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The Agrarian Crisis in Punjab and the Making of the Anti-Farm Law Protests

By: Shreya Sinha

The protests in Punjab are happening at a time when the agrarian economy is under stress. With increasing uncertainty, previously antagonistic groups across classes, castes & gender are coming closer, building a broader base for the agitation & beyond.

Punjab's farmers have been unrelenting in their opposition to the new farm laws passed in September. Their sustained and creative opposition continues to make headlines. The central government too remains adamant and increasingly belligerent about sustaining the laws in their current form. The political pressure of the farmers has led the Punjab government, in a symbolic gesture, to pass legislation rejecting the centre's farm laws. The past weeks have witnessed bitter stand-offs: farmers blocking rail tracks, the railways suspending services to Punjab for a period, and the state's power plants starved of coal. A march of thousands of farmers to Delhi earlier this week to register their opposition to these laws faced police barricades, water cannons, and tear gas shells.

In the face of the unpopularity of the farm laws, the central government has found refuge in different kinds of arguments in favour of the reforms. It has sought to discredit the protests by arguing that the agitation is driven by exploitative middlemen, and that small and marginal farmers are happy with these laws. The opposition to the new laws is portrayed as coming from large, prosperous, and politically powerful farmers, who dominate Punjab's farmers unions and who benefited the most from the old system.

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Yet, the fact is that there is wide social support for the protests. This broad resistance reflects multiple responses to the political economy and the politics of post-Green Revolution Punjab. In recent years, mobilisations have cut across class, caste and gender, with all their underlying contradictions and emerging possibilities. Drawing on my research on Punjab's agriculture over the past seven years, I argue here that there has been a marked departure from business-as-usual in the state's farmer politics. The farmers' movements in the state can no longer be painted with the same brush as before.

Defending the mandi system

Farmers in Punjab and Haryana were among the main beneficiaries of the Green Revolution, which from the late 1960s introduced across India high-yielding varieties of wheat and paddy. Farmers in the two states had secure land tenures, thanks to land reforms and the consolidation of land holdings in the region from the late colonial period onwards. This gave them an incentive to invest in the high costs of chemicals and irrigation required to grow the new crop varieties.

Perhaps the most important reason why farmers took to the high-yielding varieties was the agricultural marketing system that was put in place in the region: the mandi, the very same system that the new laws will undermine. There was an open-ended procurement scheme for wheat and paddy, under which any amount of grain of the stipulated quality brought to the mandi would be purchased by the government at a guaranteed Minimum Support Price (MSP). The system thus promised farmers a return on their investment.

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Various scholars as well as the Shanta Kumar Committee Report of 2015 have argued that large farmers benefit from the mandi system much more than smaller ones. This is true in absolute terms, since large farmers bring larger crop volumes to the market (although large farmers are also under strain now). However, small farmers too benefit from the security of the MSP. It provides them with an estimate of expected income against which household expenditure, including consumption and repayment of debt, can be managed. Farmers across classes therefore have a certain shared interest in the mandi system, which is reflected in the current mobilisation.

Crucial for the working of the mandi system is the commission agent, or arhtia, who facilitates sales to government agencies like the Food Corporation of India (FCIs). Arhtias routinely advance money to farmers, even when payments for sales have not come through

from the government procurement agencies. This ensures farmers have cash for the next season of crop production and for other needs. Small farmers are especially dependent on the arhtias for such credit. While the interest on these loans is high, most farmers consider the arhtias to be the 'banker of last resort', turning to them for a range of expenses from health and education to social functions and migration abroad.

The arhtia business in Punjab was long-dominated by the mercantile castes, or Mahajans, whose relations with their client farmers, almost entirely Sikh Jats, span many generations. Increasingly though, prosperous Jats have also become arhtias. It is no secret that prominent leaders of farmer unions and members of both the leading political parties in the state, Congress and Shiromani Akali Dal, are involved as arhtias. (I have argued elsewhere (Sinha 2020) that this has strengthened the arhtias' class position against farmers.)

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Farmers are thus associated with the arhtias through multiple social ties, which may allow for some concessions in terms of the time frame and instalments of repayment of loans. When the costs of crop production are increasing, returns to agriculture are declining, and formal credit inadequate and unevenly distributed, the arhtia is a 'necessary evil'. For the farmer, he is a familiar and approachable entity, as opposed to the all-powerful and faceless corporates that the new laws threaten to bring in. These factors, along with the growing presence of prosperous and politically connected Jat Sikh commission agents, have taken the edge off whatever opposition farmer unions earlier had against arhtias. All this is not to suggest that the arhtia as a middleman is not exploitative. But these social and economic linkages explain how the arhtias are embedded in the social landscape of rural Punjab, and why farmers oppose the new laws, which give them options beyond the mandis dominated by the arhtias.

Emergent class-caste solidarities

Overlooked in much of the reporting and commentary on the opposition to the new laws is the active participation of farm labour unions in the Punjab protests. Many of the demonstrations are replete with slogans of *mazdoor-kisan ekta zindabad* ("long live labour-farmer unity"). That labour organisations are supporting farmers at all is no small feat, given that historically there has been a strong opposition between the largely Jat Sikh farmers and the farm labourers, mostly landless Dalits.

> The farmer unions brought together Jat Sikh farmers across classes in opposition to Dalit agricultural labourers. But over the years, as the euphoria of the Green Revolution years died down, the basis of this traditional opposition has been somewhat undermined.

Farmer unions in Punjab, starting from the New Farmers Movements of the 1970s and 1980s, have served the interests of large farmers (Gill 1994). However, the unions were able to mobilise small farmers too, due to the fact that the Green Revolution subjected all farmers to forces of commercialisation. Small and large farmers also shared a common religious and caste identity. The farmer unions brought together Jat Sikh farmers across classes in opposition to Dalit agricultural labourers.

But over the years, as the euphoria of the Green Revolution years died down, the basis of this traditional opposition has somewhat been undermined. Productivity has declined, soil and water conditions have worsened, and costs have increased. Small farmers and farm labourers both struggle to make ends meet through agriculture. Reeling under chronic indebtedness, they are quitting agriculture altogether, or taking recourse to drugs, or sometimes, dying by suicide (Dhesi and Singh 2008). These conditions have become the basis of fledgling solidarities between farmers and labourers in the state.

"There is a propaganda that this is only an issue of farmers. But this is also an issue for labourers, shopkeepers, arhtias, students, employees, and young boys and girls because we all know that our stomachs are filled by farming," argues a leader of the Krantikari Pendu Mazdoor Union. He goes on to say that with the replacement of mandis by corporate purchase centres, machines would replace labourers and labour contractors would be out of business.

This new unity builds on years of pioneering work by the state's largest farmer union, the BKU (Ekta Ugrahan). Identifiable by their green and yellow flags, the BKU (Ekta Ugrahan) has managed to bring on board other farmer unions like the BKU (Dakounda), Kirti Kisan Union, and Punjab Kisan Union. In a conversation I had about a year ago with the BKU (Ekta Ugrahan)'s leader, Joginder Singh, he said that these efforts have been conscious and have required utmost commitment, given the caste and class divide between farmers and labourers. In 2004, for the first time, Joginder Singh's union decided to support an ongoing agitation of a farm labour

union in Ludhiana district by providing them tea and washing their used utensils. As the labour was primarily Dalit, this act marked an important moment in overcoming the caste divide and building solidarity.

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The union has since then extended support and actively taken up several causes of farm labourers. The BKU (Ekta Ugrahan) along with other farmer and farm labour unions supported an agitation by Dalits in Mansa district in 2010 to ensure they received compensation and rehabilitation when their homesteads were acquired for a power plant (Singh 2017). Similarly, in 2015-16, these farmer unions successfully agitated for farm workers to be included in the government's compensation package for a failed cotton crop. Cotton-picking is done mostly by landless Dalit women and constitutes an important source of income for their households. While the disbursal of the compensation remained uneven, the inclusion of labourers was an important achievement. The BKU (Ekta Ugrahan) has also supported the Zameen Prapti Sangharsh Committee, an organisation demanding land rights for Dalits, both through funds and through protection against physical attacks by the dominant Jats.

Leaders and activists of these organisations insist that this kind of mobilisation is made possible by building critical consciousness about the shared problems and interests of the landless and the farmers, in particular, the small farmers. Lachhman Singh Sewewala of the Punjab Khet Mazdoor Union, for example, argues that small farmers are in deep crisis due to the small size of landholdings, unequal access to financial and infrastructural resources and indebtedness. These are problems that resonate with the landless Dalits of Punjab's villages. Some of these leaders and activists also seem to be united in their understanding that caste and class have to be grappled with together to move towards any meaningful change. In addition, a joint front of these organisations mounts common struggles on issues such as health, education and unemployment as they affect people across caste and class lines. As Joginder Singh of the BKU (Ekta Ugrahan) put it, these struggles give them space and time to fight with each other but also understand each other and come closer.

> As farmers across class lines have mechanised heavily, opportunities for farm labour have steadily declined. Dalits therefore cannot always trust the landed Jat farmers to give equal importance to their interests in joint movements.

To be clear, these movements are limited to some districts of the state, mostly in the Malwa region that has a much longer history of radical rural mobilisations (such as the Muzara, or tenant, movement). The more status-quoist unions hold considerable power in other areas, making it difficult for the new movement to expand. Jat small farmers are reluctant to join hands with Dalits for their struggles (which include the struggle for land) for the fear of losing the little privilege they have through their higher caste status and land ownership. Through the course of my research in Punjab, I heard even small farmers routinely accuse local Dalits of being lazy, unwilling to perform farm labour, and demanding unreasonably high wages. But, in fact, labourers can barely eke out a subsistence with the current levels of wages. As farmers across class lines have mechanised heavily, opportunities for farm labour have steadily declined. Dalits therefore cannot always trust the landed Jat farmers to give equal importance to their interests in joint movements.

The land question

Small landholdings or no land is a major issue around which the farmer organisations mentioned above bring together small farmers, landless Jats, and Dalits. The organisations argue that the land ceiling-the maximum area that can legally be held by a person-established in 1972, is redundant now as the productivity of land has increased since then. They have therefore demanded that the ceiling be reduced and resulting surplus land redistributed equally among the landless and those without adequate land. They want the beneficiaries to be supported by a political and economic system that not only provides access to credit and irrigation, but also does not force them to buy expensive seeds, chemicals, and machinery.

> Land reforms remain the long-term *inquilabi* (revolutionary) vision. It is a question of social justice and equality.

It is only logical then that the spectre of corporate control of Punjab's agricultural land, mediated by the state, looms large in the speeches of leaders and activists. Oppositional discourse to the new farm laws is marked by repeated reference to the control of the state by 'Adani and Ambani' and suggestions that the new laws would make them slaves of American multinationals. The rhetoric is complemented by targeting toll plazas and Reliance petrol pumps, and burning effigies of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Mukesh Ambani, and Gautam Adani on Dussehra.

To be sure, the tensions between the unions' self-stated socialist, anti-corporate, and anti-imperialist vision, on the one hand; and the promotion of commercial farming through small holdings, on the other, do not appear to be fully resolved. Commercial farming, even when done by smallholders, typically deepens class differentiation and capitalist relations. Moreover, several recent studies suggest that scale matters for profitability in contemporary Indian agriculture. Scholars of agrarian political economy, not just in India but across the global South, have argued that the issue of land reforms is no longer as relevant as it used to be. There is merit to this argument if one were to see land reform as a vehicle for breaking up landlordism and ushering in agrarian capitalism.

For these organisations though, land reforms remain the long-term *inquilabi* (revolutionary) vision. It is a question of social justice and equality. Access to land is not just a question of income and subsistence but also of dignity for landless Dalit and non-Dalit households, and especially for women (on which more below). Moreover, in a country where the alternative or the supplement to land-based income for a large majority of agriculturists is precarious informal wage work, access to even small plots of land can provide some income security. It is notable that in some villages where the ZPSC has succeeded in securing access to panchayat lands for Dalits, the households have created different kinds of group farming arrangements to produce paddy and wheat (hitherto bought by the state at MSP) and/or fodder. Even though the returns are small, this counts as a major gain in the wider socio-economic and political context.

Women in the lead

Unlike the invisibilisation of farm labour's presence in the ongoing protests, the widespread participation of women has been widely noted. In this video, for example, women affiliated to the BKU (Ekta Ugrahan) can be heard singing:

…the Mandi Board is ours, Modi/we will take it back; Diwali is almost here/But he did not give it any thought; He pushed the whole world to the ground/we will teach you a lesson as well… I have brought other flag-bearing women with me/We will stamp you with it… Modi has kept quiet all this while/'Biba, I have made a huge mistake'/ We will make him say this… (my translation)

Such an assertion by women needs to be understood through their sustained mobilisation. Some of the farmer unions mentioned working with and organising women in the 2000s itself and now have dedicated women's wings. Death by suicides of fathers, brothers, and sons have left many farmer and farm labour households without a male earning member, leaving women to fight against a number of social and economic barriers to make ends meet. Even women from such debt-ridden agricultural families are known to have died by suicide in recent years. The direct and indirect impact of the agrarian crisis on women has allowed organisations to mobilise women on issues of land and agriculture.

Singh (2017) makes a case for recognising the resistance by Dalit women, including younger ones, both on its own terms and in terms of its crucial role in strengthening wider caste-class solidarities in Punjab's progressive movements. In the case of land acquisition in Mansa district, for example, it was Dalit women who put up the strongest resistance, blocking traffic, suffering police beatings, and continuing to picket even after the men were arrested. It was only after some days had passed in this manner that farmer and other unions joined in solidarity. The mobilisation of Dalit women in the current protests been made possible by such outreach. For instance, unions have taken up cases of sexual harassment and abuse by Jats. Unions have also raised the issue of loss of access to fodder for livestock, an important source of subsistence for landless Dalits, through the enclosure of common lands by powerful Jats and as the growing use of weedicides reduces the need for private landowners to hire labour to cut and take away grasses.

A defining moment

The new farm laws will fundamentally alter the workings of Punjab's agriculture, especially the role and relative power of social and institutional actors, marked by the mandi system for around half a century. Meanwhile, the resistance to the new laws reflects both more established as well as relatively newer forms of political mobilisations in rural areas. The protesters are responding to the current conjuncture in real time. The medium to long-term consequences of these developments are yet to be seen.

> The new, still budding, forms of agrarian mobilisation witnessed in Punjab have to continue to grapple with issues of caste and class. But there is much to celebrate in the efforts of the farmer and farm labour unions and other organisations…

Contradictions of class, caste and gender are known to undermine, if not completely paralyze, progressive agrarian politics across India. Despite support from some of the farm labour unions then, it is perhaps not surprising that the current agitation in Punjab appears to be largely a mobilisation by farmers, reflected most obviously in the popular music that has been released in recent months. Building solidarities with women of non-Dalit castes too remains challenging, with only some farmer unions like the BKU (Ekta Ugrahan) being proactive in achieving this. The new, still budding, forms of agrarian mobilisation witnessed in Punjab have to continue to grapple with issues of caste and class.

But there is much to celebrate in the efforts of the farm and farmer labour unions and other organisations towards overcoming these contradictions and in their gains so far. They recognise that expanding and sustaining this effort not only needs continuous political work on the ground but also the involvement and support of other sections of society. This is reflected in the alliances they have built with other kinds of progressive organisations such as students' unions, teachers' unions, the Taraksheel Society (Rationalist Society), and revolutionary organisations like the Lok Morcha Punjab. These alliances too are contributing to the current agitation. Despite the odds stacked against them, the forging of these solidarities not only creates hope for progressive change within Punjab but also holds lessons for social movements beyond the state.

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