

**Czech University of Life Sciences Prague**

**Faculty of Economics and Management**

**Department of Humanities**



**Bachelor Thesis**

**Political Economy and Social Movements:  
Indian Farmers Protests 2020-21**

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# CZECH UNIVERSITY OF LIFE SCIENCES PRAGUE

Faculty of Economics and Management

## BACHELOR THESIS ASSIGNMENT

Nayeemudeen Syed Ibrahim

Economics and Management

Thesis title

**Political Economy and Social Movements: Indian Farmers Protests 2020-21**

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### **Objectives of thesis**

This thesis will consider the connections between social movements and political economy using the example of farmers protests in India in 2020-21. Alongside traditional political actors like states and parties, social movements are increasingly considered as important drivers of both political and economic change. A political economy approach to social movements raises various significant questions, including what material interests drive people to participate in such movements, what resources are available to movements, what economic models and ideas are implicit and explicit in their goals and demands, and the longer term consequences of such movements for economic policy.

The protests by Indian farmers against the government's farm acts have been described by some as the largest protests in history. The thesis will look at the political-economic motivations, resources and goals of the protesting farmers, considering in particular the economic history of Indian agriculture, Indian government policy and attempts at reform, and the methods farmers and farm unions used to organise and put pressure on the government.

### **Methodology**

The thesis will develop a literature review focusing on political economic analysis of social movements, Indian agricultural policy and history, and existing secondary literature on the protests. It will conduct case study analysis of the movement, through documentary analysis and qualitative interviews.

**The proposed extent of the thesis**

40-50 pages

**Keywords**

Political Economy, Protests, Agriculture, Social Movements, India

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- FADAE, Simin. (2022). Politics of alliance in the farmers' march to Parliament in India. *International Sociology* 37(1): 31-49.
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## **Declaration**

I declare that I have worked on my bachelor thesis titled " Political Economy and Social Movements: Indian Farmers Protests 2020-21" by myself and I have used only the sources mentioned at the end of the thesis. As the author of the bachelor thesis, I declare that the thesis does not break any copyrights.

In Prague on 15/03/2023

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**Nayeemudeen Syed Ibrahim**



### **Acknowledgement**

I would like to thank Daniel Swain for his insightful advice and support during my work on the thesis. His classes in my first year were quite interesting, which encouraged me to choose him as my thesis supervisor. I'd like to thank my parents for their unconditional support and lastly I'd like to thank those I interviewed for time and insights which were invaluable for my thesis.

# **Political Economy and Social Movements: Indian Farmers Protests 2020-21**

## **Abstract**

This thesis looks at the conceptualization of social movements, their types, formation and life cycle while simultaneously understanding the Indian farmers protest movement of 2020-2021. Then we will analyse concepts of political economy in context of the farmers movement. We will then look at a brief history of Indian agriculture, protest movements from 2015 to 2018. We will analyse the three farm laws in the context of both the government and the protestors. The farmers grievances and demands are at the centre of the discussion. We will then briefly examine the society, politics and economy of the states of Punjab, Uttar Pradesh and Haryana. This is followed by interview with those with farming backgrounds to better understand the situation at the ground level.

The aims of the thesis include the understanding of the evolution of Indian agriculture, agricultural policy, understanding farmers identity, politics and movements, the context through which the three laws were passed, understanding the material interests of the protestors, their implicit and explicit goals and finally understand what the farmers see in the future.

**Keywords:** Political Economy, Agriculture, India, Social Movements, Protests, Agricultural Policy, Caste, Class, Politics, Reform, Agrarian Crisis, Crops, Laws, Minimum Support Prices

# **Politická ekonomie a sociální hnutí: Protesty indických farmářů 2020-21**

## **Abstrakt**

Tato práce se zabývá konceptualizací sociálních hnutí, jejich typy, formováním a životním cyklem při současném pochopení protestního hnutí indických farmářů v letech 2020-2021. Poté budeme analyzovat koncepty politické ekonomie v kontextu farmářského hnutí. Poté se podíváme na stručnou historii indického zemědělství, protestních hnutí od roku 2015 do roku 2018. Budeme analyzovat tři zemědělské zákony v kontextu vlády i demonstrantů. Středem diskuse jsou stížnosti a požadavky farmářů. Následně krátce prozkoumáme společnost, politiku a ekonomiku států Paňdžáb, Uttarpradéš a Harijána. Poté následuje rozhovor s lidmi s farmářským zázemím, aby lépe porozuměli situaci na úrovni terénu.

Mezi cíle práce patří pochopení vývoje indického zemědělství, zemědělské politiky, pochopení identity farmářů, politiky a hnutí, kontextu, v němž byly tři zákony přijaty, pochopení materiálních zájmů protestujících, jejich implicitních i explicitních cílů a konečně pochopit, co zemědělci vidí v budoucnosti.

**Klíčová slova:** Politická ekonomie, Zemědělství, Indie, Sociální hnutí, Protesty, Zemědělská politika, Kasta, Třída, Politika, Reforma, Agrární krize, Plodiny, Zákony, Minimální podpůrné ceny.

## Table of content

<b>1 Introduction.....</b>	<b>10</b>
1.1 Summary .....	10
<b>Objectives and Methodology.....</b>	<b>12</b>
1.2 Objectives.....	12
1.3 Methodology .....	12
<b>2 Literature Review.....</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>2.1 Social Movements .....</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>2.1.1 Conceptualization of Social Movements .....</b>	<b>13</b>
Social movements as a form of Collective action .....	13
Social movements as challengers to or defenders of existing authority .....	14
Social movements as organized activity .....	15
Social movements as existing with some temporal continuity .....	16
2.1.2 Types of Social Movements.....	17
2.1.3 Stages of Social movements .....	19
<b>2.2 Political Economy and Social Movements.....</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>2.3 Brief economic history of Agriculture in Punjab, Haryana and Western Uttar Pradesh.....</b>	<b>27</b>
2.3.1 Basics (from Independence to the 1990s) .....	27
2.3.2 The 1990s .....	28
2.3.3 Public expenditure .....	29
2.3.4 Access to Institutional Finance .....	29
2.3.5 Trade Liberalisation .....	31
<b>2.4 Evolution of Protests by Farmers from 2015 to 2018.....</b>	<b>32</b>
<b>2.5 Reasoning behind the Three Farm Acts of 2020 .....</b>	<b>38</b>
<b>2.6 Society, Politics and the Economics behind the Protests of 2020-2021.....</b>	<b>40</b>
2.6.1 Starting of Protests in Punjab and it's spread .....	40
2.6.2 Conditions that led to the Protests in Uttar Pradesh.....	45
2.6.3 Class-caste alliances and the Issue with Agrarian transition in India.....	47
2.6.4 Agricultural market Laws and Regulation, and India's new Farm laws 49	
<b>3 Practical Part.....</b>	<b>53</b>
3.1 Introduction .....	53
3.2 Summary of Interviews.....	54
3.3 Discussion .....	57
<b>4 Conclusion.....</b>	<b>58</b>

<b>5</b>	<b>References</b> .....	<b>59</b>
<b>6</b>	<b>Appendix</b> .....	<b>62</b>
6.1	The 3 farm laws:.....	62
6.2	Interview Questions .....	64
	<b>Abbreviations</b> .....	<b>66</b>

# **1 Introduction**

The Indian farmer's protests of 2020-2021 were some of the largest protests in recent Indian history. They began after the Government introduced three agricultural laws that would have upended the status quo in Indian agriculture. Due to various reasons that this Thesis explains, the farmers were threatened by these laws. Thus started a protest movement that would arguably be the most influential in recent Indian history.

These protests have been different from the farmers' movements of previous decades due to the more inclusive nature of the protests. The farmer's protest was able to establish a broad-based coalition and was even able to attract support from sympathetic urban middle classes. This thesis aims to explore the historical, social, economic, and political context behind these protests while gauging the perceptions of protestors and thereby understanding the wider movement itself.

## **1.1 Summary**

The main body of the thesis starts in section 2.1, opening with the conceptualization of social movements, discussing various criteria that define a social movement while analysing these criteria in the Indian farmer's protests. This is followed by studying the various types of social movements, then the various life stages of social movements while simultaneously identifying these stages in the farmer's protests.

In the political economy section 2.2, we will use the ideas of political economy to understand the farmers' movement. After this in section 2.3 we will analyse the history of Indian agriculture and agricultural policy.

Section 2.4 will delve into the farmers' protests of more recent years, between 2015 and 2018. Section 2.5 will explain the government's reasoning behind the laws and finally section 2.6 will look into the societal, political, and economic background of Punjab, Haryana, and Uttar Pradesh leading up to the protests.



Section 3, the practical part contains the summary of interviews taken in order to understand the demands of farmers and understanding what wrongdoings they accuse of the government.

In the conclusion, we will discuss the main aims of the thesis:

- 1) Understand the evolution of Indian agriculture in the region
- 2) Understand the economic consequences of Indian agricultural policy
- 3) Understand the evolution of farmer's identity, politics and movements
- 4) Understand the political context through which the 3 laws were passed.
- 5) Find the material interests of the participants of the protests
- 6) Find the material interests of the participants of the protests
- 7) Find out what the farmers see in the future of Indian agriculture

# **Objectives and Methodology**

## **1.2 Objectives**

This thesis will consider the connections between social movements and political economy using the example of farmers protests in India in 2020-21. Alongside traditional political actors like states and parties, social movements are increasingly considered as important drivers of both political and economic change. A political economy approach to social movements raises various significant questions, including what material interests drive people to participate in such movements, what resources are available to movements, what economic models and ideas are implicit and explicit in their goals and demands, and the longer-term consequences of such movements for economic policy.

The protests by Indian farmers against the government's farm acts have been described by some as the largest protests in history. The thesis will look at the political-economic motivations, resources, and goals of the protesting farmers, considering, in particular, the economic history of Indian agriculture, Indian government policy and attempts at reform, and the methods farmers and farmer unions used to organize and put pressure on the government.

## **1.3 Methodology**

The thesis will develop a literature review focusing on political economic analysis of social movements, Indian agricultural policy and history, and existing secondary literature on the protests. It will conduct case study analysis of the movement, through documentary analysis and qualitative interviews.

## **2 Literature Review**

### **2.1 Social Movements**

#### **2.1.1 Conceptualization of Social Movements**

There are various definitions of Social Movements, and they may differ in what is emphasized or accented, but most are based on three or more of the following criteria:

- Collective action (including non-institutional collective action)
- Change-oriented goals or claims
- Some degree of organization
- Some degree of temporal continuity

Therefore, rather than beginning with a straightforward definition, we will consider these conceptual criteria and analyse them in the context of the Indian farmers protest movement of 2021. (Snow et al., 2019)

#### **Social movements as a form of Collective action**

Collective action consists of any goal-directed activity engaged in jointly by multiple individuals. It is the pursuit of a common objective through joint action – that is people working together in some way for reasons, often with the belief that doing so enhances the prospect of achieving the goal. This definition of collective action can include a large number of human behaviour and therefore it is useful to differentiate between collective actions that are social movements from other forms of collective action. In social movements, actors and their actions collectively challenge authorities, either in an attempt of bringing about change or preventing change from occurring. Social movements often utilize non-institutionalized means of action, such as appropriating public places and using them for purposes other than for what they were intended. (Snow et al., 2019)

Social movements overlap to some degree with other varieties of collective behaviour and interest groups. Broadly speaking, collective behaviour refers to group actions that are spontaneous and often emotionally driven such as in mass panics, fads, crazes, and riots. In contrast to other forms of collective behaviour, social movements are coordinated, planned and collective action typically involving a list of articulated grievances and claims.

Similarly, social movements also overlap with interest groups to some extent but there are some notable differences. (Snow et al., 2019)

- Interest groups are usually defined in relation to the government (or polity). Meanwhile interests of social movements often extend well beyond the government to other institutional spheres and authorities.
- Even if social movements are oriented towards the governments, their standing is different. Interest groups are usually embedded within the political arena and are mostly regarded as legitimate actors within it (although they may be seen as outsiders depending on the group holding political power). Social movements on the other hand, are usually outside the government, or overlap with it on precarious ways, since they usually lack the same standing, recognition, or degree of access as interest groups do with political authorities.
- Interest groups mostly pursue their collective goals through institutionalized means, such as lobbying and campaign contributions while social movements pursue their goals through non-institutional means, such as conducting marches, boycotts, and sit-ins.

Analysing collective action in the context of the Indian farmers protest movement, farmers from various states collectively challenged the Union government of India in order to prevent the implementation of the three controversial agriculture laws by utilizing non-institutionalized means of action by marching, occupying and later camping on the national highways leading to the capital. Despite various unions, factions, and interests, they were able to send a unified list of demands to the government including the repeal of the laws, minimum support prices (MSP) and expansion of Mandis. (Jodhka, 2021)(Bakisker and Levien, 2021)

### **Social movements as challengers to or defenders of existing authority**

One component that most definitions of social movements share is that movements promote or resist changes to some aspect of the world we live in. Fostering or halting change is the very reason for the existence of social movements. It can be argued that movements are considered challengers to or defenders of existing institutional authority – whether it is located in the political, corporate, religious, or educational realm. (Snow et al., 2019)

The last three decades of Indian agriculture has been detrimental to farmers, the reasons for which will be explained in later sections. While the status quo is unfavorable and unsustainable for most farmers, they viewed the three new laws as being far worse than the status quo. Therefore, they mobilized in defence of the existing norms in the agriculture of the region such as minimum support prices (MSP) and mandis in order to keep out corporate capital from Indian agriculture and even further expand the scope and regional coverage of MSPs and Mandis. (Lerche, 2021)

### **Social movements as organized activity**

It was mentioned earlier that social movements is a form of collective action, involves joint action to pursue a common goal. Joint action implies some degree of coordination and thus organisation. Scholars have rarely agreed about the forms, functions and consequences of organization with respect to social movements. Luxembourg's and Michel's critique of formal party organization as retarding rather than promoting progressive politics and democracy. In contrast, McCarthy and Zald argued that social movement organization (SMOs) are fundamental for the assembling, deploying of necessary resources and to the realization of a movement's objective. Tarrow helps clarify these issues by distinguishing between social movements as formal organizations, the organization of collective action, and social movements as networks. The existence of social movement activity implies some degree of organization regardless of the form or consequence of the organizations. Different forms of organization (e.g. tightly coupled vs. Networked SMOs) and degree of organization (e.g. tightly coupled vs. Loosely coupled). The different forms and degrees of organization clearly lead to differences in consequences. (Snow et al., 2019)

The Indian farmer's movement involved many different organisations including opposition parties affiliated organisations and various farmers unions from across India. The organisational capacity of organisations participating in the protests was able to arrange communal kitchen, makeshift stages for speakers, stalls for medical care, bedding, clothing etc. But it is important to state that, beside their shared interests in repealing farm laws, the various organisations have diverging interests and viewpoints. And therefore, this impressive organizational feat was despite the fact that this movement was loosely coupled, multiple, networked SMO. Their shared interests against the farm laws, shared

experience of a declining agricultural sector and solidarity with farmers are some of the important reasons as to why the protests were held together. (Jodhka, 2021)

### **Social movements as existing with some temporal continuity**

The final criteria of social movements that we will discuss is their existence with some degree of temporal continuity. It was suggested by some scholars that social movements are episodic (but not regularly scheduled events). Some events do last only for a short time either due to them achieving their goals or due to their suppression. On the other hand some social movements alternating between periods of dormancy and activism such as the women's rights movement. The changes that movements pursue, whatever their degree or level usually require some measure of sustained, organized activity. Continuity like organization is a matter of degree but movements making much progress pursue their objectives through fairly persistent collective action. Therefore, some degree of sustained collective action and temporal continuity are essential characteristics of social movements. (Snow et al., 2019)

The farmers protest movement of 2020-2021 was following years of organised protests by farmers across the nation. Though constantly changing and evolving depending on circumstances, major protests by farmers have been taking place for decades, most recently, prior to 2020, there was a growing mobilization of farmers since 2017. What sets the 2020 farmers protests apart was the broad coalition that formed in the aftermath of three farm laws. But, it could be argued that the 2020 protests were just a continuation of farmers protests due to grievances after the 1991 liberalization of the Indian economy, that raised costs drastically due to reduced state support and thereby reducing farmer incomes. (Fadde, 2021)

Having explored the various conceptual criteria we can attempt to define social movements. According to *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Social Movements* (2019) can be thought of as,

*“Collectivities acting with some degree of organization and continuity outside of institutional or organizational channels for the purpose of challenging or defending extant authority, whether it is institutionally or culturally based, in the group, organization, society, culture, or world order of which they are a part.”*



### 2.1.2 Types of Social Movements

The sociologist David Aberle (1966) distinguished social movements by:

- What is it the movement wants to change?
- How much change they want?

Using these distinguishing criteria, he described four types of social movements. They are:

- **Alternative movements:** These movements are typically focused on self improvement and limited specific changes to individual beliefs and behavior. An example of such a movement is Alcoholics anonymous.
- **Redemptive movements:** Also known as religious movements, they are focused on a specific segment of the population and their goal is to provoke inner change or spiritual growth in individuals. Some religious sects fit in this category of movements
- **Reformative social movements:** These movements seek to change something specific about existing structures in society. They are aimed at the entire population but seek limited change. An example of such a movement is the women suffrage movement.
- **Revolutionary movements:** These movements seek a complete change in every aspect of society with a goal to change society in dramatic ways. The Indian independence movement is an example of a revolutionary movement.

Sociologists also describe and distinguish social movements by the following criteria (Barr et al., 2021):

- **Scope:** A movement can either be reformative or radical in its scope. A reform movement advocates changing some norms and/or laws while a radical movement is focused on changing society in a fundamental way. An example reform movement would be a green movement focused on laws to protect the environment, while an example of a radical movement would be the Free South Africa movement to end apartheid.
- **Type of Change:** A movement can be either be innovative or conservative in its type of change. An innovative movement seeks to challenge the status quo by introducing changes in norms and values while a conservative movement seeks to preserve the status quo by seeking to preserve existing norms and values. An example of an Innovative movement would be the Euthanasia movement of the late

19th and early 20th century in the US and UK while an example of a conservative movement would be groups opposed to genetically modified foods.

- **Targets:** Group-focused movements target groups or society in general while an Individual focused movement targets individuals.
- **Methods of work:** Peaceful movements attempt change through peaceful means such as civil disobedience and non-violent resistance. Violent movements on the other hand resort to violence in their quest for change. An example of a peaceful movement is the Indian independence movement with one the key tenets of the movement being 'Ahimsa' or non-violence. Violent movements on the other hand may evolve into paramilitary or terrorist organization.
- **Range:** Global movements have transnational objectives while Local movements have more local or regional objectives. Communist movements in the early 19th century is an example of a global movement meanwhile movements to preserve local natural habitats are examples of local movements.

Now we will typify the Indian farmers protest movement. According to David Aberle's (1966) four types of social movements, the Indian farmer's protest would be a reformative social movement since the movement aims to specifically change i.e. repeal the 3 farm laws that will have an impact on the entire country by influencing agriculture. (Jodhka, 2021)

Now we will typify the Indian farmer's protest movement using the criterias mentioned above (Jodhka, 2021):

- **Scope:** The Indian farmers protest movement is reform oriented in scope as it seeks to repeal the 3 farm laws.
- **Type of change:** The farmers movement is a conservative movement in the sense that it seeks preserve the historically state dominated agronomy while expanding the coverage of Minimum support prices to more crops and expanding the geographical coverage of Mandis(Government controlled wholesale market) to all of India. They seek to keep corporate capital out of agriculture.
- **Targets:** The farmers movement is a group focused movement seeking to influence society at large.
- **Methods of work:** Despite instances of violence, the farmers protest has been largely peaceful, attempting to achieve their aims through non violent means and

civil disobedience. They camped on main highways connecting the capital, organized sit ins and picketed government members. Sadly, farmers even committed suicide to express 'express their anger and pain against the government's injustice'.

- **Range:** The movement had objectives that affected the entire nation.

### 2.1.3 Stages of Social movements

Now we will look into the life cycle of social movements and analyze the life cycle of farmers protest. Blumer (1969) and Tilly (1978) outline a four stage process that explain the evolution of social movements and we will analyze the four stages in the context of the farmer's movement (Barr et al., 2021) .

- **Priliminary stage:** Awareness of an issue spreads among people and leaders emerge.

The origin of the 2020 protest movement can be traced to June 2020. The Cabinet of Prime Minister Modi (of the BJP party) introduced the three executive orders aimed at radically reforming Indian agriculture. On June 6th, protests arose in India's bread basket state of Punjab against the three laws. But once these orders were introduced in Parliament on September 17th, these laws gained more awareness from farmers, farmer orgaizations and the general public. Various farm unions organized farmers for larger protests. (TIMESOFINDIA.COM, 2021)

- **Coalescence stage:** The issue is publicized and, people organize and join together to further raise awareness.

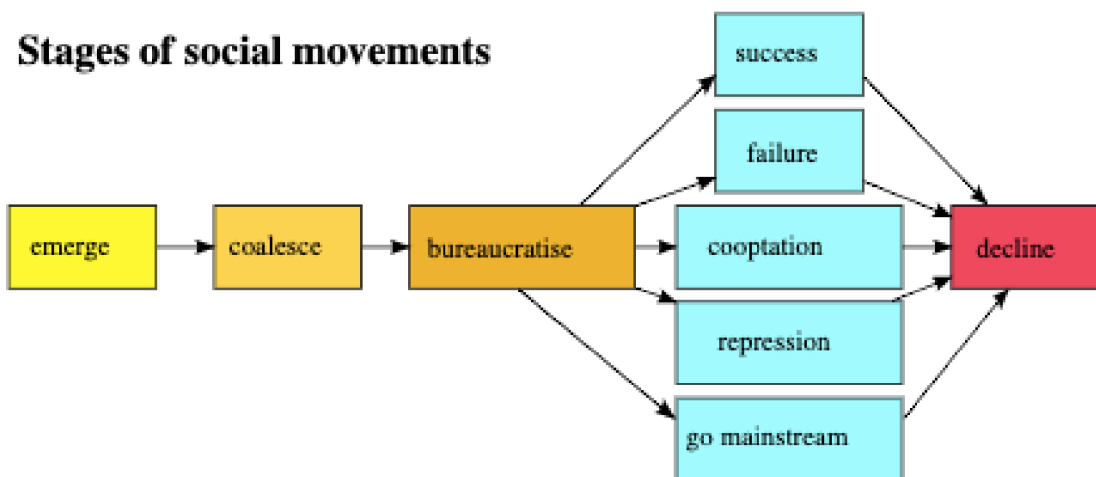
The farm laws passed the Lok Sabha (Lower house of the Indian parliament) due to the absolute majority held by the BJP on the 17th of September and passed the Rajya Sabha (Upper house) on the 20th through a voice vote, despite the opposition asking for a division vote, which the BJP was not in a postion to win due to them lacking an absolute majority in the Rajya Sabha unlike the Lok Sabha. On the 23rd, 31 farmers organizations joined hands to fight against the laws and mobilized farmers. On the 24th, farmers from the key agricultural states in north India, blocked railway tracks with bigger demonstrations the next day accross the country, with farmers blocking highways to the Capital with trucks, tractors and combine harvestors. (Sahu)(Al Jazeera, 2021)

- **Institutionalization stage:** The SMO is established, typically a paid staff and is no longer dependant on grass roots activism.

As the protests continued the All India Kisan Sangharsh Coordination Committee (AIKSCC) which is an pan-Indian umbrella organization made up of over 250 farmers organizations across the country that was established in 2017 voiced their support for the farmers protest. In November 2020, the Samyukta Kisan Morcha (SKM), a coalition of over 40 farmers unions was established to coordinate the protests. The SKM became an important coordinator and organizer throughout the protests. (The economic times)(Jodhka 2021)

- **Decline stage:** When the movement succeeds in bringing the changes it sought, or when people no longer take the issue seriously, for whatever reason, the movement loses supporters and the movement falls into the decline stage.

The movement did partially achieve its objectives. The initial objective of the movement was the repeal of farm laws which were achieved on the December of 2021. But a year of protests had also generated more demands to deal with the stagnation of India's agronomy which hasn't been fulfilled. Therefore, though the protests have ended, the movement itself hasn't ended and is yet to enter the decline stage.



Adapted from Blumer (1969), Mauss (1975), and Tilly (1978)

## 2.2 Political Economy and Social Movements

According to Jason Stanley and Jeff Goodwin in *The Wiley-Blackwell Encyclopedia of Social and Political Movements*, the analysis of the interaction between capitalism and politics i.e. Political economy played an important part in English-language studies of Social movements and revolutions written by social scientists during the 70s and 80s ((e.g., Paige 1975; Schwartz 1976; Piven & Cloward 1977; McAdam 1999). These studies radically reoriented studies of movements, revolutions and Political conflicts in general. The field moved from a focus on psychological and social-psychological treatments of political protest (that often cast a very negative light on protests) to studies focusing on the significance of resources, power, solidarities, and opportunities for movements. These studies also feature an emphasis the effects of capitalism on movements. By capitalism these authors typically mean a mode of production in which the class that owns the means of production i.e. capitalists employ a class that must sell its labour for a wage or salary i.e. workers. The market competition amongst capitalists then leads them to reinvest parts of their profits in the production process i.e. capital accumulation. These authors emphasize the dynamics of capitalism which includes processes directly linked to market competition and capital accumulation, especially commodification (or proletarianization) of labour, commodification of productive forces and, in general, the concentration and centralization of capital and periodic crises. A range of ideas offered by political economy can be helpful in understanding social movements. We will now explore seven such ideas offered by political economy and use these ideas to understand the Indian farmer's movement (Stanley, 2013) .

1. We pay attention to actor's material interests, which derive from their structural location in political and economic institutions (Stanley, 2013). But, in the Indian context, in addition to political and economic institutions, material interests of actors also derive from their social institutions. This is because, due to India's unique social institution of caste, an actor's structural location in political and economic institutions is often related to the structural location of the actor's caste, especially in rural areas. Historically, specific castes have often been tied to specific economic activities and had at times their own, sometimes autonomous, socio-political institutions. Thus, the caste system is tied to the analysis of the

interaction between politics and capitalism in India – in other words caste interactions must be understood to understand the political economy of India.

For example, medium to large scale farmers, often from more dominant castes have an interest to minimize labour costs to increase their profitability while simultaneously enforcing their dominant caste status. Farm labourers, often from castes lower on the caste hierarchy, have an interest in better wages and working conditions (eg. Humane treatment from upper caste employers) since their survival, comfort and social standing depend on these.

Substantial difference in interests can exist between different groups depending on one's structural position and antagonisms. Interests do play a role in how people think about and act in the world around them. For example, it is more likely that the range of ideas and ideologies appealing to particular classes (and castes in the Indian context) of people are likely limited by their material interest. Movements comprising of those with common interests may act collectively against those with different interests. On the other hand, within movements with conflicting interests, conflicts can arise over the end goal of the movement. (Kumar, 2021)

2. Though many analysts agree on the importance of material resources in shaping the persistence and success of a movement, political economy focuses on the key mechanisms of resource distribution in capitalist societies, namely, the market. Property relations in capitalism guarantee owners of productive assets on average greater control of resources and much greater wealth than their workers. Market mechanisms makes a stratified working class, with some earning much more than others, likely – such as a doctor employed in a factory earning much more than a janitor working in the same hospital. Understanding the distribution of resources among the various class segments and classes by markets can help us understand the variations of the emergence, trajectories, and success or failures of different movement. (Stanley 2013)

The nature of resource distribution in rural Indian society is such that the members of the SC and ST communities own disproportionately less lands than members of dominant farming communities (castes). This meant that people of SC and ST communities had to often find work in farms owned by member of dominant farming communities. As mentioned above, this meant the the owners of



the farms from dominant castes acquired greater wealth and control of resources than their lower caste workers (Lerche 2021). Due to this reason, dalits and adivasis involved in agriculture often had diverging interests from farmers of dominant communities. Although dalit organizations did participate in the farmers protests of 2020-2021, grassroots support of the farmers movement wasn't as strong among Dalits as it was among members of dominant farming communities. (Jodhka, 2021)

3. Political economists distinguish between the power of a movement derived from its size and, the power of a movement derived from the economic and political structural position of its participants to assess the relative strength of the movement. For example, organized truckers have significant structural power since they are capable to tie traffic and commerce and thereby seriously disrupting society and the economy, as in the Canadian convoy protest of 2022 against COVID vaccine mandates delaying billions of dollars in trade. On the other hand, organized unemployed workers of a similar size would be unable to force their demands on elites since they have no role in the production process and thus have little structural power. (Stanley, 2013)

It is estimated that more than 50 percent of the Indian workforce is involved in agriculture. The farmers movement in India has shown the structural power held by farmers in the country. During the protests, various groups of farmers were able to disrupt highways and railroads. This shows us that the movement has power both in terms of numbers and structural position. (Jodhka, 2022)

4. Political economy also focuses on ways the competition between firms influence social movements. Competition drive firms to adopt strategies in order to outcompete rivals. This competition generates antagonisms between economic elites based on their ownership of different kinds of firms. For example, firms that are export oriented prefer a weaker domestic economy since it makes exports cheaper abroad giving them a competitive edge, while the interests of import oriented firms are the opposite. Divergent interests can generate conflicts factions of economic elites. This intra elite conflict can generate openings for movements to ally with one elite grouping to make inroads against another. (Stanley, 2013)

But, such conflict among the economic elites hasn't been taken advantage of in the Indian farmers movement. This is because the movement has been framed as a struggle against corporate capital and control of Indian agriculture i.e. the economic elites. Therefore the movement view economic elites as a threat to farmers so there haven't been any attempts to ally with any faction of economic elites. (Baviskar and Levien, 2021)

5. As firms pursue the strategies mentioned above, political economists analyze implications for movements of the broader dynamics that arise from competition between firms. An area where this is evident is the recurrence of recessions and economic crisis due to the uncoordinated nature of capitalist competition among firms. Booms can catalyze political mobilization as expectations and optimism increases while anxiety of risks subsides, while Busts can stimulate action as millions may become unemployed, constraining communities and posing fiscal challenges to the government. Crises can spark mobilization along lines of shared interests though at times may pit vulnerable groups against each other such as working class movements against immigration in the face of disappearing jobs, welfare schemes and declining living standard. (Stanley,2013)

Though the recession prior and during the farmers movement influenced it and it's demands, it was not caused by capitalist competition but rather a global pandemic, the likes of which hasn't been since the Spanish Flu a century ago. The COVID pandemic caused increased prices for inputs due to supply chain disruptions and hampered credit services, while there was a huge inflow of migrant labour returning to the countryside due to falling employment in urban areas. The 3 farm laws in the midst of covid further infuriated the farmers. (Baviskar and Levien, 2021).

6. Political economy stresses the bias of states in favor of the shared interests of the capitalist class when confronted by reform movement. This is because the state is dependent on taxes derived from private economic activity. Therefore the state will be reluctant to implement reforms that slow down overall private investment, even when strong movements demand such policies. Even if governments implement such reforms, any slowdown in investment will cause rising unemployment,

shrinking tax revenue and thus rising difficulties in financing social program, therefore lead to a likely unpopularity of the Government. Though this does not preclude reforms, it does lead governments of all political orientations to pay attention to the demands of employers and often shy away from reforms that could slow down economic growth. (Stanley,2013)

Now that we discussed practical reasons as to why governments are biased to the interests of the capitalist class, we will look at another reason why a government would favor the interests of the capitalist class that is applicable to the farmers movement – Corruption and Crony capitalism. Paul H. Rubin (2016) defines crony capitalism as *“a term describing an economy in which success in business depends on close relationships between business people and government officials. It may be exhibited by favoritism in the distribution of legal permits, government grants, special tax breaks, or other forms of state interventionism.”*

Crony capitalism has long been an issue in India, regardless of the political party in power. After the introduction of the farm laws the farmers were articulate in their fears of corporate capital and control in Indian agriculture. Many farmers in the movement overtly conveyed their distrust of the two richest men in India, Gautam Adani and Mukesh Ambani. Both these billionaires are based in Gujarat, the home state of Prime Minister Modi of the BJP party, where the current PM ruled as Chief Minister for over 12 years. Critics of Modi have long called out the cozy nexus between magnates and the popular leader. As millions of Indians saw their livelihoods destroyed in 2020 and as farmers started protesting in late 2020, the combined fortunes of Ambani and Adani saw their collective fortunes grow by almost \$41 billion. (Mudgill, 2021)

Events in 2014 will help us to understand the distrust of the relationship between Modi and Adani. The association between Modi and Adani has been no secret. While campaigning for the 2014 general election, Adani lent his private aircrafts to Modi for him to fly around the country for his campaigns. Modi made corruption by the incumbent government a major point on his speeches. After assuming the office of Prime Minister, Modi set up a special investigation team (SIT) to investigate corruption cases on the 28th of May, 2014. But, the biggest case involving black money (unexplained/untaxed funds) was that of the Adani group before the establishment of the SIT. A senior official of the SIT stated the Adani

group would have to pay a fine of approximately INR 15,000 crores (2.5 billion USD in 2014) if the case were to reach its logical conclusion since the trail of documents showed the Adani group diverted INR 5468 crores (USD 900 million in 2014). But, mid investigation, the two most senior officers on the case were forced out of the agency and the service tenure of the leader of the Enforcement Directorate (India's financial crimes authority) came to an abrupt end, thus stalling the investigation. Despite the fact that Adani's meteoric rise has added a significant number of Jobs to the Indian economy, critics question the means of how this rise was achieved. (Tyagi, 2017)

7. Political economy can help us understand the rise of new collective identities, some of which catalyze and shape collective action. As the industrial revolution gave rise to large-scale factories across Europe and North America, industrial workers came face to face with others who shared similar experiences of exploitation which created conditions that gave rise to working class identities and Labor movements. The dynamics of capitalist development influence collective identities that appears to have little connection to the economy at first glance. For example, today's LGBT movement has its roots in the industrial revolution, the urbanization necessitated by it and the following wars, as people left rural life behind to take advantage employment in big cities or to fight wars overseas. This allowed men and women new forms of independence and made it possible for them to socialize more regularly with others of similar sexual orientation, contributing to the rise of self-conscious gay and lesbian identities in the 20th century. (Stanley, 2013)

While the farmers protests of 2020-2021 have not created a new identity, it has renewed (and possibly expanded) the 'Kisan' (Farmer) identity formulated during farmer movements of the 1960s and 1970s by Chaudhari Charan Singh, a farmer activist, former Indian Prime Minister and Chief minister of Uttar Pradesh state. By the 1980s, big and middle farmers across castes and religions were provided a platform in the Bharatiya Kisan Union (Indian Farmers' Union) representing Hindu and Muslim Jats (A middle caste that later became the dominant agrarian caste of the region) under the banner of the Kisan (farmer). (Kumar, 2021)

Political economy allows us to understand some key factors behind movements. It helps explain the divisions among elites, state fiscal crises and political opportunity for movements. It is useful in explaining how people are connected to each other (or not) at work and in civil society. It helps to explain why some ideas, frames, collective identities, narratives, tactics, and emotions are able to connect to certain classes of movement participants or potential participants. Movements are often shaped directly by the dynamics of capitalism. The dynamics of capitalism also strongly influence the political, institutional, and cultural processes that has been the emphasized by recent scholarship on movements. (Stanley,2013)

## **2.3 Brief economic history of Agriculture in Punjab, Haryana and Western Uttar Pradesh**

### **2.3.1 Basics (from Independence to the 1990s)**

Indian agricultural growth accelerated from a rate of 0.8 percent during the 50 years before independence to 2.7 percent for the 50 years after the founding of the Indian Republic. A lot of this growth was following the green revolution that introduced high yielding varieties of wheat and rice in addition to the introduction of new technology during the late 1960s and early 1970s, in Punjab, Haryana and Western Uttar Pradesh (UP). Seed-fertilizer technology that was a result of agricultural research and development that allowed drastic increases in yields by making use of lands more efficient. This green revolution lifted India from the status of a food deficient country that was dependent on foreign food aid to an agriculturally self sufficient one. (Bajpai and Volavka, 2005)

The green revolution taking hold in Punjab, Haryana and to a lesser in western UP can be attributed to several natural and man made factors. The Natural factors include:

- Fertile alluvial soil of the Indo-Gangetic plain of northern India.
- Geographical advantage of perennial Himalyan rivers amenable to multi purpose dams providing cheap power and water to canal systems.
- Topographical advantages, that allows the building of canals and road networks at lower cost, compared to peninsular India.

The man made factors were, on the other hand included:

- Consolidation of Land holdings (especially in Punjab and Haryana).
- Increased irrigation.

- Rural electrification and cheap power to agriculture.
- Agricultural research and development.

The crop that most benefited from the green revolution was wheat, so much so that the green revolution was often referred to as the Wheat revolution due to the introduction of high yield varieties (HYV) of the crop in the early 70s. (Bajpai and Volavka, 2005)

### **2.3.2 The 1990s**

The most drastic change in growth of Indian agriculture was recorded in 1992-95 over 1980-83 period with the compound growth rate of yield/ha increasing from 1.8 percent per annum to 3.1 percent per annum. Improved rice and grain technology spread eastward and oilseed technology southward. Compared to the period 1992-95 to 1980-83, Punjab experienced compound growth rate of yield/ha increased from 2.6 percent per year to 2.8 percent per year in, while the rate of output decreased from 4.7 percent to 3.9 percent. UP's growth rate increased from 2.4 percent per year to 3.39 percent per year and its rate of output marginally grew from 2.7 percent per year to 2.8 percent per year. Haryana's growth rate nearly doubled from 2.1 percent per year to 4 percent per year and its rate of output increased significantly from 3.02 percent per year to 4.7 percent per year. The net sown area had changed little in these three states since the green revolution. And therefore the increase in yield and output was attributed to higher inputs and/or changing crop patterns. (Sen, Abhijit & Ghosh, Jayati, 2017)

Despite the increases in growth rate of yield/ha and the rate of output, Indian agriculture was heading into hard times. Since the late 1980s, the Indian government was running on a huge fiscal deficit. By 1991, the collapse of the Soviet bloc, with whom India was trade partner and the Gulf war that sky-rocketed the oil import bill of the country, India faced an economic crisis. In July 1991, India devalued the Indian rupee and introduced a wide ranging economic liberalization. The immediate focus was on the balance of payments and then the industry and other sectors such as 'modern services'. Subsequent policies were oriented towards trade and foreign investment liberalization, deregulation of domestic industries and then to finance.

The economic strategy was on large investments by private corporate capital that was expected to deliver both rapid growth and more formal employment. The strategy offered



less to small-scale production (in agriculture or other activity) since the implicit idea was that the process of growth would render such production obsolete, leading to more formal employment in large-scale enterprises across all sectors. Despite the perceptions of policy makers, such expectations from the economic strategy failed to materialize. Small and micro-enterprises were largely ignored or even discriminated by the unfolding of the reforms. The reforms didn't include policies specifically aimed at agriculture as it was felt that the devaluation of the Rupee was already a sufficient incentive, as it was thought it would make export crops more attractive (as import of Indian crops would be cheaper in foreign markets against a weaker rupee) and thereby improve farm incomes and enhance investments in the sector. But, the change in government spending and financial measures had significant implications for Indian agriculture that were quite different from the anticipation of the architects of the reform process. There were vital policy areas that affected agriculture, many of which was detrimental for the first decade or more, that had to be corrected mid-2000s. They were related to public expenditure, access to institutional finance, trade liberalization and food management. We will now examine public expenditure, access to institutional finance and trade liberalization in particular. (Sen, Abhijit & Ghosh, Jayati, 2017)

### **2.3.3 Public expenditure**

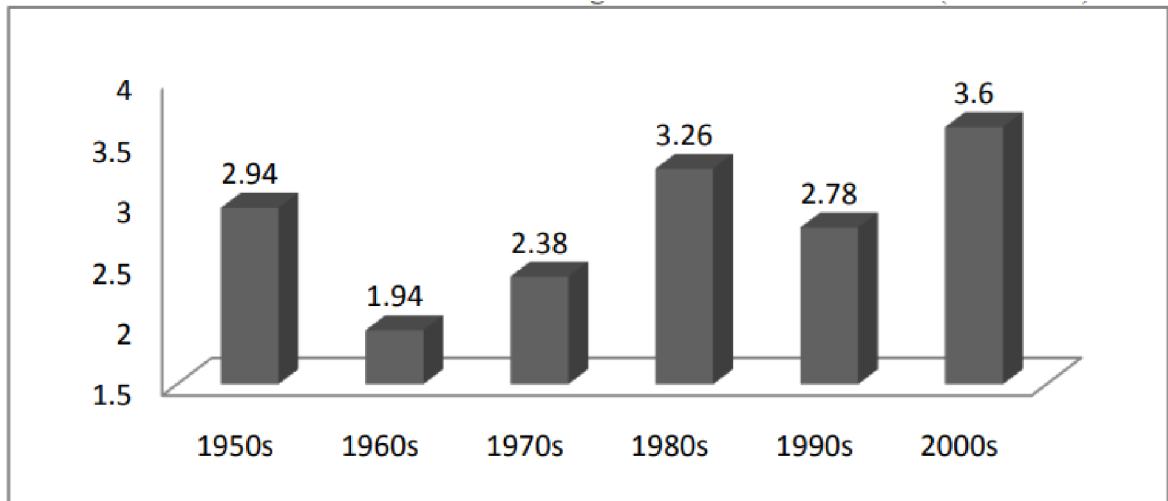
During the initial period of economic reforms that coincided with government attempts at fiscal stabilization, there were actual declines in government expenditure on agriculture and rural development, followed by cuts in real terms on fertilizer subsidies. The 1990s experienced overall decline in per capita government expenditure on rural areas in both absolute per capita terms and shares of GDP and aggregate public spending (Chandrasekhar and Ghosh 2004). Simultaneously, there were also substantial declines in public infrastructure and energy investments affecting rural areas. This was marked in irrigation and transport, which matter, directly or indirectly for agricultural growth and productivity through their linkage effects. (Sen, Abhijit & Ghosh, Jayati, 2017)

### **2.3.4 Access to Institutional Finance**

During the financial liberalization measures, the emerging scope of what was designated as "priority sector lending", in effect reduced available institutional credit to cultivators. Although problems with credit access to cultivators existed, nationalization of banks had

positive effects as public sector banks opened more rural branches and rural accounts and provided more crop loans to farmers. But after 1993, financial liberalization measures, and the explicit and implicit incentives provided to public sector banks made it less attractive for bankers to deal with agricultural lending due to high transactional costs. This led to many cultivators, especially smaller farmers, tenant farmers and those without clear land titles to seek credit from informal channels like input dealers and traditional moneylenders, making farm investment and working capital for cultivation more difficult and expensive. Inputs for agriculture also became a particular concern. Access to subsidised quality inputs was reduced and subsidies were sought to be lifted while public extension services no longer provided adequate information. Greater reliance on expensive seeds provided by domestic and multinational companies involved “terminator genes” that disallowed subsequent local reproduction. In addition, problems with price and quality of fertilizer and pesticides, and the incorrect use of both led to the quantity and quality of outputs, which in turn affected the margins available to farmers. (Sen, Abhijit & Ghosh, Jayati, 2017)

These factors led to a slowdown in agricultural growth which in turn caused widespread distress in the countryside by the 1990s. A visible extreme consequence of this was the spate in farmer’s suicide, which usually occurred when heavily indebted farmers, whose farms had lost economic viability found no other options. As the issues facing agriculture became increasingly evident, the Congress (a historically major party in Indian politics) led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) came to power in 2004 which had made the agricultural distress a major part of their campaign. For some years, they sought to reverse the trend of declining public spending by increased public investment on irrigation and rural infrastructure, more spending agricultural research and extension, and increased credit rural areas. While they did partially reverse the trend of rural decline, aided with higher prices of agricultural commodity in the global market, expenditure wound down by the end of the decade of the 2000s. (Sen, Abhijit & Ghosh, Jayati, 2017)



**Source:** CSO National Income Accounts.

**Note:** CAGR= Compound annual growth rates based on three year averages of the first three years of the decade.

### 2.3.5 Trade Liberalisation

An important element of the reform process was the liberalization of external trade, first through the lifting of restrictions on exports of agricultural commodities and second by switching from quantitative restrictions to tariffs on agricultural commodities export. Measures were directed towards the promotion of exports of raw and processed agricultural goods. The liberalization of agricultural trade was required by the GATT Uruguay Round agreement. Over the 1990s, Indian policy makers thought that this didn't pose a threat to farmers as then, most domestic crop prices were well below international prices. This misplaced optimism was evident when India made zero tariff binding commitments to the WTO for a wide range of crops. But once global prices fell and, the adverse impacts for imports and on farmer's incomes became evident, India was forced to renegotiate with the WTO for a more appropriate tariff agreement.

Trade liberalization meant that Indian agriculturalists became increasingly exposed to global competition while protections at home in terms of support prices, input assistance and public extension services were being reduced or even withdrawn. Competitiveness of Indian agriculture in the global market became dependent on world price movements that were even more volatile than domestic prices. (Sen, Abhijit & Ghosh, Jayati, 2017)

Indian farmers faced much volatility in an unprotected environment, leading to a peculiar combination of low prices and output volatility for cash crops. With new seeds and other

outputs, output volatility increased while the prices of most non-foodgrain crops weakened, plummeting in some cases. Either due to the reduced subsidies and rising input prices, or due to the need to use more inputs (such as seeds, fertilizer and pesticides) in order to achieve the same levels of output, farmers were increasingly squeezed. Despite local declines in production, the stagnation or decline in global prices of many agricultural commodities from 1996 to 2002 led to their prices plummeting in India too. Today Indian farmers operate in a highly uncertain and volatile international environment, competing against well subsidised large producers and agri-businesses in developed countries whose average level of subsidy amounts to many times the total domestic cost of production for several crops. The period did lead to a diversification of crop output, with a growing significance of cash crops in overall agricultural production. Over the decades, it is apparent that all cash crops production grew faster than that of food grains. (Sen, Abhijit & Ghosh, Jayati, 2017)

## **2.4 Evolution of Protests by Farmers from 2015 to 2018**

By 2014, Indian agriculture had faced decades of crisis with 300,000 farmers having committed suicide since 1995 due to the rural social environment of hopelessness, mostly impacting small farmers who obtained their income from subsistence farming and the sale of their labour to larger farmers. The agrarian crisis in India has a number of causes. In addition to the causes described above, climate change and its consequent effects on Indian agriculture have played a role. Some activists and opponents of government policy blame the Green revolution and the resulting transformation into large scale corporate industrial agriculture since the 70s as the main reason behind India's agrarian crises.

In 2014, a large majority of peasants and agricultural workers supported Narendra Modi of the BJP party based on his promises to provide a minimum of 50% profits over the cost of production for farmers, the implementation of farm insurance and adoption a National Land Use Policy among other policies. But in recent years, as climate change and severe drought have led to a decrease of crop yields among small and medium sized farms, observers agree that Narendra Modi failed to keep his promises. (Simin Fadaee, 2021)

There have been waves of Farmers uprisings since the 80s, however many of these movements were driven by richer farmers, who had emerged as a result of land reforms

and the green revolution post independence. These protestors framed their movements as a struggle of rural India against the exploitation by westernized urban India. Farmers' leader Sharad Joshi of Maharashtra state famously expressed this as a struggle between urban India and an authentic rural 'Bharat' (the Sanskrit term for India). (Baviskar and Levien, 2021)

The recent wave of protests farmer's movement in India however, is rooted in years of nationally oriented land rights and environmental justice struggles, as well as fragmented but continuous peasant mobilizations organized by different leftist political parties in the late 2000s and early 2010s. Small and marginal farmers, landless labourers and Adivasis (tribal groups) formed an important part of this movement, unlike the previous uprisings. Their interests and demands are not uniform and represent India's agrarian crisis on one hand, and on the other hand wide inequalities that exist across India's rural population. (Simin Fadaee, 2021)

The Green revolution and in particular, neoliberal reforms have shaped India's political economy since the early 1990s. The report from the Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers' Welfare (2018), has shown 52% of agricultural households in India are indebted. Neoliberal policies led to the decline of available agricultural land and unequal distribution of land leading to the majority of Indian farmers landless or with small and marginal holdings. For example, the percentage of land owned by small farmers has gone up from 38% in 1953–4 to 70% in 2003 (Ministry of Agriculture, 2014; cf. Dandekar and Bhattacharya, 2017: 77). This led small farmers to supplement working on their own land with wage labour (Jodhka, 2012; Nilsen, 2018).

Narendra Modi led the Hindu Nationalist BJP to a landslide victory to a landslide victory representing himself as the one to follow up on the neoliberal economic policies and scale up growth and development, in addition to the promises made to the farmers as mentioned above. The BJP, under Modi had expanded their vote beyond the upper castes and urban middle classes, by propogating an anti-elitist alternative to the long-lasting politics of the Indian National Congress (commonly known as Congress), which had become the dominant political party in post-independence India (Nilsen, 2018). The above mentioned

promises to deal with the agrarian crisis led to a large number of farmers and agricultural workers to support him.

Despite Modi's populist promises, many feared the prospect of repression against pro-farmer activists. A call by All India Kisan Sabha (AIKS), the peasants' front of the Communist Party of India (Marxist), brought a large number of groups together, shortly after Modi's victory. A representative of the group involved stated that 'There was a need to come together and different groups realized they cannot survive on their own'. Modi's victory was an opportunity for several organizations, mostly at the state and local level, who were priorly involved in questions of land grabbing, environmental justice and peasants' livelihoods to form an alliance and work on some issues. Farmers organized the first large scale demonstration against Modi's government in the February of 2010, in response to the government's aggressive changes to the Land Acquisition Act of 2013, joined by many political parties and different groups leading to the government responding harshly. The next two years saw no national level coordination, with local campaigns remaining limited, as the main organizations involved in the demonstration returned to the state level and organized in a number of states. (Simin Fadaee, 2021)

This changed on the 6th of June 2017, when police fired on the farmers' protest in the central state of Madhya Pradesh (MP) which resulted in the deaths of six Indian farmers. The protests in (MP) were following a strike in Maharashtra state, where days earlier, farmers started dumping vegetables and milk on the road, demanding debt relief and higher prices for their produce. MP is among the states, that has been hit hard by climate change in recent years, leading to crop failures. Soon after the killings, nearly 150 farmers' organizations coalesced and formed the All India Kisan Sangharsh Coordination Committee (AIKSCC), an umbrella group which by 2019 worked with over 200 farmers' organizations from all over the country. For the first time in the history of the Indian Republic, a group managed to coalesce representatives from different states, expressing the stakes involved of all farmers, including agricultural labourers, Adivasis (tribal groups), Dalits (former untouchables) and women farmers. According to a representative of the AIKSCC organizing committee, *"When the police shooting of June 2017 happened, we felt an immediate need to respond. There were already protests in Rajasthan, Maharashtra*

*and Delhi and the police firing on the protest was the turning point and gave an angle to a lot of ongoing farmers' protests." (Simin Fadaee, 2021)*

The AIKSCC organized a major protest meeting in the Capital, New Delhi on the 20 and 21 November 2017, passing a resolution that two bills should be passed in Parliament: a minimum support price (MSP) for agricultural products and a total loan waiver for farmers. According to representative of the AIKSCC, despite the organizations having their own agendas, the members of the AIKSCC had collectively agreed on these two issues.

Apart from events organized locally by the AIKSCC, 40,000 farmers marched on the financial capital of India, Mumbai from across the country in demand of debt relief, MSP and land rights on the March of 2018. During the march, an alliance of urban-based middle-class citizens, civil society groups and activists, workers, students and oppositional political parties banded together in support of the farmers and their cause. This alliance were loosely organized group of supporters, reaching out to the protesters with food, water and slippers for the barefoot farmers, while Doctors offered to treat farmers' hurt feet, and lawyers offered legal support. According to observers, this was the first time the middle classes had spontaneously come out in support of the farmers. The agrarian crisis was now increasingly framed as a national and societal crises, rather than as an agrarian crisis relegated to rural areas.

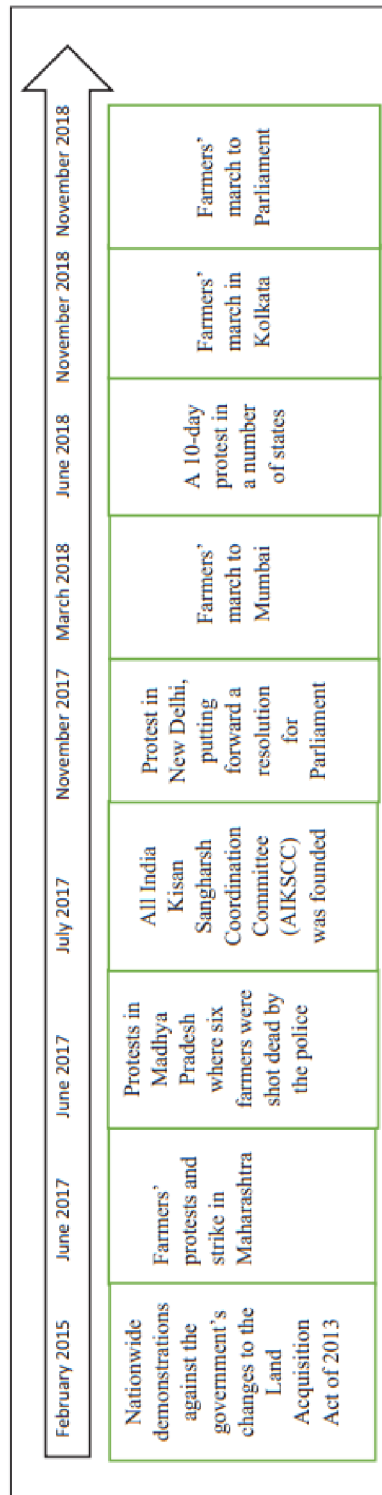
On the 1st of June of the same year, thousands of farmers, across a number of states, started a 10 day protest. In March, 50,000 farmers marched in Kolkata, the capital of West Bengal state. These mobilizations were supported by diverse farmers' organizations and groups, which was unique in the history of farmer's movements in post-independence India. (Simin Fadaee, 2021)

On 30 November 2018, tens of thousands of Indian farmers marched to New Delhi, demanding a special session in Parliament, to discuss the deepening agrarian crisis. The spontaneous and loosely organized act of solidarity during the march to Mumbai transformed into an organized alliance during the march to Parliament in November of 2018. Palagummi Sainath, the renowned journalist of rural India and the founder/editor of the People's Archive of Rural India, a digital journalism platform focusing on different aspects of rural life, helped organize support from non-farm groups for the march in Delhi by creating the platform Dilli Chalao (translates to 'Let's go to Delhi') in order to

encourage middle class groups to support the farmer's march. He declared in Twitter that 'The agrarian crisis won't be restricted to only the rural for much longer. The pressure will fall in urban India soon enough', thereby trying to connect rural and urban issues. In interviews and meetings, he argued that the agrarian crisis had gone beyond rural India and had become 'a crisis of the society and civilization', and that as a nation all people of India were responsible in fighting the 'commodification' and 'corporatization' of agriculture. During the two day gathering in delhi on the 29th and 30 of October 2018, categories of middle classes were mobilized with doctors, lawyers, artists and journalists supported in their own capacities by providing medical support, legal advice, organization of performances in support of the march across the city, as well as a wide coverage of the march by media activists and journalists from across the India. The 2020–2021 protest sites had been replicated the sense of community spirit that had begun to take shape during the 2018 march to Parliament. (Simin Fadaee 2021)

According to Sud (2020) the fact that the current model of governance under Modi combines a partnership with big capital with an authoritarian and repressive state, exposing different social groups, social movements and activists to various forms of repression. An example is the crackdown on universities (by challenging their autonomy) and student groups, who were among the more represented in the alliance, as well as the efforts taken to transform schools and higher education in an to bring India closer to the Hindu nationalist ideology of the BJP (Bhatty and Sundar, 2020).





*Source: Politics of alliance in the farmers' march to Parliament in India by Simin Fadaee (2021)*

## **2.5 Reasoning behind the Three Farm Acts of 2020**

The Government of India had introduced/amended the following Acts in 2020 to revive the age-old Indian agricultural industry:

- 1) Farmers' Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Act, 2020
- 2) Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement on Price Assurance and Farm Services Act, 2020
- 3) Essential Commodities (Amendment) Act, 2020

The reason for enactment, as per the Indian government, is that agriculture was not covered in major policy reforms of 1991, due to which the Indian economy, driven by non-agriculture sector, had started accelerating whereas the growth of agricultural sector had stagnated. Today, almost 50% Indian population rely on agriculture to make a living, though it constitutes for less than 20% of GDP. (Chand, 2020)

Following extensive research over many years, policy makers listed out some significant reasons for initiating reforms in the agriculture sector, which paved way to the above Acts. (Chand, 2020)

- 1) Income of non-agriculture worker growing faster than the agri-income of a farmer.
- 2) Imbalance had grown between domestic demand and supply. Accumulation of large surplus of some commodities while others, which could be easily grown in the country, fetch good income, have to be imported.
- 3) Need to improve export competitiveness of Indian agriculture. As per emerging demand-supply trend, India has to find overseas market for 20-25% of its agri-food production in coming years.
- 4) Liberalized markets are more favorable to agricultural growth than government support and intervention in markets.
- 5) Small farmers can be encouraged to diversify to produce high-value crops by giving price assurance and bringing markets close to production.
- 6) Agri markets remain fragmented despite infrastructure developments in the country – somewhere surplus and price crash, somewhere shortage and high prices somewhere. Low investments in storage and warehouses and dominance of local traders are the reasons for this situation.

- 7) New arrangements and partnership are required between processors and producers for the growth of food processing industry.
- 8) Border-free efficient interstate trading can be supported by commercialization of agriculture where most of the output of several crops produced in a state is consumed outside than within it.
- 9) Investment and capital formation is lacking in agriculture, which is so essential for the progress and growth. There is a pressing need to revive investments in agriculture to modernize the sector.
- 10) Due to existing marketing system, farmers are more reliant on minimum support price (MSP). Government intervention through procurement-based MSP is required and justified in staple foods due to food security concern; but it is not possible to expand through procurement to all crops. This necessitates that farmers are given more and better options and a competitive environment to get better deals for their produce in the open market.

## **2.6 Society, Politics and the Economics behind the Protests of 2020-2021**

### **2.6.1 Starting of Protests in Punjab and it's spread**

Punjabi farmers marched to the border of the national capital Delhi on 26-27 November 2020, soon joined by fellow farmers from other northern India, particularly y Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand and Rajasthan. They surrounded Delhi, layed siege to the city and occupied major highways over the following weeks. They weathered the Delhi winter as temeratures went down to 1–2°C and the hot summer months of May and June with tempratures of 45–47°C. They faced dust storms, monsoon rains and floods.

The protestors have spent months living on trollies they pulled with their tractors, temporary huts and sleeping tents. The hardships of their living condition have taken a heavy toll, leading to the deaths of over 600 farmers, mostly due to the weather and the living conditions.

The farmers persist nonetheless, determined to keep up their struggle until their demands are met. The movement intensified over 2021 with the organization of massive rallies (maha-panchayats) accross the region. In September 2021, a day long rally took place that attracted reportedly 500,000 farmers in Muzaffarnagar, a town of western Uttar Pradesh. (Jodhka, 2021)

The 3 farm laws concerning the purchase, production and storage of agricultural commodities triggered the farmers mobilization. Grain producing farmers of Punjab to state agencies such as the Food Corporation of India (FCI), through the ' arhatiyas' (private commission agents) in officially designated markets, known as the mandis. The government claims the laws will open up the markets and propel the growth of Indian agriculture, thereby increasing farm income.

Such claims have found little support among most Indian farmers. Surinder S. Jodhka in his article "Why are the farmers of Punjab protesting?", summarizes the apprehensions of the farmers as,

*The new laws are a 'sell-off'. The Indian government has become an agent of a few corporate houses. The laws have been passed to favour them, the Ambanis and the Adanis, in particular. If we let these laws prevail, we have no future. Our lands will be lost for ever. Our children will have no lands to cultivate. This is a battle for saving kisan*

*(farming culture), our livelihood and our dignity. The battle is between kisani and corporate capital. Those who hold political offices are just the mediators, their paid agents.*

The 3 farm laws were enacted hurriedly, with no meaningful consultations with farmers (and stakeholders) and dismissing all objections by the opposition (passing of acts through parliament discussed in 1.1.3).

‘The Farmers’ Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Act, 2020’, liberalizes the purchase and sale of agricultural commodities (mostly foodgrains), significantly undermining the preexisting marketing frameworks, opening up the trading of food grains outside the Agricultural Produce Marketing Committees (APMC), known in India as mandis (marketplaces). The mandis were implemented by many state governments as part of supporting structures for the surplus-producing farmers during the Green Revolution, beginning in the late 1960s. The central government began procuring food grains through the APMC at an assured Minimum Support Price (MSP), determined by the Central Government, to build up food reserves for running the public distribution system (PDS) across India. The new law’s text does away with any references to the existing MSP regime or its continuation.

The ‘Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement of Price Assurance, Farm Services Act, 2020’ provides a framework for contract farming, allowing farmers and buyers to enter into agreements in order to produce a specific crop to be purchased at a pre-fixed price. Contract farming frameworks have already existed at the state level but this new law brings it into a common national framework. In addition to no mention of price security to farmers, Mechanisms provided for dispute resolution have also become a source of contention.

The third law is an amended law by the name of ‘The Essential Commodities (Amendment) Act, 2020’. The original Essential Commodities Act, enacted in 1955 by the Government of India in order to prevent private traders from hoarding food grains, which were classified as ‘essential commodities’. Inspired by India’s experience with famines during the British era, the Indian state established a network of fair price shops, through which it operated the Public Distribution System (PDS). The amendment to the law has removed existing limits on private traders’ storage of cereals, pulses, oilseeds, edible oils, onion, and potatoes which are no longer classified as essential commodities.

These laws open up Indian agriculture to increased commercial engagement by big corporates, who would be able to purchase, store and even decide what crops to produce (through contract farming), representing a significant change in the way Indian agriculture operates. (Jodhka, 2021)

After examination of the 3 laws various farmer's organizations, they found them unacceptable. They came to the conclusion that the laws would pave the entry of corporates into agriculture and lead to an eventual end to the MSP regime. The access given to big investors, through markets and contract farming would lead to local farmers directly or indirectly losing their lands.

The provisions in the new laws would allow corporates to bypass local agents making it hard for local mandis to survive. They apprehend that the corporates would initially offer higher prices than what the commission agents and other buyers in mandis offered, even higher than the official MSP. Once the commission agents would no longer be able to stay in the business and close up, the farmers would have no choice but to enter into contractual arrangements with the private buyers, taking credit from them and eventually getting trapped into cycles of debt. In addition to seeing these laws as an economic threat, they are also seen as a threat to the culture, community and way of life. (Jodhka, 2021)

Punjab has historically been the most agriculturally productive region of India. Despite the state occupying 1.53% of India's geographic area and 2.7% of its cultivable land and its population is 2.2% of the total population of India, it accounts for 11.9% of the total wheat production and 12.5% of the rice grown in the nation. (Chengappa and Mahajan 2020).

State policy contributed in making Punjab an agriculturally vital region. Rice paddy was introduced in a large scale during the 60s and with the MSP regime, soon became an important crop. But the ongoing green revolution led to a loss of crop diversity in the region and by the 1980s, wheat and paddy made up of two-thirds of the entire cropped area. With rising input costs, Punjab's farmers became the most indebted in the country. Despite the offer of institutional credit, routine credit was offered by the commission agents (arhatiyas). After the liberalization of the 1990s, Indian farmers now faced competition from imported food grains cheaper than the MSP. (Jodhka, 2021)

After the Green revolution, India saw the emergence of powerful farmer's movements across the country, led mostly by substantial land holders from the locally dominant castes, mostly struggling for subsidised inputs and were reasonably successful in achieving their demands. But after the liberalization of the 90s, the unions of the prior era weakened and a new generation of unions and leaders arose. (Jodhka, 2021)

The first major protest in Punjab was a 'tractor march' in August, with farmers driving their tractors to blocking roads and targeting the residences and offices of the BJP and their Punjabi coalition partner, the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD). In the following month, the unions called to voluntarily get arrested to fill up the jails between 8-13 September, followed by sit ins on railway lines between 14-24 September and then a general strike across Punjab on the 25th. The protests were initially organized by left-wing farm unions, mostly affiliated with different factions of the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) but the issues raised found traction among all sections of Punjabi farmers and the left-wing organizations were even joined by those sympathetic to Akali politics (SAD). By early September, almost everyone who were directly or indirectly involved with farming in Punjab had joined the protests including nearly all the farm unions, the arhatiya traders of grain mandis and, in some cases, even farm labourers, forming a state-level coordination committee, with more than 30 farm unions.

Despite the sit-ins being started by older farmers, they were soon joined by the younger generation. And among the younger generation were singers and artists who composed and recorded more than 100 songs directly relating to the protests. Some of these artists were members of the Punjabi Diaspora and travelled all the way from Canada and the UK. Realizing the antipathy toward the law and failing to convince the BJP against forwarding them to the Parliament, the SAD left the BJP coalition. On the 14th of November, the farm leaders attended a meeting arranged by the government to discuss the farm laws only to find no union ministers present. Instead, bureaucrats tried convincing farmers of the benefits of the laws with presentations leading to the farm leaders walking out. (Jodhka, 2021)

The lack of engagement by the central government encouraged the farmers to march to Delhi, trying to make it hard for national politicians, officials and popular media to ignore them. They stocked up on essentials including foodstuffs, blankets, mattresses and set out

to Delhi on the 25th of November. But to reach Delhi from Punjab, the farmers had to go through BJP ruled Haryana state. The Haryana police installed barricades, water canons and dug up roads. But, the Punjabi farmers were soon joined by Haryana farmers and they were able to push past the hurdles to continue their march to Delhi.

The Farmers reached the Singhu border north of the Capital, while another Contingent reached Tikri border west of the Capital. Farmers from Uttar Pradesh (UP) and Uttarakhand occupied the Ghazipur border to the east, while farmers from Rajasthan state occupied the south west bound highway to Jaipur. Their numbers peaked during the 26th of January, which was the Indian Republic day. A tractor rally on the arterial ring-roads of Delhi was organized with over a hundred thousand tractors and over one million farmers.

Initial approach of the government after the farmers reached Delhi was to educate the farmers on how these new laws may benefit them even as government representatives conceded the short comings of the law and offered to revise them, while the ruling party propogandists and even state agencies used various means to portray the farmers movement in a bad light. Other rallies and protests were held in other states and even in other countries by the Punjabi diaspora. (Jodhka, 2021)

The most fascinating part of the movement was the establishment of the 'townships of protests'. As the farmers arrived, they settled down at these protest sites. The four major sites on highways became townships equipped with necessities of everyday life. Each of these sites could accommodate up to 50,000-100,000 farmers on a regular basis with numbers swelling up to 200,000-300,000 when unions gave calls for special protest events. Utilizing their social and cultural traditions of the Sikh farmers, set up Langaars (communal kitchen), which were open to anyone including the impoverished from slums and nearby rural areas. The Delhi government ruled by the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) provided water and temporary toilets. Various NGOs provided various services including medical care, food, bedding and other requirements for daily use. Residents of local villages were helpful too. (Jodhka, 2021)

Due to historical reasons, the average Punjabi land holding is more than three times larger than average Indian landholding, making them more politically and economically influential than the farmers of other parts of India. Most agricultural land is owned and cultivated by the Jatt caste and a few other communities. Despite the conflicting interests



of the Farming class and the lower caste labourers, Dalit organizations have also been active in the protests. This movement unlike past movement recognizes, at least in name, the diverging interests of the Dalits (formerly untouchables) and therefore leaders have been using more inclusive language. While several Dalit organizations have expressed solidarity and many have travelled to Delhi, overall dalit participation has been relatively limited given the history of caste-class schisms and hostilities.

Punjab and the broader northwestern agrarian landscape of India is know for its aggressive patriarchal culture. These protests are also unique in the sense that the overarching patriarchal scene also appears to be changing. Many women occupy important positions within the participating organizations and the they have been promoted by marking days when women can exclusively control and conduct the public meetings. (Jodhka, 2021)

### **2.6.2 Conditions that led to the Protests in Uttar Pradesh**

For long, the Jats have dominated land ownership in large parts of western UP. They subjugated a section of Dalits and lower caste labourers, especially in the fertile area between the rivers Ganga and Yamuna, known as the Upper Doab. From the 60s on through the 80s, the land owning middle classes including Muslim Jats united to demand subsidized inputs, loan waivers and higher crop prices. They organized under the Kisan (Farmers) identity and formed a significant political force. The Rastriya Lok Dal (RLD) was the main party of Kisan politics. But the reforms they pushed for often eluded the Dalits and other landless caste groups. However, after the 1990's liberalization, farmer's politics were supplanted by two interconnected phenomena, neoliberal economic reforms and the rise of caste and communal politics. Neoliberal reforms cut farm subsidies and worsened the agrarian crises while communal politics reduced the prominence of Kisan politics. The loss of political coordination between farmers since the 90s can be connected to the pluralization UP politics. The SP cornered the OBC (mainly Yadav caste) and Muslim vote while BSP cornered the Dalit vote. The communal politics of SP and BSP paved way for the late communal politics of the BJP. (Kumar, 2021)

Historically the landowning classes patronized the artisan-service and landless labour castes, mostly Pasmanda Muslims (members of the lower rung of Muslim society in the region) and Dalits. They had a mutually dependent though exploitative relationship. But

fall in farm incomes and the electoral pitting of the upper castes against the lower castes significantly reduced patronization. Villagers had to spend more time in urban sites to compensate for lost income on their farms. This caused a blurring of the Urban-rural divide. These villagers who lived on non farm incomes increasingly related to the urban middle class, causing them to adopt their tastes, language, rituals, symbols, and politics, thus altering the socio-cultural landscape. The kinship and obligation-based rural economy has transformed into an individual-centric economy based on skills and cash transactions. This has led to the formation of a rural middle class even among the lower rungs of the societal ladder as the artisan-service groups in the region. But, a large section of these artisan-service caste groups have also been proletarianized, forcing them into informal work in cities and other precarious livelihoods. (Kumar, 2021)

The upwardly mobile young Jats, disconnected from agriculture and thereby were disconnected to the Kisan identity and the RLD. The BJP's propaganda of a Muslim threat, the 2013 Muzaffarnagar riots, the agrarian crises, and cries to push Jat farmers to claim a Hindu identity created openings for the Hindu right. The robust Hindutva (right wing Hindu nationalist) propaganda network was able to disseminate fake news and reinterpret history to further woo the Jats and were able to capitalize on the fears of declining political influence of the Jats. Agricultural and Village festivals were slowly replaced by religious festivals. In 2014 and 2019 UP elections, these upwardly mobile young Jats came to political leadership. (Kumar, 2021)

Though, young Jats aspire to get well paying urban Jobs, to lead a respectful life in a city, the jobs they find is often low-paid and insecure in character. This leads them to still depend on their rural land for a part of their sustenance, leading many to frustration and disillusionment, leading them to cross the urban-rural line. But, with the passing of the three farm laws, their attention and frustrations are now directed at the big corporates, who are perceived as threatening their land at home, while failing to employ them in the city. Due to their passing of the laws, the BJP is now seen by many as pro- corporates. These conditions have merged land (farming) and caste identity together by reasserting the farmer (Kisan) identity over the BJP oriented Hindu identity. The ongoing agrarian crisis, rising costs of inputs, unpaid dues by sugar mills to cane farmers have severely affected Jat farmers across generation, caste and religious lines. Cow slaughter which was banned by

the BJP for religious reasons also hurt the farmers. When a cow becomes unproductive, farmers usually release the animal to save costs from sustaining it, which has led to cow rampages onto farm land. After the Muzaffernagar riots of 2013 against Muslims, there has also been a labour shortage caused by the fleeing of artisanal Muslim classes due to looting and arson. Finally, Covid made all these issues even worse. These factors led to a new united farmer's front and there have even been outreach to Dalits, posing new challenges for the BJP. (Kumar, 2021)

### **2.6.3 Class-caste alliances and the Issue with Agrarian transition in India**

The main reason a broad-based coalition was possible, was the common distrust of corporates among several groups involved in agriculture. Change of opinions of Jats towards the BJP was also beneficial for the movement. Farmers of the dominant farming classes are afraid of being subordinated to corporates, while lower caste labourers are against corporate involvement due to fears of higher mechanization requiring less of their labour. These laws are seen as a threat to those involved in agriculture and the poor of the nation since the crops acquired through the MSP is then sold across the nation in PDS stores at a subsidized rate along with other necessities. The PDS is the country's largest anti-poverty programme and is estimated to benefit a whopping 66 percent of the population. (Lerche, 2021)

Little more than half of rural households are landowners. Of them, only a few are capitalist farmers, able to accumulate, employ and reinvest outside agriculture. Most farmers are petty commodity producers, laboured mostly by family members with their own inputs and occasionally employing labourers in peak seasons. For many of them their most important income is wage labour. Although their identity and standing is tied to land ownership, by class terms, they are petty commodity producers-cum- labourers. Although different categories of farmers and farm labourers have different interests, they are united against the farm laws. 47 percent of rural households are landless. Of the various farmers categories and landless labourers, landless labourers and farmer-labourers are the numerically dominant classes for the last 30 years. While class interests of landless labourers and farmer-labourers overlap in ways, oppression along class and ethnic lines are rife. Interests of dalit rural population are different and even opposed to interests of landed

castes. Farmers of dominant castes exploit Dalits. Farmers sought to exploit Dalits by reducing wages during covid using Khaps (caste assemblies). (Lerche, 2021)

Class-caste unity despite conflicting interests is surprising. Large farmers threatened by corporate entry were involved from start. Dalit support came at a crucial point in time. Bhim army sought to represent labouring classes in both Rural and urban setting. Two major Punjabi labourer unions, the Zameen Prapti Sangharsh Committee (ZPSC) and the Punjab Khet Mazdoor Union recognized the loss in Jobs if agriculture was mechanized and the threat to the poor and labouring classes if the PDS was cut down. The movement though, continues to be silent on Dalit exploitation. The current symbolic representation of Dalits may not continue beyond this movement. Therefore, it's unsurprising that ordinary Dalits aren't as involved in the Protests. The protests also found allies in non agrarian labour unions, which is rather rare and in the 26th of November, 2020, in coordination with the opposition parties (Congress, CPI, CPIM etc.), they arranged a nationwide general strike. But this didn't represent a broad represent farmer-labour alliance since few who work as formal labourers are in unions but the farmers camped outside Delhi did form ad hoc alliances with informal labour. It is important to note that despite the fact that the current movement is more broad based than the movements in the 70s and 80s, it is the interests of the dominant caste farmers that dominate today's movement. (Lerche, 2021)

Though the focus of the protests are agrarian, the underlying structural reasons for the protests relate both to the overall trajectory of agrarian development and to the kind exclusionary economic development that is taking place outside agriculture. In India, the classic agrarian question has been bypassed. The ideal of an agrarian transition i.e. capitalist development and capital accumulation within agriculture that serving as an engine for capitalist development across the economy, driving industrial development hasn't been materialized in post liberalization India. Instead, financialization that resulted in service sector and construction led growth, as opposed to manufacturing growth drives its non-industrial development. India's answer to the agrarian question was essentially a Finance capitalist solution. This has led to the waning influence of the once politically dominant farming classes. And the falling economic viability of petty commodity producers who own little land has blurred the boundary between petty commodity producers and labourers. But the caste divides are also maintained outside agriculture, with

Dalits getting informal, insecure, temporary, and often demeaning jobs when compared to those from land owning castes. (Lerche, 2021)

But the move out of agriculture has led to some economic de-linking between Dalits and landowning groups, creating more room for maneuver for Dalits and sometimes lessened contradictions, which is significant for the farm laws struggle. There has been an unequal growth, in both jobs and income, post liberalization and in the last five years or so, there has been a direct decline in non-agricultural employment for the first time since Independence, that affects even upper castes and with COVID only making it worse. Dominant farming communities participated in agrarian protests demanding reservation (affirmative action) in 2016. For decades most farmers have combined agrarian petty commodity production and non-agricultural labour but are now squeezed on both fronts. Small farmers, along with informalized labourers, Dalits, Adivasis, etc. have been on the wrong side of the growing inequality gap in India. (Lerche, 2021)

The reasons for the wide coalition are: The near total unity in Punjab, the BKU uniting Jats, Muslims and Dalits in western UP, CPIM being pro Adivasi and pro dalit influencing the creation of the AIKSCC and its impact. The present movement could be seen as a defence of the agrarian status quo and of the significant, pro-poor, cheap food program, against the interests of corporate and merchant capital. This is an important, cross-class, caste, ethnic and even gender-based defensive struggle. During the protests, the phase of alliance between groups had interests that were sufficiently aligned for them to take action together, but in other ways are opposed to each other. Once the struggle is over, it can't be expected that all farmers would stand up for demands by Dalits, Muslims, informal workers and agricultural labourers. (Lerche, 2021)

#### **2.6.4 Agricultural market Laws and Regulation, and India's new Farm laws**

The 2020 agricultural produce marketing and trade laws, widely known as farm laws, of India have seen unprecedented levels of protest in the post Indian independence history. The government had tried to break the decades-old agriculture system and modernize it. However, the government's claim that these farm laws are pro-farmer and meant to help

India's small and marginal farmers didn't go well with farmers' unions and triggered widespread protest centering on capital Delhi. (Sethi, 2021)

Agriculture is in state list as per Constitution of India though the Indian Parliament has power to introduce new laws or amend the existing ones and impose on state governments and union territories.

The farm laws, discussed here, consist of two Acts and an amendment, namely (1) Farmers' Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Act, 2020; (2) Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement on Price Assurance and Farm Services Act, 2020; and, (3) Essential Commodities (Amendment) Act, 2020.

The most debated and opposed of these is Farmers' Produce Trade and Commerce Act. It aims to break the boundaries of conventional marketplaces, called mandis or APMC (Agricultural Produce Market Committee) and create open trade venues and e-commerce platforms. It also aims to limit the regulatory powers of APMC by putting stringent control over registration, licensing, taxation, dispute resolution and transaction recording.

The second law, Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement on Price Assurance and Farm Services Act, defines the terms and conditions for contract farming and covers all aspects ranging from contract period of farming agreement to pricing of farming produce and the method of price determination and dispute settlement mechanism.

The third law, an amendment to the Essential Commodities Act of 1955, restricts the government's influence to impose stock limits on traders - with an exemption of certain specified and limited circumstances. (Sethi, 2021)

The incumbent government's motivation to revive farm laws is driven from 1991 reforms, which is attributed to liberation of Indian economy. It believes that the Indian agriculture cannot be made efficient and neither farmers income doubled (it is also an electoral promise made by the current government) unless attracting the private sector with major investment. However, for political opponents and critics, this is an attempt to give the control of Indian agriculture to corporates. They also fear that it will dismantle public regulation and state support to farmers. The country has witnessed a deep irony during the beginning of the protest. (Sethi, 2021)

Reforms in agriculture sector has been a very sensitive and volatile subject throughout the history elsewhere in the world so as in India. It is a culmination of feeling between land, crop, producer, consumer, labor, regulations, infrastructure, inputs, outputs, subsidies, exemptions, commodities and food security. The farm laws, policy and Indian politics have seen a different kind of tensions and contradictions due to protest by farmer unions in defense of and demand for APMC and MSP. (Sethi, 2021)

The state agricultural acts across the country are seen as a bottleneck to the transformation of Indian agriculture and new farm laws are basically on this assumption. The APMC is regarded as inefficient, inadequate, corrupted, and politically captured in many places and blamed for not allowing new players on its premise. Majority of small and marginal farmers in India are reported as not selling their produce at APMC. While majority of Indian states have passed farm produce market laws, the investment in infrastructure and resources vary hugely between states. Inadequate implementation of laws is evident in many states. As found in researches, large farmers are likely to sell their produce at APMC mandis, if they are nearby. Small and marginal farmers rather prefer to sell their small lots to village-level traders. The entry of large-scale corporates to alternative privately run markets is opposed by small traders. (Sethi, 2021)

The small traders and agro-commercial capitalists, who fought against the states for opening up the agricultural market to the corporates in the past showed no resistance to farm laws. This is because they found ways to coexist and operate under amended state acts. Some of them have also turned out to be the agents for corporates. And, many of these former licensed traders even preferred to work outside APMC, at least partially, since they will be able to transact without registration, taxation and regulatory obligations. This explains why farmers unions – not traders – criticize the laws for inadequate provisions for registration, recording of transactions, transparency of stocks overview by large firms and dispute resolution mechanism. Their fear also stems from loss of easily accessible local market with access to information on prices, fair weighing practices and timely settlement of payments. (Sethi, 2021)

The farmers from states like Punjab, Haryana and western UP have had a long history of collaboration with local APMC markets and traders unlike those from states with

historically weak regulation and poor mandi network. From their long experience, they can easily distinguish between where a state promise is deferred or denied. (Sethi, 2021)

The MSP-based procurement became a huge burden for the Union government in last decade because of increased procurement volumes due to decentralized procurement at village-based centres outside mandis in new procurement states like Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh and Odisha. Reform to existing MSP system and the proposal of drastic reduction of state support in procurement and public distribution systems were frequently discussed by successive committees formed by the government. Therefore, the farmers from Punjab and Haryana saw the farm laws as an attempt to dismantle MSP system and withdraw state support for agriculture. (Sethi, 2021)

Opposition parties accuse the Union government that, though Agriculture is a state domain, state governments, especially those ruled by opposition parties, were not consulted about the Acts before presenting to the parliament. Some opposition ruled states have passed resolution against the Farm Laws while others attempting to pass their own bills. They did not try to stop farmers from protesting. The government held a series of negotiations with farmers unions and was willing to amend specific clauses. The meetings ended without any deal farmers unions refused to accept anything other than a complete repeal. The Supreme Court of India, the highest court in the country, stayed the implementation of three laws and appointed a committee to investigate and advise the court; but, that too was not accepted by the farmers. Their only demand was the repeal of laws. The government was adamant and refused to refer the laws to a parliamentary Standing Committee. When the site of public contestation over state subjects like agriculture and agricultural market move from state to center, it raises serious questions about democratic deliberation, federalism, law making and accountability. (Sethi, 2021)

On the side lines of demanding repeal of three farm laws, the farmers also demanded the union government to introduce another new all-India law to guarantee MSP for farmers across the country. (Sethi, 2021)



## **3 Practical Part**

### **3.1 Introduction**

For this part, I have conducted exhaustive semi-structured interviews with several people involved in agriculture in Punjab state, the birthplace of the 2020-2021 farmers movement. These interviews were conducted one on one, in various venues. Some of these interviews were conducted online while other interviews were done over a cup of coffee. All the interviewees were male and currently resided outside India despite living in India for a significant portion of their lives. The youngest interviewee was 21 years old, while the oldest was in his late fifties. Two thirds of the interviewees were of Sikh faith, the dominant religion of Punjab and a third from the Hindu community. These interviews lasted between one to three hours.

Before the start of the interview, I explain to them about my thesis and encourage them to ask questions about my work. I then try to make them feel comfortable and try to get to know a little about my interviewees. I encourage them to give their answers as detailed as possible and assure them that their privacy will be protected from the general public. They are allowed to skip any answers they don't wish to answer. They are also allowed to speak about topics that are not directly related to my questions, if it gives me a better idea about the condition of agriculture in the region.

The oldest interviewee was not only involved in agriculture but comes from a family that was well involved in union activity. He himself was a member of a union in his youth and is still connected and informed on union activities in his region. Due to this, he was able to acquire first-hand information on union activity during the farmer's march to Delhi in 2020. Before, I asked my questions, I asked (along with the other interviewees) about his knowledge on the protests and the information he gave corroborated with the sources used in this theses and news articles, proving he was a trustable source in facts and feelings on the ground. All the interviewees gave similar answers as they all came from the same social background (land owning dominant communities) and region. But since the oldest interviewee gave the most comprehensive and detailed answers and gave accurate judgements on the general moods of people during various events of the protests, most of the answers to my interview questions here will have the answer given by the oldest interviewee.

Despite attempts to find interviewees from Dalit castes, it proved to be extremely hard and in the end I conceded, interviewing only the interviewees I had.

### 3.2 Summary of Interviews

- 1) What do you think are the greatest threats to Indian Agriculture? How can these threats be solved?

Since the interviewees are from Punjab state, their answers concern only the North-Western region of India. Their answers included these three points,

- *Lack of diversification : In Punjab we grow only wheat and rice. So many crops we grew before the green revolution is no longer cultivated. Diversification of crops should be encouraged.*
- *Lack of marketing and food processing : Other than rice and wheat, there is no marketing and food processing infrastructure for other crops. Even our wheat and rice are taken elsewhere to be processed.*
- *Lack of planning and policies : Inflexible and outdated state policy is causing a lot of harm. This harm is not only for our income but also for our environment. We put more and more fertilizer on our land to grow the same crops year after year and we have nearly depleted our groundwater to irrigate thirsty crops like paddy. New planning and policy is our only chance to solve these issues. The government should encourage new agricultural techniques and support the inputs required for these new techniques. MSP should be expanded to more crops so that farmers can comfortably cultivate new crops without fearing price movements, which will increase crop diversity.*

- 2) What are your views on the Farmers Protest of 2020-2021? Please Explain.

*The three farm laws were introduced by the union government. These laws directly affected agriculture, This is a violation of the Indian constitution as agriculture is a matter of state government.*

*The Essential commodities act was modified to give monopoly to corporates which would lead to the abolition of the APMCs.*

3) What would you say are some important features of the 2020-2021 protests? What would you say differentiates these protests from earlier protests?

- *Unity of farmers*
- *Involvement of youth was of paramount importance.*
- *Solidarity amongst farmers of different states and different communities (Villagers near the protest camp sites brought the farmers food and offered to help the farmers where they could)*
- *Natives of Delhi came up positively in support of protesting farmers.*
- *Large scale support of farmers came from different sections of society. (doctors, teachers, lawyers, artists, etc.*
- *Protestors came from beyond the core states of Punjab, Haryana and UP including Maharashtra, TN, Kerala, WB, Bihar etc.*
- *Disruption of supply chains didn't turn people against farmers.*

4) What do you think about the process through which the government introduced these laws?

*The government mishandled the legislative process.*

*(See 1.1.3, Coalescence Stage for further detail)*

5) What do you think about the way the government handled the protests?

*Before the protestors reached Delhi, farmers of Punjab were in protest for over half a year but Union government simply neglected it. When the farmers decided to go to Delhi, Union government used it's influence on Haryana government (Both union and Haryana led by BJP) to bar the protestors reaching Delhi. Once they blocked the entrances to Delhi, government invited them for a dialogue (with Union ministers Piyush Goyal and Narendra Singh Tomar). After 11 rounds of discussion, there was a deadlock. Government misused most mainstream media to discredit the*

*farmers protest. Govt. misused all the powers and agencies against the protests but at no avail. And finally, after more than a year of residency at the borders of Delhi, government bowed in front of the strength of farmers and repealed the laws.*

6) What do you think about the government's portrayal of the protests and protestors?

*This is the general trend of this government that the protestors are labelled as anti-nationals, urban naxals, misled simple-minded peasants (bhole-bhale kisan), opposition supported, terrorists etc.*

7) What do you think about the media's ( pro-government, opposition and neutral) portrayal of the protests?

- *Most of the mainstream media was favouring the government.*
- *Exceptions of mainstream media was reporting positively about the protests*
- *The most important support to the farmers came when youth started propagating the protests on Social media.*

8) What did the protestors fear the most from the 3 farm laws?

*The biggest fear for the farmers was that misuse of these laws could render them landless.*

9) Which groups do you think were the most represented in the protests?

*Small and Medium scale farmers*

10) Do you think the interests of the oppressed classes (SC/STs) were represented during the protests?

*Yes, whoever is concerned with the farming, was an integral part of these protests.*

11) Who would have been the biggest beneficiaries if the laws had been passed? And who would be the biggest losers? Please explain.

*It is evident that these laws were passed in the favour of corporates on the expense of farmers.*

12) Do you think environmental decline and climate change played a role in these Protests?

*Though the learned farmer leaders are aware of the environmental decline and climate changes, I think these protests were not triggered by them. Lot of awareness is required to enlighten the masses to think and act about these issues.*

13) Do you think these laws will be reintroduced (even at state levels) in the future?

*The strong opposition of the 3 farm laws in 2020 has shown that the introduction of similar laws even at the state level would be met with strong opposition in the future.*

### **3.3 Discussion**

Regarding the 3 farm laws, the biggest issues the interviewees saw can be summarized as:

- Mishandling of the Judicial process
- Overstepping of the union into state's jurisdiction, under which agriculture falls under.
- Corporates cornering different sections of the agricultural market and monopolizing Indian agriculture.
- Farmers directly or indirectly losing control of their land to farmers.

There is also immense pride among the Interviewees that they were the first movement to defeat Modi's government, forcing them to repeal the laws.

## 4 Conclusion

In the Literature review of the thesis we have understood the evolution of Agriculture in the North Western states of Punjab, Haryana and UP and how a mix of natural and manmade factors made the region the bread basket of the Nation. We have also understood the economic and Social consequences of Indian agricultural policy throughout the years. We have studied the evolution of farmer's movements and farmer identities. We saw how the Initial farmer's movement was led and in the interest of the dominant landed castes. But with the worsening agrarian crisis after the liberalization in the 90s threatened all those involved in agriculture. This led to the farmers movements becoming more inclusive in the face of the agrarian crisis.

With the BJP coming to power in a landslide victory in 2014, they radically changed modern Indian politics with their authoritarian streak. Despite weathering many protests and criticism throughout the years, they realized the behemoth of a challenge the Farmers posed to them. Despite trying many of their usual tactics, they failed to pacify the farmers and for the first time in Modi's career as Prime Minister, he was forced to back track and repeal the laws.

The farmers had lost a lot throughout the years. Prosperity and political being two of them. Many from farming families had to work urban jobs while still being tied to their rural lands. When those from farming families realized that the new laws would lay their rural land potentially open to exploitation by corporates, while the same corporates failed to employ them in Urban areas, they joined the protests and marched to the capital against the 3 laws. Their material interests were to attain a decent middle-class life.

The explicit demands of the farmers include subsidized inputs and MSP for crops but the implicit demands are to keep their way of life and, to keep their autonomy and land from powerful corporate capital.

The farmers do recognise the existential crises of Indian agriculture and they want the government to drastically intervene so that the agrarian crisis can be solved and wish that agriculture too can be a part of the Indian growth story.

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## 6 Appendix

### 6.1 The 3 farm laws:

#### Key Features

#### The Farmers' Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Ordinance, 2020

- **Trade of farmers' produce:** The Ordinance allows intra-state and inter-state trade of farmers' produce outside: (i) the physical premises of market yards run by market committees formed under the state APMC Acts and (ii) other markets notified under the state APMC Acts. Such trade can be conducted in an 'outside trade area', i.e., any place of production, collection, and aggregation of farmers' produce including: (i) farm gates, (ii) factory premises, (iii) warehouses, (iv) silos, and (v) cold storages.
- **Electronic trading:** The Ordinance permits the electronic trading of scheduled farmers' produce (agricultural produce regulated under any state APMC Act) in the specified trade area. An electronic trading and transaction platform may be set up to facilitate the direct and online buying and selling of such produce through electronic devices and internet. The following entities may establish and operate such platforms: (i) companies, partnership firms, or registered societies, having permanent account number under the Income Tax Act, 1961 or any other document notified by the central government, and (ii) a farmer producer organisation or agricultural cooperative society.
- **Market fee abolished:** The Ordinance prohibits state governments from levying any market fee, cess or levy on farmers, traders, and electronic trading platforms for trade of farmers' produce conducted in an 'outside trade area'.

#### The Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement on Price Assurance and Farm Services Ordinance, 2020

- **Farming agreement:** The Ordinance provides for a farming agreement between a farmer and a buyer prior to the production or rearing of any farm produce. The minimum period of an agreement will be one crop season, or one production cycle of livestock. The maximum period is five years, unless the production cycle is more than five years.
- **Pricing of farming produce:** The price of farming produce should be mentioned in the agreement. For prices subjected to variation, a guaranteed price for the produce and a clear reference for any additional amount above the guaranteed price must be specified in the agreement. Further, the process of price determination must be mentioned in the agreement.
- **Dispute Settlement:** A farming agreement must provide for a conciliation board as well as a conciliation process for settlement of disputes. The Board should have a fair and balanced representation of parties to the agreement. At first, all disputes must be referred to the board for resolution. If the dispute remains unresolved by the Board after thirty days, parties may approach the Sub-divisional Magistrate for resolution. Parties will have a right to appeal to an Appellate Authority (presided by collector or additional collector) against decisions of the Magistrate. Both the Magistrate and Appellate Authority will be required to dispose of a dispute within thirty days from the receipt of application. The Magistrate or the Appellate Authority may impose certain penalties on the party contravening the agreement. However, no action can be taken against the agricultural land of farmer for recovery of any dues.

### **The Essential Commodities (Amendment) Ordinance, 2020**

- **Regulation of food items:** The Essential Commodities Act, 1955 empowers the central government to designate certain commodities (such as food items, fertilizers, and petroleum products) as essential commodities. The central government may regulate or prohibit the production, supply, distribution, trade, and commerce of such essential commodities. The Ordinance provides that the central government may regulate the supply of certain food items including cereals, pulses, potatoes, onions, edible oilseeds, and oils, only under extraordinary circumstances. These include: (i)

war, (ii) famine, (iii) extraordinary price rise and (iv) natural calamity of grave nature.

- **Stock limit:** The Ordinance requires that imposition of any stock limit on agricultural produce must be based on price rise. A stock limit may be imposed only if there is: (i) a 100% increase in retail price of horticultural produce; and (ii) a 50% increase in the retail price of non-perishable agricultural food items. The increase will be calculated over the price prevailing immediately preceding twelve months, or the average retail price of the last five years, whichever is lower.

Source: PRS India, <https://prsindia.org/billtrack/the-farmers-produce-trade-and-commerce-promotion-and-facilitation-bill-2020>

## 6.2 Interview Questions

- 1) What do you think are the greatest threats to Indian Agriculture?
- 2) How do you think the agrarian crises can be solved?
- 3) What are your views on the Farmers Protest of 2020-2021? Please Explain.
- 4) What would you say are some important features of the 2020-2021 protests? What would you say differentiates these protests from earlier protests?
- 5) What are your opinions on the 3 farm laws? Would you say there are both positive and negative aspects to the 3 laws? What are they?
- 6) What do you think about the process through which the government introduced these laws?
- 7) What do you think about the way the government handled the protests?
- 8) What do you think about the government's portrayal of the protests and protestors?

- 9) What do you think about the media's ( pro-government, opposition and neutral) portrayal of the protests?
- 10) What did the protestors fear the most from the 3 farm laws?
- 11) Which groups do you think were the most represented in the protests?
- 12) Do you think the interests of the oppressed classes (SC/STs) were represented during the protests?
- 13) Who would have been the biggest benefactors if the laws had been passed? And who would be the biggest losers? Please explain.
- 14) Do you think environmental decline and climate change played a role in these Protests?
- 15) Do you think environmental decline and climate change was adequately discussed during these protests?
- 16) The status quo of Indian agriculture can't be maintained. What steps must be taken in the future to solve the various aspects (Economic, Social and Environmental) of agrarian crises, now that the 3 farm laws have been repealed?
- 17) Do you think these laws will be reintroduced in the future?

## **Abbreviations**

BJP – Bhartiya Janata Party

CPIM – Communist party of India (Marxist)

TN – Tamil Nadu

WB – West Bengal

APMC – Agriculture produce market committee

SC - Scheduled castes

ST - Scheduled tribes

BKU – Bhartiya Kisan Union

AIKSCC - All India Kisan Sangharsh Coordination Committee

SKM - Samyukta Kisan Morcha