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The Success of the Farmers' Movement

<https://doi.org/10.25003/RAS.11.02.0001>

The movement of protest led by the Samyukta Kisan Morcha – a coalition of farmers' organisations in India – against three Farm Acts enacted in September 2020 ended in a historic victory when the Government of India agreed, on November 19, 2021, to repeal the three unpopular pieces of legislation. In terms of the width of mobilisation, unity across different rural segments, dogged staying power, and the winning of all demands from the state, the struggle has perhaps no precedent in post-Independence India.

The government's decision came as a surprise to many observers, as there had been no softening of its stance towards the agitation till the previous week. Over the course of the year-long struggle, followers of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) had called the demonstrators terrorists, Khalistanis, and anti-national agitators. The government tried to break the protest in multiple ways: by slapping cases of sedition against the protestors, and, on several occasions, by using the police to break up group demonstrations with batons and bullets. The ultimate show of arrogance and brutality was in Lakhimpur-Kheri, where the son of a Union Minister drove his convoy into a group of agitators, leading to the deaths of several people. The repression seemed only to steel the resolve of the protestors, and that resolve led finally to their demands being conceded in full by the government.

Five aspects of the success of this movement are worth highlighting.

First, the victory is a major setback to the neoliberal policies implemented by Union governments over the past three decades. The deregulation of agricultural markets and the entry of corporate entities into the agricultural sector has been a central goal of neoliberal policy, which the three Farm Acts were designed to facilitate.

The first of the three Farm Acts sought to weaken regulated markets (*mandis*) by restricting their area of jurisdiction and allowing unregulated private markets to

replace them. The second Act aimed at weakening regulations on contract farming in favour of the sponsor companies. The third Act aimed at removing all stock-related restrictions on traders, processors and exporters, which would have allowed large corporate players to move into storage and warehousing. With the repeal of the three Acts, it may be difficult for any future government to return to this specific path of reform in agricultural policy.

Secondly, this is a major setback to efforts of the Government of India to alter the federal principles in India's Constitution in favour of a centralised structure of Centre-State relations. Agriculture is a State subject under Entry 14 of the State List in the Constitution of India. "Markets and fairs" are also a State subject under the Constitution. The Government of India sought to use Entry 33 of the Concurrent List, which deals with "trade and commerce in, and the production, supply and distribution of" a restricted range of industrial and agricultural commodities to interfere with matters that are in the jurisdiction of the States. The Supreme Court of India, unfortunately, chose not to intervene in this important matter of federal balance.

Thirdly, it must be noted that the success of the agitation has left behind some issues for future resolution. The most important among them is the question of whether the Minimum Support Price (MSP) should be made compulsory for all market exchanges in India. There is no simple answer to this question. While a legal MSP will bring in the benefits of a stable price for farmers, it may also have disruptive outcomes in the supply chain that may harm farmers' interests. This issue therefore needs more discussion. There is however no ambiguity over other demands, namely, to fix all MSPs at the level of C2+50 per cent as recommended by the National Commission for Farmers (NCF) in 2006; to increase the procurement of the existing 23 crops for which MSP is announced; to expand procurement to new crops; to transform the Public Distribution System (PDS) into a universal system; and to distribute new commodities, such as pulses, eggs, and milk, through the PDS at subsidised prices. The Government of India should shift policy towards such interventions in agricultural markets. Such a shift will also have a significant positive impact in mitigating hunger and malnourishment.

Fourthly, the most challenging issue facing the farmer's movement is now whether it can develop a new agenda for broader socioeconomic transformation in rural India. Such a transformation should aim at encompassing issues related to class, caste, and gender, at the democratisation of rural life, and the expansion of the freedoms of its inhabitants. These are contested matters within rural India, and not amenable to unities across social groups or communities. Much will depend on how progressive sections within the farmer's movement are able, in the coming months, to generate broad-based support for a range of demands of the working people in rural society.

Fifthly, regardless of these challenges, the success of the farmer's agitation has undermined the political credibility of the BJP and its allies in rural India. This assumes particular significance in the context of the forthcoming elections to the State Assemblies of Uttar Pradesh and Punjab, States from which the biggest mobilisation for the struggle took place. The agitation built solidarity across religious groups, particularly in western Uttar Pradesh, and defeated attempts to create communal religious divisions among protesting farmers. The results of the present elections will have enormous repercussions not only for the future of the rural economy of the regions in which they are held, but for political India as a whole.