RESEARCH NOTES AND STATISTICS

The Farmers' Struggle Against the Three Farm Acts: A Participant's Memoir

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The Indian farmers' struggle that took place over the course of 13 months in 2020–21 was a unique movement of the peasantry, and one that received unprecedented support from the working class and a wide cross-section of society. It achieved what was deemed impossible: an authoritarian regime was forced to bow down and accept the major demands of the struggle. The combination of severe repression, extreme weather conditions, the extraordinary situation arising out of the Covid-19 pandemic, and an unrelenting propaganda onslaught, failed to crush the unique, issue-based unity of hundreds of peasant organisations.

The human cost and suffering of the protagonists of the historic struggle is incalculable. The state must be considered culpable for the death of more than 700 farmers, who have been hailed as martyrs to the cause. In my quarter-century of political activism, I have never seen such massive and consistent participation for such a prolonged period in pursuit of common goals end in victory. It is a victory that gives hope and confidence in the power of collective action for the future. No adversary, however powerful, can withstand the might of a united struggle.

In the seven years of its rule, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led government at the Centre made a slew of promises to create the illusion that *achche din* (good times) were at hand. These promises, which a pliant corporate media amplified, included the doubling of farmers' incomes by ensuring one-and-a-half times the cost of production as minimum support price (MSP), subsidised inputs, credit at low interest rates, insurance for crop loss, more days of work and wages under MGNREGA, and *har khet ko pani* (water to every field). Though this illusion may have helped the BJP-led government win over the rural masses and gain considerable electoral mileage, the victory of the farmers' struggle dealt it a body blow.

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THE THREE FARM ACTS: ANTI-FARMER, PRO-CORPORATE

The three farm laws brought by the BJP government had the backing of the trio of international finance and capital, namely, the World Bank (WB), the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the World Trade Organisation (WTO), institutions that had for long been pressuring India to cut farm and food subsidies, as well as dismantle its public stockholding. This position was upheld by the Shanta Kumar Committee set up by the present regime in 2014, which called for liberalisation and privatisation of stockholding, and dismantling of the price support system for crops. The three farm laws were introduced amidst the Covid-19 pandemic lockdown along with labour codes that would take away the hard-won rights of workers, including the well-recognised right to an eight-hour workday and the right to unionise. While the people were under strict lockdown, the BJP government unlocked the gates for unrestricted corporate entry. Had they been implemented, the farm laws would have led to the dismantling of government-regulated agricultural produce markets set up to protect farmers from exploitation by traders, and would have opened doors for the hoarding and black marketing of essential commodities like rice, wheat, pulses, oilseeds, potatoes, and onions even in conditions of shortage, famine or other emergencies. They would have promoted corporate contract farming on unequal terms, leading to poor farmers becoming workers on their own land with no legal recourse even if disputes arose. With the government not willing to budge on the content of the farm laws, the farmers had no option but to launch their struggle.

CROSS-CLASS AND ISSUE-BASED UNITY

The initial narrative put forth by a large section of the media was that the protest emerged spontaneously in Punjab, buttressing the Prime Minister's view that it was "a small section" of rich farmers and middlemen in just one State that was opposed to the Farm Acts. The massive show of anger against the Modi-led BJP government was not a spontaneous outburst by any measure. Rather, it was the result of meticulous efforts over the previous seven years in building broad, issue-based unity of farmers. It was this factor that brought about a qualitative change in the peasant movement, never witnessed before.

The All-India Kisan Sabha (AIKS) has played a significant role in building issue-based unity of different organisations over the last seven years of the Modi regime. In 2015, the Bhumi Adhikar Andolan (Movement for Land Rights) saw more than 300 organisations of peasants, agricultural workers, tribal people, Dalits, forest workers, the fishing community, and civil society groups come together around issues of land/forest rights and against indiscriminate land grab. The united struggles of this movement forced the government to withdraw an ordinance aimed at facilitating corporate land grab. In 2017, in another instance of issue-based unity, the All-India Kisan Sangharsh (Farmers' Struggle) Coordination Committee (AIKSCC) was formed around two issues: an assured remunerative price of at least 50 per cent more than the cost of production, and freedom from indebtedness. More than 250 farmers' organisations became part of this united movement, one that launched many struggles but also drafted two Bills during the protests, which were introduced in Parliament as Private Member Bills. This issue-based unity cutting across class, caste, religion, and region created the environment for bigger actions.

The AIKS called for the burning of the farm ordinances immediately after they were promulgated in September 2020, with the active support of the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU), the All-India Agricultural Workers' Union (AIAWU), and other mass organisations. The AIKSCC gave a call for a "Delhi Chalo" ("March to Delhi") in States neighbouring Delhi and for a Grameen Bharat Hartal (Rural India Strike) in other parts of the country to coincide with the call for a general strike by the central trade unions. The AIKS and the AIKSCC were actively involved in the Samyukta Kisan Morcha (United Farmers' Front), which has been the prime mover of the historic farmers' movement.

Comparison with Past Struggles

My first experience of marching with the people for days together to petition the state with a charter of demands was in the last week of April 2015, when I walked with agricultural workers and peasants in Karnataka. That struggle was for land, forest, and housing rights, as well as for the provision of irrigation facilities in the droughtprone regions of the State. It started in the first week of April in Naragunda, Gadag district (a region that had witnessed a revolt as early as 1980, in which two farmers were killed, against the "betterment levy"). Processions from three points in the State converged at a massive rally at Bangalore's Freedom Park. The first started from Naragunda, and comprised a dedicated team of Kisan Sabha cadre who marched about 466 kilometres to Bangalore. A second, much bigger procession started from Bagepalli in Chikkaballapur district, covering 100 kilometres to reach the State's capital. The third march was from Srinivasapura in Kolar district, 104 kilometres from Bangalore. I marched for four days and covered 100 kilometres before participating in the concluding rally. The efforts of the Karnataka Prantha Raitha Sangha (affiliated to the AIKS), and support from the AIAWU and CITU, brought together different farmers' organisations, Dalit organisations and civil society groups, as well as a cross-section of opposition leaders, to the concluding rally. The rally received wide coverage in the Kannada media, but did not gain much attention outside the State.

In what marked the first all-India protest against demonetisation, the AIKS independently organised a Kisan Sangharsh Jatha that passed through many States before culminating in a massive gathering at Delhi on November 26, 2016. Rajasthan in particular saw huge protests with thousands blocking roads, and a 13-day "Janata (peoples) curfew" that brought the administration to a standstill in many districts.

The demands of the protestors included remunerative prices for crops, the opening of purchasing centres, loan waivers, and social security pensions. The Rajasthan Kisan Sabha had planned for a mahapadav (a temporary protest camp) to lay siege to the capital city of Jaipur, but leaders of the Kisan Sabha and other class and mass organisations were arrested prior to it. The protest then took the shape of a Statewide siege, at the end of which the government was forced to release the leaders unconditionally and accept the demands of the farmers.

These mobilisations in turn inspired the decision of the Maharashtra Kisan Sabha to march to Mumbai, the capital city of the State with their demands. The Nashik-Mumbai Kisan Long March commenced from the birthplace of the historic Warli Adivasi struggle, and covered about 186 kilometres with thousands rallying under the red flag led by the All-India Kisan Sabha. This struggle too raised the issues of land and forest rights, food security, social security pensions, indiscriminate land acquisition, remunerative prices, and waiver of loans. As a participant in the march, I witnessed the unbounded energy of poor peasants, Adivasis, agricultural labourers - including and especially women - who marched undeterred by blistering and bleeding feet. A hitherto-not-seen solidarity emerged, with different sections of society coming forward in support of the farmers, hailing them as annadatas (providers of food). Indeed, a broad spectrum of opposition political parties vied to be seen as well-wishers of the peasantry. The fact that society at large had been pushed into distress by a succession of disastrous economic measures such as demonetisation and the Goods and Services Tax (GST), as well as by sky-rocketing prices and rampant unemployment, contributed to the emergence of this solidarity. The people's anger was transformed into active solidarity for the Kisan Long March. The national and international media, which ignored the march at first, were forced to cover it when a 46-second video of thousands of poor farmers – many of them with blistering feet – marching defiantly through the Kasara Ghat under a sea of red flags, went viral on social media and alternative media channels. The peaceful manner of the protest and the farmers' silent march through the city of Mumbai on the last day to avoid inconvenience to students writing exams won hearts.

Industrialists, traders, small retailers, *dabbawalas*, film personalities, writers, activists, workers, doctors, advocates, teachers, journalists, and even some Bollywood stars came out in support of the protest. The Kisan Long March stirred the collective conscience of the people and caught the imagination of the masses. The acceptance of all the demands of the protestors sent a message that victory was possible when the masses are on the move. It became the spark that inspired many more struggles, and those that followed drew lessons from the Kisan Long March. The state did not create hurdles or use force to stop the marches in Karnataka and Maharashtra, the Kisan Sangharsh Jatha or the Kisan Mukti Yatra. It was only in Rajasthan that leaders were arrested and coercive methods used to stop the marchers from reaching Jaipur.

The later struggle against the Three Farm Acts saw a marked departure from the previous marches both qualitatively and quantitatively, but with past experience strengthening it. First and foremost, an effort was under way right from June 2020 onwards to expose the intentions behind the Acts and enlist support for the farmers' cause. The Punjab farmers came prepared for the long haul in their tractors and trolleys, carrying foodgrains and other essentials needed for a prolonged stay. Farmers from other States were quick to pick up the cue and come with a preparedness rarely seen before in struggles. State repression and use of its propaganda machinery against the struggle were also unprecedented.

From day one, the state made all efforts to suppress the peasants' movement. It launched a two-pronged offensive: to physically suppress the struggle using repressive machinery on the one hand, and to launch a propaganda offensive led by the Prime Minister, on the other. Deep trenches were dug on the national highway leading to Delhi, and huge shipping containers and concrete blocks were placed across the road to stall the marchers. Barricades and barbed wire fencing were erected, and water-cannons, tear-gas, and lathis were used to deter the peaceful march from reaching Delhi. Lakhs of farmers with their families overcame all these hurdles and occupied the borders of the national capital. Seeing the determination of the marchers, efforts were then made by the police to deliberately create traffic snarls by blocking arterial roads and creating diversions, with the intention of harassing residents in the vicinity of the protest sites and pitting them against the farmers. On the Jaipur-Delhi National Highway, walls were built using concrete blocks and truck drivers were forced to halt their vehicles to block the road. Agent provocateurs were deployed to provoke the farmers at different borders. Many of them, when apprehended by the farmers, claimed to have been recruited and sent by the police themselves. Every passing day showed how innovative the state could get in conceiving of measures to stop the mobilisation. Huge steel spikes were laid across the roads, concrete walls erected on the highways, and barbed wire fencing laid at the borders, as if this was an international boundary between warring nations. Water, electricity, and the internet were disconnected in a bid to force the farmers into submission. They were branded terrorists, anti-nationals, Khalistanis, Pakistani agents, Chinese agents, thugs, urban Naxals, and so on. The Prime Minister mocked them as parasites and 'andolanjeevis' (people making a living out of protests). The godi media (lapdog media, as the pro-establishment media is derisively referred to) worked overtime to build the narrative against the protestors. But nothing could break the resolve of the farmers.

Breaking Barriers, Building Bridges, Winning Battles

The farmers' resilience and resolve demonstrated a lesson in perseverance to a world that looks for quick-fix solutions and easily gets disillusioned when results are not immediately forthcoming. Numerous organisations of the peasantry and student groups carried out a widespread campaign to educate the public about the adverse

impact of the three Farm Acts. Despite the pandemic restrictions, activists of the AIKS and other organisations went to the villages, while students and youth came forward to refute the canards spread by the BJP government and the corporate media. They published booklets and used online platforms to spread their message. The AIKS literature was translated into all the national languages. Joint campaigns by the AIKS, CITU, and AIAWU reached every nook and corner of India. In Andhra Pradesh alone, a campaign was conducted in more than 12,000 villages with the distribution of 30 lakh pamphlets, explaining the adverse impact of the farm laws, the labour codes, and the demands of the struggle.

In the run-up to the Republic Day Tractor Parade, a rehearsal was held in the first week of January 2021. The Haryana Kisan Sabha announced that 150 tractors would participate under its banner. As it turned out, over 480 tractors took part, each carrying the Kisan Sabha's red flag. On Republic Day, over 5,000 tractors with red flags were present at different border crossings of Delhi. The AIKS, as one of the main constituents of the SKM and AIKSCC, was at the forefront of the planning and mobilisation for the Mazdoor-Kisan (Worker-Peasant) Tractor Parade through Delhi and across the country. The AIKS, being one among a few organisations with a country-wide presence, coordinated with fraternal organisations of agricultural labour, the working class, women, students, youth, Dalits, and Adivasis, to make this unique form of protest successful. Working in coordination with other constituents of the SKM and AIKSCC, it ensured record participation in the peaceful celebration of Republic Day.

More than a lakh-and-a-half flags were printed by the central Kisan Sabha, and many more by the State Kisan Sabhas. One lakh badges were made and proudly worn by all the protesting farmers. Kisan Maha Panchayats and tractor rallies were held across the country. To participate in the Muzaffarnagar Kisan Mazdoor Maha Panchayat in Uttar Pradesh, a State not known for a strong Left presence, 91 busloads came under the AIKS banner from Bulandshahar alone, and over 20,000 people joined from other parts of Uttar Pradesh as well as other States.

The *langars* or community kitchens set up by Sikh gurudwaras and civil society groups ensured that no one went hungry. At the Shahjahanpur border, AIAWU leader and ex-MLA of the CPI(M), Pawan Duggal, played a key role in organising a community kitchen from December 13, 2021 till the struggle ended. Another such kitchen in Jind ensured that food was available to all those who travelled to and from the protest sites. Owners of dhabas and shopkeepers in nearby villages pitched in. The Korambadam Service Cooperative in Kerala provided more than 1 tonne of foodstuff. Non-resident Indians contributed grain, blankets, and tents. "Food Grains for Those Who Feed the Nation" was the slogan of a campaign carried out by comrades in the United Kingdom. The Democratic Youth Federation of India (DYFI) and the Students Federation of India (SFI) contributed blankets and bedsheets. The people of Mewat set up a tea-stall at the Shahjahanpur border that stayed open right

through the protest. Retired jawans and sportspersons gave up their medals in solidarity with the farmers. Musicians from Punjab composed songs in support of the farmers, which became big draws. Oorali, a popular band from Kerala, performed at the struggle sites. Activists of Jana Natya Manch and Dastak performed regularly for the farmers and their families. The 80 year-old social activist and actor Dayabai performed at different protest sites before finally settling down at the Shahjahanpur site. A young engineer from Karnataka, Nagaraj Kalkutagar, walked all the way from Bangalore, covering over 5,400 kilometres in 196 days, in solidarity with the farmers.

The AIKS made special efforts to give the struggle a pan-Indian character, initiating actions in all States with the active participation of the CITU, the AIAWU, and other fraternal mass organisations. The Shahjahanpur border soon became a "mini-India" with people from all parts of the country joining and strengthening the united struggle. The heroes of the Kisan Long March came in hundreds all the way from Nashik and other places in Maharashtra. More than a thousand people came in buses from Kerala. People from Jammu and Kashmir, West Bengal, Assam, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Karnataka, and Gujarat, in addition to comrades from Rajasthan and Haryana, formed the mainstay of the site. An enthusiastic group of comrades from Gujarat had to evade arrest and reach the Shahjahanpur border via a circuitous route from Udaipur in Rajasthan, foiling the attempts of the police to apprehend them. At the Singhu and Tikri borders, which saw the largest mobilisation, activists from Punjab and Haryana were the backbone of the struggle. Activists from Himachal Pradesh, Assam, and West Bengal, and two batches of more than 500 activists each of the Tamil Nadu Vivasayigal Sangham and Transport Workers Union, joined and stayed for a considerable period. The Ghazipur struggle site was bolstered with the presence of the Uttar Pradesh Kisan Sabha, Uttarakhand Kisan Sabha, and hundreds of activists from Bihar. The Palwal struggle site was kept alive by the efforts of the Haryana Kisan Sabha, Uttar Pradesh Kisan Sabha, and activists from Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, and Odisha. The Mewat struggle site primarily consisted of people from the locality, with other organisations strengthening it by their participation. Anganwadi workers and other women activists came in large numbers to all the struggle sites. The massive participation of women farmers was a defining feature of the struggle, with different organisations in Punjab and Haryana ensuring their effective mobilisation.

The farmers at the struggle sites made great sacrifices. Realising that their futures were under threat, they gave up the comfort of their homes and came with their families, young and old. Extremities of weather such as unseasonal heavy rains, and severe cold and frost, compounded the problems they faced. At the Shahjahanpur border, on at least three occasions, all the tents were destroyed in fierce storms, with some blown a few kilometres away. All the struggle sites suffered heavy water logging due to rains, and the belongings of the protestors were soaked. Yet the moment the weather improved a little, the tents would spring up again - a testimony to the resilience of the peasantry and the solidarity extended to them by the people.

International Solidarity

The farmers' struggle received unprecedented support globally, not just from the Indian diaspora but a far wider cross-section, including workers and peasants, trade unions, activists, students, universities, heads of state, and political parties. The World Federation of Trade Unions, Trade Union International in Agriculture, La Via Campesina, Brazil's Movimento dos Trabalhadores Sem Terra (Landless Workers' Movement), Ambedkar King Study Circle, Progressive International, Virginia Progressives, and Sikh organisations expressed solidarity in various ways. Leaders of the struggle addressed students in universities and solidarity groups across the globe. Tractor and car rallies, and protests at Indian embassies in different countries became a regular feature. The Canadian Prime Minister and a few other political leaders like Jeremy Corbyn and Noam Chomsky spoke out against the Indian government's insensitive attitude. The Seattle City Council passed a resolution in support of the Indian farmers with Kshama Sawant, a Councillor of Indian origin, taking the initiative. On March 8, 2021, there was a discussion in the British Parliament on freedom of the press and the safety of protestors in India, informed by literature issued by organisations like ours; I was provided with the link to witness the parliamentary proceedings, and was able to listen to Corbyn and other members of the British Parliament speak in favour of Indian farmers. Singer Rihanna, climate activist Greta Thunberg, actors and sportspersons, and organisations in neighbouring countries spoke in support of the farmers.

OUR RESOLVE REMAINS STRONG

The message from the farmers was clear from the outset: our struggle will not end; we will intensify our peaceful protest till the hated farm laws are withdrawn. At no point during the long duration of the struggle did the movement falter, either on its demands or its determination to see the demands through. The farmers were fearless in their conviction: the words of the nationalist poet Subramania Bharati provide an apt description of their resolve. "Even if the sky crumbles and falls we have no fear, we have no fear, we have no fear at all." Indeed, if anything, the farmers by their action sowed fear in the minds of their opponents.

Lenin once said: "There are decades where nothing happens, and there are weeks where decades happen." Indian farmers defied prophecies of defeat by their united struggle, and, with unprecedented support from other sections of the working people, won a historic victory. The Narendra Modi-led BJP government was forced to apologise to farmers and repeal the three farm laws. The government also agreed to other demands of the farmers, such as the withdrawal of criminal cases against farmers, compensation to the families of those who died or were killed during the struggle, withdrawal of the proposed amendments to the Electricity Act, and the establishment of a committee to ensure legal guarantees for MSP. The victory that was earned in the weeks when decades happened will have an impact on the future politics of this country, even as our vision and struggle for a pro-people alternative remains strong.

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