlier movement, unlike the ongoing one, was mainly confined to farmers from



western Uttar Pradesh. Tikait's own base was in and around Muzaffarnagar district in the region. More specifically, the protests then were mainly by Jat farmers growing sugarcane, whose primary demand was higher prices for the cane, loan waivers and concessions on the newly levied electricity and water charges.

There is an attempt to portray the ongoing movement as exclusively the concern of rich farmers and traders and as being confined to farmers from Punjab. There is little doubt that it has much wider support and solidarity from across the country. Although all sections of the peasants and agricultural workers may not be present at the Delhi borders, the agitation has been joined by different sections of the peasantry, including workers. Of course, these sections have joined for different reasons—the workers primarily because the new laws threaten livelihoods and access to foodgrains at reasonable prices and the other sections because the new laws threaten the very basis for farming as it has existed for decades. This wider representation was absent in the protests three decades ago.

Second, the protests of the 1980s did not draw popular support on a scale that the ongoing protests have. Third, the protests of that period did not draw the kind of brutal might of the state apparatus as they have done now. It is certain that the use of force by the government in Haryana has prevented a much larger mobilisation of peasants from reaching Delhi; but even that is proving to be insufficient against the surge. Indeed, the larger mobilisation of peasants from across India—Haryana, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand and parts of Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh—indicate that the Tikait episode pales into insignificance compared with what is happening now.

The fourth striking difference between then and now is the presence of women. Strikingly,

Tikait's later casteist slur against a Dalit Chief Minister of his time and his obvious fondness of the khap (caste panchayat) and its traditions reflected a limited role for his mobilisation, one that was severely circumscribed by the appeals of caste and a severely limited role for women—a feudal mindset, if you will. It is not as if the feudal prejudice has disappeared, it is just that the widened base of the movement and its democratisation have imposed limits on the open articulation of such rabidly sectarian views.

It is not as if these limitations, imposed by the differentiation of the peasantry, have evaporated. Instead, it is obvious that different sections of the peasants—and landless workers in the countryside, especially in Punjab—have been mobilised in waves, particularly since the disastrous demonetisation of the Indian currency, which triggered a precipitous decline in prices from which the Indian peasant has still not recovered. The incorporation of these sections—and of their specific ordering of the priority of the demands—makes the ongoing agitation stand out from peasant mobilisations in the past several decades.

A fifth standout feature of the ongoing protests—one that probably draws from all the other features mentioned earlier—is that, unlike in the past, there is no single messiah of the peasants as they have mobilised in waves since June. Recall Tikait's obviously overstated title of a messiah of the peasantry, conferred by clueless media pundits of his time, or the earlier rounds of peasant protests led by leaders such as M.D. Nanjundaswamy in Karnataka or Sharad Joshi in Maharashtra, and the difference between then and now is striking. But it would be a mistake to take the absence of a single charismatic leader as a sign of weakness. In fact, that is its strength for two reasons. First, it reflects the strong bonds of a coalition, which draws strength from an array



of protesting sections within the ranks of the peasantry. The fact that they are represented in a wide platform that has conducted the agitation is what has given it resilience. The second reason why it has turned out to be durable, much to the bewilderment of those in power, is that this kind of structured leadership in a broad coalition offers few avenues to buy off vacillating sections within the ranks of the movement.

Lastly, in terms of effect, the ongoing protests, even if prevented from reaching their intended destination in Delhi, is much bigger. For one, the Delhi of the 1980s was much smaller, nowhere near the sprawl it is today. Choking the city was a much easier task then compared with now. The widening reach of the protests now threatens to blockade the road to Jaipur.

### **The farce of negotiations**

The stubbornness of the government, reflected in the farcical manner in which it treated the negotiations with farmers' groups, was based on its flawed reading of the agitation. It assumed that the protesting groups would not be able to sustain the movement for long, especially if it could exploit the fissures in the ranks of the peasantry. Of course, the Narendra Modi government's obstinate position was also dictated by its firm resolve to use the three farm laws to embed big business in Indian agriculture like never before. But the peasant organisations too were unbending in their resolve. They have, with imagination and vigour, reached out to newer sections of the Indian polity.

The government has indicated that it is willing to introduce the notion of a minimum support price (MSP) into the laws, but this obviously just will not do for the agitating peasants. It is not difficult to see why the government's offer has no takers on this side of the divide. First, the promise of an MSP without an agricultural

produce market committee (APMC) where farmers can sell their produce under "neutral" conditions is totally meaningless.

The second aspect of the "offer" of the continuation of the MSP is neither here nor there. As with most things under the present dispensation the devil is all in the intent.

Another reason why the offer to incorporate an MSP-like feature into the legislation lacks credibility arises from this dispensation's track record. It may well be that the MSP would be mentioned in the Acts, but who will implement it? What if the Centre reins in the Food Corporation of India (FCI), thereby preventing procurement operations? It is quite likely that the States, especially in the aftermath of COVID-19, lack the resources to undertake procurement operations on the scale the FCI now does. In effect, the Centre seems to have cynically passed on the burden to the States, knowing full well what is in store. This is like rubbing salt into the wounds of the States; after legislating on agriculture—clearly lying within the legislative domain of the States—the Centre would now be passing on the additional burden as well.

Three interconnected factors needed to be achieved if big business had to overcome this hurdle, all of which hinge on the implementation of the three new farm laws across the country. The first is that large-scale investments—much larger than Indian corporates had dared to imagine in the earlier, ill-fated, round—were needed in order to establish separate supply chains. Secondly, however, if this was to happen, investors needed iron-clad assurances that they would enjoy oligopolistic control over procurement channels. Obviously, the large investments in building scaled-up supply channels would not happen without protection of profits. There is also a palpable fear among the peasantry that the new



law on contract farming may lead to greater direct forays by corporate entities into agriculture and that it would open the floodgates for new lease laws that would result in the dispossession of the peasantry.

The third feature of the new farm laws—and one that directly connects the ongoing agitation to the interests of Indians at large—is that all these arrangements on the supply side would be futile without big retail having total control over the distribution chain. This is why the fear that the abandonment of the MSP regime and the emasculation of the APMC mandi system would directly affect Indian food security is not an idle one. “What is the point of controlling the procurement channels if final profits at the retail end are not available?” is the reasoning of big business.

If the intentions of the present dispensation are any indicator, one can imagine what may happen to the PDS over time, if not immediately. Under the sway of thinking that goes in the name of Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT), and the wondrous possibilities offered by the use of Aadhaar, it is likely that the entire business of actually delivering foodstuffs to people might be abandoned.

It is quite possible that this segment of the rural elite fears losing social and economic control that flows from its possession of land. The insecurity among even these sections possibly explains why the ongoing protest movement has—despite the vacillations within the ranks of the more well-endowed—incorporated some of the concerns and demands of those lower down the socio-economic hierarchy.

The remarkable resolve with which these protests have happened, against huge odds, is the defining feature of the ongoing protests. Sections of the intelligentsia ask: what if this movement fails? What would they have achieved in that case? Such a line of questioning approaches the notion of success or failure in binary terms: that one can only win or lose, not seeing such battles as a continuum of struggles in which one may lose a particular battle, but still achieve “success” in the process.

### CONCLUSION

Now, during the second wave of pandemic, the entire nation and the world is following Covid-19 protocols. Even protesting farmers should follow the protocols. Their life is important for us “Union Agriculture Minister Narendra Singh Tomar said- in the current Covid-19 situation. He urged them to call off their protest. In the recent discussion, the Govt. had identified their concerns and offered them a proposal to suspend the laws for 1.5 years and setup a committee to examine them. This proposal was welcomed across the Country but the protesting farmers rejected it.

Ours is a democratic country, be it farmers or citizens, if they have any doubt, the Govt. believes it is its responsibility to clear doubts and find a solution.

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