

Ils ont écrit leur propre histoire: La contestation des fermiers indiens en 2020-2021

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Résumé

Pendant 16 mois, d'août 2020 à décembre 2021, des milliers de fermiers et d'ouvriers agricoles indiens ont fait la grève. Cette action était leur réponse aux lois néolibérales radicales votées par le gouvernement, qui allaient appauvrir encore plus les agriculteurs en difficultés depuis des années, comme en fait foi de façon continue le nombre effarant de suicides chez les fermiers. Les nouvelles lois allaient éliminer les mécanismes de protection et ouvrir l'agriculture indienne aux forces de marché mondiales. Éventuellement, face à la détermination et à la mobilisation tenace des agriculteurs, le gouvernement a dû reculer. Cet article d'une chercheuse-militante participante offre une description détaillée de cette grève qui a duré plus d'un an, et démontre comment son organisation a rassemblé divers secteurs, et a inclus la participation intégrale des femmes. Il fournit une analyse intersectionnelle ainsi qu'une analyse des considérations politiques évidentes de bout en bout. Il situe la grève dans le contexte général de l'économie politique d'une crise, et d'une résistance, agraires, assurant ainsi à cette grève mémorable sa place dans l'histoire et en tirant une précieuse leçon pour notre époque.

They Were Making Their Own History: The Indian Farmers Protest 2020-21

Navsharan Singh¹

Abstract

For 16 months from August 2020 to December 2021, thousands of Indian farmers and farm workers went on strike. Their strike was a response to sweeping neoliberal legislation passed by government that would further impoverish farmers who have been struggling for years, as demonstrated by the huge number of ongoing farmer suicides. The new laws would remove protections and open up Indian agriculture to global market forces. Eventually, due to the farmers' resolve and their militant organizing the government was forced to back down. This article, by a scholar-activist and participant, provides a detailed description of the strike, that lasted over a year and demonstrates its manner of organising that brought together various sectors, and featured the integral participation of women. It provides an intersectional analysis and analysis of the politics evident right through. It situates the strike within the overall context of the political economy of agrarian crisis and resistance, thereby putting this historic strike on record and providing us with a valuable lesson for our times.

Introduction

“The farmers not only know how to farm, but they also know how to protect their fields,” spoke out a farm leader from Punjab at the protest site on the outskirts of Delhi, where thousands of protesting farmers were camping. Led by the farmers' unions, with the Punjab unions at the forefront, a convoy of tractor trolleys and trucks—thousands of them, extending for several miles—had made its way into the capital city of Delhi on November 26, 2020. Eventually they set up camp and remained until December 2021.

The immediate reason for the farmers' action was a slew of neoliberal laws that were passed by the Government of India which would further impoverish them and make them much more vulnerable to market forces. Smallholder farmers have been moving

between their small holdings in the villages to urban areas where they do poorly paid jobs in manufacturing or service provision. This also means they may be involved in urban markets or other informal activity without social protection. Their small holdings in the villages are their security. With such a situation, this is one of the reasons small farmers opposed these new laws and participated in protests. This is significant not only for India but for many so-called developing countries -- small inadequate holdings, poor prices for their products if they are able to market them beyond their subsistence, extremely low wages either from rural or urban employment. This generates worker/farmers who are unable to be solely one or the other. They are vulnerable to every changing economic wind and are seen as a huge hindrance to 'development'. Government and corporate austerity programmes exploit this situation.

On 26 November, 2020, prevented by police barricades from entering India's capital, Delhi, the farmers decided to camp right where they were stopped. Soon they set up mini townships at four different entry points to the capital, naming them after well-known heroes of independence and land reform movements against British rule. They put up signage indicating the villages they came from and built little homes in the trolleys.² Within days they opened libraries and reading rooms, several health clinics, installed laundromats, hot water heaters, mini workshops for repair of tractors, phone battery charging stalls, and a large number of community kitchens. Fresh vegetables and tankers of milk came from the farmers of the neighbouring state of Haryana every day. There was plenty of food for everyone at the community kitchens. "We are here to stay, we will leave only when the government repeals these draconian laws," they said.

They had come waving their union flags, equipped with food, stoves, utensils, blankets, and other essentials to last them for months. These were overwhelmingly small and marginal farmers. In India roughly 85 percent of the farm holdings are small and marginal, that is, less than 2 hectares of land, with 70 percent less than 1 hectare and average landholding is only 0.5 hectares per household. (Kumar, *et al* 2020). "We will fight over and over again and generation upon generation, but we will not let our land go", a slogan at the camp site read. The government introduced three farm bills in Parliament in September 2020: the Farmers' Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Bill,

2020, the Farmers' (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement on Price Assurance and Farm Services Bill, 2020 and the Essential Commodities (Amendment) Bill, 2020. Together, these bills proposed to relax restrictions on purchase and sale of farm produce, on government acquiring and maintaining stocks of essential food supplies under the Essential Commodities Act, 1955 (for public distribution purposes when needed) and outlined a framework on contract farming. The Bills were introduced on September 14, were passed in the Lok Sabha (lower chamber of the national parliament) on September 17, and in Rajya Sabha (upper chamber of the national parliament) on September 20, received the President's assent on September 24 and were announced in the parliamentary *Gazette* on September 27, 2020. In a matter of less than two weeks, completely suspending any democratic process and consultation, the Farm Bills were allowed to effect a fundamental transformation in the existing regulatory framework in agriculture in favour of big business. The farmers feared that the laws would make smallholder farming unsustainable and force small and marginal farmers to give up their land and become casual or contract labourers in the cities. They were determined to fight this out.

The farmers remained steadfast and stayed for 13 months in the camps they had set up. And then, on November 29, 2021, the three laws were repealed and regarding their other pending demands, the government promised the farmers to set up joint committees to help find satisfactory solutions. It was only then that the farm unions decided to adjourn the protest and return to their villages. It was a historic victory for the farmers and a significant defeat of the unfettered neo-liberal agenda which is being pushed in the agriculture sector, fundamentally changing how farming is organised. But this victory came at a heavy human cost. Over 700 women and men died during the year-long, peaceful sit-in at the borders. (Human Cost of Farmers, 2022). Their lives had been shortened by neglect and harsh living conditions, made harsher due to state apathy contributing to farmers' vulnerability and emotional harm. Men and women died of stress, dehydration, by suicide and were run over by speeding vehicles. They were living on the roads, away from close family, and the support systems and reserves were fewer. Prolonged exposure to heavy rains, scorching heat waves and severe cold had a fatal impact on their bodies. The potential markers of neglect on the over 700 bodies remain undocumented,

but they are etched on the minds of the families who laid their loved ones to rest.

There is no expectation that the government will pursue the cases of these deaths with compassion and care, no expectation either that the costs paid by the farmers in this struggle will be officially acknowledged and reparations offered to the families. The state remains indifferent, “we have no knowledge of any deaths”, was the official response, even as questions were asked in parliament about the deaths. (Shekhar, 2021). Over 700 dead in a movement which remained peaceful throughout the thirteen-month period is a colossal tragedy. It speaks of the violence peoples’ movements are encountering in India presently.

The average age of the women and men who lost their lives is 57 years. Most of them were small and marginal farmers who belonged to the lowest rung in the farming community and have left behind destitute families, many of whom have heavy farm debts to repay. This is the conclusion from a rapid survey by a team of academics from Punjabi University, Patiala. (Gupta, 7 November 2021).

This article is about the protest that lasted for over a year, in the overall context of the political economy of agrarian crisis and resistance. There are many aspects to this movement. The farmers came to seek the roll back of the three farm laws but the backdrop of this protest were deep structural problems plaguing the agrarian sector, including the role ascribed to agriculture in India’s economic growth strategy. The three farm laws were overlain on an acute agrarian crisis which had grown into a festering wound on the body politic of rural India. The Covid pandemic experience added to the crisis. Over ten million migrant labourers, according to government’s own admission, had to return to their villages between March and June 2020 on foot³ unable to feed themselves in the cities.⁴ Many died of dehydration, exhaustion and hunger while walking back to their rural home. Several pregnant women gave birth to babies on the roadsides while walking back home. The memories of this horror were fresh in farmers’ minds. The cities did not offer them sustenance. The farmers protest therefore responded to an existential crisis -- they called it the struggle for their identity, their existence -- playing havoc in the everyday lives of the rural communities collectively and differentially along class, caste and gender axes. There were a million reasons to fight and

as the protest became protracted, multiple agrarian protests became palpable, unfolding simultaneously at the borders. The small, marginal and landless farmers, farm labourers, women, youth and Dalits⁵ and their resolve, borne out of daily experience of indignity, neglect and exploitation, laid bare the political economy of agrarian crisis from complex, gendered locations. The heterogeneity of their experiences decentred prioritization of one social section over others and pushed the movement in the direction of a strategy that was forced to synthesize different interests, even those which were previously perceived as conflicting.

Vulnerability and precariousness underscore the lives and livelihoods of farmers and farm workers. Most of the farmers are smallholders and many move between the villages and urban areas to augment their livelihoods. In urban areas they may do poorly paid jobs in manufacturing or service provision or in informal activity. Stability and security were key issues in the strike and why farmers opposed these new laws, went on strike and participated in protests in earlier years. These experiences of the farm sector are not unique to India. Many other countries have farmers with small inadequate plots and poor prices for products if they are able to market them beyond their subsistence. And wages that may be earned are extremely low. Government and austerity programmes just exploit the situation. Farmers, farm workers, members of farming families and farm worker families, all struggling to survive and then when faced with the further decimation and precarity that these farm laws augured made them come out in this historic strike. So you have worker/farmers unable to be solely one or the other.

This article is about the multiple protests and the emerging new alliances of the oppressed. It starts with the background to the existing agrarian crisis, explains how the government pushed through the farm law legislation and explains the challenge the strikers presented to corporate India. It then goes on to elaborate how the farmers' organizing strategies were crucial to the success of the strike and moves on to the victory within the victory, the manner and conditions of women's participation informed by a keen awareness of patriarchy.

Deep agrarian crisis

This farm protest was the longest lasting and most significant peasant mobilization in postcolonial India, and as it

unfolded it revealed the deep agrarian crisis which had lain buried under the myth of the “green revolution” in India. The story of the green revolution of the late 1960s, which involved the development of high-yielding varieties of cereal grains based on hybridized seeds, synthetic fertilizers, and pesticides; expansion of irrigation infrastructure; and modernization of management techniques, is now well known. Punjab became the first place in India to adopt this green revolution package, which doubled, tripled, and quadrupled the yields of wheat and rice in the 1960s and 1970s. A government-backed system of assured prices — the Minimum Support Price (MSP) — incentivized and encouraged farmers to grow only these crops.⁶

The abundant production in Punjab and in the neighbouring state of Haryana helped India attain food self-sufficiency and address hunger and malnutrition through the Public Distribution System of food (PDS) program — a government-run program of food distribution to poor households throughout the country through a network of fair price shops.⁷ But by the mid-1970s, the high costs of imported fertilizers, pesticides, and hybrid seeds controlled by large private corporations began to grow on the body politic of Punjab. The gulf between rich and poor farmers grew demonstrably wider, together with an ecological crisis in the form of a declining water table and large tracts of arable land becoming saline. In addition, a large-scale increase in terminal illnesses linked to the massive use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides became palpable as small and marginal farmers struggled to maintain their livelihoods.

By the 1980s, the gains of the green revolution had petered out further, and by the early 1990s, Punjab was plunged into a series of serious crises. The small farmers who had thus far managed a precarious balance between high input costs and the price of their produce came under a heavy debt burden as food prices began to fall in the global food market and input prices soared. The tractors, tube wells, seeds, and fertilizers all bought on credit — on the policy advice of the international financial institutions and the agriculture universities — became millstones around farmers’ necks and plunged them into deep indebtedness and stagnating incomes.

Confronted with stagnating incomes, mounting debts and the inability to repay their loans, led to a large number of farmers and agricultural labourers committing suicide. According to the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) statistics, between 2000 and 2015,

over 300,000 farmers and labourers committed suicide linked to farm distress in India and over 16,600 farmers and rural labourers took their own lives in Punjab. (Singh and Kingra, 2021). The government stopped publishing the suicide data after this period, but farm leaders at the protest kept repeating that these figures had reached alarming proportions in more recent years. By 2018-19, in India as a whole, households operating and managing farms of less than one hectare reported earning less than their monthly household expenditure and 60 percent of all farm households had substantial debt. This despite the fact that farm households do not sustain themselves on agriculture alone but receive about 40 percent of their income from working on other farms or in non-farm occupations.⁸

The farm Laws: A Covid-19 victory

Agricultural sector reforms have been on the central government agenda for several decades following the reforms initiated during the 1990s when the country undertook a structural adjustment program (SAP) under the IMF and World Bank.⁹ The policy experts continued to stress the need to shift people out of agricultural work in order to provide cheap labour to urban manufacturing and to service sectors. The Approach Paper to India's 11th Five Year Plan (2007-2012) categorically mentioned the need to shift the approximately 10 million agricultural workers into non-agricultural activities in urban manufacturing and services. (Government of India, Planning Commission, 2006; Chand, 2017). But these recommendations were ill conceived and failed to attract a large-scale shift. The manufacturing and services sectors neither created sufficient employment nor a real wage needed to sustain the working class in the cities, requiring that they maintain their dependence on the villages.¹⁰ The farmers understood that if pushed out, they would be reduced to a perennial casual labour force on slave wages in unwelcoming cities. As the employment crisis deepened the farmers further pushed against attempts to shift them out of agriculture work and demanded policy attention to make small farms sustainable with loan waivers, subsidies, higher support prices, and expand support prices to more crops and guarantee of procurement.¹¹

However, in 2020, cynically using the Covid-19 pandemic, the government pushed the agriculture reform laws through. They also pushed through other pieces of legislation that they had been

unable to do earlier that negatively impacted labour and social security. The Code on Industrial Relations, 2020 changed the laws relating to trade unions, essentially minimizing the State's regulatory role. The Occupational Safety and Working Conditions Code dilutes the duties of the employer in specifying safety standards and sublets regulatory responsibilities to third parties. The Code on Social Security shifts the onus of financing of social security schemes to a mix of private and public resources, were adopted without allowing much discussion in the Parliament. (Sood, 2020). In parallel, the disturbing suppression of basic rights and freedoms through the use of the preventive detention laws and special legislations was further entrenched during the Covid pandemic. (Aftab, 2021; Alametsä, 2022).

The farmers had long recognized that these three farm laws taken together were a death warrant for the small and marginal farmers and were designed to push them out of farming and thus facilitating the ability of large corporate players to take over control of land and farming. Prior to approval of the three laws, three ordinances¹² were introduced by the government on June 5, 2020, with the same provisions which later became laws. These ordinances were aimed at collectively seeking to facilitate barrier-free trade of farmers' produce outside the markets notified under the various state laws; define a framework for contract farming; and impose stock limits on agricultural produce only if there is a sharp increase in retail prices.

The farmers' unions were quick to convene village-level meetings with farmers to discuss the implications for various sections of the farming community. The government claimed that these laws would free farmers from the clutches of the commission agents, allowing them to sell their crops outside state-regulated areas, or *mandis*¹³, in states where they previously were not allowed to do so and allow them to benefit from efficiency along the supply chain. All farmers — big and small — currently have the right to sell their products, mainly wheat and rice, to the government for a guaranteed minimum support price.

The large corporate houses aligned with global agribusiness corporations are already diversifying into procuring, transporting, storing, processing and food distribution. The new farm laws would have pitted the farmers against agribusiness firms which would enter the market with control over market information and the

advantages of scale. The farmers recognized that this would make the *mandi* system defunct and lead to an end to the guaranteed (MSP) -- without which the debt-ridden small holders were unable to continue -- forcing them to sell their land and become wage labourers. They also feared that with government withdrawing support to the farm sector, slowly the subsidies for inputs, extension services, and procurement assurances which provided a semblance of stability to agricultural production would also be withdrawn.

When the three laws were passed in September 2020 without consulting farmers and little discussion in Parliament, the farmers' unions issued a call to fight collectively and created a joint platform. Collectively and in their respective union platforms, they held large numbers of state-wide protest marches, rallies, and meetings to discuss the new laws and mobilized farmers against them. Protests also started in many other states, notably Haryana and western Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra, Rajasthan, and Telangana, and hundreds of small and big farm unions all over India also joined the protest. On the initiative of Punjab unions, Sanyukt Kisan Morcha (SKM) -- United Front of Farmers -- was formed in November 2020.¹⁴ The SKM gave a call for a protest march to Delhi on November 25-26, 2020.

Putting the corporates on notice

The farmers' movement mounted a challenge to the official policy of facilitating market subjugation of farming communities and their forced eviction from their lands. Even prior to the strike, the farmers had been voicing resistance to policies that would subject them to the market. The National Democratic Alliance (NDA)¹⁵ government headed by Narendra Modi has been aspiring to re-position India in the world economic order. In order to attract foreign investment and showcase the country as a credible alternative for capital in search of new avenues to invest, it has been trying to create vibrant land sale markets. Right after coming to power in 2014, the NDA government tried to dilute the provisions in Right to Fair Compensation and Transparency in Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Re-Settlement Act 2013, reducing the powers of farmers and making land acquisition easier for private corporate projects. However, due to stringent opposition from the farmers and the opposition parties, the proposed amendments had to be rolled back. But removing protections for smallholders and enabling

greater liquidity of land remained a state priority.¹⁶

As the protests began, farmers focussed on the nexus between the Indian state and the corporate giants. The Adani group and the Reliance groups, making an entry into the agriculture sector, became the centre of farmers' opposition.

The Adani group is expanding infrastructure to store, transport, and market agricultural produce, along with multinationals, such as Singapore-based Wilmar.¹⁷ Adani Agri Logistics has built and operated grain silos for the central government's Food Corporation of India (FCI) in an ongoing public-private partnership. The latter activity has accelerated since 2017, with new private railway lines, automated grain-processing plants and other infrastructure built around these outsourced FCI silos in Punjab and Haryana as part of a wider process of capturing logistical chains. (Singh Bal, 2021). The state has facilitated the creation of a private security force by the Adani Group to protect its infrastructure of private railway lines, silos and grain-processing plants. Nearly 900 Adani-controlled silos have been set up all over India to facilitate grain storage and interstate as well as international food trade. (360 One World Many Voices).

Reliance Industries (RIL) is entering the agritech business through a combination of online technology and collaborations in farm equipment innovations as part of its move to expand its "farm-to-fork" model (Das Gupta, 2020).

The protesting farmers were rightly alarmed by the scale of the ambitions of these two big corporate houses.¹⁸ Both Adani and Ambani (of Reliance group)¹⁹ hail from the western Indian state of Gujarat, which is also Modi's home state, and they have ties to him going back to his time as Chief Minister of that state from 2001 until he became Prime Minister of India in 2014. Their links with the power centre are a public secret, and these two groups have become symbols of crony capitalism.²⁰ During the protest, farmers protested against Ambani and Adani which they saw as representing corporate greed which they were committed to resist. Scores of Reliance gas stations, shopping malls, warehouses and toll plazas (on national highways) were picketed by the protesting farmers. Many toll plazas, some of them set up by Reliance group investors, were made toll free throughout the protest period. The biggest farmer picket line was mounted outside the Adani dry port in Kila Raipur, Punjab. It continued for the entire period of the protest and forced Adani

Logistics Services to shut its inland container depot. (Sharma, 2021). The state-corporate nexus and the unrestrained neo-liberal agenda being pushed in the agriculture sector was perceived as an invasion of their fields, which the farmers determinedly fought against.

When hundreds of thousands of farmers occupied the roads and the toll plazas, the government was forced to negotiate with them. Nine rounds of talks were held with farm leaders between December 2020 and January 22, 2021. The farm leaders described the nine Rounds as extremely condescending where the officials' focus was not on listening but on convincing the farmers of the advantages of the new laws, claiming that the reforms were meant to bring prosperity to farmers, free them from the clutches of the middlemen, and more than double farmer incomes. The farmers rejected these arguments. They remained firm that they will accept only a total rollback, and that they will not engage in clause-by-clause amendments. Punjab farmers had the previous Pepsico contract farming experience to convince them that contract farming benefits were not for the small and marginal farmer which form the majority of farmers. (Jain, 2020). As a result the talks made no headway, and the government stopped all negotiations after the January 26 2021²¹ tractor parade by farmers, when the government accused them of insulting the nation on Republic Day. (Gupta 18 September 2021; Sharma 2021).

The farmers also knew that for the overwhelming majority of small and marginal farmers who were the backbone of the farmers resistance, the option of transporting farm produce to lucrative markets was not an option. They did not have the means to do so and they would always be forced to sell their crops near their villages to whomever was ready to buy at whatever price. Farmers cited the Bihar experience where Agricultural Produce Market Committee (APMC) system was abolished for farmers in 2006, to argue that when it came to open market operations, all odds were stacked against marginal and small farmers who were then reduced to migrant agriculture labour in Punjabi farmers' farms. (Himanshu, 2020). Interestingly, the same Punjabi farming community which did not always have great affection for the migrant Bihari farm labour, the *bhaiyyas*, started seeing an affinity with them: "they were the farmers of Bihar who have been reduced to farm labour in this reform process", Punjabi farmers were heard saying.

A secular movement

Even while negotiating with the farmers, the government kept up efforts to polarize and break the protest by dubbing it “politically motivated”, “infiltrated by Khalistan separatists” and “led by Naxals”.²² But the attempts to polarise did not succeed. The farmers movement remained united, peaceful and secular. Even though the display of Sikh markers of identity, the *langar* (community kitchen), the salutations, and the invocation of Sikh history of struggles from some platforms continued to inspire the farmers’ *morcha*,²³ the identity discovered in the movement remained that of farmers and not particular to Sikhs, Hindus or Muslims. The movement never lost sight of its core fight against the neo-liberal state’s pro-corporate farm laws designed to facilitate the entry into agriculture of capital in search of new places to invest, and to hasten the process of dispossession of small farmers from their land. The twin attack on the state and the corporations remained the core element of the movement. Early on the farmers learned that an effective resistance movement can only emerge by overcoming religious, caste, territorial, and other divisions, and building alliances with other dispossessed people. Accordingly, the farmers’ charter of demands y included demands of the peasantry, but also linked with the interests of urban and other rural poor. All farm unions demanded the unconditional repeal of the three farm laws and the Electricity Amendment Bill-2020. But unions were also seeking the universal implementation of the Public Distribution System (PDS) throughout the country, connecting their struggle to food security for the poor. They pointed out that once food grain becomes a commodity to be traded only under market conditions, the already crumbling PDS system will collapse, making the urban and rural poor food insecure.

Building alliance

The clear articulation by farmers of shared interests with different sections of the working people, created conditions for building alliances with impoverished urban and rural populations whose employment and food security were also threatened by the new laws. In the last few years, India’s right wing regime had disenfranchised the poor and the marginalized, section by section, community by community, forcing them to fight their own battles for justice in silos. The farmers’ protest staged over the year, made

it possible to identify links between the farmers' demands and the interests of the rural and urban landless and working poor. On the farmers' platforms there was a realization that the only effective resistance to these assaults on rights is through building solidarity and exerting moral pressure.

The unions' protest stages featured not only speeches by union leaders, but also performances of music, drama, poetry, and folk singing, most of the day and into the evenings, highlighting agrarian crisis, rural indebtedness, apathy of the government officials, conditions of public schools and hospitals, and women's oppression. The stage provided space to farmers ranging from the apple growers of Himachal Pradesh whose fate hung precariously on Adani Agri Fresh's price setting (Gupta, 2 September 2021) to the poor farmer-labourers of Sitapur, Uttar Pradesh state (UP), whose standing crops were ruined by stray cattle let loose on them by the arbitrary policy of UP's Prevention of Cow Slaughter Act, (Nagavarapu, 2019) to the landless Dalits of Punjab whose rights over village commons were usurped by the powerful. All these sections came to the protest stage to talk about their experience of being bled by corporate greed, of livelihoods destroyed, and lives made miserable through communal agendas of the right-wing majoritarian regime. Also participating were *anganwadi*²⁴ workers, contractual employees, para teachers, employees of Public Sector Units which are being privatised, MNREGA²⁵ workers' and so on. These were working class people who were not pressure groups in themselves, not strongly unionised, and had little bargaining power.

Gradually, these platforms turned into a school, a university of people resisting, providing the intellectual tools for understanding the diverse oppressions which the dispossessed endured as Dalits, small and marginal farmers, contractual employees and as women. The unions used these platforms to build consciousness and unity. The political resistance developed from this understanding.

The farmers' unions marked special days at the *morcha* to build solidarity and community support. They celebrated the birth anniversary of Guru Ravidas, a fifteenth-century poet who is revered by Dalits. They marked May Day in solidarity with workers, and birth and death anniversaries of Muslim freedom fighters in defiance of the regime's attempts at increasing religious polarization. The largest Punjab farmers' union BKU (Ekta-Ugrahan)²⁶ which had

a separate protest stage at the west side of the Tikri border called Bibi Gulab Kaur, named after the legendary Ghadar²⁷ party woman activist, marked International Human Rights Day on December 10, 2020. The protesting farmers demanded the release of incarcerated intellectuals and human rights activists facing state repression and booked under the draconian preventive detention laws, such as the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA) for exposing the communal and pro-corporate agendas of the government through their writings, art and speech. Despite a backlash from sections of the media, farmers' leaders defended this act of solidarity with eloquence and candour.²⁸

Several public intellectuals and human rights defenders who are incarcerated in association with the Bhima Koregaon conspiracy case²⁹ in Mumbai's Taloja prison, reciprocated farmers' solidarity by observing a day long hunger strike in support of the protesting farmers. (News18, Decemer 20). A year later, on December 10, 2021, on their final day at the protest camp site, as the farmers prepared to leave following the repeal of the three farm laws, the Bibi Gulab Kaur stage folded by marking Human Rights Day for the second time. The farmers were joined by the family members of some of the arrested intellectuals and the farm leaders emphasised the unity of farmers, writers, intellectuals and human rights defenders in building a secular struggle for the rights of the oppressed and against the regime's communal fascist onslaught. The farm leaders from Bibi Gulab Kaur stage brought the often elite-dominated agenda of the defence of human rights, embedded in high-flying international organizations, and in elite professions, right among the struggling farmers and workers. They made simple connections between the anti-people 'extraordinary' laws and the use of 'extrajudicial' measures by the state to wield sovereign power to oppress, and it resonated with them.

These special days were a way in which the farm unions sought to reach out to larger sections of society, honour women leaders, stand up against violence meted out to Muslims, uphold the fundamental right to dissent. The protest approached the thorny issue of class and caste differences between the landowning *Jats* and the low castes, largely landless, Dalit communities. The relations between landowning and landless are antagonistic as their economic interests often clash. But the protest opened a space to explore the overlapping economic concerns of landless labourers, Dalits and

struggling small and marginal farmers who feared the loss of their land. Acknowledging caste oppression allowed the potential for new alliances as a result of socio-economic differentiation in rural India.

It is observed in some literature, that farm labourers who have a high stake in food price stability and interests at variance with labour reforms that are already assaulting their work conditions and safety, hardly figured in the protest. (Lerche, 2021; Harriss-White 2021). But this is more complex than it appears. As for the physical presence at the *morcha*, foregoing daily labour to be present, was not an option for farm and other contractual labourers. They survive on their daily labour. However, they kept coming to the protest sites and the farm labour unions pushed the agenda of labour. Farm labour unions in Punjab and other places issued statements in solidarity with the protesting farmers and the farmers' unions adopted the salutation *mazdoor-kisan ekta, zindabad* (long live the unity of labour and farmer).

Bringing the focus back to the agrarian crisis and farm labour

The farmers' movement of 2020 was successful in bringing the focus back to the agrarian crisis in the public imagining.³⁰ Significantly, in the overall environment of heightened political consciousness about the processes of differentiation and dispossession in rural India, the rural labour unions started mobilizing rural labour and the landless in the states on their specific demands. In Punjab, seven rural labour unions came together in mid-2021 to form a united front *Sanjha Majdoor Morcha* (United Labour Front) around the specific demands of rural labour and landless farm workers. In August 2021, this labour front called for a three-day protest sit-in in Patiala, Punjab, to press for their demands. A joint demand charter of the front was presented at a mammoth meeting of the rural poor and landless, which included a very significant presence of women labourers. It demanded the repeal of the three farm laws and the new labour codes which were also passed in the same session of the Parliament in September 2020. The United Labour Front demanded that the debt waiver scheme of the state must include non-institutional and small cooperative societies' loans which the landless and the rural labourers accessed but had been kept outside the ambit of debt waiver schemes. They asked for land for the landless labourers for farming and for building houses.

Further, drawing attention to the fact that the agrarian

crisis is not limited to farmers but the burden is equally borne by the landless, they asked for compensation and jobs for the families of landless farm labourers who committed suicide due to farm distress. The Front also demanded that the MNREGA work be expanded to provide employment for a full year for all members of the family, the MNREGA daily wage be increased and the PDS system strengthened to ensure food and nutritional security of the rural poor. They demanded one third of the panchayat³¹ land be given on long term lease to Dalits, following the 1961 Act to ensure security of livelihoods and dignity of the landless.³² They raised a voice against caste oppression of Dalits, sexual oppression of Dalit women and for enhancing social security for the workers who are unable to work due to old age.

In a unique act of building a new class solidarity among all those who have been pushed to the margins through the processes of socio-economic differentiation, the landless labour unions while demanding redistribution of land to the Dalit landless, also demanded land for the *Jat* farmers who became landless due to the crisis caused by rising costs and falling agriculture incomes. It was clear to see the convergence of interests of all those – irrespective of their caste – who face employment and land squeeze as the state facilitates the land sales market and enables the entry of transnational agribusiness corporations into the fields.

The Labour Front leaders emphatically declared that a broad united movement was the only answer to the unequal division of land, for the economic and social security of rural labour and for ensuring a life of dignity. Resolutions were also passed for the withdrawal of UAPA and other preventive detention laws and release of all the intellectuals arrested under these laws. The Front received the support of several unions of farmers, industrial workers, Pepsico workers and MNREGA workers. The Front is a significant development and an important articulation in the new socio-economic reality of rural India where rural labour is written out of policy and reduced to a welfare category in development discourse.

Industrial workers were also mobilised in support of the farmers' movement as the new laws threatened food security not only of rural but also urban working classes. A joint platform of central trade unions observed a one-day Bharat Bandh (All India shut down) in December 2020 to lend moral support to the farmers' protest. Attempts were also made to mobilise non-unionised urban

contractual industrial workers employed in the small factories in the vicinity of farmers' camps in support of the farm movement. This was met with state repression and the two young Dalit activists who were mobilising contractual workers were arrested, brutally tortured, and slapped with serious charges, including murder. The woman activist also faced custodial sexual violence (Yadav 22 and 25 February 2022).

While the three farm laws which catalysed lakhs of farmers to leave their homes and join the *morcha* at the borders of Delhi, it was the mode of farm protest as well as the broadening of the movement concerns that created fertile space for the emergence of new class alliances of the oppressed in the countryside.

Mainu Rang De Basanti Chunniya³³: Women's stirring presence at the morcha

Thousands of yellow and green dupattas³⁴ were the omnipresent symbol of the women's stirring presence at the borders in Delhi where farmers had set up camps. When the convoy of thousands of tractor trolleys entered Delhi on November 26, 2020, women were part of these long convoys. They came waving their union flags and braving police barricades, water cannons and tear gas.

The leadership of the farm movement is predominantly elderly and male, with decades of experience of mobilizing farmers on local demands. There are over 32 farm Unions in Punjab alone and they were all at the protest sites. A few of these Unions have a women's wing which are led by women, but by and large women are not in leadership positions in the farm Unions. However, women quickly acquired very significant positions in the protest movement. They worked quietly behind-the-scenes -- collecting food and funds, talking to the press, managing the stage, and mobilising support for the movement among the families in the villages and townships near the camp sites at Delhi's borders. Women's role was exemplary in the build-up to the farmers' march to Delhi led by the unions in Punjab. Women mobilized support through the use of *Jago* (wake up) -- a folk performance tradition, going around in the villages late at night singing and giving the protest message.

Once the protest camps were set up at the borders, women took over roles and responsibilities which kept on expanding the longer the strike continued. While for many women from Haryana

and Western Uttar Pradesh, it was their first time in a protest, it was not the case with women from Punjab who were present in very large numbers. Far from first-time participants in the protest movement, they have a long history of mobilizing which goes back to at least three decades. Rural women have been part of farmers' protests to demand compensation for farmers' who died by suicide which they did because they were unable to cope with mounting farm debts and for crop failure due to faulty seeds provided through government outlets. They have been at the forefront against forcible land acquisition and in struggles for Dalit rights over village commons. Rural women in Punjab mobilised against rape and violence and the impunity perpetrators enjoyed in the rural social order. Women have been a part of the farmers' unions; and the left unions especially have been influential in bringing women into the public domain.³⁵

On 18th January, 2021, Sanyukt Kisan Morcha (SKM) dedicated one full day to celebrate women farmers' contribution to the movement. This was the first women farmer's day, many more followed in subsequent months. Women speakers talked about the three farm laws and how they affected women. Farmer women were also joined by many other working-class women on this day. There were teachers, childcare workers, informal employment workers, nurses, anganwadi workers and also women from farm suicide families. It was on these stages that women started talking not only about the farm crisis but also about patriarchy, and discrimination, not in theoretical terms but with questions and examples from their everyday lives – why are families not happy when a daughter is born; why do we prefer sons over daughters; why do we have domestic violence in our families?

In view of women's strong presence, the International Women's Day was marked at the morchas on 8 March 2021. The song of *basanti*³⁶ dupattas was in the air. *Colour my chuniya basanti* – a modified version of *mera rang de basanti chola* (colour my clothes yellow) – a well-known Ram Prasad Bismil³⁷ song associated with Bhagat Singh, Rajguru and Sukhdev as they walked to the gallows³⁸ – reverberated in the air.³⁹ The new version was about women coming out of the confines of home to claim that women's place was in the struggles. Women leaders and activists spoke about the exemplary role of women in the ongoing farm struggle and the corporate attack on their livelihood, of their exploitation in the big corporate farms where women labourers were not even paid the statutory minimum

wage, and they challenged the official policy of facilitating market subjugation of farming communities and their forced relocation to cities as perennial casual labour.

Women talked about the forgotten role of women in previous movements – from Tebhaga⁴⁰ to Telangana⁴¹ to Anti Betterment Levy struggles⁴² of the 1950s and 60s. They said that women always fought with men for the rights of the tillers but after the movements were over, they were asked to go back home to cook *chapatis*. Women were alert to the failure of the leadership of earlier movements to pay attention to what the women were saying to help transform the gender social relations. They reminded the present leadership of the need to recognise that the ongoing farm struggle would only be half as strong, half as vibrant if women had not joined the movement. The historic rally at the Bibi Gulab Kaur protest stage on March 8, 2021, proposed and passed two resolutions. The first resolution demanded the unconditional release of all women political activists incarcerated under preventive detention laws in Indian prisons. The second resolution, at the women's rally, acknowledged and expressed gratitude to women journalists who were exposing the scandals of the state, braving the threats to their lives and risking their careers and state repression.

In July 2021, the SKM held a *Kisan Parliament* in the heart of Delhi as the Indian parliament met for the Monsoon Session for two weeks. Two full days of the farmers' parliament were dedicated to women farmers when women ran the mock proceedings of the House. These two days saw a massive mobilisation of women from different states of India – from Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Andhra and Telangana in the South to the western state of Maharashtra and the central and Northern states of Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh and Haryana, the women farmers held spirited sessions foregrounding women's demands.

It was evident in the farmers' protest that women who were not even recognized as farmers in policy and society, created a space in the movement for articulating a gender perspective. Women's formidable presence was also successful in breaking the convention that politics is a male arena of activity. The layer of masculinity attributed to the farmers' movement dissolved with women's presence as women became visible everywhere.

Women brought new issues to the farm movement and from a new location. Agrarian crisis in its plurality is writ large

on the body politic of rural India – landlessness, falling incomes and rising costs of farming, mounting farm debts, ecological crisis manifesting in the degradation of environment, health, and water; lack of employment in farm sector, especially for women, and increasing hold of the corporate giants on the lives of farmers, to name a few. The crisis also erupted in the form of suicides of farmers and agricultural labour who were unable to repay the farm loans. In January 2021, just a month after the farmers' *morcha* began at the borders, women farmers and labourers from the families of farm suicides in Punjab joined the protest at the border. As they came they carried with them the pictures of their dead relatives, some held two. From the Bibi Gulab Kaur stage where they had assembled, when they held the grainy pictures high, it was like a wave of corpses rising. It was evident that while the entire farming families come under crisis with suicides, the suicides affect women profoundly as they are left to pick up the threads which men suddenly drop – carry on the responsibilities of farming, repaying debts, demanding compensation from the state and preventing forcible evictions from their land. These women have been organizing under the farmers' unions but also under *Kisan Mazdoor Khudkushi Peerat Parivar Committee* (KMKPPC) – Committee of Farmers and Labourers Suicide Victim Families which was formed in 2017 and has been actively campaigning for compensation and rehabilitation of families of suicide victims.⁴³

Since the green revolution took off in Punjab, rural women have been written out of policy. They have experienced complete neglect and total stagnation in their employment and wages, unable to get employment in farm operations even for jobs which men have vacated as they migrate to the cities. The farm work which men and women do is very different, and there is a strict gender divide in tasks. In green revolution areas mechanised farming has made it hard for agricultural wage labour to find work in all seasons, and for women work is even scarcer. In Punjab for instance, women are almost entirely out of operations associated with the wheat crop, they find rice planting at times for a few days, and it is only in cotton picking, which is not yet mechanized, that they find some paid work. The vegetable and citrus growing belt generates additional days of wage work, but the entire work put together does not exceed 150 days in a year⁴⁴, and this includes work under the government's rural employment guarantee scheme, MNREGA.

The nature of the work in rural areas has also changed, especially for women. Overwhelmingly, it is contract work, piece rate, which is given to the man, who engages his wife and children in these operations. Rates are per hectare of rice planted, quintal of cotton picked, hectare of hay baled, and so on. The daily wage rates on vegetable and fruit farms, where women are concentrated, are almost one-third lower than the stipulated minimum wage. When men migrate to nearby cities and towns, both as skilled labourers and as unskilled workers on construction sites and other odd jobs, women stay behind to look after the children and desperately seek opportunities for wage work. If agricultural work is scarce, non-farm work is even more scarce. The women are landless and assetless, representing the most marginalized section of agricultural wage workers in Punjab.

Landlessness is rampant among Dalits. At the all-India level, 58 percent of rural Dalit households are landless, much higher than households in any other social group. Landlessness is particularly severe among Dalits in Haryana, Punjab and Bihar, where more than 85 percent of Dalit households do not own any land other than homestead land. (Anand, 2016). There is also extreme inequality in ownership of land.⁴⁵ In Punjab, currently, only 3.5 percent of Punjab private farmland belongs to Dalits who make up 32 percent of the population. (India, *Agriculture Census 2015-16*). The national average is 8.6 percent of farmland for 16.6 percent of Dalits. For several years, landless Dalits in Punjab have fought to regain control of village common land that has gradually slipped away from them and Dalit women are at the forefront of these land rights movements. Over the last few years, they have been getting unionized and staking claims over the commons with some success and seeking redistribution of excess land.⁴⁶ A labour union of the landless, *Zameen Prapti Sangharsh Committee* (ZPSC) is at the forefront of this movement.⁴⁷

Women came to the *morcha* bringing with them their varied experiences of being landless labourers; having lost husbands, fathers, or sons to deaths by suicides and their fights against sexual violence and the impunity it enjoys. Some of these gendered experiences are as follows. From women labourers who are landless but dependent on land for their livelihoods, it was learnt that if cotton crop fails due to bollworm disease, farmers suffer the loss of a crop but farm workers – mostly women – lose their season's employment.

Landowning farmers receive compensation for a failed crop, but who compensates for lost labour? In Sitapur, in Uttar Pradesh (UP) state, Dalit farmer-labourer women were not only dealing with stray cattle but also excessive bureaucratisation of the MNREGA making them lose days of labour only to fulfil the paper requirement. They mentioned being hit by two kinds of unruly bulls referring to the stray cattle menace as well as the anti-labour UP state bureaucracy. Women from Haryana brought new songs about the plight of women farmers who had no ownership of land and whose fate was worse than a tenant who can be evicted from land any time the families want to teach them a lesson.

With women's rousing participation in the movement, the farm movement's claims on the state expanded. The agrarian crisis as experienced by women is far more intense. Their earlier sustained work and activism validated their experience and their present-day demands. With women's presence, the movement was no longer just about state protection through MSP. They added the demands of gender justice, land to the landless, guaranteed minimum wages for farm jobs, equal wages for farm operations and much more.

Conclusion

Prime Minister Modi in a televised address to the nation on November 19, 2022, said that he was sorry that he was not able to convince a "section of the farmers" that the laws were in their favour. Following this announcement, on November 29, 2021, on the first day of the winter session of the Parliament, the three laws were repealed without any discussion, just as they were passed without any discussion in September 2021.

The farmers' protest movement for the repeal of the pro-corporate farm laws became the largest and longest sustained non-violent movement in recent history. It captured the public imagination and brought crucial issues of democratic social change and the challenges of the anti-farmer development paradigm to the forefront of the country's attention. The movement had continued without pause through the coldest and hottest weather. The achievements of this historic farmers' movement are far greater than the mere repeal of laws. This struggle was fought and won in the context of the rise to dominance of Hindu nationalism, a hypernationalism which is aggressive and exclusionary, that legitimizes hatred and violence including lynching of minorities, that thrives on polarizing people

and criminalizing dissent. Emerging in this context, the farmers' protest became the torchbearer for democratic and justice movements more widely in the country, beyond just farmers. It was a large-scale mass mobilization across classes, in the face of which, the Modi government's communal fascism failed. The mobilization of people across classes and languages, united the farming communities in different parts of the country. The advanced organisational political consciousness and political maturity gained during the protest will work towards building a demand for a more participatory democracy in place of a rigged electoral democracy which the country has been seeing.

In the months that the farmers stayed at the *morcha*, the farm protest transformed into a strong, plural movement, which expanded beyond the goal of protesting the three farm laws. It opened pathways for building new class alliances to collectively challenge the deal between the neo-liberal state and the transnational capital. The farmers asked for reforms in the agriculture sector which included state regulation to end farmers' exploitation by big corporations and multinational companies. The declarations of support for the farm laws by the International Monetary Fund and international banks, along with multinational agribusiness firms, indicated the range of forces backing the laws, and it was not lost on the farmers. They asked for small industry, employment closer to their villages, regulation of the big business with ambitions to control agricultural market and centralise power.

The farmers' charter included producers demands, but it also related to the interests of other urban and rural poor. All farm unions were collectively demanding the unconditional repeal of the three agricultural laws. But they were also seeking implementation of the universal public distribution system and the right to food for everyone. In the manner in which the government sought to defame and criminalise their opposition to the farm laws, farmers unions saw a design in how this government treats popular dissent. Consequently, a prominent demand of the unions was the release of intellectuals, of activists seeking democratic rights including student activists, and the withdrawal of all the restrictions against the right to protest.

These are the most significant issues for this country which the farmers raised and built their actions around. The solidarities that emerged at the borders of Delhi posed a threat to the anti-farmer and

labour pro-corporate authoritarian regime. The farmers movement saw politics in command, opening realms of possibilities for new alliances, of decentring existing axis of social and economic power and halting the dispossession of small and marginal farmers. The thirteen month long *morcha* allowed farmers' unions to overcome the general unease of movements about exploring the mutual constitution of different axes of oppression in relation to the state. The *morcha* offered the space and time for common axis to emerge and the overall environment of solidarity inspired openness to explore without dogma the unfamiliar relations.

It is this realm of possibilities which needs to be explored, pulled together and consolidated. Now is the time to do this, to build up, to contribute to strengthening the emerging possibilities. The hope of a lasting impact of the movement and the ability of the protest to usher in enduring alliances across caste and gender through the politics in command which emerged against the determining power of structures rests on learning lessons and taking these achievements forward. Plunged into dark times, India saw a ray of hope in the Indian farmers' movement. The unity of farmers made the defeat of majoritarian, masculinist, militarised politics, realisable. Today the farmers of this country stand tall, resolute both in their solidarity and their resistance. They fought the good fight to the best of their ability and have much success to claim. This is the largest protest in our recent history which was a formidable challenge to the power of the state. Farmers will be remembered in history for standing their ground, for having shown the moral fibre and for seizing the mantle. This movement will be remembered as a moment of pride in the journey of this Republic.

Endnotes

1. Navsharan Singh, independent scholar and activist, navsharan@gmail.com; +919910171808
2. 'Trolley' is what is attached to a tractor to carry goods, crops, people, etc. Trolleys were ubiquitous during the strike. Parked trolleys became makeshift homes. And a publication that emerged during and out of the strike was named Trolley Times.
3. Government of India, Ministry of Road Transport and Highways Lok Sabha unstarred question no. 2044 answered on 22nd September, 2020 <http://164.100.24.220/loksabhaquestions/annex/174/AU2044.pdf>
4. Government of India imposed a lockdown from the midnight of 24 March 2020, and India went into what has been rated as the most

stringent lockdown of physical movement and economic activity in the world in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. A tracker, created by researchers from Blavatnik School of Government at the University of Oxford, the “Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker” based on data from 73 countries, calculated governments’ response to Covid-19 into a common ‘Stringency Index’. This tracker identified India’s response as one of the most stringent in the world.

5. Outside the 4-Caste group structure are people considered lower than the lowest of Castes. They go by the term Dalit meaning “broken but resilient”, formerly known as “untouchables” continue to experience profound injustices including socioeconomic inequalities, usurpation of their land, rights, and experience brutal violence at the hands of the “upper” Castes. Dalits under Caste apartheid are forced into segregated schools, villages, places of worship, and subject to violent oppression. Often they are denied access to public amenities including water and roads. This entire system is enforced by violence and maintained by one of the oldest, most persistent cultures of impunity throughout South Asia, most notably in India, where despite the contemporary illegality of the system, it has persisted and thrived for 2,500 years. (equalitylabs.org)
6. The Minimum Support Price (MSP) for any given crop is fixed so that farmers receive a price that covers their costs of cultivation and provides the farmer with a reasonable income. The government procures food grains from the farmers at the MSP and makes these grains available to workers at a reasonable price. The government sells the procured food grains through a Public Distribution System (PDS) to the working class and the peasantry. Excess grain is held in government warehouses as a buffer in case of years of bad harvests and as a counter-cyclical measure to shield the working class from high food inflation.
7. PDS was operated as a universal scheme until 1992. However, following the neo-liberal reforms initiated in 1991, it was turned into a Targeted Public Distribution System (TPDS) under which households are classified according to their economic status. There are multiple ration cards in operation under the targeted approach in the states and under central schemes. Antyodaya Anna Yojana (AAY) ration card is given to impoverished families identified by the state governments. These cardholders are eligible to receive 35kg of food grains per month per family at the subsidised price of Rs.3 for rice, Rs.2 for wheat and Rs.1 for coarse grains. The families not covered under AAY come under the Priority Household (PHH) who receive 5kg of food grains per person per month. Some state governments are still using Below Poverty Line (BPL) cards giving 10kg to 20kg food grains per family per month at 50% of the economic cost. There is also Above Poverty Line (APL)

classification under which families receive 10kg to 20kg food grains per family per month at 100% of the economic cost. There is also Annapurna Yojana (AY) for older people who are poor and above 65 years. Cardholders receive 10 kgs of food grains per month under this card. PDS distribution is done through a network of currently 5.27 lakhs Fair Price Shops (FPSs) across the country. For more details, see <https://pib.gov.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=178067>

8. At the all-India level, according to NSS Report No. 587: Situation Assessment of Agricultural Households and Land and Livestock Holdings of Households in Rural India, 2019, 39.8 % of income is earned from wages followed by cultivation/net receipt from crop production (37.2 percent), farming of animals (15.5%), and income from non-farm business (6.3%). According to the same survey, 50.2 per cent of farm households in India are in debt.
9. India agreed to an IMF-monitored structural adjustment programme in 1991. The ‘recommendations’ for reforms under the adjustment programme included scraping all subsidies for agriculture and opening agriculture to foreign trade; retreat of government from the sector and dismantling the system of procurement and the universal distribution of food. In 2008, the World Bank in its report India – Taking agriculture to the market, underlined the slow pace of reforms and promoted the complete deregulation of the agricultural marketing system. It called for the continuation of reforms initiated in the 1990s.
10. India’s jobless growth story is now well-known. Post opening up in 1991 to boost productivity and augment job opportunities while resolving the balance of payment crisis, liberalization, privatization and globalization resulted in abysmal job growth during the initial years, followed by stagnation and deceleration. The negative trend continues even today. India chose acceleration in capital intensification at the expense of creating employment. The resultant increase in labour productivity did not translate as more share to labour. The workers as a class lost in terms of both additional employment and real wages in organised manufacturing sector. See, for instance, K.P. Kannan and G Raveendra, “Gainers and Losers during 2012–18 From Jobless to Job-loss Growth”, Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. 54, Issue number 44, 2019.
11. Food Corporation of India, a central agency of the Government of India, along with State Agencies purchases food grains such as wheat and rice from farmers under a Minimum Support Price.
12. Ordinances are laws that are enforced by the president of India when the Indian parliament is not in session.
13. Mandis, in simple terms, are market yards of APMC (Agriculture Produce Market Committee), which are run and regulated by state governments. Mandis are old and ubiquitous institutions of economic

life in many parts of India. They act as a meeting point between farmers and consumers. As per suggestions by the National Commission of Agriculture (NCA), there should be at least one mandi within 80 square kilometers, so that every farmer within that area can access the mandi within one hour to sell their product. (The Nation-Wide 9 December 2020).

14. SKM represents forty unions and networks, the largest being the All India Kisan Sangarsh Coordination Committee (All India Farmers' Struggle Coordination Committee), a pan-Indian umbrella organization comprising close to four hundred farmers' unions and organizations. There are a few large unions in Punjab which are not part of the Samyukt Kisan Morcha (SKM) but support the demand of repeal of the new farm laws, and had a big presence at the Delhi borders.
15. NDA (National Democratic Alliance) is the ruling alliance of political parties led by the Bharatiya Janata Party.
16. Government's policy advisory arm, Niti Aayog also focused on creating better land records, digitisation and integration of all records relating to titles and encumbrances, formalising cadastral maps of all plots of land, defining a structured timeline for timely resolution of property disputes and making public land disputes data etc. with a purpose to develop vibrant land sales market and encourage land sales. See for instance, "Raising Agricultural Productivity and Making Farming Remunerative for farmers", December 2015. <https://www.niti.gov.in/sites/default/files/2019-08/Raising%20Agricultural%20Productivity%20and%20Making%20Farming%20Remunerative%20for%20Farmers.pdf>
17. See, for instance, "About Adani-Wilmar", <https://www.adaniwilmar.com/about-us>.
18. Reliance Industries Limited, a Fortune 500 company has seen a meteoric rise and it is the largest private sector corporation in India today <https://www.ril.com/ar2020-21/pdf/RIL-Integrated-Annual-Report-2020-21.pdf>. Adani is one of the richest people in India. His group has interests in oil and gas, power generation, logistics, ports and coal trading. Adani's meteoric rise is reflected in his net worth, which has increased by approximately 340% since May 2014 to about \$34 billion as of January 2021, according to the Bloomberg Billionaire Index. This puts him second only to India's richest individual and chairman of Reliance Industries, Mukesh Ambani, who has similarly seen his wealth spike. As it happens, the sharp increase in billionaire wealth, while predating the current government, has accelerated during the tenure of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who came to power in May 2014.
19. So, Reliance and Ambani appear interchangeably here.

20. Unfair and unethical business practices of Reliance, such as, auction rigging, and government patronage it receives are documented in the Comptroller & Auditor General (CAG) reports. On Reliance entry in the telecom industry, which is known for high barrier to entry, Reliance Jio managed to capture the telecom market in a period of 3 years, while multiple incumbents were forced to exit or merge to keep themselves afloat. The Report of the Comptroller and Auditor-General of India Report No. 35 (2017) noted that Reliance Jio Infocomm Ltd. (RJIL) got an undue benefit of about Rs. 33.67 billion after the Indian government allowed it to offer voice services over wireless broadband spectrum it had won in 2010. As reported in the newspapers, the CAG had sent a draft report to the DoT which said that the fact that a small Internet Service Provider could win the pan-India broadband spectrum which was 5000 times its net worth was a glaring sign of auction rigging, which the DoT overlooked. Similarly, when the Indian government approved the privatisation of six airports in 2018, it relaxed the rules to widen the pool of competition, allowing companies without any experience in the sector to bid. Gautam Adani, with no history of running airports, scooped up all six. See for instance, Patnaik 2022, Findlay and Lockett 2020, Adani Watch
21. 26 January is Republic Day in India.
22. Khalistan movement is a movement to create a separate, sovereign homeland—Khalistan -- for Sikhs. ‘Naxals’ refers to a political movement going back to the 1960s, inspired by Maoism, that continues in India, largely underground. Many of the people involved are from sections of the population marginalized by caste, class, and Indigeneity. In the current political climate, urban intellectuals and human rights defenders are often labelled “urban Naxals” and routinely detained and imprisoned for long periods under draconian laws. One of the most famous being the octogenarian Jesuit priest Fr. Stan Swamy who died in prison in 2021. There is more on this on p.12 below.
23. morcha – a gathering of like-minded people protesting for a cause.
24. Andagwadis are government-run rural childcare centres. Anganwadi workers are an all women cadre of over 1.4 million workers contracted by the government to run the childcare centres and various other health and welfare schemes of the government. They are the frontline welfare workers who are paid a very small honorarium and no benefits. They have been seeking better pay and working conditions for the last many years.
25. MNREGA - The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, adopted in 2005, was designed to reduce insecurity in income and food in rural areas, guaranteeing at least hundred days of wage employment at the state minimum wage to all workers who seek work. https://rural.nic.in/sites/default/files/nrega/Library/Books/1_

26. BKU – Bharati Kisan Union [Indian farmers’ union]. BKU (Ekta-Ugrahan had the largest support base of farmers in Punjab.)
27. The Ghadar Party was a revolutionary movement in colonial India and the diaspora, dedicated to ending British colonialism. It was informed by secular, democratic, socialist principles.
28. Video, “Farmers Agitation Demands Release of Human Rights Defenders” Karwan e Mohabbat, 2020 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HFHGOqE2qAE>
29. For more on this see <https://thewire.in/rights/bhima-koregaon-violence-four-different-theories-but-no-justice-in-sight>
30. The farmers union have been trying to draw attention to the farm crisis for the last many years through major mobilizations in the states such as in Maharashtra in 2018 (Dhawale, 2018); a march of Tamil Nadu farmers to Delhi twice with skulls and chains (Alavi, 2017); and a long march of all India farmers to Delhi in November 2018 (People’s Archive of Rural India, 2018). The farmers protest in 2020 successfully built on the ground prepared by the previous protests and on a wider scale.
31. A panchayat is a village council and panchayat land is land that comes under the jurisdiction of the village council.
32. According to the Punjab Village Commons Land (Regulation) Act of 1961, panchayats lease village common land annually to the highest bidder on the condition that a third is reserved for the scheduled castes and auctioned separately. Yet, for years now, Jat-Sikh landowners have been subverting the process by bidding for the reserved lands in the name of dalits or through proxy candidates.
33. Colour my head scarf yellow.
34. Dupatta – long scarves
35. Rural women’s mobilisation is deeply connected with many aspects of Punjab’s left legacy and a very vibrant progressive rural cultural movement in the state which can be traced back to the late 1960s. There is rich music, poetry and also theatre in rural areas. There are scores of rural theatre troupes in Punjab, and we saw them regularly at the borders performing where the farmers were protesting. Many of these rural theatre troupes are part of an umbrella organisation - Punjab Lok Sabhachar Manch, a people’s cultural platform committed to building a just society through progressive cultural movement. These troupes do political theatre. Women are both part of the audience and the lead performers. Another very interesting tradition in Punjab is the all-night cultural programmes in the villages, a tradition which began during the years of militancy in the 1980s when Punjab remained under night curfew - from 9 pm to 5 am – for years. A progressive left cultural tradition emerged in rural Punjab in this period. People would collect at a central point in the village before 9 pm and watch cultural

programmes all night under the open sky. This tradition continued in the villages even after militancy ebbed. Women were mobilised for these cultural programmes as a conscious strategy and women see themselves as part of the movements.

36. Basanti – a shade of yellow or saffron that symbolizes the mustard fields and has symbolic meaning of spirit and sacrifice in Sikhism.
37. Ram Prasad Bismil (1897-1927) was a writer, poet and revolutionary with the Hindustan Republican Association, who was hanged by the British to his anti-colonial revolutionary activities.
38. Three young anti-colonial political activists belonging to the Hindustan Socialist Republican Association. They were inspired by the Ghadar movement. They were condemned and executed by the British colonial state. They continue to inspire struggles for equality and justice.
39. The modified song written by poet Sarbjot Singh can be heard here <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vL2bHbjcvek>
40. For a quick reference about the movement, please see Roy, 2018.
41. For a brief summary see Mangat, 2020.
42. For a brief introduction see Peoples Democracy, 2020.
43. KMKPPC was founded by Kiranjit Kaur, a young university student whose father had committed suicide. She went from village to village, collecting data on women whose husbands, sons, fathers or fathers-in-law committed suicide. The Committee terms farmer suicides as institutional murders and seeks state accountability for every suicide.
44. These estimates are based on the author's field surveys in many parts of Punjab for an ICSSR (Indian Council of Social Science Research) project 2019 (unpublished).
45. The Gini coefficient at the all-India level is as high as 0.76. In states like Punjab, Bihar, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and Andhra Pradesh, the land distribution is even more skewed and the Gini is higher than 0.80. (Anand, 2016).
46. According to estimates, excess land (calculated by applying a uniform land ceiling of eight hectares (around 20 acres) on operational holdings), is available for redistribution all over Indian states. In Punjab, 217,265 hectares is excess land. Punjab also has 68,839 hectares shamlat land (land owned by the village panchayat) in around 8,000 of the state's 13,000 villages, according to the Rural Development and Panchayat Department. The one-third of this is reserved for Dalits which comes to around 22,946 hectares. According to a response to an RTI (right to information) query by Zameen Prapti Sangharsh Committee (Land Acquisition Struggle Committee; see f.n. below for details about this organization) in January 2018, over half of Punjab's shamlat land (land owned by the village council) is concentrated in the six districts of Punjab. Some 9307 hectare shamlat land is under the control of land grabbers; of the remaining 60 thousand hectares, most is auctioned by

panchayats every year, and any villager can bid for cultivation. The average rent is Rs 20,000 per acre in the reserved category (Dalits), and around Rs 28,000 in the general category. In comparison, lease rates to private persons (farmers) are Rs 60,000 per acre annually in Malwa region, and Rs 25,000-45,000 in other regions.

47. A labour union of the landless, Zameen Prapti Sangharsh Committee (ZPSC), was formed in 2014 for the rights and access of Dalit landless cultivators to reserved common lands in Punjab. At present, there are many villages where the union has been successful in obtaining Dalit's share in land through annual auctions by the state government. The ZPSC is now demanding that instead of annual auctions, the reserved land is leased to landless Dalits on a long term basis.

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