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India's farmers want the agrarian crisis to end

With the largest protest in human history, Indian farmers forced the Modi regime to repeal the neoliberal farm laws. But the struggle isn't over yet

On 19 November 2021, India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced the repeal of the three contentious farm laws, after thousands of farmers had been camping at Delhi border points in a protest of unprecedented scale since November 2020. Modi admitted the failure in convincing the farmers and appealed to them to call off their year-long protest. In his speech, he said: 'I apologise to you, my countrymen, that despite my government's good intentions, there may have been some lack in our *Tapasya* (penance) that we could not convince some of our farmer brothers of the intentions of these laws which were as pure as the light from a lamp.'

In the winter session of India's parliament, the three laws were withdrawn lock, stock, and barrel. But the farmers were still not willing to leave the protest sites as some of their other grievances were not yet addressed. Besides, they wanted a written assurance from the government. After a couple of rounds of negotiations, the government conceded to farmers' various other demands in black and white. The farmers then left the protest sites on 11 December.

Their demands were five-fold. First, fixing the minimum support price (MSP) for agri-products by a committee of stakeholders, including the farmers' representatives. Second, the withdrawal of police cases registered against the agitating farmers at several places and states. Third, compensations to the farmer for their losses during the agitation period. Fourth, the farmers electricity bill. And fifth, the law on stubble burning that caused air pollution, where the government agreed to exempt the farmers of the criminal liability in the law.

Many commentaries have been made about both enactment and repeal of the three farm laws. This is not unusual in an electorally competitive, multi-party democracy. In fact, the announcement of the repeal amounts

to the vindication of Indian democracy, as it went through the whole cycle of proposition, protest, participation, and responsive reconciliation.

Why have the laws been repealed?

Many believe the ruling party was forced to withdraw these controversial laws for fear of losing the forthcoming elections in the states of Punjab and Uttar Pradesh, where the farmers were agitating vigorously. The present government too, elected by the people, could not be insulated from public scrutiny and reprimand embedded in the farmers' agitation going on for about a year.

The three farm bills had been passed by parliament amid an uproar of opposition party leaders and farmers' unions. The farmer unions protested across the country – mainly in the states of Punjab, Haryana, and Uttar Pradesh, where agriculture is an important part of the economy. Several rounds of talks between the government and the farmers' union leaders were inconclusive.

In introducing the laws, the government was lacking a serious approach to inclusiveness.

In December 2020, the Supreme Court recognised the farmers' resolve against the laws, their suffering in the freezing cold around Delhi, farmers' deaths and so on. On 12 January, the court decided suspend the implementation of the three farm laws until further notice. It also constituted a four-member committee to broker a reconciliation agreement between the government and the agitating farmers. However, the committee could not temper the spirit of the farmers who continued their sit-in protest at the borders until Modi repealed the three laws.

In introducing the laws, the government was lacking a serious approach to inclusiveness. It passed the laws in a haste without multi-stakeholder consultation and adequate time for debate in parliament. But one can see the merits in the arguments on both sides.

What the farm laws were about

The first and the most contentious law was the *Farmers' Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Act, 2020*. The government said the law would provide scope for farmers to expand their area of trade from select areas to 'any place of production, collection, aggregation'. In

other words, this law allowed farmers to trade their produce outside the physical markets notified under various state laws. As such, it reduced the power of state governments, prohibiting them from levying any market fee on farmers, traders, and electronic trading platforms.

The government argued the law would eliminate the exploitation by the middlemen and interreference of the state governments. The farmers argued they were being deprived of the facilitation by the middlemen and protection by the state governments. They could not carry their produces to distant places away from the *mandis* (places fixed by the states for trading) for want of resources. The government said, the farmers could move to electronic trading and e-commerce for scheduled produce. The farmers said, given their trading culture, this provision was of no use to them.

The second law was the *Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement on Price Assurance and Farm Services Act, 2020*. It would allow farmers to enter into pre-arranged contracts with buyers within a legal framework. This would give farmers a chance to modernise farming, reap greater yields with the investment from companies. The farmers thought it would lead to corporatisation of agriculture. They also feared that it would mean the eventual abolition of the so-called 'Minimum Support Price' (MSP), fixed by the government for certain commodities. Furthermore, the contract system would make small and marginal farmers vulnerable to exploitation from big companies unless the sale prices continue to be regulated by the central government as before.

For the farmers, history will judge whether this epoch-making peasant struggle will produce the desired outcome or not.

The third law was the *Essential Commodities (Amendment) Act, 2020*. This law would do away with the central government's powers to impose stockholding limit on food items, except under extraordinary circumstances. It also removed commodities such as edible oil, onion, and potato from the list of essential commodities. It would enable the government to regulate their supply or include these items back into the list under 'extraordinary circumstances'. The government argued it would help farmers in preserving their products and in marketing them at their will. The farmers feared it will help corporates in 'hoarding' and manipulating prices in the market.

The struggle continues

In short, the government argued that the three laws would open up new opportunities for the farmers so that they can earn more from their produce and it would help to strengthen the farm sector infrastructure through greater private investments. The farmers' main apprehension was that the laws will eventually abolish the MSP guaranteed by the central government on select crops, leaving them at the mercy of big corporations. They were also anxious about the unscrupulous and aggressive takeover of the farm sector by corporates.

For progressives as well as nationalists, there are many positive implications of this historic struggle. Firstly, it has made very clear that price- and income-related issues cannot be side-lined. Second, free-market forces and neoliberal policies will no longer gain the support of small-scale farmers who are trying to eke out their livelihoods. Third, Indian farmers – and, as many are from farming community, *jawans* (soldiers) – cannot be suppressed. They are our national assets and icons. The slogan *jai jawan, jai Kisan* (hail the farmer, hail the soldier) still rings a bell in the national psyche.

The overall message of the farmers' protest to the government is that merely repealing the farm laws will not suffice, unless the deep-rooted agrarian crisis centred around predictive and remunerative prices is dealt with and a decent standard of living for the farmers is ensured. For the farmers, history will judge whether this epoch-making peasant struggle will produce the desired outcome or not. This will also depend on how the farm leaders will think and act in such decisive moment in Indian politics.



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