

# Lessons from the Indian Farmers' Movement: Emerging solidarities in the *Kisan Andolan*



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# Introduction

Large protests by Indian farmers in 2020 and 2021 marked an important political moment for social movements in the country. The immediate trigger was the hurried passage of three 'farm laws' by the Union government in September 2020. Their far-reaching implications, coupled with the lack of wider discussion or consultation, provoked a strong response from farmers' unions and rural movements across the country. When protesting farmers were prevented from entering New Delhi, the national capital, in

November 2020, they established camps at the capital's borders – at Singhu, Tikri and Ghazipur – for over a year. This sustained mobilisation ultimately forced the government to repeal the three laws in November 2021. By then, the *Kisan Andolan* (farmers agitation)<sup>1</sup> had evolved into a wider movement demanding decisive state action to address India's systemic agrarian crisis and protect rural livelihoods.

BOX 1

## The 'Farm Laws'

The three, since repealed, farm laws would have fundamentally reorganised the functioning and regulation of India's agricultural markets.

- 1 The Farmers' Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Act enabled the sale of agricultural products outside officially designated Agricultural Produce Market Committees (APMCs). APMCs have measures in place to protect sellers and ensure they get a fair price for their produce. In contrast, the new trading spaces would not be directly regulated by state and local governments.
- 2 The Farmers' (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement on Price Assurance and Farm Services Act established pricing and dispute resolution mechanisms for 'contract farming' arrangements between producers and buyers of agricultural produce.
- 3 The Essential Commodities (Amendment) Act amended the existing Essential Commodities Act (ECA), limiting the circumstances in which the government could intervene to control rapid price increases on essential food items.

For a detailed discussion, see the briefing by PRS Legislative Research  
<https://prsindia.org/billtrack/prs-products/prs-legislative-brief-3551>

Alongside well-organised protests on the ground, the *Kisan Andolan* was able to effectively shape broader narratives around the movement. It responded to widespread disinformation in mainstream media outlets that were sympathetic to the government by building an active and engaged social media presence. Participants provided regular updates from the protest sites to urban audiences. This included sections of the large Indian diaspora and international supporters who organised solidarity protests around the world. The mobilisation was also extensively documented by supporters and allies. Prominent

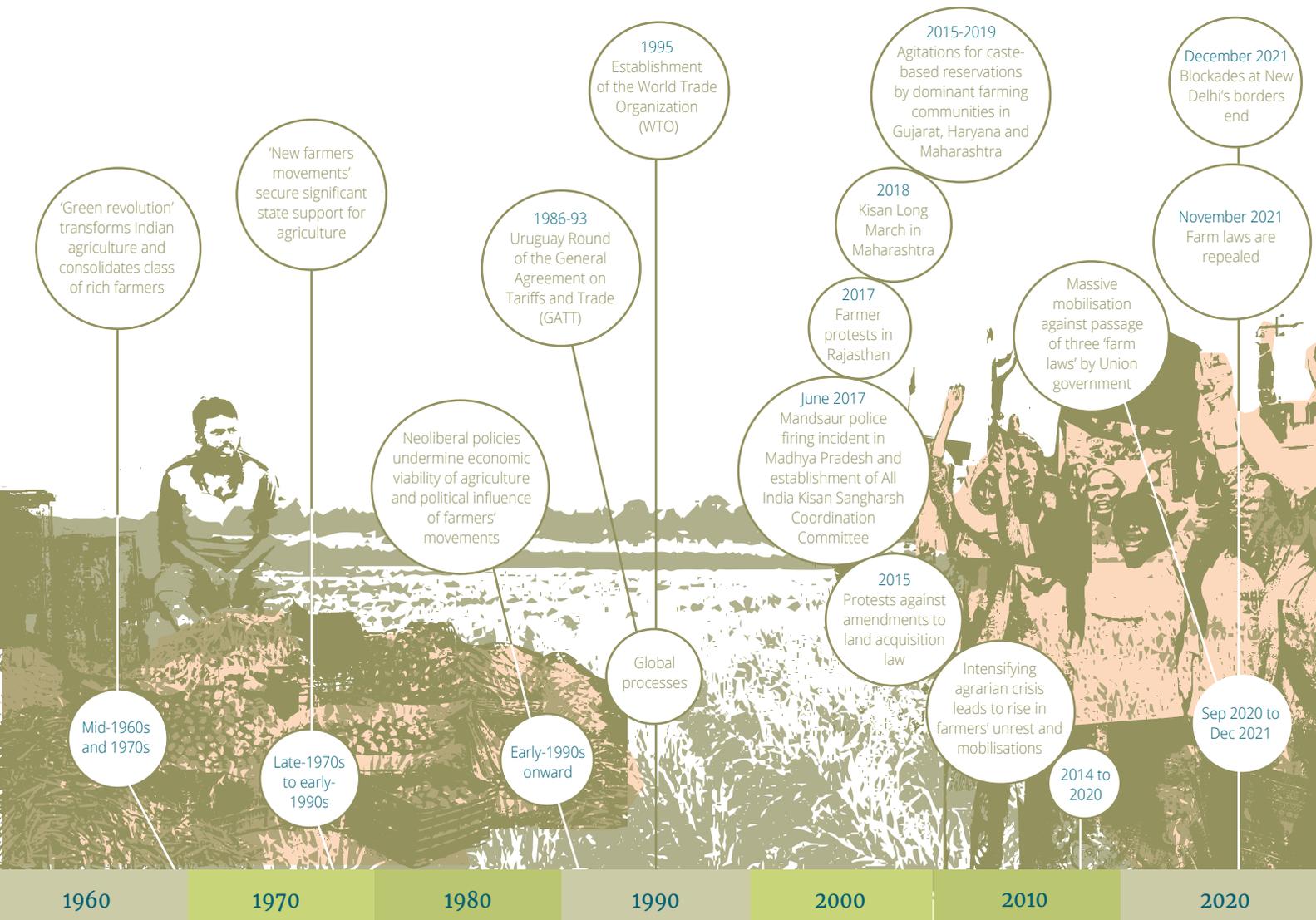
examples include a biweekly newspaper, *Trolley Times*, published online and in print in multiple languages, and *Karti Dharti*, a fortnightly publication by women volunteers.

The farmers' protests were a crucial victory for social movements in India, and came as the government was using the pretext of the COVID-19 pandemic to push through a far-reaching liberalisation of the economy. The repeal of the laws also represented a significant capitulation by an authoritarian regime that has otherwise sought to crack down on public opposition to its majoritarian

nationalist and neoliberal policies. The *Kisan Andolan* has thus demonstrated real possibilities for confronting the government's now familiar playbook of discrediting social movements, censoring dissent, and direct repression. The broad-based solidarities — among rural producers and spanning the rural-urban spectrum — that *began to emerge* over the more than year-long protests<sup>2</sup> generate new expectations for wider political struggles.

This note explores the frameworks and processes of alliance formation that contributed to the remarkable success of the *Kisan Andolan*. To be sure, the movement is grounded and embedded in the Indian context. But as progressive social movements around the world confront oppression, austerity, militarism, and the prospect of a new global food price crisis, there is much to be learned from the political dynamics of this victory.

## A brief timeline of agrarian politics in India



The People's Archive of Farmers' Protests (PAFP) has compiled a detailed timeline of the protests against the farm laws (<https://pafp.in/timeline-2/>)

For an overview of agrarian mobilisations over the 2014 to 2020 period, see Dhawale, A. (2018) 'Remarkable farmers' struggles in India: Some notes from Maharashtra and Rajasthan'. *Agrarian South: Journal of Political Economy* 7(2): 1-18; and Mehta, S., and Sinha, S. (2022) 'The rise and fall of agrarian populism in post-colonial India: Farmers' movements and electoral politics at crossroads'. *Sociological Bulletin* 71(4): 601-618.

# Strengthening Solidarities between Rural Producers

*'The three farm laws will not just ruin the farming community; these will snatch bread from the hands of the labourers as well. The concept of contract farming is anti-farmer and anti-labour class. Agriculture is the base of Punjab's economy and the black laws will not spare dalits.'*

- Lakhvir Longowal, state general secretary, Krantikari Pendu Mazdoor Union (KPMU)<sup>3</sup>

Critics allege the *Kisan Andolan* is dominated by wealthy farmers protecting their own interests, but its leadership and composition is much more diverse. Unions representing small and medium landholding farmers from Punjab were at the heart of the agitation and blockades at New Delhi's borders. The protests also saw significant participation from farmers in Haryana, Rajasthan, and Western Uttar Pradesh, and from the **All India Kisan Sangharsh Coordination Committee (AIKSCC)**, a pan-Indian alliance of movements and organisations representing diverse rural producers, including small farmers, agricultural workers, women cultivators, and indigenous *Adivasi* and *Dalit* (formerly called 'untouchable') communities.

The **Samyukta Kisan Morcha (SKM)** — established in November 2020 to coordinate the mobilisation against the farm laws — is a broad coalition of farmers' unions and organisations representing different groups of farmers with varied political ideologies. Its members include the **All India Kisan Sabha (AIKS)**, the peasant and agricultural workers wing of the Communist Party of India, and multiple affiliates of the **Bharatiya Kisan Union (BKU)**, who are part of the international peasant movement **La Via Campesina**. These close alliances with multiple ongoing agrarian struggles across the country were important for sustaining the movement through the protests and subsequent negotiations with the government.

The *Kisan Andolan's* ability to mobilise broad rural support is a major shift from previous agrarian movements in India.<sup>4</sup> Through much of the late 1970s and 1980s, the rise of 'new farmers movements' led to a consolidation of state support for agriculture, especially through input subsidies and minimum price guarantees for produce. These mobilisations were focused in parts of the country where, from the mid-1960s onwards, the 'green revolution' and its associated technologies — high-yielding seeds, chemical fertilisers, pesticides, and mechanisation — had driven rapid increases in food grain production,

commercialisation of agriculture and high reliance on purchased inputs. They mainly represented the interests of large, wealthy farmers whose profits declined as the initial gains from the green revolution petered out. With few exceptions, social justice-focused rural agendas around land reform and rights of agricultural workers were neglected. Some critical observers argue that these movements were actively antagonistic towards the rural working classes.<sup>5</sup>

In contrast, the cross-class and -caste coalitions that characterised the more recent protests resulted from conscious efforts to build alliances and shared political agendas among diverse rural producers. For instance, the BKU (Ekta Ugrahan), Punjab's largest farmer union and a key member of the *Kisan Andolan*, has joined multiple mobilisations by *Dalit* and landless agricultural workers in the state in recent years.<sup>6</sup> Farm labourers' unions leading these mobilisations, like the *Krantikari Pendu Mazdoor Union* (Revolutionary Village Workers Union, or KPMU) and the *Zameen Prapti Sangharsh Committee* (Committee for the Struggle for Land Access, or ZPSC), also actively participated in the anti-farm law protests. Similarly, a central objective of the AIKSCC is to bring together multiple agrarian movements mobilising for their rights around two common demands, for 'fair and remunerative prices, and comprehensive freedom from debt'.<sup>7</sup>

These emerging alliances — focused on concerns that cut across preexisting rural social divisions — have a strong basis in the widespread agrarian distress faced by India's food producers. Economic liberalisation since the early 1990s has transformed agriculture and rural livelihoods, and significantly deepened inequality. State support for agriculture has been dramatically rolled back, with formal rural credit programmes, input subsidies, and agricultural extension services largely withdrawn over the last 30 years. At the same time, private companies and multinationals gained control over markets for agricultural inputs

like seeds, fertilisers, and pesticides. Implementation of state-level laws regulating the pricing and sale of agricultural produce has also varied widely, and in some cases, these have been amended to benefit large private traders and corporations.

The impacts of liberalisation differ across regions and rural social groups. While large farmers lost economic power and political influence, some were able to flourish under the new regime. But, for most of India's food producers, agriculture has become an increasingly precarious enterprise. The vast majority of medium, small and marginal farmers now face a constant struggle to remain engaged in agriculture. At the same time, landless tenant cultivators and agricultural workers have seen their already tenuous livelihoods further undermined. The combination of declining state support, rising input costs, and uncertain agricultural incomes often leave producers with little choice but to take on high levels of informal debt at exorbitant interest rates. This leads to growing desperation as

evidenced by the increased incidence of farmer suicides. Official statistics count almost 300,000 farmer deaths by suicide between 1995 to 2012. But even this number is likely to significantly underestimate the problem.<sup>8</sup> Many of these deaths have occurred among producers of cash crops in former green revolution regions of the country.

The farm laws aimed to intensify and deepen agricultural liberalisation in India. The broad rural coalition that overturned them was able to do so because it worked to highlight shared interests in confronting this process. Caste and class continued to matter, and there were some unions who insisted that the movement be primarily focused on farmers. Yet there was also an effort to overcome historical political divides between different groups of rural working people. A crucial basis for these emerging cross-class and -caste solidarities was a shared acknowledgement that the large-scale corporatisation of agriculture advanced by the farm laws posed an existential threat to diverse food producers.



Families of farm suicide victims join the protests at Delhi's borders. Photo: Navsharan Singh

# Corporatisation as an Existential Threat to Diverse Rural Producers

*'The government now claims it will continue price support but after one or two years, it may withdraw all of price support to rice and wheat.... Direct contracts with corporates will not work for small farmers like me. For a year or two, corporates may offer good rates. Then they will control the market and the prices.'*

– Sajjan Singh, participant in the farmer protests at Delhi's Singhu border<sup>9</sup>

The government's justification for the farm laws relied on a specific interpretation of India's deep agrarian crisis. They suggested that existing regulations around agricultural trade have restricted farmers' choices, preventing them from receiving fair prices for their produce.<sup>10</sup> The issue was thus presented as one of poor 'price realisation' due to limited competition and unfair monopolistic practices by intermediaries: farmers were struggling because markets were not 'free' enough. The proposed laws sought to remove 'barriers' to private participation in the sector, thereby boosting farmers' incomes and giving them access to new technologies and markets. However, as the *Kisan Andolan* and its supporters convincingly argued, the three laws were in fact squarely aimed at consolidating corporate control of agriculture by undermining or eliminating crucial existing protections for food producers.

State-managed procurement and price supports are an important but often overlooked legacy of India's green revolution. Along with the push for irrigation and adoption of new technologies, the Indian government incentivised the production of selected foodgrains through guaranteed Minimum Support Prices (MSPs). This has expanded over time to cover around 20 different crops, which are procured at MSP rates by government agencies through a network of more than 6000 Agricultural Produce Market Committee (APMC) market yards and sub-yards. Colloquially called *mandis*, APMC markets are designated trading areas established under state government laws and managed by representatives of farmers, traders, market workers, and local governments.

This framework of MSPs and *mandis* is far from perfect. Large farmers who sell most of their produce at the MSP tend to benefit disproportionately and there are wide regional variations in actual levels of state procurement at guaranteed prices. Most people agree on the need to better implement existing regulations around *mandis* and to

limit the influence wielded by traders and other intermediaries. Nevertheless, these mechanisms help farmers get fair prices for their produce, while also influencing transactions that take place outside APMC markets. Perhaps most crucially, and despite three decades of liberalisation of the agricultural sector, the MSP and *mandi* system has been instrumental in limiting the corporate control and capture of produce markets. In a period of increasingly precarious agrarian livelihoods, it provides a vital source of income support for the small and marginal farmers, who make up the majority of India's rural population.<sup>11</sup>

Of the three farm laws, the Farmers' Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Act took direct aim at the MSP and *mandi* system. This made it the most contentious. The law allowed for the creation of alternative markets outside of APMC market yards. These new spaces would allow traders and corporations to bypass local regulations and protections for producers. Farmers' organisations feared that such alternative markets were a precursor to completely dismantling *mandis* and state procurement at MSPs.

The Farmers' (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement on Price Assurance and Farm Services Act, the second of the farm laws, liberalised contract farming. Contract farming involves advance agreements between farmers and buyers for the sale of a certain quantity of produce at a pre-determined price. In most cases, farmers also commit to quality standards and to use inputs set by the buyer. Such arrangements are presently regulated by state-level laws, but the Act established a national framework for agreements and dispute resolution. The Union government has argued that contract farming will protect producers against market fluctuations and ensure they receive higher prices by eliminating intermediaries. However, many food producers currently engaged in contract farming have pointed out that agreements are

structured to benefit large private traders and corporations. Access to seeds and technology, quality standards, and procurement prices are tightly controlled by buyers, leaving them with little control over the production and sale of their produce.<sup>12</sup>

Concerns about corporate control over agricultural procurement and prices were further reinforced by the third farm law, which amended the Essential Commodities Act (ECA). The ECA enables the government to impose stock limits on food items and regulate supply in response to rapid increases in price. Such measures aim to prevent hoarding, speculation, and profiteering, especially in the context of food shortages and crises. The amendments significantly restricted the circumstances and extent of such interventions, ostensibly to promote private investments in food storage and supply chains. However, in so doing, they also increased opportunities for large traders to buy produce at low prices, hold on to that supply and then sell when prices increased. In practice, this could mean large quantities of essential food items would be hoarded in times of increasing scarcity so as to maximise profit later on. Such strategies feed into food price inflation — and hunger — even as rural producers themselves are unable to benefit from rising prices.

Individually, each of the three farm laws facilitated state withdrawal and private participation in different aspects of agricultural markets. Cumulatively, they pointed to a broader vision of the full-fledged corporatisation of Indian agriculture, in which these different aspects are closely interlinked and reinforce one another. For instance, undermining the *mandi* and public procurement system is crucial for creating a situation where farmers — whether large, medium, or small — are forced to become ‘price takers’ and enter exploitative contract farming and sale arrangements with large private corporations. Landless agricultural workers, smallholders, and tenant farmers

have also argued that corporatisation of agriculture will drive land grabbing and mechanisation, forcing them out of agriculture and into urban slums. The threat of unregulated price inflation is another key concern for these groups, who, though still dependent on agriculture for their livelihood, must purchase most of their food.

The *Kisan Andolan* has argued that widespread agrarian distress is not the result of inefficient production or poor price realisation. Rather, it is an expression of the profound ways previous rounds of agricultural liberalisation — and increasingly also vulnerabilities to climate change — have affected food producers. By ushering in corporate control of produce markets and eliminating the (limited but crucial) framework of state support and protections for agriculture, the farm laws would intensify these dynamics, further squeezing incomes and autonomy. The systemic nature of these impacts also means that diverse rural producers have a shared interest in confronting them. This explicit focus of the movement, on corporatisation as a direct assault on precarious agrarian livelihoods, has been crucial for politicising different but linked economic struggles around common demands: the withdrawal of the farm laws, but also calls for meaningful state intervention to address the agrarian crisis and democratic food systems organised around principles of food sovereignty.

Such a framing of these issues is echoed by farmers’ movements<sup>13</sup> and activist-scholars<sup>14</sup> around the world who have also questioned neoliberal interpretations of agrarian crises in diverse contexts and called for solutions similar to the ones proposed by the *Kisan Andolan*. The protests therefore received widespread support and solidarity from global food sovereignty struggles, including the international peasant movement La Via Campesina.



Farmers’ protest site at Delhi’s Tikri border. Photo: Randeep Maddoke

# Building Solidarities across the Rural–Urban Spectrum

*‘There is propaganda that this is only an issue of farmers. But this is also an issue for labourers, shopkeepers, arhtias [commission agents], students, employees, and young boys and girls, because we all know that our stomachs are filled by farming.’*

Leader from the Krantikari Pendu Mazdoor Union<sup>15</sup>

Over the course of its more than year-long protests against the farm laws, the *Kisan Andolan* received crucial support and assistance from other actors. Residents near the protest sites were actively involved, as were a range of non-farmer organisations and urban allies who joined the protests and amplified the movement's messages. Most Indian trade unions also supported the protests and a national general strike in November 2021 included, among other demands, the withdrawal of the three farm laws.<sup>16</sup> The experience of the farmers' movement thus points to gradually emerging political solidarities between India's rural and urban populations. Such alliances reflect active and conscious efforts by farmers' unions to scale protests up and out. But they are also a political expression of changing economic realities and an increasing breakdown of the rural/urban dichotomy.

Rural areas are at the frontlines of contemporary land and resource grabs. These projects are often speculative, driven by financial markets, and have little need for the labour of the people they displace and dispossess. Broader economic growth has also not translated into sufficient and suitable employment for a rapidly expanding workforce, leading to 'jobless growth'. At the same time, the erosion of workers' rights and informalisation of labour under neoliberalism has made workers ever more precarious and rolled back vital state supports, where they existed previously. These global trends and their profound political implications — captured succinctly in Issa Shivji's concept of 'working people' — are equally significant in the Indian context.

## BOX 2

### The Concept of 'Working People'

Issa Shivji uses the term 'working people' to refer to otherwise very diverse social groups who share important similarities in how they are exploited under neoliberalism. He argues that capitalist profits increasingly depend on paying people below the cost of their own survival — this applies to various small producers selling products on the market, as well as to people selling their own labour for wages. Working peoples' households are therefore forced to engage in diverse forms of self-exploitation to survive, for instance, by cutting down on basic consumption, working unsustainably long hours, and relying on the intensified cultivation of small landholdings.

Shivji's work has been critiqued for underplaying the differences between the various groups that comprise the broad category of working people. Nevertheless, the political significance of this concept lies in its claim that these different forms of exploitation share a common logic. The 'super-exploitation' of labour and dispossession of land and resources are materially linked to each other. Both are key pillars of capitalist accumulation and profitmaking in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This points to crucial possibilities for mobilising diverse working people in combined political struggles that challenge the current paradigm and offer a new economic vision centred on the flourishing of human beings and their ecosystems.

For a detailed discussion, see Shivji, I. (2017) 'The concept of "working people"'. *Agrarian South: Journal of Political Economy* 6(1): 1-13.



Families of farm suicide victims at the protest stage. Photo: Navsharan Singh.

The overwhelming majority of India's workers — as many as 90% by some estimates — are informally employed in insecure, poorly paid jobs that lack social protections. For precarious urban workers, rural areas are a vital base of support — an emergency cushion against unemployment, a place to raise children or recuperate from illness, a source of provisions that supplement meagre incomes — and they retain close ties with their places of origin. Rural people are also responding to the growing impossibility of earning a decent living from agriculture not by leaving the sector entirely, but through increasingly complex and piecemeal ways of making ends meet. Some family members continue farming while others supplement their household income with waged work, including through circular or seasonal migration to urban areas. Rural and urban people and livelihoods in India are therefore increasingly intertwined. This situation was painfully apparent during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020: migrant workers' precarious employment was suddenly terminated by a stringent nationwide lockdown, forcing a mass exodus from cities to their rural homes where at least basic survival was assured.

The 'dual urban-rural lives and livelihood strategies necessitated by India's simultaneous agrarian crisis and jobless growth'<sup>17</sup> provide a crucial material and social basis for the rural-urban political alliances that contributed to the

success of the recent protests. Arguments of an 'urban bias' against rural producers were prominent in the farmers' movements of the 1970s and 1980s. But these are far less evocative when rural and urban identities are themselves highly fluid. The *Kisan Andolan* has instead focused on the far-reaching impacts of agricultural liberalisation for both rural and urban people. Greater corporate control of agriculture squeezes and dispossesses rural producers, while threatening existing mechanisms for managing food prices and the Public Distribution System (PDS) that provides access to affordable foodgrains for a large share of the Indian population.<sup>18</sup>

In this sense, a just food system or a vision of food sovereignty can be a crucial demand for both food producers and food consumers. The 'anti-corporatisation' framing of the protests recognised that greater corporate control over agriculture would lead to increased exploitation and expropriation of food producers, undermine the rural support networks of urban workers, and allow the manipulation of food prices at the cost of vulnerable urban populations. It also aligned closely with the concerns of industrial labour unions, who have been at the forefront of resisting the deregulation and privatisation of the Indian economy since the early 1990s. By illuminating these connections, the movement built a narrative of shared interests: 'our stomachs are filled by farming'.

# Learning from the *Kisan Andolan*

*“India’s farmers have inspired the world with their resilience. They have shown us what a united struggle of the working class and the peasantry can achieve even in the face of all adversities.”*

Joint solidarity statement by global social movements<sup>19</sup>

*“We in Canada recognize the Indian farmers’ struggle as similar to our own struggle.”*

Katie Ward, President, National Farmers Union, Canada<sup>20</sup>

The Indian government’s November 2021 decision to withdraw the three farm laws did not mark the end of the farmers’ movement. The SKM and its allies continue to mobilise around a range of demands including, most prominently, the passage of a national law guaranteeing MSPs for agricultural products and a full waiver of existing debts of farmers and agricultural workers. However, negotiations with the government on these demands have shown little progress and it remains unclear whether farmers’ unions and allied organisations will come together again for large scale protests. There are also differing perspectives within the movement on how it should engage with political parties and formal electoral processes. While discussions on the protests have mostly celebrated how they overcame long running social and economic antagonisms, there are important calls from within the farmers’ movement for greater representation and inclusion of diverse rural interests.

The uncertainties and challenges underlying the future political trajectory of the *Kisan Andolan* should not, however, detract from the possibilities it has opened up. The mobilisation against the farm laws was fought and won in a challenging domestic political context. This makes it an inspiration for democratic and social justice movements throughout the country, and beyond. It has raised hopes that the emerging solidarities and alliances — between rural producers and across the rural-urban spectrum — highlighted by the protests may spur wider counter-hegemonic social mobilisations against India’s authoritarian and Hindu nationalist regime. The overwhelming support extended to the *Kisan Andolan* by social movements across the world testifies to its wider relevance, and the insights this struggle can offer for progressive movements elsewhere.

The success of the anti-farm law protests was, in significant part, an outcome of the prominent role played by small and medium-landholding farmers, women, and *Dalit*

and landless workers. Harinder Kaur Bindu, a woman farm union leader, has argued that women did not just participate in the protests in large numbers, but also provided leadership to the movement.<sup>21</sup> It would be a mistake to interpret the meaningful partnership of these often neglected rural constituencies in the *Kisan Andolan* as a strategic ploy by wealthy farmers’ unions. Rather, it reflects longer running efforts to come together around shared concerns about the impacts of agricultural liberalisation and the state’s attempts to fundamentally reshape the agricultural sector. Such alliances are especially crucial in increasingly authoritarian political contexts — in India and elsewhere — where governments are quick to single out and target individual dissenters.

Widespread popular support for the movement has also presented these groups with an opportunity to open the political space for debating the causes of — and remedies for — diverse forms of rural distress in India. Farm labourers’ unions in Punjab, for instance, have built on the increased public attention to agrarian issues to further illuminate their ongoing struggles for land rights.<sup>22</sup> Collectives like the Mahila Kisan Adhikar Manch (Platform for Women Farmers’ Rights, or MAKAAM) have similarly called on farmers’ unions to engage more directly with the concerns of women cultivators. These include expanding women’s control and ownership of land and other resources, addressing the barriers they face in accessing agricultural services and markets, and specific forms of state support for women farmers.<sup>23</sup> A five-part webinar series on the theme ‘We Are All Farmers and Food Producers’ facilitated by the National Alliance of People’s Movements (NAPM), an AIKSCC member, also focused on bringing in the perspectives of small, marginal and tenant farmers, farm workers, *Adivasis*, forest dwelling communities, hill cultivators, inland and coastal fishworkers, and livestock rearing and pastoralist communities.<sup>24</sup> Networks like Alliance for Sustainable and Holistic Agriculture (ASHA-Kisan Swaraj) have emphasised the urgency of moving

towards ecologically sustainable agriculture, and its close linkages to more equitable control of agricultural resources.<sup>25</sup> Such efforts to recognise the needs of different food producers — many of which are not currently included in the *Kisan Andolan's* key demands — also feed into discussions about the wider scope and future objectives of the movement. They highlight how a continued engagement with inequalities and tensions around caste, class, and gender remains crucial for sustaining the solidarities that emerged through the protests.

Two aspects of the 'anti-corporatisation' framing of the Indian farmers' movement deserve closer attention. First, it is notable that combining the struggle against the 'farm laws' with demands for a comprehensive state response to the agrarian crisis helped to mobilise wide support for the protests across diverse agrarian caste/class groups and regional political-economic contexts. The explicit linkages between such demands and those being pursued by global food sovereignty movements also suggest a crucial focal point for broad-based struggle: reimagining the state's role in facilitating just transitions away from predominant forms of input- and capital- intensive agriculture that fuel both corporate profits and the climate crisis.

Second, as neoliberalism increasingly breaks down the rural/urban distinction, not just in India but globally, questions about the best ways of mobilising across the rural-urban spectrum have become increasingly pressing. In this

regard, the *Kisan Andolan's* emphasis on the threat of agricultural corporatisation resonated strongly with urban workers and labour justice movements. The movement consistently drew attention to the strong nexus between the Indian state and corporations.<sup>26</sup> Large conglomerates like the Adani and Reliance groups — which have steadily increased their presence in the agricultural sector — were frequently targeted by farmers' unions, both in their public statements and on-the-ground protests.<sup>27</sup> A focus on confronting greater corporate control of the economy may thus create crucial possibilities for mobilising rural and urban working people around similar demands.

The protests against the farm laws drew on long histories of farmer mobilisations and alliance-building. And yet they were also distinctively contemporary, responding to the new realities confronting rural and urban populations in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Whereas building alliances around shared interests and identities is inherently a local and context-specific process, the *Kisan Andolan* demonstrates how social movements can successfully navigate competing political imperatives: formulating demands that resonate strongly with different and differently-affected actors, while continuing to effectively confront state and corporate power. It is thus a crucial reminder of the power broad-based organising can wield to force change, even in repressive authoritarian settings and in the harrowing context of a global pandemic.



Farmers protest against the G20 summit in India. Photo: BKU (Ekta Ugrahan)

# Endnotes

- 1 The Hindi/Punjabi term *kisan* is a generalised reference to landholding agricultural producers and includes diverse groups of peasants and capitalist farmers.
- 2 We are grateful to Navsharan Singh for her helpful suggestions on this point.
- 3 Quote taken from Singh, A. (2020) 'Dalit labour unions joining farmers' stir on Delhi border', 3 December. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/cities/dalit-labour-unions-joining-farmers-stir-on-delhi-border/story-NFOWNFyve87MfLMDp7jg6K.html>
- 4 This note does not discuss post-independence India's rich history of regionally focused, leftist peasant struggles. Prominent instances include the Telangana Movement (from 1946-51), the Tebhaga Movement (from 1946-1947) and the Naxalbari Movement (in 1967).
- 5 See, for instance, Brass, T. (1994) 'Introduction: The new farmers' movements in India'. *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 21(3-4): 3-26, and some of the other contributions to the Journal of Peasant Studies Special Issue on 'The New Farmers' Movements in India'.
- 6 Sinha, S. (2020) 'The agrarian crisis in Punjab and the making of the anti-farm law protests', 27 November. <https://www.theindiaforum.in/article/agrarian-crisis-punjab-and-making-anti-farm-law-protests>
- 7 AIKSCC (n.d.) 'Demands'. <https://aiksc.in/demands/>
- 8 Nagaraj, K., Sainath, P., Rukmani, R., and Gopinath, R. (2014) 'Farmers' suicides in India: Magnitudes, trends, and spatial patterns, 1997-2012'. *Review of Agrarian Studies*. [http://www.ras.org.in/farmers\\_suicides\\_in\\_india](http://www.ras.org.in/farmers_suicides_in_india)
- 9 Quote taken from Yadav, A. (2020) 'Why landless and marginal farmers are the backbone of farmer protests', 4 December. <https://www.newslandry.com/2020/12/04/why-landless-and-marginal-farmers-are-the-backbone-of-farmer-protests>
- 10 Press Information Bureau (2020) 'Three bills aimed at transformation of agriculture and raising farmers' income introduced in Lok Sabha today; to replace ordinances promulgated on 5th June', 14 September. <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleaseSelfFramePage.aspx?PRID=1654007>. For a critical engagement with these arguments, see also pages 1411-1412 in Krishnamurthy, M. (2021) 'Agricultural market law, regulation and resistance: a reflection on India's new "farm laws" and farmers' protests'. *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 48(7), 1409-1418.
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- 12 There are also instances where private corporations have pursued legal action against farmers for 'illegally cultivating registered plant varieties used in contract farming arrangements. See Lopes, F. (2022) 'Why there is a fight over the potatoes used to make Lay's chips', 15 September. <https://www.indiaspend.com/agriculture/the-lays-chips-potato-variety-case-indian-farmers-rights-and-intellectual-property-laws-834952>
- 13 See, for instance, the 2007 Nyéléni Declaration of the Forum for Food Sovereignty (<https://nyeleni.org/en/declaration-of-nyeleni/>) and the Civil Society Mechanism (CSM) Working Group discussions on Connecting Smallholders to Markets (<https://www.csm4cfs.org/policy-working-groups/connecting-smallholders-to-markets/>)
- 14 See, for instance, van der Ploeg, J.D. (2014) 'Peasant-driven agricultural growth and food sovereignty'. *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 41(6), 999-1030; and the collection of essays in Wittman, H., Desmarais, A.A., and Wiebe, N. (eds) (2010) *Food Sovereignty: Reconnecting food, nature and community*. Halifax and Winnipeg: Fernwood.
- 15 Quote taken from Sinha, S. (2020) 'The agrarian crisis in Punjab and the making of the anti-farm law protests', 27 November. <https://www.theindiaforum.in/article/agrarian-crisis-punjab-and-making-anti-farm-law-protests>
- 16 Farmers' unions and representatives of the *Kisan Andolan* have also extended support to various ongoing anti-dispossession and labour movements across the country.
- 17 Quote taken from page 1377 in Kumar, S. (2021) 'Class, caste and agrarian change: the making of farmers' protests'. *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 48(7): 1371-1379.
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- 19 Quote taken from La Via Campesina (2021) 'Salute to India's Farmers! Global Social Movements issue solidarity as protest completes a year', 26 November. <https://viacampesina.org/en/salute-to-indias-farmers-global-social-movements-issue-solidarity-as-protest-completes-a-year/>
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- 21 Singh, P. (2021) 'Women aren't just giving "bhagidaari" but "aguvaai" to farmers' struggle: Harinder Kaur Bindu', 18 January. <https://www.newsclck.in/women-aren-providing-bhagidari-aguvaai-farmers-movement-harinder-kaur-bindu>
- 22 Majumder, S. (2021) "'Punjab Dalit Groups Supported The Farm Protests. The Ordinary Dalit Did Not.'", 28 December. <https://article-14.com/post/-punjab-dalit-groups-supported-the-farm-protests-the-ordinary-dalit-did-not--61ca852818c48>
- 23 MAKAAAM (2021) 'Statement on repeal of farm laws', 24 November. <https://makaam.in/latest-statements/>
- 24 The webinars are available on the NAPM YouTube channel (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OWAeAJNqrlA>)
- 25 For more information, see the ASHA-Kisan Swaraj website (<https://kisanswaraj.in/>)
- 26 This nexus, of course, predates the passage of the farm laws. One prominent and related example is the government's attempts in 2015 to dilute provisions of the Right to Fair Compensation and Transparency in Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Re-Settlement Act. The amendments, which aimed to make land acquisition easier for private companies, were ultimately rolled back after strong protests by farmers' organisations and opposition parties.
- 27 Vishwadeepak (2020) 'Protests against farm laws take anti-Ambani, anti-Adani turn in Punjab', 12 October. <https://www.nationalheraldindia.com/india/protests-against-farm-laws-take-anti-ambani-anti-adani-turn-in-punjab>





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