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THE FACES BEHIND THE FARMER REVOLT

Unlikely alliances brought the disquiet to Delhi's doorstep. Here's the definitive behind-the-scenes account.



In June, when the three new farm bills were imposed by way of an emergency ordinance, very few, including the government, anticipated any strong resistance.

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Enough is enough. How long will we sit like this? Let us break the barricades and move toward Delhi. If some lives have to be sacrificed, then so be it," said one firebrand farmer leader during a recent meeting at Singhu on the Delhi-Haryana border, where thousands of farmers have been camping inside tractor trolleys since 27 November. The frustration was palpable. Several rounds of talks with the government had yielded little and patience was running out.

But on that day, the proposal was shot down. "Ahimsa (non-violence) is our only strength. If we become violent, we (will) lose this battle," said another farmer leader from Punjab. Surprisingly, the person who vehemently opposed the proposal belonged to a revolutionary communist group and wasn't expected to argue like a staunch Gandhian.

The moment captures the extraordinary and unlikely changes in outlook and alliances that had to take place over the course of just a few weeks for the farmer movement to have such staying power. Over 200,000 farmers remain on Delhi's doorsteps—at four points demarcating the capital's border with Haryana, Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan.

Many of the farmer leaders who are out on the streets have not seen eye-to-eye for years, if not decades. Yet, decisions are being taken jointly, brushing aside years of acrimony and differences. While the outcome of the agitation may become clear only with time, the pushback by the government, anticipated any strong resistance. In September, the laws were passed amid a ruckus in the Parliament but, even then, the opposition was mostly limited to rural Punjab. So, how did the movement become this big, this long, and also this vociferous?

A set of key events and people were instrumental in bringing the disquiet to Delhi's doorstep. Most of the behind-the-scenes action is not widely known. Among others, a late-October meeting at Delhi's

Rakab Ganj gurudwara and the unplanned breaching of the barricades on the Punjab-Haryana border a month later turned out to be critical events.

DILLI CHALO

The call for the march toward Delhi on 26-27 November was given by the All India Kisan Sangharsh Coordination Committee (AIKSCC), a loose coalition of over 200 farmer unions from across India, which came about in 2017 with a limited set of demands: remunerative crop prices and a complete debt waiver. A feat on the part of AIKSCC was to get several farmer leaders from Punjab and Haryana, who were not a part of the coalition, to lend their support to the Delhi march. The decision to join hands was taken at a 27 October meeting at the Gurdwara Rakab Ganj in Delhi. Among those present were 78-year-old Balbir Singh Rajewal, a veteran farmer leader from Punjab, and the fiery Gurnam Singh Chaduni, the face of the farmer agitation in Haryana.

The Rakab Ganj meeting, in a way, ensured the size and the clout of the current movement. That would not have been possible without the initiative taken by VM Singh, a farmer leader from Uttar Pradesh who was then the convener of AIKSCC. However, by the time the farmers arrived at Singhu, a series of missteps on Singh's part led to his ouster from AIKSCC and him becoming a persona non grata in the movement. The first was to ask farmers not to come to Delhi, followed by a press meet where he said farmers from Uttar Pradesh will independently negotiate with the government.

The Rakab Ganj meeting also led to a new body since disparate groups were not ready to fight under the banner of AIKSCC. The Samyukt Kisan Morcha was born on 7 November. This ensured that all 32 farmer organisations from Punjab were now a part of the "Dilli chalo" call. It is this Morcha which is now negotiating with the government and is represented by 41 leaders from different states, including from Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh, and outfits like the All India Kisan Sabha of the

CPIM, which has a strong ground presence in Maharashtra and Rajasthan, among other states.

"Within the AIKSCC, my role was to go beyond the coalition and persuade others to accept outsiders. That wasn't easy," said Yogendra Yadav, who was instrumental in stitching together AIKSCC in 2017. "Some of us inside AIKSCC were absolutely convinced that unless there was the broadest possible unity, we would not be able to do such a large agitation."

While the Rakabganj meeting laid the foundation, the thousands sitting at the borders would not have been there if not for one man. "In this movement, some mistakes have proved to be very useful," said one farmer leader. The reference is to Gurnam Singh Chaduni from Haryana, who defied the unanimous plan to sit peacefully on the Punjab-Haryana border and instead broke through the barricades in Ambala on 25 November.

In the following days, Chaduni, along with youth from Punjab, was instrumental in breaching barricades in Shambhu, Kurukshetra, Karnal and Panipat. This literally opened the floodgates, allowing farmers to reach the Delhi border with their tractor trolleys in tow.

"An early September rally organised by Gurnam Singh in Pipli, Haryana, was not just a show of strength but also a turning point for the state. He is the guy who worked day and night by organising small meetings and sensitising the farmers in Haryana," said Ramandeep Singh Mann, an independent farm activist who is a part of the ongoing agitation. Chaduni, often described as an old-school and confrontational farmer leader, ensured that the movement was no longer limited to Punjab. Without the participation and active support of farmers from Haryana, the protesters would have faced a logistical nightmare.

After the farmers reached the Delhi border on 27 November, the government requested them to move to the Burari grounds in north Delhi and vacate the national highways. Most farmer leaders decided to accept the offer, but it was rejected after two—Nirbhay Singh from the Kirti Kisan Union and Harmeet Singh from Bhartiya Kisan Union (Qadian), both from Punjab—put up a staunch opposition. Soon after, all the farmer leaders realised the leverage they have got by block-



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SHORT
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WHAT

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NOW

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ing the highways and likened Burari to an "open jail".

TOUCHING WITH A TONG

Post 27 November, farmer unions have demonstrated a never seen before unity. But tensions have spilled out at times. Joginder Singh Ugrahan, 75, among the most popular farmer leader from Punjab who gathered tens of thousands of farmers and farm labourers at the Tikri border, publicly said, "I am working with those who I would not even touch with a chinta (tong)."

Ugrahan, a staunch leftist who is widely known as a man with his own mind, has so far refused to be a part of any committee—including the seven-member coordination committee of the Samyukt Kisan Morcha—but his sheer presence and strength lends a great deal of mettle to the movement. "The inclusivity which Ugrahan practices by taking farm labourers along in any movement is showing its results. It is due to him that Dalits from the Malwa region of Punjab (but not from Majha or Doaba) has joined the protests," said Amandeep Sandhu, author of Panjab: Journeys through Fault Lines.

The apparent coming together of disparate groups and their working together on

THE PROTESTORS

The key players animating the ongoing agitation

Balbir Singh Rajewal: Veteran farmer leader from Punjab and among the earliest to object to the reform bills

Gurnam Singh Chaduni: Firebrand Haryana leader who broke through several barricades, opening the floodgates to Delhi

Yogendra Yadav: Instrumental in cobbling together the coalition which is leading the protests and negotiating with the government

Joginder Singh Ugrahan: Stalwart of farm movement from Punjab who got thousands of farm labourers to Tikri border

Darshan Pal: Former anaesthetist who is said to be the glue that holds disparate groups together

Rakesh Tikait: Farmer leader from western UP who joined the movement late but is holding fort at the crucial Ghazipur border

Kavitha Kuruganti: Farm activist preparing responses to government; lone woman in the 41-member negotiating team

40 days, the movement is not in the hands of any leader. Yet, the fact that the Ghazipur site is growing in numbers is critical. "Unless you get the cow-belt to protest, the goals of the movement could prove to be elusive," said Sandhu, the author.

THE LAST BIG FIGHT

According to several farmer leaders, Balbir Singh Rajewal, 78, has played a crucial role in coalescing the movement within Punjab alongside the likes of Ugrahan and Bhartiya Kisan Union (Ekta-Da-kaunda). "Once Rajewal saab made his position clear, the Akalis could no longer ignore the ground sentiment," said a farmer leader who didn't wish to be identified. It eventually led to the ruling Bhartiya Janata Party losing its oldest ally, the Shiromani Akali Dal from Punjab. Rajewal has also been articulating the farmers' position on the "unconstitutionality of the bills" and how it contradicts the concept of cooperative federalism. Like many farmer leaders who are past their prime, he has been quite frankly saying to others that "this is going to be the last big fight for me and I do not wish to die with a blot."

Among the myriad events and people, a lone person has worked to keep the broader goals at the forefront, Yogendra Yadav said, referring to the only woman who is a part of the negotiating team, Kavitha Kuruganti. "She speaks many languages. She connected leaders from outside to Punjab unions... from preparing notes and letters to the government and manning the war room to smoothening ego clashes, she has pushed herself selflessly at great personal cost," Yadav said. Kuruganti missed meeting her father one final time by a few hours when he passed away on 17 December. She had to attend a meeting at the Singhu border before boarding a flight to Bengaluru.

After a series of such personal sacrifices and losses (more than 65 protesters have died due to the winter chill, road accidents or by suicide), the appetite for compromise is very low. In the words of Balbir Rajewal: "The situation is such that no one dare leave each other's side now."

Rajinder Singh, a farmer leader with the Kirti Kisan Union, explained the mood by quoting a popular proverb from Punjab: Khaada peeta lahe da, Ahmed Shahe da (all you have is what you consume, Ahmed Shah loots the rest). "We have battled invaders for two thousand years. And we prepared for this fight for months. Who do we fear?"

While the outcome of the agitation may become clear only with time, the pushback by an unlikely coalition of farmers is already a case study in the art of protest

A significant leverage point or bargaining chip for the movement is the strength at the different border zones of Delhi. Over 200,000 have assembled in four sites