

India: 'It's Time We Speak up For Each Other': Farmers' Group Supports Political Prisoners

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"We are confronting a prime minister who is behaving like an exploitative king. All these activists and intellectuals have been arrested on false charges merely because they highlighted the plight of the poor," said the head of BKU (Ekta-Ugrahan).

Bahadurgarh (Haryana): A day after farmers' unions [rejected an elaborate proposal](#) by the Union government to address multiple concerns related to the three contentious farm laws, the Bharatiya Kisan Union (Ekta-Ugrahan), the biggest group among the 32 organisations, marked Human Rights Day by demanding the release of several democratic rights activists and intellectuals who are lodged in prison.

In an indication that the group may only intensify its protests against the Centre by espousing a broad-based agenda, the BKU (Ugrahan), which is camped near Delhi's Tikri border at Bahadurgarh, hosted a function to show its solidarity with other democratic and human rights movements. In a full-fledged attack on what it called an "authoritarian" Central government led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the farmer leaders asserted that it was time to stand with different democratic movements of the country, as their larger struggle was against "corporatisation" of Indian agriculture, and not merely against the contentious farm laws.

"We are confronting a prime minister who is behaving like an exploitative king. All these activists and intellectuals have been arrested on false charges merely because they highlighted the plight of the poor, without bothering about their own safety. It is now our responsibility that we extend our support to them. That is why we are also demanding the release of all these intellectuals and activists, apart from our resistance to the farm laws," Joginder Ugrahan, president of the BKU (Ekta-Ugrahan), told *The Wire*.

"What did people like Gautam Navlakha or Sudha Bharadwaj do? They showed how poor people in remote areas are living under extreme stress and how they were unfairly treated by the governments. There are others who show how people of Kashmir live in constant fear of the security forces. We believe that the Modi government put all of them in prison only to silence them. It is our responsibility, then, to speak up for the citizens," he said.

Ugrahan's deputy, Jhanda Singh, said that the farmers' movement could not be isolated from the larger political developments of the country. "Most of the protests over the last few years – be it in Shaheen Bagh (against the CAA-NRC), or against removing Article 370 – happened because the government didn't bother to consult those who would be impacted because of these measures. The same happened with the farm laws. Only a few who have more than 5,000 acres of land, and corporates, were kept in loop. The farm laws are against 85% of Indian farmers who own very little land. And now the government is trying to whitewash its sins by giving false assurances to us."

"It is time that all democratic movements come together to expose this government. Their intentions are not right. *Hum toh sach bolenge* (We will anyway speak the truth)," he told *The Wire*.

Ever since the farmers started their agitation, their one-point agenda has been to get the farm laws repealed. Despite ideological differences, these organisations could come together to stand on common ground. However, BKU groups like those of Ugrahan's or Rakaunda's and some Leftist unions have been highlighting the issue of "false incarceration" of political prisoners in Punjab since the last four months, when the farmer agitations first began in Punjab and Haryana.

Yet, many in the movement are cautious about the fact that speaking up on issues like CAA, or Article 370, or incarceration of intellectuals and activists, may dilute the primary issue of farm laws. Some of the unions, thus, have strategically stayed away from speaking up on these issues despite endorsing the view that the Modi government has been largely "authoritarian". The ruling party, BJP, has used these issues to successfully polarise the Indian electorate, and may also attempt to swing opinion around the farmers' movement in its favour on this count.

However, Joginder Ugrahan isn't bothered. "We know how this government has pushed the poor to the wall. Today, we farmers are feeling the brunt of its unilateral, pro-corporate, approach. Tomorrow, someone else would feel the pinch of the government's policies. It is time we speak up for each other," he said.

"Even when we made it clear that our agitation is against farm laws, the government and the *godi* media (pliant media) painted us as Khalistanis. Now they may call us 'urban Naxals'. But farmers and the poor know that all of that is plain propaganda. So we are not scared," he added.

He made it a point to say that the farm laws are a result of the larger tendency of the government to make agriculture corporate-friendly. "It was the Congress which first pursued the policy of economic liberalisation; the BJP has now intensified it. When we say that our movement is not political, we mean to say that we are not affiliated with any political organisation. But we are definitely 'political' in the sense that we are opposed to the corporatisation of agriculture."

"It is a question of our land. We want the farm laws to go, and at the same time want the Public Distribution Scheme (PDS) to have a greater reach. And in that regard we will support and seek support from all democratic groups which are opposed to such policies which hurt the poor," he added.

"We also believe that the government has used all laws of the land against the poor. The same laws are not being used against the rich, who have been violating all rules without any fear," said Ugrahan.

Throughout the day, hundreds of people sat under the sun with placards of political prisoners, demanding their release. BKU (Ekta-Ugrahan) had invited multiple cultural activists and intellectuals to address the crowd. Among them were economist Navsharan Kaur, academic-activist Nandini Sundar, Vimal Bhai of the National Alliance for People's Movements (NAPM), renowned Punjabi playwright Kewal Dhaliwal, and retired scientist Mahavir Narwal, whose daughter Natasha Narwal, also one of the founders of feminist student group Pinjra Tod, is currently in jail on stringent UAPA charges in cases related to the 2020 Delhi riots.

"So many people who are speaking up against authoritarian tendencies of the government are being falsely implicated in 'conspiracy' charges. I want to say that the government is actually conspiring to slap 'conspiracy' charges against its critics," said Narwal in his speech.

Other speakers spoke about how activists like Stan Swamy, Umar Khalid, Khalid Saifi, Sudha

Bharadwaj, Surendra Gadling, Mahesh Raut and many others have been falsely implicated in criminal cases for their consistent work among marginalised sections of the population.

Speaking on the occasion, Joginder Ugrahan said, "Pro-people writers and rights activists have been silenced with a repressive campaign. Their protests were peaceful, much like ours. Yet they are in jail. There is an emergency-like situation in the country. Today's struggle (of the farmers) strengthens people's rights for freedom of speech and expression."

The event ended with a 70-year-old play. *Harhiya-Shauniya* (Rabi-Kharif crops considered as two daughters of Punjab) written by Joginder Baharla against feudal encroachments. It was recreated in the context of possible corporate control over farm lands by Dhaliwal's group 'Manch Rangmanch'.

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