RESEARCH NOTES AND STATISTICS

The Farmers' Movement Against Three Agricultural Laws in India: A Study of Organisation

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https://doi.org/10.25003/RAS.12.01.0012

INTRODUCTION

The struggle of Indian farmers against the three farm laws promulgated by the Indian government in September 2020 lasted a little over a year, making it the longest rural struggle in post-Independence India.¹ The laws were the Farmers' Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Act, 2020 and the Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement on Price Assurance and Farm Services Act, 2020. In addition, an amendment was made to the Essential Commodities Act, 1955. Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced the withdrawal of the laws in a televised address on November 19, 2021. The Farm Laws Repeal Bill, 2021 was passed in both houses of the Parliament on November 29, 2021 and the farmer organisations suspended the protests in December, 2021.

This article documents the organisational skill and coordination that underlay the protest and kept it alive. It provides a description of the establishment of protest camps, living arrangements at these camps, and the mechanisms by which the movement sought to integrate with local populations. It also describes how the larger anti-farm-laws protest provided heft and unity to smaller but important State-level struggles, resulting in victories that strengthened the unity of the protesters and organisational strength of the farmers' movement in India as a whole.

The paper is based on information from media reports, newspaper articles and the social media Platforms Facebook and YouTube, documented by the author as part of a larger project, the People's Archive of Farmers' Protest (PAFP). Interviews were

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¹ These laws came into force from June 5, 2020.

conducted by the author at the protest sites and *langar* to understand the management and functioning of these sites.

The Beginning of the Protests: The March on Delhi

The Acts were first passed by the Union Cabinet as ordinances in June 2020. Once the acts were passed by Parliament, the build-up of a spate of local protests in Punjab and Haryana (*National Herald* 2020) led to an important development for the struggle, the creation in early November 2020 of a joint platform, the Joint Farmers' Front (Samyukta Kisan Morcha, hereafter SKM), to lead the agitation against the farm laws. SKM comprised around 40 leading farmer organisations and represented tens of millions of farmers all over the country. This was not the first time a joint platform had been created. As early as September 2017, the All India Kisan Sangharsh (Struggle) Coordination Committee (AIKSCC) had been formed and had led several farmer struggles and agitations.

A good example of planning and solidarity under a centralised leadership was in the lead up to and after the call to "March on Delhi" (*Dilli Chalo*) given by the SKM on November 26-27, 2020. (Newsclick 2020). Alarmed by the call given for an all-India general strike called by major trade unions on November 26, the Haryana police raided the homes and offices of farmer-organisers and trade unionists at several places across the State on the night of November 24. The police took around 30 leaders and activists into preventive custody ahead of the Delhi March (Kumar 2020). However, the all-India strike was a huge success, and saw the participation of hundreds of thousands of workers cutting across all sections (Hemalata 2020).

Unprecedented methods were used to keep protestors from marching towards Delhi. Farmers from Punjab, for example, who tried to enter the neighbouring state of Haryana enroute Delhi, faced heavy barricading, dug-up roads blocked by boulders, large concrete pipes, wires and huge piles of sand. At various points the police used tear gas and water cannon to disrupt the march.² However, the lines of tractor-trolleys kept getting longer as more farmers joined the protestors. Tractors and earth movers were brought from nearby villages to repair dug-up roads and remove blockades until, after a point, it seemed impossible to stop the marchers. Free community kitchens (langar) and cooked food stalls mushroomed overnight along the national highways passing through Haryana, where rural volunteers served food and made other arrangements for farmers. It was clear that the plans to stop the farmers from reaching Delhi had proved counter-productive. On November 27, the marchers reached two entry points to the national capital, Singhu (on National Highway 44) and Tikri (on National Highway 9). They were stopped at these points, although they demanded access to Jantar Mantar, the place in Delhi designated for public protests. On November 28, when the Home Minister invited

² Water cannon were used multiple times in winter, when temperatures fell as low as 1-5 degree Celsius.

farmers' leaders for talks, the police asked them to vacate the roads and shift to another place. The farmers refused to shift from the borders of the city.

After the protesting farmers sat at the borders, farmers from other parts of country, including Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Uttarakhand, and Uttar Pradesh joined their ranks. Police in these states tried to prevent them from marching towards Delhi, and arrested many. Within a few days new border protest sites sprung up. These were at Ghazipur (where farmers from Uttar Pradesh joined), Shahjahanpur Kheda (on National Highway 48), where farmers from Rajasthan joined, Palwal (on National Highway 2) where farmers from Haryana, Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh put up their tents, and Dhansa-Badli (close to Gurugram) where farmers from southern Haryana started a protest site. A convoy of thousands of farmers that started from Maharashtra's Nashik reached the border of Delhi at Shahjahanpur on December 25.

In the early stages of the struggle most of the farmers at the protest sites were from Punjab and Haryana. By the end of December, farmers from more Indian States were involved. Leaders of the SKM worked hard to give the struggle a more all-India character; they made regular visits to different States to address farmers about the impact of the new farm laws and to mobilise support for the protests.

Life at the Protest Sites

Although there is no precise figure, by the beginning of 2021 there appeared to be several hundred thousand farmers living in struggle-sites or encampments called "Dilli Border Morche." Farmers were far away from their villages and homes and in the midst of a severe winter. They first stayed either in or under their tractor trolleys; as the days passed, and with no sign of a settlement in sight, they set up temporary tents and huts covered with polythene and tarpaulin. As the protest progressed, new services began in these temporary encampments. "Kisan Malls" were set up by some non-profit and social service organisations, and from their shelves, many items of daily use, including blankets, quilts, socks, and soap, were handed out free. Soon clusters of tents and *langar* arose; each would be named after the village from where the farmers using them came, with the "village" clearly signposted by name, with "0 kms" written below to indicate that a person had arrived at his or her "village." Such villages were also identified by numbers on highway lampposts and metro pillars. During the peak agricultural season, for the convenience of participating farmers, some villages from Punjab even had regular bus services to protest sites.

An important question to be asked of this large-scale and year-long social mobilisation is whether the sharp inequalities of class, caste and gender that mark rural India were replicated in the protest sites. A feature of most Indian villages is, as is well known, the

caste-based segregation of Dalit settlements from the rest of the village.³ This phenomenon was not evident in the same way in these newly settled "protest villages." There are two possible reasons for this. First, these camps were set up at the borders in a somewhat spontaneous and unplanned manner: contingents of protesters settled wherever they could find space. At this juncture protestors tended to congregate from the particular region where the site was located - Malwa, Majha, Doaba and so on. Their primary affiliation was to their village and a particular union; these affiliations were given prominent public visibility by the village names and union flags displayed on the tents. Secondly, given that the demands of the movement were primarily of the landed castes and classes, the presence of Dalits and other landless communities was not prominent due to the class character of the struggle at this juncture. The mobilisation of sections of the rural poor at the border protest sites were in the early stages occasional, and for specific events. A more systematic and organised attempt to mobilise these sections occurred during the later stages of the struggle, when the villages evolved a roster system ensuring participation from different strata of households in the village. Once Dalits came to reside at the protest sites, however, they lived at the sites and ate from the *langar*, or common dining, facilities. These are, however, preliminary observations on this important question of class and social segregation. The participation of Dalit communities and of women is part of a different study by the author (Singh 2022b, Sangwan and Singh 2022).

The preparation of food was a particularly well-organised feature of the protest sites. All tents had supplies and cooking arrangements. Often rations and cooking were shared by a few tents. There were of course roadside *langar* where anyone could eat free. Vegetables, milk, and other perishable goods were brought to these tent kitchens and *langar* on alternate days from farmers' own villages, and from the nearby villages of Haryana where a number of groups mobilised and collected supplies on a regular basis (Singh 2020). Most kitchen tasks, including cooking, were mainly performed by women, although it was not an uncommon sight to see men washing dishes, chopping vegetables and making chapatis. Certain tents also employed women from landless communities on wages for cooking and related kitchen work.

New Living Arrangements

By the beginning of 2021 some protestors began to construct permanent (*pucca*) accommodation (*The Sentinel* 2021), As the summer months of March-April approached, farmers replaced most of their tarpaulin tents with huts made of bamboo, wooden planks and straw, with many relocating their huts to cooler places under trees. Fans were installed in the huts; some installed facilities such as

³ For more on caste-based residential segregation in rural India see Singh 2015. In addition to segregation, the labourers also in many cases depend on landed employers for shelter (for more on housing and labour relations, see Singh 2022a).

lavatories, refrigerators, internet connections, inverters, generators, solar plates, water purifiers, and water coolers. Some even installed air-coolers and air conditioners in their new dwellings. In the settlements, most tents were spaces where people from the same village lived. The protest sites suffered repeated disruption of water supplies, waste-collection facilities, electricity, and internet services by the local authorities. Tents became makaans (homes), as flower pots appeared and vegetable plots sprung up. Neighbours invited each other to the "house warming" of a new temporary home. Many residents did not go home at all during the protest period (Akhar 2021). Even letters were delivered to the protest site addresses (Pawan Duggal of the All-India Kisan Sabha told me that he received a wedding invitation addressed to his protest site). A strong sense of collective caring, solidarity, and support was a feature of the camps; festivals were celebrated, rituals performed and deaths mourned together.⁴ Open spaces along the highway were converted into courts for volleyball, badminton, wrestling, and *kabaddi*, with some competitions in which national and international players participated. Together the residents of protest sites weathered storms that blew away tents. They stood together to resist the attacks on their homes by criminals and right-wing groups.

Solidarity and support for the protestors took many forms. *Dhabas* (eating places) on highways provided food for farmers, local residents provided grain and pulses, fresh vegetables, and milk. They contributed Wi-Fi connections, helped charge mobile telephones, and provided other forms of assistance. Shops, hotels, petrol pumps, showrooms, and other business establishments opened their facilities to be used by the farmers. Businesses and individuals that supported the farmers were targeted by the authorities (Kamal 2021). Farmers from around Delhi sent tractor-trailers full of wheat directly from the harvested fields in April, and local flour mills offered their services to farmers free of cost. Village-level committees managed the supply of rations and organised the participation of farmers from each village. These committees maintained rosters of protestor-participants at the border. Motor vehicles took people to and from villages in Punjab and Haryana so that wider participation could be ensured and people could rest and manage their chores at their village homes (TNIE 2021).

Support From Local People

A close relationship developed between those staying at the borders and local people. The border areas are predominantly rural and come under the National Capital Region (NCR) and the Haryana State administration. When the schools were closed because of Covid-19, many families joined the protests along with children who attended online classes from the sites (Joseph 2020). There were a few groups and individuals who ran free classes for children of street vendors, and the families

⁴ A protester, Sohan Singh Baba of Gurdaspur, who had been staying at the Singhu border protest site died and, according to his wish, was cremated on land adjacent to the protest site.

of people from nearby industrial slums. Soon, the infrastructure created at the protest sites began to be used by the local population as well. Libraries with books on literature, poetry, politics and the social sciences were set up at the border sites (Arora 2021; Saini 2021).⁵ The SKM started a Sadbhavna Mission (Harmony Mission) in May 2021 to expand its reach among the local population and to strengthen the relationship of the SKM with them. As part of this mission a medical team organised free health check-ups for the local population as well as the protesters at the Singhu border. According to Dr Balbir Singh, the coordinator of medical camps, volunteers organized eye check-ups three days in a week, and general medical and heart check-ups once a week, and also organised ENT check-ups, and orthopaedic and physiotherapy help. In the first five months of these camps, 250-300 eye cataract operations were conducted successfully and around 6000 people underwent eye tests and received free spectacles. Local doctors, drug manufacturers, NGOs, and charitable trusts also extended support to the camps. Some donors sponsored Ainak Langars (or events for the free distribution of spectacles). The Sadbhavna Mission volunteers would take patients from their homes/tents for treatment. The medical team also planned to provide mechanical hands to those who lost them in accidents, as well as hearing aids to those with hearing problems (Kisan Ekta Morcha 2021). More than 100 medical camps, small and big, were opened across all border sites, including a large facility set up by a non-resident Indian doctor from the US at Tikri border which attended to 4000-6000 patents in a day (ANI 2021).

Mitti Aid was another voluntary organization from Punjab that served the people at the Singhu protest site and in nearby areas. They ran a "*Zakhmi Jooton ka Aspataal*" (Hospital for Wounded Shoes) at the border from December 2020. Here the shoes of the protestors were cleaned and mended and made to last the harsh winter. After the winter season they began "foot massage *langar*" to provide comfort to the tired feet of the older protesters. They also made pickles, supplied free to all *langar* at the Delhi border (Newslaundry 2021).

On October 30, 2021, the SKM and the local administration agreed to open two lanes of two and half feet each for two-wheelers to pass from 7 am to 8 pm at the Tikri border. This decision was welcomed by the local population and farmers.

The governments of Haryana and Punjab had used the Sutlej-Yamuna Link (SYL) canal water-sharing issue to sour relations between farmers of the two States. In fact, the SYL issue was raised by the ruling party in Haryana during the initial phase of the agitation, but no rift or divide was created between the agitating farmers of these States. On the other hand, the farmers' movement has proved to be a unifying force. The slogan "*Punjab badda bhai*" (Punjab, the elder brother of

⁵ Libraries including "Bahujan libraries" set up by students from various universities became meeting points for people from various walks of life to organise literary and cultural activities and discussions.

Haryana) was a commonly heard one and was used in the protest music generated during the protests.

Loss of Lives

Some volunteers and a few farmer organisations maintained a record of the deaths of farmers during the protests (Human Cost of Farmers' Protest 2020). According to some estimates there have been approximately 750 deaths of farmers at different protest sites around Delhi. Of the total, around 550 deaths were of farmers belonging to the state of Punjab, 200 were from Haryana and rest from other States.⁶ The first death during the protest was of a woman protester from Budladha, Mansa, Punjab, reported in October, 2020 before the protests at the Delhi border started (Punjab Kesari Harvana 2021). From November 2020 till May 2021, 477 farmers lost their lives, of whom the majority were from Punjab, according to the SKM. The month of January, 2021 witnessed the highest number of deaths, mostly due to the cold wave (Chaba 2021). Most deaths were due to weather-related causes, poor health and accidents. There were also some suicides (Saha and Ojha 2021). Rajbir Singh of Sisai village in Hisar district of Haryana in his suicide note urged his fellow protestors not to return home until their demands were met (HT Correspondents 2021). Sant Baba Ram Singh from Karnal district in his suicide note wrote that he was unable to bear the plight of farmers and was sacrificing his life for their cause (ENS 2020).

In addition to weather and other challenges, the protestors had to confront the second wave of the Covid-19 pandemic which hit the country severely during March-May 2021. The SKM leadership instructed farm unions to reduce the number of farmers at the borders and to follow Covid-19-appropriate behaviour.

Offshoots of the Main Protest: Confronting State Government Actions

Other than the main protest sites at the borders, there were localised offshoots of the main protest sites at toll-plazas on national highways in the states of Punjab and Haryana. The "capture" of these toll booths at the beginning of the agitation was an expression of the anger of local farmers at the treatment meted out to the agitating farmers by the state. The toll plazas then became permanent sites of protests from where protestors gave calls for independent actions in addition to those called by the SKM. ⁷

 $^{^{6}}$ On November 20, 2021, the Government of Telangana announced Rs 3 lakh ex-gratia for families of farmers who died during the protests. This amount was handed over to the family members of the farmers on May 22, 2022 in Chandigarh. There have also been efforts by individuals and organisations to extend monetary support to these families.

⁷ There were more than 100 protest sites in Punjab. There were two permanent sites at Rampur Baghelan town in Satna district and Bihra village in Rewa district in Madhya Pradesh, where protests continued for more than 300 days.

In addition to protests against the Central farm laws, farmers from Haryana and Punjab organised actions against the State Governments. In Haryana, the farmers called for a boycott of elected representatives and office bearers of the two ruling parties, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and Jannayak Janta Party (JJP), after they issued statements against the struggle, alleging that farmers were supported by "foreign powers" hostile to the country (Deswal 2021). Farmers protested at official events, and the police dispersed such gatherings, sometimes with lathis and arresting farmers. These incidents then led to more protests at local administration buildings and police stations. Women participated in these protests in large numbers. Ruling alliance representatives could not enter many villages in the state and had to cancel public programmes. Protests against state administrations were also organised in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand and Punjab.

In Punjab, sugarcane farmers in the Doaba and Majha regions came together in an organization called the Doaba Farmers' Struggle Committee (Doaba Kisan Sangharsh Committee) and blocked the Jalandhar-Delhi national highway and railway tracks on August 20, 2021 to demand a hike in sugarcane prices and payment of pending dues from sugar mills (Kaur 2021). On August 24, after a fiveday protest, farmers won a hike of Rs 50 per quintal (100 kg), taking the State Agreed Price (SAP) to Rs 360 per quintal, the highest in the country. The State Government also agreed to clear all pending sugarcane dues in 15 days. This was a historic victory as sugarcane prices had remained unchanged over the previous four years in Punjab (Shagun 2021). The next day the Central Government increased the Fair and Remunerative Price (FRP) of sugarcane by Rs 5 per quintal, setting the price at Rs 290 per quintal. On September 9, Haryana announced an increase of Rs 12 per quintal over its existing price of Rs 350 (Sharma 2021). The Uttar Pradesh government conceded the demand, and on September 27, 2021, increased sugarcane prices to Rs 350 per quintal, an increase by Rs 25 per quintal (Jainani 2021).

Farmers also protested against shortages and illegal trading of fertilizer and other agricultural inputs (prices rose during the winter sowing season) and the Government's failure to procure paddy at the Minimum Support Price in agricultural produce markets. The governments of Haryana and Punjab announced a 10-day delay in the procurement of paddy just a day before the scheduled announcement date of October 1, 2021. Protests broke out, forcing the governments to start procurement immediately. On August 25, 2021, the Uttar Pradesh Government announced the withdrawal of crop-stubble burning cases filed against farmers. It revoked the fines imposed on them and agreed not to disconnect electricity connections in cases where dues had not been paid. It also waived interest on such dues (*HT* Correspondent 2021).

The movement also influenced in a positive way socio-cultural aspects of the regions that were the epicentres of this struggle. Take gender relations, for example. A

relatively high participation of women in the public and social sphere, in many cases in leading roles, had a positive impact on gender equality, at least during the period of the protests. As Subhashini Ali of the All-India Democratic Women's' Association (AIDWA) noted

The roots of the movement are very deep and the way local toll plazas are organising themselves with the active participation and leadership of women is going to impact the social status of women in a positive way in the long term. The democratic movement in Haryana shall get strength and momentum from this (Digital City 2021).

The Highway Langar

The *langar* became an important site of gathering and organisation. In origin, *langar* is a Sikh institution where food is cooked by volunteers and distributed free of cost. The *langar* at a protest site was run by different sections of society and was not necessarily located in the vicinity of a Sikh temple (gurdwara). During the course of the protests, *langar* were set up along roads and highways, parks, railway tracks, and near government offices, and police stations; in short, wherever farmers organised protest actions.

One such *langar* functioned near Jhanj village on the outskirts of Jind, Haryana. It was managed primarily by non-Sikhs, and was on one of the busiest routes connecting the Punjab and Delhi protest sites. According to Kapoor Singh, an organiser of the *langar* and a trade union leader, the *langar* was set up on December 13, 2020 as a tea-and-snacks stop for those travelling to Delhi from Punjab, but soon became a regular set-up serving food and meals. A team of five to six hired cooks did the cooking, volunteers handled the rest. From a straw-and-polythene shed, it expanded to a 50-ft-long shed with a tin roof, with the numbers eating at it reaching 5000 a day. Ramniwas Dhankhadi, a volunteer, said that there was never an occasion when a person said no to his appeal for contributions (*JAN Kranti News* 2021). Grain and pulses, flour, milk, buttermilk, ghee, vegetables, and even cooked food were collected from households in the villages. People sent cooked chapatis to supplement the shortage of chapatis on weekends. The furniture at the *langar* was made by carpenters free of cost, and nearby villages and local dairies also contributed milk.

According to Phool Singh Sheokand, All India Kisan Sabha (AIKS) State President, 150 villages contributed regularly to this *langar*, with additional financial contributions coming in from government school teachers, electricity department workers, retired employees and trader and shopkeeper associations. Indeed, food was collected from all castes in a village, a significant occurrence in an area where caste divides between Jat and non-Jat castes are very strong.

After the protests were called off, the one-year anniversary of the *langar* was observed on December 13, 2021. The *langar* committee noted that the donations received in kind were around five times more than cash donations.

Concluding Notes

The victory of India's longest running farmers' protest lay in great measure in the organization and coordination of the protest by farmer unions, volunteer groups, and others, often with different political views. The ruling regime miscalculated and underestimated the resolve of the protesters. The protests at the borders of the capital city gave a new lease of life to farmers' protests on other State-level and local issues and demands across the country. While the main demand was the withdrawal of the three laws and legal guarantee of MSP, a number of smaller agitations were conducted concurrently, and have grown since the suspension of the larger struggle, many of them following the model of the camps on the Delhi border, some of which lasted weeks. Many of these local struggles also resulted in victories, backed as they were by the force of the larger protest. This suggests the beginning of a new phase of agrarian politics.

The penetration of the protests to villages and small towns put pressure on State and Central governments. The toll and *langar* committees undertook the tasks also of providing material help and of keeping numbers at the protest sites high. The movement created and trained a new generation of agrarian activists and workers who are articulate and spirited. Youth and women formed a high proportion of the activist base.

The participation of diverse sections of society and their unity of purpose is the glue that held this mass movement together. Collective struggle can bring together people belonging to different regions, religions, cultures, languages, socio-economic backgrounds, and caste identities. However, it is incorrect to draw the conclusion that the struggle rose above or dissolved the existing inequalities and contradictions of rural society. The victory of the struggle underlined the importance of forming alliances and building solidarity between different sections of the people, on common issues, to counter neoliberalism.

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Date of submission of manuscript: March 4, 2022 Date of acceptance for publication: June 10, 2022