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### Introduction

Hundreds of thousands of small farmers, some driving tractors, converged on Delhi in November 2020, and set up three protest camps on the outskirts of the capital. Their descent on Delhi had been preceded by a farm strike across India since August, and months of local campaigning against the farm laws introduced in August by Rajendra Modi's government. The three farm laws brought major changes relating to the sale, prices and storage of crops. The markets with controlled prices were to lose their central role and seemed likely to be abolished leaving farmers to deal directly with major corporations. Over 50 per cent of India's population is engaged in agriculture and over 85 per cent are small farmers owning less than two hectares of land, which they feared they would lose. The farmers also resented the lack of advance consultation - the law was steam-rolled through parliament without the chance of debate and amendment, and was passed in September. At the same time the government passed a new labour code making it easier to fire workers. Resistance to both the farm laws and the new labour code led to a general strike in November 2020, by an estimated 250 million farmers and workers.

The protests were therefore a reaction to the government's extension to agriculture of neo-liberal economic policies, which would in practice prioritize corporate interests over the needs of the poor in the name of modernization. But they can also be seen as an impressive display of resistance to the political style and wider agenda promoted by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Since Modi became prime minister of India in 2014 there has been a clear trend towards increasingly arbitrary and authoritarian government.

This trend has included suppressing the rights of states within the federation, diminishing the role of parliament, harassing and arresting journalists, and trying to control universities and cultural bodies. This authoritarianism is linked to promotion of an intolerant Hindu nationalism, which undermines the rights of religious minorities and often treats links to international activists or organization as sedition. Modi had by 2020 already arbitrarily annulled the special status, which had been granted to the state of Kashmir, imposing draconian control over it. In late 2019 the government passed the Citizenship Amendment Act and the National Register of Citizens, which both had the effect of treating India's population of 200 million Muslims (14 per cent of the population) as second class citizens. This had led to major protests by both Muslims and those opposed to creating religious divisions and in favour of a secular state. The opposition to the farm laws could therefore be seen as a new phase in resisting the trend towards autocracy. Indeed, the laws themselves are authoritarian, forbidding any legal action to contest issues covered by the legislation.

Opposition to the farm laws by the state legislature of Punjab had been met by government measures to block transport of coal and grain to the state, as well as withdrawal of a federal agricultural subsidy for rural development. Most of the farmers who decided to bring their protest to Delhi were Sikhs from the Punjab or from another northern grain growing state, Haryana, though there were also contingents from Gujarat, Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan. The predominantly Sikh identity of the protesters also led the government to treat them as suspect.

International publicity for the farmers' protests, which had not been extensive, increased after 26 January 2021, India's Independence Day, when the farmers organized a tractor rally in the centre of Delhi. A breakaway group took over the symbolic Red Fort and was met by police using tear gas and batons. One protester died and many others were hurt, and an estimated 300 police were also injured, and 200 protesters were arrested and charged with sedition and criminal conspiracy. Eight journalists covering the protests were also arrested and charged with sedition. The government responded as well by barricading the protest camps with concrete and barbed wire, disrupting food and water supplies, and shutting down internet access. An environmental activist, Disha Ravi, who publicly supported the farmers, was seized and taken to Delhi, where she was charged with sedition and criminal conspiracy. The charges against her were based on her re-tweeting a toolkit for protest, which had been tweeted by climate activist Greta Thunberg to suggest forms of action to the farmers. Thunberg's tweet was controversial in India and provided the basis for charging Ravi.

### Gains Made by Farmers and Future Prospects



Despite the government crackdown on the protest camps, the farmers were in quite a strong position. The government had felt obliged to enter into a round of negotiations with their representatives, and after these proved abortive the Supreme Court had suspended the farm laws and set up a special Committee to hear the farmers' case. When the farmers refused to cooperate, on the grounds the Committee was clearly biased in favour of the government, the Court suspended the new farm laws in January 2021 for 18 months. The farmers' union leaders later extended their demands beyond repeal of the new farm laws to call for a new law which would require the government to buy all farm produce at a price set and guaranteed by the state.

Moreover, the farmers' movement was itself strong and highly organized. The Punjabi farmers arranged that work should continue on their farms and that the camps should be maintained

by operating a rotation of personnel at the camps. Women were actively and prominently involved as well as men. The camps themselves were also impressively organized, with over 1500 communal kitchens, a huge tent for meetings, libraries and gyms and use of ingenious technology including solar panels and plans for fans and water coolers when the summer heat arrived later. The camps received visits from supporting groups, for example students, as well as practical support such as supplies of soap and other essentials by Sikh groups. Campaigning also took place in many others parts of India. There was in addition significant political and practical support from international bodies with related interests, including the Punjabi diaspora, international Sikh bodies, and from farmers and farming organizations.

Therefore the protest camps survived, despite the disastrous impact of Covid-19 in India in April 2021, which resulted in numerous deaths and near-collapse of medical services. Numbers at the camp diminished for a while - this was also the month for harvesting grain in the Punjab and Haryana. But the camps were still in place by September 2021, despite hardships suffered. Indeed the protesters said that they were planning to continue until the next national elections in 2024.

The farmers have extended their campaign to focus on defeating the BJP in state elections. After the BJP lost the elections in West Bengal in May 2021, farmers leaders claimed their role in the electoral campaign had been decisive. Farmers also mobilized in September 2021 in a campaign designed to defeat the ruling BJP in the state assembly election in February/March 2022 in the populous state of Uttar Pradesh. The BJP managed to win 67 out of 75 seats in the district (panchayat) in the July 2021 elections, seen as a significant precursor of the assembly elections. However, the farmers' leaders planned to increase protests within the state, and to tour every city and town in the state to attack Modi, and the BJP's attitude towards farmers. Moreover, in western Uttar Pradesh upper caste landlords combined with lower caste farm workers to oppose the farm laws. In the same area Hindu farmers also collaborated with Muslim farmers - despite the legacy of communal riots in 2013. Both the protesters camped around Delhi and farm organizations in many parts of India appeared, therefore, to have committed themselves to a long struggle with the BJP and Modi's government, aiming not only to repeal the farm laws and secure a favourable alternative, but to depose the BJP from government both within individual states and at the federal level.

The references below includes news reports and analyses of the scope and nature of the protests from August 2020 to September 2021, the protesters' policy goals and the nature of the government responses. They also include analysis of the farm laws that sparked the protests, the wider agricultural and economic context and the political trend under the BJP government towards autocracy based on Hindu nationalism.

### **Modi Promises Repeal of Farm Laws on 19 November 2021**

The farmers, unexpectedly won their long campaign against the new farm laws when Prime Minister Modi announced on 19 November 2021, a day auspicious for Sikhs, that he would repeal the laws. Modi said he still believed the laws could help farmers, but accepted that he had not managed to convince them. Farmers in the Punjab and Haryana held celebrations to mark their victory, but those in the protest camps around Delhi told reporters that they did not trust the announcement, and a protest leader declared that they would not leave camps until the laws had been formally repealed in parliament. Commentators speculated that the reason for Modi's unexpected decision was concern that his party, the BJP, might be threatened by Sikh voters in the forthcoming state elections in the Punjab and, especially, in Uttar Pradesh. currently governed by the BJP, Losing control of India's most populous state, where farmers were already actively campaigning, could also jeopardise a BJP victory in the subsequent 2024 general election.



[India: Journalists Covering Farmer Protests Charged](#) [1], Human Rights Watch, 02/02/2021,

Critical account of the Indian government's response to the farmers' protest in central Delhi on Independence Day. This response included shutting down the internet, charging six journalists with sedition, promoting communal disharmony and making statements prejudicial to national integration.

Bengali, Shashank ; Parth, M.N., "[It Isn't Just Men Who Drive Tractors](#)". [Women Help Lead India's Historic Farm Protests](#) [2], Los Angeles Times, 27/01/2021,

This article explores the role of women in the farmers' protests in the context of 75 per cent of rural women working in agriculture. The authors note that this sector has been left behind in the boom accompanying the previous three decades of economic liberalization.

See also <https://time.com/5942125/women-india-farmers-protests/> [3] and <https://thedi diplomat.com//2021/01/indias-invisible-women-farmers//> [4]

Bikrum, Gill, [The Data Harvest](#) [5], Red Pepper, 2021, pp. 30-33

Gill discusses the Indian farmers' protests in the context of the shift towards neo-liberal global capitalism and the power of Indian agribusiness, aided by new internet platforms and data analytics.

Chatterie, Sritama, [Reading Climate Justice through the Indian Farmers' Movement](#) [6], Edge Effects, 02/03/2021,

This article sets the Indian farmers' movement within the context of climate justice, since farmers, who are a significant proportion of the population, are dependent on rainfall for their crops. Due to climate change farmers are increasingly affected by changing rainfall patterns and suffering from drought.

Chatteriee, Shritama, [Reading Climate Justice through the Indian Farmers' Movement](#) [7], Edge Effects, 02/03/2021,

This article positions the Indian farmers' movement within a conversation about climate justice because a significant demography of farmers in India are dependent on rainfall for the growth of crops. The author highlights that due to uneven rainfall patterns caused by climate change, instances of drought and rainfall are frequent, leading to a feeling of uncertainty about rainfall and sense of insecurity about crops.

Chibber, Ajay, [Farm Protests in India. A New Menu Needed](#) [8], Institute for International Economic Policy, 2021, pp. 17

The author argues that Indian agricultural policy, devised in response to food shortages in the 1960s, relied on a mix of technological solutions to increase yields and a range of pricing measures to support farmers. These policies are out of date, but changing the overall policy is difficult as farmers believe their livelihoods are at stake. This paper considers the issues behind the protests and suggests ways forward.

Chibber, Ajay, [Farm Protests in India. A New Menu Needed](#) [9], Institute for International Economic Policy, 2021, pp. 17

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Ellis-Petersen, Hannah, ["We Know We Will Win." Farmers in for Long Haul](#) [10], Guardian Weekly, 2021, pp. 15-17

Provides an account of who is protesting in the camps around Delhi, why the farmers oppose the government's new farm laws, the government's responses to the protests, and future plans.

Gandbhir, Gaur, [India: New Laws will Enslave Farmers, Workers, Enrich Big Business](#) [11], Green Left Weekly, issue 1292, 11/12/2020, pp. 10-10

This article was written in response to the All India General Strike of 26 November 2020, organized by 10 trade unions and over 250 farmers' organizations, that mobilized over 250 million to protest against the new farm and labour laws passed by the BJP dominated coalition government. It examines the protests and the laws which gave rise to them.

Gopikutan, Goti ; Naik, Gopal, [Deregulation of Agricultural Markets in India](#) [12], Indian Institute of Management Bangalore - Indian Institute of Management (IIMB), 2021, pp. 19

This paper argues that in principle there is a potential for market reforms to benefit farmers, but that the farm laws passed by the government will in practice benefit 'traders' rather than farmers. Deregulation without 'enabling preconditions' is not likely to help farmers, and may prove counterproductive.

Hundai, Sunny, [Why Sikh Farmers' Protests have Sikhs Fearing Violent Attacks](#) [13], OpenDemocracy, 04/02/2021,

Hundai examines the predominantly Sikh farmers protests centred on Delhi in the context of the history of religious pogroms in India, and notes that fear of persecution has resurfaced within the Sikh community.

Jodkha, Ravinnder, [Farmers in India Have Been Protesting for 6 Months. Have they Made any Progress?](#) [14], The Conversation, 25/05/2021,

Overview of farmers protests round Delhi after six months, including the impact of Covid-19. Jodkha also summarizes why the farmers are protesting and what they had achieved, and also their future plans. The article includes links to more detailed examination of specific issues, such as the role of women.

Kaur, Ravinder, [How a Farmers' Protest in India Evolved into a Mass Movement that Refuses to Fade](#) [15], New Statesman, 19/02/2021,

Kaur explains the social and economic context within which the Modi government introduced the new farm laws. These, he argues, will result in an unending cycle of structural adjustments, disinvestment and privatization, that farmers fear will lead to debts and dispossession. He outlines how the farmers are, despite intimidation, developing solidarity across caste, class, religion and regional divides.

Khan, Naila ; Usman, Uzair, [Modi's Repeal of Farm Laws Isn't Enough, Say Indian Farmers](#) [16], The Diplomat, 22/11/2021,

The authors explain the significance for Sikhs of the date (19 November) of Modi's surprise announcement, summarize the laws to be repealed, and interview a number of protesters who express their distrust and require proof the laws will no longer apply.

See also: BBC, 'Farm Laws: India's PM Narendra Modi Repeals Controversial Reforms', 19 November, 2021

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-india-59342627> [17]

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Report on Modi's announcement and the laws to be repealed, and on farmers' reactions. Notes celebrations in Punjab and Haryana, but also the refusal to end protest camps until formal repeal by parliament. The report is followed by an analysis by the BBC's India Correspondent.

N.P., Ullekh, [In India, Farmers Are Resisting Narendra Modi's Propaganda Machine](#) [18], The Nation, 04/02/2021,

An in depth examination of the Indian farmers' resistance to the 2020 agricultural laws passed by Narendra Modi's government.

See also: <https://nationalheraldindia.com/india/why-are-farmers-protesting> [19] and <https://thediomat.com/2021/02/past-imperfect-the-future-of-indias-farmer-protests> [20]

Singh, Navsharan, [Holding Out for the Harvest](#) [21], New Internationalist, issue Nov-Dec, 2021, pp. 28-31

This article explains the new laws which are the focus of the farmers' protest, describes the initial protest journey to Delhi and explains the spirit and organization of the protests and the building of solidarity with other groups, for example by celebrating International Women's Day and May Day to link with women's and workers' struggles. Singh then engages in an analysis of 'disaster capitalism' including the revision of the labour laws. It concludes that the farmers' movement has become a struggle for 'a more just future for India's dispossessed'.

Singh, Simran, [The Farmers' Protests are a Turning Point for India's Democracy - and the World Can No Longer Ignore That](#) [22], Time, 11/02/2021,

Provides historical background to the Indian farmers protests against the Modi government's 2020 farm laws and draws parallels with earlier movements since the 1970s for stronger government support for agriculture.

Subramanian, Samanth, [Tipping Point: How the Rise of Hindu Nationalism is Threatening to Tear India Apart](#) [23], Guardian Weekly, 28/02/2020, pp. 35-41

This 'long read' article focuses on the nature and goals of Hindu nationalism and the role of the extremist Hindu organization the RSS. It also makes comparisons with the rise of right wing populism.

See also: 'Subcontinental Drift: Danger – One Party State', *Economist*, 28 November, 2020, pp.20-22.

This article examines in some detail the erosion of judicial independence and the Modi government's stringent measures against state governments run by parties opposed to the BJP. critical journalists and NGOs, thousands of which have been closed down for receiving foreign funds. It also notes Modi's emphasis on his role as Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces and his aspirations to rebuild Delhi to symbolize imperial-style power. It compares the autocratic trend under Modi to developments in Hungary, Poland and Turkey.

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### Links

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