

## Letter

# India's Farmers' Protest: An Inclusive Vision of Indian Democracy

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*India, the world's largest democracy, has been experiencing a democratic decline. Since coming to power in 2014 and winning reelection in 2019, Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the Bharatiya Janata Party have become increasingly illiberal and authoritarian. The rule of law has deteriorated, rights and liberties have been curtailed, and scholars and the media have been silenced. If electoral constraint, constitutional design, judicial independence, and a free press haven't slowed India's march toward illiberalism, what can? In November 2020, India's farmers began a highly organized protest against the government. In this research note, I ask, how has this protest protected Indian democracy from further degradation, and has it radically altered India's political future? I argue that the farmers' protest provides an alternative vision of democracy, one rooted in radical egalitarianism. Protesting farmers have actualized the spirit of dissent enshrined in the Indian constitution by holding the current government accountable to it.*

“This movement not only led to a slowdown in the BJP government's aspirations for a Hindutva state, but it has also created space for the resurgence of grassroots democracy.”

—Rajinder Singh Deepsinghwal,  
Kirti Kisan Union (Singh 2021)

## INTRODUCTION

India, the world's largest democracy, has been experiencing a democratic decline. Multiple organizations have downgraded India to a “partly free” (Freedom House) or “flawed” democracy (Economist Intelligence Unit), signaling that its electoral integrity is at risk, while others now classify it not as a democracy but as an “electoral autocracy” (V-Dem Institute). Since coming to power in 2014 and winning reelection in 2019, Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) have become increasingly illiberal and authoritarian. The rule of law has deteriorated, rights and liberties have been curtailed, and scholars and the media have been silenced (Ganguly 2019; 2020).

Following the 2014 elections, some scholars argued that electoral constraints and constitutional realities would push the BJP's Hindu nationalist agenda toward a centrist position (Varshney 2019). Others argued that public intellectuals, judicial independence, and media outlets would be formidable impediments to the BJP's implementation of its antiseccular vision (Ganguly 2019). Still others argued that the BJP's politics of resentment against minorities would not be sustainable

over time and across regions (Palshikar 2019). However, since the 2019 elections, India's descent toward illiberalism has accelerated. The BJP has become India's most powerful party while the opposition parties have weakened, judicial independence has been undermined, and the once vibrant press has become compliant (Ganguly 2020).

If electoral constraint, constitutional design, judicial independence, and a free press haven't slowed India's march toward illiberalism, what can? In November 2020, India's farmers began a massive and highly organized protest against the government. In this research note, I draw on news articles as a preliminary source of data on the farmers' protest to ask, in what ways has this protest protected Indian democracy from further degradation, and has it radically altered India's political future?

Since coming to power in 2014, the BJP has used legal and extralegal mechanisms to undermine democracy. State-sanctioned violence against Muslims and crackdowns on dissent have intensified (Varshney 2019). Minorities have been portrayed as unassimilable obstacles to economic development, drains on state resources, and threats to cultural cohesion and national security (Chatterji, Hansen, and Jaffrelot 2019, 12), thus justifying a “regime of terror” against them (Ullekh 2021). Furthermore, Hindu vigilantism that targets these perceived offenders has been on the rise. The BJP has delegated cultural policing to various Hindu nationalist groups, such as the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, which attacks minorities, elites, and other opponents with near impunity (Jaffrelot 2019, 57).

In addition, the BJP has used existing laws on sedition, defamation, and counterterrorism to demonize targeted minorities, deprive them of their citizenship rights, and turn them into noncitizens (Chatterji, Hansen, and Jaffrelot 2019). Since winning reelection in 2019, the party has passed laws that target minority communities, such as the Jammu and Kashmir Reorganisation Act, Citizenship Amendment Act, National

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Register of Citizens, and the National Population Register (V-Dem Institute 2021). The outcome has been an erosion of pluralism, secularism, and equality in India's multicultural democracy through both *de facto* and *de jure* mechanisms. Modi and the BJP, in short, have been driving India toward authoritarianism.

The Indian constitution adopted in 1950 is a highly inclusive democratic constitution, offering citizenship to women, illiterates, lower castes, and other marginalized groups, and promising equality to religious minorities (Keating 2007, 135). Yet the framers of the Indian constitution eliminated provisions that would have ensured the political viability of minorities (such as reserved seats and communal electorates) and in doing so created a model of multicultural democracy that consolidated Hindu majority group domination (Keating 2011, 5).

Indian constitutional design combined with the BJP's current electoral dominance and authoritarian measures has catalyzed the current crisis in Indian democracy. And this decline of democracy might signal more broadly that liberal democracies under late capitalism cannot flourish amid ethnic and religious diversity. It might also signal a pervasive democratic weakening and a global ascendancy of authoritarian populism (Repucci and Slipowitz 2021).

And yet, the farmers' protest has provided an alternative vision of democracy, one rooted in a radical egalitarianism. Protesting farmers have actualized the spirit of dissent enshrined in the Indian constitution by holding the current government accountable to it (White and Farr 2012, 47). Protestors have also developed new and inclusive forms of solidarity and allegiance, demonstrating the possibility of more equitable forms of democracy.

Social justice movements like the farmers' protest can lead to a deepening of democracy (della Porta 2005a; 2005b) and perhaps to the promise of a more radical democracy (Inouye 2021; Pineda 2021). Movements such as Occupy Wallstreet, Gezi Park, and Shaheen Bagh pushed back against increasing illiberalism through inclusive forms of protest that experimented with alternative models of democracy (della Porta 2005b, 337; see also Contractor 2021; Einwohner et al. 2021; Karakayali and Yaka 2014; Montoya 2019; Tormos 2017; Weldon 2006). The farmers' protest has engaged in similar experiments and in doing so offers considerable insight into the relationship between social movements and democracy (della Porta 2005a, 75). Social movements are often studied through narrow definitions of "success," which overlook the ways that even in their so-called failure they can be successful in envisioning and enacting alternative political imaginaries (Beard 2022; Kelley 2002). And the farmer's protest has certainly not been a failure.

## FARMERS' PROTEST AND INDIAN DEMOCRACY

In September 2020, the Indian Parliament passed three agriculture reform bills concerning the pricing, sale,

and storage of farm products, without following parliamentary procedure or consulting farmers' organizations (Jebaraj 2021). These laws deregulated and privatized India's agrarian economy by allowing private corporations to purchase crops at market prices without paying taxes, stockpile essential commodities in unlimited quantities, and engage in contract farming while denying farmers legal recourse (Dubal and Gill 2020). The BJP asserted that the reforms would provide farmers with more choice within the agricultural market by giving them the option to sell directly to private companies while freeing them from traditional wholesale "mandis," or markets. Yet many farmers feared that the reforms would lower prices for their products, incentivize the hoarding of essential goods, and remove an essential safety net (Aljazeera 2020).

The likely outcome of the reforms would be a collapse of the mandi system, which currently guarantees farmers a minimum support price (MSP). During the first few years of reform, private corporations would likely purchase agricultural goods at a price surpassing MSP, which would secure them monopoly power in the market. They could then set prices far lower than MSP, which would likely have devastating consequences for Indian farmers, 85% of whom own less than five acres of land (Aljazeera 2020). These farmers, who have been overwhelmed by debt and suicide in recent decades (Swaminathan Report 2006), would need to compete in a market that favors corporations. Many farmers would likely lose their land, their livelihoods, and their way of life. In response, protesting farmers have demanded that the central government repeal the three farm laws and legalize a national MSP index for farm produce. And to achieve these goals, they are prepared to occupy Delhi for years (Mander 2021).

The agricultural reform bills represent a continued privatization of India's economy, including the agricultural sector, which accounts for 18% of India's GDP and employs more than 60% of the workforce. For decades, the Indian government has largely ignored farmers, activists, and scholars who called on the government to follow its own recommendations by adopting the reforms proposed in the Swaminathan Report (2006). The report, which addresses problems with the mandi system and MSP along with environmental issues and farmer suicide, concludes that farmers should be given access to and control over basic resources, including "lands, water, bioresources, credit and insurance, technology and knowledge management, and markets." The report also recommends an increase in MSP to at least 50% more than the weighted average cost of production and an expansion of covered crops beyond paddy and wheat. Rather than adopting these reforms, the BJP has passed laws that open up the agricultural market to private corporations without addressing the underlying problems in the agricultural sector. The likely outcome of these laws would be the collapse of the public agricultural system, which would jeopardize small farmers' livelihood and the nation's food security.

The protestors have been wary that privatizing India's agriculture would lead to a monopoly, for

monopoly power is quite common in India, as currently 20 firms account for 70% of all corporate earnings (Economist 2020). Protesting farmers have claimed that the laws use the language of choice and freedom to hand over the agricultural market to private corporations, like Mukesh Ambani's group, Reliance Industries, which enjoys monopoly power in telecom, oil, and retail, and Gautam Adani's group, which enjoys monopolies in infrastructure, including airports and ports (Dubal and Gill 2020).

On November 26, 2020, the movement emerged nationally through two distinct organizational tactics. First, farmers joined trade unions in a massive nationwide one-day strike, with 250 million participants (Joy 2020). Second, tens of thousands of farmers from Punjab, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, and Rajasthan participated in the *Delhi chalo* (Let's go to Delhi) march. Predominantly peaceful protestors confronted a militarized police force that attacked them with tear gas, batons, and water cannons at the Punjab-Haryana and Haryana-Delhi borders (Slater 2020). Police also erected barricades and dug trenches in an effort to block the farmers (Rahar 2020).

Nevertheless, after two days of marching, the farmers entered Delhi and established protest camps on the outskirts of the city. For more than a year, farmers organized sit-ins with some 300,000 supporters gathered outside Delhi at the Tikri, Singhu, and Ghazipur borders (Sandhu 2021). Farmers also confronted the government through nonviolent actions, including surrounding the homes of politicians, closing down government buildings, opening up toll plazas, and stopping railway lines (Dubal and Gill 2020). Last, farmers engaged in direct actions against Ambani and Adani conglomerates and their subsidiaries by boycotting petrol pumps and megamalls, and disconnecting cell phone towers (Dubal and Gill 2020).

The BJP government reacted to the ongoing protest by erecting militarized borders around the protest camps and arresting hundreds of protestors (BBC 2021). It also charged journalists with sedition, shut down internet services in Delhi and Haryana, ordered Twitter to suspend the accounts of noncompliant news organizations (Roy and Purnell 2021), and halted water and electricity to the camps (Kumar 2021).

The farmers' protest has challenged the BJP by showing the world how illiberal the government is, especially by critiquing the so-called *godhi* media—that is, media that sits in the “lap” (*godhi*) of government. Most national media outlets, in fact, have close ties to the government and are owned by the same corporations that control much of the economy (Reporters Without Borders 2019). Criticism of the government is increasingly rare. By labeling its critics as “antinational,” the government has effectively used sedition laws to crack down on dissent. As a result, only a few media organizations have maintained their independence (Goel and Gettleman 2020). Mainstream media has effectively become a propaganda outlet for the BJP.

In response, protesting farmers have founded what is now India's fastest growing newspaper, *Trolley Times*,

which has allowed farmers to produce their own narratives to counter the BJP's propaganda (Ramani 2020). The BJP, with support of numerous media outlets, has tried to define the protesting farmers as enemies of the nation—“separatists,” “Maoists,” and “terrorists” (Sen 2021)—and as “rich famers” concerned “only with Punjab and Haryana” (Sainth 2021). *Trolley Times* has challenged this kind of coverage, and since it has been published in Gurmukhi and Hindi, it has also led farmers from Punjab and Haryana, who are linguistically diverse and historically divided, to forge solidarities as partners in a mass movement (Singh and Punia 2020).

Although a majority of the protesting farmers have been Sikh, their membership includes Hindus, Muslims, Christians, and Buddhists (Mander 2021), and their practices reflect this diversity. The farmers have engaged in forms of protest based both in Gandhian practices of nonviolence rooted in Hindu, Jain, and Buddhist concepts of *ahimsa* (Dalton 2012) and in Sikh practices of loving sacrifice for collective human flourishing [*sarbat da bhala*], especially *langar* (communal kitchen), *shahidi* (martyrdom), and *seva* (service) (Singh 2014). For example, during the *Delhi chalo* march, protestors broke through barricades and then cleared the very roads that the police had rigged to stop them (Bera 2020). And after clashes with police officers, at least one Sikh temple fed officers who were still dressed in riot gear (Ghazali 2020). These practices, rooted in a kind of egalitarian community building, have forged new solidarities across religion, class, language, caste, age, and gender (Mander 2021), helping to create an inclusive environment in which Dalits, Muslims, and women are valued.

The protest camps have been likened to Begumpura (Dalit Camera 2020)—literally, “a city without sorrow”—an earthly utopia without caste and class oppression. Originally conceived by the Dalit poet-saint Ravidas (c. 1450–1520), Begumpura has been central to the political imagination of Sikhs, who have included Ravidas's poetry in their scripture, and of oppressed populations across India (Omvedt 2008). The protesting farmers have adopted the egalitarianism of a proverbial Begumpura while deftly staying clear of Sikh separatist aspirations for a sovereign homeland. The farmers have been more progressive than the larger Sikh community, and by drawing on the imaginary of an idyllic city rather than a separate nation or a Gandhian village, they have sought common cause with dispossessed people across India and perhaps transformed Sikh political aspirations in the process.

If only for a short time, the farmers' protest has created an inclusive democracy, which includes the protest camps and rural support networks. At the camps, basic public services including schools and libraries, arts and music, and medical and dental camps, have been made available to everyone (Economic Times 2020). Communal kitchens have fed hundreds of thousands of people, regardless of religion, class, caste, or gender, thus undermining caste rules regarding interdining and building heterogenous coalitions. When possible, decisions have been made collectively



with shared leadership that ensures representation of multiple member unions (Sharma 2020). Beyond the camps, villages across Punjab and Haryana have supported the protestors by sending essential supplies and organizing rotating batches of protestors (Sethi 2021). And families have agreed to divide their time between working in the fields and participating in the protest camps (Mander 2021).

The work of farmer and laborer unions has been crucial to the success of the farmers' protest, its networked democracy, and its ability to overcome previous caste and class animosities. Landowning farmers, who are high-caste Jats, have a history of oppressing landless farm laborers, who are primarily Dalits (Sinha 2020), but at this moment their interests have aligned against the dangers posed by the deregulation of the agricultural sector (Dubal and Gill 2020). In the summer of 2020, farmer and laborer unions led education campaigns about the farm laws in rural Punjab and Haryana (Dubal and Gill 2020), and they also came together to demand land and labor reforms (Sinha 2020). This solidarity has been evident in one of the movement's slogans: "Long Live Farmer-Laborer Unity" (Kisan-Mazdoor Ekta Zindabad). This alignment of unions, which have been largely secular and socialist, has helped forge new solidarities across religion, class, and caste, and these solidarities have deepened during the protests, with farmers and laborers living, eating, and organizing together.

The movement also owes its success to the labor and leadership of women, which has been fostered in part by responding to women's experience of gendered violence, at large and in the protests themselves. Women's contribution to the farmers' protest has been celebrated with headlines proclaiming that women have been "leading India's farmers' protest" (Bhowmich and Sonthalia 2021), echoing the praise for women's leadership at the 2019–2020 Shaheen Bagh protests in Delhi (Contractor 2021). Nevertheless, women in the farmers' protest, much like women in the Occupy Movement (Montoya 2019), have had to navigate threats of gendered violence. The movement has been progressive in many ways, but it still embodies gendered inequities (Tribune 2021). And Delhi is one of the most dangerous cities in the world for women (Thomson Reuters Foundation 2017). In response, some women in the protest joined forces with the nationwide network, Women against Sexual Violence and State Repression, and called on farmer leaders to make the movement safer for women by creating internal complaint committees for accusations of sexual misconduct, listening to survivors, and investigating potential offenses (WSS 2021).

Yet, when protestors return to their villages will these inclusive solidarities travel with them and lead to changes in religious, class, caste, and gender norms? What will become of women empowered by the protests when they return to rural Haryana, Punjab, and Uttar Pradesh and refuse to be silenced in the fields, in public spaces, and in their homes? What will become of the farmer–laborer unity cultivated at the protest camps when Dalits demand that land reform, legalized

through the 1961 Punjab Village Common Lands (Regulation) Act, be actualized (Misra and Bhardwaj 2021)? What will become of the Hindu Jat and Muslim solidarity when protesting farmers return to Muzaffarnagar, the site of the 2013 anti-Muslim riots that displaced at least 50,000 people (Choudhury 2021)? Will we see a new kind of democratic practice that seeks to build Begumpuras in the here and now? Or will these solidarities wither once the imminent threat of the farm laws passes?

## LEARNING FROM THE FARMERS' PROTEST

On November 19, 2021, Prime Minister Modi acquiesced to the farmers' demands and announced the repeal of the three farm laws. On December 9, 2021, the farmers formally suspended their protest but warned that it would resume if Modi reneged on his promise (Aljazeera 2021). It was a rare retreat by the "veritable juggernaut" (Ganguly 2020) of Indian politics, perhaps signaling the "twilight of this Raj" (Appadurai 2021).

What can movements like the farmers' protest teach us about democracy? In Gezi Park, a heterogeneous group of citizens engaged in a collective protest, creating "a radical democratic public space" (Inceoglu 2015, 538) that challenged authoritarianism. They established a "culture of mutual care" where "everything from food to water, medical treatment to books was free of charge" (Karakayali and Yaka 2014, 125). Similarly, the farmers created a "protest with compassion" (Mander 2021), where many public services were accessible to all, forms of membership and belonging were inclusive, decision-making was collective, and citizens felt safe and empowered.

Both the farmers' protest and those at Gezi Park made use of religion to create new solidarities, with the former embracing Sikh and various syncretic practices and the latter embracing Islamic practices (Damar 2016). These protests demonstrate that an embrace of religion is not antithetical to liberal democracy and is not necessarily a harbinger of exclusion or oppression (Behl 2019). Religious practices, in fact, might serve to protect liberal democracy by enabling coalitions across religion, class, language, caste, age, and gender and making possible the emergence of inclusive political subjectivities.

Although traditional approaches to social movements often reduce the politics of protest to "rational (collective) action," some scholars suggest studying protests as a "moment of emergence" that cannot be reduced to its constitutive parts (Karakayali and Yaka 2014, 123), whereas others call for a "processual analysis of opportunities" (Meyer 2004, 126) that avoids mechanistic understandings. To understand movements like Gezi Park and the farmers' protest (Jodhka 2022), political scientists need to understand how, even for a short time, protests can be both places of being and becoming in which egalitarian political imaginaries can be envisioned and enacted, heterogeneous political subjectivities can emerge, and robust

solidarities rooted in inclusive social practices and norms can be created. The farmers' protest demonstrates hope by highlighting the promise of democracy in action, precisely at a moment when an increasingly authoritarian regime seeks to close it down.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

## ETHICAL STANDARDS

The author affirms this research did not involve human subjects.

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