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The Indian Farmer Makes Her Voice Heard

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SUMMARY In August 2020, thousands of farmers, mostly from Punjab, Haryana, and western Uttar Pradesh, gathered on the outskirts of India's national capital, New Delhi, to protest the passage of three controversial "farm laws" perceived by these farmers as threats to their livelihoods and well-being. Though the farm laws would affect only a small percentage of India's farmers, over the next 16 months the protests attracted participation from across the country, cutting across class, caste, gender, and religious identities. While the proximate driver seemed to be the farmers' fear of losing legal protections against a collapse in the market price of their produce, broader economic, ecological, and social factors helped trigger the movement. The protestors employed several strategies that made their movement successful enough in pushing back against a hugely popular government to bring about a repeal of the laws the farmers objected to.

Victory for Farmers

On November 20, 2021, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced the withdrawal of controversial “farm laws” that sought to liberalize agricultural production and trading.¹ This marked the triumphant culmination of a 16-month struggle that saw over 40,000 farmers camping in protest on the outskirts of India’s national capital, New Delhi. The protest was coordinated by the *Samyukt Kisan Morcha* (SKM, United Farmers’ Front), a coalition of over 40 farmers’ unions from across India. Participation was initially confined to well-off farmers from the irrigated belts of Punjab, Haryana, and western Uttar Pradesh (UP), but soon grew to become a movement encompassing the concerns of small farmers and even non-farmers, including forest-dwelling communities, minorities, women, and rural and urban wageworkers. The anti-farm law (AFL) movement became a symbol for the larger struggle for democracy and for the freedom of dissent, and against a government viewed as intolerant of criticism. Throughout the long protest, the government and segments of the popular media alike accused the farmers of being *parjeevis*² (parasites), *bhole bhale* (simple-minded), and even of being *khalistanis* or Punjabi separatists. Yet, despite these insults, the AFL protest continued. The Indian government ultimately acquiesced to the farmers’ demand and repealed the farm laws. The “simple-minded” farmers prevailed against a government that was adept at using mass media, social media, and its own electoral majority to overcome opposition and push through even the most contentious policies without much discussion.³

The AFL movement was initially driven by the perceived threat to the existing regime of Minimum Support Price (MSP) and assured procurement. MSP is a state-sponsored market intervention introduced in the 1960s to promote the Green Revolution among farmers. In this phase, the movement had very limited appeal, mostly attracting participation from a small

subset of farmers from a handful of northern Indian states. As the movement unfolded, however, a broader conception of “MSP regime” came to the forefront. Combined with the twin demands of increasing the MSP to at least 1.5 times the cost of cultivation and guaranteeing it to all farmers through a national law, the movement broadened its appeal and drew participation from farmers across the country. However, it would be erroneous to reduce the AFL movement to an MSP movement. In this article, we delineate the social, economic, and ecological underpinnings of the AFL movement. Further, we identify the factors that helped this particular movement make the gains that it did, and the key lessons that it has to offer.

“Farm Laws Must Be Repealed”

The immediate trigger for the farmers’ agitation was the passage of three “farm laws,” which they viewed individually and cumulatively as threats to a state-supported system of agricultural commodity trading and, thereby, the livelihoods of farmers, particularly those from Punjab, Haryana, and western Uttar Pradesh.

The Farmers’ Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Act of 2020 liberalized the sale and purchase of agricultural commodities, including food grains. A key provision of this law was to free government agencies from the requirement that they procure commodities at a guaranteed price and thereby protect farmers from falling prices (during bumper crops, for instance). This is the Minimum Support Price (MSP).

The Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement of Price Assurance and Farm Services Act of 2020 proposed a framework of contract farming where farmers could directly enter into agreements with buyers to produce specific crops, but farmers felt it was dangerously thin on details regarding price security and dispute resolution.

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Finally, the Essential Commodities (Amendment) Act of 2020 would have removed existing limits on the quantity of agricultural commodities that could be stored by private traders, allowing them to hold as much stock of essential commodities as they deemed fit.

These laws aimed to liberalize agricultural commodity trading in India, with the government claiming that the laws would increase agricultural incomes by unshackling farmers from the clutches of middlemen and a select group of traders in the commodity markets.

Expanding the MSP

The farmers, particularly those from northern Indian states such as Punjab, Haryana, and Western Uttar Pradesh who benefitted immensely from the existing MSP regime, were concerned that these laws were a precursor to dismantling the MSPs, which guaranteed farmers a minimum price for their crops. The threat to the MSPs was the immediate trigger for the AFL movement, with farmers from states like Punjab and Haryana being among those who were first to protest.

The AFL movement demanded that the MSP be universalized for all farmers across the country. The movement also demanded that the recommendations of the Swaminathan Commission⁴ be implemented in full. Dr. M.S. Swaminathan, one of the architects of the Green Revolution, chaired the Commission, which sought solutions to the growing incidence of farmers' suicides. It had recommended that the MSP be fixed at 1.5 times the cost of production of a crop, and that the scope of the MSP be expanded to include more crops. The AFL movement went further, demanding that the Indian Parliament pass a law guaranteeing MSP to all Indian farmers. As Ashok Dhawale, president of the largest farmers' union in India, put it, "a legal guarantee for a remunerative

MSP can ameliorate farmers' distress in India."⁵ The movement, however, strove to widen the contours of the MSP debate by looking beyond mere procurement of grains. Others within the AFL movement such as Kavita Kuruganti, a prominent sustainable agriculture activist from Bengaluru, have advocated a more expansive view of MSP. Kuruganti has argued that other crops besides rice and wheat, such as millets, be procured at the MSP. She has also championed compensating farmers for the difference between MSP and market price when the latter is lower.

The AFL movement, however, was not driven solely by the fear of losing the MSP or by the desire for a universal MSP. There were broader economic, ecological, and social factors that helped triggered the movement.

Distress in Indian Agriculture

Falling agricultural incomes, rising costs of cultivation, increasing indebtedness among rural households, the ecological limits of the Green Revolution, climate change, and growing inequalities within rural society were all responsible for the angst among farmers that ultimately motivated them to camp on the Delhi outskirts.

Stagnant or falling agricultural incomes

Farming does not earn enough for the farmers. Between 2012-13 and 2018-19, real agricultural incomes⁶ fell by 12.47 percent. This decline has been observed across all landholding classes, whether marginal (< 2.5 acres of operational landholdings) or large (> 25 acres). Lack of remunerative prices of agricultural commodities, cutbacks in government subsidies on key inputs like fertilizers and seeds, and rising costs of cultivation have all contributed to the decline in farm incomes. Most agricultural households, irrespective of their landholdings, have diversified into animal husbandry and salary/wage work. However, this diversification

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appears to have played out differently depending on the landholdings. Thus, large landholders saw a significant increase in their income from salary/wage work and animal husbandry (114 percent and 211 percent, respectively), whereas for marginal and small farmers (2.5-5 acres), this increase was more modest (38 percent and 60 percent for the former, and 50 percent and 60 percent for the latter, respectively). Large landholders, given their greater resources, are likely to be in a better position to make the investments necessary to diversify their income sources. These include buying better cattle breeds and providing them with better feed and fodder, or accessing superior education, which would help them in seeking out better paying jobs. This could partly explain the discrepancies seen in the rate of increase in the income earned from animal husbandry and from salary/wages.

The decline in agricultural incomes and the growing inability of farming to provide rural households with reliable and sufficient income are at the root of the agricultural households' distress. It is for this reason that marginal and small farmers lent their strength to the AFL movement in large numbers. As Dhawale pointed out, farmers with less than two acres of land "formed a predominant section of the Delhi struggle,⁷ although sections of rich farmers also participated in the struggle." What surprised the organizers of the movement was the enthusiastic participation of the large farmers, who in the past had stayed away from farmers' movements. This hints at the possibility that they too are feeling the pinch of declining agricultural incomes.

Increasing cost of cultivation

Alongside falling agricultural incomes is the rising cost of cultivation. A survey of data for six important crops grown in India—paddy, wheat, groundnut, cotton, sugarcane, and green gram⁸—shows that the cost of cultivation went up by an average of between 4 percent, for sugarcane, and 59 percent, for green gram.⁹ Among

the various components of agricultural costs, the most significant increase was seen for fertilizers, insecticides/pesticides, and interest on loans.¹⁰ Together, these components make up a significant percentage of the total cultivation costs and contribute significantly to an increase in the overall cost of cultivation. This trend holds true across all landholding classes. However, such an increase has graver implications for marginal and small landholders. Given that even in normal times, the return on investment for these households is marginal, a significant increase in cultivation costs would translate into outright losses. This, in turn, translates into more people from these landholding classes quitting agriculture altogether, as is evidenced by the fact that the percentage of rural households who report agriculture as their primary occupation has declined over the past thirty years.¹¹ In response, many marginal and small farmers today resort to "distress migration" and work in urban centers under highly precarious conditions.

Rising debt levels

Rising costs of cultivation coupled with stagnant or falling incomes compel rural households to borrow. Declining agricultural incomes also mean that agricultural households must borrow to maintain their consumption levels. Thus, there has been a general increase in household debt across rural India. The mean number of loans for all landholding categories nearly doubled in this duration, going up from an average of 1.5 loans to nearly 3 loans.¹² The amount borrowed, in real terms, witnessed a three- to five-fold increase for all landholding categories. Finally, the ratio of total debts to total assets went up by 13 to 33 percent across all landholding categories. However, there are significant differences in how indebtedness plays out across landholding classes.¹³

Large landholders tended to borrow higher sums of money, possibly to finance big-ticket purchases such as a tractor or land. On the

other hand, wage workers tended to be deeper in debt. Households across the landholding spectrum witnessed a significant increase in their debt-to-asset ratio, but the increase was most pronounced for wageworkers. Uncertainties inherent to wage work mean that there are frequent disruptions to income flow. Households involved in this work resort to borrowing to keep up their consumption levels and to meet social and cultural obligations. Rising debt levels have contributed to the growing distress among agricultural households. The AFL protests provided a valuable platform for farmers from across the country to discuss this issue and to express their angst.

Ecological limits of the Green Revolution

The use of high-yielding seeds, chemical fertilizers and pesticides, and the extraction of groundwater for irrigation, are aspects of the Green Revolution¹⁴ (GR). This approach helped turn India from a food-deficit nation into a food-surplus one. This transition, however, has come at a steep ecological cost. The intensive and sustained use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides has resulted in degraded soils and polluted water sources.

The heavy dependence on groundwater has triggered a “race to the bottom” in many regions of India. In the arid and semi-arid regions of the country, groundwater is the principal source for domestic consumption needs. The exploitation of groundwater for agriculture and domestic use has proven to be a double blow, turning many parts of India into water-stressed regions.¹⁵ The degradation of soil and water in turn depress crop yields. The decline in yields traps farmers into a vicious cycle where they have to use ever higher doses of chemicals and dig still deeper tube-wells to access as yet untapped reserves of groundwater.

All this calls for significant financial investments, which unfortunately are not readily available to most farmers. The resulting increase in the cost of cultivation forces many households to

borrow beyond their means, thus landing them in a debt trap. This is another cause for the rising distress among agricultural households, which found a voice through the AFL movement.

Climate change

Shifts in patterns of rainfall, temperature, and the occurrence of extreme events such as droughts have imbued agriculture, and farmers’ lives, with uncertainty. In northern Indian states where wheat is the mainstay of agriculture, even a slight increase in temperature can reduce the overall yields. In arid and semi-arid regions of India, high temperatures can result in loss of soil moisture, while recurring droughts deplete water sources such as tanks and groundwater aquifers.¹⁶ These scenarios result in significant crop loss, which in turn translates into income loss for farmers.

Climate change also pushes small farmers to make significant investments in seeds, irrigation, and fertilizers to mitigate the change. This increases the cost of production, making agriculture expensive, especially for small farmers. Climate change combined with declining state support for small farmer agriculture could be another reason why the AFL movement attracted the participation of farmers from across the country.

Inequalities and uncertainties

Inequalities have been growing, both between large and small farmers, and between farmers and other occupational groups. Large farmers, often from upper castes, are better positioned to marshal credit and other inputs needed for agriculture relative to smaller farmers, many of whom are from marginalized castes. At the same time, a general decline in farm incomes has meant that households across the entire landholding spectrum that largely depend on farming earn less relative to other types of workers.

Furthermore, even large farmers have little control over the different aspects of agricul-

tural production, be it weather, the cost of inputs, or the sale price of their produce. As Kuruganti explains:

It is not just uncertainty. I think it's the lack of control of a farmer over her enterprise...It begins with the land that they inherit...The uncertainty element begins with where you were born, your agroclimatic conditions, and the kind of land that you have inherited or not inherited. Starting from there, your enterprise (farming) is out of your control. How to tame so many factors to work in your favor is the challenge of farming really.¹⁷

Given these social, economic, and environmental stresses, how did farmers beat a politically astute government that had the vast resources of the state, and several pliant media channels, at its disposal? What strategies did they adopt?

The Road to Victory

The AFL movement was launched with the goal of getting the Indian government to repeal the farm laws. Over time the movement added other demands that sought to enhance farm incomes and sustain input support from the government.

Three strategies served the protesting farmers. The first was to form a broad-based alliance of farmers' unions. The SKM brought together unions from across the ideological spectrum—Marxists and centrists, socialists and free-market champions, advocates of commercial farming and those standing for sustainable agricultural practices, “progressives” and “conservatives”—something that had never happened in the history of independent India. Kuruganti saw this unity among farmers' unions as one of the biggest accomplishments of the AFL movement. These unions developed an appreciation for, and learned from, each other, not only in their articulations about the challenges facing Indian agriculture, but also how they went about addressing them. To craft a common narrative against the farm laws, they learned to negotiate across their

differences to find areas of convergence while placing their divergences on the back burner.

The second strategy was to consciously articulate the concerns of a broad spectrum of farmers, and not just of those who would have been directly impacted by the farm laws. The movement realized early on that it had a better chance of succeeding if it could go beyond the confines of the farm laws and represent the concerns of *all* farmers including those from arid and semi-arid regions. Thus, in addition to demanding that the farm laws be repealed, one of the core demands of the AFL movement was that the central government pass a law making MSP a legal right for all farmers.

The third strategy was to reach out to seemingly incompatible groups. Kuruganti reported that the AFL movement engaged with the *Khap Panchayats*, community groups that set rules for social conduct for people in designated areas comprising several villages. These groups are very powerful, especially in parts of Haryana and Uttar Pradesh, and have over the years gained notoriety for their regressive positions on women and Dalits (people of low caste). However, there is another facet to these institutions: they take enormous pride in their identity as farmers, and the arguments made by the AFL movement struck a chord with them. Participants in the movement set aside their reservations about *khaps* and engaged them without compromising on their inclusive ideals, which added considerable ballast to the movement.

Alongside these strategies, there are five operational aspects that stood the movement in good stead. First is the adherence to the Gandhian principles of *satyagraha* (passive political resistance) and non-violence. The movement made a conscious attempt to remain peaceful, despite numerous provocations, and repeatedly signaled that it was an inclusive space for all groups including women, religious minorities, Dalits, and Adivasis (indigenous groups). The second aspect that proved to be a force multiplier was the religious precepts of Sikhism. The Sikh teaching of *Seva* (service) and the practice of

langar (community kitchen) contributed significantly to the months-long movement. The sense of *seva* motivated people from all walks of life to contribute to the movement in myriad ways.

The third operational aspect that strengthened the movement was intellectual deftness. The movement adroitly blended diverse intellectual strands including Marxism, Ambedkarism (opposition to the caste system and other bases of social discrimination), Gandhism, feminism, and religious teachings to craft an eclectic idiom of protest. Fourth, the AFL movement used space shrewdly. When the farmers reached the Delhi outskirts in their tractors and trolleys, they were prevented from entering the city. As they were deciding on a site for their protest, the Delhi state government offered a nearby *maidan* or ground where they could camp for the duration of the protest. However, realizing that if they opted for the *maidan*, their movement would gain no visibility whatsoever, they opted to camp on the highway. Indeed, this decision was crucial for their success, ensuring that they received daily coverage from the local, national, and international media.

Finally, the farmers proved to be remarkably media savvy. Through a well-organized social media campaign comprising regular updates on Twitter, Facebook, blogs, and vlogs, they ensured that their views were widely disseminated. Spokespersons of the movement never shied away from talking to the mainstream media, despite the latter's hostility towards them. The movement also published a well-curated newsletter called *Trolley Times* that combined poetry, visual art, and reportage to give readers insights into the farmers' concerns.

The AFL movement, as scholars have shown, is not just about agricultural policy. Instead, it must be viewed in light of the rise of Hindu nationalism in India. The movement strove to articulate a progressive and inclusive vision of rural development that was predicated on Hindu-Muslim unity.¹⁸ The movement consciously included voices of not just Muslims but also of other marginalized groups such as

women, Dalits, indigenous groups, small farmers, and agricultural laborers.

The Fight Continues

The anti-farm law movement has implications for Indian democracy and beyond. The movement has shown that with tenacity and creativity, it was possible to mount a credible opposition to a popular government led by a charismatic leader. The farmers successfully demonstrated that with a willingness to dig in and fight, political opposition in India could carve a space for itself. The AFL movement is now over, and the farm laws have been repealed. The structural issues at the heart of Indian agriculture, however, have been left unaddressed.

First is the urgent need to make MSPs a more effective instrument in guaranteeing the income security of farmers and the food security of the nation.^{19,20} Second, farmer-led institutions at the subdistrict and village levels should have greater agriculture-related decision-making powers.²¹ This would improve the odds of local agroclimatic and socioeconomic realities receiving due consideration in agricultural planning. Third, the government should take urgent steps to enhance the incomes of farmers and pull them out of debt traps. Viable models for this already exist in some states. The government of Telangana, for instance, guarantees a minimum income every agricultural season to most small and marginal farmers.²² Such programs should be scaled up. Finally, policies and programs that encourage farmers to take up ecologically friendly agriculture are needed. Such policies should incentivize sustainable agricultural practices that encourage farmers to consider alternatives to pesticides, fertilizers, and the overuse of groundwater.²³ As the architects of the AFL movement realize, placing these issues front and center of the national discourse on agriculture is the big challenge ahead.

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Notes

- ¹ NDTV, Nov. 19, 2021, <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/pm-narendra-modi-says-3-farm-laws-to-be-withdrawn-2616711>
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- ¹¹ Census of India for 1991, 2001, and 2011. <https://censusindia.gov.in/census.website/data/census-tables>
- ¹² All-India Debt and Investment Survey for the years 1992, 2003, and 2013. [https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1753935#:~:text=Incidence%20of%20indebtedness%20\(IOI\)%20as,%2C%2020.6%25%20other%20households](https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1753935#:~:text=Incidence%20of%20indebtedness%20(IOI)%20as,%2C%2020.6%25%20other%20households)
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- ¹⁸ Baviskar.A and Levien, M., (2021). Farmers' protests in India: introduction to the JPS Forum. *Journal of Peasant Studies*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2021.1998002>
- ¹⁹ An example is Madhya Pradesh's Bhavantar Bhugtan Yojana or Price-difference Compensation Scheme. https://www.google.com/search?q=madhya+pradesh+bhavantar+bhugtan+yojana&rlz=1C1GCEA_enUS988US988&coq=madhya+pradesh+bhugtan+yo&aqs=chrome.1.69i57j0i22i30.7535j0j9&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8
- ²⁰ Via Campesina has advocated for decentralized food production. See: <https://viacampesina.org/en/>
- ²¹ Grassroots organizations like the Deccan Development Society of Telangana have demonstrated this. See: <http://www.ddsindia.com/www/default.asp>
- ²² Rythu Bandhu program is an example. For more, see: <http://rythubandhu.telangana.gov.in/>
- ²³ For more on this, visit the website of Alliance for Sustainable and Holistic Agriculture, India. <https://agriculturesrc.wordpress.com/agriculture-books/>

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