

How Farmers Defeated the Government of India

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In the following report, Pranav Jeevan P¹ explores the conflict between the farmers and the far-right government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the character of the movement that the farmers initiated, and the means by which they triumphed.

“People shouldn’t be afraid of their governments. Governments should be afraid of their people.” — Alan Moore, *V for Vendetta*

Farmers in India have won a historic victory against state efforts to privatize the agricultural sector for corporate exploitation. The authoritarian right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi finally had to bow before the farmers’ protests, accepting the demand to repeal the three anti-farmer laws. The success of the year-long farmers’ struggle shows that horizontal, self-organized, decentralized protests can involve hundreds of thousands of people—that they can persist against tremendous obstacles—that they can triumph even against determined authoritarian regimes.

Neither corporate media propaganda, nor state repression, nor attacks by pro-government mobs succeeded in suppressing the farmers. The protests became one of the largest anti-corporate and anti-government mass movements in the world, identifying the corporate-government nexus as enemies of the freedom, well-being, and self-determination of the rest of the population of India. Even when parliamentary opposition to the reigning regime is weak, the judiciary is silent about the injustices people face, and bureaucracy serves the oppressors to pave the way for more exploitation, mass movements can always find a way to defeat these systems of oppression.

The farmers were able to sustain these massive protests month after month in the face of so much hardship for two reasons: self-organization and decentralization. No single leader commanded the protests; meetings involving all the farmers’ unions made all the decisions together.

¹ For context, the author is a student activist completing a PhD at the Indian Institute of Technology Bombay, who focuses on the issues of representation of marginalized castes in higher educational institutions in India; an active participant in the protests against the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) of December 2019 to March 2020; and an anarchist from India who works with the Ambedkarite anti-caste movement. The author has participated in the social media team supporting the farmers’ protests, helping to spread news from the protests directly and to create protest art. ☒

The participation of women and landless laborers added to the cause, addressing their concerns and creating a unified front that cut across the usual fault lines of Indian society. This in turn fostered discussions about the caste and gender discrimination prevalent in Indian society, other antisocial legislation such as the Abrogation of Article 370 (which removed the statehood of Jammu and Kashmir), demonetization, the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), the New Education Policy (NEP), the Environment Impact Assessment (EIA), rampant privatization, the rising prices of fuel and essential goods, unemployment, and the economic crisis. The struggle against the farm laws quickly emerged as a struggle against all the different forms of oppression that people face in India today as the protesters gained consciousness about other social and political issues plaguing the country. This led to more scrutiny and backlash against police violence, media propaganda, and judicial negligence and to protesters holding politicians and bureaucrats accountable for their actions.

This was visible in the response to Lakhimpur Kheri incident, in which the son of a BJP minister ran over farmers with an SUV; the farmers forced the BJP government to file a First Information Report (FIR) and arrest the culprit, despite the government's clear intend not to. Farmers also sat in protest against brutal police violence targeting Dalit labor activists Nodeep Kaur and Shiv Kumar. They forced the removal of an IAS officer who ordered a lathi charge against farmers in Karnal. They protested against the killing of a Dalit man, Lakhbir Singh, by a group of Nihang Sikhs who claimed that he had desecrated the Sikh holy book—a clear case showing how Dalit people are still treated as untouchables in India.

The methods that the protesters employed were both unprecedented and revolutionary. The farmers began by marching to Delhi, where they occupied the border around the city, stationing themselves on the highways. Rail Roko (Stop the Trains) protests took place in which farmers stopped trains and addressed travelers about the importance of the protests.

The protesters met with brutal state violence; both military and police forces attempted to crack down on them. The police employed tear gas and water cannons, dug up the roads, and used layers of barricades and sand barriers to stop the protesters. Over 700 farmers have been martyred during these protests so far. The government tried to disband the protesters by cutting off water, electricity, and internet service to the locations they were occupying. In response, farmers brought everything they needed from their villages in order to survive in the protest sites. Participants organized massive langars, providing food to all the protesters.

The police and the corporate media functioned together as two wings of the same assault on the farmers—but they could not defeat them.

Little by little, these forms of self-organization enabled the establishing of other utilities including tents, solar-powered mobile charging points, laundry, library, medical stalls, and dental care. At the same time, the farmers were careful not to let any of the opposition political parties appropriate their protests. They refused to endorse any political leaders and did not offer any of them a platform from which to claim leadership. Many of the protesters have lost trust in the established parties, which they know will back away when the political tides turn. They question the sincerity of the politicians who claim to support them against the farm laws, considering that these same politicians have supported other oppressive authoritarian laws such as the Abrogation of Article 370.

The farmers continued to block motorways to Delhi through a harsh winter, through the summer months, and even through deadly waves of the pandemic. They called for strikes across the country. They did not give up, even as dozens of them died due to cold, heat, and COVID-19.

The farmers know that almost all government policies are dictated by the massive corporate monopolies that fund the ruling party. They aimed their attack at the politicians and bureaucrats, but also against the corporate empires of Mukesh Ambani and Gautam Adani, India's top billionaires. They were aware of the threats that these corporate monopolies pose to their livelihoods, refusing to accept the assurances of the "experts" and "economists" who described the laws as free market policies that would allegedly "help farmers." They knew that most of these "experts" and "economists" have never stepped out of their corporate-funded air-conditioned offices to learn about the nuances of the Indian agricultural economy firsthand. They know that if all the top economists of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) agree that India needs the new farm laws, then these are definitely bad news. Since Ambani and Adani were the principal beneficiaries of the farm laws that the BJP Government enacted, Punjab and Haryana farmers gave up using Jio SIMS cards, which are owned by Ambani, and switched to rival networks. A number of Reliance Jio telecom towers and other infrastructure were damaged in Punjab. Farmers started boycotting Reliance-owned products and services including petrol pumps.

At one point, the Supreme Court of India intervened to end the stand off between farmers and government. The farmers were adamant in their demand and openly challenged the court, asserting that they would not abandon the protest even if the court ordered them to do so, because this is a matter of life and death for them. The farmers had lost faith in the judicial system, as recent Supreme Court judgments have often catered to the demands of the government. Ultimately, the court was forced to give in, ordering a stay on the implementation of the laws for 18 months.

Practically all of the news media outlets have been broadcasting pro-government narratives—spreading false propaganda against farmers, calling them "Khalistanis"² and "terrorists," demonizing them, infantilizing their protests, and calling them "ignorant." Corporate media deliberately suppressed news about the growth of the protests. Yet this did not succeed in hampering the movement at all. The participants went directly from village to village in each state, organizing gatherings of hundreds and thousands, at which they discussed the issues relating to the farm laws and how they would adversely affect their lives, putting them at the mercy of corporations. Those who attended these gatherings were urged to communicate what they had learned to their villages and families. These channels of direct communication reaching people directly at the grassroots were much stronger than any propaganda that the government could spread, even with all the corporate networks at its disposal.

When the farmers turned to social media to spread information, Facebook and its subsidiary Instagram began to take down the farmers' pages along with other pages that criticized the government. Twitter removed more than 500 accounts that farmers had used to discuss the laws. Facebook removed the page belonging to Kisan Ekta Morcha, an official news source from within the movement; following a massive public backlash, however, they were forced to reinstate the page.

When Rihanna tweeted in support of farmers protest, helping contribute momentum to international solidarity and a backlash against Indian government, the state tried to do damage control

² Khalistanis are a separatist group seeking to create a homeland for Sikhs by establishing a sovereign state, called Khālistān, in the Punjab region of India and Pakistan. The term was used to demonize the protesting farmers, who are mostly sikhs from Punjab.

by making their own media celebrities respond by calling this an “international conspiracy” to defame India.

In each state where an election was to happen—such as Bengal, which the BJP had been eyeing for years—the farmers sent their delegates to address people directly in order to explain the nature of the anti-farmer laws and ask them to not vote for the BJP. This led to a massive electoral loss for BJP in multiple states. The upcoming Uttar Pradesh (UP) elections, which could decide the fate of BJP rule in India, have come at a time when farmers are intensifying their protests; massive gatherings are being planned all over India for the anniversary of the beginning of the protests, which began on November 26, 2020. BJP fears a backlash in these elections, both from farmers and in response to their catastrophic failure to manage the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has wreaked havoc due to the shortage of oxygen, among other reasons.

In response, they took immediate steps to placate the farmers before the elections; the government had no alternative other than to bend to the farmers’ demands. Farmers have asserted that Prime Minister Modi’s statement has no value—that they want to see the law repealed by the parliament in its next session, and the protests will continue until then. They also want the government to ensure a Minimum Support Price for agricultural goods. This government, which was indifferent to people’s demands—which continuously attacked dissent with brutality, violence, and propaganda—which was determined to carry out privatizations at any cost to people—has been defeated and forced to change course.

This is the latest in a series of powerful movements in India. The protests against the discriminatory Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) set a precedent on this same path. Although the Citizenship Amendment Act was passed on December 11, 2019, almost two years have elapsed and the government has yet to frame rules for the implementation of the law. The massive protests that erupted all over India in response to the act drew participants from all sectors of society; they were anchored by Muslim women who initiated protest occupations all over the country. In the end, the pandemic forced people to call off the protests, but the government still fears a massive backlash if they try to implement the act. When people organize and come into an awareness of the power they can wield together, no authority can stop them.

The principles of anarchism—including horizontal and participatory decision-making, the decentralization of power, solidarity, mutual aid, and voluntary association—are all visible in the farmer protests. Anarchists employ direct action, disrupting hierarchies and protesting against injustice, self-organizing their lives by creating counter-institutions such as communes and non-hierarchical collectives. Anarchists seek to foster an anti-authoritarian relationship to collective agency so that everyone can have an equal say in each decision that affects them, seeking to build a rough consensus among members of a group without recourse to a leader or cadre. Anarchists organize to occupy and reclaim public spaces where art, poetry, and music are blended to express anarchist ideals. Squatting is one way to regain public space from the capitalist market or an authoritarian state; it also serves to set an example of direct action.

We can find elements of all of these principles and practices in the farmers’ protests—and that is the reason for their robustness and their success. This victory debunks the myth that we need a centralized chain of command with leaders on top and blind followers below in order for large-scale organizing to succeed. All of these protests were leaderless: the participants themselves reached consensus on the course of action to be followed. When people make decisions themselves and coordinate with each other in small communities, providing aid to each other, this creates the strongest forms of collective power and solidarity.

The fact that these protests succeeded, thanks to so many people collectively organizing and cooperating for such a long time, shows us that we can self-organize and create communities without externally imposed institutions—that we don't need autocratic bureaucracy and authoritarian governments, which concentrate power and oppress people. For the most part, these protests were driven by women without formal education, poor farmers, and people from other marginalized communities; together, they showed that they can create communities which are more ethical and egalitarian than those that exist among the affluent and highly educated. They showed that the oppressed and underprivileged can organize themselves into communities of mutual aid and direct decision-making, eliminating the supposed need for coercive and hierarchical systems of governance, which in fact exist only to exploit them.

The success of the farmers' protest offers a model that everyone around the world can learn from—that all of us can implement in our struggles against the oppressive regimes that exploit us. The world is witnessing a new era of protests and activism. The farmers' protests should become a beacon of democracy showing how we can defeat authoritarian regimes.

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