[Navyug Gill](https://www.thenews.com.pk/writer/navyug-gill)

December 14, 2020

**Fight for rights**

On November 26, tens of thousands of Indians marched on foot, trolley and tractor from the states of Punjab and Haryana to the capital, New Delhi. To try to stop them, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led state government in Haryana blocked the main highways with metal barriers, shipping containers and concrete pillars, and even dug up parts of the road. They also unleashed legions of riot police armed with batons, tear gas canisters and water cannon.

Undeterred, the protesters pushed forward, casting aside the barriers and batons and ploughing over the ditches. Rather than end up at the designated protest grounds – where they would have been corralled – they halted with months of supplies at the outskirts of New Delhi in order to shut down the main arteries to the city. At the moment there is a tense standoff with no clear end in sight.

Organised by more than 31 trade unions, the protest has drawn in a diverse group of farmers, labourers and their supporters from nearly all segments of Punjabi society. The demographics of the march cuts across caste, class and religious lines – predominantly Sikh women and men, young and old, rural as well as urban have come together in solidarity.

This impressive mobilisation was triggered by the passing of three controversial farm bills into law in late September. This legislation is designed to commercialise agricultural procurement and distribution and allow private corporations to purchase crops at market prices while removing key government controls.

The farmers argue these neoliberal changes will effectively dismantle the most important safeguards of the existing public system in Punjab, Haryana and western Uttar Pradesh states, leading to greater volatility and poverty for the bulk of the population dependent on agriculture. They see this as a direct threat to their livelihoods and a danger to the stability of the entire regional economy. The slogans of the protests refer to a fight for rights (hakk) and existence (hond).

The march on Delhi was a dramatic escalation of months-long peaceful agitation. It began over the summer with farmers gathering in public squares and outside government offices. Leaders gave impassioned speeches, processions were taken out to nearby villages and a mass education campaign was launched to inform people about the effects of the new laws.

When this had no effect on the government, the protesters then blocked the railways and toll booths, surrounded the homes of politicians and boycotted corporations such as Ambani and Adani that are poised to profit most from the changes.

Throughout they scrupulously avoided violence or damage to public property. Yet apart from a few fitful rounds of talks with officials, this too yielded nothing. Indeed, not only did the government fail to consult farmers when devising the bills, but it thereafter consistently refused to meaningfully negotiate.

These protests are no ordinary expression of grievance. What the world is witnessing in Punjab is a grassroots popular upsurge that has the potential to transform the political landscape of India.

The implications can be gleaned from an unlikely source, the reactions and arguments of the government and its supporters. Rarely do they discuss the content of the laws in detail or try to counter the farmers’ claims.

Instead, proponents have maintained that those protesting are either disgruntled elites who fear the erosion of their privileges, or uneducated simpletons who fail to understand how these laws will be to their benefit. Another conspiratorial angle – invoked by segments of the mainstream Indian media – is that separatists bent on dividing the country are misleading the farmers.

Beyond such dismissals and delusions lies a more pernicious argument. Supporters of the BJP insist these laws were passed by a duly elected government following the proper procedure, and are therefore justified regardless of the opposition. According to this line of thinking, since the BJP won 303 out of 543 seats in the 2019 parliamentary election, the decisions it makes are inherently legitimate because they reflect the general will of the people.

This perception of a blanket mandate presumably extends to other controversial measures, such as the bungled demonetisation of high-value currency notes, the revocation of special status in the disputed state of Jammu and Kashmir, and the imposition of an exclusionary refugee law and national citizen registry. In other words, the merits of an issue matter not in the arrogant logic of majority rule.

The overriding power of the central government thus reveals a deeper contradiction in the very structure of the Indian state. Technically the BJP supporters are not wrong when they claim a procedural right to pass legislation. That is why the government has thus far rejected calls to annul the laws.

However, by being so obstinate in the face of unanimous and sustained regional opposition, they have inadvertently provoked the question of the limits of democracy itself. With only 13 and 10 seats in parliament respectively, Punjab and Haryana will hardly ever matter electorally. The combined population of these two states is over 53 million people with large global diasporas – a small proportion of India’s total of 1.3 billion, but more than the populations of Spain, Columbia or South Korea.

Also, the two states are of major importance to India’s food security. For the past five decades, Punjab alone has on average produced over two-thirds of the wheat and rice that made India food self-sufficient. Should its fate be decided by politicians elected from other, more populous states? What does it mean to be a forever minority in a country claiming to be the world’s largest democracy? Is the rule of the people nothing more than a crass tally of numbers?

What the BJP and its supporters fail to realise is that their intransigence is having the opposite of its intended effect. Rather than weaken the protesters, it has invigorated many of them beyond demanding a repeal of the laws to debating the meaning of democracy and the purpose of federalism. It has not only drawn in vast numbers of people from across India, but has become an international issue.

Excerpted: ‘A popular upsurge against neoliberal arithmetic in India’

Aljazeera.com