



Modi's India and the Farmer's Revolt: When Nationalism Meets the Plow

By: Michael Lihanda

In September 2020, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government introduced three agricultural bills into the Indian Parliament, pushing them through with minimal debate, under the pretext of urgent reform. The Farmers' Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Act, the Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement on Price Assurance and Farm Services Act, and the Essential Commodities (Amendment) Act aimed to liberalize India's agricultural sector, which despite employing nearly 60% of the population, contributed only 17-18% to GDP. The logic was unmistakably neoliberal: allow market forces to enter the agrarian economy, reduce the role of state-controlled mandis (marketplaces), eliminate the Agricultural Produce Market Committee (APMC) monopoly, and thereby usher in efficiency, investment, and income growth. But the architecture of this vision was not built on the ground realities of India's rural political economy—it was imposed on top of them.

The Modi government insisted that these reforms would "empower" farmers by granting them the freedom to sell produce to private players beyond government-regulated platforms. However, what it offered was not freedom but exposure. The Minimum Support Price (MSP) system, though technically unaffected, was left dangerously ambiguous in the new framework, giving rise to fears of its eventual dismantling. For states like Punjab and Haryana, where MSP is central to the agricultural livelihood model, this ambiguity was not a detail—it was a threat. The specter of unregulated market exploitation by corporate giants like Reliance and Adani hung heavy over the countryside.



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But the real miscalculation was political. Modi's administration underestimated the historical, emotional, and strategic significance of farmers in the Indian national psyche. Farmers are not just laborers; they are cultural icons, symbols of self-reliance and sacrificial patriotism dating back to the Green Revolution. The protests that emerged from these laws were not sporadic or symbolic. They were systemic and unrelenting. What began as regional outrage quickly coalesced into a nationwide movement, anchored at the borders of Delhi by tens of thousands of farmers who occupied highways and built semi-permanent protest camps in the face of tear gas, barricades, water cannons, and police batons.

It would become the largest protest in recorded human history. On November 26, 2020, over 250 million Indians—farmers, laborers, students, union members—joined in a one-day strike. The world could not ignore it. The Indian diaspora organized global solidarity rallies. International figures from Rihanna to Greta Thunberg drew attention to the crackdown. In response, the Indian state dug in, launching a digital campaign to delegitimize protesters as "Khalistani separatists," "anti-nationals," and pawns of foreign interference. Sikh farmers, who made up a large percentage of the movement's backbone, were especially targeted in this disinformation assault. This framing backfired. The diasporic Sikh community mobilized



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powerful advocacy across Western democracies, especially in Canada and the UK, where elected officials condemned India's repression. Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International issued critical reports.

What Modi faced was not just a political inconvenience; it was a legitimacy crisis. He had banked on his majoritarian populist appeal—rooted in a muscular Hindu nationalism fused with developmental ambition—to pass controversial economic policies through sheer rhetorical dominance. It had worked in demonetization, it had worked in the CAA-NRC controversy to a point, and it had worked during the revocation of Article 370. But farmers were different. They were not an abstraction. They fed the nation. And they voted in vast numbers.

In November 2021, after more than a year of protests and over 700 reported deaths of farmers due to protest-related causes, Modi announced the repeal of the three farm laws. He did so in a nationally televised address that tried to cloak the climbdown in moral language. He said he had failed to convince the farmers of his intentions. But the real language was electoral: critical state elections in Punjab and Uttar Pradesh were on the horizon. The BJP, which had been bleeding rural goodwill, could no longer afford the rebellion.



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Yet this repeal was strategic, not substantive. No permanent legal guarantee of MSP was granted, no systemic reform to rural credit or climate resilience offered, and no public accountability taken. The movement was forced to consider whether tactical victory was enough, or whether structural transformation remained an elusive dream. In truth, Modi had not lost power—he had temporarily deferred its exercise.

The deeper analytical frame of this episode reveals a central contradiction of 21st-century strongman governance: charismatic regimes seek to liberalize economies while centralizing power. In doing so, they mistake top-down authority for consent. But the Indian farmer proved that policy, no matter how technocratically sound on paper, cannot erase the lived histories of communities. The land remembers. The social memory of betrayal under colonialism, Green Revolution disenchantment, and decades of bureaucratic neglect shaped the response. The government invoked the future; the farmers invoked the past. What resulted was a standoff not just over agriculture, but over the meaning of democracy itself.

Modi's vision—a self-reliant India driven by Hindu civilizational resurgence and privatized modernization—met its boundary at the village. In Amasican terms, this was a classic instance of the political backfire doctrine: a strongman's overreach activates the latent resistance



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of the very constituency he claims to protect. Modi's agricultural laws intended to streamline inefficiencies; instead, they streamlined the formation of resistance networks that now span rural India, urban labor unions, digital activists, and global observers. In a system increasingly structured by electoral calculus, the farmers reintroduced a more durable concept: legitimacy derived from moral sovereignty and historical consciousness.

To this day, the long-term fate of agricultural reform in India remains unresolved. The issues that spurred the revolt—fragile incomes, lack of crop diversification, debt cycles, and water scarcity—still persist. The state's silence on a national MSP law and its continued repression of agrarian leaders reflect the unresolved nature of this conflict. But the field has changed. The plow has spoken. And the next time it is pushed, it may no longer wait to be heard.