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Many Battles Lie Ahead for India's Indigenous farmers

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Indigenous farmers are at the centre of the massive mobilisation of peasants in Maharashtra

"You see this hut? From here on, it is all our land," says Kisan Gujar. [[1](#)]

We're in a car, and I'm driving to give Ashok Dhawale some rest. Dusk is falling, and we're driving out of Kalwan. Also with us is Prasad of the social media team. We had driven over 200 km to get here earlier in the day, with Ashok at the wheel the whole time.

"Till where," I ask.

"All the way to the hill," Gujar says, pointing to the horizon.

"Oh." But I don't understand. What does he mean by "our land"?

Ashok perceives my confusion. "All this is forest land being cultivated by Adivasi farmers, for which the Kisan Sabha got them the possession." The Forest Rights Act (FRA), passed by the first UPA government under pressure from the Left, made it easier for Adivasis to open the way for giving them their right to the land that they had been tilling for generations. When we were driving in, too, I had seen the red flag in many fields – on little huts, on electric poles, on trees. Now I understood what that meant.

There isn't much activity on most fields, which look dry and fallow. I see grapes being cultivated here and there. Many years ago I had driven past several vineyards and wineries, and I know that some of the best Indian wine comes from the Nashik region. At some places I see harvested onion being stored. This is also onion country.

"The traders are paying farmers only Rs 1,000 for onions, even though this variety lasts about six months," Gujar explains. "They'll hold on to it, and only release this in the winter, when the supply goes down and they can make a killing. The farmer gets nothing. Last year, the traders pushed the rate down to as low as 400. It was cheaper for farmers to destroy the onion than sell it. The traders are with Congress BJP. The farmers are with us."

We had come by the main highway route in the morning, and all along, we had seen groups of farmers going to the Kisan Vijay March. The entire town of Kalwan was red. Red flags everywhere. Red wall writing. And red caps. After the rally, Gujar got us out from a tiny, winding, picturesque back road because, he said, the main road will have all of our people going back, leading to heavy traffic and congestion.

Ajit Nawale is following us in another car, so we have to periodically stop to allow him to catch up. I don't mind stopping, but I'm intrigued. Ajit has a local farmer with him, so why does he need us to stop?

"This is not the normal route," says Gujar. "Most people don't know all the turns."

I don't mind. It allows us to take in the surroundings, pause, chat. Ajit drives at an easy pace. When we finally hit National Highway 160, it is dark. "Now we don't need to stop for him," Gujar says. "Step on it," he instructs me.

"Gavit and Gujar know this area the best," Ashok tells me.

"You know, Doctor," Gujar turns to Ashok, "when we have to go underground, you will all get caught. Except me. I know places and roads that even the police don't know."

Later, as we stop for dinner on the highway, Gujar ribs him gently, complimenting Ajit for catching up with us in his "bullock cart." Ajit laughs. "Every time I go anywhere with Comrade Gujar, I learn a new route," he tells me. "Where it comes to maps, I don't think. I just trust Google and Gujar. They know best."

The rally itself was a sober affair. The local police estimated, Gujar told us later, that between 25,000 to 30,000 farmers attended. All I could see was a river of red when they marched. The Kisan Sabha had erected a large pandal with a stage on one side. This pandal couldn't have accommodated everybody, and so they spilled out on all sides. Hundreds sat behind the pandal, many of them directly in the sun. Hundreds more, maybe thousands, sat on the main road, from where they could not see the stage, but could hear the speeches, thanks to the megaphones. And to the left and right of the pandal as well, wherever there was a nook or cranny, there were farmers.

It was a hot day, though not brutally hot. High 30s, I guess. The pandal blocked the sun, but it was still pretty hot in there, with buildings on all sides blocking the breeze, and thousands of bodies packed closely together. Outside the pandal, people were sometimes in the sun and sometimes in the shade, depending on the position of the sun.

Inside the pandal, the farmers, women and men, young and old, sat and listened in rapt attention as the leaders spoke. Each speaker began with fulsome praise for the courage and determination of the farmers. It is true, as everybody said, that they were the real heroes. Every once in a while, they would laugh when a speaker cracked a joke. Sometimes they would clap at a pronouncement. There were many speakers, and the rally went on for over four hours. And yet, right till the end, I didn't see any flagging of attention, nor did people start leaving. I walked around the area, outside the pandal, about three hours after the rally had begun. Even here, where even the stage was not visible, farmers sat in silence, paying close attention to the speeches.

One of the key allies of the AIKS in the Long March was the Bharatiya Shetkari Kamgar Paksha (Peasants and Workers Party of India; PWP). The General Secretary of the party is Jayant Patil, a member of the Legislative Council of Maharashtra. Patil referred to the arrogance of the BJP in thinking that they had wiped out the red flag with their win in the Tripura Assembly Elections. "Come here and see," he roared, "this is a sea of red here." As if on cue, hundreds of red flags started waving. "You think you can destroy the image of Lenin we carry in our hearts? We will erect a statue of Lenin in Alibag [Raigad district, near Mumbai; this is the main base of the PWP], and we will ask every political party to join us in doing this. By pulling down one Lenin statue, they don't know how many more statues they have helped in erecting."

Ajit Nawale, the young, firebrand General Secretary of Maharashtra Rajya Kisan Sabha, explained

the important concessions about the loan waiver as a result of the pressure of the Long March. He told the farmers that the government hadn't earlier agreed to a waiver of loans in the period 2001-09, which they did this time, and extended the waiver to 2016-17 as well. He also detailed a number of other onerous conditions that the government had earlier imposed, which they have removed this time.

Ashok Dhawale, President of All India Kisan Sabha, talked about the highlights and the significance of the Long March and also went into the details of the many demands conceded. He made three additional points. One, that the Modi government is set on diluting the provisions of the Forest Rights Act by proposing a PPP model for forests in its new Draft Forest Policy. This means, in simple terms, a privatization of forests, and opening them up to rapacious exploitation. Second, he explained how the Supreme Court has diluted the provisions of the SC/ST Prevention of Atrocities Act, and the government had done little to defend it. He condemned the government's stand, and extended full support to the protests that marked the entire country that day. Since a large number of the farmers are tribals, this affects them directly. Third, he outlined the future course of struggle. He told the farmers that the AIKS has decided to collect 10 crore (100 million) signatures for their basic demands and present these to the government. August 9, the anniversary of the Quit India movement of 1942, will be the day that farmers will court arrest en masse, in hundreds of thousands, all over the country. And they will ask the BJP government of Narendra Modi, the most anti-farmer government ever in the history of the nation, to Quit India.

The man of the hour was undoubtedly J.P. Gavit. He is a seven time (and current) MLA and the former president of the Maharashtra Rajya Kisan Sabha. He spoke last, and his speech went over an hour. A large part of the speech was devoted to explaining in detail the nitty-gritty of the implementation of the FRA. While it is a historic victory, he said, there is every reason to be vigilant. The track record of this government, and previous governments, hasn't been anything to write home about. Farmers have been betrayed again and again. The proof of the pudding is in the eating. You have forced the government to concede your demands, he told the farmers, but don't think the implementation will happen without struggle. Ever vigilant, ever ready to fight.

To do this, he said, we need to build the Kisan Sabha in every village. He urged all those present to focus totally on membership and on creating village committees. Without a strong organization, there can be no struggle. And without struggle, there is no victory.

There were other speakers as well, who each spoke for a short time. All of them congratulated the farmers on their historic victory. Some of the more prominent among them included: Kisan Gujar, President of the Maharashtra Rajya Kisan Sabha; Ratan Budhar, President of the Thane-Palghar district Kisan Sabha; Savliram Pawar, President of the Nashik district Kisan Sabha; and Dr. D.L. Karad, Maharashtra State President of the Centre for Indian Trade Unions (CITU). The meeting was conducted by Sunil Malusare, Joint Secretary of Maharashtra Rajya Kisan Sabha.

It was, as I said, a sober affair. There was the occasional fire and brimstone, but in the main, the rally was more like a general body meeting, with the leaders reporting to the farmers in fairly minute detail what was agreed to in their negotiations with the state government, and why.

Both Ashok and Gavit explained why they didn't get the Chief Minister to sign the agreement with the farmers' delegation. Chief Ministers come and go, they said. It is relatively easy for a government to go back on the word of a previous government. What stays is the bureaucracy. So they had decided that they would insist on the agreement being signed by the Chief Secretary of the Government of Maharashtra, and ask for the Chief Minister to table it in the Assembly the next day. Given the upsurge of popular support, the government had no option but to accede to this.

Then there was the question of the support extended to the Kisan Long March by the opposition parties like the Congress, NCP and MNS, but also by the Shiv Sena, which is a part of the government. Since the demands concerned all farmers, the leaders said that we want our demands to be supported by all political parties. But we also know what these political parties are, and what they've done for farmers. So we welcome the support, but don't depend on it.

Farmers' demands are not partisan. They are society's demands.

Consider this: the decision to have the Long March was taken on February 16; the march itself began on March 6, a mere 17 days later.

The Long March was, apart from everything else, a logistical miracle. Earlier in the day, as we were driving from Mumbai to Kalwan, we had stopped at Igatpuri where Ashok and Prasad had shown me the spot next to the highway where they had spent the second night of the march. Kisan Gujar, Sunil Malusare, and a couple of other comrades had done recces of the route three times (in vehicles, of course) to calculate the distances they could walk every day, where they could rest, have a bath, cook, and so on.

They asked groups of 500 farmers to pool together their grain, oil and other provisions. These were loaded on to tempos, which travelled ahead of the marchers. By the time the marchers reached the resting place, the tempos had set up camp and the volunteers had cooked the food on makeshift stoves made up of stones. And yes, they had also carried their own firewood, so as not to destroy anything on the way.

Gujar is a man with an eye for detail. They were carrying firewood and provisions, but where would they get the stones to make the stoves once they reached Mumbai? So, it was decided, they would carry their own stones. In the Kalwan Vijay March, when Gavit was recounting this, I could see many in the audience nodding and smiling when he said: You thought we were crazy to ask you to bring your own stones. But when you reached Mumbai, it made sense, didn't it?

He spoke about the outpouring of support and affection by the citizens of Mumbai, going over particular instances – doctors coming with medicines and setting up free camps; Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Dalits, and even the famous Dabbawalas of Mumbai serving food; a policeman supplying 50 buckets with his own money; and so on. He spoke about how the entire media supported the marchers, and why that was critical for them.

On the last day of the march (March 12), the Class X board exam was to be held in Mumbai. Had the farmers walked through the day, it would have surely disrupted traffic, causing snarls all along, and thousands of students would have been affected. Ashok spoke about that moment, when they had to decide what to do. On March 10, the fifth day, the farmers had covered the longest distance yet – 43 km. On March 11, again 25 km. Everybody was exhausted. Many farmers had calloused feet. Some were dehydrated. And yet, Ashok recalled, when Gavit explained to them the situation, they voted as one, all 40,000 of them, to walk through the night and reach Azad Maidan at dawn before school children left their homes.

Then there was the other mind-boggling detail: when the marchers reached Azad Maidan, they found three truckloads of *bhakri* (a thick dry roti made generally of jowar, bajra or rice) and dry fish. This was the contribution of the Peasants and Workers Party members from Raigad district. They had collected grain and fish, and had cooked 150,000 *bhakris* for the marchers. It took them three days to make the *bhakris*. This was solidarity in action. Ashok pointed out another detail to me: while the AIKS accepted the support of all political parties including right-wing parties like the Shiv Sena and MNS, letting their leaders address the farmers, they refused to accept any material help from

them. All parties were ready to contribute food, he said. We said no. When they insisted, we said, ok, you may give us water. But that's all.

In his speech, Gavit spent a surprisingly long time going over details about food. Listening to him, and watching the audience listen to him, retracing in their head the march, was a humbling experience for me. I have never experienced poverty. I have never had to sleep hungry because there was no food. Gavit is from a poor peasant family. He is tribal. Even after having been elected MLA seven times, he is known to be a man of simple means and lifestyle. He is a man of the soil. He is a man of the people. He knows what it is to be hungry. He appreciated, with his audience, the value of every meal they had while they marched.

Jiva Pandu Gavit first contested the election to the Maharashtra Assembly from Surgana (a reserved ST seat in Nashik district) in 1978 on the CPI(M) ticket. He got 7,527 votes and lost his deposit.

But, it turned out, all the other candidates had lost their deposits too, and Gavit emerged the winner by a margin of 595 votes. A narrow margin in absolute terms, but in context, comfortable enough.

The genius behind this win was Nana Malusare, a highly respected Kisan Sabha leader. He had instigated a very large number of candidates to file their nominations. One of them was even Gavit's own father-in-law. Votes were split; Gavit scraped through. He was a young man then, barely in his mid-twenties. Nobody in his family had previously been in politics. He was educated, having done his graduation, and worked as a muster assistant in the Employment Guarantee Scheme. He saw, from close quarters, how the benefits hardly ever reached the people they were meant for. When the legendary Kisan Sabha leader Godavari Parulekar, along with Nana Malusare, led an agitation at the time of the great drought in Maharashtra in the early 1970s to ask for the correct implementation of EGS, Gavit joined them.

Gavit has come a long way since. Today, he is Maharashtra's preeminent kisan leader. In a landscape dominated by Maratha kulaks and rural barons, for a tribal to reach this position is remarkable.

At the start of the march in Kalwan on April 2, there was a bit of chaos, with people raising slogans, playing instruments, dancing, and jostling, eager to get going. The main banner of the march was totally obscured from view. Several announcements for calm and order from the tempo that had the sound system made no impact. Nobody was listening. Till Gavit took the microphone. In less than a minute, he had got thousands of farmers to sit down on the blazing tarmac. He reminded them that the whole of Mumbai had admired their discipline, and that they were role models for kisans all over the country. "Now, in our own backyard, are we going to behave like this?" The march began soon after, in an entirely orderly fashion, with the banner and leaders in front.

If Gavit is the mass leader of the Kisan Sabha and its most recognized face, Kisan Gujar is the quintessential organization man. To a Delhi resident like me, his name sounds familiar - I had assumed that Kisan was pronounced as the Hindi word for peasant or farmer, with a long second vowel, and the j of Gujar was pronounced as in jar. I was wrong. Kisan is from Krishan, and Gujar is pronounced with z. Rugged and tough-looking, he worked in a factory in Nashik as a young man in the 1970s, and came in contact with Parulekar and Malusare. He was drawn to the Left movement, and joined CITU. He later joined the Kisan Sabha in the late 1980s. The Kisan Sabha was then struggling to strike roots outside the Thane-Palghar region, which had seen the historic Warli Revolt in the 1940s. Sometime in the mid-1990s, Ashok Dhawale suggested to Malusare that Gujar be brought into the leadership of the district Kisan Sabha. He was given key organizational positions, and within a few years the organizational strength of the Kisan Sabha in Nashik district was evident. A fair share of the credit for that must go to Gujar, who travelled tirelessly in the entire district,

going to village after village, building the units of the organization.

Dr. Ajit Nawale is young, in his early 40s, thin and wiry, and he is the dynamic face of the Kisan Sabha. He came in the spotlight when he emerged as a key leader in the statewide Kisan Strike of 2017. This agitation included several kisan organizations, with the Kisan Sabha being an important component. At a crucial point, he saved the movement by walking out of a late night meeting with the Chief Minister and exposed the compromised deal that one section of the joint leadership was going to sign. That deal didn't go through, the farmers' strike was intensified with a successful Maharashtra Bandh to support it, and the government was forced to re-negotiate. The eventual agreement, though still not perfect, was in essence pro-kisan, and it was the non-implementation and subversion of that agreement by the government that eventually led to the Kisan Long March.

There's a story behind how Nawale came into the Kisan Sabha. An internet news story claimed that he and Ashok Dhawale happened to be co-passengers in a train and got into a conversation. When they exchanged names and towns of origin, Ashok asked him if he was related to Buwa Nawale, who was the founder president of the Maharashtra Rajya Kisan Sabha. It turned out that young Ajit, then a student at an Ayurvedic medical college, was the older Nawale's grandnephew, and did not know much about him. When Ashok recounted to him the senior Nawale's contributions, he became interested in the Kisan Sabha and eventually joined it.

It is a charming story, but not entirely true. "I wish it had been so dramatic," Ashok said when I asked him about it. "It is true that Ajit didn't know much about his granduncle, and it is true that I told him. But it happened in the Pune Party office, not in a train, and it happened when I had gone, as State CPI(M) Secretary, to meet some young SFI (Students' Federation of India) comrades in Pune. So Ajit was already in the SFI movement when this happened."

It is characteristic of Ashok Dhawale to underplay his part. In personal conversations, he is soft-spoken and mild-mannered. I've now known him for some two decades, and have seen how he is always courteous to his comrades, concerned about their wellbeing, and deeply appreciative of their contributions. This kindly, eventempered exterior hides a deep commitment to principles and a steely resolve. When Bal Thackeray died in 2012, the whole of Maharashtra, it appeared, had a collective paroxysm, praising the strongman as the greatest son the state had produced in modern times. Even the CPI issued a shockingly mild statement. Nobody - no commentator, no media outlet, no political party or figure, nobody at all - was willing to say that Thackeray represented the politics of the gutter, that he rose to prominence on the back of brute thuggery, demagoguery, xenophobia and violence. Except Ashok Dhawale. He wrote the CPI(M)'s statement, and it was the one statement that did not even doff a token hat at the niceties of offering condolences. On the contrary, it reminded readers that it was Thackeray's Shiv Sena that was responsible for the killing of Krishna Desai in 1970. Desai, a respected trade unionist, was the sitting CPI MLA from the working class constituency of Parel.

"How did you come to the Left movement?" I asked him as we drove back from Kalwan. "Through the SFI, right?"

"No," he said. "I came first to the CPI(M). Then the SFI."

Here's what happened. As a young medical student attached to Nair Hospital located next to the Mumbai Central railway station in the mid-1970s, Ashok saw how they were routinely getting young children with tuberculosis. The children would be treated and cured, but very often the same children were back with a relapse a few months later. The young doctor decided to see for himself what the matter was. He visited the homes of many of these children, whose parents were often migrants who were in Mumbai looking for work. They lived in tiny hovels, dark and dingy, packed

like sardines. "I realized that no medicine could cure the root causes of the children's tuberculosis. That required radical social change."

Ashok started reading, and was drawn to Marxism. Dr. R.D. Potdar, an older doctor in Nair Hospital, his mentor, was the neighbour of Ahilya and P.B. Rangnekar, who were among the veterans of the Communist movement in Maharashtra. After discussions with them, and also once with B.T. Ranadive, Ashok joined the CPI(M). Simultaneously, after completing his medical studies, he decided to do an M.A. in Political Science, which led the Party asking him to work in the SFI. This was in the late 1970s. Within two years of joining the organization, Ashok was elected State Secretary of the SFI. He hastens to add that this was only because the SFI in Maharashtra was then a very small organization. Listening to him recounting how it happened, one would imagine that it was all a matter of him being at the right place at the right time, that it was luck, more or less undeserved.

Godavari Parulekar, all-India President of the Kisan Sabha, took a shine to the young, studious, radical doctor. She was keen for him to join the Kisan Sabha after SFI. He was too. But the Party decided that the Democratic Youth Federation of India (DYFI) needed to be pushed along, so Ashok spent six years building the organization in key positions. Finally, in the early 1990s, he joined the Kisan Sabha. Between then and now, he has also served for three terms as the Maharashtra State Secretary of the CPI(M).

The Maharashtra Rajya Kisan Sabha is today led by this core group of four - Jiva Pandu Gavit, the mass leader with a huge popular base; Kisan Gujar, the organization man looking at the nuts and bolts; Dr. Ajit Nawale, the dynamic young leader, unafraid to stick his neck out and take risks; and Dr. Ashok Dhawale, the experienced elder statesman, veteran of countless battles. Each of them brings their strengths to the organization, and complements the others. Around these four, there are a large number of other leaders from several districts.

With its deep roots among the poorest and most marginalized sections of the peasantry, and with a leadership which has risen, substantially, from them, the Kisan Sabha is the most dynamic Left organization in Maharashtra today. By a mile.

As we get back to Thane around midnight, I'm still processing all that I've seen and learnt. What, I ask myself, is the most heartwarming image I'm going to carry back to Delhi?

Perhaps it is this.

Vijay Patil, executive editor of Jeewan Marg, the CPI(M)'s weekly magazine, has taken up one corner of the stage as the meeting is in progress. With him is Dharma Shinde, another comrade. They are counting and making stacks of the magazine. Ashok Dhawale, in his speech, asks the farmers to buy the two special issues of Jeewan Marg, which have write-ups and photos of the Kisan Long March. The two together cost Rs 15. As soon as the announcement is made, one by one people start inching their way to the stage and collecting copies for their groups. Then the copies are distributed to the farmers, who each pay for it. As I move around, I see farmers reading the magazine, looking at the photos, pointing out faces, smiling. "Many of them can't read," Kisan Gujar tells me later. "But they'll all buy the issues, take them home and get their children or grandchildren to read it to them. Not this or that article. The whole issue, cover to cover. If you come here twenty years later, you'll find these two special issues in many homes. Why? Because they're about the Long March. The farmers know they've done something historic. And they are proud." Over 1,000 sets of the magazine were sold that day, till they ran out of copies. Many more would have sold, if only they had stock. After the rally ends, I find many people ruing that they were right at the back, so couldn't get to the stage in time.

Earlier in the day, I had seen how farmers paid Rs 5 each for the red cap. That they will take home, of course. At the end of the rally, an announcement is made from the stage to return the red flags, so they can be used again. Again, people start collecting the flags and returning them. The red flag is called *lal jhenda* in standard, urban Marathi, but it is called the much more endearing *lal bawta* in villages. One of the popular slogans is: Lal Bawte Ki - Jai! (Victory to the Red Flag!) The Communist Party (irrespective of which particular one it may be) is called *Lal Bawta Party*. The poorest farmers, tribals, Dalits, and women, the marginalized of the marginalized, owe their allegiance not to this or that leader, but to the *lal bawta*.

As I pass a young boy rounding up flags, I ask him what he's doing.

"Collecting flags so that people don't take them home."

"Why?" I ask.

"We need them for the future," he says. Then, in Hindi, "Aage aur ladai hai." I smile, and he smiles, because we both know the popular slogan he is quoting,

Abhi toh yeh angdai hai
Aage aur ladai hai
This was but an arm stretch
Many battles lie ahead.

Sudhanva Deshpande

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P.S.

This is an extract from the free 'Long March' e-Book

<http://kisansabha.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/longmarchbook.pdf>

Footnotes

- [1] As a follow up of the historic Kisan Long March from Nashik to Mumbai from March 6-12, 2018, the All India Kisan Sabha (AIKS) called for a Kisan Vijay [Victory] March in Kalwan, about 70 km north of Nashik, close to the border with Gujarat, on April 2. I travelled to Kalwan to be part of the march. I had never before been part of a farmers' rally (except the ones that came to Delhi), and the Long March had been so inspiring that I wanted to get a feel of it from up close. I was particularly interested in learning about the organizers who had led the march. I've known one of them, Ashok Dhawale, for over two decades as a friend and comrade. The other three leaders I talk about here - Jiva Pandu Gavit, Kisan Gujar and Ajit Nawale - were people I knew of, but hadn't really interacted with before. What follows, therefore, is a modest eyewitness account, no more.