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The Indian Farmers' protest of the century: Jats, Sikhs and beyond

It has been labelled the largest farmers' protest in the world. Since September 2020, hundreds of thousands of Indian farmers have been in a continuous protest action against three new laws. The protests are still spreading across India. The protest has turned into the most serious challenge to what many sees as the increasingly authoritarian BJP government of India. In enormous *Mahasabhas* across [north](#), [east](#) and [central India](#) farmers have pledged to continue the fight until the laws have been repelled.

The ruling BJP never thought that the farmers – let alone the Jat farmers – would become their main problem. It was the mainly Sikh farmers from Punjab that first spearheaded the protests, leaving the movement vulnerable to smears that it was limited to well-off farmers from a particular religious minority. When the Jats joined in huge numbers, that illusion could no longer be maintained.

The ferocity of their engagement was unexpected for the powers-that-be. But it shouldn't have been. Rightly or wrongly, the Jats see the farm laws as a direct threat to their continued existence as independent farmers. The pushing through of the laws without any consultations with farmers such as themselves has challenged the very perception the Jats held of their position in society. They – as many other farmers - have always viewed themselves as central to what India is.

The final nail in the coffin was the humiliation of the Bharatiya Kisan Union (BKU) leader Rakesh Tikait, a prominent Jat figure, at the protest camp at the Delhi borders in January as

the government prepared to dislodge farmers. It showed them that farmers, including the Jat farmers, could be ridden roughshod over by a government that, they felt, listened to big capital and not to the them, the sons of the soil. The Jat farmers have had enough of what they see as their humiliation by the government.

Worryingly for the government, Rakesh Tikait and his brother Naresh, the BKU farmers union they are leading, as well as the *Mahasabhas* have pledged to vote out the BJP in upcoming state elections. Across western UP, local BJP politicians find themselves [socially boycotted](#) by their caste and farmer brethren.

The ham-fisted government action in attempting to dislodge protesting farmers in January transformed the leaders of the Jat farmers of west UP into heroes of the protest action. It has turned the protest against the farm laws into a fight for the future of this government and its pro-business agenda which farmers and others view as anti-farmer and anti-people. For the farmers, this has become a struggle about the very future of farming in India – and the future of the farmers themselves.

The Jat Farmers and the Protest

Most of the Jats have been solidly behind the BJP since the late 1990s, and this has been an important ingredient of the electoral strength of the BJP. The BJP's anti-minority nationalism has played well with the Jats. As elsewhere in India, the BJP's mobilisation strategy amongst that Jats has included the stoking of anti-Muslim sentiment. This culminated in [riots](#) in the Jat heartland of Muzaffarnagar in 2013, instigated by groups of BJP activists and Jats. The riots

led to the killing of 66 people, mainly Muslims. Tens of thousands of Muslims fled the area, never to return.

But this successful divide and rule politics papered over economic discontent. Farmers had not been happy with their economic conditions for a long while. Agriculture has become less profitable and most farmers today cannot live off agriculture alone. In 2015-16, a whopping [86 percent](#) of farming households had less than two hectares of land; and 68 percent of all farmers made do with less than one hectare. Nearly all farmers are forced to combine farming with work outside agriculture.

To make matters worse, in spite of India's economic boom from the 1990s onwards good jobs in the non-agricultural sectors are few and far between. The economy has been informalised and in the last years the number of jobs in India have even [slumped](#) for the first time since records began. The BJP government had promised to [double farmers' income](#) by 2022-23 from the 2016-17 levels. Just before the 2019 general election it put in place [cash transfers](#) to farmers. But that is practically all the farmers have seen of the promised improvements, leading to protests. In spite of all that, in north India, the farmers still voted BJP.

Since 1993 I have been doing fieldwork in the area around Sisauli, the small market town where the Bharatiya Kisan Union has its headquarters (and is the hometown of the Rakesh and Naresh Tikait, the brothers who lead the union). When I last visited in 2016, the local Jat farmers were fully supportive of the BJP government. Economically the Jats here said they were doing okay, combining sugarcane farming with outside jobs in the private sector, the army, and the police.

But even in this relatively prosperous area things were not as easy as they used to be. The government minimum prices for sugarcane had fallen in real terms for years and payments for the sugarcane harvests were now delayed on average for more than a year. The *notebandi*, the abrupt decommissioning of high denomination bank notes in November 2016, also created problems. But the support for the BJP was unrelenting, just as unrelenting as the anti-Pakistan, anti-Muslim and pro-Hindu staples of the TV channels.

Across this region the bedrock of the economy was the government guaranteed sugarcane prices. A future without them was unimaginable. So, when this was threatened in the late 2020 – at a time where the non-agricultural job market had gone into reverse too – the Jats did what they have done many times in the past: they joined the protests against cuts to their farm economy.

The Farm Laws

At the heart of the dispute is the future of farming and farmers in India. Since the start of neo-liberalism in India in 1991, successive governments have cut state support and subsidies to agriculture. These support systems that had been put in place from the 1960s onwards to ensure that India could feed itself. They aimed to usher in a green revolution and to transform the farming economy into a modern capital intensive sector. With the major ongoing subsidies to farmers in the US and Europe, such systems should not surprise.

The government maintains a system of regulated markets and guaranteed minimum purchase prices for some of the main crops, including paddy and wheat. A similar system exists for

sugarcane. The new farm laws will promote private markets, and the fear is this will effectively do away with the government regulated markets. They will also give private business free reins to engage in large-scale trading and stocking of agricultural produce. And finally, they will enable contract farming. Farmers see the laws as inevitably leading to [the undermining of](#) the existing minimum purchase prices.

They think that the laws will benefit large scale trading businesses instead of small farmers. To them the laws are [shoe-ins for conglomerates](#) run by [billionaires close to](#) Prime Minister Narendra Modi, such as Gautam Adani and Mukesh Ambani, whose businesses already have benefitted from other reforms of the government. The government, on the other hand, claims the reforms will benefit farmers as it will lead to increased prices for their produce and a much more effective sector.

The Jat history of dominance

The BJP should have known better. The Jats aren't used to be bossed around. Historically they were warriors as much as cultivators. Their entry into known history began at the early part of the last millennium, in the western parts of North India. They and other semi-tribal pastoral bands gradually conquered huge swathes of territory and settled and dominated what is now Punjab, Haryana and Western UP. They reached into UP in the 12th century and continued their conquest and colonisation until the 16th century, before it was halted by the Mughal Empire (Pradhan 1966: 95). The Jats in Punjab joined Sikhism, but their dominance continued.

The Jats were organised in egalitarian *bhaichara* (brotherhoods), and the brotherhoods and villages were part of a wider Jat *khap* (clan) structure. Each *khap* had its own militia. A *khap* council might cover up to 84 villages. The Jats were owner-cultivators who would take part in all agricultural activities themselves (Stokes 1978: 82, 241). But they also subjugated large groups of mainly Dalits as agrestic labourers, especially in the fertile tracts of western UP between the rivers Ganga and Yamuna.

In the decades after the first war of Independence (1857-59) (labelled the ‘Mutiny’ by the colonial regime) the colonial powers invested in canal irrigation schemes in the Jat dominated areas in order to feed Delhi and to pacify the area. These areas became the new bread-basket of northern India. This led to a long period of growing wealth (or, at least, falling poverty) among the Jats (Stokes 1978: 211).

After India’s Independence in 1947, the Jats continued to dominate across the region. Charan Singh, a Jat from West UP, was one of the foremost peasant leaders from the 1930s till the 1980s and briefly served as India’s prime minister. After his death, Mahendra Singh Tikait took up the mantle and led an alliance of Jat and Muslim farmers in often confrontational struggles for higher prices and better conditions. Always prepared to go to jail for the cause and to be at the forefront of the action, he led the famous ‘Boat Club Rally’ of 1987 when half a million farmers took over central New Delhi. That protest won them higher sugarcane procurement prices and lower input prices. The Jats clearly were the masters of the countryside, and they did not take edicts from above lying down.

The farmers’ movement lost strength from the 1990s onwards. I have argued [elsewhere](#) that suggestions that the farmers’ movements only represented the interests of the well-off

capitalist farmers is wrong. All farmers who lived off selling their produce would benefit from their demands. At least within the Jat community they had strong support amongst the small farmers. But by the 1990s many Jats had one foot in the non-agricultural economy which dented their resolve. The hardening neo-liberal position of the government from 1991 onwards too made their struggle more difficult. In that context, the BJP policy of curtailing the rights of minorities and thus promoting groups such as Jats seemed a better bet.

That was the path taken when Mahendra Singh Tikait's sons, Naresh and Rakesh, took over the BKU leadership after his death in 2011. It is only the present events that have jolted them back into the independent position of their father.

In this, just as their father, they also draw on the historic solidarity and ruling structures of the Jats. Naresh Tikait is the Chaudhary (traditional leader) of one of the Jat *khaps*, the Baliyan *khap*. Just as their father he and his brother openly use the caste structures in the mobilisation of the Jats. Their *Mahasabhas* now organised are a case in point. In the Jat territories they are in principle gathering of all Jats and of Jats only, mobilised through the *khap* structures. For the purpose of the protest, though, they are opened up for others as well; but at their core they draw on caste solidarity. They are now central to the broadening and deepening of the protests against the farm laws.

The combination of caste and farmer identity is a strength in the sense that their message — such as social boycott of BJP politicians, and fight to the end against the farms laws — for many carries more weight than would a similar farmers' union call. Caste and class are [inextricably linked](#).

This enables strong resistance against government edicts and outside authorities – but also strong dominance of others, such as Dalit labourers. At local level, in the villages, the Jats

have maintained their [dominance](#) of these groups, which include their erstwhile Dalit Jatav farmhands, in often quite violent ways. It is quite common in many Jat dominated villages in western UP and Haryana that the village Jat panchayat would take the law into its own hand and use social boycott and fines as means of exercising its authority and dominance across castes. The lines of oppression and exploitation more often than not followed caste-class lines.

Beyond Farmers?

In some important ways the present protests are different from those of the past. Just as the farmers' movements of the 1980s the present movement too involves farmers of all ages, men and women, and both large capitalist farmers and poorer farmers.

But the leadership of the present campaign has a much better eye for inclusiveness across farmers' groups. The movement makes a point of consciously reaching beyond the better-off capitalist farmers who are part of the movement. The Samyukta Kisan Morcha, the umbrella group leading the protests, includes among its constituents the All India Kisan Sangharsh Coordination Committee, formed as part of small farmers' mobilisation in central and western India in 2017. They seek to include the many farmers who presently do not benefit from the fixed procurement prices because there is little procurement and few regulated markets in their states. (A part of the movement's official demands is the expansion of regulated markets and of fixed procurement prices across India, and the lowering of electricity prices for all farmers.)

They are also seeking alliances with the [unions](#) representing mainly the regular urban workers, supporting their claims for the repulsion of the present anti-labour labour laws. And they are even aiming to integrate rural labourers and Dalit organisations into their campaign, with some success. The [Bhim army](#), a radical Dalit activist group from west UP, arrived with 100 activists to reinforce Rakesh Tikait's camp when it really mattered, and the likewise radical Dalit grassroots movements for Dalit land rights in Punjab, the [Zameen Prapti Sangharsh Committee](#), are also joining in.

What can unite them is the fight against [big capital](#) reshaping Indian agriculture, as well as the fight against the potential collapse of the public distribution system (PDS) that may well follow should the farm laws stay. It is a widespread assumption that if the regulated markets and the minimum support prices are abolished and procurement ceases, the PDS too will fall. [Estimates](#) show that in 2020, 66% of the population was covered by this. The potential [collapse](#) of the most encompassing poverty reduction scheme in India also matters in the mobilisation against the farm laws. At least some grassroots representatives for groups of those at the bottom of rural society, the Dalit, mainly landless rural workers who constitute around 17% of the Indian population, concur and therefore [support](#) the protest campaign.

Some grassroots informalised labour groups have also taken advantage of the farm laws struggle to be bolder in their own local actions. This was the case for the Dalit labour activist [Nodeep Kaur](#), who took advantage of the support from the farm laws movement to push through demands for pending back-pay. Her activism meant that she was arrested for a month and allegedly tortured. But because of the publicity and support from the farm laws movement she was eventually released.

This broad alliance against the farm laws and the BJP government is no doubt useful for the struggle to repeal the farm laws and to vote the BJP out of power, a target all the constituents agree on. However, it is probably questionable how much further than that the alliance can last. Most of the interests of Dalit rural labourers and their dominant farming caste employers are opposed to each other. As recent as 2020, during the covid-19 lockdown, farmers would often seek to [lower wages](#) or rely on machinery instead of labour, to save money, creating even more hardship amongst the labourers.

Even outside of agriculture the relationship between better-off workers and the most precarious mainly Dalit and Adivasi workers is often [adversarial](#). Caste-class differences are reproduced outside of the agricultural sector. Higher ranking castes and dominant farming caste households, who are more likely to be landholders, tend to get the better jobs— that are more regular, better paid, and less backbreaking and dirty. Dalits and Adivasis, who tend to be landless, get the insecure, informal, poorly paid and menial jobs.

Indian history, at least from the struggle of land reform onwards, is full of instances where the weaker parts of alliances are left empty-handed when the dominant group has got what it wanted. For now, the farmers' resolve and their new alliances are changing the political landscape. It is not inconceivable that the common goal of repelling the farm laws and denting the future of the BJP government may just be achievable, but anything beyond that is more doubtful.

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