



Jurnal Kajian Agraria dan Kedaulatan Pangan

Journal homepage: <https://talenta.usu.ac.id/jkakp>



State and Farmers' Protest in India

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 8 December 2024

Revised 22 December 2024

Accepted 30 December 2024

Available online:

<https://talenta.usu.ac.id/jkakp>

E-ISSN: 2829-4793

ABSTRACT

The Indian farmers' protests against the government's agricultural reforms marked a pivotal moment in the country's history, resonating not only nationally but also garnering international scrutiny and support. The Marxist theory of the state, which holds that the state primarily serves as an instrument of class power, advancing the interests of the ruling capitalist class at the expense of the working class, is used to study the farmers' response to the creation farmers' bills in India. This article employs the study of documents containing secondary data from the journal, news, working paper, and official website. The analysis highlights that the government has consistently favored capitalist interests, contributing to the marginalization of these farmers, and the current laws are seen as a continuation of this trend, further entrenching the power of large agribusinesses. The farmers, therefore, represent a significant moment of struggle against neoliberal policies that prioritize corporate interests ahead of the demands of the agrarian community.

Keyword: State and Farmer, Protest, Marxist Theory of the State, Agrarian Community.



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<http://doi.org/10.32734/jkakp.v3i2.19120>

1. Introduction

The widespread demonstrations by Indian farmers in 2020 protesting the government's agricultural reforms marked a pivotal moment in the country's history, resonating not only nationally but also garnering international scrutiny and support (Ganapathy, 2021). The protests, which began in November 2020, were a response to the three farm laws introduced by the central government, which aimed to deregulate the agricultural sector and remove the longstanding minimum support price system for key crops (Abbi, 1999; Pathak, 2023). The farmers, predominantly from the states of Punjab, Haryana, and western Uttar Pradesh, consolidated under various unions and organizations to voice their concerns over the potential impact of these laws on their livelihoods and the broader agricultural

ecosystem (Abbi, 1999). The demonstrations, which saw thousands of farmers converge on the borders of the national capital New Delhi, were marked by resilience and determination, as the protesters braved the Coronavirus 19 pandemic, harsh winter conditions, and the government's attempts to suppress the movement (Cariappa et al., 2022; Vatta et al., 2021).

The farmers' protest was not merely a reaction to the specific farm laws but rather a manifestation of the underlying tensions and challenges faced by the agricultural community in India. The protesters argued that the reforms would erode their bargaining power, expose them to the whims of corporate interests, and undermine the role of state-regulated wholesale markets, known as *mandis*, which have long served as a lifeline for small and marginal farmers (Abbi, 1999). This circumstance can be analyzed through the lens of Marxist theory of the state, as they involve the dynamics of class struggle, state power, and economic forces that benefit the capitalist elite at the expense of the working class and peasants and farmers.

Marxist theory has long grappled with the concept of the state and its role in a capitalist society. The idea that the state is a tool of class dominance, employed by the ruling class to hold onto power and oppress the working class, is one of the fundamental principles of Marxism. This instrumentalist view of the state is crucial in understanding the Marxist approach to analyzing social conflicts and resistance movements, such as the recent farmer protests in India. The Marxist perspective suggests that the state in a capitalist society is not a neutral arbiter, but rather a tool that serves the interests of the ruling class, typically the bourgeoisie. The state's power is wielded to preserve the existing social relations and protect the economic interests of the dominant class. This understanding of the state as an instrument of class rule has implications for how Marxists approach the analysis of social and political conflicts (Das, 2006; Jessop, 1982).

In the case of the farmer protests in India, the Marxist lens suggests that the state's response to the protests can be understood as an attempt to defend the interests of the ruling class, which may include large corporate entities, landowners, and other powerful economic actors. Apart from other literature, this article use Marxist theory which focuses on the broader structural issues of capitalism, class struggle, and the dynamics of production relations. Empirical literature, on the other hand, often provides detailed accounts of the farmer protests, emphasizing specific events, actions, and local dynamics. The gap lies in the generalization of the protests' significance within a Marxist framework versus the particularities observed in on-the-ground research.

2. Research Method

The qualitative approach used in this article is based on ideas from the interpretive or critical social sciences. Cultural meanings and "cases and contexts" are the language of qualitative research. The focus is on thoroughly analyzing a few situations that naturally occur in social interactions

(Neuman, 2011). The case, background, and significance of the Indian farmers' protests against their government policy are covered in this article. The research of documents with secondary data from the journal, news, working paper, and official website is used in this piece. We use the Marxist theory of the state to understand the farmers' protest of new policy from their state.

3. Results and Discussion

The disagreement between the people of developing nations and their governments as a result of the 2020 economic upheaval is exemplified by the protests of Indian farmers. Three new agricultural legislation intended to overhaul India's farming sector were introduced by the Indian Parliament in August 2020 (aljazeera.com, 2020). Farmers in a number of Indian states staged widespread protests after these Farm Bills were signed into law in September (Ellis-Petersen, 2020). The bulk of Indian farmers depend on regulations like minimum selling prices and stockpiling limitations to compete with big corporations, and the laws fundamentally deregulate these components of the agricultural industry. Additionally, they establish the foundation for an electronic trading network, which empowers national and international enterprises and is a service that few farmers can afford. In order to entice foreign private investment, the Indian government proposed measures that farmers in a number of less developed areas saw as a threat to their livelihoods. Farmers' organizations have presented a list of proposals to ease tensions as the protests have gathered steam since the first demonstrations. The repeal of the Farm Bills and the passage of new laws to assist farmers in overcoming the difficulties they encountered prior to the passage of the Farm Bills are among these demands. The protests have intensified over the course of several months, attracting international attention. The demonstrations have increased in scale and fervor, causing confrontations with police, which have led to multiple injuries and deaths. Given the large crowd of demonstrators and the administration's attempts to quell the protests, this matter demands substantial focus. The best resolution to this issue is for the Indian government to annul these bills and concentrate on resolving the enduring struggles encountered by the farmers of India, who make up a large segment of the population. The timeline about the farmers protest in India are shown in the following table.

Table 1. Timeline of India Farmers' Protest to Farm Bills

| No | Event | Time |
|----|---|-----------------|
| 1 | The government of India has introduced farm bills, which consist of the Farmers' Produce Trade and Commerce Bill, the Farmers Agreement on Price Assurance and Farm Services Bill, and the Essential Commodities Bill. All of these intended to liberalize the agricultural market. | September, 2020 |
| 2 | Following the passing of the bills, farmers from Punjab and Haryana began mobilizing for protests, expressing | September, 2020 |

| | | |
|---|--|--------------------------------|
| | fears that the bills would dismantle the Minimum Support Price (MSP) system. | |
| 3 | Farmers organized a nationwide strike known as Bharat Bandh to oppose the bills, which saw widespread participation across different sectors | December, 2020 |
| 4 | Farmers set up camps at the borders of Delhi, particularly at Singhu and Tikri, demanding the repeal of the laws. This sit-in protest continued for months, with farmers facing harsh winter conditions. | November, 2020- February, 2021 |
| 5 | On 2021 India's Republic Day, protests escalated resulting in violent clashes between farmers and police. Farmers deviated from the agreed route to take their tractor rally into the heart of Delhi. | January, 2021 |
| 6 | The Indian government held several rounds of talks with farmer leaders but failed to reach an agreement. The farmers refused to move until their demands for a complete repeal of the laws were met. | Late 2020 to early 2021 |
| 7 | Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced the repeal of the three farm bills during a public address, after wide protests | November, 2021 |

Source: compiled by authors

For many farmers in India, the Farm Bills symbolize a betrayal following years of escalating difficulties. Previously, Prime Minister Narendra Modi pledged to transform the agricultural sector and asserted that the Farm Bills would advantage farmers. Nevertheless, numerous farmers, especially in areas like Punjab that have traditionally faced decreasing output and increasing expenses, view the Farm Bills as a way to marginalize the typical farmer and provide corporations with unbridled authority over India's farming industry. Protest organizers have emphasized that the Farm Bills arrive during a period of severe hardship for farmers, pointing to an increasing incidence of farmer suicides in recent decades. It is clear that numerous farmers in India have needed increased government support for a long time, and their worries regarding the Farm Bills show a critical scenario. Having a thorough grasp of the movement and its roots, it is evident that for the benefit of India's farmers, the government ought to repeal these detrimental laws and strive to uphold farmers' rights, create a fair-trade framework, and prioritize the modernization of rural regions to relieve their struggles instead of threatening their livelihoods.

When the Farm Bills were passed in September 2020, the Indian government asserted that they would revitalize the agricultural sector and facilitate greater participation by corporations in the market. Prime Minister Modi stated that the new laws would bring technological innovation to India's farmers, leading to increased production, and described the laws as "a welcome step". To comprehend the rationale behind passing the laws and the hostile response from farmers, it is necessary to examine the three laws more closely. The first bill primarily addresses the commercial aspect of the farming industry, amending the rules and regulations governing how farmers trade and sell their produce, as

well as proposing a new framework for electronic-based trade. The second bill establishes a price assurance system and expands on contract farming. The third bill, which came as a particular shock to farmers, removes limits on stockholding for several different categories of produce, giving large-scale agricultural corporations an advantage in terms of supply and shipping. Each of these bills instilled fear in regular farmers, particularly because the rights they guarantee only serve to assist larger producers and offer rights that local farmers would not have much need for. Additionally, they create a framework in which corporations will have almost absolute control over pricing and supply, effectively squeezing out farmers from the market. Lastly, the laws eliminate the government-guaranteed minimum pricing for selling crops, a provision that helped farmers maintain their livelihoods.

When the Farm Bills were enacted in September 2020, the Indian government claimed that they would rejuvenate the agricultural sector and encourage increased corporate involvement in the market. Prime Minister Modi remarked that the new regulations would introduce technological advancements for India's farmers, resulting in boosted production, and he referred to the laws as “a positive move.” To understand the reasoning for enacting the laws and the negative reaction from farmers, it is essential to scrutinize the three laws in greater detail. The initial bill mainly focuses on the business side of agriculture, modifying the laws and regulations that control how farmers market and sell their goods, while also suggesting a new structure for electronic trading. The second bill creates a price guarantee system and elaborates on contract farming. The third bill, which surprised farmers significantly, eliminates restrictions on stockholding for various categories of produce, thereby granting large-scale agricultural companies an edge in supply and shipping. Every one of these laws generated anxiety among ordinary farmers, especially since the rights they provide primarily benefit bigger producers and offer protections that local farmers would find largely unnecessary. Moreover, they establish a system that grants companies near total authority over pricing and supply, essentially pushing farmers out of the marketplace. Finally, the legislation removes the government-backed minimum price for crop sales, a regulation that supported farmers in sustaining their livelihoods.

The role of the state in the creation of the three farmers' bills in India can be critically analyzed through the lens of Marxist theory, which suggests that the state mainly acts as a tool of class power, catering to the needs of the dominant capitalist class to the detriment of the working class (Roy, 2022). In this context, the Indian state has been perceived as aligning itself with the interests of large corporations and agribusinesses, particularly during the formulation and passage of these bills, which were introduced with minimal consultation and debate. This lack of democratic engagement underscores a broader trend where state policies prioritize corporate profits over the welfare of the agrarian community.

The bills facilitate deregulation and privatization of agricultural markets, effectively dismantling the existing frameworks that provide some level of protection for farmers, such as the

Minimum Support Price (MSP). This shift raises significant concerns among farmers, who fear that deregulation will lead to their exploitation by large corporations, thereby exacerbating their vulnerability to market fluctuations. The protests that erupted in response to these laws reflect a deep-seated class struggle, as farmers mobilize against what they perceive as an existential threat to their livelihoods and way of life. This situation is further complicated by the historical context of an ongoing agrarian crisis in India, characterized by declining incomes, increasing debt, and a lack of state support for small and marginal farmers.

The Marxist analysis highlights that the state has consistently favored capitalist interests, contributing to the marginalization of these farmers, and the current laws are seen as a continuation of this trend, further entrenching the power of large agribusinesses. The farmers' protests, therefore, represent a significant moment of resistance against neoliberal policies that prioritize corporate interests over the agrarian community's needs. This movement has the potential to forge alliances among various classes affected by these policies, including agricultural workers and small traders, as they recognize their shared struggles against the state's alignment with capitalist interests. The involvement of leftist organizations in mobilizing farmers and articulating their grievances is crucial, as they can help frame the struggle in class terms, fostering solidarity among diverse groups facing similar challenges. Ultimately, the ongoing resistance against the farmers' bills may serve as a catalyst for broader social and economic change, challenging the existing power dynamics in Indian agriculture and highlighting the need for a more equitable and just agricultural policy framework that prioritizes the rights and livelihoods of the working class.

4. Conclusion

Marxist state of theory, which holds that the state primarily serves as an instrument of class power, advancing the interests of the ruling capitalist class at the expense of the working class, especially farmers, can be used to study the state's involvement in creating farmers bill in India. The proposals dismantle current frameworks that offer farmers some degree of protection, like the Minimum Support Price (MSP), and enable the liberalization and privatization of agricultural markets. Farmers are concerned about this change because they believe deregulation would increase their susceptibility to market swings and allow big businesses to take advantage of them. An important moment of struggle against neoliberal policies that put corporate interests ahead of the demands of the agrarian community is represented by the farmers' protests. Leftist groups participation in organizing farmers and voicing their complaints.

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