

Peasant Movement and its Impact on the 2024 Election

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Abstract

The peasant movement has historically been a significant force in shaping political landscapes, and its role in the 2024 election underscores its enduring influence. In the context of the 2024 election, peasant movements have evolved beyond traditional protests to become pivotal political actors. Their impact is evident in the formation of alliances with political parties, the emergence of agrarian-based political candidates, and the significant voter mobilization efforts in rural constituencies. These movements have effectively utilized social media and grassroots organizing to amplify their voices, influencing public discourse and shaping policy agendas. The alignment of peasant interests with broader social justice movements has further strengthened their political clout, creating a formidable coalition advocating for systemic change. The electoral impact of the peasant movement is multifaceted. Firstly, it has altered campaign strategies, compelling political parties to address agrarian issues more substantively. Secondly, it has shifted the electoral demographics, as rural voters, traditionally considered a passive bloc, have become more active and organized. Thirdly, the movement has introduced new narratives into the political arena, emphasizing sustainability, food security, and economic equity. In some regions, peasant-led initiatives have even led to significant electoral victories, challenging established political hierarchies.

Key Words: Peasant movements, India, 2024 election

Introduction

"India lives in the village," Mahatma Gandhi said long ago. The development of villages and, herein, their inhabitants constitute the basic tenets of his philosophy of *swaraj*. Gandhiji, in his book *Hind Swaraj*, envisioned self-sustaining villages free of poverty and destitution. Today, more than 65 per cent of India's population lives in

villages, and agriculture is the main occupation of the people in the hinterland. Hence, the development of agriculture is *qua non* for the development of rural hinterland and the country's inclusive growth.

When the country gained independence from foreign rule in 1947, the agriculture sector employed 85 per cent of the population, but it could not feed its population. Further, the country's partition aggravated India's food situation, leaving all high food crises and inflation. Since then India's agriculture has achieved tremendous achievement in the production and productivity of the crops. The per capita availability of the food grains has increased from 429 grams in 1947 to 568 grams in 2023. The growth rate of food grains has outstripped the growth rate of the population, resulting in a net increase in the per capita availability of the food grains. The country, which was dependent on the import of food grains to feed its population, is now a net exporter of food grains and the largest producer of vegetables, fruits, rice and wheat.

Agriculture production is important not only for food security but also as a source of income for most rural poor. In India, food inflation is a prime concern as it erodes the real income of the vast, poor population. The role of agriculture in transforming an economy like India is to narrow down the urban-rural income inequality and alleviate rural poverty. All the inequality indicators confirm that urban-rural income disparity has widened in the post-reform period in India. Recent reports on inequality by Oxfam and famous French economist Thomas Picketty substantiate the rising income disparity in India.

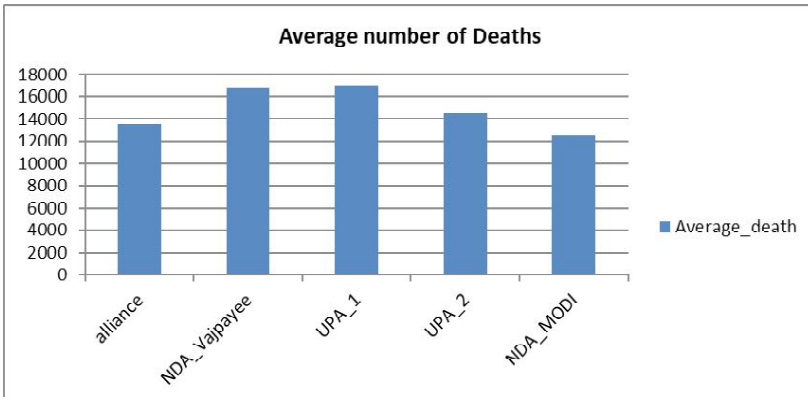
Though the country has become self-sufficient in food grain production and become a net exporter, the farmers' economic conditions have not improved as expected compared to those of their counterparts in other sectors of the economy. This lopsided development of the country by passing the farmers in the country has been depicted by the severe rural distress manifested by the farmer's suicide (Figure 1). In the post-liberalization period, the number of farmers killing themselves became a common phenomenon, and in 2006, the then United Progressive Alliance (UPA) govt constituted a committee to study the farmer's plight known as the National Farmers Commission under the chairmanship of a prominent scientist, Dr M.S. Swaminathan.

Minimum Support Price (MSP) is a form of market intervention by the Government of India to protect the farmers against any sharp fall in farm prices. The minimum support prices are announced by the Government of India at the beginning of the sowing season for certain crops based on the recommendations of the Commission for Agricultural

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Costs and Prices (CACP). MSP is a kind of insurance to the farmers against the market volatility and a guarantee that in case of bumper crop the govt. agencies would purchase the excessive crops and will protect the prices from falling below the minimum support price. The Minimum Support Prices in India are recommended by a statutory body known as the Commission for Agricultural Costs and Prices (CACP). It gives recommendations to the government on MSP for Kharif and Rabi seasons. The objective of the price policy underlying MSP is to bring a balanced and integrated price structure for agricultural commodities. The prices should be in accordance with the overall needs of the economy and protecting the interests of the producer and the consumer. Several price and non-price factors are considered while estimating the MSP. The CACP, while formulating the recommendations on Price Policy, considers a number of important factors, including cost of production, changes in input price, trends in market prices, demand and supply situation, etc.

Figure 1: Average number of Farmers' deaths during different regimes.



Source: National Crime Record Bureau.

As of now, CACP recommends MSPs of 23 commodities, which comprise seven cereals (paddy, wheat, maize, sorghum, pearl millet, barley and ragi), five pulses (gram, tur, moong, urad, lentil), seven oilseeds (groundnut, rapeseed-mustard, soyabean, sesamum, sunflower, safflower, nigerseed), and four commercial crops (copra, sugarcane, cotton and raw jute)¹.

The National Commission on Agriculture under Dr. Swaminathan had recommended the fixation of a Minimum support price (MSP) of 50%

over the C2 cost. The Commission for Agriculture Cost and Prices (CACPC), which suggests the government on the fixation of MSP, defines three types of cultivation cost, i.e., A2, A2+FL, and C2. The A2 cost covers the actual expenses incurred by the farmers, A2 + FL includes the A2 plus an imputed value of unpaid family labour, and C2 costs are more comprehensive and include the rental or the interest foregone on owned land and fixed capital assets. The current MSP is almost 50 per cent of the A2 cost for most crops except a few.

Thus, farmers have been demanding the provision of MSP statutory and fixing the MSP to over 50% of the C2, which the government is reluctant to implement. Secondly, the government has passed three bills, commonly known as Farms bills, without proper discussion in the parliament, calling for large-scale resentment from the farmer's associations across the country.

The three farm bills

The three farm bills were notified through the ordinance route and passed without debate in both Houses of Parliament². They have stoked controversy, with major farmer protests in a few states like Punjab and Haryana. These protests forced an ally, the Akali Dal1, to withdraw its support to the central government. By September 14, 2020, these ordinances had been brought to Parliament as legislative bills for "discussion", approval and have since been passed. The proceedings in Parliament have regrettably been vastly inadequate in highlighting the bills' potential ramifications and redressing their many lacunae. Nor did the government use the parliamentary discussion as an opportunity to reveal and clarify its larger vision for Indian agriculture that these bills foregrounded. On 27 September, the bills received presidential assent and were notified in the gazette. One bill relaxes restrictions governing the purchase and sale of farm produce, the second relaxes restrictions on stocking under the Essential Commodities Act (ECA), 1955, and the third introduces dedicated legislation to enable contract farming based on written agreements.

The three bills need to be read together. They share a premise that they will enable private players to invest in agri-food supply chains more easily, lead to gains in efficiency downstream along the supply chain (and upstream in the input supply chain) and that these gains will be passed on to farmers in the form of higher output prices or lower input prices as the case may be. On the one hand, many have hailed the bills as a watershed, while others have critiqued them as sounding the death knell for farmers. The government said the new

laws would help strengthen basic farm sector infrastructure through more significant private investments. Successive governments have found financial constraints in investing in farm and rural infrastructure. It is argued that with food markets growing exponentially in India, private players would make agriculture profitable for the farmers. But farmers were, and still are, worried over MSP assurance. The MSP assurance emerged as the main sticking point in the farmers' protest. There has been an apprehension among the farmers that allowing outside-APMC trade of farm produces would lead to lesser buying by the government agencies in the approved mandis. The protesting farmers have said the new laws would thus make the MSP system irrelevant and they would not have any assured income from their farming. They marched in from the north-western Indian state of Punjab, reaching the border of the national capital of Delhi on 26–27 November 2020, where they were soon joined by fellow farmers from other states of northern India, particularly Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand and Rajasthan. The protest remained for a year amid Corona, and Prime Minister Narendra Modi said in a stunning address to the country that the laws would be withdrawn, and the same had been done³. The 13-month long protest ended in December 2021 with the withdrawal of three farm laws and a promise to meet other demands gradually.

There was speculation that the protest would sway the fortunes for the BJP in the 2022 Uttar Pradesh Assembly polls held within two months of the protest. The impact was expected in the Assembly polls in Punjab, largely an agrarian state, too. As the results came, the BJP reigned supreme on 85 seats out of the 126 across 24 districts of western Uttar Pradesh — just 15 down from the 2017 Assembly elections, which was expected considering the incumbency of the Yogi Adityanath-led government in the state. Overall, the popular mandate tilted towards the BJP as it won 255 seats in the 403-member Uttar Pradesh Assembly negating all the impact of farmers' protest. In the run up to Lok Sabha elections, RLD, the political party of western UP with a sizeable support base among Jats in western Uttar Pradesh, has reportedly decided to join the NDA camp. This soon after the government of India decided to confer Bharat Ratna on former Prime Minister and farmer leader Chaudhury Charan Singh and architect of green revolution MS Swaminathan. Nationally, the BJP lost its majority after a decade of dominance, winning 240 seats in a house of 543, compared with 303 in 2019. Modi and his party still formed India's next government with the help of alliance partners. And in Uttar Pradesh, where 65 percent of the population is dependent on agriculture, the BJP won just 33 seats out of 80, down from 62 in 2019 and 71 in 2014.

In Punjab, an agrarian state, while the ruling Congress was busy in handling the infighting, the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) won the elections with a brute majority in 2022 UP Assembly polls. The Party contested 117 Assembly seats and won 92, a major jump from the 20 it won in the 217 Assembly polls. The Congress, which won 77 seats in 2017 polls, dropped to 18 seats in 2022. The BJP, getting its hopes up after scrapping the three farm laws, won only 2 seats, down from 3 it bagged in the 2017 polls. The BJP drew a blank in Punjab in general elections, one of the country's top producers of rice and wheat.

In Haryana, known as India's bread basket, where the BJP won 10 out of 10 seats on offer in 2019, its tally was slashed to five this time, with the opposition Congress winning the other five. In Rajasthan, where the BJP won the state government only last December, it won 14 seats out of 25 – it had won all 25 in 2019.

Nationally, the NDA witnessed a 2.2 per cent drop in its vote share in rural areas. Meanwhile, the opposition Congress-led INDIA alliance's rural and semi-rural area vote share rose by nearly 18 per cent.

Conclusion

Government data shows that from 2018 to 2022, as many as 53,478 farmers took their own lives, crushed by unending debt, poor remuneration for their produce and erratic weather patterns, which experts feel the incumbent government failed to rein in fueling the farmer's frustration and rural distress.

When Modi first came to power in 2014, he had promised to reform the agriculture sector and double farm income. Farmers, though, continue to live in penury, with farmers earning an annual average of Rs 10,218 (\$122), or a daily income of just Rs 28 (\$0.34), government data from 2022 shows. Even a Dalwai committee had been formed to recommend to the government to double the farmer's income by 2022⁴.

Modi's government pushed through three controversial new laws to regulate Indian agriculture in 2020, without any consultations with farmers' groups. The step triggered a massive yearlong protest by farmers, who feared that these laws would usher in greater corporatisation of Indian agriculture and would lead to the government scrapping state-backed protections for them, like a minimum support price and the procurement of farm produce by state agencies. At the national level, the NDA has suffered in electoral politics from the rural and semi-rural areas, where they lost a considerable share of votes that

pulled them below the mark halfway of the majority in the parliament. The political impact of the farmers' distress is undoubtedly not as humongous as was predicted by the experts in the general election of 2024.

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- [2] The three farm bills, also known as the “farm laws”, are: The Farmers’ Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Act, 2020, The Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement on Price Assurance and Farm Services Act, 2020, and The Essential Commodities (Amendment) Act, 2020.
- [3] <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/pm-modi-announces-repeal-of-three-contentious-farm-laws/article37573664.ece>, accessed on 16-12-2024.
- [4] This was an 8-member inter-ministerial committee headed by Ashok Dalwai, to consider major reforms in agriculture sector. It was tasked to prepare a blueprint for transition of farm policies from being production oriented to based on incomes or value addition.