

Politics of Agrarian Protests: Resistance to Corporatisation of Agriculture in Punjab

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Contemporary agrarian protests have their basis in the process of liberalisation, privatisation and globalization in the post-1991 phase. As has been established in the history of peasant movements, the strategy of protests differed in different phases. The thrust of the peasant movements in colonial India, in post-independent India from 1947 to mid-1960s and, in the early and post-Green Revolution phase, followed different strategies. Contemporary protests are, however, qualitatively distinct in many ways. The three Acts passed by Parliament acted as a catalyst to reinforce the apprehensions of farmers that these would weaken their control over the agricultural economy as they were not able to graduate to industry, trade and service sector. For the hegemonic agrarian ruling class in Punjab, land is not merely an economic asset, but also has social and cultural value.

The present protest movement is different from the earlier agrarian protests in terms of the economic demands, politico-cultural stakes and identity overtones. For instance, earlier protests threatened to stop the supply of food grains to other states. This time, however, the protest is directed against the privatisation of agricultural operations and food grains not finding a market. As such, this protest is for survival.

A study of successive agrarian movements also provides insights into interactions between changing contradictions relating to the development processes, the nature of agrarian movements and the State's response. This paper has contextualised this protest in history and located it in changing political and economic contours. It has critically analysed the State's response and emerging faultlines in the strategy of farmers' protest.

Introduction: Uniqueness

The farmers' agitation is unique in many ways. One, it is a conglomerate of 32 ideologically competing organisations.¹ Two, it has successfully purged the interference of the established political parties as reflected in the popular song, '*Kithe kithe paye aa vande, kedi party de kede jhande, O vota paake khaave dande, Oh bholeya Jatta samajh agende*'... [We are divided under different party flags, you vote and get beaten up, Oh, the innocent souls, arise and understand their agendas (Grewal and Cheema, 2020)]. A clear message to the common people, that it is the political parties and leaders who divide us, seek our votes, but in the end, we get beaten. However, it is indeed the time to understand their real agendas (Kumar, 2020). Bharatiya Kisan Union Krantikari-wing's president Surjeet S Phul on Sunday said that no political party will be allowed to speak at the protest site on behalf of or for the farmers.² Three, the movement is beyond the 'kisans', as there is a broad-based engagement of the

arhtiyas', small shopkeepers, landless labourers and social and cultural activists. The three Acts promulgated contain provisions to dismantle the traditional Arhtiyas system as their 2.5 per cent commission shall be eliminated. Their number is more than two hundred thousand in Punjab. The shop keepers are apprehensive that with corporatisation they will lose business as procurement and Minimum Support Price (MSP) may be substantially reduced.³ Fourthly, in the kisan agitation, the radical right-wing, the Hindu and the Sikh fundamentalists have their own narrative, but it is on the margins. The mere fact that the movement is led by progressive farmers and supported by moderate supporters, irrespective of their religious and caste affiliation, the role of radical right-wing politics remained limited. And, the active participation of non-Jat commission agents, shopkeepers and liberal intelligentsia has provided a secular face to the agitation, and has checked social polarization on communal lines notwithstanding the efforts made in the post-January 26, 2021 events in Delhi (Kumar, 2021). Therefore, considerations of pragmatic politics and economic reality are keeping the radical right-wing politics on the margins.

Historical Context

The agrarian movements in the Punjab region can be broadly located in four phases. During the colonial rule till 1947, the peasant mobilizations were largely about the tenurial rights; from 1947 to mid-1960s, the 'land to the tiller' provided the background of the land reforms initiated by the governments this became the central thrust of the peasant movement. In the third phase, with the commercialisation of agriculture, monetisation of agriculture activities, unfavourable terms of trade in agriculture, input pricing, agricultural subsidies and minimum support price for the agriculture produce emerged as the source of agrarian unrest. The fourth phase started with the post-1991 economic reforms, i.e., liberalisation, privatisation and globalization. This phase brought a major shift in the farmer's protests, resisting changes in terms of trade from seller to the buyer's market and attempts to seek political resolution without active engagement of the major political parties. The qualitative change in the path of development, and in the demographic, social and regional context has transformed the mode of protest, the nature of 'Kisan' organisational structures and extent of the engagement of '*Khet Mazdoors*' (farm labour), '*Kisans*' and other affiliates.

Several questions arise: How can this transformation in the relations of production and the mode of protest be interpreted? How far will agrarian movements and their interaction within the context of macro-political economy moderate the process of economic reforms? What would be the implications of mobilisation by farmers on the socio-political fault lines in the state of Punjab? To what extent will this protest movement be able to shape the discourse on food security, food sovereignty and livelihood of the agrarian classes?

To attempt to answer these questions it is, therefore, relevant to situate the contemporary farmers' protest in a broad historical perspective. In brief, an attempt shall be made to find the continuities and digressions in the demands

raised, nature of mobilisation and response of the State to farmers' protests historically.

The Punjab region has witnessed decades of agrarian unrest, whether it was the Mughal era (Baba Banda Singh Bahadur struggle to abolish the *Zamindari* system); or British Colonial rule (most intense protest against introduction of the Colonisation Bill in 1906 by Lord Minto, then Viceroy of India popularly known as '*Pagri Sambhal Jatta*' movement)⁴. These unrests were strengthened by the *Ghadar* movement of 1914-15; Anti-Money-Lender uprising in West Punjab;⁵ the Akali movement 1920-25;⁶ *Muzara* movement of 1920s (tenant farmers demanded land ownership rights) and several other movements fought between 1936-37, 1948⁷ and in 1958-59 (Puri, 1983).

During the British period, the focus in agriculture was mainly on the production of non-food crops for export purposes. But, due to the recurring famines in the late 19th and early 20th century, a system of canal irrigation was developed to augment food production. Almost negligible investment was made in infrastructure and no initiatives were taken to transform the exploitative land relations. As a consequence, food grains production did not increase from 1904-05 to 1944-45. The nature of the peasant movements in the colonial period can be understood in the context of colonial government's alliance with vested landed interests, and its oppressive predisposition towards peasant movements. For this reason, the grand alliance between peasant movements and anti-imperialist nationalist movements became functional, and within agriculture, it blurred the contradictions between the cultivators and the landless labourers. In spite of this, the Kisan Sabha was dominated by the cultivators and it could not mobilise the landless labourers' in the various protest movements.⁸ However, in the first few decades of the consolidation of colonization,⁹ most of the struggles of the peasantry were against surplus extraction. The struggles were directed against the landlords or moneylenders.

Right from 1901 to 1937, there have been peasant struggles in Punjab. The first organized struggle was directed against the Land Alienation Act of 1901, and was organized by the *Kirti Kisan Sabha* in 1906-07. In 1915, anti-moneylender protests were registered in the West Punjab due the indebtedness of the Muslim peasants. In 1936, movements were launched against the land settlement cess, canal irrigation rates, *chowkidara* tax and police atrocities while the leadership was still in the hands of the Kirti Kisan Sabha (Singh, 1984). The *Charik* agitation was started in early 1938 in the Ferozepur district where the cattle market had been closed down, land tax was four times greater than that levied in British territories and social amenities were lacking. The tenant struggle in *Nilibar* in 1937 targeted big landlords who exploited the tenants who cultivated the land purchased by the farmers'. The demand to abolish *Biswedari* was raised in an organised manner during and after 1937-38 in Patiala and in other areas. It was in response to the growing unrest among the peasantry that the British tried to accommodate emerging interests in the rural areas. The politics of accommodation were extended to the emerging middle class from amongst all the religious groups. This introduced a new kind of social identity and competition on that basis amongst them. The patronage extended by the

British to recruit Sikh peasantry in the army,¹⁰ was partly due to increasing unrest in the villages, where according to Hamid, 4 per cent of the population owned more than 50 per cent of the land, while 80 per cent population comprised of poor peasants, landless, sharecroppers and agricultural labourers (Hamid, 1982: 67-68).

Colonial Response

It is here that the British followed a multi-pronged strategy to use and perpetuate the division on caste and religious group lines. The British response to the peasant unrest was to divide them between the agriculturists and non-agriculturists, having religious overtones. For instance, the Land Alienation Act of 1901 segregated the religious groups according to their occupations also (Kumar et. al. 1984: 31-33). The introduction of the Land Alienation Act, which divided Punjabis into agriculturist and non-agriculturist categories, continued to have ramification on the contemporary social, political and economic life in this region. The act affected adversely the economic interests of the Hindu moneylenders. Some of the communalist Hindus interpreted this as an attempt by the British to discriminate against them on the basis of their religion. Such an interpretation and its usage helped in identifying a reference point and possibly a misplaced target of attack in case of perceived discrimination, in a specific situation, along communal lines.

At that juncture, peasant movements were launched against an increase in water rates on land irrigated by the Bari Doab Canal and because of the proposed 'Colonialization of Land Bill', which would have strengthened government control over the Chenab Colony. The above two factors and the Land Alienation Act tended to unite rural and urban Panjabis. Lala Lajpat Rai and Ajit Singh spearheaded a movement against the British in the first decade of the 20th century.

The British Government accepted the two demands of the peasant proprietors and, in the process isolated the urban Hindu moneylenders. The apparent solidarity with their rural counterparts crumbled under the ruthless repression of the British administration. This development further disillusioned the moneylenders, who incidentally were also Hindus, and the perceived discrimination provided an opportunity for attempts at furthering communalization. This policy found continuity in various other Acts. For example, the Punjab Relief of Indebtedness Act of 1934 and the Debtor's Protection Act, 1936, divided the population on similar lines by adversely affecting the interests of the non-agriculturist Hindu moneylenders (Chowdhry, 1984: 252-253).

However, the freedom struggle mobilised the people against British imperialism, irrespective of their religious, caste or class affiliations. As a result, the British design to weaken the peasant struggle by dividing them on religious or caste lines was thwarted.

Land Reforms and Farmers Movements in Independent India

After Independence, a number of pro-people welfare measures were undertaken, for instance, radical land reforms with a focus on abolition of intermediary interests, regularisation of the land rent and provision of security of tenure, and eventual ownership rights. This reform was partially and unevenly implemented across the States. But to a large extent they succeeded in abolishing absentee landlordism and encouraged self-cultivation as a dominant mode. This major initiative was taken to modernise agriculture, strengthen credit institutions, regulate markets, rural roads and agriculture research institutions. The middle and rich farmers benefited as land ownership at the middle level was improved. However, the ownership pattern of small and marginal farmers did not experience any change for their betterment.

The partial implementation of land reforms provided sufficient reasons for the continuation of the agitation to pressurise the government to implement land reforms across the board. Tenant movements and anti-water levy agitations were launched in different areas of Punjab in the 1950s. The movements and agitations were led by the Punjab Kisan Sabha (a wing of the CPI). The tenant movement in PEPSU was mainly launched against the 'Biswedars' who were high revenue officials appointed by the erstwhile rulers. It was the largest and one of the most militant movements in Punjab. The tenants were transformed into peasant proprietors by the 'Vesting Tenants Act 1954'. The abolition of Ala-Malkiat Act (superior ownership) during the same period converted inferior owners into superior ones on payment of five times compensation. In the 1960s and 1970s, the 'Abadkar' (Settlers) movement and the 'land to the tiller' movements were launched. Drawing a lesson from the PEPSU tenant movement, the CPM directed each 'Abadkar' family not to occupy more than 5 acres of land (Chandan, 1979: 188). Along with land reforms, another thrust of the government was to build irrigation and power infrastructure, credit institutions, regulated markets and rural link roads.

Transformation of Farmers' Movement: From Land to Input Prices

Significant changes took place with the introduction of the Borlaug seed-fertilizer technology during the mid-1960s. As a result, the nature of the protest changed in terms of economic demands, and its politico-cultural stakes with identity overtones. The introduction of mechanized farm operations, commercialization of production and input structure, canal and tube well irrigation and adoption of high-yielding varieties transformed land relations and income distribution in Punjab agriculture. The level of agricultural growth can be gauged from the fact that, in Punjab, it contributed around 44 per cent of the state GDP as compared to 40 per cent in India in the 1970s (See Table 1). The agriculture growth rate in Punjab was 4 per cent, whereas in India it was merely 1 per cent (See Table 2).

Table 1: Structure of Economy

Share in GSDP/GDP					
	1970s	1980s	1990s	2000s	2010s
PUNJAB					
Agriculture & Allied	43.72	40.82	39.14	30.20	22.32
Industry	18.30	18.95	22.91	26.46	29.64
Total Services	37.98	40.23	37.95	43.34	48.04
Traditional Services	34.87	35.26	30.50	29.45	30.34
Modern Services	3.11	4.97	7.45	13.90	17.71

Source: Computed from Central Statistics Office (CSO). 2010s represents 2010-11 to 2013-14.

Table 2: Growth Rate of GSDP/GDP

Growth					
	1970s	1980s	1990s	2000s	2010s
PUNJAB					
Agriculture & Allied	4.1	3.5	3.1	2.4	1.0
Industry	5.5	5.1	7.1	7.6	3.8
Total Services	5.1	4.6	4.3	7.5	9.3
Traditional Services	4.9	3.8	3.3	5.5	7.6
Modern Services	8.2	10.0	8.8	15.1	12.5
Total	4.7	4.2	4.5	5.8	5.7

Source: Computed from CSO, at 2004-05 prices.

This resulted in capital accumulation at a fast rate as most of the rich farmers purchased costly capital equipment like, tractors, threshers, combine harvesters, tube wells, pumpsets and fertilizers. However, the increase in productivity brought all the cultivators into the market, but the gains were not equally distributed amongst the various categories of cultivators. According to Bhalla, 'The higher incomes for the rich farmers have enabled them to record substantial surpluses which have enhanced their economic and political power' (Bhalla 1983: 48). Above all, the share of wages of the landless labour increased but could not keep pace with the gains like, rent, etc. From a political economy perspective, every section involved in the agricultural operations gained, but these gains were uneven. No doubt, the Green Revolution made a dent on poverty, but inequalities multiplied amongst the various strata. In this phase, there were only few cases of distress sales of land. At the same time, it had sown

the seed for the emergence of landless labour as a 'class' with greater bargaining capacity and with a freedom to be mobile rather than stay bonded.

This is quite visible even in the contemporary protests. These protests could not succeed to build bridges with landless labour. However, farmers belonging to all categories continued to participate in farmer movements as they have common economic demands such as higher prices for their produce and for subsidies for agriculture inputs like power, irrigation, fertilisers etc. And also, they share a religio-caste identity for exercising hegemony in politics. In the early Green Revolution phase, the agriculturists and others indirectly allied with agriculture, experienced improvement in their conditions and political power gains. But in the later phase, these sections experienced a downturn in their economic gains in relation to others engaged in trade, industry, commerce and service sector.

The Green Revolution was marketed as a powerful engine of growth and, two decades later, it was 'discovered' that it had led to an environmental disaster, increase in social and economic inequalities, multiple rises in the debt of farmers and the incidence of farmer suicides increased, etc. Not only this, even the growth rate of agriculture declined from 4 per cent in 1970s to 1 per cent in the 2010s in Punjab as we can see in Table 2.

Stagnation and Crisis in Agriculture

Punjab represents a peculiar development paradox. Punjabis are the most globalised, but Punjab's economy is least globalised. This is reflected in a nominal amount of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) of 0.88 per cent (Fact Sheet on FDI 2021). It has a highly developed agriculture, but without much direct linkages with industrial development. Thus, agriculture accounts for 24.6 per cent of the state's GDP and its industry accounts for 35.4 per cent of state's GDP (Punjab Economic Survey, 2021). Punjab has a high per capita income, but a dismal social development index. Punjab's per capita income is Rs. 1,15,882 (2018-19 at constant prices) and it ranks 11th with Maharashtra in the lead followed by Tamil Nadu and Gujarat respectively. The social development index resonates with the most adverse child sex ratio in the country (at 793), high level of sex-selective abortions, high rates of farmers' suicides, widespread substance abuse and a large educated unemployed youth population.

It is a paradox that despite having a high per capita income, it does not have commensurate social development index. On inclusive growth, it has a low poverty level in general, but poverty amongst Scheduled Castes is high. It has an overall low poverty level at 8.2%, but economic deprivation among the Scheduled Castes is double at 15.6% - see Table 3.

Table 3: Incidence of Poverty across Social Groups in Punjab (in per cent)

Social Groups	1993-94			2004-06			2011-15		
	Rural	Urban	Total	Rural	Urban	Total	Rural	Urban	Total
ST	35.9	42.1	36.8	30.7	2.4	18.7	0.0	7.2	6.2

SC	35.1	50.6	38.2	38.4	36.2	37.9	14.7	18.3	15.6
OBC	NA	NA	NA	21.7	20.2	21.3	3.6	14.0	8.1
Others	NA	NA	NA	5.1	9.6	6.9	1.1	3.8	2.3
Non-SC/ST	10.8	20.5	14.1	11.1	12.3	11.5	1.7	6.1	3.6
Total	20.4	27.4	22.4	22.1	18.7	21.0	7.7	9.2	8.2

Source: NSSO Consumption Expenditure Survey

The cost of cultivation of the two main crops increased, for instance, for rice it increased by five percentage points (44% to 49%), for wheat it increased by eight percentage points during 2000-01 to 2005-06 period over 1995-96 to 2000-01 period. Gross income of farmers was reduced by 33 percentage points for rice, and almost by 100 percentage points for wheat from 1995-96 to 2000-01 to 2000-01 to 2005-06 respectively (Shergill, 2012).

A large gap exists in the yields of both the crops, i.e. wheat and rice between the small, marginal and big farms. The low yield level on small farms turns into lower profitability on these farms. Moreover, rates of returns from these crops are not remunerative. The growth in minimum support prices and variable cost has almost remained the same. The minimum support prices just increased by 7.34 per cent per annum and variable costs by 5.60 per cent. Inequalities have increased substantially within various categories of agriculturalists. The difference in the income of the small and large farmers is Rs. 7,92,003 - see Table 4.

Table 4: Comparison of Annual Income of Small and Large Farmers from Different Sources in Punjab, 2012-2013

Source of Income	Small Farmers	Large Farmers	Difference	Ratio
	(i)	(ii)	(ii) - (i)	(ii) / (i)
Cultivation	117753 (60.77)	909756 (83.50)	792003.00	7.73
Wages	42420 (21.89)	19128 (1.75)	(-) 23292	0.45
Animal Husbandry	25326 (13.07)	127212 (11.68)	101886.00	5.02
Non-Farming Activities	8250 (4.26)	33468 (3.07)	25218.00	4.05
Total Income	193757 (100)	1089552 (100)	895795.00	5.62

Source: Calculated from some characteristics of Agricultural Households in India (NSS, 70th Round).

Animal husbandry is the main source of secondary income for farmers. Here, again large farmers are doing better than small farmers. The large farmers can

invest on high milk yielding animals because they are having surplus capital to invest. That is why the income of large farmers from non-farming activities is four times more than small farmers. The large farmers, due to their economic status, involve themselves less in economic activities which provide just minimum wages. Here the income from wages is more of small farmers. Overall, the large farmers' income is five times more than the small farmers.

It seems that rising land prices, non-viability of small units and development of capitalism in agriculture have contributed to the process of land alienation. A significant fact is that small and marginal farms are increasingly becoming uneconomical. This has pushed a large number of marginal and small farmers into the 'vicious circle of debt'. Indebtedness amongst the farmers has increased over the years. According to a study by Shergill (in 1998 and 2008), the total amount of debt on the farmers in the state was Rs 5,700 crore in 1997 and Rs 30,394 crore in 2008. This debt is about 70 per cent of the Net Domestic Product originated in the state in a year. A per acre debt of all the holdings is Rs 5,721, but debt amongst small farmers is the highest at Rs 10,105 per acre. Further, the burden of debt varies inversely with the size of the holding. The liability in the form of debt of small and marginal farmers is to the extent of Rs 1,229.58 crore i.e., 21.5 per cent of the total debt.

Table 5: Indebtedness of Punjab Farmers

	1997	2008
Total	Rs 5,700.91 crore	Rs 30,394.12 cr
<u>Purpose of credit</u>	(in %)	(in %)
Short-term productive	54.72	76.33
Long-term productive	25.39	12.67
Non-productive	19.89	29.67
<u>Source of credit</u>		
Commercial banks	19.42	31.78
Co-operatives	27.14	18.91
Commission agents	36.32	43.36
Mortgagor (agricultural)	7.12	0.81
Annual interest charges	Rs 1,102.78 crore	-

Source: Shergill, (1998) and Shergill, (2008).

This is not to deny that the small and marginal peasants, and even the landless labourers did benefit from the trickle-down effect of the Green Revolution. However, they had to pay a heavy social cost. The increasing debt and shrinking opportunities of income augmentation as reflected in the multiplication of unemployed persons, low educational facilities have contributed to growing unrest and economic depression in rural Punjab.

As a fallout of the increasing debt and shrinking opportunities of income augmentation, more than 60 percent of farmers left farming between 2001 and 2007 whereas in the period of the 1980s, only 5 percent of farmers left farming.

There are many reasons for this, but the most important reason is the lower profitability on small farms in comparison to their consumption needs.

Table 6: Pattern of Farmers who left Farming, 1981 to 2007

Criteria	Percent of Farmers who left Farming
Farm Size Class wise Incidence:	
Marginal (Up to 1.00 Acre)	10.80
Small (1.00 to 2.00 Acre)	15.00
Medium (2.00 to 4.00 Acre)	11.30
Large (Above 4.00 Acre)	4.90
All	10.90

Source: Singh, Singh and Kingra (2007).

Consequently, the quality of education has deteriorated, and most of the educated youth, particularly, from rural areas, have become unemployable in Punjab. They do not prefer to revert to farming and, consequently, tend to drift towards drug addiction or attempt immigration abroad, even illegally.

Notwithstanding the structural shift, agriculture experienced a massive slowdown. Many experts have noted that a large section of the farmers has been alienated since farming has become less remunerative besides leading to environmental degradation. Public investment in agriculture in India has declined in 2004-5 from 0.5 per cent of total GDP at constant prices (2004-5) to 0.4 per cent of GDP in 2011-12. This is also reflected in decline in the agricultural growth rate to 2 per cent per annum in 2012-13 at the all-India level (Ministry of Agriculture, GoI).

The Punjab economy could not build a robust system of forward and backward linkages between various sectors of the economy. Agriculture has slowed down whilst the industrial sector has maintained its historical rate of growth so far but the modern service sector has acquired a predominant position. This crisis has been unleashed by the nature of development and excessive reliance on reductionist and short-sighted policy interventions. In view of the stagnant agriculture, rising debt burden of the farmers and environment degradation, policy planners have offered solutions in diversification of crops from the wheat-paddy rotation, fiscal management and corporatisation of agriculture.

Diversification of Crops: A non-starter

Agriculture in Punjab was relatively diversified prior to the introduction of the Green Revolution strategy. The Green Revolution was introduced as a grain producing machine. Then, in the early-1990s, proponents of the Green Revolution realised the need for further diversifying of agriculture in Punjab. Diversification of crops was propagated not in response to the negative effects

of the Green Revolution, i.e., environmental degradation, increasing social and economic inequalities, failure to build forward and backward economic linkages, but as an answer to its only positive outcome i.e., production of food grains. This anti-grain policy had its political dimensions. The former US Secretary of Agriculture, Butz provides the bottom-line: 'Food as a weapon is a powerful tool in our negotiating kit.'

But, what is our politics? Till recently the crisis of agriculture was characterised as one of food grains not finding a market. And policy initiatives have been towards corporatisation of agriculture and shifting small and marginal farmers from 'unviable economic activity'. It is unfortunate that due to lack of a clear agricultural policy, Punjab has seen many perspectives since 1986 on whether Punjab needs or does not need diversification of crops. As of now, Punjab could neither diversify to cash crops nor become globally competitive by specialising in food grains. If we look back, it was learning the hard way. The then US Agriculture Secretary, John Block, in 1986 had, at the start of the first Uruguay Round negotiations asserted that, 'the idea that developing countries should feed themselves is an anachronism. They could better ensure their food security by relying on US agricultural products, which are available in most cases at much lower costs' (Malhotra, 1996). These countries can, therefore, utilise their land and resources for growing other crops. After a few months in 1986 we had the famous diversification report. To characterize the crisis of agriculture as food grains not finding a market or farmers getting pauperized, is paradoxical. The agri-business in food is making huge profits and producers of food are starving. The crisis is much deeper.

Another policy prescription was that freebies or subsidies to the farmers are not productive. As far as subsidy for agriculture is concerned, it is not only a survival need of the poor, but also of keeping food producing farmers globally competitive. To sustain their commercial farms, developed countries are giving huge subsidies. According to a recent estimate by the Centre of WTO Studies at the Indian Institute of Foreign Trade, shows that the per farmer subsidy in US is around \$61286, in the European Union it is \$8588 and in India it is \$282 as per the 2019 data (Nirmal, 2020). Thus in comparison European farmers, Punjab farmers are getting less than 5 per cent of their income from subsidy to maintain equally commercialized and high productivity farming!

There is no doubt that populist politics is a short-cut way of luring people. But to argue that subsidies are freebies or doles is fallacious. These are, of course, distortions and outcome of a feudal response to the crisis of capitalism. Whereas, subsidies are capitalist response to the crisis of capitalism to ensure equity and productivity of agriculture. If there was no subsidy for farmers, agriculture may thrive, but the agriculturists may not survive. Agriculture must be supported and given subsidies. Rather, subsidies to the farm sector must be increased to enable farmers to compete against large corporations and also to create a level playing field with the developed countries where farming is heavily subsidised.

Genesis of Agrarian Protests: Early and Late Green Revolution

The agrarian protests during this phase largely revolved around remunerative prices, and on the regular and subsidised supply of the inputs (Bhalla, 1983: 56). On the other hand, agricultural labour was mobilised on issues relating to wages and other working conditions. Agricultural labourers did not participate in the protests for higher prices. For instance, the political Left began to organise agricultural labourers separately by from the Kisan Sabha of the peasantry. The Punjab Khet Mazdoor Sabha (1954), Bhartiya Khet Mazdoor Union (1958) and some of the Naxalite groups mobilised agricultural labourers in Punjab. The main thrust of the agitations launched by these organisation, was to ensure fixed daily wage of Rs 7 and meals for the casual labourers, fixation of annual wages for the regular labourers' at Rs 1,800 plus meals, eight hours of daily work and remuneration for overtime. Agitations were launched in the villages of Ludhiana, Faridkot, Amritsar, Hoshiarpur, Gurdaspur and Jalandhar districts. These agitations continued in the decade of 1970s. The Minimum Wages Act, 1948 was revised in 1960, 1968, 1972, 1975 and 1978 and minimum wages multiplied from Rs 2 in 1951 to Rs 10. A study by Reddy (1990) noted that the Minimum Wage Act was not always implemented; in fact, labourers organized by the Mazdoor Sabhas, received wages higher than the minimum wages rates in Ferozepur, Faridkot and Bathinda districts, which produced commercial crops. It is also noteworthy that payment in kind continued alongside cash wages.

Along with the mobilisation of agricultural labourers, in the 1980s, farmers were also mobilised for remunerative prices, increase in subsidies on farm inputs and reduction in cost of inputs required for agricultural production (Gill and Singhal, 1984). This agitation was led by Punjab Khetibari Zimindara Union (1972), which later merged with the Punjab unit of Bhartiya Kisan Union (1980), and waged agitations to increase procurement prices of food grains. It also launched a number of agitations demanding higher support prices based on the cost of cultivation, regular supply of inputs on subsidised prices, access to institutional rural credit and non-payment of electricity bills, etc. (Gill and Singhal, 1984). The most successful movement was launched in March 1984.

To get their demands accepted, they mobilised a large number of farmers and gheraoed the Punjab Raj Bhavan (Punjab Governor's residence) at Chandigarh. The Golf Club of Chandigarh was converted into 'Kisan Nagar' with their own community kitchens and thatched huts (Reddy, 1990). The present farmers' protests in Singhu, Tikri and bordering Delhi (Ghaziipur) is a replica of 1984, except that, the scale is much bigger and participation is massive. It is necessary, therefore, to understand these protests in their historical context and their ideological origin along with the space-time continuum.

It would be pertinent to note that the ideological and regional differences between the 'Kisan' organizations entangled them into a dissolution and formation cycle, which apparently only helped the agrarian unrest to prevail. The conclusion of all past farmer protests and their outcomes were based, by and large, on compromises leading to the reinforcement of the status quo and

this kept a window open for future agrarian crises to resurface again. The short-term, regional and organizational specific, interests-based approach of these unions and organizations restricted the space for a paradigm shift.

The main limitation was that agricultural labourers have not actively participated in farmers' protest geared towards achieving higher prices for crops (Bhalla, 1983: 56). The landless labourers emerged as a distinct class with the development of capitalism in agriculture. Despite accentuated economic inequalities, no differentiation has taken place amongst the cultivators. To unite the entire peasantry on slogans like, anti-betterment levy in the late-1950s and the price question in the 1960s and till now, could not reach out to the landless labourers as a class. In an interview, Joginder Singh Ugrahan, President of BKU (EKTA Ugraha), acknowledged that the labourer class is not participating against these three Acts.¹¹

As mentioned earlier, various struggles to raise farmers' issues during the post-Independence era, Green Revolution (both pre and post) phase, the Liberalization, Privatization, and Globalization (LPG) phase to the present phase with newly passed farm bills, have been waged by the *All India Kisan Sabha (AIKS)*, *The Punjab Khet Mazdoor Sabha (PKMS)*, *Punjab Khetibari Zimindara Union (PKZU)*, *Bharatiya Khet Mazdoor Union (BKMU)*, *All-India Agricultural Workers Union (AIAWU)*, and *Inter-State Coordination Committees (ISCC)*. So is the case of the ongoing farmers' protests, and respective unions and organizations working for the cause of farmers?

From Punjab alone, 32 organizations are driving the farm agitations. Significant among these are *BKU (Ekta Ugrahan)*, *BKU (Ekta Dakaunda)*, *BKU (Lakhawal)*, *BKU (Rajewal)*, *BKU (Sidhupur)*, *Krantikari Kisan Union*, *Krantikari Kisan Union*, *Kirti Kisan Union*, *Kisan Mazdoor Sangharsh Committee*, *Kisan Sangharsh Committee Punjab*, *Punjab Kisan Union*, *BKU (Kadian)*, and *BKU (Mansa)* (Times of India, 2020). These Kisan Unions have launched their struggles in different phases, using distinct strategies. For example, Mukherji asserts how the cultivating classes started getting mobilized after new challenges such as 'remunerative prices for their major crops, subsidization of the farm inputs, and reduction in the rates of other factors, of agricultural production.' (Mukherji, 1998). But these qualitative changes have their impact, as the development of capitalist agriculture in the region gave birth to two farmer unions, namely CPI's Bharatiya Khet Mazdoor Union (BKMU) in 1968 and the CPI (M)'s All-India Agricultural Workers Union (AIAWU) in 1982 (Gill, 1994).

Most of the farmer movements in Punjab start after the Green Revolution and LPG were launched and their consequent impact on changing agrarian relations in the State. As Reddy aptly states, 'agrarian transformations in Punjab have contributed both to pauperization and proletarianization' (Reddy, 1990) as the farmers in Punjab began to have a higher commercial orientation. Thus, unsurprisingly, the issue of remunerative prices for their agricultural produce became a highly important factor. The present stage of the farmers' movement in Punjab has its roots in the struggles launched in the 1970s and 1980s, as many farmer organizations sprouted out of them.

Shaping up of Contemporary Protests

The neo-liberal economic reforms launched in 1991 provided the basis for the enactment of the three Acts, coupled with ongoing crisis in the agriculture that resulted in the present protests. The government's agricultural policy could not respond to the existing crisis and the proposed policy regime of diversification of crops could not succeed. The three Acts passed by Parliament acted as catalyst to reinforce the apprehensions of the farmers that these Acts would weaken their control over the agricultural economy, as they could not graduate to industry, trade and the service sector. For the hegemonic agrarian ruling class in Punjab, land is not merely an economic asset, but instead, it has social and cultural value.

The farmers' protest in Punjab has now acquired much larger space. Interestingly, maybe for the first time in history, the State government is also supporting the farmers' movement against the Central government. In fact, the movement is being supported by all the political parties in the State, i.e., the Congress, the Akalis, the AAP, except the BJP. Above all, it has found massive support among the retired and even serving civil servants and police officers, both of the Central and the State services, teachers, students, academics, civil society activists, artists and professionals. In other words, the class which has ruled this State since the mid-1960s in the post-Green Revolution phase has also joined this protest.

Perception of Relative Progressive Deprivation

The post-1991 implementation of neo-liberal reforms and promulgation of these three Acts reinforced fear in farmers that as a class, this will lead to further decline in their access to the market and also to their hegemonic power position. Interestingly, the dominance of farmers in Punjab politics since the mid-1960s, in terms of share in state legislature and state cabinet, increased initially and now it has been reduced from a dominant to a bargaining position with the other non-agriculture based group. As has been aptly described by Ted Robert Gurr, groups having witnessed improvement in terms of their access to market and political power, and who subsequently experience stagnation or decline accompanied by a fear that the ground gained will be lost in future, provides the necessary space for discontent leading to protests (Gurr, 2016: 53-56). This is precisely what has happened in the case of Punjab farmers. The data shows that the political hegemony of the Sikh Jat peasantry has weakened as their representation in the state legislature reduced from 42 per cent to 29 per cent and in state cabinet from 40 per cent to 26 per cent between 1997 and 2017 - for details see Table 7. This well-entrenched class, having at its disposal an abundance of human and material resources, but nurturing a feeling of progressive deprivation,¹² can thus provide sustainability to this movement for a long period of time.

Even the songs sung during the current protest have exhorted the people, in general, to join the protest using a nostalgic theme, i.e., once a farmer, always a farmer and also addressing those who left farming and are now engaged in non-

agriculture activities, and also the slogan - no farmer, no food. This is, perhaps, one of the reasons why this movement has survived for one year and yet has the potential to still continue for a much longer time.

Table 7: Social Background of Legislature in Punjab, 1997-2017

YEAR	Jat Sikh Agriculturist Representation in Cabinet (Number and %)	Jat Sikh Agriculturist Representation in Assembly (Number and %)
1997	17	47
	41.50%	40.20%
2002	9	45
	36.00%	38.50%
2007	8	42
	44.40%	35.90%
2012	11	31
	61.10%	26.50%
2017	5	30
	29.40%	25.60%

Source: Punjab Vidhan Sabha Compendium of Who's Who of members (1960-2017), Chandigarh: Punjab Vidhan Sabha Secretariat, 2003. Election Commission Reports, Punjab (1967-2017)

Families and Women Protest

The support of the families and the women for the protest is unprecedented. My interactions with the families of the agitators in the Malwa region of Punjab have been quite revealing and educational. The women, in particular, were very expressive. They perceived that there is a move to rob them of their land. As stated earlier, for a Punjabi, the land is not only an economic asset, it is a lifeline and a status symbol. And, it was because of this, that many women exhorted their men, 'Go and fight; we will look after the home and the land, come back victorious.' This sentiment is reflected in the popular songs - '*Khet tere eh khon nu firde; Jo tu paddre kiteh enter naal*' [These corporates are eyeing to take away your land, which you have cultivated with hard labour] (Grewal and Cheema, 2020).

Anti-Centre Anger at the Grass Roots

The anger against the central government was visible amongst the farmers, 'Arhtiyas' and their families. The extent of this anti-Centre feeling was almost similar to what it was at the time of Emergency in the 1970s. This time, the anger has been mainly directed at the BJP and the big corporates. This anti-Centre sentiment has been expressed in a song '*Khichla jatta, khich tyaari, pecha pai gaya centre naal*' [Pull up your socks, as we have locked our horns with the

centre (Grewal and Cheema, 2020)]. This was a call A to the Jatt farming community to be ready to fight against the anti-people policies of the Centre. Even the traders and the 'Arhtiyas', who have been staunch supporter of the BJP all these years, expressed their anguish against these Acts and were forthcoming; to quote, 'we were the BJP supporters, and now onwards, we shall work to dislodge them.' The social activists, youth and local singers and artists based in the region have been actively involved in the mobilisation. To quote Grewal and Cheema (2020) '*Oh akla waleo chak lo kalma, Mar len na raflan saanu* (To all those who have a 'mind', pick up your pen, before the men with rifles kill us)'. This song is a clarion call to the intelligentsia, to use their pen as a weapon and a shield to save the farmers from the rifles of the Central government, and from the false promises made by the opportunist leaders during election campaigns. Many of the accomplished writers, artistes, singers and others have come forward and some even returned their state honours in protest.

Purged Mainstream Political Parties: Consensus on Neo-Liberal Economic Reforms?

Another important reason for the prolonged continuity of the protest is that it has purged the mainstream political parties from being a part of the movement. The protestors believed that these parties are in favour of neo-liberal economic policies. For instance, the ruling Congress Party in its 2019 parliamentary elections promised that it will introduce free trade in agriculture. It now realises that opposition to these Acts happens to be a solid currency to woo the voters (Indian National Congress 2019: 52).¹³ Knowing full well that the State Assembly has no powers to nullify Central Acts and introduce their own Acts to regulate the agriculture trade, they did exactly that. Similarly, the AAP government in Delhi, notified these central legislations and its Punjab unit went overboard to support the farmers' agitation. The dominant Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD), a regional rural-based organisation and an erstwhile ally of the BJP, after initial hiccups, also came to support this agitation. Its Minister resigned from the Union Cabinet, and the Party broke its alliance with the BJP. And, although the BJP in Punjab had been nurturing an ambition to repeat the Haryana electoral success in Punjab, it found itself on the margins of Punjab politics. They had actively supported and piloted these Acts, which not only had adverse implications for farmers but have directly hit its support base amongst the small traders, 'Arthiyas' and small shopkeepers. The lesson to be drawn by the political parties is that blanket support to the economic reforms' agenda shaped by the former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, and now being effectively implemented by Prime Minister Modi, is fraught with danger as it directly affects the survival of people living on the margins.

A Shift from Seller to the Buyer Market

Another reasons for the continuity of the movement and its Punjab-centric thrust is that Punjab has traditionally contributed maximum food grains to the central

pool. However, in 2020, Madhya Pradesh contributed 129 lakh metric tonnes (LMT), while Punjab's share was 127 LMT of wheat - see Table 8.

Table 8: Wheat Procurement for Central Pool (Marketing Season-wise)

S.No.	States/UTs	RMS (2017-18)	RMS (2018-19)	RMS (2019-20)	RMS (2020-21)
1	Punjab	117.06	126.92	129.12	127.14
2	Haryana	74.32	87.84	93.20	74.00
3	UP	36.99	52.94	37.00	35.77
4	M.P.	67.25	73.13	67.25	129.42
5	Others	12.62	17.1	14.75	23.59
	TOTAL	308.24	357.95	341.32	389.92

Source: Calculated from Annual Report & Accounts, Food Corporation of India.

Punjab for the first time rallied behind Madhya Pradesh and it has largely functioned in the seller's market. The Punjab farmers argue that they are being asked to diversify their cropping pattern, whereas, other states like Madhya Pradesh and western Uttar Pradesh, are encouraged to produce the grains. Why are the farmers in these States not being supported to diversify towards commercial crops? Further, Punjab and Haryana receive more than Rs 80,000 crore of Minimum Support Price (MSP) every year. Not only is the livelihood of the farmers and their families, but that of the traders, shopkeepers and other derivative beneficiaries also dependent on this system of support. As per the data, only 6 per cent of the farmers in India are fully covered by the MSP, with a majority of 84 per cent located in the States of Punjab and Haryana. Therefore, apprehensions about possible withdrawal of protective cover offered by the MSP policy is seen as an act of betrayal and chicanery. The young supporters were convinced that Punjab was initially used to fight national hunger; the farmers of Punjab worked hard against all odds, whereas other states were taking advantage of the industrial and information technology (IT) revolutions. As a result, Punjab lagged behind and remained a predominantly agricultural state. However, that is also now being dismantled. In other words, farmers of Punjab feel that they are now being pushed into the buyers' market from the sellers' market. And, it would obviously be at the discretion of the Central Government to decide on the quantum of procurement on the declared MSP, provided MSP still existed. Also, by taking agriculture out of the Essential Commodities (Amendment) Act, the centre has not only legalised, but legitimised private players to procure food grains at prices lower than the fixed MSP. In other words, nearly 86 per cent of the small and marginal farmers would be left at the mercy of the corporates, with reduced collective bargaining capacity.

The Central government's argument is that these Acts are intended to empower the farmers and ensure doubling of their income. On the other hand, the farmers' organisations are critical of these Acts as they believe that these will lead to privatisation of agriculture, reduce agriculture to a subsidiary

activity, and eventually pave the way for removing the protective cover of government-led procurement, MSP, Agriculture Produce Market Committee (APMC) Act and other safety nets.

Given this background, the present protest movement is different from the earlier agrarian protests in terms of economic demands, politico-cultural stakes and identity overtones. Most of the protests in the 1980s revolved largely around enhancement of the support price, need for an institutionalised credit system, necessity of a regular supply of inputs at subsidised rates, etc. And as pressure tactics, these protests used to threaten to stop the supply of the food grains to other states. Whereas, now, the crisis is related to privatisation of agricultural operation, and food grains not finding market. As such, this protest is, indeed, geared at survival of farmers.

Fear of Land Dispossession, Corporates Supremacy and Political Marginalisation: Results of a Random Survey

Not only this, a random survey of 150 kisans at two protests sites Singhu and Tikri borders has clearly shown that all category of farmers were opposed to the privatisation of agriculture, in favour of enhancement of subsidies for agricultural operations, statutory provision for procurement and MSP, and for repealing of the three Acts. The summary results of this survey regarding reasons and frequency of participation are presented in Table 9 and a more detailed discussion follows below.

Table 9: Reasons for Participation: Stakeholders Survey (N=150)

Size of the Land (Acres)	Reasons of Participation	Frequency of Participation
Small & Marginal Below 2 hectares (30)	Land to be taken over by Corporates, statutory assurance for Minimum Support Price and assured procurement	Occasionally
Semi-Medium 2-4 hectares (30)	Land dispossession, reduced income, enhancement in Minimum Support Prices and assured procurement	Regular
Medium 4-10 hectares (35)	Privatisation, Corporatisation and Political marginalisation	Regular

Large 10 and above hectares (55)	Corporatisation, political bargaining and crop diversification	Reduced and crop	Regular
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Source: IDC Field survey, 2021

Small and Marginal Farmers

It was interesting to find that the small and marginal farmers were in support of this protest, but they were more active at the village level and, occasionally, visited these two sites. They were also apprehensive about losing their land. And they believed that the prices of agricultural inputs are rising on account of multinationals who have monopolized important input markets such as seeds and pesticides under the globalization process. They were of the view that it was because of the Green Revolution that farm yields were on the decline due to soil erosion, receding water table and waterlogging. Instead of raising subsidies for agriculture, these Acts passed by the government, is a license to the corporates to take our land. The small farmers recognised the need of commission agents in the agricultural process. Notwithstanding the fact that many of the Kisan Union are opposed to 'Arhtiyas', they want their system to be more transparent and interest rates to be rationalised.

Semi-Medium Farmers

The semi-medium farm owners were very vocal about the falling income of the farmers, increasing unemployment amongst the rural youth and the fear of losing control over their land. They were critical of the State government for not proactively attempting to mitigate the agrarian crises. They emphasized the need to make their youth employable and provide them opportunities to undertake agro-processing ventures.

Medium and Large Farmers

The medium and large farm owners highlighted that there is a crisis of market for the two main crops. The debt on farmers is multiplying. There are no new avenues created to facilitate agriculture surpluses into trade or industrial activities. Diversification of crops has remained on paper only. There is no clear perspective on subsidising agriculture operations. The subsidy is given with a view to garner votes of the poor farmers. There is a need to give globally competitive subsidies and they should be given to all the farmers. It is wrong to exclude the so-called rich farmers for giving financial support, as, globally, there is no set definition of who resource poor farmers are. How can providing to a resource poor farmer of 25 acres be compared with providing to the resource poor farmer of USA who would be owning a thousand acres of land? They also added that there should be an exclusive political party of the farmers to protect

their interests in view of the pro-corporate policies supported by most of the mainstream political parties.

Kisan Union Leadership

There were also interactions with randomly selected Kisan Union activists from amongst the 32 farmers' unions active in Punjab. The largest farm union was BKU (Ekta Ugrahan) headed by Joginder Singh Ugrahan, having its allegiance to the radical Left. There are other 6 Kisan Organisations largely affiliated with the left, and other organisations claimed to be non-partisan. Most of the activist Kisan Union leaders at the district and the State level were vocal about the impact of these Acts and other issues they raised. Instead of dismantling the existing system, the government should have strengthened the existing system to provide food security, food sovereignty and make farming a viable activity.

A. Impact of the Ordinances

- 1) Kisan activists were of the view that these Acts have been framed to privatise agriculture operations, agriculture practices and food distribution. They will benefit the traders, especially big corporates. Together, these ordinances are targeted at usurping State powers, and override state laws and the market committees.
- 2) Secondly, these Acts will adversely affect consumers as prices of agricultural commodities shall rise. It may also, by implication, encourage imports on competitive prices. If that happens, farmers will be pauperized due to competition from imports and an information asymmetry in the market.
- 3) Thirdly, in the case of a dispute, the power given to sub-divisional magistrate will strengthen the hold of the powerful interests in the village.

B. What are the issues?

- 1) Procurement by Central Agencies may become fluid and reduce the bargaining capacity of the farmers. This may provide favourable conditions to the corporates to exploit the vulnerability of the small and marginal farmers.
- 2) The Act does not stipulate that the private players *will not* be able to procure at rates lower than the Minimum Support Prices (MSP) fixed by the government for various crops. In fact, there is no protection to the farmers on the account.
- 3) The FCI procures around 10% of the total production, and 90% is procured by the state agencies in Punjab. The Act does not provide for payment of the carry forward charges to the State agencies. This will create further problems in procurement.
- 4) Presently in India, six per cent of the total farmers are covered under MSP, and the remaining 94 per cent are already at the mercy of the market forces. However, in Punjab and Haryana, it is the reverse. Now

the farmers in Punjab and Haryana will also be forced to surrender to the corporates.

C. What should have been done?

- 1) Three Acts passed by the Parliament require to be repealed as they will promote privatisation of agriculture and shall benefit the hoarders and big corporates.
- 2) The agricultural reforms as claimed by the government, are in fact a retrogression. The need is to legalise Minimum Support Price (MSP) rather than eliminate it. This is necessary for the survival of the farmers and for the food security of the poor.

The Core issues is Procurement of the total produce. Even if the whole State is declared as Mandi, who will procure and how much? After the State government has passed the legislation, it should procure the grains on the declared MSP and therefore, sell the same to the Centre; or the Centre can continue to procure and, if they procure less, then the remaining should be procured by the State by paying the declared MSP.

Governments should be bound to procure the stocks from farmers in Punjab particularly wheat and paddy. If they want to procure less, farmer should be paid for not producing. In other words, farmers should be given option for not growing and be compensated under the WTO compatible blue box.

- 3) Subsidies are considered trade-distorting by the World Trade Organisation under the agreement on agriculture. It is divided into three boxes - Blue, Green and Amber. In amber box, the subsidy is limited like, support prices or directly related to production up to five per cent for developed countries and 10 per cent for countries like, India. The need is to make agricultural subsidies to the Indian farmers globally competitive.
- 4) Another, major demand is to scrap the Electricity (Amendment) Bill. The Farmer Unions say if this Bill becomes a law, they will lose the free electricity provision as it will promote privatisation of electricity and discontinuation of the free power supplied to the farmers in Punjab.
- 5) To scrap a provision under which the farmers responsible for burning the farm residue can be imprisoned for five years, besides imposition of a fine of up to Rs 1 crore. The farmers arrested on the charges of burning paddy stubble in Punjab should be released forthwith unconditionally.¹⁴

Negotiations

There is currently political stalemate regarding the movement as both the parties i.e. the Central Government and the Kisan Unions have defined their boundaries. The Kisan Unions asserted that they want their Acts to be repealed. Whereas, the repeated assertions made by the Prime Minister is that there was no question

of withdrawal of the Acts as these were favourable to the farmers - defined the limits of negotiations.

The first round of talks with the farmers were held on December 3, 2020. In the sixth round, the Centre agreed to exempt the farmers from stubble burning penalty and dropped the changes notified in the Electricity Amendment Bill, 2020. As a follow-up, the government also offered to amend the provisions related to the fee structure notified in the Agriculture Produce Market Committees (APMCs), and also promised stricter provisions to safeguard the farmers' land rights, strengthening of the notified markets and a guarantee on minimum support prices (MSPs). These proposals were debated and rejected by a majority vote by 35 farmer organisations represented in the *Samyukt Kisan Morcha* (SKM). Subsequently, in January 12, 2021, the Supreme Court stayed for 18 months the implementation of three controversial farm laws, besides constituting a committee to reach fair and equitable solutions. The leaders of the movement registered the fact that it was politics, which had primacy not legal recourse. The Supreme Court has a role, but it cannot reverse the anti-people implications of the process of liberalisation, privatization and globalisation. In the aftermath of SC intervention, it is clear that there exists harmony amongst the various institutions of the State on market reforms that were initiated in 1991. And in that sense, the farmer unions were clear that resolution of this conflict was within the political domain and not legal.

It has also been shown that there has been something seriously wrong with the prescription of 'diversification' since it was presented as anti-grain, as if income of the farmers cannot be multiplied by growing grains. If the Acts proposed can help farmers earn more income, then what stops the State from purchasing grains from the farmers and sell the same to corporates and earn income for the State? It is strange that the State government has abdicated its responsibilities. Why cannot the State government take assurance from the Central government and procure from the farmers and stand guarantee for payment?

Turning Point: State Response from Indifference to Communal Twist

The turning point in the movement came when the protest march on the Republic Day (January 26, 2021) turned violent and some of the protesters hoisted the Nishan Sahib at the historic the Red Fort in Delhi. And it was propagated that the movement had been hijacked by Sikh radicals and anti-national forces. As a result, 44 FIRs were registered and 127 persons were arrested in connection with the violence on Republic Day. The government slammed the farmers' leadership and asked protesting farmers on the Delhi-Ghazipur border to vacate the protest site (Dhankhar et al., 2021).

The Central government, during hearings on pleas challenging the constitutional validity of farm laws in the Supreme Court, claimed that 'Khalistanis' have infiltrated the ongoing farmers' protest on Delhi borders. According to The Express, 'The claim made by Attorney General K K Venugopal came in response when the Bench headed by Chief Justice of India

S A Bobde enquired about the charges by one of the parties that a banned outfit, 'Sikhs for Justice', was aiding the protests.' The Attorney General said in response 'We have been informed there is a Khalistani infiltration in the protests', also adding that he will file an affidavit along with the necessary inputs of the intelligence bureau' (Express Web Desk, 2021).

The establishment's hopes of damning the movement and dampening the spirit of the farmers proved to be wrong. So was the establishment's attempt to polarize Sikhs and Hindus. What happened instead was the opposite as leaders of the Kisan Unions disowned the violators and condemned the violent acts.

No doubt, leaders of the farmers' protest were pushed on to the back foot by these developments. Even a balanced BKU leader Rajewal accused the youth from Haryana for these violent acts. To quote;

I refused to preside over the meeting because I knew farmers from Haryana cannot keep their protests peaceful and their children do not obey their orders. I told them that Haryanvi farmers had failed the Jat agitation in 2016 and would jeopardise our peaceful protest (Manav, 2021).¹⁵

However, Rajewal apologised for his statement, and said he did not mean to undermine the role of Haryanvi farmers. The Kisan Unions disowned those elements who were responsible for going against the mandate of the Samyukt Kisan Morcha. They debarred an activist Deep Sidhu for this.¹⁶ Bharatiya Kisan Union (BKU) leader Rakesh Tikait's emotional appeal on January 28, 2021 provided another lease of life to the movement. The farmers condemned the violence, disowned the perpetrators and termed the Red Fort incident as shameful.¹⁷

A number of farmers and their sympathisers resented the act of fringe elements at the Lal Kila. They termed it as an anti-farmer, anti-Sikh and anti-Punjab act encouraged by those who are opposed to the farmers' interest. Even the Akalis, who profess to represent the interests of Punjab and of the Sikh minority, condemned it. All the Punjab Kisan unions termed it as a conspiracy to defame the movement. Even the urban Hindus, while condemning this event, blamed the fringe elements and not the Sikhs or farmers.

However, after the incident, songs started reverberating the political events, such as Mamata Banerjee's victory in West-Bengal, as result of their efforts. 'Ho wih Bengal te jadta koka/Fer dubare Mamta ne dhonn cho killa kadh ke rakhta/Kadh ke rakhta janata ne/Ho Didi di iss jeet ch hissa/Thodda vi taan paya ae' (Mamata has embellished Bengal's Cap with other jewel/People have defeated a humbled the arrogant/All of us have contributed to Didi's Victory).

A significant dimension was added to the protest when farmers carried out Covid care and relief activities, refuting the Centre's bid to label them as terrorist sympathizers or anti-national. The 18th century folk song *Bella Ciao*, originally sung by women workers in Italy on paddy fields to protest against the harsh working conditions, became the main theme song to oppose new farm laws in India. The song goes 'Bella Ciao - Bella Ciao, Farm Laws Vapis Jao'. The *Bella Ciao* means Goodbye Beautiful. Another significant dimension was added to the

protest when Punjabis carried out welfare activities and a popular singer Bajwa wrote a song citing how the so-called Terrorist Kaum (Punjabi Kaum), accusingly labelled as such by some right wing sections, is distributing oxygen cylinders to the needy ones under *Langar Seva*. The song goes '*Ho Nawa Banaya Pind Aa Authe, Saddi Vi Hunn Hind Ae Authe, Junga Na Itihaas Hai Sadda, Guru Gobind De Singh Hai Othe, Atankwadiya Ne Hi Langar, Oxygen Da Laya Ae* [We have set up a new village, a replica of Hind; Rewriting history are the descendant of the tenth Guru. And these very terrorists do free sewa of the oxygen for the needy] (Bajwa, 2021).

The leaders of the movement registered the fact that it was the politics which had primacy in resolving the conflicts, not the legal recourse. It asserted that the Supreme Court has its role, but it cannot reverse the processes of liberalization, privatization and globalization having anti-people implications. In view of the economic reforms since 1994, there exists a peculiar sense of harmony with the market among the various institutions of the State, including the Supreme Court. The same logic was extended to the political parties as consensus on the market reforms had been evident. Thus, it is the growth model which is primarily under the shadow even as the federal principle is also being tested.

One limitation of the movement is that it has remained a conglomerate of 35 organisations and could not throw up a leader for shaping future politics. One of the songs lamented this fact and stated that had there been a strong leader, a number of activities could have been initiated like tearing up of these farm Acts, defeating the government, but only if *Bhindra da Sher Jiunda hunda je aaj kithe*. Also, the agitation could not transcend the social and class fault-lines that have traditionally existed between the farmers and the landless labourers. It has also failed to throw up a framework for the transformation of agriculture.

However, the protest is going to resist the implementation of the three Acts. The agenda to transform agriculture is yet to be articulated. This needs to be comprehensive to include strategies for the redistribution of income, integration of agrarian class and capital with other sectors of the economy and also to mitigate environmental consequences such as, receding ground water table, water logging, damage to soil fertility, infection of pesticide residues in water, milk vegetables, grains, cattle and humans.

Summary

A critical analysis of the agitations and movements launched indicates that most of the demands highlighted were economic in nature and were shorn of religious and communal in content, but the state response has been invariably communal either blatantly or in a disguised manner. Further, historically, most of the kisan movements could not overcome the faultline between the 'Kisans' and the 'Khet Mazdoors'. There is an urgent need to overcome the flipflop in public policy and revisit the market-centered growth model to ensure food security for the poor, food sovereignty of the country, and income redistribution policies for the marginalized populations, including farmers.

Food is grown not merely for profit. Food production is for livelihood, food distribution is for survival of the poor and food trade involves sovereignty of the country. Therefore, it is not in the domain of market; it is at the core of a welfare state. If the State does not proactively engage with the market to moderate its callousness, it loses its purpose as a constitutional entity, mandated to provide the people their basic existence.

The assumption that the market shall protest and multiply the farmers' income is not only fallacious, but misleading. Three Acts passed by the Parliament is a step towards making agriculture a hostage to market fundamentalism. To pursue policies under the assumption that these Acts shall ensure a better livelihood of the farmers, provide food security to the millions living on the margins and protect the sovereignty of the country, is untenable. These Acts shall have direct implications on the livelihood and survival of the people engaged in or dependent on agriculture, food security of the poor and food sovereignty of the country. No doubt, with these Acts, agricultural operations may become more efficient, but it will only marginalize the farmers.

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Notes

¹ From Punjab alone, 32 organizations are driving the farm agitations. Significant among these are BKU Ekta Ugrahan, BKU Ekta Dakonda, BKU Lakhawal, BKU Rajewal, BKU Sidhupur, Krantikari Kisan Union, Kirti Kisan Union, Kisan Mazdoor Sangharsh Committee, Kisan Sangharsh Committee Punjab, Punjab Kisan Union, BKU Kadian, and BKU Mansa (Times of India, 2020). Eight of the kisan unions of Punjab have political affiliations. Six kisan unions are affiliated with the left and two are affiliates of the Shiromani Akali Dal, a regional party of Punjab. The largest union Bharatiya Kisan Union (EKTA Ugrahan) is also a left leaning groups and ideologically is not in favour of contesting elections.

² 'We've decided that we won't allow any political party leader to speak on our stage, be it Congress, BJP, AAP or other parties. Our Committee will allow other organisations, who are supporting us, to speak if they follow our rules' (Sarkar, 2020).

³ '...commission agents or arhtiyas in Punjab get 2.5% commission, which is around Rs 1,500 crore annually. Once new trade areas develop, the market may

not require the commission agents. Even if buyers go through these agents, their commissions will fall drastically' (Paliath, 2020).

⁴ The struggle against the Anti-colonization Bill of 1906 is also known as the *Pagri Sambhal O Jatta* movement (Singh, 1984).

⁵ The Anti-money-lender uprising took place in West Punjab (in the districts of Multan, Muzaffargarh and Jhang) in the year 1915 due to heavy indebtedness among Muslim peasants under the debt of Kirars, Hindu money-lenders (Singh, 1984).

⁶ In the 1920s, the Akali movement also had anti-feudalism characteristics as the movement activities sought to wrest a large number of properties of Gurudwaras taken by Mahants (Singh, 1984).

⁷ Most of these tenant struggles were fought in Patiala state, Una tehsil of Hoshiarpur, hilly regions and in the Nili-bar belt of West Punjab. Most prominent among those are agitation against the Biswedari system in the Patiala state; Struggle against Thappa (Stamp) and Kankoot system; No rent movement of 1936-37 with the objective of No-Batai-Non-payment of Rent; Muzara agitation; United struggle of Hindus, Muslim, and Sikh tenants against Pathan Landlord in Hoshiarpur; Agitation of tenants in Rabi 1948 by rejecting the *shahi-farman* (Singh, 1984).

⁸ In general, the communist-controlled radical Kisan movement under the banner of Kisan Sabha was dominated by cultivators. This movement was not able to draw landless labour in a big way (Bhalla, 1983).

⁹ 'The British initiated a process of agricultural colonization. This was projected by the British as a kind of welfarism. It is with this motive in mind that the British developed Canal Colonies. The Canal Colonies represented the most extensive form of socio-economic and demographic engineering attempted by the British in South Asia. The gains that accrued from agricultural colonization made the Punjab appear to be the success story for British rule in India. Closer examination reveals a very different picture. Canal colonization released vast resources and provided a real opportunity for economic development in the Punjab. However, despite significant economic growth, the Punjab remained an underdeveloped region' (Ali 1987: 237).

¹⁰ These processes suggest that the period of British rule in Punjab was dominated by three major themes: political entrenchment, revenue extraction and military requirements (Ali 1988: 5).

¹¹ 'The labour class is not participating although it was connected with land. These laws will affect labour badly. This is a matter of food security because the public distribution system will continue only if the government continues to

make purchases. Secondly, farm labour are also part of agriculture - if the land is handed over to corporates, it will also harm them' (Excerpts) (Singh, 2021). 'Image that Modi Doesn't Retract Statements is Shattered: Excerpts from an interview with BKU (EU) head Joginder Singh Ugrahan'. (Caravan, 2021)

¹² Progressive Deprivation (RD) is a stage which takes place when 'long-run, more-or-less steady improvement in peoples' value position generates expectations about continued improvement but value capabilities stabilize or decline after such a period of improvement. The value expectations generated due to continued improvement stand for the goods and particular conditions of life that people believe they are rightfully entitled to, whereas value capabilities are the goods and conditions that people think they can get and keep' (Gurr, 2016: 53).

¹³ The privatisation of agriculture operations in Punjab was initiated in 1986 under the Congress regime. A Rs 22 crore fruit pulp and concentration plant of the multinational soft drink giant Pepsi-Cola was to be set up in collaboration with the Tatas and Punjab Agro Ltd. It promises larger incomes for fruit and vegetables growers of the state and job opportunities for about 50,000 people in the long run (Mudgal, 1988).

¹⁴ There is a consensus on the above-mentioned demands amongst the Kisan Unions. However, BKU (Ekta Ugrahan) and the left affiliated farmer unions have presented a separate 13-point charter of demands to the government (Sahgal, 2020).

¹⁵ Dr. Darshan Pal, President Krantikari Kisan Union, said that 'there were some attempts at creating differences between members from Punjab and Haryana - we instantly planned this rally to tell our brothers from Haryana that we are united' (Tribune News Service, 2021).

¹⁶ Actor-turned-activist Deep Sidhu has been barred from speaking on the official stage of farmers' organisations. Sidhu also courted controversy after he aired his views in support of the slain Sikh militant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale. Apart from Sidhu, farmer organisations have announced that former gangster-turned-activist Lakha Sidhana, a close associate of Sidhu, will also not be allowed to speak from their stage. Ravneet Bittu, a Congress Member of Parliament alleged that the Khalistani elements were trying to hijack the farmers' agitation and Union Home Minister Amit Shah should act quickly to resolve the situation (Sethi, 2020).

¹⁷ Several farmer unions protesting at the Tikri border took out a 'tiranga rally' on Thursday in what they said was an attempt to dispel 'myths' allegedly being propagated by the government that protesters at Delhi borders did not respect the Tricolour, while insisting they would not vacate the protest site until their demands were met (Iftikhar, 2021).

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