

Agriculture and Citizenship: Making Sense of the Farmers' Movement of 2020-21

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The on-going farmers' movement, which started in Punjab in wake of the three farm laws passed by the union government of India in July 2020, culminated in mobilisations against them across different states and then reaching the borders of Delhi in the last week of November 2020. With its focus on Punjab and Punjabi farmers, this paper attempts at understanding this rather surprisingly massive response of the farmers to the new laws. The paper attempts to explore possible reasons for the farmers' anger and their ability to gain support from a much wider section of Punjabis, including the Punjabi diaspora and the younger generations, who have often expressed distaste for agriculture. It goes on to argue for a need to explore cultural roots of the agrarian protests through historical and anthropological lens.

After briefly introducing the three farm laws, the paper offers a short overview of the contemporary history of Indian agriculture with focus on Punjab as a region. This is followed by a critical engagement with popular ideas of the inevitability of the decline of agriculture and demise of agrarian cultures. The paper underlines the need for a context specific historical and sociological understanding of agrarian cultures rather than a pre-scripted teleology that takes the end of agriculture for granted. By doing so, it also questions the value of the nearly universal view of 'growth and development', which sees the end of village and agriculture not only as inevitable but also a desirable accomplishment for a nation trying to modernize itself.

Introduction

In the last week of November 2020, a large contingent of farmers from Punjab began their march to the national capital demanding immediate repeal of three newly enacted laws concerning agriculture. They were joined on their way, in large numbers, by their fellow farmers from Haryana. Defying all the odds and crossing all the hurdles, they managed to reach the borders of Delhi on 26th-27th of November. Their numbers kept swelling by the hours, going up to around 300,000 over the next few days. They settled in for the winter, staying put at the borders of Delhi, despite the harsh weather. On the 26th of January, their strength rose to nearly a million, as many more of them arrived from across the country on a special call to show their strength. Thus, when India celebrated its Republic Day in the capital city, and paraded its military might to the Indian public and

the world, the farmers drove their tractors on belt roads of the city, in a parallel display of strength.

The farmers since then have been sitting on the borders of Delhi. Though their numbers have been fluctuating, their resolve to fight for their demands appears intact. Their spirit, their courage, their conduct and their organizational discipline has been a source of surprise for many. Perhaps the most bewildered were the 'pro-regime' intellectuals, journalists and opinion makers. Though the ruling establishment had sensed that the new laws are unlikely to be welcomed by the farmers, they had hoped that the looming pandemic would discourage them from stepping out to protest and they would eventually reconcile to the intended changes. This is clearly evident from the fact the three laws were initially introduced as 'ordinances' by the Union Cabinet in the month of June 2020, without the mandated feedback from the Indian public and consultations with the stake holders. They were subsequently passed by the Indian Parliament, during the second half of September 2020, when India was experiencing its first peak of Covid-19 infections and the country was under a national lockdown.

The resolve of the farmers also seems to have bemused, albeit pleasantly, the critiques of the Union Government of India led by Mr Modi. 'Someone had finally found the courage to stand-up to the undemocratic and authoritarian power that ruled the country', was echoed by a wide range of 'left-liberal' intellectuals and political activists from across the country. Many of them would have normally looked at such protests of the landed Jatts of Punjab and Jats of Haryana with a sense of suspicion, if not outright scorn. The visible Sikh religious symbols and slogans of the Punjabi farmers, displayed proudly and loudly in their gatherings, no longer seemed to attract any objections from the secularist elite of Delhi. Even the communists of Kerala and Bengal appeared mesmerised by the Punjabi songs of Kanwar Grewal and Harf Cheema and their open use of the Khalsa symbols and the militant religious Sikh greetings/slogans that the congregations on Delhi borders echoed in their *pandals* and on the micro-YouTube channels.

As the movement kept gaining in strength and support over the next few weeks, many of the farmer leaders too expressed their amazement. That 'they had not expected the kind of groundswell of support from farmers of the region and from such a wide spectrum of the Indian society, and even the outside world', was repeated by many speakers at these meetings over the next few weeks and months, while complimenting those sitting on the *dharnas*. 'This is no longer a movement of the farmers of Punjab and Haryana, or of India. This has become a much bigger movement, a global movement. We are being supported by people from across the world. We have become a source of their hopes as well', farmer leader Balbir Singh Rajewal often repeated in his speeches.

How do we make sense of such an unexpected and unanticipated mobilization? Some well-meaning experts have described the farmers' movement as something similar to the peasant uprisings of the 19th and 20th century, invoking categories like 'moral economy' to understand and explain the anger and anguish of the protesting farmers.¹ Or, should we describe this as

simply a struggle for continued state patronage and support, by those involved in farming as an occupation, since the farm unions have been demanding an assurance on extending the minimum support price regime? Or, is this merely an assertion of a rural dominant caste that is anxious of its future and wary of losing its regional dominance in the emerging power structure and shifting class balance in the national and regional politics in favour of the urban-based corporate capital?²

While there may be an element of truth in some of these explanations, the protesting farmers are certainly not 'subsistence-oriented peasants'. They are enterprising cultivators, who use a wide range of farm inputs and produce primarily for the market. They have been doing this for decades. Beyond farms, they are also integrated into the larger economic, social and political life of the nation and the world. Their organizations are named 'unions' because they function like the trade unions of urban factory workers, as interest groups, meant to bargain with relevant 'others' on their behalf. However, the latter two explanations are too instrumental and do not explain the overwhelming support that the movement has received, particularly the financial and emotional support of the Punjabi diaspora, living far away from the farm lands of Punjab, and the younger generations, who have often expressed a distaste for agriculture as a possible occupation.

This paper is an attempt at exploring the sources of the 'surprise' and basis for why these protests have struck such a deep chord and argues for a need to examine its cultural roots with a historical and anthropological lens. The paper begins by providing a brief context to the ongoing farmers' movement and the three farm laws. The next section provides a brief overview of the contemporary history of Indian agriculture with a regional focus on Punjab, a kind of revisit. The last section attempts a critical engagement with the popular ideas of the inevitability of the decline of agriculture and a demise of agrarian cultures. The concluding section goes on to argue for a historical and sociological understanding of the agrarian cultures rather than a pre-scripted teleology that takes the end of agriculture for granted, and is accompanied by a discussion on the idea of developmentalism, which sees the end of village and agriculture not only as inevitable but also a desirable accomplishment for a nation trying to modernize itself, its ultimate self-realization.

The Context

As is evident from the above discussion, the immediate context of the current movement is the enactment of three laws by the Union government, done without any real consultations with the relevant stake holders. In the Indian legal system, agriculture is listed as a subject where provincial governments have autonomy of legislation and governance. However, given the nature of India's weak federal structure, the Union government often manages to compromise provincial autonomy. The enactment of the new laws is an example of such an overreach.

Of the three laws, two are newly drafted ‘acts’ and one an ‘amendment’ to a pre-existing law. The first of these, ‘The Farmers’ Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Act, 2020’, proposes to ‘liberalize’ the sale and purchase of agricultural commodities, specifically of food grains. The apprehension of the farmers is that it would undermine the pre-existing marketing framework and open-up the trading of farm produce outside the Agricultural Produce Marketing Committees (APMC), the *mandis*. The mandis were put in place by different state governments (although, not all) as part of a supporting structure for the surplus producing farmers of the state at the time of the Green Revolution which began in the 1960s and 1970s. Agencies of the Union government began to procure food grains through the APMC at an assured minimum support price (MSP) determined by it, to shore up its own food reserves for running the public distribution system (PDS) across the country. The new law makes no reference to the existing MSP regime or its future and raises the suspicion that the MSP may be done away with entirely.

The second legislation, the ‘Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement of Price Assurance, Farm Services Act, 2020’, provides a framework for contract farming, where farmers can directly enter into agreements with one or more buyers to produce a specific crop, which the latter purchases at a pre-fixed price. Provisions of contract farming have already been in place at the state level but the new law brings it into a common national framework. This law, too, makes no provision for any kind of price security to the cultivators. Provisions provided for dispute resolution have been particularly a source of anxiety for the farmers, since they see these as skewed in favour of the buyers.

The third law is an amendment of the existing law named ‘The Essential Commodities (Amendment) Act, 2020’. The new amendment does away with the existing limits on storage of cereals, pulses, oilseeds, edible oils, onions, and potatoes. They are no longer listed as essential commodities, opening up the possibility of their being hoarded by those with the resources and storage facilities, namely corporate capital. Farmers fear that is the real intention of the government, providing corporate capital an opportunity to enter agricultural markets to earn big profits. Such a provision would also imply an eventual withdrawal of price security to the farmers, exposing them to the vagaries of a market dominated by big corporates. Together, the three new laws open-up the agricultural sector to an active commercial engagement by the big corporates, who could purchase, store and even dictate to the farmers what crops to produce, through the contract farming system.

While the farmers, particularly those from the north and north-western state of Punjab, Haryana, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh, find everything in the new laws as being against their interests, and a sell-off to the corporate capital, pro-government economists insist that the new laws will help the farmers immensely. Chand articulates this perspective clearly in the following:

...the three policy reforms undertaken by the Central government through the three new Acts are in keeping with the changing times and requirements of farmers and farming. If they are implemented in the right spirit, they will take Indian agriculture to new heights and usher in the transformation of the rural economy. The reforms have generated optimism for India to become a global power in agriculture and a powerhouse for global food supply. The reforms carry the seed for farmers' prosperity and transformation of the rural economy and to make it a growth engine of the Indian economy.³

Why do the farmers not recognize what is good for them? For the Union government the problem lies primarily in their inability to comprehend the laws and them being manipulated by certain oppositional political interests. When the farmer organizations were initially called for discussions by the central government, at the early stage of the protests, they were given presentations by government officials on the various clauses and to emphasize the point that they had not actually understood the new laws. A senior minister even suggested that the concerned ministry and its officials, who were engaging with farmers, ought to prepare better-quality power point presentations, in simple and clear language, to remove the farmers' doubts about the new laws. Some mainstream television channels too repeated this narrative, through their reporting and their discussions, with 'experts'. They invariably tended to accuse the 'leaders' of the farmers of collaborating with opposition politicians to fool the *bhole-bhale kisan* (naive farmers).⁴

While this may appear simply to be a case of statist propaganda against a popular movement, there is also an underlying appeal of such an argument among the urban middle classes, who have increasingly come to be the hegemonic social group. It is their perception of agriculture and its place in their visions of India's futures that have come to increasingly dominate the mainstream of India's political agenda. It is in this context that the next section attempts a brief revisit to the contemporary history of Indian agriculture.

Revisiting Indian Agriculture⁵

When Robert Clive won the battle of Plassey for the British East India Company in 1757 and the company established its rule over parts of Indian territories, their first target was to secure rights over the revenue collected from agricultural lands. Envisaging an endless capacity of Indian peasant to pay taxes, they initiated formalization of the existing arrangements of revenue administration through a range of reforms, called the land settlements. By the time they managed to reach Punjab after defeating the Sikh forces in 1849, they had experimented with a range of land revenue systems. However, they formalised land relations everywhere, hoping to maximise their share of the revenue collection. As the demand for raw cotton in Britain escalated after the Industrial Revolution, they also ensured through their revenue policies that the Indian cultivators shifted to the cultivation of cash crops like cotton over cereals. Their

policies also introduced a new legal framework, which enabled the creation of a market for the sale and purchase of agricultural lands.

As is well-known, the British colonial administrators popularised the view that the pre-colonial rural India had a hopeless economy, which had been stagnant for centuries and millennia, caught in the whirlpool of caste and a self-imposed culture of isolation from the outside world. As they propagated to the world outside, the colonial and Orientalist narratives framed the Indian culture as having had no history of technological progress (Inden, 1986). The local people purportedly surrendered to the vagaries of nature and the ideology of *karma*. In reality, however, the agrarian economy of the region during the pre-colonial period had not been a 'backward' system or a homogenous social and economic universe that had been eternally stagnant. As historical research has shown, the Indian cultivators had evolved a range of sustainable systems, including modes of irrigating their fields with wells and ponds (Chatterjee and Rudra, 1989). They did not depend only on rains. Indian agriculture also produced a substantial surplus. Thriving urban centres and flourishing political empires of the ancient and medieval times were a proof of this. Much of the wealth that the empires possessed, and in search of which the European colonizers came to India in the first place, was sourced primarily from its agrarian riches, the origin of which mostly lay in its diverse agrarian crops, spices and indigo.

Commenting on the economic vibrancy of the region, historian David Ludden, for example, sums up the historical evidence on the pre-colonial period, particularly the period immediately before the British established their rule in the region as follows:

In the fourteenth century, South Asia became a region of travel and transport connecting Central Asia and the Indian Ocean. This redefined the location of all its agrarian territories... New technology, ideas, habits, languages, people and needs came into farming communities. New elements entered local cuisine. People produced new powers of command, accumulation, and control, focused on strategic urban sites in agrarian space. By 1600, ships sailed between China, Gujarat, Europe, and America. ... A long expansion in world connections occurred during centuries when a visible increase in farming intensity was also reshaping agrarian South Asia. Regional formations of agrarian territory came into being, sewn together by urban networks... (Ludden, 1999:113)

Questioning the assumptions of the colonial view, he shows how certain communities moved across regions, resulting in significant changes in the agrarian economies, as also in the social composition of cultivating classes. Speaking about the present north-west of India, he writes how the drying up of the Saraswati river forced the Jat farmers of Rajasthan region to move 'into the upper Punjab doabs and into the western Ganga basin in the first half of the second millennium' (ibid117). He continues:

All these trends combined to open new agricultural territories from Panipat to Sialkot along very old trade routes running from Kabul to Agra. By the sixteenth century, Jalandhar and Lahore were thriving towns surrounded by lush farmland. Wheat lands expanded west of the Ganga and in Punjab doabs astride trade routes and around old trading towns where distinctively urban commercial and administrative groups were already prominent... As farmland expanded in spaces between the plains and high mountains, new opportunities for trade arose at ecological boundaries, and this stimulated more commercially oriented production and processing. By the sixteenth century, tobacco, sugarcane, honey, fruits, vegetables, and melons fed Punjab commercial life, along with profits from sericulture, indigo, and all the elements of cloth manufacturing (ibid 117-8).

The decadence of the Indian agriculture started during the British rule, particularly in the eastern regions, where they established their rule first, after the battle of Plassey in 1757. As mentioned above, their only aim of colonizing the region during the initial decades seems to have been driven by a greed for extracting land revenue, which produced economic and social disasters. A move to the cultivation of cash crops, such as cotton for export and for its use in the newly opened cloth mills in their emerging industrial cities of Britain meant lesser production of the cereals required for local consumption. Their policies also killed the local craft and industry, leading to a massive de-urbanization of India and a significant increase in the rural population and their dependence on the agrarian economy.

The frequent famines caused by the shifting cropping patterns in different part of the subcontinent and a general sense of desperation in the countryside produced anger against the colonial rulers. It manifested itself in a series of 'peasant movements' during the first half of the 20th century. Some of these movements were led by the Congress Party under the leadership of Gandhi, while others were helmed by communists. They all demanded a change in the political regime and restoration of their rights over the lands they cultivated. It was in this context that the agrarian question became an urgent priority with the native political elite who inherited power from the colonial rulers after Independence in 1947.

Rural Development and Agrarian Change

The early initiatives by the independent Indian state were in the form of legislative interventions that attempted to restore ownership right to tillers of the land and provide them security of tenure. Land Reform legislations enacted by the state governments on the directives of the Union government produced mixed results. They did help in reducing the hold of intermediaries and traditional *zamindaris* in some parts of the country, but did so only in those states where the cultivating peasants could build sufficient pressure on the local state

functionaries. The government of India also introduced a Community Development Programme (CDP) hoping that the villages would work cooperatively towards rebuilding local communities, as Gandhi had envisaged. However, these initiatives had very limited success in improving the productivity of land (Moore, 1966).

By the late 1960s the Nehruvian state managed to find the resources to invest in modernizing its agrarian economy. Helped by some global agencies, and using the new technologies developed elsewhere, India moved on to a path of increased productivity. Though confined to a few promising pockets, state investment in agriculture provided an impetus to its growth and, within a just a decade or so, the country was producing enough food for its rapidly growing population. The Green Revolution was made possible as much by the enterprising farmers as by the kind of investments that the Indian state made in establishing agricultural infrastructure. From the construction of dams and canal networks to setting-up agricultural universities, marketing networks and making provisions for cheap credit from institutional sources on a 'priority' basis, the Indian state played a critical role in enabling its farmers to pursue the path of intensifying production. Green Revolution, as a concept, has since spread to some other 'less-developed' regions of India as well, though the required investments in agricultural infrastructure are no longer forthcoming from any agency of the Union or state governments.

Envisaged in North America, the Green Revolution was a technology-driven programme focused on increasing productivity of land. It assumed that an increase in income would eventually also 'trickle-down' to the poor. However, empirical research showed that this was not happening and the number of those living below a subsistence level of nutrition, the poverty-line, was quite large. The Union government responded to this by introducing special programmes targeting the poor. These initiatives were put together into a single scheme called the Integrated Rural Development Programme (IRDP). The IRDP was replaced with the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) during the early 2000s.

Neo-liberal Reforms and the 'Decline' of Agriculture

The neo-liberal reforms of the early 1990s fundamentally changed the orientation of the Indian state towards agriculture and its farming populations. The broader orientation of the Indian economy also began to change. Once liberalization was unleashed, the private corporate sector began to grow rapidly. Thus, the size of the national economy expanded. But the corporate economy was at first largely focused on the high-end service sector, which did not generate many jobs. Thus, unlike the 'classical' growth trajectories of the industrialized nations of the global North, even when the share of India's agriculture in national income declined rather rapidly, a much larger proportion of the workforce remained employed in agriculture. Such a decline in the relative size of agrarian economy in terms of its value addition has produced many imbalances, going beyond the sphere of income and employment.

The growing size and power of the urban and corporate economy marginalized its agrarian economy in the national imagination, the effects of which began to also be felt by those working in the sector. For example, the earlier growth in agriculture had given enough incomes and aspiration to the landowning classes/castes to educate their wards, hoping that they would find employment outside the village. However, the ones who controlled corporate capital preferred their own and only those from the urban upper castes and urban educated individuals with the required cultural capital, leaving those coming from agrarian backgrounds in the lurch.

As the power and influence of the corporate capital grew, it also began to diversify its economic enterprises beyond traditional manufacturing and business outsourcing in IT services and software. Agriculture and food processing began to attract them as avenues of possible investments and incomes. The growing size of the urban middle-classes and its increasing penchant for consumption provided a sure source of demand for processed food. Processed food products could also be exported to emerging markets abroad. To the neo-liberal policy makers of the Indian state, these appeared to be the most desirable solutions for an agricultural sector complaining of crises for a long time. However, given the diversity of legal frameworks governing agricultural lands and the restrictions put in-place against the purchase or leasing-in of agricultural lands by corporates, as a measure of protection to the farmers, corporate capital could not easily enter the agricultural economy. It is in this context that the Union government decided to enact the set of three new laws that would make it easier for the big corporations to enter the agricultural sector, on their own terms.

Punjab, the Regional Trajectories⁶

The partition of the subcontinent in 1947 and the subsequent political history of the region has produced a strong centripetal tendency, with the central government acquiring a much stronger position over the provincial states. As indicated above, the passing of the three laws by the Union government without any meaningful consultations with the state government and other stakeholders is another clear evidence of such a process. While this has often been discussed and debated at the political level, the diverse realities on the ground are rarely spoken about. The historical dynamics of agrarian regions, during the pre-colonial and colonial period were very diverse. These diversities continue to be significant even today. The agrarian trajectory of Punjab has been very different from that of other regions and the national narrative of agrarian realities today.

The Indian Punjab is among the smaller states of the union, covering just around 1.5 percent of its total geographical area, and a little over 2 percent contribution to its total population. However, the region has had a distinctive identity, shaped by its history, culture and linguistic distinctiveness. Until around the early 1990s, Punjab had been the richest state of the country with the highest per capita income. The sources of its prosperity had been its vibrant urban centres and a thriving agriculture.

It was not the post-independence state initiatives alone that helped the region develop its agrarian economy. Punjab had occupied a special status during the British rule as well. It was among the last territories to be conquered by the British colonizers, and they treated it very differently. The British recruited a section of the Punjabis into their army, who even fought wars for them, outside the subcontinent, including during the two World Wars. They also saw Punjab as a region with a potential for agricultural growth. Given that a good number of rivers flowed through the region, they invested in building a network of canals and moved sections of the Sikh farmers from its central and eastern districts to the newly irrigated lands of western Punjab, thus setting-up the 'Canal Colonies' (see Ali, 1988). The Sikh farmers returned back to their native districts after the Partition bringing with them the experience of entrepreneurial farming.

The post-colonial state too saw Punjab as a region with exceptional potential for agricultural growth. Confronting serious food deficits during the early decades after its independence, the Union government looked at Punjab as one of the most suitable regions for rapid economic growth. The first major irrigation and hydro-power project set-up after independence was primarily to serve the agricultural lands of Punjab. Though the construction of the legendary Bhakhra Nangal Dam on the river Satluj had been visualised by the pre-independence Punjab government, its construction was completed in 1963, just a few years before introduction of the Green Revolution technology in the region. As an extension of the Bhakhra Nangal project, the region saw the laying of an extensive network of canals, reaching up to parts of Rajasthan and Gujarat. The hydro-power generated by the project too became a cheap source of electricity for the tube-wells extensively used for irrigation in the region and their numbers steadily grew.

As indicated above, Punjab had been agriculturally a vibrant agrarian region even during the colonial period and it continued to record a positive growth during the first few decades after independence, despite all the social and political disruptions caused by the Partition. Punjab's agriculture grew at an impressive rate of 4.6% during 1950-64,⁷ improving India's food supplies.⁸

However, in the emerging geo-political and intellectual environment of the time, countries like India were being seen as 'Malthusian time bombs' (see Kumar, 1999:44). According to this view, their rapidly growing population could not be sustained by the slow pace of growth in their ability to produce food. This was also seen as a source of 'worry' by the western political powers in a world marked by the Cold-War. They advocated technology driven solutions to such perceived challenges. The hybrid high yielding variety (HYV) of seeds being developed in North America during the 1950s were seen as a way out for newly independent countries like India, which could be saved from an impending human and political crises, it was argued.

The western powers succeeded in selling this idea to the Union government of India and the HYV seeds arrived in the country in the mid-1960s. They were introduced as a package programme for 'revolutionary' growth of the agricultural economy. The 'package' called Green Revolution included use of chemical fertilizers, a variety of pesticides and herbicides, and an extensive use

of agricultural machinery. This package came with a variety of incentives, such as cheap credit from commercial banks and subsidies on farm inputs. It was around this time that the state governments were encouraged to also put in place a marketing network in the form of mandis for assured procurement of the farm produce. In order to build its own stocks of food grains for the PDS, the central government began to procure food grains through the newly set-up mandis at a pre-declared MSP, which was decided after calculating all the costs incurred by the cultivators, including the costs of labour. This new technological revolution in agriculture was to be supported by a network of scientifically trained professionals who were to be educated in the newly set-up agricultural universities, the first of which was set-up in Punjab at Ludhiana in 1962.

The success of the new seeds was premised on availability of assured irrigation. The canal network and water flowing from the Bhakhra Nangal project would have strengthened Punjab's claim for being selected as a prime site for the experiment. Though a large number of districts were selected from different parts of the country for the experiment with HYV seeds, Punjab was at the forefront of all this.

Given that the logic of new technology was about feeding the growing population and production of food-grains, the new HYV seeds were initially used for wheat cultivation, which is also a staple food of the Punjabis. However, it was soon realised that a large proportion of the Indian population ate rice. Though rice cultivation was not unknown in the region, it was a marginal crop. Rice needed a much larger volume of water than was available at most times of the year in the region. With new sources of irrigation becoming available, cultivation of rice was no longer a difficult proposition. It also turned out to be an economic and ecological boon for those pockets of the state that experienced perpetual water-logging, made worse by the newly constructed canals in these regions. Tube-wells that irrigated paddy remedied the problems created by the water seeping in from the canals and kept the fields ready for *rabi* crops later in the year (Shergill, 2005). Cultivation of paddy also came with other incentives. It was eagerly procured by the Food Corporation of India (FCI) and quickly became a viable commercial crop for the Punjabi farmers. Given its wider market, locally and abroad, farmers could often sell it at a price higher than the MSP to private traders. Some varieties, like the Basmati, for example, continue to be sold at a much higher price in the open market than the MSP available in the *mandis*.

As expected, Punjab turned out to be the most successful case in terms of adoption of new technologies and increase in agricultural productivity. While the average growth rate of the agricultural sector for the entire country in the period between 1961-62 and 1985-86 was 2.6 percent, the corresponding numbers for the state of Punjab alone was 6.4 percent, the highest across all the states. The neighbouring state of Haryana followed Punjab with 4.7 percent and Gujarat with a 3.4 percent growth rate was placed third during this period.

The adoption of HYV seeds was also much more extensive in the state of Punjab. Against the national average of 31 percent for 1974-76 and 54 percent for 1983-85, the total area under HYV seeds in Punjab was 73 and 95 percent,

respectively, significantly higher than in any other state of the country. This was true also for use of other inputs such as chemical fertilizers, pesticides, tube-wells, tractors and other machines. For example, by 1984-85 Punjab had 4642 tractors per 1 lakh gross cultivated area against the national average of 230 (Singh and Kohli, 2005:286-89). With increased use of technology, Punjab was also able to bring almost all of its cultivable land under farming. The prosperity produced by its agricultural sector made Punjab the state with the highest per capita income.

Such an extensive adoption of the new technology was made possible because of its acceptance by different classes of cultivators in Punjab. However, although new technology was supposed to be scale neutral, it certainly wasn't resource neutral, as John Harriss argues (Harriss, 1987). Along with the large landowners, the smaller landholders too, took to the new seeds, but many did not have the resources required for all the inputs, that had to be necessarily purchased from the market. They borrowed money, often from informal sources. The commission agents, the *arhtiyas*, in the newly set-up mandis did not hesitate to lend as long as they promised to bring their farm produce to them for sale. Thus, rural Punjab saw rapid mechanization of agriculture. Even those without the resources to buy tractors, shifted from the traditional bullocks, preferring to instead hire machines from the bigger landowners. Everyone was soon integrated into a market-oriented agriculture. Smaller landowners used their family labour more intensively, often getting a slightly higher yield per acre from their farms as compared to the more resourceful bigger farmers (Bhalla and Chadha, 1983).

Punjab agriculture also witnessed a significant change in its cropping pattern. The variety of crops sown in Punjab came down from 21 in the year 1960-61 to only 9 by 1990-91 and this has remained so thereafter. Wheat and rice emerged as the two most popular crops. The area under crops other than wheat during the *rabi* season declined from 62.74 percent in 1960-61 to 17.12 per cent in 2004-05. The change was much bigger for the *kharif* season and the area under rice cultivation increased ten-folds, from a mere 6.05 per cent in 1960-61 to a whopping 63.02 per cent in 2004-05.⁹

Caste, Class and Power

Use of new technology and HYV seeds also implied shift to a far more intensive agriculture. Cultivation of crops like paddy required much more labour, and it was needed throughout the cropping season. Machines also helped bring the barren and uncultivated lands under cultivation. Land owners began to increasingly self-cultivate, preferring to hire wage labour over leasing their lands out to tenants and *siris*. *Siris* worked as attached labourers but were paid a share of the produce, generally one-fifth, for their labour input. With a significant increase in productivity of land, this was no longer acceptable to the farmers. They preferred hiring them on annual wages, as *naukars* or farm servants but also often kept them tied by paying them wages in advance and keeping them perpetually indebted. In addition, they hired a much larger number

of casual labourers. Demand for labour was particularly high during the peak farm operations, such as sowing, harvesting and paddy transplantation.

As elsewhere in the subcontinent, land and labour relations in rural Punjab also have a caste dimension. Almost the entire population of *Dalits*, who make up nearly one-third of the total state population, are landless. They had traditionally been the source of agricultural labour for the landowning castes. Land ownership was caste-centric too. Most of the agricultural land is owned and cultivated by the *Jatts*. Besides Jatts, Punjab also has some other castes who own and cultivate land. They include *Rajputs*, *Gujjars*, *Sainis*, *Labanas* and *Kambojs*. These communities are either confined to a few pockets of the state or they are mostly owners of small and marginal holdings. Jatts too are internally heterogeneous in terms of their holding size. However, almost all the big landowners are Jatts and they have been part of the regional elite of Punjab. They were the group that gained the most from the British colonial policies of recruitment in the armed forces and the granting of land titles, as mentioned above.

The success of Green Revolution strengthened their hold over the rural economy and regional politics. Introduction of electoral democracy after independence enabled them to quickly emerge as the regional ruling elite. Their rise to power at the regional level further helped them consolidate their position in the village and the agrarian economy. The increasing demand for labour and growing formalization of labour relations tended to produce frictions in their relationship with the Dalits. The older *jajmani* ties disintegrated fast with most of the traditional caste occupations of the servicing castes becoming redundant.

Seeing their position change in the emerging capitalist agrarian economy, the labouring poor began to unite to demand better wages. However, the farmers found a solution to the growing assertion of the local Dalits by utilising labour from poorer regions of the country. A large number of the labouring poor began to arrive in Punjab from the eastern districts of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. They initially came only for the peak season activities, arriving for the wheat harvesting and staying back until paddy transplantation. Over the years, some of them began to stay through the year, working as regular farm servants, replacing the local Dalits. With increasing mechanization of agricultural processes, such as harvesting of wheat and paddy, and paddy transplantation, during the post-1990s, demand for this labour too has been declining.

However, the caste question has not gone away and continues to be conflictual, although the nature of caste conflict between Dalits and Jatts seems to have shifted from the axis of class to a question of dignity and citizenship. Though sharply divided across *jatis*, they all ask for a dignified space in the village life. The traditionally dominant Jatt Sikhs continue to see themselves as a superior people even when this idea receives no ideological sanctity from their religious traditions. They often see any form of Dalit assertion as a challenge to their authority, which occasionally leads to inter-caste tensions and conflict (Jodhka, 2002; 2003).

The landowning Jatts have also been looking outwards, aspiring to diversify their sources of income by investing in urban trade and educating their wards

(Jodhka, 2006). Many of the richer farmers have themselves become *arhtiyas* in grain mandis and have diversified their economic portfolios in other ways (Sinha, 2020). The Jatt Sikhs of Punjab have also been among the most mobile communities of the subcontinent and have been emigrating abroad in large numbers, mostly to the countries of Europe, North America and Australia. However, even when they leave the village and country along with their families, they tend to not sell their agricultural lands. This has produced a vibrant land tenancy market (Bansal, 2020). This also keeps them connected to their 'roots'. Some of the smaller cultivators in the region have also been exiting from agriculture to pursue their careers in the non-farm economy. They too tend to lease-out their land for cultivation to enterprising farmers with the resources and the required farm equipment.

Such a practice of reverse tenancy has kept the average size of *operational holdings* relatively large in the state. As per the Agricultural Census of 2015-16, on an average, as many as 86 percent of India's operational holdings were in the size category of small (less than two hectare) and marginal (less than one hectare). Together they cultivated 47 percent of all the cultivated area. In contrast, only 33% of the operational holdings in Punjab fell in the small and marginal categories and they accounted for only 9 percent of the state's total cultivated area. Punjab had 33 percent of its operational holdings in the category of medium (4 to 10 hectares) and large (above 10 hectares), and together they cultivate two-third of its total cultivated area. The remaining 34 percent of the holdings were in the semi-medium size category with 2 to 4 hectares of land cultivating 25 percent of the land. Nationally, only 5 percent of all the operational holdings fell in the two upper (above 4 hectares) categories with 29 percent of the total area under cultivation.¹⁰

Futures of Punjab Agriculture

In the recent national discourse, Punjab and its agrarian economy is invariably presented through its negatives: depleting water tables, growing farmer indebtedness, lack of alternative sources of employment, declining incomes and a general sense of social fragmentation, reflected presumably in widespread drug-addition among its youth. While there is an element of truth in some of this, they surely do not provide a complete picture of the ground realities of Punjab agriculture.

As mentioned above, in the post-independence period, Punjab emerged as the most prosperous state of India in terms of its per capita income and remained so until the early 1990s. The shift in India's development trajectory during the early 1990s unleashed new forces of economic growth. The prolonged conflict in the region around the question of Khalistan during the 1980s also dented the Punjab economy. While agricultural growth picked-up in rest of the country, Punjab saw a dip and grew by only 1.6 percent during 2005-06 and 2015-15 when the national average was 3.5 percent. The growth rate of agriculture in Punjab currently stands at around 2.3 percent. Its position in the national

economy has since been declining and it currently stands at number 10 among the major states of the country.

However, the reason for the relative decline of Punjab is not to be viewed in its agricultural sector alone. In fact, agriculture continues to do reasonably well in the state, primarily because the average size of its operational holdings is much higher than the national average. Punjab also has the best infrastructure required for agriculture in the entire country. An average agricultural household in Punjab still generates the highest monthly income (₹23,133), followed by Haryana (₹18,496) and Kerala (₹16,927).¹¹ Punjab has also done well in reducing the work force employed in agriculture. As per the periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) 2017-18, against the national average of 44.14 percent, agricultural sector in Punjab employed only 26 percent of its workers aged above 15 years.¹² Even in rural Punjab, agriculture does not provide employment to a majority of the resident workers. In the same year only 40.68 percent of the rural workers, including landless labourers, were employed in agriculture.

However, agriculture continues to be the most important economic activity in the state's economy and its social life. A significant proportion of the urban trade and industry are allied to agriculture. Punjab ranks fourth in terms of the number of agro-processing units in the country, after Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Telangana. The sector added 44 percent to the total gross value added by the manufacturing sector and employed about 46 percent of the total workers employed by registered factories.¹³ Punjab also continues to be ahead of other states in terms of productivity of food grains (wheat and rice) and the surpluses it generates. During the year 2017-18, average per hectare yield of cereals in Punjab was 4,733 kg against the national average of 2661 kg.

This is not to deny an absence of 'negatives' or 'crises' in rural Punjab and its agrarian economy. These have been well-known for quite some time. As is the case with the rest of India, agriculture in Punjab has been under severe stress since the early 1990s. While rice cultivation made sense for a limited while, it is no longer a sustainable crop for the state. Unregulated and subsidised exploitation of ground water has begun to produce a serious ecological crisis for the local agrarian economy, effects of which are already visible. Declining returns and rising costs have further strained the farming population of Punjab. This is clearly reflected in their growing indebtedness¹⁴ and increasing incidences of suicide (Singh et.al., 2016). The increasing desperation for going abroad among the rural Punjab youth is also indicative of the severe stress that the cultivating households feel today.

The local elite has been acutely aware of these crises, as also the cultivating farmers. When water tables go down, they are the ones whose cost of installing a tube-well substantially goes-up. The agenda of crop diversification has been around since 1986 when a committee headed by S.S. Johl had prepared a Report on the subject for the Punjab Government. While the proposal of replacing paddy with other crops has been forcefully advocated by many 'outsiders', in the absence of any concrete alternatives and initiative offered to the farmers, it is unlikely to be taken seriously. The way forward from these crossroads is difficult but certainly not impossible. The recent proposal by the Union

government and by a section of the establishment economists to let the free market take care of all the problems of India's agrarian economy has only deepened the anxiety felt by the farmers of Punjab, and elsewhere.

Farming, Developmentalism and Agrarian Cultures

Turning our focus back to the current protests and the protesting farmers, who have been sitting on the roads surrounding Delhi ever since their arrival, and occupying parts of the major highways connecting the national capital to different parts of the country, it is important to note their remarkable resilience. They have sat through the harsh winter and the peak summer temperatures, sleeping on mettled roads. More than 500 protesting farmers have died, mostly at the protest sites around Delhi, due to the hardships of weather and living conditions. Sitting in their thousands at the protest sites, far away from their homes and villages, also implies a significant expenditure, every day that they wouldn't be bearing lightly. How do we then explain the rise of such a strong farmers movement and its resilience?

The answer is simple. Treat it for what it is: the articulation of a voice demanding to be heard. As Kanwar Grewal puts it in one of his songs: '*fasla de faisla kisan karega*', those who cultivate shall have the right to decide what to grow on their lands. This is a struggle for democratic rights, for being recognized as citizens. Agriculture is not merely an occupation of a subject population in an empire, where the peasant cultivates land only at the will of the supreme power, the king, and as per his directives.

The popular and establishment narrative on Indian agriculture has come to be framed through the 20th century theories of economic growth, inscribed in textbooks of economics and other social sciences. The narrative goes somewhat like this: All societies go through certain phases of evolution. Early human life was primitive, when homo-sapiens lived like other animals, struggling to collect food for their survival. Agricultural innovations were the first major revolutions in human history. This made it possible for the kin groups to live together, at one place, along with others, forming rural settlements. Agricultural surpluses also enabled the emergence of urban centres, a new elite, and eventually new forms of political authority, the king. The next major revolution to occur in human history was the discovery of inanimate sources of energy; the industrial revolution followed in countries of Western Europe. In due course, they all became urban. Even agriculture was subsumed by it, turning it into a bourgeois enterprise. While all this was accomplished by the Western Europe during the 19th century, the developing world, the present-day Global South, is still striving to 'catch-up' with the developed world. The narrative also marks these two groupings of countries as being characterised by distinct values or culture, often described as 'modern' versus 'traditional'.

However, the actual history of the world does not begin or end with the 19th and 20th century Western Europe. Patterns of change and development have continued to be significantly diverse across regions. The above narrative also provides no space for the colonial history of plunder and the consequent

‘backwardisation’ (Washbrook, 1993) of regions like India. However, this textbook narrative of human history came to be a hegemonic view of the world during the second half of the 20th century and it continues to hold sway even today. Built into this view is also a larger narrative of human ‘evolutionism’ and ‘developmentalism’. The world, is thus assumed to have evolved out of tradition to modernity; from myth to reason; from collective will to individual agency. Modernity, as sociologist Gurminder Bhambra argues, invoked the ideas of *rupture* and *difference*. Its advocates underlined that the societies of the modern West had gone through a process of a temporal rupture, which implied a complete break from the agrarian ways of life of the past. The modernist conception of the world simultaneously also equated the agrarian societies of the non-Western world as being similar to the pasts of Western Europe. The difference between the West and the non-West was thus constructed in a manner that the two were viewed as being at different stages of their evolutionary process (Bhambra, 2007).

Such a view found considerable favour with the urban-centric professional middle-class elite that emerged under the colonial patronage in countries like India and inherited political power from the colonial masters. The models of change proposed by ‘development studies’ (the economists) and ‘modernization theories’ (sociologists and anthropologists) during the early decades after the decolonization of countries like India, in many ways reinforced the colonial view of underdevelopment as a natural stage in the process of the evolution of the developing countries of the Global South into developed countries, at par with those of the Global North. Thus, agriculture has no place in the elite imaginations of the futures of their countries. And, in their frames of imaginations, farmers certainly have no ability or right to propose an alternative vision, even when it concerns their own lives and livelihoods. The mainstream narratives of modernity and developmentalism frames them as infantile, and thus having no claim to an agency of their own.

The protesting farmers see themselves as citizens of the country, with a sense of entitlement. Their being from the relatively better-off position helps them sustain the movement. However, this is not a movement only of the cultivating farmers. It is also an assertion of farming cultures, embedded in which are the regional cultures. The new laws would not only change the way agriculture is done, but would also bring-in a new corporate economy into the regional heartlands. It is this that explains the overwhelming support that the movement has been able to generate across sections of Punjabis, particularly the Sikhs, from across the world. The movement is thus also a refusal and resistance to subjection and subjugation of regional culture to a view of market driven national culture. Further, farming cultures also go beyond those who are directly involved in agriculture as an occupation, and counted by official surveys. They find support and solidarities across neighbouring castes, communities and classes. The Punjabi farmers’ choice of Sikhi as a mediating language for their politics is precisely to articulate their interests in an inclusive language.

The source of surprise is thus not simply the ability of farmers to be able to stand-up firmly and make their views on their futures heard, but at the very idea

that they even ought to be having a view. While this surprise among the establishment economists is easy to explain, the left-wing intellectuals and even farm leaders feel the pressure of the ‘mainstream narrative’. It is the confidence and firmness of the so-called lay farmers, and the larger solidarities across genders, castes and classes that they have been able to forge, that has kept the movement going. Social movements of this scale are thus not only ‘moments of being’, but also ‘moments of becoming’.

Notes

¹ See Yogendra Yadav’s piece in *The Print*, December 30, 2020, ‘Why the farmers’ movement is no longer what the Modi govt thinks it is’.

<https://theprint.in/opinion/farmers-movement-no-longer-what-modi-govt-thinks-it-is/576380/>

² See a discussion organized by Centre of Policy Research on March 18, 2021 and argument made by Harish Damodaran, available on YouTube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sfxTN9qJL9o&t=4712s>

³ Ramesh Chand. 2020. ‘New Farm Laws: Understanding the Implications’. Niti Working paper Series 1/2020. <http://niti.gov.in/sites/default/files/2020-11/NewFarmActs2020.pdf>. Accessed July 08 2021.

⁴ See, for example, a series of stories by Zee Television, Hindi, by its main news reader, Sudhir Chaudhary. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rXG5fRbBtk4>

⁵ This section of the paper expands some of the arguments I presented in my *Economic and Political Weekly* editorial on the subject (Jodhka, 2020).

⁶ This section partially draws from an earlier piece on the subject (Jodhka, 2021).

⁷ Bhalla et al. cited in Kumar, 2019:43.

⁸ As cited by Kumar (ibid:43) India’s food availability per capita increased from 144.1 kilograms (kg) per person per annum in 1951 to 171.1 kg per person per annum in 1961.

⁹ Toor et.al. cited in Lakhwinder Singh et al (2016) <https://thi.ucsc.edu/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/Vision-for-Economic-Development-in-Punjab.pdf>. Accessed February 24, 2021.

¹⁰ *Economic Survey*, Punjab 2018-19: page 63-4. Available at: <https://www.esopb.gov.in/static/PDF/EconomicSurvey-2019-20.pdf>

¹¹ Ibid page 64.

¹² Ibid page 40.

¹³ Ibid page 40.

¹⁴ There is a large volume of literature on the growing indebtedness of the Punjabi farmers and its different manifestations in the popular culture and everyday life. See, for example, Sidhu and Gill, 2006; Shergill, 2010; Singh et.al, 2017; Kaur, B 2021; and Kaur, T. 2021.

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