

INHE EXPRESSES SOLIDARITY WITH THE INDIAN FARMERS

The current Indian farmers' protest is an ongoing resistance to the central government for repealing the 3 new contentious agri-marketing laws which were passed by the Parliament of India in September 2020. The laws have been described by the protesting farmers as "anti-farmer laws" which would leave them at the "mercy of giant private corporations". The government, however, maintains that the new laws would make it effortless for farmers to sell their produce directly to big buyers, and that stated protests were based on misinformation and misunderstanding. The government, even before the breakout of the pandemic, started to formalise the informal sector including agriculture in favour of the neoliberal markets and took steps in that direction (announced various liberalisation of labour laws, policies and actions including demonetisation and GST). The government and the transnational corporate world have been claiming that formalisation of the informal sector would facilitate them to get access to various government welfare schemes over the time.

Since November 2020, over 250 farmer unions have been protesting, transport unions representing over 14 million trucker drivers have come out in support of the farmers, threatening to halt movement of supplies in certain states of India. The government offered some amendments in the newly introduced laws, but the farmer unions' demand for total repealing of the laws. By mid December, even the Supreme Court of India asked the government to put the laws on hold, which the government has refused.

Earlier in September 2020, the Indian Parliament enacted three laws: (i) *the Farmers' Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Act, 2020*, (ii) *the Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement on Price Assurance and Farm Services Act, 2020*, and (iii) *the Essential Commodities (Amendment) Act, 2020*. The laws collectively seek to: (i) provide farmers as well as buyers with barrier-free multiple trading channels outside the markets notified under the various state Agriculture Produce Marketing Committee (APMC) laws, (ii) provide a legal framework for private companies to enter into pre-arranged contracts with farmers, and (iii) deregulate the supply of certain food items, including cereals, pulses, potatoes, and onions for normal times and regulate only under extraordinary circumstances such as war, famine, and extraordinary price rise. Low bargaining power of the farmers and lack of statutory support in the new laws for the Minimum Support Prices (MSPs) are the key concerns and apprehensions that have led to the opposition to the new agricultural laws.

The Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement on Price Assurance and Farm Services Act, 2020 creates a national framework for contract farming through an agreement

between a farmer and a buyer/trader before the production or rearing of any farm produce. The Act provided for a 3-level dispute settlement mechanism by the Conciliation Board, Sub-Divisional Magistrate, and Appellate Authority. Since the Appellate Authority was the highest level of appeal for the farmer against any private entity, the farmer is effectively prevented from moving the Courts. Thus, the Opposition claims that the law is highly skewed in favour of mega corporate entities as the individual farmers did not have the resources that domestic private giants or transnational corporations had.

The Farmers' Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Act, 2020 permits barrier-free intra-state and inter-state trade of farmers' produce beyond the physical premises of Agricultural Produce Market Committee (APMC), Market Yards (mandis) and other markets notified under state APMC Acts. This Act allows trading in "outside trade areas"—such as farm gates, factory premises, warehouses, silos, and cold storages—and prohibits state government from levying any market fee or cess on farmers and traders. It also permits the electronic trading of farmers' produce in the specified trade area, facilitating direct and online buying & selling of such produce through electronic devices and internet. The law bypasses the APMC altogether, creating a separate structure of trading.

The Essential Commodities Act (ECA) since 1955 has been used by the Government to regulate the production, supply, and distribution of a whole host of commodities that it declares 'essential' in order to make them available to citizens and consumers at fair prices. Additionally, the government can also fix the "Minimum Support Prices-MSPs" of any packaged product that it declares an "essential commodity". The list of items under the law includes drugs, fertilizers, pulses, and edible oils, as well as petrol and petroleum products. This law now has been modified by ***the Essential Commodities (Amendment) Act, 2020*** as part of the so-called "reforms". The government now has announced that there will be no stock limit for processors and supply chain owners based on their capacity and for exporters based on the export demand. It would also end some existing punitive measures. The commodities that have been deregulated are food items, including cereals, pulses, potato, onion, oilseeds, and edible oils.

Soon after the laws were introduced, agricultural sector unions began holding local protests, mostly in Punjab state. After two months of protests, farmers— notably from Punjab, Rajasthan and Haryana states began a movement named '*Dilli Chalo*' (Let's go to Delhi), in which tens of thousands of farmers marched towards the nation's capital. Police and law enforcement dug trenches, used water cannons and tear gas to prevent the farmers from entering Delhi. By the end of November, more than 300,000 farmers converged at various border points on the way to Delhi.

From the farmers' standpoint, the ordinances were unfairly promulgated in June 2020, during the COVID19 lockdown, without consulting them. Then the Bills were hurriedly

passed during the monsoon session of Parliament. The farmers were already reeling under the ravages of the COVID-19 lockdown. Farmers could not sell their vegetables and fruits because of the lockdown. With the loss of income during the lockdown and the imposition of the new laws, purported to help them, the farmers were hit by a double whammy. The farmers fear that big companies might usurp their land and might not pay them an agreed price on the pretext of “poor quality” of produce. They feel that the big companies might become monopolies, and exploit both farmers and consumers also by stockpiling and hoarding. Farmers fear being made into labourers in their own lands in the long run. Following this, farmers from different states then marched to Delhi to protest against the laws. Farmers also criticized the national media for misrepresenting the protest. Farmers' groups said that in the first 22 days of protests, more than 20 farmers had died protesting; some due to hypothermia caused by cold weather.

In Tamilnadu state too various protests in solidarity to the farmers agitating at national capital borders were organised by different farmers unions. In Karur district as well, a series of demonstrations and protests took place in solidarity with farmers. More than 100 persons were arrested by police continuously for three days and later released. On 20 December at Karur the INHE members along with Tamil Nadu Land Rights Federation (TNLRF), Swaraj India and AIKSCC paid tribute to those who lost their lives during this movement. AIKSCC (All India Farmers' Struggle Coordination Committee) is a pan-Indian umbrella platform comprising more than 250 farmers' organisations. Earlier on 19 December 2020, INHE members participated in the youth training program organised by the TNLRF and deliberated upon the “human economy perspective” as a peaceful way forward to the current agrarian crisis across the region in South Asia.

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