

ALL IS NOT WELL WITH INDIA

Abdul Waheed Parry



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Farmer Protests in India

Farmers in India have been protesting against a set of new laws enacted by the extremist right-wing government led by Narendra Modi. The nationwide strikes are being held against controversial reforms. Hundreds of thousands of farmers are rallying in the outskirts of New Delhi, blocking main highways into the capital city.

The government argues that the new laws will give farmers more freedom and the reforms are much needed to increase the efficiency of the country's agriculture and farming sector. The government claims that the farming sector accounts for half of the country's workforce but generates merely 16% of GDP, which has made reforms necessary.

But farmers fear corporate exploitation and takeovers under the pretext of these reforms. Another claim of the farmers is that the government did not hold sufficient consultation before signing the laws. The farmers argue that the new laws will deregulate the sale of crops by the intervention of corporate buyers, replacing the market that has been dominated by government subsidies for decades. They fear reforms will put them at risk of losing their businesses and land to a private corporatist regime that is trying to invade the marketplace.

The Laws

India is among the countries most hit by the corona pandemic. The extremist right-wing government has successfully used the pandemic

lockdowns for passing the controversial laws in the Indian parliament. In September, at the height of the pandemic, the extremist right-wing government succeeded in passing three controversial agricultural reform laws in the parliament. There was less or no consultation with the farmers before presenting the reform laws to the parliament, and this has outraged farmers and political parties supporting farmer protests across India. There are few people in the Indian economic sector who are in favor of the implementation of these laws but the majority of experts have criticized the manner in which the laws are being imposed.

The first law is the Farmers' Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Bill, which is mostly opposed by farmers. This bill would facilitate farmers to make business directly with private corporations without going through the Indian government.

The second law is the Farmers' (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement of Price Assurance and Farm Services Bill. This bill deals with product pricing.

And the third law passed is the Essential Commodities (Amendment) Bill. This bill is aimed at modernizing India's food supply chain. It would reduce stockpiling and allow "freedom to produce, hold, move, distribute, and supply" products.

The Indian government has been running schemes since mid of last century which guaranteed farmers a set of prices for certain commodities. These schemes with advancements in agricultural technologies helped India to overcome its hunger crisis. According to the government, the new laws do not remove guaranteed minimum prices but will exterminate previous restrictions on corporatists in buying land and stockpiling commodities past a certain level. These laws would allow corporations and businesses to bypass the markets where farmers' produce was normally sold. They will be able to deal directly and will be less subject to the regulations which is what the farmers fear the most.

The Reactions

The mass farmers' mobilization has seen mass support in the north Indian states of Punjab and Haryana. Punjab has a bloody history of the secessionist movement, which was met with a harsh response by the Indian state. The people, mainly the Sikh population, have succeeded in sustaining a powerful public protest against the extremist Bharatiya Janata Party. Punjab is an agriculture-rich state with the second-largest wheat producer and the third-largest rice producer in India. Besides common farmers being at the forefront of agitation, Punjabi actors, singers, and athletes are also rallying behind these farmers. Many of them are returning the awards they have received from the Indian state.

On one hand, the government claims that the new laws will empower farmers and boost India's agricultural sector. On the other hand, farmer leaders and unions argue that instead of helping farmers, the legislation will open doors for big corporations who may eventually force them off their lands.

According to the Time USA, *"For many years, a certain agri-business lobby, backed by some of the biggest corporations in the county, has been wanting to enter agriculture," says, Yogendra Yadav, the national president of Swaraj India, a political party that is supporting the farmers' demands. "Similar proposals were put to previous governments as well, but no government had the political courage to do it because they knew it would be very unpopular with the farmers. There are large groups that want to enter agriculture. The problem is the laws in the country which do not allow big corporations to purchase land."*

*What farmers really want, says Yadav, is the government to actually guarantee that its minimum prices for farm produce are accessible to all farmers. Currently, Yadav says, as many as 80% of farmers don't receive the promised amount. "The government announces the minimum support price every year, but it remains on paper," he says, "Because the government doesn't back it with a system where farmers are actually assured that price."*¹

On the other hand, there are many economists who support the new legislation for agricultural reforms in India. People who have extreme right leanings favor the Modi government's every move, unbothered about the positive or negative effects of the new legislation in India.

*"There's no doubt that agriculture and markets need a lot of very serious public investment and reform," says Mekhala Krishnamurthy, a senior fellow at the Centre for Policy Research, a New Delhi think tank. "We have a situation where Indian agriculture is the site of enormous livelihoods and economic opportunity, but it has also been riddled with huge challenges and a lot of economic distress."*²

There is a debate going on in India about the new laws being implemented by the right-wing BJP government. Modi government is blamed for manipulating institutions for its own interests. The scrapping of article 370 and 35 (A) from the Indian constitution in August 2019, the implementation of the Citizenship Amendment Act in late 2019, and other anti minorities, anti-

people laws have seen resentment throughout India. Now the legislation for agricultural reform has seen a new surge of mass protests.

All these protests are clear indications of the emerging trends of mass agitation against the Modi government and it shows that the populist Modi government is running into trouble for pushing the people of India through mindless legislation unilaterally.

The rightwing BJP government under Narendra Modi is miscalculating the Indian public's moral force. The policies of this regime are based on the manipulation of electoral support it has gained in previous elections. India has more than 60 percent of its population dependent on agriculture. The farmers' protests in the outskirts of Delhi have gained widespread support across Indian states from north to south. These protests are actually a challenge to the authoritarian decision-making manner of Modi and the BJP government. The recent protests against agricultural reforms are the writing on the wall; that all is not well in India.

Endnotes

¹ <https://time.com/5918967/india-farmer-protests/>

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