

# The many layers to agricultural discontent



The Farm Acts that are the focus of the farmers' protest bear variously on the different strata of the farming community

At a kisan rally in Bareilly, Uttar Pradesh on February 28, 2016, Prime Minister Narendra Modi spoke of his vision of doubling the income of India's farmers by 2022. Subsequently, several central leaders and even official committees have reiterated this tall promise. Probably, one of the measures that the Union government proposed to sub serve this end was in the form of the three Farm Bills in September 2020 — by liberalising access to agricultural markets, removing existing barriers to storage of agricultural produce, and facilitating contract farming. In the process, the regulatory role the state played hitherto with regard to these issues was watered down to a great extent. While these measures have been defended on the basis of slogans such as 'One Nation, One Market', they appear to be more directed to scoring brownie points in the 'Ease of doing business' index (the present regime has scored impressively well here in the last couple of years). Probably, more policy measures were in the offing to sub serve this objective.

## THE RESPONSE

Paradoxically, organised farmers' bodies are not in sync with the reasoning of the government. It is necessary to point out that a wide spectrum of the political Opposition in Parliament offered strong resistance to these Bills; some State governments even enacted their own Bills that were largely directed against the key provisions of the central farm Acts even though the constitutional status of these enactments is highly dubious. One of the oldest members of the ruling National Democratic Alliance (NDA), the Shiromani Akali Dal, walked out of the alliance in protest against these Bills.

Even if we set aside the complex and multipronged challenges that rural India confronts today, there is a substantial body of studies that demonstrates how the vagaries of the market and the role of the middlemen reinforce agrarian distress in India. Although a body of piecemeal legislation and regulative processes have been put in place over the years in response to these issues — these include a few Pradhan Mantri yojanas — several key concerns of farmers have gone unattended.

## **STATES HAVE A PIVOTAL ROLE**

However, these issues and the relation across them vary remarkably across the different regions of India and in terms of the different produce. While we can debate the constitutional provisions with regard to the respective domains of the State and the Union with regard to agricultural marketing, there is little doubt that issues affecting the farming community have a far greater bearing on the States relative to the Centre. Ideally, given its immediacy, the States are the apt agencies to respond to a host of concerns faced by the farming community, which includes agricultural marketing. While enacting the Farm Bills, the Centre extended little consideration to the sensitivity of the States, leave alone consultation, although some of them made their opposition to the Farm Bills quite explicit.

The three Acts that are the focus of the farmers' agitation, and which farmers have demanded be repealed, bear differently on the different strata of the farming community and in different regions.

## **APMC AS CUSHION**

In the very high stake and large scale farming in Punjab and Haryana, for instance, weakening the Agricultural Produce Market Committee (APMC) system by subjecting it to competition — and its resultant bearing on Minimum Support Price (MSP), particularly on crops such as rice and wheat — is seen by the farmers as a threat to an assured sale of their produce at a price.

This system provides a cushion, wherein the farmer can anticipate the cost of opting for these crops and tap the necessary supports through channels he has been familiar with. Subjecting this system to the vagaries of a competitive market, including storing and contracting of the produce, where he would eventually be beholden to the large players, including monopolies, are prospects that a farmer detests even though he is aware that the middleman is not a saint. While elsewhere in the country the dependence on the APMC system is variegated, and where several States have redefined the role and place of this system over the years, there is widespread apprehension that the measures proposed by the Farm Acts in addition to the existing agrarian distress, are only going to make the lot of the farmer even more precarious. All across the country, the farming community is prone to sympathise with the demand to scrap the new laws, as they have little to offer to them in a positive sense.

## **MOVEMENTS AND AN EVOLUTION**

But the way the three Farming Acts were enacted, tends to crystallize a common sympathy across the farming community in India. Initially, there were ordinances that were passed when there was little urgency for these measures. After three months, when they were brought as Bills before the Houses, there was hardly any consultation with farmers' organisations. They were rushed through the Houses of Parliament by paying little heed to the issues they raised. Farmers

in India, have now shown that the saying, 'they cannot govern themselves. They have to be governed' is way off the mark. India's farmers are a constituency deeply aware of their interests and challenges before them and are sensitive to developments elsewhere.

In this context it is important to recall the powerful farmers' movements that sprouted across India from the 1970s, led by such iconic leaders as M.D. Nanjunda swamy, Sharad Joshi, and Mahendra Singh Tikait, which claimed to speak not merely for farmers but to the rural segment as a whole. Even though they were clearly directed by the concerns of the relatively better off farmers, they attempted to reach out to the farming community as a whole. There were major differences within these movements, and a few stances of some of them were definitely archaic and poorly thought over, but they presented a platform for discussion and debate beyond their immediate concerns.

The organisations that these movements set up have undergone much change and a split today. But they have also learnt much in the process. While in some parts of the country the class and caste divide are still sharp, in other places, farmers' organizations have not shied away from critically engaging with class, caste and gender concerns, although it has not made a substantial difference to the prevailing configuration of these relations. The very fact that a social reality is widely accepted provides space for policy intervention. The Farm Bills have ignored that the rural is a vibrant space in India, with 'elective affinities' binding its vast expanse.

#### **THE FARMING STRATA**

Clearly, the rich farmers — those with large holdings and produce for the market — are spearheading the present stand off against the Farm Bills, as it affects them very deeply. But farming distress is shared in common by the different strata within the farming community, even though it has a differential impact on them.

It is important to bear in mind that the rich farmer has also reinforced his position enormously in the rural over the years after the Green Revolution and farmers' movements of the 1970s. They have also invested their surplus in agribusiness and clearly hold access to the wider economic and institutional domains. The lower strata of the farming community is invariably beholden to the rich farmer not merely for employment but also to access resources and services. There is very little autonomous organisation of the former in much of the country except caste. Therefore, when the die is cast on issues such as the Farm Acts, there is little doubt where the lower strata of the farming community would throw in their lot with.

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