

Why are Indian Farmers up in Arms?

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“The farmer is the only man in our economy who buys everything at retail, sells everything at wholesale, and pays the freight both ways.”

John F. Kennedy



Today, 25th September 2020, across the country and amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, India witnessed the anger of the farming community over the three farm bills that were passed by the Parliament. This, for them, has been one of the biggest betrayals by the government.

The Farmers’ Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Bill 2020 and The Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement of Price Assurance and Farm Services Bill 2020 were passed by the Lok Sabha on 17 September and by the Rajya Sabha, three days later, on 20 September 2020. Narendra Singh Tomar, Union Minister for Agriculture & Farmers’ Welfare, Rural Development & Panchayati Raj introduced the bills in the Lok Sabha on 14 September 2020, to formalize the ordinances promulgated on 5 June 2020. Later, on 22 September, Rajya Sabha passed yet another bill—Essential Commodities (Amendment) Bill, 2020. The bill, introduced by Minister of State for Consumer Affairs, Food & Public Distribution, Danve Raosaheb Dadarao, was cleared by the Lok Sabha on 15 September 2020.

The government claims that the bills will transform agriculture in the country and raise farmers’ income.

Why then are farmers protesting...?

The Prime Minister of India said, "The new agriculture bills passed in Parliament is a watershed moment in the history of Indian agriculture." According to Narendra Singh Tomar, "(These) legislations will enable barrier-free trade in agricultural produce and empower farmers to engage with investors of their choice." And for Danve Raosaheb Dadarao, "This legislation will help in more investment in cold storages, modernization of food supply chain, bring price stability, create a competitive market environment and prevent waste of agri-produce."

As per government claims, the bills, which will open up the tightly controlled agricultural sector to free market sources, will allow farmers to sell their produce directly to private buyers and also enable them to enter into contract with them. This is being strongly opposed by farmers all over the country. For the agitating farmers, this legislation will dismantle the existing system and leave them to the mercy of corporate interests.

The Farmers' Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Bill 2020 says the government will create an ecosystem, by which farmers and traders will enjoy freedom of choice of sale and purchase of agri-produce and promote barrier-free, inter-state and intra-state trade and commerce outside the physical premises of the markets notified under State Agricultural Produce Marketing legislations. No cess will be levied on farmers for sale of their produce nor do they need to bear transport costs. Electronic trading on transaction platforms will ensure seamless trade. Farmers will have the freedom to trade at their farm gates, the cold storage, the warehouse, the processing units, etc., in addition to the mandis (local markets), and to engage in direct marketing, thereby eliminating intermediaries and resulting in full realization of price.

The government argues that The Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement of Price Assurance and Farm Services Bill 2020 empowers farmers to engage with all parties (processors, wholesalers, aggregators, large retailers, exporters, etc.) on a level playing field; to gain price assurance even before the sowing of the crops; to risk transfer of market unpredictability from the farmer to the sponsor, shielding the farmer from the rise and fall of market prices through prior price determination.

For the protesting farmers and unions, however, these legislations will restructure completely the management of the agricultural economy, including farm trade, in absolute favour of the big landlord corporate nexus and multinational trading cliques on agricultural produce thereby virtually killing the rights and entitlement of the agricultural population.

The withdrawal of the government from its role of ensuring fair and remunerative prices for farmers' produce will slowly bring to a halt the practice of government procurement of agricultural produce with minimum support price. Contract farming will be promoted at terms and prices dictated by big landlord-corporate nexus. The non-agricultural population will also be severely affected because the food security of the country is going to be endangered under these new dispensations.

The peasant agriculture, on which the survival of more than sixty per cent population is dependent, will be totally ruined.

A press release issued by the joint platform of Central Trade Unions and sectoral Federations declared its unstinted support to the initiative of Peasants and Agricultural Workers' Organisations, by stating, "These legislations are aimed at completely restructuring the management of the agricultural economy, including farm trade, in total favour of the big-landlord corporate nexus and multinational trading cliques on agricultural produce. They virtually kill the rights and entitlements of the agricultural population."

The All India Kisan Sangharsh Coordination Committee—the joint platform of peasants and agricultural workers' organizations—organized a countrywide protest and resistance today in different parts of the country, through massive demonstrations, 'rail roko', 'rasta roko', etc. Around 31 farmers' unions in Punjab and Haryana had given a call for a 'Bharat bandh' (a nation-wide strike) today (25 September) as a mark of protest. Several organizations in Haryana, including Bharatiya Kisan Union (BKU) extended support to the strike. On the call, given by the All India Kisan Sangharsh Coordination Committee (AIKSCC), All India Kisan Mahasangh (AIKM) and BKU, highways and railway tracks were blocked across the country. In Punjab and Haryana, farmers came out to protest en masse, and the states reverberated with slogans about protecting farmers' rights.

In Tiruchirapalli, Tamil Nadu, farmers staged a sit-in protest, carrying human skulls and chaining their hands. Farmer groups and trade unions in Karnataka too have joined hands, to oppose these farm bills, and a large group of farmers largely from Mandya and Mysore staged protests in Bengaluru.

In Kerala, various farmers' bodies announced support to the nationwide agitation. Two MPs, Elamaram Kareem and K. K. Ragesh, are among the six members, who objected to the bill and created noisy scenes in the Rajya Sabha, ending in their suspension. The Kerala government, in its cabinet meeting on 23 September 2020, decided to move the Supreme Court against the contentious bills. These agriculture bills, introduced by the Centre, are an encroachment of the powers of the state government because agriculture is a state subject under the concurrent list of the Constitution. The cabinet meeting observed that the agriculture bills raise serious issues over constitutional rights.

Speaking to the media in a press conference at the BJP headquarters, the government reiterated its commitment to farmers' welfare, and said it is open to holding talks with farmers to assuage any doubts on the efficacy of the reforms.

Over 265 farmer-groups participated in the nationwide protest, and are determined to intensify their protest until the bills are repealed.