

# **“Twenty thousand farmers commit suicide in India every year” - Interview with Madhuresh Kumar**

Thursday 25 February 2021, by [KUMAR Madhuresh](#), [LEHOCZKI Noémi](#) (Date first published: 24 February 2021).

**“The moment the more corporations are coming and the market players are coming, the prices will go further down. So as a result, when the input cost is very high, the farmers will not have the desired output. So I think the whole contention is around the fact that the laws are to benefit the corporate houses and the commercialization of agriculture. That’s the one, the second is that the minimum support prices structure and the government subsidies for the farmers, that will end, slowly the government will withdraw from it.”**

**This interview, conducted by Noémi Lehoczki, first appeared on the Hungary-based publication [Mérce](#). We publish the English version with their permission. The transcript of the interview was lightly edited for clarity and spelling.**

On June 5, 2020, amidst the spread of the COVID -19 pandemic, the Government of India hastily passed three ordinances, namely the Farmers’ Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Act, 2020; the Farmers’ (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement on Price Assurance and Farm Services Act, 2020; and the Essential Commodities (Amendment) Act, 2020. By September 2020, these ordinances were made into law without sufficient parliamentary discussion or any talks with the farmers’ representatives on the law and its possible ramifications on their lives.

**Mérce: Could you explain what are the new laws against which Indian farmers are protesting and why they are problematic?**

**Madhuresh Kumar:** I think there is a context to it why these three laws have been introduced. The government’s explanation is that Indian agriculture is in crisis, it needs reforms and what this requires is to try to increase farmers’ incomes and to liberalize the agricultural market so that there can be more investment. Investment from the private sector and industry so there can be greater commercialization of agriculture. That’s the logic with which the government of India has brought in these three laws.

Everybody agrees that Indian agriculture is in crisis because, on average, every year, roughly twenty thousand farmers commit suicide out of debt and out of desperation or because there is a crop failure. Nearly 60 percent of India’s population is involved in agriculture and related activities, even though its contribution to the overall GDP is only 18 percent. 80 percent of all these farmers, those who have any ownership of land, are small owners. They work one or two acres of land, not even a hectare. So it’s that kind of peasantry we have, a small scale peasantry. And there is a large section which is completely agricultural laborers. They don’t have any ownership of land. They just work as agricultural laborers.

Now, these laws which have been brought in in the name of bringing in investment and doing all

that will basically promote contract farming. I think the biggest point of contention for all the farmers is that this is going to do a couple of things. One is that the laws are going to promote contract farming, where the big corporations like Pepsi, Coke, then even Adani and the ITC, the big corporations, will enter into agreements with the farmers, but the farmers will not have enough leeway. When you make a contract between two equal parties, then you can enforce contracts. But between a farmer and a big giant corporation, there is no parity of power, and the law does not protect the farmer. The law is only protecting the contractual obligations towards the corporations. So it's going to promote the corporatizing of the farmer.

Second is that it's going to increase dismantling of an already existing supportive pricing structure, which is there for the farmers. At the moment, farmers do get some kind of support. Every year, let's say a farmer grows wheat and maize and the government announces a certain Minimum Support Price, MSP it's called. And so, if they announce a 30 dollars per quintal, in the market, what the farmer gets is 20 dollars. So, you do not even get a basic set up by that. The moment more corporations are coming, and the market players are coming, the prices will go further down. So as a result, when the input cost is very high, the farmers will not have the desired output. So, I think the whole contention is around the fact that the laws are to benefit the corporate houses and the commercialization of agriculture. That's the one, the second is that the minimum support price structure and the government subsidies for the farmers, that will end, slowly the government will withdraw from it.

Third is the way these laws were brought in. In India, in July, when we had a peak of the pandemic last year, they convened the parliament session and proceeded without any discussion. So even while the pandemic was on, in March and April, they brought on emergency provisions, though what we call *ordinances*. So: the government can bring in an ordinance, but to make it a law, they have to take it to the parliament and go through certain committee discussions. Also, there are pre-legislative discussions, where people are asked to give their opinion, Members of Parliament are asked to debate, discuss and there is a period of at least six to seven months of pre-consultative decisions or discussions, as a procedure; this precedes any major law which comes into the parliament. But in this case, firstly, they brought in the ordinance and when the parliament was on, they just introduced it because they have a majority. They introduced it, they passed it, without debate and discussion. As a result, everybody is asking: if it is such a beneficial and historic piece of legislation, then why are you not consulting us, if it is for our good and we are not convinced, why did you not take our opinion? So, the whole lawmaking process has been done in an authoritarian way, and that has attracted criticism. This is the broad context of the major protests.

**Mérce: It is reported that the protests are the strongest in Punjab, where the Green Revolution was first introduced. Is there a connection?**

**Madhuresh Kumar:** The current trade of agriculture commodities happens through government markets. In the district headquarters, there are these Agricultural Price Mechanism Commodities Markets – APMC markets. As a farmer, I can take my produce to the APMC market, and the government will buy it from me. Agriculture is both a center and a state subject, that is state governments can make law, and the central government can also make law on the subject. But the state has more power in this regard. What happened is that in other states, like in the state of Bihar, the state of Jharkhand and in many other states, the APMC system, the market system, has already been broken down. So the farmers there do not get the benefit.

In Punjab, Haryana, Maharashtra and Kerala, and to an extent in Madhya Pradesh, the APMC system is in function. As a result, farmers there are more affected [by the change of policy]. The moment you destroy the APMC system, where now benefit from it, they will lose everything.

We have these laws, but you have to constantly be vigilant, to keep making sure that these laws are implemented. And so farmers say that there are problems with the APMC market. But this is not the way to resolve those problems. So they want to at least maintain the existing structures. In Punjab and Haryana, they have a very strong APMC system, because the Green Revolution was effective there, and farmers there have to make sure that the systems function. That's the reason why they are also more concerned about defending this.

The protests shifted to Delhi only on 24, 26 November. But the protests in Punjab have been going on from August, so they have been protesting for long. And now the protests are also notable in Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, the whole of North India, I would say. South India is also protesting, but because of the distance, they are not able to come here all the way.

**Mérce: Recently, the Supreme Court of India stayed the implementation of the agriculture reforms. What is the significance of this decision?**

**Madhuresh Kumar:** When the Supreme Court stays a law, they have to give a reason for it. It can be that it is constitutionally not valid, they can say that it's constitutionally illegal, because the government has done it in an illegal way. So, without validating it as illegal, without saying so, the Supreme Court just said we are suspending the law, which is not in their power, unless they say that we are doing it for so-and-so reason and the government can then argue that. But the Supreme Court's decision is a political decision, it's trying to meddle with a law. The Supreme Court is trying to intervene politically rather than on a legal basis.

They formed a committee with the four people, and all of them have already expressed their views in support of the law. So, the farmers and everybody have refused to appear before the committee. In fact, one of the members of the committee already resigned from it, saying that "I'm not going to be part of this committee". And the fact remains that the committee, which the Supreme Court has set up, has no power to repeal the law or to make any recommendation. So, the farmers are saying, "it's the government which is responsible for repealing the law, so why should we talk to the committee?" In all, I would say it's a political decision of the Supreme Court, it has not much to do with the actual content of the laws.

**Mérce: So it's a way to force farmers to negotiate rather than protes.**

**Madhuresh Kumar:** Yes, but not even negotiate. They are saying, "look, we are hearing you, why should you keep protesting? You should just withdraw your protests." So farmers said, "no, we don't trust you." I think that in the last couple of years, the Supreme Court has abdicated its responsibility. Actually, it has shown favoritism. It has shown its inability to actually stand up for the constitutional rights of the people and key constitutional matters have been pending at the court for a very long time. And the court had been spending its time on trivial matters.

As we are speaking, there is a comedian, who made four tweets about the Supreme Court, criticizing one of its judgments. Students wrote to the attorney general, who is the top law officer from the government side, saying that it's contempt of court. The court and the law officer, the attorney general said, "yes, you can start a contempt proceeding against that." And now the Supreme Court is hearing that. And the comedian said, "I'm not pleading guilty that I'm in contempt. You justices are such powerful people. If a comedian can threaten you then where's the sanctity of the institution? You have all the power."

**Mérce: I read the press note by Samyukta Kisa Morcha. It mentions that the 18<sup>th</sup> of January would be celebrated as Women's Farmers Day. I thought I would ask, has there been strong women's presence in the protests?**

**Madhuresh Kumar:** Yes. So: there are tensions within the farmer's movement, and I think the question of the women has remained invisible because it's a patriarchal society. Now, if anybody says "farmer", it means a man. But I think there have been significant gains made by the women's movement. And also, I think beyond the women's movement, there has been an attempt by the Green Movement, environmental movement, to say *but who is a farmer?* So the whole definition of the *farmer* has also been changing over a period of time. People are saying that "the tribal people who live in the forest, they are also agricultural workers, agricultural producers, they are working in the forest and most of them are women." Similarly, women labourers. So, there is a definitional shift in terms of who is a farmer. And because of the increased migration from the rural areas, it's the women who are carrying on most of the farming tasks. There is that, and I think farmers' organizations have come to accept it. But at the same time, the society remains patriarchal. At the broader level, you will see that there is an acceptance of women farmers and the discourse around. But I think on the ground, it's still not that visible, that you will not find many women farmers as leaders. I think the problems remain. At the same time, there is a much greater recognition and the presence of women. They are the backbone, even if the men are here at the border, then the women are doing the actual farming. And so there has been a lot of change. That's true.

**Mérce:** Lastly, do you think the farmer movement may challenge Modi's legitimacy and power?

**Madhuresh Kumar:** I would say that even before, 2014 to 2019, in the first period of Modi, the first political defeat they got was from the farmers. Because when he came, he wanted to change the land acquisition law, again to make it corporate friendly, so corporations can more easily acquire the land of the farmers. And there was a massive mobilization. The planned law was challenged and finally, he did suffer a defeat. After that, throughout 2017, '18 and '19, for three years, there were massive protests by the farmers. In 2018, fifty thousand farmers walked nearly 300 kilometers from Nashik all the way to Mumbai. And there was a big coverage. So there have been protests going on, even at this time. I think we have to see the continuation of all these protests.

Everybody is hoping that this will shift the narrative. We were hoping even in 2019. The problem remains that the opposition political parties, they are not as strong. They are the ones who are fighting the election and they are not able to make use of the narrative set by the farmers and the workers. Because the industrial workers have also led historic strikes in the previous time, in 2014, '16, '17, '18, '19 - all the time. It's hard to say. Because Modi still has three and a half years left before the next elections. And unless something dramatic happens, farmers' protests will have an impact. Definitely, it's energizing for everyone. It's really having an impact even on the discourse. The media is under pressure, judges are under pressure, but the political parties, opposition political parties have to pull themselves together. I think that's going to be difficult.

---

**Madhuresh Kumar** is the Coordinator of the National Alliance of People's Movements in India.

**Noémi Lehoczki** is an author at the Hungarian left-wing news site [Mérce](#).

[Click here](#) to subscribe to ESSF newsletters in English and or French. You will receive one email every Monday containing links to all articles published in the last 7 days.

---

**P.S.**

Left East

<https://lefteast.org/interview-with-madhuresh-kumar-india-farmers-merce/>