

# Farm Protests Reflect India's Worst Failing: A Broken Farmer-State Contract

At the protest site near the Delhi border, farmers are of the opinion that unless they do not protest, they do not get any respect or dignity.



A farmer at the protest site near the Delhi border. Photo: Jignesh Mistry/PAIGAM

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In a [recent](#) column, echoing a tone of grave disappointment on India's political economy landscape, Andy Mukherjee wrote:

*“A disturbing arbitrariness has crept into (India's) policymaking, institutions have decayed, and the economy's structural deficiencies have worsened... Animal spirits have been sucked out of all but a handful of firms. Zombie business groups are perched atop the debris of debt-fuelled expansion, waiting for politicians to signal what role they still have, if any. The defeatist slogan of self-reliance, which blighted our parents' generation, is back...”*

Mukherjee's own reflection quite aptly brings out the stark realities shaping one's collective disappointment in India's dwindling developmental possibilities and our intrinsic comparative advantages (say, in constitutionally safeguarded political, economic freedoms). The 'blight' that inhibited growth in previous generations is slowly returning now – in an air of grave uncertainty, despair for the most vulnerable in the country.

As one writes this in the dawn of a new-morning, parts of Delhi remain still engulfed in darkness, clouded with barricades, with its borders blocked by farmers lying down on the street, protesting against the new farm laws, that were railroaded in parliament. The situation, like many other from the recent past, forces (and urges) each of us to take a step back and reflect on one of the nation's structural failings – a broken *kisan-sarkar* contract.

On visiting the site of protests at the northern border of Delhi we met Major Singh, a farmer for over 35 years in Punjab. He says, “Since independence, farmers have contributed more than 75-80% to the Centre's stock of food-grains, even in the most difficult conditions and have always supported the government. But they have received very little in return. We don't get even the basic price promised as MSP [minimum support price] to our produce. Unless a farmer doesn't protest, he doesn't get anything. That is why we are here, to be treated with respect and dignity.”



Farmers at the protest site in Delhi. Photo: Jignesh Mistry/PAIGAM

It is true that a broken farmer-state relationship has been one of independent India's worst failings and is a vital contributor in breeding widespread rural-urban inequalities – in terms of both (limiting) incomes, aspirations, and opportunities for the citizenry. The context of this numbing economic divide, further impacted by another crisis context of a pandemic, is bound to breed collective feelings of chronic discontentment and fuel public resentment, that is now being witnessed on the streets.

Nirbhay Singh, a farmer from Kurukshetra (Haryana), [explains](#) at the protest site why this resistance is so important for farmers in removing *kaale kanoon* (black laws). “Each of the provisions under the new farm laws, whether it is with respect to contract farming and stockpiling of food produce, aim to take the agency of an average farmer away from him and give it to corporates and big businesses. They can control the prices at will and exploit the market without giving anything to farmers, who won’t receive any support from the government either after the laws are passed.”

Having [written](#) about this previously, the root of India’s agrarian crisis (as echoed by Nirbhay Singh too) is somewhere linked to the five Ps: price, product, position, profitability and protection. These are the foundational pillars of strategic focus for any enterprise (even farming) or an entrepreneur (a farmer).

Farmers have often found it difficult to get their main produce sold at a fair, market price at a place of proximity. Their cropping pattern and choice on ‘what to produce’ is conditioned by a string of factors that are less grounded in commercial, market principles, but are sourced more in conditions of political leveraging (around MSPs), poor market-infrastructure, high costs of production, and entrenched middlemen-based price interventions. The urban consumer bias entrenched in our consumption pattern of farm goods further adds to the seasonal price fluctuations which become a warring cry on news channels every once in a while.



A farmer works in his field. Photo: Jignesh Mistry/PAIGAM

In a previous [study](#) undertaken in Haryana, we discussed some of these issues at length. Studying average land-size under cultivation, one saw, how around 68-70% of the farmers have acreage of less than 4-5 acres (i.e. with 16% land harvested anywhere between 1-2.5 acres; 24% owning anywhere between 2.5- 5 acres, and 28% with less than an acre). The national-level scenario sees more than 80% of farmers having less than 3 acres of cultivable land. The issue of lesser acreage, entwined with concerns

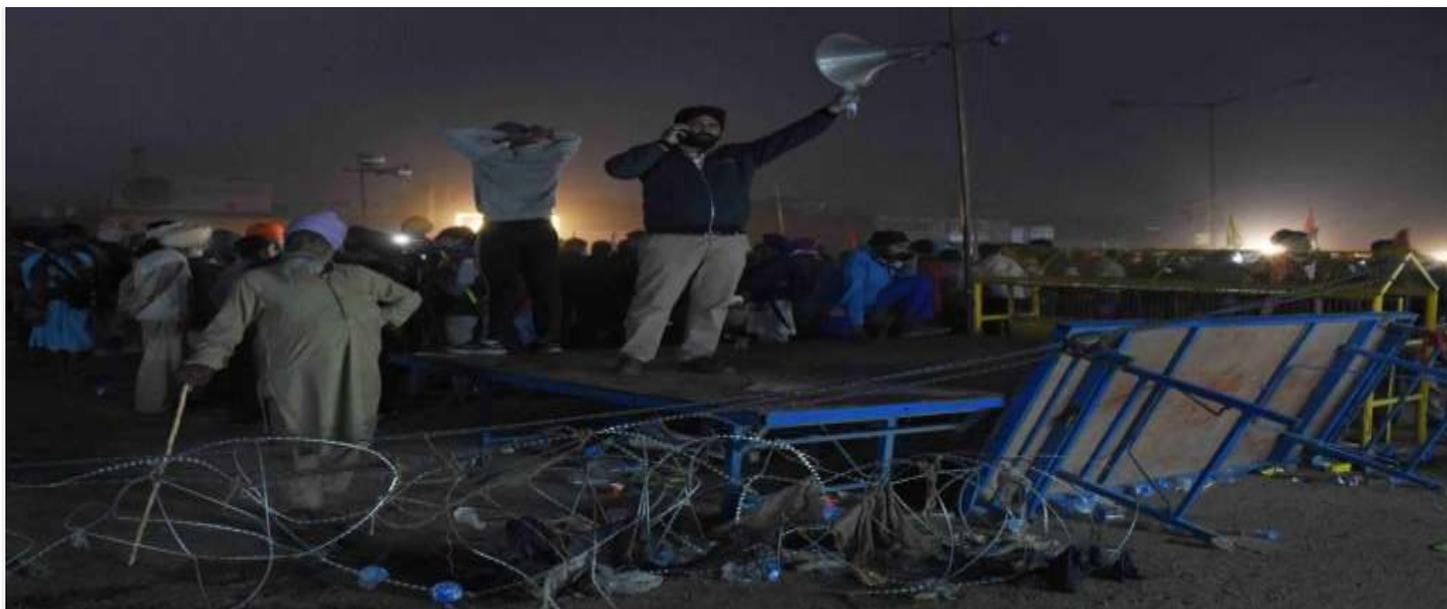
around processes of land ownership, and easier availability of credit also makes the situation of women-farmers (and their own agency in farming) even more inhibiting.

An interplay of all these variables has lowered a farmer's actual income, negatively impacted her profitability, while pre-designed measures of social (or crop) protection schemes have remained poorly implemented at a local level. Most states even don't pay the promised MSP to farmers on listed crops that they are bound by law to provide for. India's average farmer is self-reliant (*atmanirbhar*) and remains financially indebted in almost medieval style living conditions with very little to actually be content about.

Even during the pandemic induced lockdown, the situation (as [The Wire](#) reporter) for most farmers across India (particularly in Haryana, Punjab) became worse. Ravinder, a farmer from Bhidnauli village of Haryana said, "The vegetables we could earlier sell for Rs 30 per kg (in a pre-pandemic time) can now get us only Rs 10 per kg maximum. Our yield has already dropped by at least 25-30%. Farmers who generally grew around 20 quintals (50 mann) of wheat have seen their yield reduced to 14 quintals (35 mann)."

As more *mandis* opened up, overall demand was still low and extremely volatile, forcing most farmers to sell their produce for amounts as low as Rs 2 per kg. Social distancing requirements, poor healthcare safety conditions made many retailers and wholesalers averse to visiting mandis while consumers were too afraid to buy non-packaged vegetables that resulted in aggregating the demand-shock.

Neetu, a young farmer from village Rampur has been farming since the age of 12. More than the loss of livelihood due to the pandemic-induced lockdown, he expressed extreme frustration against the local and state governments for mismanaging the response to the health-crisis that destroyed his family's main source of income and livelihood. He said, "*Sarkaar ne hamare liye kuch nahi kiya, siraf TV pe dikhate hai sab, kisaan ke liye kuch hota nahi hai* (The government has done nothing for the farmer, it is all a performance for the television)."



Farmers protest against the farm laws. Photo: Jignesh Mistry/PAIGAM

The symbolic reflection of current farmer protests and angst is a reflection of the deep erosion of the kisan-sarkar contract. And, unfortunately, there is little hope on offer. No matter what one may think on the farmers protest, or the opposition to the new agricultural laws, what is lucid is how our system of governance and its projected 'economic reform' model lacks any effective institutional channel for ensuring a proper debate on the kind of 'economic ideology' new laws or 'reforms' are being (mis)guided upon, nor there is a mechanism for participatory dialogue with concerned (aggrieved) stakeholders in a reasoned way. The prevailing governmentality is embedded in a monolithic command style order of functioning, where law (and its institutions) is simply used as a tool of enforcement-at-all-cost against all, irrespective of who's at the receiving end.

*Names of the respondents have been changed to protect their identity. All photographs have been taken by Jignesh Mistry (PAIGAM).*

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