

Reconceptualising farmer protests

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From Mandstaur to Mumbai and Delhi, in recent times, India's towns and cities have witnessed a series of extraordinary mobilisations by protesting farmers from across the country. As a result, there has been a renewed policy focus on the two long-standing demands of farmers' movements: higher minimum support prices (MSPs) and loan waivers. The public debate this time round has been unusually specific — A2+FL vs C2 are now frequently invoked acronyms on TV and op-ed pages when discussing the agrarian crisis. The debate has also focused on a range of policy technicalities from procurement to price-deficiency payments and income support.

Agricultural prices and farmer indebtedness are undoubtedly critical issues. However, by focusing almost entirely on MSPs and loan waivers, both the protesters and politicians have taken attention away from the remarkable diversity of regional voices that are trying to find expression in current agrarian mobilisations. They also disengage from the complexity of the structural transitions that these mobilisations represent. In doing

so, we are losing sight of a potentially transformative political moment.

Farmers' movements have long been an important part of the Indian political landscape and the subject of considerable historical and sociological analysis. At a recent discussion organised by the Centre for Policy Research (CPR), panelists reflected on the evolution and changing nature of agrarian coalitions and claim-making. An earlier pre- and early-Independence phase was rooted in struggles for land titling and distribution. This was followed by post-Green Revolution farmers' movements that prioritised the demands of land-owning cultivators for input support (seeds, fertilisers, power/water) and assured prices for outputs (MSPs and procurement). Importantly, this phase did not have a transformative rural agenda and coalesced largely around protecting the interests of landed farmers.

In contrast, the current agrarian mobilisations seem to be distinct in two critical respects. First, the recent protests have not been confined to landed farmers, but appear to have brought together diverse groups of agriculturalists, including small and marginal cultivators, *adivasi* farmers, landless farmers and rural labourers, along with urban youth from rural backgrounds. In this sense, these protests represent a wider coalition of interests and perhaps the possibility of forging a new, more complex and multi-faceted agrarian and rural identity. The protests also emerged in different regional contexts and were led by diverse communities and classes of farmers. In 2017 in Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan, for instance, the agitations were largely led by landed farmers from relatively productive agricultural



regions. But several months later, the historic march from Nashik to Mumbai was notable for the great number of *adivasi* farmers who joined the movement. The All India Kisan Sangharsh Coordination Committee (AIKSSOC) is now a platform with nearly 200 organisations representing a wide range of agrarian regions and communities.

Second, as a number of acute observers of agrarian India have emphasised, the current mobilisations are an expression of the diverse, complex and often contradictory dynamics that stem from both growing agricultural surplus and deepening agrarian distress in different parts of the country. Surplus and distress are also closely linked because increases in agricultural production have not met with concomitant strengthening of access to credit, markets, infrastructure and agricultural institutions. In either case, both conditions have led agrarian households to rapidly diversify their sources of income, resulting in a multiplicity of linkages between the farm and non-

farm sectors of the economy and between rural and urban India. These linkages have generated new aspirations and vulnerabilities that are being voiced through today's protests.

It is against this background that the multiplicity of demands emerging from the protests need to be understood. On the one hand, the protests focus on addressing agricultural production and marketing-related vulnerabilities — land, inputs, assured prices, loan waivers, and insurance. At the same time, protesters, especially young farmers and rural labourers are agitating for minimum wages, better jobs and pensions, which reflect the changing terms of farm and non-farm relations and urban-rural interlinkages. Farmers' enormous investments in education are perhaps the most important expression of these aspirations and their attendant anxieties. It is worth remembering that the same farmers who walked through the night so that school exams in Mumbai were undisrupted are also parents of school-going children. These dif-

ferent and seemingly oppositional assertions may represent different classes, castes and social groups in rural society but they also increasingly reflect the different faces of the same farming family.

The current policy debate and politics around the farmers protests have failed to engage with the complexity of the multiple drivers of agricultural distress, but worse, they seem to rest on the ultimate assumption that Indian farming is unviable and futureless. Instead, Indian agriculture needs far greater public investment, revitalised extension, enabling infrastructure, access to markets, and much more agro-ecological sensitivity in a sector that is always local, national and global in its scope and interactions. It also requires a new political and policy imagination that is alert to the energetic interlinkages between agriculture and the non-agrarian economy and between rural and urban regions and settlements. Most of all, today's mobilisations are a call to attend to the expanding aspirations and risks that agrarian households are experiencing today. Engaging with this is critical to securing and strengthening agricultural incomes, and also for expanding and deepening our understanding of agrarian citizenship and the potential for forging a new, transformative politics.

(This is part of an ongoing seminar series organised jointly by Centre for Policy Research and Trivedi Centre for Political Data, Ashoka University, on Indian politics)

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