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Sangha, Kamaljit

Published in:
Journal of Agriculture and Ecology Research International

DOI:
[10.9734/jaeri/2021/v22i630203](https://doi.org/10.9734/jaeri/2021/v22i630203)

Published: 15/10/2021

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):
Sangha, K. (2021). The biggest peaceful protest against corporations in human history—Daring farmers of India. *Journal of Agriculture and Ecology Research International*, 22(6), 1-8.
<https://doi.org/10.9734/jaeri/2021/v22i630203>

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The Biggest Peaceful Protest against Corporations in Human History—Daring Farmers of India

Kamaljit K. Sangha^{1*}

¹*Research Institute for the Environment and Livelihoods, Charles Darwin University, Darwin, NT, 0810, Australia.*

Author's contribution

The sole author designed, analyzed, interpreted and prepared the manuscript.

Article Information

DOI: 10.9734/JAERI/2021/v22i630203

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- Complete Peer review History: <https://www.sdiarticle4.com/review-history/74013>

Opinion Article

Received 04 August 2021
Accepted 08 October 2021
Published 15 October 2021

ABSTRACT

The current crisis in Indian agriculture warrants solutions, but in consultation with farmers and related institutions; unlike the imposition of Farming Reforming Bills passed by the Indian Government on 20-22 September 2020. The three recent Indian Government's Farming Reform Acts i.e. Farmers' Produce Trade and Commerce; Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement on Price Assurance and Farm Services Act; and Essential Commodities Act, have caused frustration and agitation among millions of farmers, farm-workers, and the general public since September 2020. The agitation continues to date and has expanded to almost every state and territory. The government has failed to understand the fundamental farmers' perspective—agriculture is their heritage, not a business. The main reason for the design of these Acts is that policymakers within the government do not understand the true value of agricultural economy in villages which are the foundation of India, and instead prefer to liaise with corporations for business gains while compromising the needs of millions of people. This article provides a critical analysis of the current agricultural situation in India.

Keywords: Agriculture; Indian farmers protest; Indian farming reforming bills; village economy.

1. CONTEXT OF AGRICULTURE IN INDIA

Since November 2020, millions of farmers from across India, particularly from the north-western states, Punjab—covering a geographic area of 5 million ha and supporting 30 million people, and Haryana—covering 4.4million ha and supporting a population of 28.4million, are protesting peacefully on a mass scale against the Farming Bills (passed on 20-22 Sept 2020) by the Indian Government without any consultation with farmers or their representative institutions [1]. There are 250 million other farmers, farm-workers and the general public who are supporting farmers across the country (<https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/police-use-water-cannon-tear-gas-shells-as-protesting-farmers-inch-closer-to-delhi-in-pictures-and-videos-1744574-2020-11-27>). Over the last 6-8 months, farmers and farm-workers from all across India, especially Uttar Pradesh, Kerala, Tamil, Nadu, West Bengal, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, and many other states have joined the ongoing protest in Delhi and surrounding areas, but Indian government to date remains completely silent on this matter, jeopardizing the lives of millions of people.

In the leading agricultural states of Punjab and Haryana, >80% of total geographical land is under agriculture for the last few decades. Farmers in these states have been cultivating land for centuries, but not at such a massive scale with heavy use of machinery. With the onset of Green Revolution in the 1960s, introduced High Yielding Varieties, mechanised techniques, and intensive use of fertilizers and pesticides, particularly in the state of Punjab has led India to become self-sufficient in food production — hence the state is often called, ‘the food bowl of India’. Later, Haryana joined the line too. Currently, both these states contribute >60% wheat and 34% rice to the central pool in India, providing food security to millions of Indians [2].

Agriculture is the largest single sector employing >70% of people in these states (Punjab and Haryana Statistical Abstracts 2019). Currently, the average size of landholding is around 3.9 ha [2]. Almost 60% of these operational holdings are semi-medium to medium, with a median farm size of 2-10 ha [3]. The proportion of marginal and small operational holdings operating less than 1 ha and 1-2 ha is 15.6% and 18.6%

respectively, and that of large operational holdings of more than 10 ha is only 6.6%. Overall, >93% of land holdings are of size <10ha [2].

Across India, there are more than one million villages where agriculture is the main profession among villagers. Almost entire rural population in villages, particularly in these two and similar agricultural states across India, depend on farming. Within each village, there are farmers, carpenters, locksmiths, messengers, labourers and other workers who are directly or indirectly involved in farming. Traditionally, when a crop is harvested the farmer distributes produce among all the non-farming communities in both the seasons (Rabi [winter] and Kharif [summer]) who directly or indirectly contribute towards farming. This custom has led to traditions which still exist in many villages. Moreover, almost every farming household in a village produces their own milk, pulses, some vegetables, etc. to meet their own needs, and to distribute extras among others. An important part of the village community is that when non-farming people ask the farmers for assistance (particularly food), it is always there. As a result, Indian villages are quite self-reliant in meeting their food requirements (grains, vegetables, etc.) and milk demands. One will rarely hear people dying from hunger in a village [4]. Even in the current Covid-19 situation, villages have proven much more resilient where locals have demonstrated their capacity to collectively address local security, food and health demands, by forming groups to guard their villages against outside visitors, and supporting each other (many stories published in newspapers and social media since the outbreak).

Community and individual well-being is a significant element of a typical village economy, which includes strong social network and support, especially in times of crisis. However, such aspects are highly significant and form the village community. Yet, the value of such aspects, due to lack of a price tag, lies outside the market economy. The societal norms, cultural protocols and networks further inculcates sharing and caring among people. This kind of setting enables most of the villagers to be engaged in some kind of work opportunities or social tasks within their local areas, and to lead a secure and sustainable living (Fig. 1).

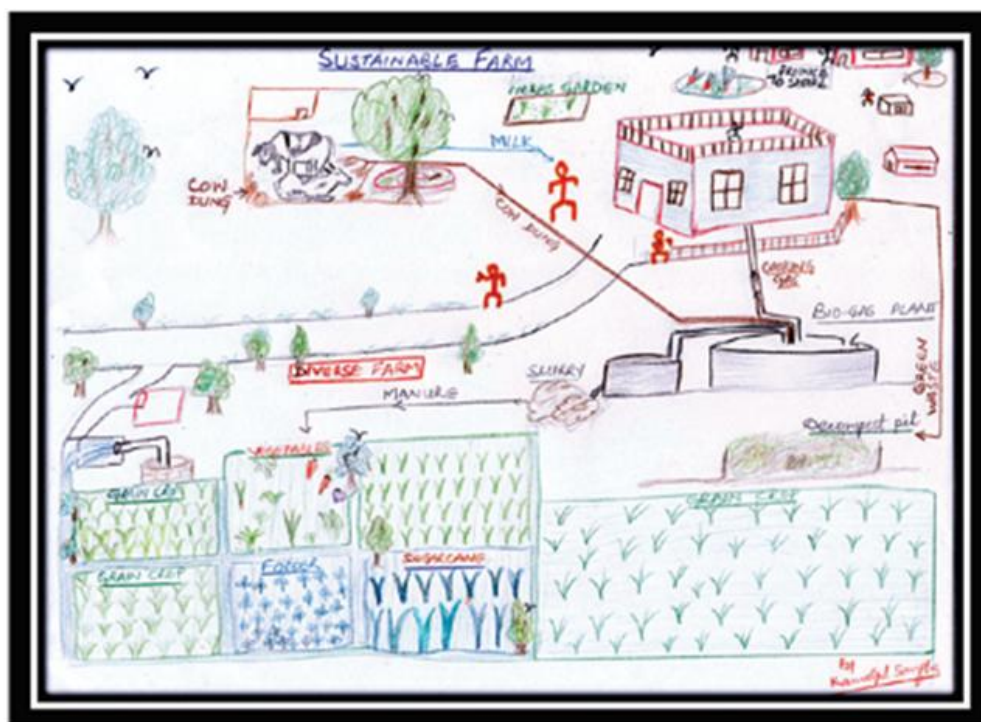


Fig. 1. Sustainable living depicted for a typical Indian village where local food production, and cultural norms and customs for sharing produce with non-farming communities are common practices. Increasingly, modern cooking (biogas plant) and electricity facilities (solar), are becoming part of people's living [4]

Climatically, the main agricultural states of Punjab and Haryana in India are situated in the foothills of the Himalayas, occupying a large area of the great Gangetic Plains, with fertile soils and availability of water resources, that are coupled with hard-working people. Hence, the state of Punjab, and later Haryana were selected for fulfilling the needs of grain production for the entire Indian population after independence. More than 90% people in 12,097 villages in the state of Punjab depend on agriculture, with an average per capita income Rs. 128,780 per year, equating to USD 1,750/yr (using currency conversion rate as on 14 July 2021; Punjab Statistical Abstracts 2019). In the state of Haryana, there are 6,848 villages, and an average per capita income is Rs. 185,000 (USD 2,514/yr; Haryana Statistical Abstracts 2019). These figures suggest that the market representation of the agricultural economy is relatively small, but the true value of the village economy is far and beyond the market production prices. The GDP/Market measures, as claimed and targeted by the current Indian Government, suggesting to reform the existing agriculture systems in both these states are indeed a fallacy [5], (TEEB 2018). The hidden

value of agricultural economy in the villages is far and much beyond the crop production values, considered by the Indian government. The world is moving away from the GDP measures of economy, as initiatives are already taken by the governments of Scotland, New Zealand, and others [6,7]. Moreover, agriculture is a cultural heritage for many people in these two states emphasised in here.

2. CHALLENGES

The agricultural states of Punjab and Haryana and other neighbouring states implementing mechanized agriculture since the 1960s are now facing serious socio-ecological issues for more than a decade due to stagnation in crop production, increased cost of production and exploitation of water and soil resources [8,3,9,2]. Highly mechanised agriculture coupled with exploitation of land and water resources has raised concerns for provisioning basic services such as good quality food and water. The situation has become so dire over the last 10 years or so that it has led to joblessness and drug addiction among the youngsters, and a widespread and uprise of severe health issues

such as cancer, osteoarthritis, etc., as outlined by Sangha [10] and recently by the FAO India [2] in a background paper for a workshop on 'Revitalizing Punjab Agriculture' organised by Punjab Government and FAO India. Notably, these issues are not often reported by the researchers or professional, but very regularly discussed via the TV channels, social media, and newspapers, and was the key focus for the Punjab Legislative Assembly Election in 2017.

Lack of appropriate and timely initiatives from both, the state and central governments, over the last two decades despite key government commissioned reports on finding alternatives [8,3,9], has led to frustration among farmers. Diversification is highly recommended in all of those reports but there has been no policy initiatives by any state or central governments. The current socio-political situation raises serious concerns about a complete lack of political will to support farmers who are regarded as '*Ann Datta*' (the food provider) according to Indian scriptures. Farmer organisations have approached various governments and political parties over time, but no success to date (with farmers being on hunger strike and protest for the last nine months). Whereas, the political greed for *GDP/Development* has been increasing at the cost of handing over the destiny of millions of small-scale farmers to corporations, and severely threatening the survival of millions of people across India [1].

Rather than offering any amenable and affordable solutions to the above-mentioned problems, the Indian Government recently introduced three Farming Reform Bills—labelled as 'Black Bills' by the farmers, unions, and farm-workers—to further add to the farmers' plight. These bills (as discussed below) evidently favour corporations to help them explicitly exploit remaining soil and water resources, jeopardize village economy and livelihoods of millions of rural people. These bills will lead to the expansion of monocultures at even a larger scale [11,1]—resulting in much greater adverse impacts on the ecological, social, and cultural systems, both in scale and intensity.

3. ANALYSIS OF THE FARMING BILLS PASSED BY THE INDIAN GOVERNMENT

Three Farm Bills, under the Indian Farm Reforms 2020, were passed by the Indian Government on 20-22 September 2020, and these include:

1. Farmers' Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Act, 2020 (<https://www.prsindia.org/billtrack/farmers-produce-trade-and-commerce-promotion-and-facilitation-bill-2020>);
2. Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement on Price Assurance and Farm Services Act, 2020 (<https://www.prsindia.org/billtrack/farmers-empowerment-and-protection-agreement-price-assurance-and-farm-services-bill-2020>);
3. Essential Commodities Act, 2020 (<https://www.prsindia.org/billtrack/essential-commodities-amendment-bill-2020>).

The Farmers' Produce Trade and Commerce, Act is meant to permit intra-state and inter-state trade of farmers' produce beyond the physical premises of currently, well-established and unique Agricultural Produce Market Committee (APMC), called *mandis*. These *mandis* were established during the era of green revolution with a provision of secure place to trade grains, and have been working quite well for farmers over the last few decades. This Act abolishes the existing operational structure and proposes to establish a separate structure for promoting the open markets without any sense of security for farmers. The proposed Act supports free trade of farm produce, whereas, >90% farmers are (technically) illiterate to deal with modern trading rules, using technology, and have no capacity to negotiate in an open or e-commerce market, as proposed under this Act by the Indian Government. Consequences are that the traders will dictate the price to farmers or cartelisation among the traders is evident to keep farm produce at low prices [11], which is already happening for several farm products. A good example of this kind of experience is Sugarcane Farmers who, typically, have to wait for few years to obtain a payment for the sale of their produce and can't take any legal action against Sugar Mills [12].

Under the existing APMS or *mandi* system, a minimum support price (MSP) is established by the Indian Government for the main crops, and the government or private buyers can buy the produce from farmers at or above the MSP. The established '*mandis*' afford a secure and physical place where farmers can take their produce to, and the agriculture service providers (*Aartihias*) assist farmers to sell their produce. The existing arrangements could be improved to include other crops than wheat and rice, if the government has

an intention to improve and sustain agriculture for the local communities. The proposed Act lacks any assurance or an appropriate set of procedures for farmers to obtain a fair price for their produce. Under the proposed Act, in case of a dispute farmers can appeal only to the Sub-Divisional Magistrate who could be potentially bribed by the Corporations (a common practice in India), without any provision for farmers to approach the State/Territory courts.

The Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement on Price Assurance and Farm Services Act, 2020 is to create a national framework for contract farming, promoting agreements between a farmer and a buyer. This Act omits any details about how farmers will be enabled to understand and deal with corporations so that their agreements are at least genuine and just. It offers no minimum support price (MSP) for the farmers. The consequences are that corporations can offer low prices, cartelise the market, and farmers may be forced to sell at that price, without any legal rights. Again, the hidden agenda of this Act is indirectly or directly compelling farmers to lease or sell their land to corporations who can then rule for their private profits. Well-being of rural communities and village economies—a key aspect supported by farming, that keeps everyone well fed in rural India, is completely ignored under this Act.

The Essential Commodities Act (ECA) is about removing stock limits for essential commodities such as wheat and rice, meaning any person can store an unlimited amount of farm produce and sell it when the demand is high to fetch higher prices. Under this Act, the government can regulate but only in extraordinary circumstances such as war or famine. Currently, farmers, due to their liabilities, can't afford to stock their produce, however the corporation can do so to obtain greater private profits. The consequences are that corporations such as Adani Group, who has already build silos in India for stocking farm produce through the Food Corporation of India [13,14], will sell the produce, particularly cereals which are staples for millions of Indians, at a much higher price, and many poor people will have no other option than dying of hunger.

Overall, all the proposed bills are meant to support corporations without even understanding and realising the value of current village economy driven by the millions of farmers, thus compromising already deprived, and compelling millions of small-medium farmers to destitution. These bills offer no solution to the current agricultural problems which are driving a toll on farmers to the extent that ecological, social and cultural systems that underpin the economy, are already in a miserable state.



Images: Farmers protesting in New Delhi against Farming Reform Bills passed by the Indian Government in September 2020. (courtesy: Social media and The Times of India)

4. CONCLUSION

The farmers and common people including educationists, workers, lawyers, artists and students, comprising ~500 farming unions and >250 million people from across India, are protesting peacefully since 28 November 2020 in New Delhi, i.e. for more than nine months. More than 20 states including Punjab, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, Kerala, Orissa, Tamil Nadu, and Karnataka have participated in 'India Shut Down' called by farmers a few times since the protest started. This demonstrates people's fear against corporations such as Adani Group, which have created their regimes to exert significant influence upon the Indian Government [13,14]. In a democracy, it is very unusual that the Head of the state—the Prime Minister of India—has not paid attention to such a mass agitation that has drawn consideration attention internationally from farmers, journalists, and media (mainly, in the US, Canada, Germany, and the UK). This indeed raises serious questions about the democracy in India.

Doubtlessly, these three Acts, if implemented, will lead to a complete chaos among the entire Indian society, not just for farmers but also for millions from the general public who directly and indirectly depend on farming [1]. The existing socio-cultural support network at the village levels will be jeopardized by forcing people to leave their villages and find work in towns and cities, hence increasing pressure on already over-populated towns, with a highly likely probability of labour exploitation by big firms. As a result, millions of people, who are currently engaged in farm-related work in their communities, will be forced out of work and eventually, to suffer from hunger and social crisis.

Environmentally, the current sustainable economy in villages, is worth millions of rupees. Some of which is measurable, but a substantial part is non-measurable—the latter will be completely destroyed with the reformed agricultural settings. Presently, the social cohesion plays a vital role for feeding and maintaining law and order in rural populations especially, the farming communities help their non-farming counterparts at crucial times. Once corporations come into their role, there will be no such help available within the villages to non-farming communities, and the social fabric will be ruined. Moreover, the total village economy which does not flow in the formal market but

significantly contributes to the well-being of rural village communities, will sadly vanish exposing many people to destitute. The socio-economic situation is likely to further marginalise rural populations, which may eventually become a burden on the government in several different ways: increased disorder in the society, frustration for lack of work opportunities suiting people's skills and hence more protests and damage to government properties and infrastructure, or increased incarceration, and health issues. Disrupting village economies, without understanding its true value for the sake of improving GDP and supporting corporations, is the biggest mistake that any government can commit to do.

The proposed bills undermine food security, compromise equity rights of the farmers in Punjab, Haryana and other states who have been largely feeding the nation since the 1960s, and exposes them to coercion, and the general public to the insecurity of food and chaos [1,11]. Moreover, these Acts trespass State legislation on agriculture. Currently agriculture is a state/territory issue, not a central issue in entirety [1].

The solution is to repeal the bills, and co-design mechanisms, in collaboration with farmers and their institutions, to address farmers needs so they are able to sustainably cultivate their lands and provide food and security to millions of Indians while enhancing social cohesion. There is a need to review the existing arrangements, understand the 'true value' of current village economy, and consider sustainable and diversification options, in consultation with farmers, while focusing on people's well-being rather than a few corporations [15]. Understanding the contributions of farmers' work to the Indian economy, and appreciating how their work delivers food at affordable prices for millions of people in India is the first lesson for governments to learn, which can then help develop policies with farmers rather than for them [16-18].

To conclude farmers' agitation, it is a moral responsibility of any government in a democratic institution to openly listen to its citizens' concerns; and farmers' and farm-workers, comprising >70% of total population, are the key players in Indian democratic system. Efforts from both parties are necessary to find the pathways to resume conversations

and develop solutions to the current on-going protest.

Villages are the foundation of India. The need is to build and support village communities through sustainable farming, as Mahatma Gandhi said:

“...if the village perishes India will perish too. India will be no more India.”

COMPETING INTERESTS

Author has declared that no competing interests exist.

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