

DRAFT

The biggest peaceful protest against corporations in human history—Daring farmers of India

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Images: Farmers protesting in New Delhi against Farming Reform Bills passed by the Indian Government in September 2020. (courtesy: Social media and The Times of India)

Abstract

The current crisis in Indian agriculture warrants solutions, but in consultation with farmers and related institutions; unlike the imposition of Farming Reforming Bills passed by the

Indian Government on 20-22 September 2020. The three recent Government Farming Reform Acts i.e. Farmers' Produce Trade and Commerce; Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement on Price Assurance and Farm Services Act; and Essential Commodities Act, have caused frustration among millions of farmers, farmworkers, and the general public since September 2020, and the government fails to understand farmers' perspective—agriculture is their heritage, not a business. The main reason for these Acts is that the policymakers within the government fail to understand the true value of agricultural economy in villages which are the foundation of India, and instead preferred to liaise with corporations for business gains while compromising the needs of millions of people. This article provides a critical analysis of the current situation.

Key words: agriculture, Indian farmers protest, Indian Farming Reforming Bills, village economy,

Context of agriculture in north-western states of India

One million farmers from the north-western states of India, Punjab—covering a geographic area of 5 million ha and supporting 30 million people, and Haryana—covering 4.4million ha and supporting a population of 28.4million, are protesting peacefully on a mass scale over the last three months against the Farming Bills (passed on 20-22 Sept 2020) by the Indian Government without any consultation with the farmers/their institutions (Lexforti 2020; <https://news.sky.com/story/indian-farmers-stand-in-defiance-of-new-laws-well-never-leave-the-battlefield-12162043>). There are 250 million other farmers, farmworkers and the general public who are supporting farmers across the country (<https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/police-use-water-cannon-tear-gas-shells-as-protesting-farmers-inch-closer-to-delhi-in-pictures-and-videos-1744574-2020-11-27>).

In both these states, >80% of total geographical land is under agriculture for the last few decades. Farmers in these states have been cultivating land for centuries, but not at such a massive scale with heavy use of machinery. With the onset of Green Revolution in the 1960s, introduced High Yielding Varieties, mechanised techniques, and intensive use of fertilizers and pesticides, particularly in the state of Punjab has led India to become self-sufficient in food production — hence it is often called, 'the food bowl of India'. Later, Haryana joined the line too. Currently, both these states contribute >60% wheat and 34% rice to the central pool in India, providing food security to millions of Indians (FAO India 2018).

Agriculture is the largest single sector employing >70% of people in these states (Punjab and Haryana Statistical Abstracts 2019). Currently, the average size of landholding is around 3.9 ha (FAO India 2018). Almost 60% of these operational holdings are semi-medium to medium, with a median farm size of 2-10 ha. The proportion of marginal and small operational holdings operating less than 1 ha and 1-2 ha is 15.6% and 18.6% respectively, and that of large operational holdings of more than 10 ha is only 6.6%. Overall, >93% of land holdings are of size <10ha of size (FAO India 2018).

Across India, there are >1 million villages where agriculture is the main profession. Almost the entire rural population in villages, particularly in these two and other similar agricultural states across India, depend on farming. Within each village, there are farmers,

carpenters/woodworkers, locksmiths, messengers, labourers and other workers who are directly or indirectly involved in farming. Traditionally, when a crop is harvested the farmer distributes produce among non-farming communities in both seasons (Rabi [winter] and Kharif [summer]). This custom has led to traditions which still exist in many villages. Moreover, each farming household in a village produces their milk, pulses, some vegetables, etc. to support their own needs, and to distribute extras among others. As a result, Indian villages are quite self-reliant in food, and one will rarely hear people dying from hunger in a village (Sangha 2015). Even in the current Covid-19 situation, villages have proven much more resilient where locals are collectively meeting their food and health demands, forming groups to guard their villages against outsiders, and are supporting each other (many stories published in newspapers and social media). A significant element of a typical village economy is well-being i.e. non-market economy, of people involving sharing and caring among village communities. This system enables a majority of the villagers to be engaged in some kind of work opportunities or social tasks, and to lead secure and sustainable living (Image 1).

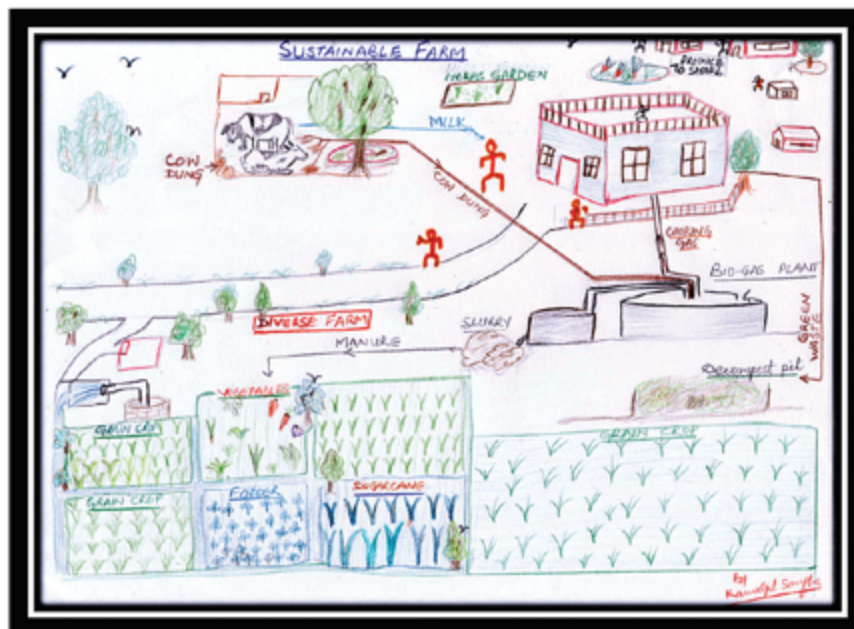


Image 1: Sustainable living depicted for a typical Indian village where local food production, sharing norms and customs with non-farming communities, and sometimes modern cooking (biogas plant) and electricity facilities (solar), are part of people's living.

Climatically, both these states are situated in the foothills of the Himalayas occupying a large area of the great Gangetic Plains, with fertile soils and good water resources, coupled with hard-working people. Hence, the state of Punjab and later Haryana were selected for fulfilling the needs of grain production of Indian population after independence. There are 12,097 villages in the state of Punjab where >90% of residents depend on agriculture, with an average per capita income Rs. 128,780 per year, equating to USD 1,750/yr (using currency conversion rate as on 14 Dec 2020; Punjab Statistical Abstracts 2019). In the state of Haryana, there are 6,848 villages, and an average per capita income is Rs. 185,000 (USD 2,514/yr; Haryana Statistical Abstracts 2019). These figures suggest that the direct market

role of the agricultural economy is relatively small, but the true value of village economy is far and beyond the GDP/Market measures that the current Indian Government is considering to reform (or otherwise) the existing agriculture systems in both these states. Moreover, agriculture is a cultural heritage for many people across both of these states.

The problems

The agricultural states of Punjab and Haryana and other neighbouring states supporting mechanized agriculture since the 1960s are now facing some serious socio-ecological issues for more than a decade due to stagnation in crop production, increased cost of production and exploitation of water and soil resources (Johl Committee 1986, 2002; Punjab State Farmers' Commission 2009; FAO India 2018). Highly mechanised agriculture coupled with exploitation of resources has raised concerns for joblessness and drug addiction among the youngsters, and widespread and the uprise of severe health issues such as cancer as outlined by Sangha (2014), and recently by the FAO India (2018) in a background paper for a workshop on 'Revitalizing Punjab Agriculture' organised by the Punjab Government and FAO India. But more importantly, these issues are regularly discussed via TV channels, newspapers and became a focus for the Punjab Legislative Assembly Election in 2017.

Lack of appropriate and timely initiatives from both, the state and central governments over the last two decades despite key government reports (Johl Committee 1986, 2002; and Punjab State Farmers' Commission 2009), has led to frustration among farmers. Diversification is highly recommended in those reports but there have been no policy initiatives by the state/central government over the last two decades. The current socio-political situation raises serious concerns about a complete lack of political will to support farmers who are regarded as '*Ann Datta*' (the food provider) according to Indian scriptures. Farmer organisations have approached various governments and political parties over time, but no success. Whereas, the political greed for *GDP/Development* has been increasing at the cost of handing over the destiny of millions of small-scale farmers to corporations, threatening the survival of millions of people across India (Lexforti 2020).

Rather than offering any amenable and affordable solutions to the above-mentioned problems, the Indian Government recently introduced three Farming Reform Bills—labelled as 'Black Bills' by the farmers, unions, and farmworkers—to further add to farmers' plight. These bills (as discussed below) evidently favour corporations to exploit remaining soil and water resources, and will lead to the expansion of monocultures at even a larger scale (Pilot 2020; Lexforti 2020).

Analysis of the Farming Bills passed by the Indian Government

Three Farm Bills under the Indian Farm Reforms 2020 were passed by the Indian Government on 20-22 September 2020, include:

1. Farmers' Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Act, 2020 (<https://www.prsindia.org/billtrack/farmers-produce-trade-and-commerce-promotion-and-facilitation-bill-2020>);
2. Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement on Price Assurance and Farm Services Act, 2020 (<https://www.prsindia.org/billtrack/farmers-empowerment-and-protection-agreement-price-assurance-and-farm-services-bill-2020>);

3. Essential Commodities Act, 2020 (<https://www.prsindia.org/billtrack/essential-commodities-amendment-bill-2020>).

The Farmers' Produce Trade and Commerce, Act is meant to permit intra-state and inter-state trade of farmers' produce beyond the physical premises of currently, well-established and unique Agricultural Produce Market Committee (APMC), called *mandis*, which have been working quite well for the farmers for the last few decades. This Act abolishes the existing working structure and established a separate structure for the open market. This Act supports free trade of farm produce where >90% farmers are (technically) illiterate to deal with modern trading and have no capacity to negotiate in an open or e-commerce market, as the Indian Government has proposed. Consequences are that the traders will dictate the price to the farmers or cartelisation among the traders is evident to keep low prices for farm produce (Pilot 2020). A good example of this kind of experience is Sugarcane Farmers who have to typically wait for a few years to obtain a payment for the sale of their produce and can't take any legal action against Sugar Mills.

Under the APMS system, the minimum support price (MSP) is established by the Indian Government, and the government or private buyers can buy the produce at or above the MSP. The established '*mandis*' afford a secure and physical place where farmers can take their produce to, and the agriculture service providers (*Aartihias*) assist farmers to sell their produce. The existing settings could be improved to include other crops than wheat and rice, if the government intends to improve agriculture. The proposed Act lacks any assurance or fair set of procedures. In case of a dispute, farmers can appeal only to the Sub-Divisional Magistrate who could be potentially bribed by the Corporations (a common practice in India), without any provision for the farmers to approach the State/Territory courts.

The Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement on Price Assurance and Farm Services Act, 2020 is to create a national framework for contract farming, promoting agreement between a farmer and a buyer. This Act omits any details about how farmers will be enabled to understand and deal with corporation led agreements, and offers no minimum support price (MSP) for the farmers as they receive now for wheat and rice. The consequences are that corporations can offer low prices, cartelise the market, and farmers may be forced to sell at that price.

The Essential Commodities Act (ECA) is about removing stock limits for essential commodities such as wheat and rice, meaning any person can store an unlimited amount of farm produce and sell it when the demand is high to fetch higher prices. The government can regulate but only under extraordinary circumstances such as war or famine. Farmers, due to their liabilities, can't afford to stock their produce, however the corporation can do so to obtain higher prices. The consequences are that corporations such as Adani Group, who have already build silos in India for stocking farm produce through the Food Corporation of India (All India Students' Association 2020; https://www.business-standard.com/article/pti-stories/adani-group-says-does-not-buy-food-grains-from-farmers-only-manages-storage-for-fci-120120900933_1.html), will sell the produce, particularly cereals which are staples for millions of Indians, at a much higher price, and many poor people will have no other option than dying of hunger.

Conclusion

The farmers and common people including educationists, workers, lawyers, artists and students, comprising ~500 farming unions and >250 million people from across India, are protesting peacefully since 28 November 2020 in New Delhi. More than 10 states including Punjab, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, Kerala, Orissa, Tamil Nadu, and Karnataka have participated in 'India Shut Down' called by farmers on 8 December 2020. This demonstrates people's fear against corporations such as Adani Group, which has created their regimes to exert significant influence upon the Indian Government (All India Students' Association 2020; Bal 2019; Findley and Locket 2020).

Doubtlessly, these three Acts, if implemented, will create complete chaos among the entire Indian society not just for farmers but also for millions from the general public (Lexforti 2020; <https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/punjab/ordinance-to-put-farmers-at-mercy-of-corporates-99720>). The existing social network at village levels will be jeopardized by forcing people to leave the village and find work in towns and cities, increasing pressure on already over-populated towns along with high probability for labour exploitation by big firms. As a result, millions of people, who are currently engaged in work, will be forced out of work and eventually, to suffer from hunger.

Environmentally, the current sustainable economy in villages, worth millions of rupees some of which is tangible but a large part intangible, will be destroyed. Presently, farming communities in villages help their non-farming counterparts at crucial times; once corporations come in there will be no help available within the villages and the social fabric will be ruined. Moreover, the value of total village economy, which does not flow in the market/GDP, but significantly contributes to the well-being of rural village communities will vanish, and people will eventually become a burden/cost to the government (in several different ways: increased disorder in the society, frustration for lack of work opportunities suiting people's skills and hence more protests and damage to government properties/infrastructure, or increased incarceration). Disrupting villages economies, without understanding its true value for the sake of GDP and supporting corporations, is the biggest mistake that any government can commit to do.

These bills undermine food security, compromise equity rights of Punjab and Haryana farmers who have been largely feeding the nation since the 1960s, and exposes farmers to coercion, and the general public to the insecurity of food and chaos (Lexforti 2020; Pilot 2020). Moreover, these Acts trespass State legislation on agriculture. Currently agriculture is a state/territory issue not the central issue in entirety (Lexforti 2020).

The solution is to review the existing structures and consider diversification options, in consultation with farmers, while focusing on people's well-being rather than a few corporations. Villages are the foundation of India, and the need is to build resilient communities through sustainable farming. As Mahatma Gandhi said,

"...if the village perishes India will perish too. India will be no more India."

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