

India: Narendra Modi's got a farmers problem

The tide is turning for the Hindutva in rural India.

Thursday 27 December 2018, by [NILSEN Alf Gunvald](#) (Date first published: 26 December 2018).

"Modi Sarkar Murdabad! Murdabad! Murdabad!" (Down with the Modi government! Down! Down!)

This was one of the slogans that reverberated in the streets of New Delhi as tens of thousands of farmers [marched](#) through the Indian capital in the last two days of November. The protesters were demanding political action in response to the deep [crisis in India's countryside](#). "We are very angry with the Central government," a farmer from Jhabua, one of India's poorest districts, [told a reporter](#). "They have not fulfilled any of the promises they made for farmers."

Organised by the All-India Kisan Sangharsh Coordination Committee, a network of more than 200 farmers' organisations from across India, the two-day Kisan Mukti March (Farmers' Liberation March) raised [several demands](#) to alleviate the plight of the peasantry - firstly, that a Joint Session of Parliament should be held to discuss the agrarian crisis; secondly, that minimum support prices should be introduced for agricultural produce; and thirdly, that laws should be passed to secure debt relief for farmers.

The representatives of 21 opposition parties lent their support to the massive demonstration. "Farmers are not begging, they want what is rightfully due to them," [declared Arvind Kejriwal](#), leader of the Aam Admi Party.

The march in New Delhi was not the first organised display of anger and discontent among India's farmers since Narendra Modi and the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) took power after a landslide victory in the 2014 elections. Quite the contrary - this was [the third time in 2018](#) that farmers took to the streets of New Delhi to protest against political inaction in the face of crisis.

Looking back a little further, the past year and a half has witnessed several major agrarian protests. During the summer of 2017, protests and riots erupted in several rural areas, and in Mandsaur city in BJP-ruled Madhya Pradesh state, six farmers were [shot and killed by police](#) during violent demonstrations.

During the same year, farmers from Tamil Nadu state in southern India [protested in New Delhi](#) for more than 100 days. In March 2018, some 25,000 farmers in the state of Maharashtra - also ruled by the BJP - marched from the city of Nasik to Mumbai to demand debt relief, minimum support prices, and land rights. And in late November, another march took place in Maharashtra. This time 20,000 farmers marched from the city Thane to Mumbai to demand drought compensation.

These large-scale protests have been taking place against the backdrop of [widespread and increasing unrest](#) throughout India's vast countryside - often rooted in the discontent generated by

agricultural stagnation, unemployment, and state-sponsored land grabs.

This situation begs two important questions: Why is this happening? And why are agrarian protests significant in relation to the wider political scenario in terms of the upcoming general election in April of next year?

The current agrarian unrest in India is, above all, symptomatic of the crisis of the country's agricultural sector - and particularly [the toll](#) that this crisis is taking on the country's small and marginal farmers. [At the heart of this crisis](#) is a pincer movement where the costs of cultivation have escalated strongly, while at the same time, agricultural incomes have declined or stagnated.

This has resulted in increasing levels of indebtedness as farmers [borrow money](#) at usurious interest rates - often upward of 60 percent - which more often than not is impossible to pay back. The most grotesque result of this situation is the epidemic of [suicides](#) among farmers and agricultural workers that has swept across India in recent years. In 2016, which is the last year for which data is available, more than 11,300 farmers and agricultural workers [committed suicide](#).

Contrary to Prime Minister Modi's message that he would bring "acche din" (good days) to the people of India, the condition of Indian farmers has [deteriorated](#) since 2014, as the cost of inputs have continued to [rise](#) and prices for agricultural products have kept [dropping](#).

The current government has not responded adequately to the problem of farmer indebtedness, and in addition, the agricultural sector has been extremely negatively impacted by [demonetisation](#) - the 2016 decision of the BJP government to withdraw 500 and 1000 rupee notes from circulation, purportedly to curb the flow of black money and combat corruption. In light of these facts, Modi's claim that his government [aims to double](#) the incomes of farmers by 2020 naturally rings hollow in the ears of those who marched in New Delhi a few weeks back.

In a country where [most voters still live in rural areas](#) and poor people participate more actively in elections than rich people, these high levels of agrarian distress and unrest are of course of great consequence.

After the general elections in 2014, Modi's BJP appeared to be somewhat of an unstoppable force. Its massive 2016 victory in the state of Uttar Pradesh was further testimony to the party's status as an electoral juggernaut, and until recently, the party held power in 20 of India's 29 states. However, ever since [the lacklustre performance](#) in the assembly elections in Modi's home state of Gujarat in late 2017, the BJP's electoral fortunes appear to have been waning.

In the first half of 2018, [the party lost parliamentary by-elections](#) in both Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, and in early December - not long after peasant protesters flooded the streets of New Delhi - the BJP was [voted out of power](#) in the states of Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, and Chhattisgarh. As many commentators have noted, discontented rural voters played a key role in all these setbacks to Modi's regime.

This, in turn, suggests that the configuration that enabled Modi's sweeping victory in the 2014 general election is disintegrating. Crucially, [as I have argued elsewhere](#), the BJP's ability to capture an absolute majority in parliament four and a half years ago was based in no small part on a relatively successful effort to extend the party's vote base beyond the urban, middle class, and upper caste groups that have been its traditional pillars of support.

More specifically, the party was [successful](#) in increasing its vote share among lower caste groups

and the rural poor who have tended to vote either for Congress or regional caste-based parties. The fact that this strategy now seems to be disintegrating - at the same time as the country's opposition parties have found a common rallying point precisely in India's agrarian crisis - does not bode well for Modi and the ruling dispensation.

However, whereas in 2019, rural India might very well turn out to be the rock against which the Modi wave finally breaks, a resolution of India's agrarian crisis requires more than just the removal of the current regime in New Delhi. The roots of the crisis run deeper than the Modi regime - indeed, it has been [developing for two decades](#) as a result of neoliberal policies that have been pursued both by Congress and BJP governments.

Therefore, a genuine alternative for those who languish in the underbelly of the Indian economic boom will require a break not just with Modi, but with the market-oriented policy regimes that heighten dispossession and deepening inequality in India today.

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