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INSIDE FARMER DISQUIET AT DELHI'S DOORSTEP

The protesting farmers have rejected all offers by the government. What will make them change their mind?



Clockwise from left: Lakhbir Singh, 80, from Tarn Taran in Punjab is among thousands of farmers who have made the national highways bordering Delhi their home for close to a month; despite the winter chill, farmers at the Singhu and Tikri border say they will only go back after the government repeals the reform bills; Protestors are running several community kitchens.

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Before you start a protest you have to measure who you are up against... what are its ways; what are its habits; will it ever step back?" Joginder Singh Ugrahan's soft-spoken voice is drowned out by a cacophony of slogans coming from outside his office at Delhi's borders.

For close to a month now, Ugrahan, a venerated 75-year-old farmer leader from Punjab, has been running his make-shift office from a warehouse-cum-cowshed—the venue of this brief conversation—surrounded by an army of farmers, about three km from the Delhi-Haryana border in Tikri.

The resolve in Ugrahan's voice is unmistakable: "We started the movement after considering all these points. We knew from the beginning this was a long struggle... this will take time." Ugrahan is referring to the farmer protest which has choked major national highways to Delhi. The farmers want the government to repeal a set of market reform bills passed by Parliament in September.

Farmers from Punjab and Haryana, tens of thousands of them, currently stationed in tractor-trolleys have turned the highways into a sprawling village. It has been more than 25 days since they arrived. About 30 protesters have died so far due to the winter chill and in road accidents, including a Sikh preacher who committed suicide at the protest site. Several rounds of negotiations with the government have failed to break the deadlock—the government has offered to amend the laws but farmers have held their ground.

"Iss hukumat ke niyat pe hamein bharosa nahin (we have no trust in the intent of this government)," Ugrahan said, adding, the government is offering to amend the bills, yet, it is on a publicity overdrive claiming how beneficial they are for farmers.

The amendments—which dilute the reform bills to the point of turning them redundant—were proposed to farmer unions on 9 December. They rejected the offer. But a week later agriculture minister

Narendra Singh Tomar said in a letter addressed to farmers that the bills 'will lay the foundation of a new era in Indian agriculture.'

"If the laws are so good why offer to amend them?" asks Ugrahan. "The state is trying everything it can. They called us Khalistanis (separatists), terrorists and Naxalites; they tried to break the unity of farmer unions. That is why we are cautious... we will stay here peacefully, and for as long as it takes."

A SELF-FUNDED AGITATION

On the Tikri border, where Ugrahan is camping, the mood is sombre. Unlike the Singhu border, the arrangements here are modest—there are no foot masseurs or gyms, nor is there anyone serving pizzas or instant noodles for free.

Sitting in a small group huddled together, chopping carrots is 45-year-old Gurjan Singh from Bhatinda district in Punjab. His family owns a small patch of land, about a hectare, but depends on Singh's earnings as a driver and remittances from his son who is in the army.

Farmers in Punjab and Haryana have led the protests fearing the new farm laws will push them to private markets run by giant corporations, and weaken the current system where the government purchases every grain of rice and wheat they

grow at an assured minimum support price. But what does Gurjan Singh, who has little surplus left to sell anyway, fear from these laws?

"My conscience forced me to come here," Gurjan said. For over two months, the residents of his village in Bhatinda had prepared for the protest. Their contributions, from grains and pulses to diesel for the fifteen tractors which made the journey to Delhi, have been funded by villagers—estimated at over Rs 200,000 so far.

This is a unique feature of these protests which have no parallels in recent memory (it's been three decades since the feisty Mahendra Singh Tikait from Western Uttar Pradesh occupied the heart of Delhi with thousands of farmers in 1988). The current agitation is funded by farmers themselves who want to protect their gains from assured government purchase, a system put in place

during the green revolution years dating back to the 1970s, when India was dependent on foreign food aid and hunger was rampant.

As Punjab and Haryana are major beneficiaries of state-led purchases, they have the mettle to fund a movement. In other states where farm incomes are significantly lower the protests have been sporadic.

But the fact that Gurjan, who joined the protests 15 days after it started also shows how the entire state of Punjab and to an extent, Haryana, have rallied behind the cause. Here, one can find a pharmacist from Ludhiana who is distributing medicines and a final-year law student from Ambala manning a laundry service for farmers. Every need—from toothpaste and slippers to sanitary napkins and warm blankets are taken care of by the community and Gurudwaras which consider 'sewa' (service) an essential part of the Sikh religion.

However, a robust support price regime is not the only reason why the protests have been largely dominated by farmers from Punjab and Haryana. It is also due to a lack of diversity in the agricultural practices; most farmers in the region are tied to the paddy-wheat cycle.

Their problems, like their fears, are of a similar nature—and very different from say, farmers in Maharashtra, who grow a variety of crops like sugarcane, cotton, pulses, oilseeds, and high value fruits and vegetables; each of those crops comes with its own set of problems.

Though in smaller numbers, farmers from states like Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra are trying to reach Delhi. And if the deadlock continues, these protests may well turn into a melting pot of grievances—from low crop prices and rising debts to climate risks and state apathy.

EMOTIONS AND ECONOMICS

A confounding part of the ongoing protest is how prepared farmers are, to sacrifice their lives for the cause. The deaths due to cold and accidents seem to have strengthened instead of weakening their resolve.

For instance, 72-year-old Kulwant Singh from Haryana said with a straight face that he purchased a garland and left it at home before joining the protest. "Victorious or dead, either way, I'll be garlanded when I return home," he said. In a similar vein, 80-year-old Lakhvir Singh from Tarn Taran in Punjab said he will either die in Singhu or go back after the laws are quashed.

WHAT

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MOREOVER

Farmers from Punjab and Haryana, for now, are unwilling to trade the assured prices guaranteed by the MSP regime for the uncertainty that free markets may bring.

"There is a larger cultural aspect here," said Amandeep Sandhu, author of the book *Punjab: Journeys through Fault Lines*. "For three millennia Punjab has been the gateway to the Indian subcontinent and has repeatedly battled invaders. Sovereignty and land rights are sensitive issues here—and martyrdom a matter of pride for Sikhs. But in times like now, they are showing how to carry on a peaceful agitation."

Despite the surfeit of emotions, farmers seem to be well-versed in their economics too. Most are able to articulate their opposition to the laws.

Many economists have argued that the laws—which allow farmers and traders to transact outside state regulated market yards without paying any taxes or fees (the government has proposed to dilute this key element via an amendment)—will unshackle farmers.

The argument is that farmers will not only have the freedom of choice but also receive better prices from private players. The changes to the decades-old Essential Commodities Act will encourage food companies to invest in infrastructure and processing facilities, while contract farm-

ing will help farmers access latest technology and assured prices.

"If these laws are so good, why do farmers from Bihar come to our fields to work on daily wages? Why do traders buy paddy and wheat from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh to sell it in Punjab and Haryana at support prices?" countered Gamdur Singh, a farmer from Patiala in Punjab who is at the Singhu border now.

Gamdur's reference to Bihar is due to the fact that the state abolished regulated markets in 2006, giving farmers access to a free market which did not translate into higher prices and better incomes. Private buyers did not invest in post-harvest infrastructure and short-changed farmers in an unregulated market, observed a 2019 report by the National Council of Applied Economic Research.

A recent study of agricultural markets in Bihar, Odisha and Punjab by the Centre for the Advanced Study of India at Pennsylvania University concluded: the idea that low-hanging fruits like market reforms 'will result in significant gains in price realisations for farmers is as seductive as it is mistaken.'

Farmers from Punjab and Haryana, for now, are unwilling to trade the assured prices guaranteed by the MSP regime for the uncertainty that free markets may bring. Their fears are borne out of a lived experience—over the past few years they have seen farmers across India dumping their perishable harvest (where no support prices are announced) for want of a better price.

For crops like oilseeds, pulses and cotton where the government purchases are minimal, farmers face significant price risks. These risks are often worsened by inflation management and trade policies which have a pro-consumer bias. For instance, soon after the centre promulgated the reform ordinances in June 'liberating' farmers, it imposed an export ban on onions to keep prices in check, at the cost of depressing domestic farm-gate prices.

The relative safety of support prices has pushed Punjab to continue with paddy, a crop which is neither consumed locally nor suited to its agro-climate.

Interestingly, way back in 1973 Punjab had put forth a demand for diversification

of crops, alongside other demands which formed the Anandpur Sahib Resolution. The document was seen as a charter of religious demand and separatism by the Indian state, but was located in the context of a state experiencing green revolution. The resolution was against a dominant centre and a plea for greater federalism at a time when the Congress was unchallenged at the centre, wrote Sandhu in his book.

"Today Punjab needs to move away from paddy to pulses and oilseeds. But the centre's reform push does not support this transition... instead it is facilitating corporations to extract the last scoop of profit from a region which is turning into a desert," Sandhu said over the phone.

TROLLEY TIMES

The protest at Delhi's doorstep is also a lesson in being 'atmanirbhar' or self-sufficient. Farmers have not only come prepared with stocks of grains and pulses to stay put for months on end, 'reinforcements' of fuel, milk and perishables arrive almost daily. There is food for everyone, including for the impoverished families who live next to the highways.

The protestors have also launched a four-page bi-weekly newsletter called *Trolley Times*. The first edition had a print run of 2,000 copies which was scaled up

to 5,000 copies for the second edition.

Surmeet Maavi, a film writer and resident of Punjab, who is part of the production team, said its purpose is to counter the false narrative in the media. "The government and corporations can afford full page advertisements in newspapers; this is our way of showing the ground reality—that we are not here for a picnic. This is both *inquilab* (revolution) and *satyagraha* (non-violent resistance)—an event which may find its way into text books one day."

For now, Maavi narrates an anecdote which found its way into the *Trolley Times*. Two warring neighbours from Mansa in Punjab who were fighting a court battle became friends after reaching Singhu in a tractor-trolley. The first thing they would do after returning home, they have promised each other, would be to withdraw the lawsuit.



Centre is facilitating corporations to extract the last scoop of profit from a region which is turning into a desert

AMANDEEP SANDHU
AUTHOR



We started the movement after knowing from the beginning that this will be a long struggle

JOGINDER SINGH UGRAHAN
FARM LEADER