**The Farm Laws Struggle 2020-2021: class-caste alliances and bypassed agrarian transition in neoliberal India**

*Jens Lerche*

Abstract:

*The article analyses the farm laws struggle in India which, at the time of writing (September 2021), has lasted more than a year. It aims to explain its unusually broad support base, and to discuss the potentially wider impact of the new social coalition that is emerging. It argues that the unity of the movement is forced upon the concerned social groups by the threat that the farm laws and, ultimately, the oppressive Hindu fundamentalist government, poses to all of them. The involvement of the different social groups is analysed with a focus on exploitation and oppression along inextricably linked lines of class, caste, ethnicity and gender. This also includes a focus on the ongoing structural change in Indian agriculture and – at least as importantly – in the Indian economy at large. It is shown that this has exacerbated their predicament but also enabled the broad alliance. The article concludes that there are a number of different reasons why the farm laws struggle is important for exploited and oppressed groups as well as for capitalist farmers, and that an important progressive aspect is its potential to disrupt the present government’s political oppression well beyond the agricultural sector. However, there is little evidence that the broad-based unity will persist beyond the farm laws struggle, as the alliance is crosscut by exploitation and oppression between its constituent parts, based on class, caste, ethnicity and gender.*

In the autumn of 2020, farmers in India embarked on the largest and most sustained agrarian protests since the 1950s, protests that at the time of writing (September 2021) are still ongoing. The farmers’ action started in Punjab in August 2020 and spread to other states across North India and beyond. In late November, farmers marched on the capital Delhi. They were stopped at the borders of the metropolis where they then established large and still ongoing protest camps. Large swathes of the countryside, especially in the northern states of Punjab, Haryana and western Uttar Pradesh (UP), are still in open revolt against the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) central government on issues raised by the farmers.

The focus of the struggle is three new farm laws that were pushed through parliament in 2020. The laws potentially have far-reaching implications for other sections of society as well, and many social groups and organisations, including the mainly landless Dalits (ex-untouchable castes) who normally do not see eye-to-eye with landowning farmers, have been supporting the struggle. It has become an important part of a fight against India’s autocratic Hindu fundamentalist government.

The aim of the article is to understand why and how such a broad alliance has become possible, and what the implications of this are for future agrarian and wider social relations and politics in India. This is done through an analysis of the farm laws struggle from a class-caste perspective. The view here is that class and oppression based on caste, race, ethnicity and gender are inextricably linked (see e.g., Bourgois (1988), Camfield (2016), Cox 1970 [1948], Du Bois 1998 [1935], Hall (1986), McNally (2015), Robinson 2021 [1983], as discussed in Lerche and Shah (2018)). We must therefore ask not only which classes lead and are involved in the ongoing protests, but also which castes, ethnic groups and genders?[[1]](#footnote-1) How have they been able to achieve the support of other social groups? Which social groups are against the agitation? Which social groups will benefit from these struggles, and in what ways? The article also analyses underlying structural changes within agriculture and the wider economy as, it is argued, these changes have enabled and even pushed the various social groups to join the alliance. These structural changes include both on-going developments in agriculture along a trajectory that differs from a ‘classic’ agrarian transition, and, at least as importantly, adverse economic and political changes outside agriculture.

Analysing the different groups and interests involved leads to an assessment of the prospects and consequences of the struggle. The article concludes that while the farm laws struggle is indeed politically progressive, there is little space for the radical interests of exploited and oppressed classes and groups who are part of the present movement to shape its future. In this assessment it differs from those that do not consider contradictory class etc. interests within the movement, such as analyses from a populist perspective that would see the struggle as a conflict between the Indian countryside and global agribusiness, or possibly even against global capitalism (e.g., Patnaik 2020, RUPE 2020).

The article will proceed by outlining the farm laws and the social groups taking part in the struggle against them from a class and caste perspective. Other groups such as Adivasis (India’s indigenous population) and Muslims will be considered briefly when relevant for the main objectives of the paper, and the gendered character of the struggle will be discussed. It will then move on to the analysis of the impact of certain structural changes leading up to the conflict. The concluding section, as indicated, will discuss political aspects of the farm laws movement and what the future may hold for it and some of the social groups involved.

***The Farm Laws and Rural Class and Caste Relations***

The farm laws have made it abundantly clear to farmers that they matter very little to the government. Not for the first time has the BJP-led government sided with big corporate capital instead. While it pays lip service to competitive markets, it is steeped in crony capitalism. Multi-billionaires, big trading houses and agribusinesses with close connections to the government, such as the Adani and the Ambani groups, are expected by many to be the beneficiaries from the opening up of the agricultural sector to corporate capital (Bloomberg 2021).

The antagonism of farmers towards the BJP government is a major political change that has enabled the protests. It has certainly been a drastic shift for the Jat farmers of North India who are one of the two groups of farmers central to the protests.[[2]](#footnote-2) The Jats have formed a stable and vocal vote bank for the BJP for 20 years or more, wooed by the BJP’s anti-Muslim propaganda and its ability to form a bulwark against Dalit political influence. In fact, it is no more that 8 years since the BJP instigated a Jat-led pogrom against Muslims in west UP’s Muzaffarnagar district, involving 66 killings and leading to an exodus of Muslims from the rural parts of the district (Ramakumar 2017). That has all changed.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Central to the struggle is the farmers’ belief that the three farm laws will strip away the last remnants of government support to the agricultural sector. The laws will promote private agrarian produce markets at the cost of the existing system of government regulated markets (*mandi*s) for the main crops. The farmers expect that this will lead to the termination of the existing system of fixed Minimum Support Prices (MSP) (Agarwal 2020). The state currently procures wheat, paddy, cotton and 19 other crops through the regulated markets at government fixed minimum prices, and for sugarcane it sets the procurement price at the sugar mills.

That said, only 15-25% of the farmers benefit from the system. This may not sound like much but it is a good deal more than what the Indian government claims (Damodaran 2020).[[4]](#footnote-4) Regional differences in the coverage may also explain why the protests against the farm laws are most vociferous in (though not limited to) the northern states.[[5]](#footnote-5) A number of other demands and issues, such as the extension of government procurement to more regions, loan waivers, and the proper implementation of the Forest Rights Act, are included in these protests (Pal 2021; Trivedi, 2021).

In class terms, the MSPs benefit all farmers. While there is a bias towards large farmers, with a higher proportion of this numerically relatively small group selling at MSP prices, more than half of all beneficiaries are small and marginal farmers (Gupta et al. 2021). MSP-based procurement also forms the basis of India’s largest anti-poverty programme, the Public Distribution System (PDS) of subsidised grains, sugar, cooking oil, etc. via so-called Fair Price Shops across Indian villages and towns (Dhar 2020). At present an estimated 66% of the population benefits from this system (Khera and Somanchi 2020). This could well be threatened by the farm laws, with significant consequences for poor farmers and agricultural labourers (Rajalakshmi 2021).

The farm laws will also open up large-scale trading and storing of agricultural produce to large trading houses and agribusiness, and further enable contract farming, allowing big business to dominate the sector (Dhar 2020). In addition to the farmers, landless labourers’ organisations are against this as they expect it to result in fewer, larger and more mechanized farmers requiring less labour (Yadav 2020). In short, the farm laws could well be the end-game for an agricultural sector which has not yet been fully penetrated by non-farming capital, while also potentially threatening existing (already insufficient) pro-poor food policies.

Such is the basis for the broad coalition that has emerged against the farm laws. But the analysis cannot end there. Moving on to a more detailed analysis of class, caste and gender in the countryside and beyond, we start with rural class relations. Landowners now only constitute a little more than half of rural households; the rest do not own any agricultural land (see below). Of the landed households, it is generally accepted that a relatively small group of capitalist farmers accumulate through farming, employ agricultural wage workers and also tend to invest and accumulate outside of agriculture (Lerche 2015, Ramachandran 2011).[[6]](#footnote-6) By far, most farmers are petty commodity producers, combining capital and labour within their households: they own land, tools and machinery, and their agricultural work is done primarily by members of the household. Many petty commodity producers may also employ wage labour for peak seasons such as harvesting. At the same time, work incomes from outside of farming are essential, especially for the majority of farmers that possess less than one hectare. Their most important income source is, in fact, wage labour (in 2016-17) (NABARD: 2018: 28). While much of their identity, and their standing in the community, is tied to landownership they are, in class terms, petty commodity producers-cum-labourers – in short, farmer-labourers – who combine wage labour with the tilling of a small plot of land.[[7]](#footnote-7) The different classes of farmers and farmer-labourers have different class interests in many respects, but, when it comes to the farm laws, they are united by the fact that they all stand to lose.

The quantification of these classes is more nebulous. Using the standard indicator of land sizes, most are mini-landowners. In 2015-16, according to the National Family Health Survey (NFHS),[[8]](#footnote-8) 58 per cent[[9]](#footnote-9) of all farming households operated less than one hectare of land and altogether 78 per cent operated less than two hectares. However, in economic terms it is the small group of large landowners (8 per cent) that is more important as they own more than half of all agricultural land – nearly twice as much as the mini-farmers (Rawal and V Bansal 2021:10).[[10]](#footnote-10) While there is not a 1:1 relationship between size and social class this does provide an indication of the continued class divisions among farmers.

Moving on from farmers to the landless rural population, surviving through agricultural and non-agricultural wage labour, the numerical significance of this class should be emphasised. The NFHS data shows that 47 per cent of all rural households own no agricultural land,[[11]](#footnote-11) which makes this group larger even than the group of mini-farmers owning less than 2 hectares.[[12]](#footnote-12)

It is thus clear that the *numerically* dominant classes in the countryside are labourers without agricultural land, petty commodity producing farmers and farmers-labourers. The data show that these classes have become more numerically dominant in the last 30 years. However, in spite of this, the small class of large capitalist farmers is still *economically* significant due to their dominance of agricultural land and their ability to accumulate from outside of agriculture as well.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Moreover, while the class interests of labour and petty commodity producers-cum-labourers are overlapping in some narrow economic respects, class relations and oppression along lines of caste and ethnicity are inextricably linked. The 18.5 per cent of the rural population belonging to the predominant landless Dalit castes[[14]](#footnote-14) forms the core of the class-caste of oppressed agricultural labourers. The interests of the Dalit rural population are in general quite different from, and opposed to, those of the landed farming castes (Lerche and Shah 2018). Farmers from dominant farming groups--in West UP, Haryana and Punjab these are mainly Jats (Hindu as well as Sikh), but also other castes such as Yadavs and Thakurs--oppress and exploit local Dalits as well as mainly Dalit, Adivasi and OBC[[15]](#footnote-15) seasonal migrant workers from Bihar and Jharkhand. For example, in Punjab, in addition to ongoing struggles between Dalits and the dominant Jat Sikhs over land (Singh 2017), farmers even sought to increase the exploitation of agricultural labourers during the Covid pandemic by using their caste *panchayats* (traditional caste councils) to decree that harvesting wages would be reduced (Kaur Tur 2020). Caste-based atrocities also continue to increase (IDSN News, n.d.).

Given the class-caste differences and antagonistic relations in the countryside, it is perhaps surprising that the present farm law struggles have cross-class and cross-caste backing. The big capitalist farmers, e.g. from the agriculturally developed Punjab where the protest began, were involved from the start. Basu (2021) suggests that they joined the action because the threatened entry of corporate businesses would challenge their accumulation from large-scale farming and trade. But, for reasons stated above, all farmers have a strong interest in repealing the farm laws and small farmers are very active in the protests too, as reported from North, West and Central India. This include also Adivasi (indigenous peoples) farmers from central India (Basu 2021, Yadav 2020, Trivedi 2021, Pal 2021).

Moreover, agricultural labour and Dalit left-wing mainly rural or small town organisations in West UP and Punjab have come out strongly in support of the struggle. The Dalit ‘Bhim Army’ group reinforced the Bharatiya Kisan Union (BKU) action at the outskirts of Delhi at a crucial point in time, and other active Dalit organisations include the Punjab based Zameen Prapti Sangharsh Committee (ZPSC) and the Punjab Khet Mazdoor Union. They seek to represent the interests of both urban and rural Dalit labouring classes. They argue that corporate, mechanised agriculture will lead to major job losses for agricultural labour and highlight the potentially disastrous consequences of the farm laws for the provisioning of cheap food through the PDS (Rajalakshmi 2021, Yadav 2020). They also welcome the anti-BJP focus of the struggle. Farmer activists, on their part, now emphasise the unity between farmers and Dalits. For example, the Jat BKU leader Rakesh Tikait uses the slogan ‘Jai Bhim, Jai Ram’ in his speeches, combining the greeting used by politicised Dalits with the standard caste-Hindu greeting, to emphasise that winning the struggle involves unity across the caste divide, and to symbolically recognise Dalits as an equal partner in the struggle.[[16]](#footnote-16)

The Dalit – farmer collaboration goes beyond the lip service the BKU paid to the unity between farmers and agricultural labourers and Dalits in the 1980s (Hasan 1989). In fact, back then Jats even used the BKU strength to increase their dominance over Dalits (Lerche 1995). However, the present farm laws struggle continues to be silent on the oppression and exploitation of Dalits by upper caste farmers. The protests are not engaging with concerns such as higher wages for agricultural workers; land reforms for the Dalits, by way of redistributing land now belonging to the landed castes; or the increase in violence and atrocities against Dalits. They ignore the structural class-caste differences in the countryside. The present – important – symbolic recognition of Dalits may well not continue beyond this specific struggle. It is therefore perhaps unsurprising that local spontaneous support amongst ordinary Dalits appears to be less widespread, judging from what can be gleaned from the existing sources (Scroll Staff 2020, S. Singh 2021).

The protest movement has also successfully reached out to non-agrarian groups, especially labour unions. It is rare in India that farmers and labour organisations act together. Nevertheless, they (and the main anti-BJP political parties) coordinated a country-wide general strike for labour and livelihoods rights in support of the protest against the farm laws on 26th November 2020. This marked the start of a farmers’ protest march on Delhi and led to the on-going protest camps at the edge of the capital. However, this does not represent an encompassing farmer – labour alliance as the labour unions represent only the minority of labourers who work as formal labour in the organised sector. But the farmers have also allied in a more ad hoc manner with local movements of informalised labour. These solidarity links have worked both ways. For example, when the Dalit labour rights activist Nodeep Kaur was arrested during a strike in support of informal workers in a nearby shoe factory, she was eventually freed thanks to the farmers’ movement highlighting her case and attracting a high level of international solidarity (Pandey 2021).

The class, caste and gendered analyses now brings us to the role of women in the protests. Nodeep Kaur is a labour activist, a Dalit – and a woman. Her high profile reflects the prominence of women in the protests, with significant more women taking part compared to earlier farmers’ actions (Salam 2020, P. Singh 2021). They are primarily from small farmers’ and Dalit rural labourers’ households, many of them mobilised by radical organisations in Punjab such as BKU- Ekta Ugrahan, and the ZPSC that for long has organised Dalit women’s struggle for land.[[17]](#footnote-17) Many are reported to have joined due to concerns over the farm laws’ impact on the livelihood of their household, or due to their economic hardship during the pandemic lockdown, and they have had a significant profile on speaking platforms in the protests. There is no doubt that their participation strengthens the protests (Salam 2020, Toor 2020)) but there is little indication that they have had much impact on its objectives or overall trajectory. From a gender perspective it is positive that their participation in the struggle may have led to the ‘normalisation’ of women’s presence in ‘political space’ (Toor 2020) but it remains to be seen if their involvement will have wider emancipatory impacts.

The social basis of the current protests outlined above takes us towards an understanding of the cross-class character of the movement, including its internal tensions. This can be further sharpened through a comparison with the farmers’ movements of the late 1980s and early 1990s. Back then, assessments of the movements ranged from a denial of class differences amongst farmers, i.e. a ‘populist’ position, to the branding of the movements as representing big capitalist farmers only (see e.g. the special issue of *Journal of Peasant Studies* 1994). Lindberg’s (1994) position that the movements represented the interests of farmers who were net food sellers, as this group would benefit from its demands for higher prices, while net food buyers would lose out, was influential. However, it overlooked that higher procurement prices (on sugar, wheat) were unlikely to harm poor farmers as they had access, through the Public Distribution System (PDS), to heavily subsidised grains and sugar at prices fixed irrespective of the actual procurement price.[[18]](#footnote-18) This as well as other BKU demands, such as for cheap electricity for irrigation tubewells (commonly used in West UP), thus enabled cross-class farmer unity. But, as importantly, the alliance between petty commodity producers and capitalist farmers based on their position as landowners foreclosed the more radical unity between farmer-labourers and landless rural groups against major landowning farmer-capitalists (as for example a demand for redistributive land reforms might have done). My argument here is in line with Hasan’s (1989) view that the BKU back then represented the interests of the rich and middle peasants while also being able to mobilise the ‘peasant majority’. The lesson for an assessment of the present-day farm law movement is that it is not sufficient to look at which classes, castes, ethnic groups and genders take part in the movement, one must also analyse which class-caste interests the movement represents and which interests are swept under the carpet.[[19]](#footnote-19) Analysed in that manner, it is clear that it is interests of the dominant caste farmers that dominate also today’s movement, even if the present alliance has become more broad-based. In order to develop the understanding of this further, the analysis now has to be situated within India’s changing political economy.

***Structural Change, Politics and the Protests***

As the foci of the protests are straightforwardly agrarian it is tempting to look for the reasons for the protest within the agrarian realm only. However, the underlying structural reasons for the protests relate both to the overall trajectory of agrarian development and to the kind of economic development that is taking place outside agriculture.

First, as I have argued elsewhere, in India, the classical ‘agrarian question’, i.e. what Bernstein (1996) labelled the ‘agrarian question of capital’ has been bypassed, at least since India embarked on its neoliberal trajectory in 1991(Lerche 2013). The ideal of an agrarian transition, i.e., capitalist development and capital accumulation within or from agriculture that served as an engine for capitalist development across the economy, driving nascent industrial development (Byres 1986) has not materialised in neo-liberal India.[[20]](#footnote-20) Financialisation instead drives its non-agricultural development (Chandrasekhar 2016), and has resulted in service sector and construction led growth (infrastructure and real estate speculation-driven), as opposed to manufacturing led growth (Basole et al. 2018: 61-62, Ghose 2016). In fact, as evidenced by Damodaran (2008), throughout the 20th century the role of agrarian capital in industrial development was limited to certain parts of India, and since neoliberalisation this link has become even weaker (Damodaran 2008, Lerche 2013, 2015). Agriculture’s economic contribution to the overall economy, measured as GDP contribution, has also shrunk dramatically[[21]](#footnote-21) while the absence of a fast-growing domestic rural market is a major concern for those seeking a domestically oriented industrial growth strategy (Ghose 2016: 120-21).[[22]](#footnote-22) The economic role of farmers in India’s now ‘global’ capitalist development has never been as small as in the present.[[23]](#footnote-23) In the 1980s Bardhan (1984) argued that ‘rich farmers’ were one of the three classes in the ‘dominant coalition’ in India but they no longer hold such structural power - even though they of course still have positions of power, including through voting arithmetic.

Second, in spite of the bypassing of the agrarian question of capital, India has experienced what at first glance looks like another classical agrarian development. As indicated, agriculture is losing its importance over time, economically and as a source of employment. More and more people have shifted out of agriculture. While in 2000, 60 percent of the population worked in agriculture, this has fallen to 43 percent in 2018-19 (Government of India 2020: 55), and the prevalence of very small farmers-cum-labourers has also increased over time. It is several decades since most farmers were able to live off agriculture alone. Landless labourer households have, to an even larger extent, moved out of agricultural wage work, and have at least one foot in the non-agricultural sectors, often as seasonal migrant labourers. Old class categories that saw farmers as agrarian petty commodity producers, separate from and maybe even in opposition to non-agricultural labour, must therefore be replaced with new analytical categories that start out by recognising commonalities and fluidity between petty commodity producers and labourers, while still not conflating them into a seamless whole. One such useful starting point is the category ‘classes of labour’, coined by Bernstein (2007).[[24]](#footnote-24) So, even though many still view themselves as farmers and as landowners, their economic interests, and the areas where they may feel they are being squeezed, now stretch across what used to be an agrarian-non-agrarian divide.

Caste and class are inextricably linked and put their stamp on this trajectory. The jobs that farming caste people get tend to differ from those available to Dalits. Dalits can primarily access informal, insecure, temporary, hardscrabble, often demeaning jobs, e.g. in brick kilns, construction, sanitation and waste, and low-end industrial work. Upper-caste farmer households are better represented in less badly paid, less temporary work, such as skilled and semiskilled work and low-end managerial positions, and more of them work as non-agricultural petty commodity producers / traders, work that is limited to those that have access to at least a small amount of capital.[[25]](#footnote-25) This means that the caste-class differences are maintained outside agriculture and that the different groups are reproduced as different layers of the classes of labour (Shah, Lerche et al. 2018).

But – and this is significant for the farm laws struggle - the move out of agriculture has led to some economic de-linking between Dalits and landowning groups, creating more room for manoeuvre for Dalits and *sometimes* lessened contradictions (see e.g. Lerche 1999; see also Kumar this issue). Often it is Dalit women that are now the main part-time local labourers for the landowners while Dalit men work outside agriculture for most of the year (Shah and Lerche 2020). While the move into non-agricultural sectors has not broken down the difference between Dalit low-end labourers and the farming caste PCP–cum–labourers, their increased separation might have reduced conflicts of interest and increased the potential for alliances between the two groups, muting but not eliminating the contradictions between them.[[26]](#footnote-26)

Third, the fact that the non-agricultural economy does not create jobs fast enough to absorb the agrarian surplus population, and that the jobs on offer are mainly insecure and so meagrely paid that the families of labourers from the countryside still have to remain back home and make a living there, is linked to the neoliberal development that has replaced an actual agrarian transition (Lerche and Shah 2018). The outcome for the classes of labour – ie for those working as agrarian labour, different kinds of non-agrarian labour, agrarian and non-agrarian petty commodity producers, and combinations of all these categories– is dismal. They have benefitted very little from India’s record breaking economic growth which, instead of being pro-poor, was closely linked to increasing inequality. Granted, absolute poverty continued to decrease up until 2011-12,[[27]](#footnote-27) mainly due to the continued slow growth of low-end non-agricultural work, the introduction of the pro-poor National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme in 2005 and a related minor improvement of the bargaining power or rural workers (Chand and Srivastava 2014). However, in the last five years or so, there has been a direct decline in non-agricultural employment for the first time since Independence. Hence farmers as well as labourers are now compelled to stay in agriculture if at all they can, squeezing livelihoods. The fall in non-agricultural low-end employment is likely to have led to a fall in living standards amongst rural petty commodity producers and labourers (Kannan and Raveendran 2019). Even the dominant farming caste found it harder to get into the better-paid jobs they used to have access to. The covid pandemic has added to this. An abruptly enforced lockdown from late March 2020 contributed to non-agricultural seasonal migration falling off a cliff, forcing people back to doing whatever they could in agriculture: in 2019-20 the proportion of the population working in agriculture increased for the first time since records began (Jha and Kishore 2021). Covid related poverty is significant, with an estimated additional 75 million people falling below the $ 2 poverty line in 2020 (Kochhar 2021).

Within agriculture it is well documented that small and marginal farmers have experienced significant hardship from the late 1990s onwards, as witnessed for example by the extreme of farmers’ suicides. Compared to the times of greater government support to the agricultural sector, before 1991, small farmers have clearly lost out compared to other groups. They – as well as informalised labourers, Dalits, Adivasis etc. – have been on the wrong side of the increasing inequality gap in India.[[28]](#footnote-28)

Farmers combining agrarian petty commodity production and non-agricultural labour are now squeezed on both fronts. While small farmers today are in a worse position *within* agriculture compared to a generation ago, the main negative change in the years immediately leading up to the farm laws protests was not an abrupt fall in the already low agricultural income, but the fall in non-agricultural wage labour. While a deep-felt identity as ‘farmers’ might lead to a focus on improving their lot as farmers, their class position across the agrarian divide was, in fact, reflected in the protest actions that farming groups undertook in the years leading up to the farm laws struggle. Some protests focused on non-agrarian issues. For example, in 2016, dominant caste Jat groups, especially in the northern state of Haryana, undertook a mass non-agrarian protest, demanding inclusion in affirmative action programmes providing better access to public sector higher education and permanent jobs (Deshpande and Ramachandran 2017). But other protest actions were agrarian, most notably the 2018 and 2019 ‘Kisan [Farmers] Long March’ to Mumbai that included a significant proportion of small Adivasi farmers amongst its tens of thousands participants, demanding a set of reforms to improve the economic conditions for farmers, including the proper implementation of laws protecting Adivasi lands (Prashad 2018).

In addition to these structural changes, the general political context also matters. The autocratic Hindu fundamentalist government has for several years enjoyed significant support from practically all social groups, castes, and ethnic groups.[[29]](#footnote-29) The exceptions were Muslims who have been at the receiving end of extreme oppression, anti-Muslim legislation and hate crimes; and Dalit and Adivasi political activists, labour activists and defenders of human rights and freedoms, many of whom are now behind bars on trumped-up charges (Teltumbde 2020, Sundar 2020). The anti-farm laws movement is the strongest anti-government alliance for long and this no doubt is also a significant reason for the strong involvement of these groups and activists in the movement. In this sense also, there is more to the farm laws protests than agriculture.

***Concluding remarks: the wide participation in the protest, and beyond***

The structural changes outlined above form the background for the broad coalition against the farm laws. For decades most farmers have combined agrarian petty commodity production and non-agricultural labour but are now squeezed on both fronts. In addition to the continued slow decrease in land-holding sizes, their move out of agriculture has been abruptly halted and, for now at least, even reversed. This exacerbates the seriousness of the threat that the farm laws pose to agrarian livelihoods and its challenge to the profits of capitalist farmers at a time when non-agricultural livelihoods and accumulation opportunities are drying out for them. While the farmers of North India and those other parts of India where the government procurement system is in place are likely to be hardest hit, other farmers will also feel the heat if the last protection against large scale merchant and agribusiness capital falls. Alliances with Dalit organisations have also become possible, in part because of the less all-encompassing nature of farmers’ dominance over rural Dalits, in part because of the long-term interests of Dalit rural workers against the farm laws. The partial move into non-agricultural work of farmers and agricultural labourers also facilitates an alliance with formal sector workers as well as informalised labour; and the wholesale attack by the BJP on human rights and labour rights, and minority groups, means that progressive movements and activists across society have a common interest in fighting the BJP government.

Political action does not always follow lines of structural class interests. The success in establishing wide alliances and broad-based participation in the protest, while facilitated by the structural political interests outlined, is also based on the ability and political perspectives of the organisations involved in struggle. That, again, relates to the realisation of what they are up against. The government is firmly on the side of finance capital, global and national agribusiness and merchant capital, and is not concerned with the interests of the farmers, be they capitalists or PCPs. The farmers’ realisation of this may have taken a while to crystallise but this is abundantly clear now. The strategy of the farmers’ movement is guided by the knowledge that, in order to win, it is crucial to have as wide a unity as possible.

They have built such broad alliances exceptionally well. Their achievement of near-total unity in Punjab across class and caste divides is described by Jodhka in this issue. In West UP – which is the focus of Kumar’s contribution in this issue -, the BKU used to be a force to reckon with in the late 1980s. In the 2000s it had become a pale shadow of itself but in January 2021 it turned impending defeat at its protest camp at the Delhi border into a rallying cry which was heeded across West UP, against a government riding roughshod over the Jats’ pride as farmers and over the BKU (Lerche 2021). It has proceeded to mobilise the farmers through Kisan *Mahapanchayats* (large scale farmers’ grassroots meetings), which in the Jat areas draw on the Jat clan organisations (*khap panchayats*) but involve all farmers, including Muslims; it has helped instigate similar farmers’ gatherings across most of India, in many cases leading to social boycotts of BJP politicians only to be lifted when the farm laws are rescinded (Mahaprashasta 2021, M. Singh 2021). The BKU has also re-built bridges to Muslim farmers, thus rejecting the anti-Muslim strategy of the BJP that they supported during the 2000s. Their repeated statements of Dalits and Jats being equal is also unprecedented, and has involved the BKU leadership going against caste and religion-related prejudices prevalent among many Jat farmers.

Farmers’ movements in central and western India had, in fact, shown how to build broad alliances some years earlier. Since 2014 the All India Kisan Sabha, affiliated with the Communist Party of India (Marxist), has pursued such a broad-based and progressive agenda, leading to the formation of the All India Kisan Sangharsh Coordination Committee (AIKSCC) in 2017 and the successful 2018 and 2019 farmers’ march on Mumbai. Not only did the AIKSCC prioritise land rights issues of Adivasis and small farmers, they also consciously showed solidarity against atrocities against Dalits and defended Dalit and workers’ rights. Together with the Punjab farmers’ organisations they were central to the formation of the leadership of the farm law protests, the Samyukt Kisan Morcha. This has increased the chance for the struggle being successful, if not now then at the ballot box at the next election.

Maintaining Hasan’s (1989) analytical distinction between the social groups participating in a movement and the class interests the movement represents, the perspective of the present movement could be seen as a defence of the agrarian status quo and of the significant, pro-poor, cheap food programme, against the interests of corporate and merchant capital. This is an important, cross-class, caste, ethnic and gender – based defensive struggle. However, the most radical perspective of the movement lies, perhaps, in its likewise broad-based *political* challenge to the increasingly repressive BJP government, the toppling of which is now an absolute condition for progressive change in India.

There is less reason to believe that this protest will also usher in enduring popular alliances across the caste-class divide, between Dalit labourers and petty commodity producers as well as agrarian capitalists from farming castes. For most farmers, this is a contingent phase, a phase of alliance between groups that right now have interests that are sufficiently aligned for them to take action together, but in other ways are opposed to each other. When this struggle is over, one should not expect all farmers to stand up for demands by Dalits, Muslims, informal workers, let alone agricultural labourers. This alliance will not stop future atrocities against Dalits, the ignoring of their rights by caste Hindus and possibly also by future governments of more mainstream persuasion than that of the BJP, or the on-going class struggle between farmers and their Dalit and Adivasi agricultural labourers. Likewise concerning gender relations: the activism of the women might spur an ability to stand up for other gender issues, but this is likely to be tempered both by the fact that their activism presently is grounded in household based as opposed to gender based concerns, and by the strength of the patriarchal structures that they are up against.

The lessons from the past also point to dominant caste farmers foregrounding their own interests over continued broad-based alliances. For example, the fight for land reforms at the time of Independence left Dalits high and dry while tenants from the main farming castes were much more successful; the farmers’ movements of the 1980s such as the BKU strengthened the farmers’ hold over the Dalits (Lerche 1995); and the routine attacks on Dalit activists by the dominant farming communities across India are still ongoing (Ara 2020). Granted, the partial move out of agriculture has weakened the local oppression of Dalits and thereby enabled local alliances, but the absence of extreme oppression is not the same as resolving class and caste based contradictions. Male dominant caste farmers are firmly in the driving seat in the present alliance and it would be naïve to think that they would stick their necks out for the other groups when this particular struggle is over. That, though, doesn’t make this particular, broad-based, struggle less important.

**References**

Ara, I. 2020. “Hathras Gang-Rape and Murder Case: A Timeline.” *The Wire* 28/10/2020 <https://thewire.in/women/hathras-gang-rape-and-murder-case-a-timeline>

Agarwal, K. 2020. “India's Farm Protests: A Basic Guide to the Issues at Stake.” *The Wire* 11/12/2020 <https://thewire.in/agriculture/indias-farmers-protests-guide-issues-at-stake-reforms-laws-msp>

Bardhan, P. 1984. *The Political Economy of Development in India.* Oxford: Basil Blackwell. viii, 118 pp.

Basole, A., A. Jayadev, A. Shrivastava, R. Abraham. 2018. *The State of Working India 2018*. Bangaluru: Azam Premji University. <https://cse.azimpremjiuniversity.edu.in/state-of-working-india/swi-2018/>

Basu, R. 2021. “The Threat of Corporate Interests Is a Key Unifying Factor in the Farmer Protests.” *The Wire* 21/01/2021 <https://thewire.in/agriculture/farmers-protests-agriculture-laws-corporate-interests>

Bernstein, H. 2007. “Capital and Labour From Centre to Margins.” *Keynote address at living on the margins: vulnerability, exclusion and the state in the informal economy conference*, Isandla Institute, Cape Town, 26–28 March.

Bernstein, Henry, 1996. “Agrarian Questions Then and Now.” *Journal of Peasant Studies* 24(1–2): 22–59.

Bloomberg. 2021. “Why Indian billionaires Mukesh Ambani and Gautam Adani were targeted in protests over Modi’s farm laws.” *South China Morning Post* 17/01/2021 <https://www.scmp.com/news/asia/south-asia/article/3118078/why-indias-mukesh-ambani-and-gautam-adani-were-targeted>

Bourgois, P. 1988. “Conjugated Oppression: Class and Ethnicity among Guaymi and Kuna Banana Workers.” *American Ethnologist* 15 (2): 328–348.

Byres, T. J. [1996](#_bookmark3). *Capitalism From Above and Capitalism From Below. An Essay in Comparative Political Economy*. London: Macmillan.

Camfield, D. [2016](#_bookmark4). “Elements of a Historical-Materialist Theory of Racism.” *Historical Materialism* 24 (1): 31–70.

Chand, R. and SK Srivastava. 2014. “Changes in the rural labour market and their implications for agriculture.” *Economic and Political Weekly* 49 (10): 47-54.

Chandrasekhar, C.P. 2016. “Finance Capital and the Nature of Capitalism in India Today.” *Macroscan* 25/11/2016 <https://macroscan.org/anl/nov16/anl25112016Finance_Capital.htm>

Cox, O. C. [1970 [1948]](#_bookmark5). *Caste, Class, and Race. A Study in Social Dynamics*. New York: Monthly Review Press.

Damodaran, H. 2020. “Explained: Why it’s an underestimate to say only 6% farmers benefit from MSP.” *Indian Express* 06/10/2020 <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/explained-why-its-an-underestimate-to-say-only-6-farmers-benefit-from-msp-6704397/>

Damodaran, H. 2008. *India’s New Capitalists: Caste, Business, and Industry in a*

*Modern Nation*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Data.gov.in. n.d. *GDP of India and major Sectors of Economy, Share of each sector to GDP and Growth rate of GDP and other sectors of economy 1951-52 onward.* Niti Aayog. <https://data.gov.in/catalog/gdp-india-and-major-sectors-economy-share-each-sector-gdp-and-growth-rate-gdp-and-other?filters%5Bfield_catalog_reference%5D=88141&format=json&offset=0&limit=6&sort%5Bcreated%5D=desc>

Deshpande, A. and R. Ramachandran. 2017. “Dominant or Backward? Political Economy of Demand for Quotas by Jats, Patels, and Marathas.” *Economic and Political Weekly* 52 (19).

Dhar, B., 2020. “Protesting 'Agri Reform': Why Do Farmers Feel the Deck Is Stacked Against Them?” *The Wire* 14/12/2020 <https://thewire.in/agriculture/agri-reform-farmers-protest-msp-pds-contract-farming>

Du Bois, W. E. B. [1998 [1935]](#_bookmark6). *Black Reconstruction in America 1860*–*1880*. New York: The Free Press.

Government of India. 2020. Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) June 2018- June 2019. Annual Report. <http://mospi.nic.in/download-reports>

Ghose, A.K. 2016. *India Employment Report 2016. Challenges and the Imperative of Manufacturing-Led Growth.* New Delhi: Institute for Human Development and Oxford University Press. http://www.ihdindia.org › books › IEG\_2016\_ES

Gupta, D. 1997. *Rivalry and Brotherhood: Politics in the Life of Farmers in Northern India.* Delhi: Oxford University Press, pp 218.

Gupta, P., R. Khera, S. Narayanan. 2021. “Minimum support prices in India: distilling the facts.” *Review of Agrarian Studies* 11(1) *http://ras.org.in/minimum\_support\_prices\_in\_india*

Hall, S. [1986](#_bookmark6). “Gramsci’s Relevance for the Study of Race and Ethnicity.” *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 10 (5): 5–27.

Hasan Z. 1989. “Self-Serving Guardians. Formation and Strategy of the Bhartiya Kisan Union.” *Economic and Political Weekly* 24(48): 2663-65 & 2667-70.

IDSN News. n.d. *Surge in atrocities against Dalits and Adivasis under COVID-19 lockdown*

<https://idsn.org/surge-in-atrocities-against-dalits-and-adivasis-under-covid-19-lockdown-in-india-reported/>

Jha, A. and R. Kishore. 2021. “How the pandemic and lockdown have hit labour markets.” *Hindustan Times* 28/07/2021. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/how-the-pandemic-and-lockdown-have-hit-labour-markets-101627421254987.html>

Journal of Peasant Studies. 1994. Special issue: New Farmers' Movements in India. With preface by T Byres and introduction by T Brass. *Journal of Peasant Studies* 21(3-4).

Kancharla, B. 2020. “Data: MSP is helping, but only the Rice & Wheat growing farmers from a few states.” *Factly* 05/10/2020 <https://factly.in/data-msp-is-helping-but-only-the-rice-wheat-growing-farmers-from-a-few-states/>

Kannan, K.P. and G. Raveendran. 2019. “From Jobless to Job-loss Growth. Gainers and Losers during 2012–18.” *Economic and Political Weekly* 54 (44): 38-44.

Karat, B. 2015. “The Criminal Approach of the Shanta Kumar Committee Report.” *People’s Democracy* 08/02/2015 <https://peoplesdemocracy.in/2015/0208_pd/criminal-approach-shanta-kumar-committee-report>

Kaur Tur, J. 2020. “COVID-19: Dominant-caste panchayats in Punjab pass resolutions to reduce labour wages.” *The Caravan* 18/06/2020 <https://caravanmagazine.in/labour/covid19-dominant-caste-panchayats-in-punjab-pass-resolutions-to-reduce-labour-wages>

Khera, R. and A. Somanchi. 2020. “A review of the coverage of PDS.” *Ideas for India* 19/08/2020 <https://www.ideasforindia.in/topics/poverty-inequality/a-review-of-the-coverage-of-pds.html>

Kochhar, R. 2021. In the pandemic, India's middle class shrinks and poverty spreads while China sees smaller changes’, India's middle class shrinks amid COVID-19 as China sees less change. Pew Research Center: Washington D.C. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/03/18/in-the-pandemic-indias-middle-class-shrinks-and-poverty-spreads-while-china-sees-smaller-changes/>

Lerche, J. and A. Shah. 2018. “Conjugated Oppression under Contemporary Capitalism: Class Relations, Social Oppression and Agrarian Change in India.” *Journal of Peasant Studies* 45(5-6): 927-949.

Lerche, J. 2015. “Regional patterns of agrarian accumulation in India.” In J. Heyer and B. Harriss-White (eds.), *Indian Capitalism in Development,* London: Routledge pp. 46-65.

Lerche, J. 2013. “The Agrarian Question in Neoliberal India: Agrarian Transition Bypassed?” *Journal of Agrarian Change* 13(3): 382–404.

Lerche, J. 2010. “From ‘Rural Labour’ to ‘Classes of Labour’: Class Fragmentation, Caste and Class Struggle at the Bottom of the Indian Labour Hierarchy.” Harriss-White, B. and J. Heyer (eds.) 2010, *The Comparative Political Economy of Development. Africa and South Asia.* London: Routledge, pp 66-87.

Lerche, J. 1999. “Politics of the Poor: Agricultural Labourers and Political Transformations in Uttar Pradesh.” *Journal of Peasant Studies* 26(2/3):182-243.

Lerche, J. 1995. “Is Bonded Labour a Bound category? Reconceptualising Agrarian Conflict in India.” *Journal of Peasant Studies* 22(3): 484-515.

Lindberg, S. 1994. “New farmers’ movements in India as structural response and collective identity formation: The cases of the Shetkari Sanghatana and the BKU.” *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 21 (3-4): 95-125.

[Mahaprashasta](https://thewire.in/author/ajoy-ashirwad-mahaprashasta), A.A. 2021. “With Growing Trust Deficit for Modi Govt, Will Opposition Gain From the Kisan Mahapanchayat Model?” *The Wire* 11/02/2021 <https://thewire.in/politics/kisan-mahapanchayat-opposition-parties-modi-farmers-movement-bjp-congress>

McNally, D. 2015. “The Dialectics of Unity and Difference in the Constitution of Wage-Labour: On Internal Relations and Working-Class Formation.” *Capital & Class* 39 (1): 131–146.

NABARD. 2018. *NABARD All India Rural Financial Inclusion Survey*. Mumbai: National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development.

Pal, S. 2021. “How Farm Laws Constitute an Attack on Adivasis.” *Newsclick* 31/02/2021 <https://www.newsclick.in/How-Farm-Laws-Constitute-Attack-Adivasis>

Pandey, G. 2021. “Nodeep Kaur: The jailed activist Meena Harris tweeted about”. *BBC News* 17/02/2021 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-india-56071706>

Patnaik, U. 2020. “The Global Angle to the Farmer Protests”. *The Hindu* 30/12/2020 <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/the-global-angle-to-the-farmer-protests/article33447976.ece>

Pattenden, J. and G. Bansal, 2021. “A New Class Alliance in the Indian Countryside? From New Farmers’ Movements to the 2020 Protest Wave.” *Economic and Political Weekly* 56 (26-27): 22-29.

Pattenden, J. 2016. *Labour, State and Society in Rural India: A Class-Relational Approach*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Prashad, V. (ed). 2018. *The Kisan Long March in Maharashtra*. New Delhi: Left Words Books. Pp. 63. <https://ruralindiaonline.org/en/library/resource/the-kisan-long-march-in-maharashtra/>

Rajalakshmi, T.K. 2021. “Lachhman Sewewala: 'Under the *farm laws*, the *farmer* will lose his land and we will lose the *PDS*'.” *Frontline* 12/2/2021.

Ramachandran, V.K., 2011. “The State of Agrarian Relations in India Today.” *The Marxist* 27(1–2): 51–89. <http://www.cpim.org/marxist/201101-agrarian-relations-vkr.pdf>

Ramakumar, R. 2017. “Jats, Khaps and Riots: Communal Politics and the Bharatiya Kisan Union in Northern India.” *Journal of Agrarian Change*, 17 (1): 22– 42.

Rawal, V. and V. Bansal. 2021. “The Land Question in Contemporary Rural India”. *SSER Monograph* 21/2 New Delhi: Society for Social and Economic Research, 2021.

Rawal, V. 2008. “Ownership Holdings of Land in Rural India: Putting the Record Straight.” Economic and Political Weekly 43(10): 43–47.

Robinson, C. J. 2021 [1983]. Black Marxism: the making of the Black radical tradition. 3rd edition. Penguin Classics. Pp. 436+ xxxiii.

RUPE. 2020. Crisis and Predation. India, Covid-19 and Global Finance. Gurgaon: Three Essays Collective [Originally published by Monthly Press].

Salam, Z. 2020. “'We Have to Look After Our Homes as Well as the Movement': Women at Farmers' Protest.” The Wire 06/12/2020 <https://thewire.in/agriculture/women-farmers-protest-dilli-challo>

Sawhney. N. S. 2021. “One or Two Things About Rakesh Tikait.” *Raiot* 31/01/2021. <https://raiot.in/one-or-two-things-about-rakesh-tikait/>

Scroll Staff. 2020. “Bhim Army chief prevented from joining farmers’ protests, placed under house arrest.” Scroll.in 08/12/2020 <https://scroll.in/latest/980652/bhim-army-chief-prevented-from-joining-farmers-protests-placed-under-house-arrest>

Shah, A., J. Lerche, R. Axelby, D. Benbabaali, B. Donegan, J. Raj and V. Thakur. 2018. *Ground Down by Growth. Tribe, Caste, Class and Inequality in Twenty-first-century India.* London: Pluto and New Delhi: OUP. 281pp.

Shah, A. and J. Lerche. 2020. “Migration and the Invisible Economies of Care: Production, Social Reproduction and Seasonal Migrant Labour in India.” Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers 45: 719– 734.

Singh, M. 2021. “'Supporting BJP My Biggest Mistake': BKU's Naresh Tikait at Munderwa Mahapanchayat.” The Wire 27/02/2021 <https://thewire.in/agriculture/bharatiya-kisan-union-naresh-tikait-bjp-mahapanchayat>

Singh, N. 2017. “Writing Dalit women in political economy of agrarian crisis and resistance in Punjab.” *Sikh Formations* 13:1-2, 30-47 DOI: [10.1080/17448727.2016.1147180](https://doi.org/10.1080/17448727.2016.1147180)

Singh, P. 2021. “Farmers' Protest Once Again Brought to Fore the Power of Women in Mass Mobilisations.” The Wire 08/03/2021 <https://thewire.in/women/farmers-protest-once-again-brought-to-fore-the-power-of-women-in-mass-mobilisations>

Singh, S. 2021. “‘We Are One’: Why Punjab’s Landless Dalits are Standing with Protesting Farmers.” The Wire 07/01/2021 <https://thewire.in/caste/punjab-landless-dalit-farmers-protest>

Sinha, S., 2020. “Betting on Potatoes: Accumulation in Times of Agrarian Crisis in Punjab, India.” *Development and Change* 51(6): 1533-1554.

Srinivas, M.N. 1966. *Social Change in Modern India*. University of California Press: Berkeley and Los Angeles, and Cambridge University Press: London. Pp. xv + 194.

Statista. 2021. *India: Distribution of the workforce across economic sectors from 2010 to 2020* <https://www.statista.com/statistics/271320/distribution-of-the-workforce-across-economic-sectors-in-india/>

Sundar, N. 2020. “India’s Unofficial Emergency.” In Vormann, B. and M. Weinman (eds.), *The Emergence of Illiberalism. Understanding a Global Phenomenon.* London and New York: Routledge. Pp. 272.

Teltumbde, A. 2020. *Dalits. Past, Present and Future*. 2nd edition. London and New York: Routledge. Pp. 208.

Toor, S. 2020. “Between debt and landlessness, Punjab’s protesting women assert fight for rights.” *Caravan* 13/12/2020 <https://caravanmagazine.in/commentary/farmers-protests-women-punjab-singhu-tikri-delhi-farm-bills>

Trivedi, N. 2021. “Centre's farm laws, non-execution of Forest Rights Act insidiously linked, say Maharashtra's Adivasi farmers at Azad Maidan.” *Firstpost* 26/01/2021 https://www.firstpost.com/india/centres-farm-laws-and-non-execution-of-fra-insidiously-linked-say-maharashtras-adivasi-farmers-at-azad-maidan-protest-9241221.html

Yadav, A. 2020. “Why landless and marginal farmers are the backbone of farmer protests.” *Newslaundry* 04/12/2020 <https://www.newslaundry.com/2020/12/04/why-landless-and-marginal-farmers-are-the-backbone-of-farmer-protests>

1. ‘Race’ is not considered here as, in India, ‘ethnicity’ is more relevant. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The Jats are a ‘dominant caste’ in large parts of north-western India’s countryside, following Srinivas’ (1966) classic definition of the term: a caste possessing politically and economical power through significant landownership, strength in numbers and a ‘medium’ or ‘high’ rank within the traditional caste hierarchy. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The Jats’ newfound opposition to the BJP has echoes of the past. In the 1980s and early 1990s the Jats formed the backbone of the powerful farmers’ movement, the Bharatiya Kisan Union (BKU), that united Hindu and Muslim farmers in a decade of struggles for higher farmgate prices, and more. During those years, the BKU took a clear stand against affiliating with any political party (Gupta 1997). See Ramakumar (2017) for an analysis of its later alliance with the BJP and its anti-Muslim shift. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The government claims that the MSPs only cover 6 per cent of Indian farmers. However, this arguably politically motivated underestimate is based on the much-criticised Shanta Kumar Committee Report which only looks at the two main crops wheat and paddy even though there are MSPs for 23 crops (Damodaran 2020). The report is also criticised for even getting the figures for wheat and paddy procurement wrong (Karat 2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. MSP-based procurement used to be concentrated in the North-Western states of Punjab and Haryana, the western parts of Uttar Pradesh, and Telangana and Andhra Pradesh. However, in recent years it has also become more prevalent in other states, including in Odisha and Chhattisgarh, thus lessening the bias towards the better-off regions (Kancharla 2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See Sinha (2020) for a study of capitalist farmers in Punjab. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The term ‘semi-proletarian’ also covers this class position. However, the focus of that term is on a yet-to-be-achieved endpoint, the fully-fledged proletariat, semantically excluding the non-labour relation part of the position of this social group, which makes it a less than ideal category. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Problematically, nearly all quantitative landownership analyses in India rely on Agricultural Census data. It is well known that it significantly underreports the prevalence of larger landholdings and inflates the number of smaller landowners. This is because it is based on the flawed official land records where large landowners avoid registering their land properly (Rawal and V Bansal 2012:1-2). Rawal and V Bansal (2021: 1-3) argue convincingly that the landownership data of the national survey-based NFHS and the National Sample Surveys (NSSO) is more reliable - although still not very precise. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Measured as size-class percentage of all landholding households, excluding those enumerated in categories not translatable to hectares; calculations based on Rawal and V Bansal table 8 (2021:10). The corresponding inflated Agricultural Census figure is 69 per cent. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. The mini-farmers (below 2 ha) owned only 29 per cent of the agricultural land while large landowners owned 54 per cent. In the analytical category ‘Large Farmers’ I include the standard descriptive Indian statistical categories Medium-II (4-10ha) and Large (10+ha) Landowners. In my fieldwork experience, at village level, landowners with more than 4 hectares (10 acres) are considered large farmers and very often also employ full time farm labourers, and engage in extended reproduction i.e., capital accumulation - as do some smaller landowners as well. Jeffrey, working in Meerut district, found that farmers owning 12+ acres (4.9 ha) employed full time labourers (Jeffrey and Lerche 2000: 463) while Rawal and V Bansal (2021:11) set a (less content-defined) main cut-off point at the lower level of 2 hectares. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. They may own their homestead and very small scale homestead farming may take place. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Farmers owning less that 2 ha makes up 41 per cent of the total rural households (Rawal and V Bansal 2021: 12). Calculations are based on Rawal and V Bansal table 8 (2021: 10). Landownership registered by the survey in non-standard categories that cannot be converted to hectares are added to all the other landownership classes in proportion to the existing distribution of households across these classes. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. The suggestion by Pattenden and G Bansal (2021) that the rural class structure has changed qualitatively is probably premature, based as it is on the Agricultural Census data. The Agricultural Census claims that only 29 per cent of the land is owned by households in the 4+ ha group (Government of India 2019: 27). This is approximately half of the NFSH figure of 54 per cent. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. According to the 2011 Census of India, Dalits make up 16.8 per cent of the overall population. This figure covers Hindu, Buddhist and Sikh Dalits but excludes Dalit Christians and Dalit Muslims. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. OBC: Other Backward Classes, a government category that in principle covers non-Dalit castes that also are socially and educationally disadvantaged. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. The BKU has also revived its old slogan ‘Allahu Akbar’ as part of its rekindled unity with Muslim farmers (Sawhney 2021). See also Kumar this issue. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. It is well known that the very unequal patriarchal gender relations in India are less extreme among Dalits. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. While it also would not harm *local* agricultural labour, seasonal *migrant* labour which does not have access to the PDS while away from home, and populations in regions where PDS does not work adequately, would suffer. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. See Pattenden and G. Bansal (2021) for a detailed, somewhat different, analysis of the changes from the old to the new movement. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Capitalist development of agriculture would also create the surplus labour required for industrial growth, as well as a growing market for industrial products. However, especially from the 1970s onwards, globally, it was not domestic markets but export orientation that was the main driver of industrialisation. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. The share of the sector ‘agriculture & allied services’ to total GDP halved since the onset of neoliberalism in 1991 (from 30% in 1990-91 to 14% in 2012-13 (data.gov.in, n.d.)). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. See Lerche (2015) for more details, including an outline of the sectors and states in India where the link between agriculture and manufacturing is strongest. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. It may be that the continued push for deregulation of the agricultural sector, and the farm law proposals opening up agriculture even more for large scale agribusiness and merchant capital, could result in significant siphoning off of capital from agriculture. Whether that would ‘reinstate’ the ‘agrarian question of capital’ is a moot point but if it did, it would likely primarily strengthen the hoarding of capital by major Indian agro-industries, trading houses, and international agro-industries; and take place at the cost of the farmers. It would be a finance capitalist solution to the agrarian question. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. The ‘classes of labour’ concept emphasises that the main class contradiction in society is between capital and all social groups exploited by capital, while also recognising differences between the relations of exploitation of different groups (hence class*es*), and the fluidity of the specific class positions held within the classes of labour. For the application of the concept to the Indian context, see Lerche (2010) and Pattenden (2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. See Shah, Lerche et al. (2018) for further analysis and empirical details. We argue that relations of oppression and exploitation of Dalits and Adivasis have been entrenched by capitalism in India, based on at least three interrelated processes: historical inherited inequalities of power, super-exploitation of casual migrant labour, and ‘conjugated’ oppression of inextricably linked class relations and relations based on caste, tribe, class, gender and region. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. The ongoing extreme Covid-19 pandemic in India may have had an impact on this, as millions of informal labourers, not the least Dalits, have returned to the villages. However, it is beyond the remit of this paper to assess the potentially significant changes arising from the pandemic. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. This is the most recent Government poverty data. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Claims that the full agricultural sector (i.e. including capitalist farmers) has been in an economic crisis since the late 1990s when all-India agricultural growth rates came close to zero (1997-2003) are however less plausible as, after 2004, overall agricultural growth recovered to pre-1990s levels (Lerche 2013). Indian agriculture is likely to be heading towards an *ecological* crisis in the medium term, a crisis already manifested in fast-falling water tables, increasing soil salinity and soil erosion; but this has not yet put a halt to the overall economic growth of the sector. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. At least until the start of the farm protests, and its extreme mismanagement of the healthcare crisis caused by the second wave of Covid in April-May 2021. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)