

At the Border between Farmers and Rulers

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***Abstract:** In the wake of the new agriculture policy (2020), farmers from many states have been protesting and camping along different borders of New Delhi, India's capital, for more than a year now. This article, initially delivered as a talk, discusses the motivations, the struggles, and the growth of the protests that have developed into a countrywide farmers' movement which is refusing to bow down to the pressures from the Government of India and its media apparatuses. It further discusses the self-motivated nature of the farmers' protests and what it may mean for the working classes as well as the landlord classes of Punjab and for protestors and farmers from other states. The author highlights the emancipatory potential of the ongoing farmers protests and the need to recognize the larger Brahmin ideology at work that lies at the very foundation of the Indian state.*

Jai Bhim to all. I hope all of you are fine.

I hope everyone is aware of the farmers' protests. There have been a lot of updates. I don't know how much you are aware of the situation because the media is saying something completely different and there is a lot of misinformation around the whole issue. Do I need to talk about the three bills? I think everybody is aware of them. We know that Adani, Ambani and other such industrialists have already built their big cold storehouses, such as one in Karnal. They started working on them in April through May 2020 itself, now it is December 2020, so it all started long before the bills were introduced. Finally, when the bills were introduced, the farmers started protesting.



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Let me speak about the situation in Punjab as a response to the bills. Many small kisan unions started coming together, and as usual, they went to the Congress government, and said, “this has happened, what should we be doing, we don’t want them (the proposed bills)” and started the discussion there. When they saw that nothing was happening from the Congress side (Congress is in power in Punjab) then they went for protests. The protests started in Shambhu, a region between Ambala and Rajpura which also happens to be my hometown. It marks the border between Punjab and Haryana on the National Highway 1.

These kisan unions were looking to the government expecting that they would do something. When they saw that the political leaders were not doing anything as per their expectations, they said, “Let us go to Delhi”. Whatever protests you are seeing today, they are self-motivated, there is no leader involved, there is no political party involved. Later on, they joined hands together, but even then, they were kept aside. When farmers said “We’re going to Delhi”, it was solely from Punjab. They did not talk to Haryana, Rajasthan and other state unions, the alliances that we are seeing now were not there then.

Small protests were there in Karnataka, in Rajasthan, but Punjab was taking the initiative. In Shambhu people also started coming in but they did not have it in mind that they would be going to Delhi. Then, the political leaders said, “Let us wait more” but the Kisan said, “we will not do that.” Suddenly things started happening and the police barricades came up. It was a very quick decision “Let’s go!” The political leaders came onto the roads and tried to stop everybody, but the Kisan would not listen and started dragging the trucks. Manohar Khattar, the chief minister of Haryana, could not do anything immediately so he started digging trenches on the national highway. But the farmers were in so much pain and at the same time enthusiastic and they moved ahead and reached the Singhu border. They did not know where to go in Delhi whether to Jantar Mantar or Ram Lila maidan. Since then, they have been there! Seeing them, farmers from Haryana also moved and started coming from the other side of Haryana, which is the Tikri border and made a halt there. Now, there are Rajasthan farmers on the Rajasthan-Delhi highway. In the same way, Uttar Pradesh farmers are also there on the border, so Delhi is surrounded from different sides now. Protests are going on. Singhu border is the main site because the protests are led by Punjab, and most of the Punjabi farmers are there.

The following is a little bit about how they have reached this stage. Six times they (the farmers) have been called (for talks, by the government), two times they rejected, four times they attended and participated in those talks. Now it has come to a deadlock situation, a standstill kind of a situation. They (the government) have said we will find a middle path but farmers have rejected their propositions so far.

So, how does one look at this picture holistically? Why should the Bahujans support the farmers? Why have I gone there and started expressing my solidarity? I was criticized for going there by

many people from Punjab, Delhi and other places. I want to discuss why I am going there and why I decided to be with them.

The farmers' issue is a big issue. I believe that many other states are showing up now and it is a very big thing, this is a beautiful protest and it has taken a beautiful shape now. Farmers from Uttar Pradesh, Karnataka, and other states take issue with only these three bills, whereas Punjab is thinking beyond that. Many discussions had already happened on the state of affairs. It is not that before these bills were introduced the situation was good everywhere. Everybody is aware that it was not at all good and discussions were going on already, regarding how to deal with the Center (Government at the Center). I was also participating in those discussions and keeping an eye on whatever was going on in Punjab. But the Bahujans have been feeling that these are the zamindar log, or the landlord class. They were atrocious towards the Dalits, and Dalits do not have much land, and these landlords never raised issues of Dalits. Now lots of people are leaving their jobs and coming here to serve the community and the issues of farmers but they never turned up when Dalits raised their issues. People are right in pointing this out but I would like to suggest that this is how the Center divides us, it will never allow us to sit and discuss issues that matter to us.

Everyone here must be aware of Sir Chotu Ram from Haryana, he was born a decade before Babasaheb Ambedkar. He had spoken about who is a zamindar. He said that in many states, the zamindar is one and the Kisan—the farmer—is another. But in Punjab, they are the same! Just visualize what the Bhumihaar Brahmins have been doing in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. Over there, caste is much more involved. Here in Punjab, zamindar is also a farmer. Even if there is a migrant laborer, he works with them. In U.P. or Bihar, they don't do that much. So, in Punjab whatever a farmer eats, he shares it with the migrant-laborers.

To quote Sir Chotu Ram:

kayi pranton me zamindaar ek hasti hai tatha kisan ek doosri hasti ka naam hai. parantu Punjab ke andar kisan aur zamindar mein koi antar nahin hai. zamindar aur kisan donon ka ek hi matlab hai

trans: In many states, zamindar is one and the Kisan (farmer) is another. In Punjab, there is no difference between the two. Zamindar and Kisan mean one and the same thing

Jo zamin ka malik hai wahi zamin ko jotne wala hai. Jo doosre subon ki boli me khali zamindar hai

trans: The owner of the land is the one who tills the land, cultivates the land. In the language of other states, they are considered only landlords.

Is liye Punjab ke liye zamindar aur kisan shadbon ko main ek hi arth mein leta hun. Aur is arth mein main dehkansh shabd ka istemal karta hun

trans: That is why for Punjab, I take words such as zamindar and farmer to mean one and the same thing. And in this meaning, the farmer is one who lives in the village.

This is Sir Chotu Ram; in 1935 he said these things in a Jat Gazette. This issue of farming is a very old issue. If he was writing this in 1935 (He wrote about it extensively and he met with Babasaheb also), this means it is a very old issue. We know that, since independence FCI (Food Corporation of India) and other government agencies have been taking the crops, grains and whatever the farmers grow from them and then buy and then sell it on their own. We know that the issue of prices is there and the issue of not procuring grains on time is also there. Whether or not rains will happen is another problem. Then there are the mediators and they take money and the government agencies buy from them. This is a common phenomenon. I don't know how it happens in South India but in North India this is the system. Harvest season is the season to make money for many government officials as well as brokers and mediators and the farmer is always pissed off.

If we see the data from 1970, the price of wheat was Rs 76 per quintal. In 2015, it was still only Rs 1450 per quintal. This means that in 45 years, it only increased 19 times, whereas for the government employees, teachers and other such salaried employees, the salary has been increased 150 to 320 folds. You can understand that this is a huge difference. On top of this, lots of allowances, lots of other benefits are there for the government employees, whereas if drought happens or flood happens, nothing is there for the farmers. No one talks about it. Whenever the farmers raise their issues, no one pays any attention. Why? Because they think that if the farmers are given more money or other facilities then there will be a financial deficit, whereas, these concerns don't arise when it comes to government employees' salaries and benefits. There is a 7th pay commission, which is a central, pan-India phenomenon. No one from that class raises these questions because the salaries and allowances are coming and the salaried classes have a happy life. But it needs to be reminded that the farmers' situation is deteriorating every day.

This issue has been boiling for a very long time and Punjab has been seeing it from a holistic point of view. Now it is not just a question of these three bills. It is a question of autonomy and it is a question of strengthening the federal structure. I have spoken to farmers of other states, and they are just happy if the three bills are frozen. Punjab is not looking at just that. This is the difference. We should not see that in these protests which are going on, their demands are more or less the same, however, their aspirations, what they want are different.

Why should Bahujan support them? I can speak from Punjab's perspective. It is not that Punjab is free from caste; there is oppression, there are a variety of other things that may happen and it may be different from other states but caste is definitely there. But we believe that it is our internal issue, which other Bahujan may not like to hear and thus they are criticizing, but it is our internal

issue, I am saying that and we have to deal with it alongside strengthening the federal structure, otherwise, everyone is vulnerable. Whoever wants to have a good future, food, crops, preserve their languages, need to think about it seriously. Society grows together. If that is not happening, then no one can live in peace. So, we want to deal with it within the Punjab framework. This is my version. Many people are understanding it now, many who were opposing it are also coming to the Singhu border, a lot of discussion has already happened.

I think everybody should have this vision—the power of looking at things this way—that if the center was not there for the last 70+ years, how would we have been? And if it has been there for the past 70 years what is the way out now? I am seeing the way out but first we need a platform for discussions, otherwise, we will keep on reacting; every time they throw issues in front of us, we play into their hands and this is how we will continue to waste our energies. Of course, reaction is also important but only to a certain extent. What can we do that the government has to respond to these issues? That situation hardly comes into our life. This is the time when we have created a situation where the government has to respond and they are not able to deviate from the whole issue.

In Punjab, whenever the space for discussion has happened, they have created other parallel issues, for example, when Kanshiramji started talking to the Ad Dharm movement people, to the Jats, other Bahujan castes, scheduled caste (SC) and backward classes (BC) people. Then we see that in 1978-1995 what Punjab has seen all these years: the emergency, large number of state-sponsored killings in 1984, and in all this somewhere the dialogue did not happen. The only period was 1995 to 2002, when Kanshiramji did some work. In these 6-7 years, we witnessed that lots of Jats came with Kanshiramji. They are still alive, they talk to me, there are a lot of stories, very positive stories, I would say. Discussion and dialogue could not take place among various communities because the Center was always meddling. It was always there to throw something, do something, and then we'd always be deviated, and so we would chase, we would react. We usually think that the success of a movement is in the reaction. That needs to stop. For the last 3-4 years, I have been in this mode, since I started thinking of making a documentary film [on Kanshiram sahab]. It opened up various new windows for me to have such discussions and dialogues. In these 3-4 years, I was visualizing that such a situation would come about, but I never imagined it would happen this way, with the farmers. Surprisingly, those people I wished to interact with but could not, now they are at the Singhu border and we are interacting. There is a discussion on Ambedkarism now; we find ourselves in the small tents and having discussions and dialogue on Ambedkarism. They are very open to know more about how the pan-India Bahujan movement is working. It is a good sign, they have said “we don't want the Center,” this is a big success for me.

Leave aside these bills, because if bills are withdrawn then the earlier situation will again be there in front of us. Even then, we don't have anything much to enjoy. It does not mean that only because of the bills Punjab or entire India is facing these problems. We have to think beyond. Now, at this

critical juncture, where there is a standstill situation, I am seeing that something good is happening. Begumpura Society and Bahujan Samaj Party in Punjab, and Punjabi Diaspora, which include Ravidasis, some Ad Dharmis, and some people from the Valmiki community, have offered their support. Sikh diaspora is talking about the Bahujan ideology now. It is not fake and it is not that at this moment they want to bring more people, so they are using us, that is not the case. I am seeing that no state can move ahead, especially in this situation, where the Government is hellbent on crushing all the structures and platforms you have built, even on social media. Whatever is there, they (The central government) have an eye on it now. They are not leaving any stone unturned to bring you down. They are snatching your land now. I visualize that Punjab is my boundary and first of all I have to secure that.

When I go to the Singhu border and join protests, I always talk to a variety of people, the farmers coming from the different states, and what their take is on the future. I am getting good vibes. Since the Khalistan movement was there, the Government is saying, it is the Khalistani diaspora who are behind these protests. Rajasthan people said that “If asking for our rights makes me a Khalistani, then I am Khalistani, everybody is Khalistani.” There are people who are saying “I am Hindu Khalistani” now, from Haryana. There are very poor people who are coming to these border protests and contributing. From Jalandhar, I have seen one handicapped person, who is a Dalit, come on a tricycle. In 8 days he reached there. Wherever he took a halt for the night, hotels were free for him and with a lot of respect they entertained him and that is how he got there. A blood cancer patient reached there and said “This is my last time, I know that I’ll die but I did not want to miss it.” It is so emotional also, you get to witness a variety of scenes. It is so emotional that sometimes it feels like, tomorrow we are going to kill Brahminism. This strength should not die down or get wasted just like that.

I believe in the Sikh philosophy, at par with Bahujan philosophy and icons: Babasaheb Ambedkar, Periyar, Phule among others. But I also believe, Punjab is my space, it is our space. In order to have a dialogue, we should be honestly talking to them (The people of Punjab), and I should be honest that I believe in that, there is no harm in talking about Ravidas ji, Kabir ji, and Guru Nanak ji. This is not an overnight thing, in my earlier talks also (links), I have spoken about how Brahminism has crushed Punjab. So, it is a very different state. I really wish that other states that are joining, they should understand that without federalism you cannot survive anymore, there is hardly any space left to breathe. Else, the corporates will be the owners of the land and it will be so that if the farmers’ crops are not taken by the FCI, or other government agencies, then crops will be there in the mandi, and the corporates will buy at very cheap prices and store them and sell it to us at a much higher rate. The situation will only get uglier. We already know that because of the GST we have lots of debts, and we are paying huge taxes to the center and not getting back anything. For example, take educational support. Leave aside the issue of post-matric scholarship, all other education funds have also been reduced. Student dropout is tremendous now. In the last 4-5 years, we had worked on the issue of post-matric scholarship. Now we can’t even speak about

scholarships because the funds are not there and the Chief Minister has said “we don’t have money, ask the Center.” As Babasaheb had said post-1950 that if the Center is too powerful, states will run like municipal corporation offices. The same situation has occurred, rather it is even worse than that.

There are a lot of problems and everyone is well aware of them. I think this is the time we should talk and build larger alliances with the stakeholders. I am not saying I am going to talk to the Punjabi Brahmin, but Sikhs are definitely the best people for alliances. They have actually understood the situation well in the last decade or so because the Kanshiram movement had been very strong in Punjab. They have openly said that the root cause of all these problems is Brahminism. They are very vocal about Kashmir as well. They openly say “If Kashmir wants our help, we are ready for that also.” They are very assertive. Sometimes it makes me scared when they use such a language but they believe in that.

This protest is a platform for discussion and dialogue, which is opening up new windows. I wish to focus more on this opportunity and would like to talk even after this protest is over, whether it is tomorrow or in one year or two years. Even when the people go back, they are not going to sit idle, this is a good sign. As of now, most of the people in the kisan andolan (Farmers movement) are believers of Punjab, not of comradeship, Left or pan-India something. They are talking about having an organic kind of relationship with other states based on the Bahujan ideology. Now the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) is also there, which is ready to talk. There are regional parties in Punjab, I am in touch with them and will engage through the Bahujan perspective. Other platforms like Begumpura Society and other smaller Ambedkarite organizations are there, and Sikh diaspora, and social media platforms like Sikh Siasat, Rozana Spokesman are also participating. Everybody is in touch with each other, and I just want to work with this, I do not want to miss this opportunity.

I always say, the Sikh movement is a Bahujan movement. I strongly believe in state autonomy and Bahujan autonomy. Let us see where we are going to land. But certainly, any person belonging to a certain state, has to choose their linguistic boundary and their own people. The Indian framework has created such a dismal situation for the Bahujan movement, that we are not able to see opportunities that are next door. This is extremely important to understand. Once we open ourselves up, lots of dialogue, lots of opportunities, lots of positive vibes are there. Jai Bhim!

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