[**Tractors at the gate**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1605979/tractors-at-the-gate)

[Shahzad Sharjeel](https://www.dawn.com/authors/7601/shahzad-sharjeel)Published February 7, 2021

The writer is a poet and analyst.

THE Indian farmers have been protesting for months now in Delhi’s vicinity against legislation they view as anti-farmer and detrimental to the country’s agriculture. The protest and the Indian government’s response to it is being watched with interest in Pakistan. The mainstream media may not have accorded it much coverage, but its portrayal on social media has a certain ‘Modi had it coming’ feel to it.

Some songs, mostly in Punjabi, have also started doing the rounds with lyrics bordering on incitement. One song actually offers the ‘farmer brothers’ to borrow ‘equipment’ that we on this side of the border have a surplus of. At this point, the visuals of the song cut to a car trunk full of weapons. Not sure if these are just some young artists striking out on their own or if the ‘Burnol’ brigade is at it again.

While it is alright to feel empathy with the Indian farmers and derive satisfaction at the Indian government’s discomfiture, would it not be more useful to learn from their follies and figure out how we in Pakistan can handle the same issues of agriculture ‘reform’, because it is just a matter of time before we are in a similar quandary?

So, what is it that hundreds of thousands of Indian farmers are protesting against? A legislation introduced by the government. But what is it about? In a nutshell, among other things, the Indian government wants to do away with what is called the ‘support price’ mechanism. For the uninitiated, all it means is that in order to encourage the farming community to continue to produce essential crops, ie staple food such as wheat or cash crops like cotton and sugarcane, governments, prior to the sowing season, announce a ‘support price’ at which they guarantee to buy these crops from the farmers.

It would be useful to learn from the follies of the other side.

Ideally, this should set the minimum price, and theoretically, the farmer is free to sell it to anyone in the open market at a higher price. However, this is not how it works, and the proponents of the free market deem it as ‘interference’ with the market mechanism. They would have us believe that we end up paying higher prices for wheat flour or sugar because the ‘support price’ does not abide by the demand-and-supply rule and is a political gimmick to keep the rural vote bank happy.

**Read:** [*Why are Indian farmers protesting, and what can Modi do?*](https://www.dawn.com/news/1595357)

It is also argued that if you let the ‘self-correcting’ market mechanisms work, it would be a win-win situation for everyone. How, you may ask? Well, when you have surplus export, and the world lines up to buy from you because your prices are internationally competitive, sans the support price of course; in a lean year you make up for the shortages by importing from countries at competitive prices because the globalised economy is forcing everyone to play by the same rules of non-interference in the market.

Wish all of this was as simple and true. We have all just recently witnessed how our government first allowed wheat to be exported, only to wake up to the fact that we did not have sufficient stocks to meet our own need and then imported it at a higher price. The same with sugar.

Secondly, let us suppose that the Indian government succeeds in finding some middle ground with its farmers and the country does away with subsidies etc. In a lean year, would we ever consider importing wheat from India because it involves fewer logistics and will be cheaper? The answer is no because they won’t play cricket with us until we stop bringing up Kashmir, and we will not buy even the Covid vaccine from them till we have Kashmir — do the two sides care for what the Kash­miris want? Self-correc­ting markets are supposed to be a win-win for everyone, but some like to not just win but also annihilate. They make a killing when the cabinet approves export and another when it approves imports from the farthest possible destination.

Coming back to the farmers’ protest in India and why it is a matter of when not if we will have our very own peasants’ uprising across the country, just pick up any loan agreement with any of the IFIs that has to do with agriculture or productivity reforms. We are legally bound to do away with the support price mechanisms and subsidies.

Actually, we are already in violation of many such agreements and the IFIs continue to release loan tranches by misleading their boards who in turn play along to ‘contain’ the Chinese influence.

The world may one day decide to learn from our prime minister and refuse to be ‘blackmailed’ and insist we undertake the reforms against which we have taken loans. The farmers would then protest, only the boot will be on the other foot and our ­ministers would scamper to find the ‘foreign hand’.

*The writer is a poet and analyst.*

[**shahzadsharjeel1@gmail.com**](http://mailto:shahzadsharjeel1@gmail.com)

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