**Farmer protests in India**

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A nationwide general strike on 26 November 2020 that involved an estimated 250 million people was staged in support of the farmer unions in India. Approximately 200,000 to 300,000 farmers on tractors converged on 30 November at various border points on the way to Delhi. From nearby Punjab known as the “bread basket of India” due to its large food production industry, as well as Uttar Pradesh and Haryana, those farmers were protesting new agriculture laws these farmers set up multiple blockades at the city’s borders. Shaking the Indian government and arousing international support the “farmer protests” in India for the last several months has evoked a flair of sympathy in the social media by international personalities from politics and entertainment.

Thousands of farmers are occupying three major temporary settlements on the outskirts of Delhi, One of them Ghazipur, is essentially a 2-kilometer stretch of a six-lane expressway consisting of supply stores, a medical department and even a library. Using tractors (10 to 12 such tanks a day), water is brought in from nearby civic stations for drinking, bathing, and cleaning. Facing challenges — cold winter temperatures, clashes with police and security forces, and restrictions on their internet access, among others, their numbers fluctuates from day-to-day as farmers split their numbers, some minding their farms.

Contrary to Indian propaganda it is not Sikhs alone that are aggrieved, camped at Tikri on the border with Delhi a 27-year-old farmer Parveen Sarsod from Sarsod village in Hisar district says, “the whole of Haryana is up in arms. The first push for the protests says, did some from Punjab when Sikh farmers drove up to the Delhi border on November 25”. The subsequent groundswell of anger of Haryana farmers mocked the claims made by members of the ruling party that the protests had been infiltrated by “Khalistanis”.80-year-old Dayanand Dalal said, Look at us and see how many terrorists we are. We will be made into bonded labourers and will not have any rights if these laws come into place”. using the word “aakrosh”, most commonly used for “anger”. In Punjab, much of the organisation has been done by farmer unions, without such a union culture in Haryana, the movement is largely being run by traditional caste organisations known as “Khaps” from the Jat caste. Camped out by the Rohtak Bypass, Sajjan stated with some pride: “There is no politics in this protest. Jats held power for a long time but have now lost it under the BJP [since 2014], this is by and large a Khap movement with only small sections of support from Rajput, Brahmin and Ror communities”. With the two states having a tetchy relationship in the past. Dharampal Dalal, a farmer from Asoda village helping run the Bhandara on Rohtak Bypass, says “the only good thing that has emerged from these laws is the brotherhood between Haryana and Punjab. Modi has done us this favour”.

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A farmer’s parade of tens of thousands drove into Delhi on a large convoy of tractors. On India’s National Day 26 January Deviating from the pre-sanctioned routes permitted by the Delhi Police, they violently clashed with the police at the barricades and installed farmer union flags and religious flags on the mast on the ramparts of the Red Fort.

Making up 60% of the Indian population: the farmers provide 18% of the country’s gross domestic product (GDP). Marginal or poor farmers comprise 85% growing crops on small parcels of land, of averaging less than 3 acres. The monthly income of agricultural households from cultivation has recorded only a marginal increase since the national census in 2011. Almost 52% of total rural agricultural households are estimated to be under heavy debt, news about farmers committing suicides frequently sweeps the media.

Keeping to their dictatorial character the BJP majority forced three heavily contested farm bills through Parliament in September 2020 aiming to reform the agricultural sector. Opposition parties accused the government of flouting parliamentary procedure by passing the bills hurriedly and not listening to their demand of sending the bills to a parliamentary committee for further deliberations. Having many loopholes the hurriedly passed bills have created the unprecedented protests.

The Farmers Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Bill aims to dismantle existing trade and distribution monopoly, the “Mandi” system, government-run markets or agricultural produce marketing committees. Allowing farmers to sell outside of their designated districts middlemen, thereby advancing their interaction with the market directly. Much of the agricultural produce, particularly wheat and paddy is sold here at the minimum support price (MSP) announced by the government every year. The “Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement of Price Assurance and Farm Services” Bill is meant to create avenues for farmers to engage in contract farming through verbal or written contracts, supposedly to open the way for farmers to access national and corporate markets. The last is an Amendment to the Essential Commodities Act, 1955, according to which, cereals, pulses, oilseeds, edible oils, onions and potatoes have been deregulated. Together, the three bills aspire to liberalise and deregulate the market for the agrarian sector. The laws are supposed to destroy and substitute the mandi system that works with middlemen but also with assured minimum prices. One farmer explained to BBC: “First, farmers will feel attracted towards these private players, who will offer a better price for the produce. The government mandis will pack up meanwhile and after a few years, these players will start exploiting the farmers. That’s what we fear”. In response, the government said the “Mandi” system will continue, and they will not withdraw the Minimum Support Price (MSP) they currently offer. Farmers remain suspicious and refuse to budge.

Multiple other problems include 85% of the Indian farming community being marginal farmers and not having access to markets or transportation facilities, how are they expected to reach the regional, national or even corporate markets? The laws are also supposed to facilitate corporate farming, the practice of large-scale agriculture on farms owned or greatly influenced by large companies. This includes corporate ownership of farms and selling of agricultural products, as well as their roles in influencing agricultural education, research, and public policy. As in developed countries Multinational corporations will purchase land from farmers, leaving than without work, and forcing them to move into urban slums to find a living. Indian industry is hardly big and strong enough to absorb millions of unskilled labour. The big corporates could well enslave the already marginalised farmers. By allowing both verbal and written contracts, the BJP government has placed the farmers at the vulnerable end of the bargain with no redress. Given their widely disproportionate access to legal resources rather than that of the farmers, big corporates can bury the farmers in an avalanche of legal tangles. No real law is in place to safeguard the interests of the farmers.

Those corporations will make Indian farmers use genetically manipulated seeds to produce GM crops. Much of the world has been busy banning, restricting and otherwise shunning GM foods. Nearly all the corn and soybeans grown in the U.S. are genetically modified, but only two GM crops are accepted in the European Union. Ten E.U. nations have banned even those two. India has no official policy towards GM food and reaching new markets in Europe or even Asia might be difficult. Both Indian farmers and Indian consumers run the risk of exploitation by placing the market in the hands of big businesses.

Employing more than half of India’s population, agriculture has long been in desperate need of reform. But the goal of the new – and controversial – bills is to allow greater play of market forces in agriculture, improving farm incomes, attracting investment and technology, and increasing productivity, freeing the farmer from the control of middlemen who effectively run wholesale markets. Experience across the world has shown that corporatisation of agriculture, contrary to improving farm incomes has often depressed them. “Leaving farmers to the tyranny of the markets would be akin to putting the sheep before the wolf,” the farmers held. Leakages in the current system need to be reformed, but replacing one failed model with another is not the solution. Evidence from states where farmers haven’t benefited even after wholesale markets were dismantled supports this argument. The Modi govt’s ruthless liberalization policy has caused a stir among Indian farmers that will not subside anytime soon. BJP has a penchant for rushing anti-people bills through a parliament for their own political ends without right of input into legislation. Instead of improving the income of farmers it will bring than more misery.

Meant to divert both domestic and public opinion, Indian propaganda is blaming Pakistan for fanning the agitation having links to the Khalistani operatives in Canada. India’s former High Commissioner to Pakistan Sharat Sabharwal attempted to obscure a visible reality, saying, “they (Khalistanis) are a minority in the 6,00,000-strong Sikh community, nevertheless a “noisy minority” that can interfere to create internal disturbances in India. A lot of Khalistani supporters still live in Pakistan and Pakistan uses them to rake up every internal issue pertaining to India.” While this is food for thought of how we can actually exploit the situation and make India’s allegations come true, we in Pakistan must learn lessons from the situation in India. Our own agricultural sector desperately needs reforms, the Indian experience is a living example of how not to do it!

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