

# India: From the Fields to the Capital

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## India's farmers in the fight against neoliberalism and Hindu nationalism

*India's farmers are fighting the new agricultural legislation. It is the cause of the moment. But to understand what is happening behind the scenes, a deeper examination of the crisis of Indian agriculture is necessary. The mass protests are also an expression of the growing resistance to the government's authoritarian and neoliberal policies. Government responses to this resistance are proving less and less effective, and much suggests that the protesters may succeed this time around.*

Anyone approaching the outskirts of Delhi today will find the image of a city under siege: tens of thousands of people are camped out along every access road. Many have come with their animals and have set up makeshift tent villages. Flags and banners hang from brightly painted tractors; protest chants ring out in all directions. With a little luck, one might glimpse a decked-out elephant, the red flag with its hammer and sickle draped across its back. It is now estimated that up to two million farmers are protesting at the gates of the Indian capital against the central government's agricultural reforms.

In late November, more than 300,000 farmers from the states of Haryana and Punjab, northwest of Delhi, marched on foot toward the capital. The central government responded to the protest with meter-deep trenches, barbed wire, concrete blockades, and water cannons, and allowed only a small portion of the protesters to enter the city. The rest stood at the city limits, indicating their determination to hold their ground until the government relented. Even the chief minister of the Union Territory of Delhi, Arvind Kejriwal of the opposition AAP party, attended the protests before the police placed him under house arrest, according to his account. The Delhi Police, subordinate to the central government, [denies this](#). The supply of essential foodstuffs to the capital has now dropped by 30–50 percent due to the blockades, and prices are rising, though traders' representatives currently still believe that basic supplies can be maintained.

While Delhi is the epicentre of the Bharat Bandh—the national strike—hundreds of thousands of people are protesting across the country: from Assam in the northeast, to Karnataka and Kerala in the south, to Uttar Pradesh in northern India. More than 500 farmers' organizations, 15 opposition parties, and several trade unions are supporting the protest, which is directed against three new agricultural laws. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government [fast-tracked the bills through both houses of parliament in September](#).

At first glance, [the three agricultural laws](#) seem relatively harmless. They aim to liberalize the market for agricultural products to the extent that producers can negotiate contracts directly with end sellers. The laws give farmers more opportunities to sell their products. But the protesters fear the abolition of the state purchasing system, which guarantees them fixed prices and thus security. The [government, for its part, has dismissed these](#) concerns. The core of the system is comprised of the state's minimum support prices (MSPs) and the so-called *mandis*. These are the state-regulated and farmers' self-managed markets, to which only authorized traders have access. Under a weakened *mandis* system, farmers find themselves at the mercy of the large agribusiness and food

companies. For example, the reforms permit these agribusinesses to store staple foods for sale at a later date—once a privilege only granted to state-authorized intermediaries. As a result, it is now possible to manipulate prices by way of artificial shortages or oversupply. In extreme cases, prices might be depressed during harvest periods when farmers need to sell, and increased during seed purchase periods, when they buy.

The anger of the protesters is not directed only against the content of the laws, but also at the fact that the government adopted them in the midst of a pandemic, and without any consultation with affected organizations. It had earlier enacted sweeping “reforms” of the labour law in the same manner, by rolling back a host of previously-established rights. These events also play a major role in the mass protests.

### **Free Trade and the Crisis in Indian Agriculture**

Agriculture occupies an immensely important place in the Indian economy. In [2016](#), the sector accounted for 23 percent of gross domestic product and 59 percent of all employment in the workforce. The abolition of the state protection system and its guaranteed prices would have catastrophic consequences, especially for small farmers, who are responsible for 82 percent of Indian agricultural output. In the northern Indian state of Bihar, where the state protection system has already been largely dismantled, average prices are now far below MSP, and can barely cover production costs.

It is no coincidence that the protests are so strongly concentrated in Haryana and Punjab. These two states are among the most productive agricultural regions in India. Even small farmers here sell genuine surpluses and do not farm only for their own subsistence, as is the case in most other regions of India. This set of circumstances can also be attributed to the fact that the two states lie in the heartland of the so-called Green Revolution, a gigantic agricultural modernization campaign dating to the 1960s. Although this program increased yields, it also led to a high dependence on industrial fertilizers, reduced the genetic diversity of crops, and damaged soil quality. The resulting risks could only be compensated for by protective action on the part of the state, which is why agriculture in the region today is especially dependent on state-guaranteed prices and sales prospects.

Farmers’ fears are, however, only the tip of the iceberg; the problems actually run deeper. For this reason, the government’s promises have no effect on the protests. Demonstrators do not believe the new agricultural legislation will have no impact on the government’s minimum price guarantees, and so continue in their demands that the laws be rescinded, and that the existing MSP system be further expanded to respond to the longstanding crisis in Indian agriculture. The economic situation of Indian farmers is indeed dire: high debt, virtually non-existent profit margins, and decreasing demand due to the ongoing economic crisis push more than ten thousand farmers to suicide each year. These alarming figures, now regularly reported in Indian newspapers with gloomy indifference, are likely compounded by a high number of unreported cases. It has recently been [alleged](#) that the central government is preventing the publication of relevant statistics so as to divert attention from the dismal situation faced by farmers.

Regardless, the complete abolition of guaranteed prices has always been politically taboo in India—even though the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the United States have criticized the system for years as a supposed illegal subsidy to agriculture. US and European farmers in any case receive by far the largest agricultural subsidies in the world. India’s resistance to a reduction of its own subsidies, which led to the collapse of the WTO’s global free trade agreement, is no doubt also rooted in the knowledge that their abolition would have catastrophic consequences for the population.

By persisting with the reforms now, the central government is exposing itself to considerable domestic political pressure and eroding its base of support. That it is nevertheless willing to continue on this path may be a result of [the new drive for a free trade agreement between the US and India](#). Sharply [rising tensions between India and China](#)—which recently established the world’s largest free trade area (the RCEP) without India—are fuelling interest on the Indian side in closer cooperation with the US. At the same time, the US is urgently seeking markets for its own agricultural surpluses. Agricultural reforms are therefore a potential step toward removing one of the main obstacles to such an agreement. In the end, it would likely come at the expense of the Indian people.

## **Hindu Nationalists under Pressure**

Since Modi’s election victory in 2014, critics have accused the government of promoting the transformation of pluralistic and multi-religious India into a Hindu-dominated and increasingly totalitarian society. Accordingly, the central government reacted to the protests with a well-tested strategy: first, it ignored them as long as possible. When this could no longer be sustained, the government [attempted to paint the mass demonstrations as an “anti-national movement” led and manipulated by “terrorists” and “Sikh separatists”](#). The goal was to turn the rest of the population against the protesters and at the same time justify the harsh police measures. The mainstream media, now largely controlled by Hindu nationalists, [also manipulated video material across social media](#) to help set the scene. This effort was, however, flagged by Twitter. Although the government is now meeting with representatives of the protesters, it still refuses to concede to their core demands and is stalling where it can. It is most likely hoping the protests will disperse by the onset of winter in Delhi.

It is astonishing that the Hindu nationalists are taking such strong action against the farmers, since the BJP has so far achieved its electoral successes largely thanks to the support of the rural population. Before his first election victory, [Modi promised to double incomes in Indian agriculture by 2022 through guaranteed prices of 50 percent above production costs](#). This promise was betrayed; today, guaranteed prices are even lower than they were at that time. In other respects, too, the Hindu nationalists’ agricultural policy is characterized [primarily by grand announcements which were discarded in the end](#). This is one reason why farmers are no longer satisfied with the government’s assurances and now demand concrete changes.

The protests should not be seen as an isolated event, but rather as a renewed upsurge of the ever-widening resistance against the Hindu nationalists, undertaken by a diverse and increasingly united alliance of movements. The students and professors who in 2016-2018 protested the Hindu nationalists’ totalitarian intervention in the universities were at the time mostly on their own.

The situation changed in 2019, however, following the [month-long mobilization](#) against the new citizenship law. In December 2019, the central government passed the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), opening a path to citizenship for non-Muslim migrants. For the first time, citizenship was to be determined by law on the basis of religion. Many observers also feared that the government was planning to render Indian Muslims stateless by introducing the National Register of Citizens (NRC). In response to this attack on a pluralistic India, months of sustained protests erupted throughout the country. As with the current demonstrations, their focus was on those primarily affected, first and foremost Muslims and *adivasis* (the indigenous peoples of India). Yet at that time, as now, protesters were supported by a nationwide uprising of civil society, spanning diverse actors from women’s and Dalit organizations to students and left-wing intellectuals, to trade unions and left-wing parties.

This alliance brought intense pressure to bear on the government, but the protests were broken up by a strict COVID-19 lockdown and violent riots against Muslims in Delhi. The movement against the

citizenship laws, however, remains the linchpin of resistance to the Hindu nationalists. Pluralistic resistance roared back again not long after the hard lockdown, first against labour law reforms, then against the state's disregard of sexual violence committed against low-caste groups.

The current protests against the farm bill can also be seen as a new wave in this ever-expanding alliance of resistance. Each wave of protest gathers new actors against the government. Whereas past protests were mainly urban, it is now the rural population, formerly the backbone of the Hindu nationalists, that is leading the way. With each wave, the government's divisive strategies are less effective. Although the protesters have so far achieved little political success at a national level, New Delhi is growing increasingly uncomfortable. And there is every indication that this time will be different.

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