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How to Address the Farmers' Protests in India

Roughly 60% of India's population consists of farmers, but agriculture accounts for "only about 15% of the country's economic output" ^[1]. Farmers are provided with generous subsidies, exempted from income taxes, and loan debts are waived when they are unable to be met. The patriarchal society in rural India demands that men provide for their wives, children, and extended family in times of crisis/financial need. Unfortunately, debt and damaged pride has driven India's male farmers to high rates of suicide over the past few years. The increased unemployment rate, which escalated in May of 2020 due to the prevalence of Covid-19, sent many urban workers back to their rural villages, exacerbating the farmers' problems.

In September of 2020, the Indian parliament passed three ordinances to allow for foreign private investment, ultimately decreasing government involvement in the nation's agricultural economy. Many farmers fear that with the passage of these new laws, India's Minimum Support Price system — an economic system ensuring that India's farmers will acquire a minimum price for the harvest if their profits do not cover the cost of input production — will be dismantled. Thus, they would be left without an assured income in the face of a brutalized economy thanks to the ongoing pandemic.

The Farmers' Produce Trade and Commerce Act allows Indian farmers to sell their crops outside of the government-run marketplaces; however, their crops will not be subject to the MSP. Farmers believe that this law will permit private buyers to force the systematic shutdown of government-controlled marketplaces (mandis) before allowing them to turn to large-scale farmers for lower purchase rates, destroying small-scale farms in the process.

The Farmers Agreement on Price Assurance and Farm Services Act allows Indian farmers to enter into private contracts before harvest begins but states that any resulting disputes must be handled through alternative dispute resolution (ADR) mechanisms. Farmers fear that

their buyers will have absolute control over what they grow and do not trust private companies to honor their contracts faithfully.

Finally, the Essential Commodities Amendment limits the government's ability to regulate food supply and price only in extreme circumstances such as war, famine, or significant price increases. Additionally, the amendment allows the government to remove items from the list as non-essential. Farmers are concerned that with no stock limit for processors and supply chain owners or exporters, private businesses will hoard crops to manipulate market prices, which can cause food shortages/insecurity.

While farmers see the existing state protections as insufficient — only 6% of farmers receive the guaranteed price support for their crops — they now fear that freeing India's agricultural market will "leave [farmers] at the mercy of greedy corporations" [\[1\]](#).

India's Supreme Court agreed to suspend the laws for 12 to 18 months. Unfortunately, the farmers do not trust in the justices' impartiality after three of them had openly supported the new laws when they were first passed, and are thus refusing to participate in compromise discussions [\[2\]](#).

After several months of peaceful protests, during which farmers from across India gathered to block highways and hold rallies around the capital, violence broke out on January 26th, India's Republic Day. Protestors took restricted routes through New Delhi and plowed their tractors through the police barricades while others carried swords, axes, and daggers, turning the demonstration into a deadly riot. Officers bore assault rifles and water canons, beat protestors with batons, and liberally sprayed the crowd with tear gas in an attempt to regain control. One protestor died, and 394 police and civilians were injured [\[1\]](#).

Afterwards, the government temporarily suspended internet access in areas of Punjab and Haryana, where the protests were primarily orchestrated by farmer members of Sikh religious minority groups (believed to be Khalistani infiltrators, advocating for secession and the creation of an independent Sikh state). In addition, several social media accounts (over 500 in total)

belonging to reputable news sites and prominent social figures were suspended temporarily from Twitter when the government claimed they posed a risk to public safety.

Sedition charges were brought against several journalists and activists following the protest's escalation. Female activists Disha Ravi, Nikita Jacob, and Shantanu Muluk were arrested on suspicion of ties to the pro-Khalistani movement and creating an online "toolkit" that explained the farmers' protests and provided sources for outside support ^[3]. Activist Nodeep Kaur was arrested and held in custody for over a month, after which she accused police of sexual assault and torture ^[4].

Traditional Indian joint families are perceived to be strong, stable, and focused on family loyalty and unity, but only at the expense of individual freedom, privacy, and space. Women are viewed as caretakers whose societal role is to provide cooking and cleaning services for their male counterparts. While 85% of women in rural India are farmers, only 13% of women own any farmland ^[5]. However, as the protests continued, rural Indian women began to experience personal freedoms and opportunities for public speaking for the first time. Despite the Chief Justice of India calling for women and the elderly to return to the farms, female farmers did not back down. "I am here now, and I cannot be oppressed," declared fifty-five year old Sudesh Kandela. "I cannot be intimidated. I cannot be bought" ^[5]. As the protests continue, Indian women's rights are becoming a more pressing issue as women take a more active political role and subvert the traditional patriarchy.

Human rights violations perpetrated by the Indian government have garnered international attention from climate activists like Greta Thunberg to Hollywood stars such as Rhianna. The United Nations Human Rights Council issued a call for "maximum restraint" by the Indian authorities and voiced concerns about the treatment of protestors and free speech restrictions ^[6]. Unfortunately, as protests continue into August of 2021, international media attention has shifted away from the situation in India, leaving the issue unresolved with no clear end in sight.

Distrust in the government/public officials amongst agricultural communities is nothing new. Still, relations are increasingly tenuous for India's farmers who have consistently struggled

for decades to meet the demands of the country's incredible population with little to no annual profit. An open market economy could prove to be beneficial to Indian farmers. Modi has stated that with the passage of these new laws, farmers will be allowed to “sell directly to buyers without a middle man, and sell to other states or large grocery chains.”

However, with no promised safeguards or regulations on the corporations that may choose to invest, India's farmers are rightfully skeptical of the recent ordinances. The situation has only been compounded by the social and religious unrest currently festering in India's political world due to the recent military coup in Myanmar, the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, tension over the withdrawal of US troops in Afghanistan, and the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) 2019 Citizenship Amendment Act (which provided citizenship for non-muslim minorities fleeing religious persecution from neighboring countries, but which dissenters argues made it harder for Muslims to gain citizenship in India). Politics, racial and religious affiliations, economic activity, global health, etc., all combine to influence the lives of Indian farmers and will all play a role in solving this crisis.

India is a fast developing country, and the entry of its citizens into the global economy is apparent. The drastic changes Modi proposed with these ordinances left farmers wary, but all involved parties must reach a compromise to end the now year long protests at the capital. Growing attention surrounding the demonstrations initially inspired plans for Pakistani farmer protests over unequal government subsidies and the unregulated exploitation of small farmers, however they were swiftly shut down [\[7\]](#).

A solution might be found through ADR, administered through the United Nations to prevent further human rights violations and the spread of international instability and violence. In order for this to occur, the International Court of Justice will need to receive a request from the Union Territory of New Delhi to settle the legal disputes between the farmers and the Indian government [\[8\]](#).

Ideally, the Indian government would roll back the ordinances, and any new legislation on the issue would be introduced as a referendum to be voted on by the citizens themselves. Farmers should be allowed to speak civilly to their representatives about their concerns. Accurate

information about the ramifications of any future legislation that proposes free-market globalization needs to be issued through neutral parties such as the UN or NGOs that promote education for farmers like VRUTTI and the Center for Sustainable Agriculture [\[9\]](#). VRUTTI is an NGO that pledges to promote food and income security, provide farmers the opportunity to live with dignity, and eliminate intermediaries. The CSA's mission is to work with farmers to promote sustainable agriculture with the understanding that this will increase productivity by 10% and farmer incomes by 15%, hopefully eliminating the shame that comes with unpaid debt [\[10\]](#). The CSA is also already available for consultation on governance-related concerns.

More importantly, the MSP, which is currently not enforceable by law, must be protected through national legislation and provided to all Indian farmers who require it. Additionally, the essential commodities list should maintain the goods initially slated to be deregulated (onions, potatoes, oilseeds, etc.) while relaxing, but not outright banning, stock limits.

As the leader of the BJP, Prime Minister Modi pledged to double India's economy for farmers by the next general election in May of 2024. Now he is feeling pressure from the electorate, roughly 55% of which is made up of rural farmers, to deliver on that promise. While the farm laws initially seemed like an efficient way to reach his lofty goal, faced with ongoing, vehement protest, Modi must look to alternative solutions. Federal collaboration with NGOs to provide counseling to farmers on contract negotiations and debt repayment would be a good way to start. Despite the good intentions behind the farm laws, after over a year of protests, Indian farmers do not trust that their voices are being heard. A massive shift in policy approach and execution will be required of Modi and the BJP to recover support from the farming community.

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