



Agrarian Struggles in India: Past and Present

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Abstract: *Agrarian discontentment and unrest has remained a phenomenon since centuries. The causes and nature of unrest has, however, altered with time. From the medieval era farmers' unrest against excessive taxation to the colonial era revolts against colonial exploitation of farmers to the post- independence farmers movements under communist leadership, India has had a long trajectory. In the more recent times, the new farmers movements opened up newer horizons followed by the more recent anti-land acquisition protests, anti-farm law agitations, fight for adequate wages, and price guarantees; the nature of farmers demands and agitations have changed significantly.*

Keywords: Zamindars, Indian State, Farmers' Organisations, Minimum Support Price, Liberalisation, Mobilisation, Commercialisation

Introduction

Farmers in India are a group of heterogeneous socio-economic agents. Some are land owners, others are not. Landowners have different sizes of landholding, and can be categorised as large, small, and marginal farmers. Amongst the non-owners of land, some are share-croppers and tenants, others are mere agricultural labourers. This manifold categorisation of farmers in the country has its fair share of problems and faces varied challenges. Correspondingly, the difficulties and challenges have switched or changed from time to time and have created a distinct trajectory. While agrarian distress remains a common thread both in the past and now, leading to episodes of farmer unrest, the paper will make it clear that with the passage of time, the nature of farmer unrest has changed, and so have the causes for such discontentment. So while unrest has remained a continuous phenomenon, the causes of unrest and its nature has reciprocated to altered times and corresponding needs.

Historical Background



Going back to medieval times in India, farmers' revolts were quite common and localised. They were centred around oppressive taxation regimes. The Satnami uprising of 1672 against the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb, and the Jat and the Bundela rebellions, brought together both landless peasants and the zamindars against the Mughal land revenue system. The colonial era too saw no improvement in the conditions of the farming community. Atrocities ranged from high rents, illegal levies, arbitrary evictions, and unpaid labour to various kinds of social stigmatisation. The Indigo rebellion of 1860, the Pabna movement of the 1870s, and the Deccan riots of 1875 were against the excesses of the British administration and heavy taxation and exploitation under the ryotwari and the zamindari system. Some were armed uprisings, while others took the form of social boycott. In the 20th century, peasant movements became more broad-based and were no longer restricted to local issues. The Champaran satyagraha of 1917, Kheda satyagraha of 1918, the Moplah rebellion of 1921, and the Bardoli satyagraha of 1928 combined a struggle against economic exploitation as well as colonial rule. The role of Mahatma Gandhi in making these struggles broad-based remains undisputable. Mass mobilisation and growth of farmer consciousness paved the way for the formation of independent kisan organisations. For instance, the All India Kisan Sabha was formed in 1936. There were many reasons for the sorry state of agriculture in the country during the British era. These included dissatisfaction with the various land settlement systems of the colonial government, concentration of land in the hands of a few landlords, ruthless nature of the zamindars exposed by their high rent extraction techniques, shift from self-sustainability to commercialisation of agriculture, among others. Forced cultivation of cash crops like indigo and jute further added to the woes of the peasants (Bhattacharya, 2004, pp. 427-440).

On the eve of India's independence, the economy was badly damaged. Two hundred years of plunder and bleeding of resources meant that even in good crop years, farmers produced barely enough crops to survive. Farmers were highly vulnerable owing to meagre savings, frequent crop failures, and natural disasters. Memories of the 1943 Bengal Famine ensured that agriculture would remain outside the ambit of taxation in a newly independent India. Moreover, the majority of farmers were left with small and fragmented landholdings. The gap between rich farmers owning huge landholdings and marginal or poor farmers was significantly wide. Hence, after independence, one of the primary challenges was land distribution and ownership. Land reforms were initiated to address this inequality, with states implementing measures like tenancy reforms and ceilings on land holdings. After the 1940s, organisations such as the All India Kisan Sabha became more proactive and became



an important force in rallying farmers behind a common cause. Demands were raised to abolish injustices arising from differential ownership patterns of land. For instance, the Tebhaga movement of 1946-47 demanded for a greater share of produce to actual cultivators i.e. sharecroppers demanded two-thirds share of the harvest, while the remaining one-third was to be given to the landlord. This resulted in violent clashes between the *jotedars* (wealthy landlords) and the *bargadars* (sharecroppers). The Telangana movement (1946-51), land grab movement in Uttar Pradesh during the 1970s, Naxalite movement in the 1960s, Bhoomi Sena and Shram Sangathana movement in Maharashtra in the 1970s, and the Bhoodan movement of the 1950s demanded equitable distribution of land. Similarly, peasants demanded increased minimum wages in the 1960s and 1970s, leading to movements across Uttar Pradesh, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Bengal, Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, and other parts of the country. These struggles played a major role in uniting farmers from all religions at the grassroots level. There were also several political and legal repercussions. The Telangana movement, for instance, paved the way for zamindari abolition and land reforms legislation. Vinoba Bhave's Bhoodan movement raised similar questions as the movement in Telangana, but the course of action was different. While the Telangana movement was an armed struggle, the Bhoodan movement adopted non-violent means.

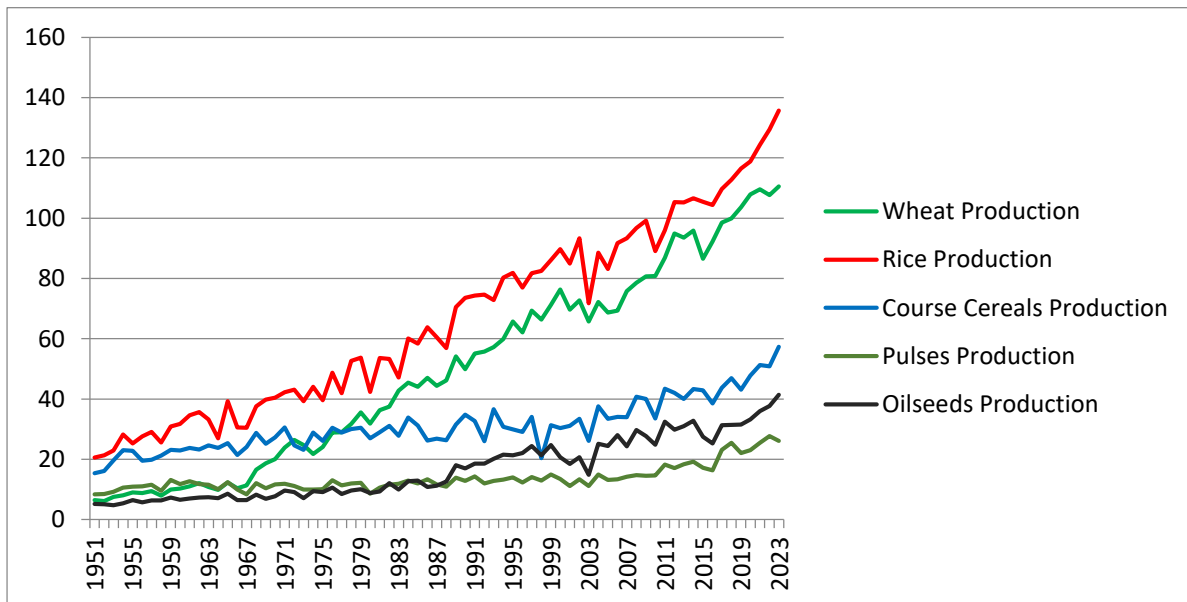
From the 1970s, a new type of peasant movement started emerging in response to novel challenges. Land reforms and other legislations ended traditional landlordism, but left small and marginal farmers at the mercy of rising intermediary classes. While the Green revolution managed to increase productivity in the fields, a new agrarian power structure started haunting farmers outside the fields. These challenges brought together farmers - big and small, poor and rich to fight against a perceived common opponent - the Indian State. Marginal farmers no longer looked at the big farmers as their enemy. Rather, they were united by the feeling that stagnation in agriculture was a result of exogenous factors, and not a consequence of relations of production in agriculture. The sudden rise of a middle class in agriculture diminished polarisation and altered the nature of their demands. Farmers in the 1970s and 1980s no longer wanted more land, greater share of crops, or security of tenure. Rather, they started demanding better seeds, irrigation facilities, low cost pesticides and fertilisers, etc. They were now being represented by different organisations at the regional level such as the Bharatiya Kisan Union (BKU), Shetkari Sangathana (SS), Karnataka Rajya Ryatha Sangha (KRRS), Tamil Nadu Vivasavigal Sangam (TNVS), etc.

Changing scenario and shifting concerns: post-1990s



During the course of the past century, a newly independent India was gradually able to reduce the problems of insufficient agricultural production and food insecurity. India achieved self-sufficiency in paddy and wheat cultivation following the Green Revolution. Increased crop production came on the back of enhanced productivity levels. Farmers cultivating food crops for subsistence were now producing surplus. Several regions across the country also saw diversification in crop patterns. Therefore, by the late 1990s, the twin spectre of food and foreign exchange crisis no longer haunted the country. Meanwhile, India's celebrated economic reforms of 1991 led to a massive overhaul of the domestic economy, with substantial increase in economic growth, per-capita incomes, trade openness, stock of foreign exchange and deepening of the financial sector. Unfortunately, the 1991 reforms had nothing much to offer directly to the agriculture sector in the country (Chand, 2020). Measures such as deregulation, delicensing, less government control, free markets remained absent when it came to farm issues.

Production of Major Agricultural Crops (in million tonnes)



Source: Data compiled from Agricultural Statistics at a Glance 2022, Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare.

https://agriwelfare.gov.in/Documents/CWWGDATA/Agricultural_Statistics_at_a_Glance_2022_0.pdf (Here years represent Crop Year i.e. 2015 would mean crop year 2014-15).



But overall economic prosperity in the post-nineties has permeated certain sections of farmers too. More and more farmers are now doing better than before. Thanks to farm mechanisation, infrastructural support, and other welfare schemes running in the rural areas; a significant proportion of farmers are no longer distressed. For a lot of them, their primary concerns now relate to ensuring fair pricing and access to a reliable market for their produce. Farmers' concerns and problems have evolved over time. More generally, their needs and aspirations have been on the rise just like the rest of the population. Often, farmers seek direct intervention from the government to ensure remunerative prices. The shift in focus in the post-liberalisation era from agricultural yields to prices and marketing strategies can be traced back to several socio-economic factors. This is not to say that incidents of agrarian distress are no longer there. Fragmented marketing channels have led to a mushrooming of intermediaries who tend to elevate retail prices on the one hand, and lessen the price received by farmers, on the other. As India embraced trade liberalisation, prices of agricultural commodities embraced increased volatility, rendering farmers vulnerable to sudden price crashes and spikes. Commercialisation of agriculture, reliance on borrowings has also forced farmers to seek protection from sudden losses.

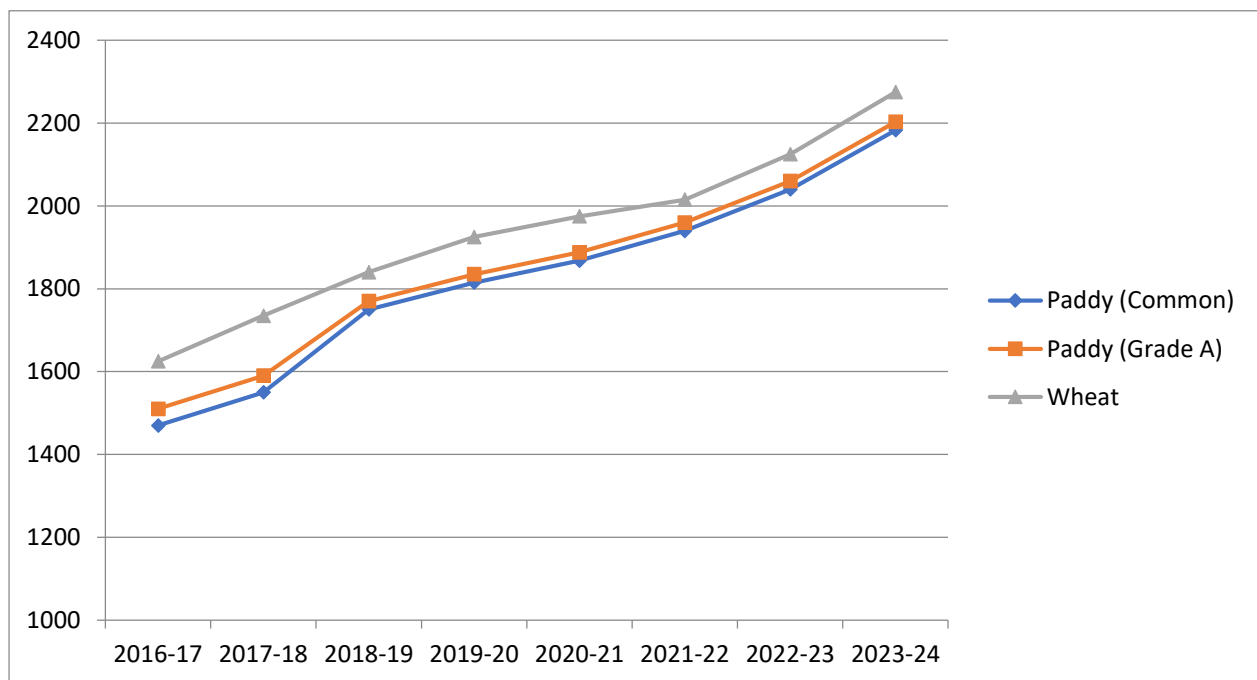
In today's time, the issues before the farmers are particularly different from the traditional concerns. One such issue is that of pricing i.e. the price that their crops would fetch.

Pricing issues: Minimum Support Price

The issue of minimum support price (MSP) deserves special attention here. MSP is the guaranteed amount paid to farmers when their produce is procured by the government. Aimed at ensuring remunerative prices and acting as a safety net for farmers, MSPs are based on the recommendations of the Commission for Agricultural Costs and Prices, which considers various factors such as cost of production, market trends, inter-crop price parity, etc. Currently, MSPs are announced for 22 mandated agricultural crops while fair and remunerative price (FRP) is announced for sugarcane. The mandated crops include 14 crops of the kharif season, 6 rabi crops and 2 other commercial crops (farmers' portal). But there are a few associated problems. First, out of the 23 crops, procurement by the government happens for mainly two crops – rice and wheat – as they are distributed among the public under the National Food Security Act in the form of public distribution system (PDS). For the rest of the crops, government procurement is mostly ad-hoc and insignificant (Tiwari, 2020). On many occasions, the government cannot provide equal priorities to all crops in so far as MSP is concerned, thereby farmers do not fully benefit from the price support system. This can be attributed

to factors including limited procurement and storage infrastructure and situations when MSP ceases to exceed the market price for certain crops. Second, as per calculations done by the Shanta Kumar Committee in 2015, close to 94 per cent of the farmers are deprived from the benefits of the MSP. Third, the concept of MSP does not find mention in any law even though it has been around for several decades. So the government is not legally obliged to buy crops at MSP. Additionally, there is no law mentioning that private traders must also buy from farmers at MSP. All these issues have become a bone of contention between India's farmers and the government.

Minimum Support Price (in Rs. per quintal) for select food crops



Source: Source: Data compiled from Agricultural Statistics at a Glance 2022, Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare and PIB Press Release (06/02/2024).

https://agriwelfare.gov.in/Documents/CWWGDATA/Agricultural_Statistics_at_a_Glance_2022_0.pdf

<https://pib.gov.in/PressReleaseIframePage.aspx?PRID=2003184>

Time and again, a section of farmers have demanded legislation to iron out a concrete MSP law. Given that MSP imposes a huge fiscal burden on the government's resources, the Indian state of Madhya Pradesh adopted an alternative method of compensating the farmers in 2017 – the Bhavantar Bhugtan Yojana. It was a price deficiency payments (PDP) scheme wherein crops were not procured from farmers at MSP. Instead, farmers were paid the gap between the market price and the MSP,



whenever market prices fell below MSP (Chand, 2019). The scheme was, however, revoked the very next cropping season since it mostly benefited the intermediaries who widened the gap between the market price and the MSP further, at the expense of high government expenditure. Initiatives like the Odisha Millet Mission encouraged millet production for nutritional security through decentralised procurement and distribution. But such initiatives have limited scope and many farmers face challenges due to the absence of sufficient government procurement points. Farmers' unions are asking the government for price guarantees, and higher wages. These may ultimately end up hurting competition. Farmers in Punjab, Haryana and elsewhere in India, benefiting from stable incomes due to the guaranteed minimum support price (MSP) for wheat and paddy, now seek MSP assurance for other crops as declining water tables render paddy and wheat cultivation unsustainable. This is prompting the need for diversification into other high value added agriculture production such as fruits and vegetables.

Farmers' discontent with the current system of MSPs became quite evident during the 2020 farmer protests. In 2020, the government aimed to carry out reforms in the agricultural marketing system such as removing restrictions of private stock holding of agricultural produce or creating trading areas free of middlemen and taking the market to the farmer. Accordingly, three new legislations were amended or brought into force. These were - the Farmers Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Bill, 2020, The Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement on Price Assurance and Farm Services Bill, 2020, and The Essential Commodities (Amendment) Bill. The first bill aimed to allow farmers to sell their produce outside APMC *mandis* to whoever, even if it is the end customer, offers a higher price. The second bill allowed farmers to enter into a contract farming agreement with agri-business firms or large retailers for procurement of crops at pre-approved prices. The third amended bill sought to declassify items like onions, cereals, pulses, potatoes, edible oilseeds and oils as essential items in normal circumstances. The government hoped that the three farm laws would promote competition, help farmers fetch better prices, and also accelerate growth in the agriculture sector through private sector investment. Contrary to the government's expectations, the bills upset the farmers since they had no mention of MSP. A verbal promise regarding continuity of MSP was no longer enough to pacify nearly 60 per cent of India's population who are engaged in agriculture and allied activities. Farmers also feared that large corporations would start exploiting them in the absence of a MSP. The government, however,



believed that the new laws would benefit farmers and there is a need for APMC *mandis* and private channels to coexist and compete. Moreover, formal contract farming can also prove advantageous for farmers, as seen in Nestle's partnership with farmers in the Moga district of Punjab in the dairy sector. Massive protests erupted in the national capital and its surrounding areas. Finally, the government had to repeal all three bills. It must be said in this context that while MSPs promise fair prices to farmers and prevent them from exploitation, it must act as an incentive and not a right. A legislation on MSP for 23 crops would pose a huge fiscal burden for the government, and will also eat away from necessary government outlay in other sectors. Not only is the cost of MSP high, but also has market distortionary tendencies since it acts like a price floor (Chand, 2022). Consider times when the market price falls below the MSP; a law would simply mean that farmers would sell all their produce to the government instead of private players. Thus the government may often end up becoming the sole buyer of the crops. Of course, procurement of such mammoth quantities of foodgrains requires adequate cold storage facilities and supply chain infrastructure, which is untenable in the short run. Interestingly, farmers were back on the streets again in early 2024, raising demands of a legal guarantee for MSP, implementation of the Swaminathan Committee report, loan waivers and pensions, and doubling the number of work days under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act of 2005. The protesting farmers also wanted India to withdraw from the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and scrap all free trade agreements. The 'de minimis' principle of WTO allows for minimal support on products due to fears of trade distortion and environmental impact. For developing countries, the maximum support that can be provided is 10 percent of the total value of agricultural production. According to the WTO Agreement on Agriculture (AOA), however, India's MSP support surpasses the allowed 10 per cent subsidy limit. While it is true that agriculture needs government protection in a developing nation like India and the country must protect its interests at international forums like the WTO, at the same time, isolation would negate the country's progress. Quitting or withdrawing is not a plausible option, despite a moribund WTO. At the same time, government procurement at MSP is mainly confined to wheat and paddy, and is also geographically concentrated. For instance, three states -Madhya Pradesh, Punjab, and Haryana, produce 46 per cent of the wheat in the country but account for 85 per cent of the total procurement. For paddy, six states – Punjab, Telangana, Andhra Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Odisha, and Haryana, contribute 40 per cent of the production but 74 per cent share in procurement. Geographical and crop diversification of procurement operations is needed to bring about reforms in the MSP



regime. Interestingly, participation in farmer protests also remained limited to regions of Punjab, Haryana, and western Uttar Pradesh - the Green Revolution states. While the bulk of MSP procurement happens in these states, it also exposes a huge bias. Favouritism in MSP-based procurements is not just evident at the state level, but data also suggests that farmers with larger landholdings are more likely to enjoy the gains of MSP-based procurement. It is thus not very clear where farmers from the rest of the country stand on these issues, especially the marginal farmers in eastern and southern regions who have received negligible government support in the past several decades.

Recent controversies surrounding MSP and the farm laws allowed farmers of all categories to collectively bargain with the government. It is not very clear though whether these developments gave any voice to the marginal and landless farm worker. After all, the peasant community in India is non-homogenous and diffused, operating under diverse conditions nationwide. They do not possess a unified voice, and are not represented by an interest group (unlike industry chambers).

Grain storage facilities

Associated with public procurement of food grains is the issue of grain storage facilities. At present, grain management (procurement and storage) facilities are provided by the Food Corporation of India, Central Warehousing Corporation, and a host of other big and small government departments. Total food grain production in India is 311 million metric tonnes (MMT), but total storage capacity is a measly 145 MMT, i.e. less than 50 per cent. Clearly, that has not yielded the desired results even after many decades. In this regard, the Union government recently announced its plan to unveil the world's largest grain storage plan in the cooperative sector. Spread across 11 Primary Agricultural Credit Societies (PACS), the storage facilities will be completed in the next five years and will be able to store 700 lakh metric tonnes of food grains. Involving the PACS to develop their own godowns, custom hiring centres, processing units, and fair price shops is a step towards decentralised storage systems. One can hope that this new initiative shall work towards diversifying the procurement process of government agencies, and help percolate the benefits to farmers across the country. At the same time, PACS, the smallest cooperative agencies operating at the grassroots level, have so far been involved in extending short term credit for agricultural production. The last link in a three-tier cooperative credit structure, their outreach to the rural masses engaged in agriculture and allied services makes the PACS apt for undertaking grain management in villages and gram panchayats.



Indeed, the new grain storage plan will ultimately metamorphose the PACS into multifunctional economic entities, further strengthening the role of cooperatives in the agricultural sector. The plan will also have other benefits including reducing wastage of food grains which will eventually fetch higher prices for farmers. Incidents of distress sale are also expected to go down, along with a reduction in transportation cost of agri produce from the farm to the marketplace.

Land acquisition

Farmers have a complex relationship with their land (Sathe, 2017). Land serves as both a source of capital and income for the large swathes of agricultural and rural communities in the country. Governments are acquiring land for various development purposes like development of roads, mining projects and industrial parks for private, national and international companies. But many feel that acquiring land from the small and marginal farmers amounts to reversal of land reforms. In most cases, land is acquired directly from the farmers. It is amidst these conflicting understandings that the fundamental challenges to land acquisition are building up today. Recently, India has seen farmer movements against special economic zones (SEZs) and land dispossession. Often farmers complain that they do not get adequate compensation. Incomplete land records and lack of clarity regarding land ownership adds to the woes of the farming community. Agitation by farmers are related to right over one's land and property, right to fair compensation, right not to be forcibly displaced, right to timely rehabilitation and several other issues. The issue of land acquisition brings to the fore several key questions centering India's development trajectory. First, what is the rationale behind acquiring fertile agricultural land for private enterprises. Second, should India follow a growth path that maintains a balance between agriculture and industrial development, or should the country prioritise one over the other. Cross-country evidence suggests that most countries shift away from agriculture as they develop. Over-reliance on agriculture can be detrimental to labour productivity. Moreover, agriculture is an imperfect safety net against food price volatility. However, for a country where agriculture still employs over 150 million people and contributes around 18 per cent to the country's gross domestic product, a balance must be struck between agricultural development and industrialisation. Third, does the government have the authority to force farmers to part with their land for the purpose of infrastructural growth and industrial development. Certainly, the government has the legal authority to do so. The question of moral authority is, however, different and is subject to widespread debate within the country. The erstwhile Land Acquisition Act of 1894 allowed the



government to acquire land for undertaking “projects of public purpose”. Gradually, the colonial-era law was done away with in 2013 with the passage of the Right to Fair Compensation and Transparency in Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement Act, 2013 (LARR). The law was passed at a time when state governments were invoking ‘eminent domain’ every now and then. The new law sought to put an end to this, and is widely regarded as pro-farmer legislation. The new act was an improvement over the 1894 legislation in the following ways - increased compensation amount, consent of landowner required, compulsory social impact assessment by independent experts and local government representatives, and accountability of the department head in case of malfeasance in the acquisition of land. The Singur controversy of 2006 in the Indian state of West Bengal is a case in point. The then state government in West Bengal stirred a controversy by conducting an eminent domain takeover of around 1000 acres of farmland on which a car manufacturing facility was supposed to be set up. Inadequate compensation and a delay in the offering of new housing facilities led to massive protests by peasants.

Farm loan waiver

Another farmer issue that finds centre stage in Indian politics is that of farm loan waivers. Data released by the National Statistical Office in 2021 suggests that more than half of India’s agricultural households were in debt with an average outstanding loan amount of Rs.74,121 (Shagun, 2021). In this regard, most political parties promise to waive off farm loans if elected to office. It has emerged as a prominent policy choice for tackling agrarian distress. Studies have found that there is no consistent pattern between loan waivers and incidence of droughts in different states. Interestingly, loan waiver announcements are strategically timed according to the electoral cycle. Clearly loan waivers are no panacea for India’s farmers (Kumar and Bathla, 2019). Politicians, nevertheless, continue to use it as part of their election victory toolkit. The concept of farm loan waivers has its pitfalls too. In a country where only a very small percent (approximately 15 percent) of marginal farmers have access to formal credit, loan waivers predominantly benefit those with formal loans. Evidence indicates that farm loan waivers often fail to benefit small and marginal farmers.

The power of farmer’s mobilisation

It must be said that farmers are and have remained a formidable force in Indian politics despite not being organised. Disputes between farmers and the government have previously brought major Indian



cities to a standstill. One can recall when the Indian government was engaged in negotiations to form the World Trade Organization during the early 1990s. Pressure from farmers led India to demand high tariff protection – ranging from 100 percent to 300 percent – as a way to lessen the competition from imports. Similarly, the Singur and Nandigram land acquisition cases in West Bengal began as mere farmer protests. But they had the power to topple the state government of 34 years during the 2011 state legislative assembly elections. More recently, the 2020 farm law protests played an instrumental role in the repeal of the three contentious farm laws.

Way Forward

In light of farmers's struggles and associated movements, it must be emphasised that India's agricultural sector needs reforms. Often, political parties in the country bicker over a range of these issues. Farmers too get embroiled in bickerings on the basis of their priorities. In this scenario, both central and state governments must come together and arrive at more inclusive policy actions to strengthen India's position as a global agricultural powerhouse. Some recommendations for the future include – (1) enhancing agricultural productivity, (2) boosting rural growth, (3) improving water resources and irrigation management, (4) facilitating agri-commodity diversification, (5) developing mature agricultural markets and deepening their reach, (6) upgrading technology and fostering innovation and research in the sector, and (7) ensuring ease of credit access for millions of small and marginal farmers. Practising climate-resilient agriculture and encouraging farmers to diversify from staple cereal crops to livestock rearing, horticulture and small-scale agro-processing industries will surely increase farmers' incomes in the long run. While many argue in favour of removal of input subsidies on seeds, fertilisers, and power and also reducing MSP, what should also be taken into account is that scrapping of input subsidies can help only in the medium to long term. Getting rid of them now, in the absence of structural reforms, will only add to the woes of the farmers.

Concluding Remarks

India has indeed come a long way and farmers' struggles have considerably evolved over time. India has witnessed peasant struggles time and again, but their challenges and demands continued to evolve in varied patterns. Interestingly, farmers' engagement with the Indian state has also changed. From asking for security of tenure, better wages from landlords, farmers now demand rights over their land protesting against acquisition, and better prices for agrarian produce from the government. Farmers' fight against colonial era laws mandating indigo and jute cultivation is no longer relevant, but we still see farmers protesting against commercialisation in present times. Today it is no longer about dearth



of production but about storage of the excess produce. The roots of activism have also changed. It is easier to mobilise people during present times. People can also be brought together through emails, Facebook, Whatsapp and other electronic and social media. The modalities of enhancing the reach and the impact of a movement and rallying thousands behind it today is quite different from what it was in the earlier decades. The government, the farmers, the farmer organisations, in the present times and in the immediate future will have to concentrate on and relentlessly strive for changes like technology and pan-India implementation of agricultural technology, diversification of agricultural production, delivery of irrigation water, improved groundwater management, strengthening water institutions, sustainable agricultural practices, credit facilities, land record management system and also gender distribution in rural economic activities.

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