

Opinion: How India's farmers took on its most powerful political party

By Natasha Behl

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Over the past seven years, Prime Minister Narendra and the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party have dominated Indian politics. During this time, democracy in the country has undergone a drastic decline. Rights and freedoms have been eroded, with Muslims in particular marginalized from the nation.

Today, however, protesting farmers are protecting Indian democracy from further degradation — and showing the world how social justice movements can lead the values and practices of liberal democracy to flourish.

On Friday, Modi, in a rare retreat, announced the repeal of three laws that farmers across India have been protesting for more than a year. The three agriculture reform bills, which concern the pricing, sale and storage of farm products, were passed by the Indian parliament in September 2020. They were designed to deregulate and privatize India's agrarian economy. The BJP claimed that the reforms would “liberate” farmers from India's traditional “mandis,” or wholesale markets, by allowing farmers to sell directly to private corporations.

Yet farmers feared that the reforms would collapse the “mandi” system, which guarantees them a minimum support price for products, and thereby permit private players to set lower prices. Such a change could devastate Indian farmers, nearly 85 percent of whom have small farms with less than two hectares (five acres) of land.

So how did the farmers manage to take on India's most powerful political party?

The movement emerged nationally on Nov. 26, 2020, with a record-breaking nationwide strike involving an estimated 250 million participants, and a march to Delhi that brought out tens of thousands of peaceful farmers from the northern states of Punjab, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan. These protesters encountered a militarized police force armed with batons, tear gas and water cannons, and had to navigate trenches, barbed wire and barricades designed to keep them out of the capital. After two days, they were able to establish protest camps at Delhi's borders with Tikri, Singhu and Ghazipur.

For nearly a year since, some 300,000 people have engaged in a sit-in at these camps. They have also organized nonviolent direct actions such as blocking railways, shutting down government buildings and forcing open toll plazas.

The BJP government responded to the ongoing protest by calling the participants “terrorists” and casting them as separatists. Authorities created fortified borders around the protest camps and cut off water and electricity. They

In response, farmers created an inclusive democracy at the protest camps. Essential public services, such as schools and medical clinics, have been made available to all, along with arts and music. Communal kitchens have fed thousands of people daily, including migrant workers and the destitute with no connection to the protest. Living, eating and organizing within the camps have helped forge solidarities across caste, gender, religion, class, age and language. And decisions have been made collectively in daily meetings, determining everything from the distribution of hygiene products to the speakers at daily assemblies.

In their effort to build more democratic communities and counter the government's growing authoritarianism, protesters have adopted modes of protest that are rooted in Sikh principles and practices. The movement espouses a radical egalitarianism that promotes inclusion and values workers' livelihoods.

Rural communities throughout Punjab and Haryana have sustained the movement. In villages, Sikh temples organize rotating batches of protesters for the camp sites, coordinate supplies for the movement and function as hubs of education. Villagers share the work of sowing and harvesting with protesting, as some return to villages while others remain at the camps.

The future of the protest camps is unclear. Modi has called on all the protesting farmers to return home, but farmers are steadfast that they will not leave until the three farm laws are formally repealed and a minimum support price for all agricultural produce is guaranteed. Farm unions are currently deliberating their next step.

The farmers' protest — like the months-long protest in Delhi's Shaheen Bagh against the government's controversial citizenship law in 2019 and 2020 — has created its own internal democratic practices, which helped to actualize the progressive ideals of the Indian constitution. It demonstrates how citizens can use inclusive forms of protest to experiment with alternative visions of democracy.

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