

India: Portents from the United Resistance to Anti-Farmer Laws

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In the 25 years of my involvement with the student and peasant movements, last week's Pratirodh Diwas or Resistance Day against the Union government's three Anti-Farmer Acts has been by far the farmers' most widespread agitation.

A call by the All India Kisan Sangharsh Coordination Committee (AIKSCC) saw trades unions and many mass organisations and civil society groups extend active solidarity to farmers. It has been a historic resistance, with people coming out in lakhs across India.

Farmers were supported actively by the Central Trade Unions, organisations of Workers, Students, Women, Youth, Dalits and Adivasis across the country, in a unique show of solidarity with farmers which is not an everyday happening.

Despite the corona pandemic, restrictions, repression and rain in many states people's participation in the protest action was overwhelming. Why?

This massive show of anger and disapproval against the Narendra Modi led BJP government is no spontaneous outburst against a perceived injustice. It is rather one result of meticulous efforts to build broad, issue-based unity among farmers over the last six years.

The first such instance was when the BJP government brought the Land Acquisition Ordinance in December 2014. It was immediately opposed by mass burning of the ordinance in over 400 districts, and the Bhumi Adhikar Andolan (Movement for Earth Rights) formed around issues of land and forest rights and resources came into being.

Organisations of the peasantry, agricultural labour, Adivasis, Dalits, fishing community and forest workers came together. The struggles built by the Bhumi Adhikar Andolan contributed in some measure to the government's withdrawing the ordinance.

Over years of united struggle, these organisations came to agree upon an ever increasing range of issues and facts, achieving a broad consensus against neoliberal economic policies, fascist forces, communal, casteist attacks, attacks on the Constitution and curbs on democratic rights.

In 2017, after the police killed six farmers in Mandsaur, Madhya Pradesh, the AIKSCC was formed. Initially a unity around two issues, namely assured remunerative prices and freedom from indebtedness, it now has over 200 farmers' organisations countrywide under its umbrella.

Organisations of the working class have had a tradition of issue-based unity where disparate unions came together under the banner of Central Trade Unions, with numerous Joint Actions including many nationwide strikes on pressing economic demands.

The most significant aspect of these developments over the last six years has been the greater

solidarities emerging between organisations representing the peasantry and those representing the working class as well as the oppressed.

Retired soldiers and victims of the Chit Fund Scam too have come out in support of these struggles. Massive marches on Parliament by the peasantry and in unison with the working class as well as oppressed sections were a hallmark of the period 2014-19.

This trend has far-reaching implications for the future of the country.

The second coming of Narendra Modi in 2019 with a bigger margin has seen an arrogant, aggressive Union government pursue a divisive communal agenda and further entrench neoliberal economic policies. The promises of Achhe Din, two crore jobs for the youth every year, and doubling farmers' incomes have all come a cropper.

In a state of economic recession and acute agrarian crisis where millions of workers lost jobs, farmers in distress committed suicide, youth remained unemployed, the poor were in hunger, the government relentlessly pursued policies to facilitate corporate profiteering.

In such a situation the pandemic struck. All the peasantry and toiling masses suffered huge losses of income and sustained debt due to the unplanned lockdown. Unemployment touched a high of 27% and over 12 crore Indians are reported to be unemployed.

The government did not ensure access to health or even foodgrains for the poor. Instead of providing relief with compensatory income, debt waivers, food provision, employment generation and health facilities, the BJP government is only showering unending benefits and subsidies to big businesses.

It saw the pandemic as an opportunity to give public largesse and free rein to its corporate cronies. We have seen the manner in which workers' rights are being snatched and how three bills were pushed through Parliament without any consultation with state governments or farmers' organisations.

Meanwhile the government goes on oppressing those who dissent and arresting activists.

There have been massive protests on these issues of the peasantry and workers. The three government ordinances and the Electricity (Amendment) Bill of 2020 were burnt in protest in more than 3,000 centres across India within a week of their promulgation.

A united movement by workers, peasants and agricultural workers has been underway and an elaborate plan worked out for struggle. This year on August 9 when the Quit India Movement got underway, and on September 5, massive united struggles took place with over 2 million participating across the country in each of these actions.

The AIKSCC, Central Trade Unions and the Bhumi Adhikar Andolan have been in the forefront of these struggles. On September 25 the Pratirodh Diwas saw a beautiful resistance being built against the anti-farmer bills.

Instead of addressing the real issues of farmers and workers, the BJP-RSS has been trying to divert our attention through a divisive communal campaign.

Clearly, a sizeable section of the farmers, workers and masses out on the streets protesting on economic issues have been BJP voters, and probably didn't disagree much with the fascist agenda of the Sangh Parivar - including its attacks on the Constitution and our democratic rights.

The challenge before us is to expose this face of the BJP, RSS, Sangh Parivar and enlist more people's support on the streets for a pro-people alternative, a Common Minimum Programme around which all can unite.

The LDF Government in Kerala has won acclaim in this Pandemic for the universal access to quality health and education facilities, universal Public Distribution System inclusive of essential commodities other than food grains, universal housing and social welfare pensions which touch every family.

It has given support to farmers and cooperatives, not corporates.

An alternative involving these elements, land and forest rights, as well as decentralised planning which would stand rock solid against neoliberal economic policies, caste oppression as well as communalism, and in defence of democratic rights, could be the starting point to work a political transformation in India.

We need to envisage a Struggle Front of organisations of workers, peasants, all oppressed communities, women, students and youth around such an alternative. It will require patience and immense courage, going far beyond electoral arithmetic and dalliances.

The challenge is surely not easy; nor is it impossible.

These united struggles bring the hope that an alternative is eminently possible.

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