

India: The Farmers' Struggle And The Agrarian Crisis

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Not only did the Modi government not pay any heed to the demands raised by the massive Kisan Mukti March of November 2018, it in fact, went on to surreptitiously promulgate three ordinances, in June this year, that go directly against everything that the farmers want. Indeed, they seek to hand over agriculture to the corporate sector - which will effectively mean destruction for a large mass of farmers. Naturally they are up in arms in what is perhaps the most determined struggle of the last four decades. The protests have been going on in many states since September 2020 and have reached the capital only now.

The three ordinances that are currently pushing farmers into a 'do or die' struggle in different parts of the country, have been widely written about and their different dimensions explained. We will therefore not go into their analysis in this article. The ordinances are: (i) Farmers Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Ordinance, 2020, (ii) The Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement on Price Assurance and Farm Services Ordinance, 2020, and (iii) The Essential Commodities (Amendment) Ordinance, 2020. Farmers' organizations opposing the ordinances claim that they have been very misleadingly named so as to give the impression that they empower the farmers; they suggest the ordinances might be more accurately renamed the "APMC Bypass Bill", "Contract Farming Promotion Bill" and the "Food Hoarding by Corporates Bill" respectively.

The long and short of these ordinances is quite nicely summed up in these suggested names - for what the three together aim to achieve is the dismantling of state procurement (though on paper it may continue to remain), and thereby open agriculture to contract farming for big corporations, allowing them to corner essential food commodities in as large quantities as they want. The entire attempt, it is not hard to see, is to open out the agriculture sector to giant retail chains like Reliance - which is why it is necessary to remove the limits on purchase and storage of essential commodities.

Contract farming, already happening informally at individual levels, once it is made the norm, is certainly going to seriously compromise food security for all. For if an agribusiness firm eyeing quick and massive profits wants farmers to change from essential food production to some other crop, it will decide what will be produced. And of course, what gets you quick profits is not what is sold as essential food item in the domestic or local market but it could be anything from potatoes for chips to maize to manufacture 'alternative fuel' for US consumers. So entire cropping patterns can change, endangering our food sovereignty as a people.

The farmers, in a word, are not just fighting a battle for their own survival but one where the survival of all of us is at stake. If the design visualized in the three ordinances comes to pass, it will also lead to the complete destruction of lakhs of people who earn their livelihoods by selling fruit and vegetables - for those too will be produced by farmers under contract farming with corporations which will sell them at their retail stores. Prices for millions of consumers too will then be determined by these giant retail chains.

But these issues have only come up now. Why have the farmers/ peasants been agitating for the last couple of years?

Rewind to November 2018

“Farmers are not just a residue from our past; farmers, agriculture and village India are integral to the future of India and the world”, declares the Kisan Charter (Farmers’ Charter) released by the All India Kisan Sangharsh Coordination Committee (AIKSCC) that had called for the massive Kisan Mukti (Peasant Freedom) March in New Delhi, two years ago, on 29-30 November 2018. This was a decisive declaration by the farmers of India, who till just the other day were committing suicide in the face of destitution, that they are not ready to vacate the stage and go into oblivion in the name of Development or Progress. In any case, as the saying goes, ‘the future is not what it used to be’ and historical destinies too change. After all, we no longer believe it was the historical destiny of either the Native Americans or indigenous people at large to disappear into the pages of history in order to make way for ‘modern civilization’. Nor do Indian farmers believe this to be their fate.

As over 100,000 farmers marched into Delhi on 29 November 2018 and then to parliament, the streets of Delhi had resounded with this sense, this determination that ‘we are not going anywhere’. The main slogans of the farmers’ march were remunerative support prices for their produce, writing off of their debts and the passing of two legislations piloted by the AIKSCC – a platform of around 250 peasants’ organizations (the number has since increased). The very names of the proposed bills, the *Farmers’ Freedom from Indebtedness Bill 2018*, and the *Farmers’ Right to Guaranteed Remunerative Minimum Support Prices 2018*, together referred to as the Kisan Mukti Bills, underline these key demands of the march to parliament.

A Brief History

The question of remunerative support prices for farm produce has been on the table for a very long time now. It was in the late 1970s and early 1980s that this demand became a major issue, with major farmers’ agitations taking place around it. Organizations like the Shetkari Sanghatana formed in 1979 in Maharashtra, were characteristic of that phase of the movement. In the mid-1980s, farmers in the northern Indian state of Uttar Pradesh rose under the banner of the newly formed Bharatiya Kisan Union, demanding among other things, higher prices for sugar cane (the main produce in that belt), cancellation of loans and cheaper electricity.

Before going into the specific context of that demand in the late 1970s and 1980s, one elementary fact about agriculture should perhaps be stated here, since most people of neoliberal urban India today do not seem to get it. Agriculturists suffer both when crops fail and when they are very good. When they fail (say due to a failed monsoon), then there is despair all around, indebtedness increases. But equally, when harvest/ production is very good too, prices crash because of abundant supply. No ‘free market’ mechanism can ensure that farmers get a decent return for them to continue farming and live a decent and dignified life. Minimum Support Price (MSP) has to be therefore been seen as a kind of necessary support for us in the cities so that we continue to get our food – cereals, pulses, edible oil, vegetables, fruit and so on. It makes sense for us to invest that extra amount in our annual budgets to provide for that support to the farmers – with all the gratitude they deserve. However, this can be done and passed on to the farmers / peasants *only if* the state is the main procurer of at least the essential food items. No corporate house is interested in offering MSP for the simple reason that an Ambani or an Adani are in it for business and their purpose is simply to maximize their own predatory profits.

Basically, the entire phase of the ‘new peasant upsurge’, of the 1970s and 1980s, heralded the emergence of a different kind of peasant/ farmers’ movement from the kind that the Marxist Left had

long imagined. Marxist parties had long thought of the peasant movement and the 'agrarian revolution' in terms of the alliance of the poor peasant and landless labour, where issues of land redistribution and, at a more immediate level, of higher wages and security of tenure for sharecroppers were more important. In fact, most of the radical left parties/ groups believed that the aim of the peasant movement was to achieve 'allin peasant unity' against landlordism - till well into the 1970s when that kind of landlordism had ceased to exist in large parts of the country, thanks to the post-independence land reforms. Though those land reforms did not aim at radical land redistribution ('land to the tiller'), they did abolish tenancy and effect a transformation of land relations.

The 'new peasant upsurge' of the 1970s and 1980s was essentially a consequence of the Green Revolution of the 1960s which involved cultivation of new high-yielding varieties of wheat, alongside mechanization of production - use of tractors, electrically driven pumps for irrigation, widespread use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides. While the long-term ecologically destructive effects of the Green Revolution only became evident later, the more immediate effect was felt by the farmers. Productivity increased and led to a general improvement of earnings initially, but gradually increasing input costs - of electricity, of machinery, of chemicals and fertilizers - all began to impact upon the earnings. This combined with the general difficulties of agricultural pricing led to a situation where remunerative prices and the question of MSP moved centre-stage.

This is not to suggest that the older questions around land and wages have become irrelevant but the situation is far more diverse and varies greatly across regions. The fact of the matter is that there is no single 'agrarian question' exhibiting the same character across the length and breadth of India. In all the states where the new upsurge was taking place, issues had changed in a very fundamental way. Postindependence land reforms by giving ownership rights to tenant cultivators in many areas and had altered class-caste relations in the countryside very significantly. In most of these areas - and they constituted a very large part of the landmass called India - it was the middle to rich peasant, more directly integrated into the capitalist market, who was now up in arms. The demands of this middle caste, middle or rich peasantry were no longer internal to the agrarian economy in the way questions of wages or land-reforms were. Rather, they were now in direct conflict with corporate/ industrial capitalists and the state. Their demands were often directed, as in the case of sugarcane cultivators, against the sugar factory owners. And yet, their emergence as a powerful element in the rural areas, transformed the internal caste-power dynamic there as well, bringing into being a powerful middle and backward caste farmer.

At the same time, another set of struggles had been going on that involved, in sharp contrast, the adivasi populations at the point of dispossession through state-led mega development projects like the series of dams long the river Narmada. They had come together under the banner of the iconic Narmada Bachao Andolan in the Narmada valley but there were others too, in different parts of the country who were resisting moves to displace them. For instance, one can mention the epic struggle of the adivasis of Niyamgiri Hills in Odisha state, against the bauxite mining project involving the mining giant Vedanta. The movements against displacement and land acquisition have a much longer history but with the onset of neoliberalism, they acquired a whole new dimension and urgency. Gradually, over time, a relationship has developed between the different kinds of broadly agrarian movements and, in the face of many offensives of the neoliberal state, these different movements have found some common ground.

Corporate Globalization - Backdrop to the Present Phase

The present phase actually comes after a lull of sorts. The years from the early to mid-1990s till about 2006-2007, were years of resignation and despondency, of mass destitution and suicides - and the overall atmosphere was not at all conducive to the voice of peasants or workers being heard.

Demands of writing off of debts or of minimum support prices through state intervention would be brushed aside as 'populist' demands. Thus, according to the National Crime Records Bureau, 310,000 farmers committed suicide between 1995 and 2015, though unofficial estimates put the number much higher. In 2019 alone, 42,280 farmers and agricultural daily wagers committed suicide.

Though peasant indebtedness and struggles against debt and for remunerative prices, reduction of energy and other input costs, both have separate and much longer histories, matters reached crisis proportions since the beginning of the 1990s, as neoliberal policies combined with the effects of the ecological crisis began to wreak havoc on farmers' lives. In an early report based on investigation in different states, Vandana Shiva and Kunwar Jalees noted that '1997 witnessed the first emergence of farm suicides in India', and that 'rapid increases in indebtedness were at the root of farmers taking their lives.' Shiva and Jalees underlined the fact that the farmers' debt situation worsened because of the dramatic fall in the prices of farm produce as a result of free trade policies dictated by the World Trade Organization (WTO), which were essentially rules for dumping. In another early Jan Sunwai report on the agrarian crisis, Gene Campaign noted that between 1998 and 2005 alone, 6000 indebted farmers, mainly cotton farmers, committed suicide in the then Andhra Pradesh. What was telling was that following the state-level Structural Adjustment Programme which the government initiated at the behest of the World Bank, the government 'raised power tariff five times even as cotton price fell by half.'

Sharp increases in input costs, from diesel to fertilizers and pesticides, were a direct consequence of cuts in input subsidies which did not just increase costs of agricultural production but in fact, made agriculture itself look like an unprofitable activity. Added to this is the increasing promotion of expensive, patented, genetically modified seeds that can only be purchased from multinationals like Monsanto and Cargill at four times the price of traditional seeds. Changes in the public sector banks' lending policies also affected the availability of cheaper institutional credit, especially to smaller farmers.

And to cap it all, neoliberalism sounded agriculture's death knell by making it clear that it was the lowest priority, that highly fertile agricultural lands could now easily be diverted, not only to the construction of Special Economic Zones (SEZs), but also to many other things that had to simply do with the luxury living of the new consuming middle classes - from malls and expressways to huge gated residential complexes.

The current crisis of agriculture is actually a combination of all these factors. Acquisition of very fertile lands for all the purposes mentioned above is also a crucial issue now, though it does not find a very prominent place in the Charter, which formulates its demand on this issue within the limits of the law enacted by the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government: It demands only that land should be acquired with 'informed consent' of the farmers and should not bypass the Right to Fair Compensation and Transparency in Land Acquisition (Rehabilitation and Resettlement Act) 2013. This effectively pushes the most burning issue concerning the livelihoods and habitat of indigenous and forest people to the background since 'rehabilitation and resettlement' for them means little to them: for the loss of their lands means far more than loss of livelihood; it is the loss of the land of their ancestors, their gods and goddesses, and their entire culture.

Huge and frequent crop losses due to endemic droughts on the one hand, combined with frequent untimely rain and hailstorm episodes on the other, have led to large-scale destitution among farmers. Whatever our government might like to pretend, the fact of the matter is that increased incidence of droughts is not unrelated to the phenomenon of rapidly increasing desertification. Very recently, even the Minister for Environment of the present government accepted that almost a quarter of the country is turning into a desert. And desertification has to do, quite directly, with fast

depleting water tables, deforestation, erosion of soil quality due to overuse of chemical fertilizers and pesticides and unsuitable cropping patterns. Increasingly, we are also becoming aware that the wild fluctuations in weather conditions, leading to destruction of an entire season's crop, are quite directly related to the effects of climate change.

It is in a context like this that the demand has been raised for the writing off of the debts of farmers for they simply do not have the capacity to pay, not only when crops fail but equally when there are bumper crops and prices crash. It is true that writing off debts can only be a measure aimed at providing immediate relief.

In a longer term sense, however, there can be no solution that evades the very crucial question of evolving a new agro-ecological paradigm that can reverse the process of environmental degradation that lies at the root of the crisis - towards which, some suggestions made by the National Commission on Farmers, also known as the Swaminathan Commission can work as interim steps. However, at a more immediate level, the demand for writing off loans is not only important for what it might mean to farmers in the here and now, for it also acquires special significance in the context of the present government writing off INR 6.6 lakh crore of big corporate loans from public sector banks, between 2014 and now, while remaining totally insensitive to the problems faced by the farmers.

A Convergence and Some Challenges

All these issues have been there for some time but there were virtually no protests till very recently. The logjam was broken by the massive struggles against the acquisition of land by various state governments for SEZs and for corporations to set up industries. The big change came, ironically, with the movements in the Marxist-ruled state of West Bengal, where peasants offered determined resistance to such acquisition first in Singur and then in Nandigram, in 2006-2007. In Singur, in early 2006, the state's Marxist government acquired and forcibly cordoned off highly fertile land in the face of stiff resistance from peasants - for the purpose of setting up an automobile factory. Nandigram followed soon thereafter, towards the end of 2006, when information leaked out that the government intended to acquire more than 10,000 acres of land for the setting up of a chemical hub in the area with an Indonesian corporation. The massive public outcry and vigorous debate on land acquisition under a 19th century colonial law that followed, made the central government of the day initiate the process of making a new law that would govern land acquisition - the one referred to in the Charter and mentioned earlier. This law was enacted by the previous United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government in 2013 which had stricter provisions regarding the obtaining of peasants' consent and regarding their resettlement and rehabilitation, once land was acquired. However, soon after the present right-wing government of Narendra Modi took over power, it promulgated an ordinance that would nullify the gains made in the 2013 law, making acquisition once again easier for corporations.

The struggle against the new ordinance acquired another dimension when the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), a new player in Indian politics swept the elections in Delhi in 2015 and openly declared its opposition to the new ordinance. A big rally was held in Delhi in April 2015 by the AAP, whose leaders had had connections with various social movements, including those against land acquisition. And it is roughly around this time, especially with the advent of the NDA government that other sections of the peasantry also moved into action with their own demands.

Farmers have since then been on the warpath. Earlier, from 2017 there had been widespread reports of farmers emptying milk containers and dumping vegetables on the streets as part of their ongoing protests. In June 2017, in the course of their agitation for better prices, six farmers were killed in police firing Mandsaur in the state of Madhya Pradesh. That incident further angered the

farmers who stepped up their protests.

It is at this point that we begin to see the peasant organizations of the Left parties and other sections of the farmers' and adivasis making common cause. From early 2017, the CPI (M)- affiliated All India Kisan Sabha (AIKS) organized a series of powerful protests on the issue of remunerative prices and electricity rates in the Shekhawati region of Rajasthan. In March 2018, the CPI(M) and its AIKS once again took the lead in organizing the Long March of peasants in Maharashtra which attracted wide attention and in fact, became the precursor to the November 2018 all-India March to Parliament in New Delhi. There is no doubt that the entry of the Left parties galvanized other sections of agrarian movements as well and created possibilities for the emergence of the common platform that called for the march. The website of the AIKSCC states very clearly therefore, that 'the All India Kisan Sangharsh Coordination Committee was formed in late June 2017, *in response to the spontaneous struggles of farmers* in different state like Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra, for debt relief and remunerative prices.' This is the first time in the history of independent India that such a wide and broad-based coalition of peasants' and agrarian organizations has come into being. In terms of their ideological orientation, the organizations that constitute the AIKSCC include, apart from the Marxist Left, those from Gandhian and Socialist orientations as well as those who are difficult to place in any specific ideological category. That is really the strength of the AIKSCC.

The real challenge before the peasants'/ farmers' movement now lies in working towards articulating 'an agro-ecology paradigm that is based on suitable cropping patterns and local seed diversity revival so as to build economic viability and ecologically sustainable, autonomous and climate-resilient agriculture', in the words of the Charter. This is where it will require a great deal of patience and maturity and a readiness to re-think ideological articles of faith.

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