

June 2022

## Dissenting Bodies, Disruptive Pandemic: Farmers' Protest and Women's Participation in Mass Mobilisation in India

Paromita Chakrabarti

*H.R. College of Commerce and Economics, University of Mumbai*

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### Recommended Citation

Chakrabarti, Paromita (2022) "Dissenting Bodies, Disruptive Pandemic: Farmers' Protest and Women's Participation in Mass Mobilisation in India," *Journal of International Women's Studies*: Vol. 24: Iss. 2, Article 9.

Available at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol24/iss2/9>

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## **Dissenting Bodies, Disruptive Pandemic: Farmers' Protest and Women's Participation in Mass Mobilisation in India**

By Paromita Chakrabarti<sup>1</sup>

### **Abstract**

While authoritarian states promoting neoliberal forms of governance have taken advantage of COVID-19 to weaken the foundations of civil society, there has also been a significant rise in contemporary struggles for a more democratic society during and around the pandemic. From December 2019 to November 2021, India has seen a significant number of protests. The timeline of collective resistance against the state and its divisive, violent and neoliberal agenda represents a critical juncture in Indian politics. This paper focuses on the farmers' protests that started from last November and recently ended in a stunning, hard-earned victory. In a sector that is overwhelmingly male-dominated and deeply patriarchal, women farmers have come out on the streets protesting the controversial Farm Laws hastily passed by the Indian government in September 2019 that threatened to corporatize farming and increase exploitation and marginalisation of small farmers. What is most interesting about the farmers' protests is large-scale participation of women across caste, class, occupational, and religious divide which has changed the composition and dynamics of collective resistance and demonstrate how organised and collective resistance can become symbols of solidarity and intersectional dissent. The paper will examine the role of gender and female agency in protests by female occupying bodies in physical spaces particularly when under the pretext of COVID-19 crisis management the state has severely pushed back against citizens right to dissent and fight for justice. The farmer's protest has brought to the fore women's role in mass mobilisations. Women's participation in the protest has tremendous significance for women's movement for justice, equality and rights and can pose a real challenge to the return of the 'Strong State'.

*Keywords:* protest, farmers' protests, India, women, farmers, women farmers, demonstration, farm laws, gender; mass mobilisation

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. Paromita Chakrabarti is Professor and Head of the Department of English and Director, Global Research Initiatives (GRI) at H.R. College of Commerce and Economics, University of Mumbai where she has been teaching since 2001. Her research areas include migration, diaspora, postcolonial studies, gender and nation. She has been a 2010-11 Fulbright-Nehru Doctoral Research Fellow at the Department of English, Indiana University, Bloomington. Dr. Chakrabarti has published several articles in international journals and is the assistant editor of the peer reviewed journal *Writing Today: International Journal of Studies in English*. She has been a joint editor for the peer reviewed journal *Baltic Worlds* from Södertörn University, Stockholm and has been a resource person at University Grants Commission (UGC) sponsored refresher courses and short-term courses for faculty across colleges and universities in India. She annually teaches a Master's level seminar class on Feminist Critical Theory at the University of Sheffield, UK, and has been an invited speaker for seminar lecture at several universities and colleges both in India and abroad. In her spare time Paromita enjoys trekking and travelling. E-mail contact: [drparomitachakrabarti@hrcollege.edu](mailto:drparomitachakrabarti@hrcollege.edu)

## Introduction

History has witnessed instances of individual protests injustice and brutality such as the famed image of the young man standing in front of the army tank in Tiananmen square, China.<sup>2</sup> The world has also seen spectacular mass movements of resistance and rebellion such as the French Revolution, the Russian Revolution, global struggles for independence from colonial rule in parts of Asia, the Caribbean, Africa; anti-war protests, anti-slavery abolition movements, the Civil Rights Movement in the US, the anti-Apartheid movement in South Africa, the Arab Spring, among others; that have changed the course of nations and transformed societies. Protests have been a defining feature of our world and modern history is replete with evidence of popular uprising, political and civil rights movements, mass rebellion, demonstrations, picketing, rioting etc., that have challenged existing power structures and, on many occasions, have also successfully overturned them.

We are currently living in times of protest. Protests against, protests by, protests for, protests within are not simply hashtags. There are virtual protests and protests by occupying bodies in physical spaces. We have seen protests such as the #MeToo movement, Black Lives Matter movement, Occupy Wall Street, the Arab Spring in North Africa, the *gilet jaunes* in France, the Youth Strike for Climate, #NiUnaMas and anti-femicide movements of Latin America, the Right to Abortion in Argentina, Poland and Ireland that have rocked the world; while closer home in India, we have witnessed massive resistance and ceaseless protests in Kashmir, the anti-rape and anti CAA (Citizenship Amendment Act) protest and the farmers' protests in India. These protests have demonstrated how organised and collective resistance can become symbols of solidarity and intersectional dissent. They are stunning examples of mass participation on a very large scale which has revitalized collective resistance in our present times. Protests have the ability to energize a restive populace by bringing them together in harmony, shot with the force of solidarity that comes through collective political action. Protests also can become sites of discordance and tension as they bring divergent bodies and discrete views together in a common struggle for equality and justice. A viable protest that has any chance of being successful has to be constantly open to negotiation and interrogation of its own position and an acknowledgement of the diverse character and divergent positionalities of the protesting publics.<sup>3</sup> Large scale mobilisation of people in the current moment in history is extremely interesting for feminist scholars as well as for those studying social movements. Examining women's mass mobilisation can offer insight into questions of identity, sexual relations and power structure and how women negotiate them through their participation in these mass movements.

Today protesting bodies on the streets are made highly conspicuous through media and other streaming devices. These images are shared widely through social networking feeds and often become the most visible moment in the history of collective struggle, 'overshadowing other temporalities, sites and modes of protest' (Cohen, Forbis and Misri, 2018: 15). Visibility is seen as agency and the deploying of protesting bodies in public sphere is construed as defiance. Streets on which demonstrations take place are thus marked as sites of resistance and has an immediate performative appeal. However, there is a whole repertoire of tactics that often comprise less visible acts of organized resistance and expands beyond the public sphere to include sonic, visual and digital practices along with the textual.<sup>4</sup> Visible protests in the public

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<sup>2</sup> This iconic image of an unidentified man who stood in front of a column of tanks leaving Tiananmen Square in Beijing, June 5, 1989, blocking their path, after the violent crackdown of the Chinese govt against protests is seen today as a symbol of fearless resistance against censorship and state authority. He is known as "Tank Man".

<sup>3</sup> For more on this see Melissa Schwartzberg edited 'Protest and Dissent' in *Nomos* LXII and Cohen et al.

<sup>4</sup> Photography, paintings, graphic art, literature, theatre, dance, cinema, songs and speeches on radio (sonic protests), memoirs, oral history, testimonies, community storytelling, food, clothing, digital culture and

sphere often exclude or obscure those acts of individual or collective resistance that fall outside of them due to the threat of retaliatory state violence, immediate danger to life and liberty, disability, job precarity, child care, citizenship status etc. There is an urgent need to engage with forms of protest that exists beyond the boundaries of the visible, break free from an ableist framework and expand the discourse on organised resistance and collective struggle (Cohen, Forbis and Misri, 2018: 15).

Acts of organised resistance can be thus mapped on a huge scale which spans multiple registers and repertoire of strategies and tactics to fight oppression and exploitation. They address the pressing material and social concerns of our times and help build solidarity and partnerships across divides. Both individual and group struggle for an equal and just world has led to many a liberation movement and strengthened the contest against neo-imperialism, racial, gender and religious discrimination, and state violence. This paper looks at the organised struggle against steady corporatisation of the economy and neoliberal offensives by the state particularly through the mass mobilisation of women and the broader impact of women's participation in collective struggle in general on questions of gender and in particular the effect it has on gender roles, gender relations and gender equality in India.

### **Indian protest scene and farmers agitation**

From December 2019 to November 2021, Indian streets have exploded in demonstrations, agitations, blockades, and conflict.<sup>5</sup> Streets have become the most visible sites of occupation by the protesting bodies and one of the many violent sites of state repression. With the pandemic raging, the heavy-handed way in which the state responded to collective protest reveals the precarious nature of Indian democracy. The central government curbed civil liberties, shut down the internet at protest sites, clamped down on news in the media, arrested political opponents/students/dissidents/protestors all in the name of restoring order and managing COVID-19 crisis along with the usual excuse of weeding out the 'anti-nationals' who apparently pose a threat to India's security and unity. Despite severe repression, the protests have continued unabated, particularly the ongoing farmers' protests which have the potential to seriously challenge deregulated capitalism and state oppression. The government brought in COVID -19 control regulations and tried to forcibly clear out the sites of protests, ban gathering of people and implemented a slew of measures that restricted access to public spaces making it very difficult to organise any kind of mass protests. In spite of COVID-19 regulations being in place and series of enforced lockdowns, the Indian protestors found a way to mass mobilise and storm the capital with demonstrations.

Since November 2020, Indian farmers have been staging one of the biggest protests that the country has seen. The farmers have been fighting against the implementation of three farm bills that the government tabled at the Parliament and rushed it through based on strength of numbers, and it passed in the form of the controversial Farm Laws in September 2020. The three controversial Farm Laws hurriedly passed without proper debate in the parliament were: Farmers' Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Act, 2020; Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement on Price Assurance and Farm Services Act,

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subcultures, can operate as sites of protest and struggle for transformation outside of the very visible demonstrations of collective resistance that take place on the street.

<sup>5</sup> One of the most significant protests that drew in thousands across the country was the Anti-CAA demonstrations that reached a crescendo in December 2019-January 2020. Protesters demonstrated against the implementation of the controversial and discriminatory Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) of 2019 that makes provisions for Indian citizenship to persecuted religious minorities from neighbouring Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan. This provision is for only Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, Parsis, Jains and/or Christians. The CAA specifically excludes Muslims. The Act has come under severe criticism as it clearly makes religious identity as a criterion for Indian citizenship.

2020 and Essential Commodities (Amendment) Act, 2020. According to the government, the new Farm Laws signal a new era which will give more freedom to the farmer, more autonomy as s/he will no longer have to depend on a middleman for selling and can send produce across state borders as well as to large agro-businesses and grocery chains. The Modi government made loud proclamations that deregulation will open up agriculture to market competition thus boosting farmer income; open Indian agriculture to foreign markets; attract private investment; modernise the sector; improve infrastructure and all transactions would go digital. Foregrounding how this elimination of a public regulatory system will make farming more profitable, the government has opened up agriculture for big players from the corporate world. The government very carefully framed the argument for deregulation in the rhetoric of rights discourse saying that farmers will now be able to widen their networks, move freely across artificial, restrictive borders and create alliances transcending them.<sup>6</sup> Since the current BJP ruling party is a technocratic-populist one, the entire attempt was to justify the new laws as progressive and welfare-oriented through the adoption of a language which privileged technocratic interventions for problem solving and free-market logic that pretends to offer choice.<sup>7</sup> De-regulation will usher in a new era in farmers rights and bring with it greater opportunities. However, farmers fear that inequality and exploitation will exacerbate in a sector that has been reeling under massive poverty and has been divided by caste, gender and class differences.

The agricultural sector has never been a level playing field and neoliberal interventions will render it even more inequitable. With 85 percent of marginal farmers who have no access or minimum access to markets or transportation facilities, profit making through liberalisation and de-regulation will be in favour of big corporations who are already beginning to make their presence felt in the field. Farmers fear that de-regulation and entry of giant corporations will drive down prices, increase exploitation and marginalisation of small farmers and create havoc particularly during times of uncertainty such as over-supply as well as crop failure. Thousands of farmers especially from the states of Punjab, Haryana and western Uttar Pradesh started long marches to Delhi, the seat of power and have been camping at three Delhi border points: Tikri, Singhu and Ghazipur since 26<sup>th</sup> November 2020, demanding an immediate repeal of the three controversial laws. They also demanded a legal guarantee on Minimum Support Prices (MSP) for their crops.

From November 2020 to January 2021, 11 rounds of talks had been held between the government and the farmers' union. Under the coordination of 'Samyukt Kisan Morcha' and 'All India Kisan Sangharsh Coordination Committee', at least 22 farmers' union participated in the protests. The farmers' union received direct and indirect support also from other trade unions prominent among them is the All-India Motor Transport Congress (AIMTC). In the last round of talks that ended in January, the government offered to suspend the Farm Laws for one to 1.5 years. The farmers' union decried the proposal stating firmly that they will accept nothing short of complete repeal of these pro-corporate Farm Laws. The matter then moved to the Supreme Court which had passed a stay order on the laws and ordered to set up a four-member committee to resolve the impasse over them between the Centre and farmers' unions protesting at the Delhi borders. Unflinching in the face of police action, rampant arrests and threat of escalating violence, the farmers' union persisted in continuing their protests and

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<sup>6</sup> Radha D'Souza (2018) provides a detailed critique of the way governments and businesses use the rights discourse to justify neoliberal policies and globalisation. She also exposes the ways in which governments court big businesses and suggests corporate capitalism as a means to improving people's lives.

<sup>7</sup> See Friedman's work on how governments use technocracy as an approach to governance. In this system technical expertise is prized over democratic representation. Also see Ostiguy and Moffitt's work on performative-relational approach towards populism. The politics of both technocracy and populism are viewed as hostile to representative democracy and pluralistic politics.

finally won a stunning victory on 19<sup>th</sup> November 2021 when the Modi Government announced the repeal of all three Farm Laws. The farmers' unions welcomed the announcement but decided to continue their stir until the minimum support prices (MSP) is guaranteed by the government.

### **Farmers' Protests and Women in Mass Mobilisation**

The farmers' protests are very interesting because of several reasons. They are one of the biggest that we have seen in recent times; they have been supported by trade unions from various sectors including service and manufacturing; the protests and blockades have spread to different states with simultaneous sit-ins and marches organized across state borders; several state governments tacitly extended their support to the protests (in keeping with their dissent against the bills before the Farm Laws were hastily passed); they received wide media coverage both national and international; they have seen overwhelming support from civil society and large-scale participation of women across the caste, class, occupational, and religious divide.

It has brought the women of the Anti-CAA movement and the women farmers together on the same platform; strengthening each other's fight and offering solidarity. The farmers' protests have brought to the fore women's role in mass mobilisations. Women's participation in the protests has tremendous significance for women's movement for justice, equality and rights. The clarion call for women to join in large numbers to mark March 8<sup>th</sup> at the protest sites is cause for celebration as it has been one of the largest gathering of women protesting against privatisation, corporatisation and neoliberalism in the world.

In January 2021, the Chief Justice of India (CJI) asked lawyers to persuade women, children and the elderly to leave protest sites and go home as it could be very difficult for them to brace the biting cold winter, especially when they are involved in sit-ins and hunger strikes and there may be considerable danger to their person if they continue to participate in such acts of resistance. The court also indirectly suggested that women's participation in the protests was as care givers, providing cooking and cleaning services; insinuating thousands of women farmers who were stung by the reductive attitude that treated them as frail and weak, did not see them as equal partners in the struggle and failed to recognise them as farmers in their own right. The CJI's remarks drew large scale ire across the protest lines as it was seen as not just as an attempt to exclude women from the protests, but also as a warning of violence to come against the protesters.

Unanimously rejecting the CJI's appeal with a resounding 'No' these women farmers continued their protests at the blockade sites along with male farmers asserting their identity as farmers and upholding their right to be seen as equal stakeholders. Bhowmick's report for *Time* mentions how women have risen up in fierce resistance. She quotes women farmers extensively from her interviews: "We either die and go back, or win and go back," said a woman protester. "Something snapped within us when we heard the government tell the women to go back home," says Jasbir Kaur, a 74-year-old farmer from Rampur in western Uttar Pradesh. Bhowmick finds out that Kaur has been bravely camping at the Ghazipur protest site for over three months, only returning home once. "Why should we go back? This is not just the men's protest. We toil in the fields alongside the men. Who are we—if not farmers?" (Bhowmick, 2021). The protest sites became an alternative space for women as they converted it to a place to resume their daily activities such as cooking, cleaning etc. Photo journalist Pundir's interviews with several women farmer protesters show how they have been not only defiant of the CJI's appeal but also developed a deeper sense of solidarity and community through their experience of being part of a collective struggle. When Pundir asked the women when would they go back home, one protester replied: "this is my home now, with a bigger family" (Pundir, 2021).

The protest has drawn women of all ages and diverse backgrounds from across India. From Septuagenarian Gurmer Kaur from Uttar Pradesh to 41-year-old widowed mother of two Amandeep Kaur from Punjab with her children, from 18-year-old farmers Sahumati Padha, and Hiraath Jhade who came from the central state of Chhattisgarh to Bindu Ammini Dalit rights and women's rights activist from the southernmost state of Kerala, this protest has witnessed pan-Indian support and solidarity. The protestors through their overwhelming and active participation have successfully challenged the traditionally accepted gender roles of simply being caregivers and housewives who help the family in farming. They have also been able to resist gender discrimination through an assertion of identity as farmers and protesters in the public space.

Changing mindsets in states where sexual violence, femicide, and gender discrimination are rampant has been a persistent challenge for activists. For her report, Bhowmick interviews Sudesh Goyat, the firebrand gender rights activist from Haryana. Goyat tells her: "We have been working to bring about gender equality in these parts for so long—but the process has been slow." Goyat declares how during the first few days of protests in Tikri, she was the only woman from Haryana there. But after the court suggested women leave, Goyat says proudly how women "started to pour in. They came with their families. They came with other women. They came alone. It's no less than a miracle." (Bhowmick, 2021).

The sites have also become important venues for discussion and debate on gender equality. The men and women have had to occupy spaces in close proximity and a deeper understanding of gender imbalance is beginning to emerge among both men and women who have had to share spaces for several months. Taking advantage of this rare situation, activists held frequent discussions on women's work and their contribution to the rural economy. Regular announcements from the stage about treating women as equals echoed around the protest sites throughout the day. Bhowmick's other interviewees, such as the young and passionate Harsharan Kaur **who left a job in Dubai to volunteer at the protest site** draw courage from and display her faith in the mass mobilisation: **"I like this India" she tells Bhowmick.** (Bhowmick, 2021).

Gender rights activists have been working with women and men at these sites and have been able to **normalise conversations around taboo topics such as menstruation.** At the Ghazipur site, Bhowmick interviews the 29-year-old Ravneet Kaur, a law student from Bangalore, who has set up a mobile sanitary napkin store where the products are displayed openly. Kaur tells Bhowmick: "The men got used to it soon enough." **"Now these conversations are normal around here. Men don't flinch when they say sanitary napkins anymore"** (Bhowmick, 2021). Sudesh Goyat, the gender rights activist has been at the Tikri protest site since the very beginning, helping mobilize women and organize for January 18 to be recognized as Women Farmers Day. She tells Bhowmick: "Women work equally in the fields with the men. It's only right they should be here to protest. The awareness among women about their own power has never been higher than now" (Bhowmick, 2021).

Whether such sentiments will spread beyond the protests is unclear, but for now, female farmers are being seen, heard and acknowledged—offering a new vision of what gender equality might look like for the country. In an interview with Sukh Deep Singh, a young farmer from Punjab, Bhowmick quotes him: "We have looked upon them as mothers, sisters, wives," he says, "but now we see them in a different light" (Bhowmick, 2021). Singh's awareness signals an interesting shift in gender relations and reveals how participation in mass struggle can dislodge deep seated gender stereotypes. The large presence of women in public spaces, holding their own, also has a significant impact on how they are viewed by their male counterparts. From being seen simply as

mothers and wives to becoming comrades in a battle is a really important shift that can have very decisive transformation on gender relations in particular. What is most important is women have begun to see themselves differently. There is a rising consciousness among women protestors who now understand their oppression and exploitation and know that they have to stand up and fight. This self-awareness has led to agency and made these women vocal and brave. In Tikri, Sudesh Kandela, a 55-year-old farmer from Haryana, whom Bhowmick interviews tells her while she watches a play being staged by a local theatre group, enraptured by the spectacle: "I didn't know what I was capable of beyond the expectations of me as a woman, a wife and mother." She confesses to Bhowmick that she has never been to a protest or taken her veil off outside her home. "But I am here now," she says, clenching her fists, "and I cannot be oppressed. I cannot be intimidated. I cannot be bought" (Bhowmick, 2021).

### **Taking Centre stage: Women's radical activism through mass protests**

On March 8<sup>th</sup>, India witnessed a new Women's Day. Wearing bright yellow scarves representing the colour of mustard fields, the women took centre stage at key protest sites, chanting slogans, holding small marches, and making speeches against the laws. Holding flags of farm unions, the women gather around women leaders from the farming community and around those activists who had joined the swell of protests from all over the country. These women leaders made fiery speeches against Modi government's complete lack of concern towards women farmers and its apathetic attitude towards women in general. Some protestors went on a day-long hunger strike demanding an immediate repeal of the Farm Laws. The women protestors were joined by thousands of women from all walks of life and those who have been sitting at Shaheen Bagh in protest of the draconian CAA since November 2019. There were speeches, plays, songs, dance, poetry readings that highlighted women's contribution to farming among others. The stage was managed by women, the speakers were all women and the issues tackled were about farming in general and women farmers in particular and the contribution of women farmers in this movement. While the focus was primarily on women farmers and their concerns, there were many discussions and speeches made around women's role in the economy, their contribution to society, exploitation of and violence against women, and the importance of collective struggle for gender justice and equality.

What is extremely significant about these protests is the emergence of a new crop of feminist activists who co-organised and co-ordinated the protests that brought both men and women together. These new women activists demonstrated a high level of political consciousness by recognising the common struggles of both factory/industrial workers and farmers. Nodeep Kaur who has been organising male and female industrial workers to demand better working conditions and assumed a leadership role in this organisation lead a rally of thousands of industrial workers – men and women – in support of the farmers' movement.

The case of Disha Ravi is a very interesting one. On 13<sup>th</sup> February 2021, twenty-two-year-old old environmental and gender activist Ravi was arrested by the Delhi Police on the allegation of providing an online toolkit to defame India, allegedly taking and offering support to pro- Khalistani separatist group (which wants to create a separate country in Punjab) under the garb of farmer's protest. There was a global outcry and widespread protests in India against her arrest. The way she was arrested once again confirmed the heavy-handed way in which the current government tried to muffle dissent and scare young activists by jailing them under sedition laws on the flimsiest pretext of spreading disaffection and ill will against the government (*Al Jazeera*, 2021). Ravi was later released for lack of evidence by the Delhi High Court which pronounced the toolkit at the centre of controversy

as an innocuous one with no evidence of any call for violence. In her support to the farmers' cause, Ravi said: "My grandparents, who are farmers, indirectly birthed my climate activism." She explained in detail why climate activism and the farmers' protest against the three Farm Laws resonated with her. Ravi said in her statement after her release:

"Climate Justice isn't just for the rich and the white. It is a fight alongside those who are displaced; whose rivers have been poisoned; whose lands were stolen; who watch their houses get washed away every other season; and those who fight tirelessly for what are basic human rights. We fight alongside those actively silenced by the masses and portrayed as 'voiceless', because it is easier for savarnas<sup>8</sup> to call them voiceless. We take the easy way out and fund saviourism rather than amplify the voices on ground" (Dutta Roy, 2021).

Ravi's activism and support to the farmers' protests is a case in point where women have come out in the open to argue against the government's neo-liberal offensives and successfully make links with the larger social, environmental and political struggles that define our century and those of caste, gender and class that divide Indian society.

The massive participation of women in the protests has garnered worldwide attention. The protests have attracted the attention of activists, politicians and celebrities around the world, such as singer Rihanna, climate activist Greta Thunberg, legal activist Meena Harris (the niece of US Vice President Kamala Harris), the Hollywood film actress Susan Sarandon, UN human rights chief Michelle Bachelet and the UK Green Party member of parliament Caroline Lucas. They have all extended support to the farmers' protests against the three Farm Laws brought in by the BJP government.

### **Women, food and farm labour: The optics of protest**

The prominent presence of women in what was perhaps the world's largest ongoing protest movement till early December 2021, and certainly one of the biggest domestic challenge facing Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government, has put a spotlight on the important role women play in agriculture in India. It also marks a milestone in women's struggle for equality, and their leadership in resistance movements. Most of the protesting farmers have come from the three north Indian states of Haryana, Uttar Pradesh and Punjab, states that have the worst male to female sex ratio, highest record of violent crimes against women, rampant practice of dowry in marriage, and lowest property and land ownership among women in the country. The large presence of protesting women from these states is thus extremely significant and quite remarkable (Nabourema, 2021).

Women farmers comprise an invisible workforce in India's vast agricultural sector. Most spend long hours of hard farm labour but own no land. Women who are protesting the Farm Laws worry that these laws will not only threaten their livelihoods but may drive their male relatives to desperate measures such as suicide and abandonment. Mitra and Shroff argue that farmers' suicides have acquired epidemic proportions in India spiralling out of control. The loss of competitiveness with the opening up of India's agricultural economy in the mid-1990's by several states was a major reason for farmers suicides. Most farmers' suicides are brought on by their inability to repay loans taken from private moneylenders and banks (Mitra and Shroff, 2007:73).<sup>9</sup> Statistics on farmers' suicides reveal the extent of catastrophe and

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<sup>8</sup> Upper caste people are the savarnas.

<sup>9</sup> The maximum number of suicides reported are from those states of Karnataka, Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh. It is interesting to note that these are the states that have adopted the economic reforms of 1990's in totality and aggressively promoted market-oriented model of agriculture while withdrawing state support and welfare measures for farmers. In promoting market-oriented production systems, these states have also pushed

indicate that it is mostly men who take their lives leaving the women and children in abject poverty. Widows of farmers and agricultural labourers have had to bear the excruciating burden of childcare and work to provide for food, education and shelter for the family. It is no wonder that women are fiercely contesting the laws that they believe will exacerbate poverty, exploitation and financial hardship.

The farmers' protests have also rekindled women's demands for land reforms. According to an Oxfam India report, more than 85 per cent of rural women in India are engaged in agriculture, yet less than 13 percent of women owned land. Nearly 75 percent of rural women in India who work full-time are farmers, and the numbers are expected to rise as more men migrate to cities for jobs (Oxfam India, 2018). According to the India Human Development Survey conducted by National Council of Applied Economic Research (NCAER), 83 percent of agricultural land is inherited by male members of the family and less than 2 percent by females. The lack of formal ownership makes it very difficult for women farmers to access bank loans, government assistance, subsidies, support of the agricultural cooperatives etc. Furthermore, women, especially those whose spouses have committed suicide, are unable to gain the right to the land they farm due to gender-biased inheritance laws particularly in the north Indian states of Punjab, Uttar Pradesh, Haryana among others . Inheritance provisions are governed by multiple laws and in the case of women farmers assertion of land rights through marriage or birth is further complicated with different states implementing land laws that clearly reflect gender bias through covert or overt favouring of the male of the family. This reality, coupled with the inability of female farmers to access subsidies, insurance, loans and aid programmes, has driven women to join the protests in large numbers and demand wider reforms (Nabourema, 2021). The odds are particularly stacked against single women farmers as they juggle home and work, land and law; if the new laws are passed the market for agricultural produce is bound to become more distant and hence more competitive and exploitative.

Women are keenly aware that their presence at the protest sites offers some level of protection to the men from police brutality and tough action by security forces; they are also conscious of their contribution to the cause of resistance as they maintain a steady supply of rations and daily necessities at the camp sites. Many women farmers participated in the protest by rotation as female family and community members took turns to look after children and tend to the farms back home. This has strengthened affective networks and consolidated the fight against state sponsored capitalist takeover of their lands and labour. Women protesters are now a formidable group forging alliances with the wider struggles of the working-class movement. Pundir notes that the predominantly non-violent nature of the protests has also encouraged large scale participation of women and the elderly in the protests and the visible presence of women farmers at the camp sites have inspired other oppressed groups in society and particularly minority women and students, both urban and rural; to come out openly in support of the protestors and combine forces to fight the government's anti-people, anti-farmer measures (Pundir, 2021).

The role of gender and female agency in protests by female bodies occupying physical spaces particularly when, under the pretext of the COVID -19 crisis management, the state has severely curtailed citizens' right to dissent and the fight for justice must be seriously considered. The collective struggle against the encroachment of corporate capital has weakened gender, caste and communal divisions. Although there are divisions between small and medium farmers the encroachment of corporate capitalism represents a danger to both and on this basis, women have taken a prominent role in organising resistance even among those communities

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for the cultivation of cash crops for profit (predominantly cotton) even when the land and the supporting ecological system may have been unsuitable for such cultivation.

that are traditional, and male dominated. The farmers' protests has brought to the fore women's role in mass mobilisations and has tremendous significance for the women's movement for justice, equality and rights. Their participation represents a crucial dimension in resisting the return of the 'Strong State'. The farmers' protests need to make links with larger urban struggles and the workers movement in order to move beyond its current impasse. The struggle of the working class needs to be unified under a leadership that can bring diverse trade unions together to bargain for collective rights and push back against the behemoth of corporate capitalism that has weakened many labour organisations. Currently the impasse is trade unions organising separately and not joining forces to secure greater rights for its workers to fight against austerity measures. Until all trade unions of the country come together on one plank and demand an end to rampant privatization, corporate take-over of public institutions, induced precarity and push for the return of a welfare state, the farmers' victory may be a short lived one.

### **Conclusion**

The protests have highlighted both the role women play in farming and revealed their skills of organising and mobilising. The presence of women in the protests also challenges the stereotype of Indian women as being passive victims of social injustices and violence. Women have seized the opportunity presented by the protests to demand not just the repeal of the controversial Farm Laws, but also to end discrimination and inequality (Nabourema, 2021). It is yet to be seen to what extent women's mass mobilisation transforms the existing structures of gender relations and succeeds in addressing current social and economic inequalities.

However, there is no doubt that these massive protests have shaken the very foundations of the country and brought ordinary people from all walks of life to lend support to the cause of the farmers. It is this collaborative aspect of the mobilisation that seems to be one of the most interesting dimensions of the struggle. Women farmers' participation in the protests have given rise to new coalitions of activists and inspired spirited critique on women's empowerment, women's roles in agriculture, women and land rights, gender relations and patriarchy, among others. The interactions that have taken place between women at the protest sites cut across class, caste, religion and geographical divides, revealing the importance of doing intersectional feminism and reviving the possibility of social egalitarianism.

The farmers' protests to a large extent have been able to successfully contest the onslaught of privatization and the associated dismantling of the public sector and decline of social welfare measures particularly in the field of agriculture. These protests have been able to expose the consequences of privatization and neoliberal market reforms such as inequities of distribution and consequent threats to livelihood. Fiercely resisting the state's insistence on a restructured partnership as a strategy for survival in neoliberal times by submitting to the demands of the private marketplace, the farmers have shown immense resilience through their yearlong sit-ins. Demanding social provisioning and guaranteed welfare protection from a state that has clearly embraced free market neoliberalism, the farmers' protests encapsulate the challenge that defines our current moment of crisis. Should we organize and fight for a more protectionist state that provides us social services and is not undermined by transnational corporations that circumvent state regulations and structures? Or should we celebrate the weakening of the state in favour of globalization, NGOization, free flow of resources and transnationalization of public welfare? The debate between a statist and non-statist mode of political economy as a favoured form of political space lies at the heart of the farmers' protests. All the actors involved in the protests are highly critical of the state-in-retreat. The farmers' protests as a social movement demands a certain kind of role from the state, it envisions the state as a provider of welfare provisions with responsibility towards

its citizens that can be fulfilled through uncompromising public institutions that are accountable.

What is interesting is that the current farmers' protests not only demand a protectionist state that fights off privatization but as a social movement seeks to democratize it. This aspect of the protests is extremely crucial as we witness a slow demise of the welfarist state while also noticing the frightening rise of a police state that relies on force, surveillance and other methods of control to regulate and subjugate. The farmers' protest thus occurs at a critical moment in time when the state is poised to withdraw from public welfare and yet strengthen its disciplinary apparatus to impose its will on the citizens. It offers us a nuanced perspective on contestations, oppositional discourses, intersectionality, self-organisation at local levels, the power and reach of mass mobilisation and the various dimensions of governmentality. It shows us the importance of organising based on class and yet considers gender, caste, religious differences that if ignored can fracture the movement and lead to its defeat. The biggest strength of the farmers' protests lies in their egalitarian, democratic and participatory character. They offer us an insight into what larger struggles against neoliberal capitalism can achieve by organizing based on changing class relations, by diminishing the agrarian/non-agrarian divide, and by considering multiple axes of oppression based on social relations such as gender, sexuality, caste, race, ethnicity, religion, tribe etc.

After a year of sit-ins, road blockades, marches, demonstrations, rallies, the farmers have won. The government's repeal of the controversial Farm Laws has turned one of the most important organised struggles of our times into a success story. The farmers have resisted and triumphed for now. What remains to be seen is whether this particular social movement can sustain itself and yet merge into larger struggles for social justice, economic empowerment, gender equality, political freedom and communal harmony in India. One takes hope from the fact that the movement and mass mobilisation of both men and women seem to be going from strength to strength and there are no signs of anyone involved giving up.

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