

India: 'The law related to APMCs is a death warrant'

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At the Delhi-Haryana protests, the farmers' demands include a repeal of the three new farm laws - and they are determined to confront barbed wire, barricades, their own losses, humiliation and more to be heard

"When protestors block a road or damage it, they are branded as criminals. What if governments do the same? Are they not what they call us?" asks 70-year-old Harinder Singh Lakha, a farmer from Mehna village in Punjab's Moga district.

Lakha is referring to the 10-foot trenches dug in the roads by the authorities to prevent Punjab's marching farmers from entering Delhi. For days now, well over 100,000 farmers from the state, along with many from Uttar Pradesh and Haryana, have been compelled to fight pitched battles with the police and other forces for the right to enter their country's capital city.

While the Delhi police relented after three days of confrontation, the Haryana government is still preventing the protestors from crossing the state borders. And though they have publicly been given permission to enter the capital, on the ground the central government has not tried to make that any easier. Despite the 'permission', the trenches, the barbed wire, the barricades - all remain. And the tear gas shells and water cannons have left a lingering trail of destruction.

The farmers have come together to protest against the three farm laws passed by the Centre in September this year. They point out that [the law](#) related to the Agricultural Produce Marketing Committees (APMCs) will destroy the system of *mandis* which has worked reasonably for them. It will destroy the MSP (minimum support price) process and allow large agro-chains and corporations to control prices. They know that this and the other two laws not only fail to mandate an MSP, but also make no mention at all of the Swaminathan (National Commission for Farmers) reports. The farmers have pointed out that the second of these laws, the [Farmers \(Empowerment And Protection\) Agreement On Price Assurance And Farm Services Act, 2020](#), which deals with contracts, unduly favours private traders and large corporations. And that the amended [Essential Commodities Act](#) also boosts corporations, allowing stockpiling and hoarding while stifling the bargaining power of farmers.

The protestors' demands include a repeal of these three laws.

"This [the law related to APMCs] is a death warrant," says Surjeet Man, from Bahola village in Karnal district in Haryana, where he cultivates wheat and rice on around 2.5 acres. "If our crops get destroyed (while I am at the protests), let that happen this once. But our next generations should not suffer."

The farmers are wary and worried about the private entities who could gain control - empowered by these laws - over the country's agriculture. "We will not let the Adanis and Ambanis come to Punjab," says Baldev Singh, 72, from Kot Budha village in Punjab's Tarn Taran district. He has

travelled over 500 kilometres, passing multiple barricades, to be here. Singh has grown food crops all his life on his family's 12-acre farmland, where he should be right now. But, he says, "In the final years of my life, I am on the roads, under these clouds of uncertainty."

Kot Budha is not far from the India-Pakistan border. "I have seen barbed wires," Singh says. "Never did it occur to me that I would have to face them one day. That too for trying to enter the capital of my country."

"This is a straightforward fight with the centre," says Bhim Singh, eyes alight. The 68-year-old farmer from Khanpur Kalan village in Haryana's Sonapat district cultivates 1.5 acres. He adds that either the government takes the farm laws back or he and his brethren will stop growing food for others.

He recalls Sir Chhotu Ram, who fought for the peasants against the British. "The English were paying 25-50 paise for a quintal [of grain] and Sir was demanding roughly Rs. 10. He said that the farmers would rather burn the harvest than bow down to the colonial powers," Bhim says. "If the Modi government does not listen, we might have to actually do that."

In October 2018, the prime minister had inaugurated a statue of Sir Chhotu Ram in Rohtak, and [had said](#) that India has deprived itself by restricting his legacy and message to just one state. But now, Bhim Singh adds, "His government is insulting our Sir by bringing these laws."

"I cannot see my country dying of hunger," says 70-year-old Harinder Singh, a five-acre farmer from Mehna village in Punjab's Moga district. "There would be no guarantee [as a result of the new laws] of the government purchasing farmers' produce and the entire Public Distribution System could come into question."

Will the corporates not feed the poor? I ask. "Feeding the poor? The corporates are feeding on the poor," he replies. "If they were not doing that, we could be addressing this question of yours."

The farmers' have been protesting for months now. Their talks with authorities at different levels reached nowhere. "There will not be any conversation with Agriculture Minister Narendra Singh Tomar. Now we will have a dialogue with Prime Minister Narendra Modi," says Surjeet Mann from Bahola village in Karnal.

"First, we came to Delhi for a meeting [when the Parliament session was on]. They insulted us. Now we are coming again. This time they beat us," said Baldev Singh of Kot Budha village. "First adding salt, then wounding."

"It moistens our eyes, this in return from the government for bringing the country out of starvation," say Baldev Singh and Hrinder Singh.

"Be it the Congress, the Bharatiya Janata Party or the local Akali Dal, all political parties connived with each other to loot Punjab. The Aam Aadmi Party also trailed in their paths," says Jograj Singh, 62, a 12-acre farmer from Moga in Punjab.

The farmers are agitated about the national media too. "They are showing us in a negative way. The reporters are not talking to us in detail," adds Jograj Singh. "How can they understand the issue without talking to the aggrieved? They should have shown the truth. The death warrant that the government has readied for us. They should have shown that if the government wants to snatch our lands, so be it. But first let it cut us into pieces."

A multitude of voices breaks out:

“Contract farming will increase. Though they will initially give high prices in farming, this will serve as the free Jio SIM card scheme. Slowly, they will become the boss on our land.”

“Through contract, they can raise structures on our land and for that they could get a loan. If the harvest does not go well, or in case of contract-breach, they will run away. And we shall have to pay the loan. If unable to pay, our land will go.”

“The police personnel [at the protests] are our children. They too understand that the government is harming the farmers. It is pitting them against us. If they are getting salaries for *lathi*-charging us, they have our bodies. We will feed them either way.”

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