A New Class Alliance in the Indian Countryside?

From New Farmers' Movements to the 2020 Protest Wave

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Abstract

Processes of socio-economic differentiation alter balances of power. This article explores the possibility that the current wave of farmers' protests partly reflects a re-setting of class alliances in the Indian countryside centred on small farmers and farmer-labourers who now account for over 85% of farming households. It does so by returning to the New Farmers Movement mobilisations of the 1980s and 1990s, and comparing three key relations between then and now: relations between farmers and the state, between farmers and large capital, and relations *within* the countryside between larger and smaller farmers and landless labourers. Smaller farmers, it is argued, are now more likely to ally with farmer-labourers and the landless, who are in turn less dependent on larger farmers than they used to be because of the growth of non-agricultural wage-labour. The neo-liberal Indian state's pro-corporate Farm Bills mean that contradictions *within* the countryside are for now over-shadowed by external contradictions. And if implemented they will accelerate processes of socio-economic differentiation in ways that make a new centre of political gravity in the Indian countryside more likely.

Keywords: Farmers' Movements; Class; Caste; Agribusiness; Punjab; Karnataka

After two decades on the side-lines, Indian Farmers' Movements are back at the forefront of national politics - dominating the news and unsettling India's neoliberal, pro-corporate BJP government. This article locates the current wave of farmers' protests in a broader historical context of agrarian political dynamics, and suggests that it *may* reflect a re-setting of class alliances in the Indian countryside with an emerging centre of gravity among small farmers and labourers – in contrast to the last major wave of farmers' protests a generation ago which was anchored among better-off male farmers who mostly hailed from dominant castes.

The Farm Bills threaten the interests of labourers as well as the bulk of farmers, and particularly smaller farmers. Many smaller farmers have already seen their relative socio-economic position slip - a predicament rendered more acute by damaging Covid-19-induced lockdowns, which have also affected rural-based labourers.[i] Structurally, the Indian countryside is well-set for a broad alliance of less wealthy sections: 79 per cent of rural households and 68.45 per cent of farming households own less than a hectare of land (Table 1). While this is enough for some to get by, most Indian farmers cannot survive from their land alone, and have to work as wage-labourers as well. The overlapping economic concerns of labourers, farmer-labourers and struggling smaller farmers who fear the loss of their land has *the potential* to re-set agrarian politics in India, in spite of divisive caste ideologies.

Table 1: Proportion of number of operational holdings all-India, size wise, 1980-81 and 2015-16

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Size Class	1980-81	2015-16
Marginal (0.01-1ha)	56.39	68.45
Small (1.01-2.0 ha)	18.08	17.62
Others (2.01 ha and above)	25.52	13.92
All Sizes	100	100

Source: All India Report on Number and Area of Operational Holdings, Agricultural Census Division, GoI, 2019

As processes of socio-economic differentiation unfold over time they throw up contrasting political dynamics, and moments in the balance of class forces. The rise of the last wave of farmers' movements in the 1980s and 1990s represented, this paper argues, a convergence of the interests of growing numbers of commercially-oriented farmers as the input-heavy state-mediated wave of Green Revolution accumulation rolled across much of the Indian countryside. It united all commercial farmers in their search for better terms of trade, but it excluded the smallest farmers, the landless, and Dalits whose socio-economic positions were worsening in relative terms.

During the 2000s New Farmers Movements subsided, the wind sucked from their sails in part by the growing diversification of bases of accumulation in rural India (Pattenden 2011; 2016). Larger numbers of better-off farmers were taking up high-value crops, moving into agribusiness, accessing local government resources, or investing in towns. More fingers in more pies diffused the clamour for better terms of trade for 'traditional crops' whose terms of trade were largely set by the state.

Smaller farmers, whose cropping patterns had changed little, maintained an appetite for collective action, but they had not been at the helm of the earlier protests and lacked the social power to renew them. At this point, then, one might somewhat crudely suggest that cross-class unity among farmers' middling to upper tiers was petering out, while unity between the middling and lower tiers of rural India was yet to take shape - in part due to the ongoing divisiveness of caste and its ability to smother horizontal social alliances.

Fast-forward to the present, and the continuing process of socio-economic differentiation, added to a sense of growing vulnerability in the face of Farm reforms, and the material impacts of Covid-19, may be throwing up a different political dynamic in some regions: an emerging alliance of smaller farmers, farmer-labourers and landless labourers that is tentatively nudging its way across caste and gender-based divisions.

Political realignments at moments of heightened economic distress have varying durability. We argue that the recent wave of farmers' protests underlined *the potential for* an alliance based around those who reproduce themselves through a combination of petty commodity production including small-scale farming, other forms of petty self-employment, and wage-labour within and outside of agriculture (Bernstein 2006). More specifically such an alliance would bring together those who share an interest in accessing more land and more work: farmers who also work as wage-labourers as they lack enough land to reproduce their households, and labourers who either have very small landholdings or are landless and cannot access enough wage-labour[ii].

Contradictions within the Indian countryside have not gone away of course, but for now they have been eclipsed by the visceral alliance between the neoliberal Indian state and large transnational agribusiness corporations as the latter attempt to loosen pathways to appropriating a greater share of the value produced in India's fields – an alliance that might still prompt some Sangh Parivar members to dust down copies of *Hind Swaraj*,[iii] and that relates to broader geopolitical fault-lines forged by the ways in which capitalism's competitive dynamics (re-)sharpen antagonisms between nation-states.[iv] These 'external' contradictions, we argue, re-work those within by accelerating

processes of socio-economic differentiation and increasing the proportion of farmers, farmer-labourers and labourer-farmers with deteriorating conditions.

And so this paper aims to shed some light on the current wave of farmers' protests by returning to the mass mobilisations of the 1980s and 1990s, and the relative lull of the 2000s that came in between. The analysis is structured around the three central 'relations' that, along with the ebb and flow of uneven accumulation within and beyond the countryside, explain the rise and fall of farmers' movements in the nineteen-eighties and late nineties, and their recent resurgence. These three are: relations between farmers and the state, relations between farmers and large capital, and relations *within* the countryside between larger and smaller farmers and landless labourers.

While the paper analyses the earlier wave of farmers' protests largely in relation to contradictions *within* the countryside, it analyses the political significance of the current wave of protests primarily in relation to contradictions *beyond* the countryside. The New Farmers Movements of the 1980s and 1990s, this paper argues, were not progressive organisations. They were led by better-off farmers and not in the interests of Dalits, women, the landless, net buyers of foodgrains, or the smallest farmers who make ends meet primarily by working for others (Banaji 1994; Nadkarni 1987; Assadi 1997; Pattenden 2005). And they were clearly distinct from earlier movements of landless labourers, tenant farmers and what were once called poor and middle peasants (see, for example, Alavi 1973 on the Telangana movement).

This remains the case to a considerable degree, but the greater contradiction, for now, pivots against large capital and the right-wing extremists presiding over the Lok Sabha. The current government's pro-corporate stance has exacerbated contradictions between farmers, and the state and large capital. Consequently, although the contradictions *within* the countryside between capitalist farmers on the one hand and landless labourers and farmer-labourers on the other are in no way diminished (see, for example, Breman 2019), the current moment is one where contradictions beyond the countryside takes political precedence.

We assess the scope for a genuine broad alliance of agrarian classes today by analysing the three major legislative changes relating to agricultural markets, contract farming and essential commodities. We also briefly assess very preliminary evidence that a cross-class alliance is emerging in parts of the Indian countryside. While the impacts of the three main legislative changes will vary substantially across social classes and across Indian states, taken as a whole we argue that the laws threaten the interests of landless labourers, the urban poor, and all but the largest farmers. Consequently, the current moment offers up greater possibilities for a broad-based alliance capable of reconfiguring the balance of power. Central to that argument is the threat to the Public Distribution System that lurks within the legislative changes, as well as the likely broader upwards pressure on food costs stemming from the Farm Bills as a whole. While the threat posed to farmers that remain tightly plumbed into the public procurement system is the main driving force of the current protests, this to some degree distracts from a broader sharpening of antagonisms that should also not be seen in isolation from the ongoing loosening of labour laws. The government is eager to open up larger spaces for big capital and cheapen its running costs so that India can increase its mark on the global economy - at the cost of its poorest citizens.

The paper proceeds by analysing the New Farmers Movements of the 1980s and 1990s in terms of relations between farmers and the state, and between farmers and capital, but above all in terms of relations within the countryside. The second part analyses the legislative changes in order to support its argument about the current wave of protests. It ends by providing tentative evidence of the broader social bases of today's farmers' movement.

New Farmers Movement in the 1980s and 1990s: the State, Petty Capitalists and the Contradictions within

In 1989 hundreds of thousands of farmers flooded into Delhi in one of a series of mass rallies that punctuated the late 1980s and early 1990s (Varshney 1995, 1). At their peak no national government risked the ire of New Farmers Movements that were mobilising across India – perhaps most notably as the Bharatiya Kisan Union (BKU) in the North and the Karnataka Rajya Raitha Sangha (KRRS) in the south. But barely a decade later these New Farmers Movements' social bases had thinned out. Their protests had become limited in scope, and the national stage had slipped out of view.

Why? And how had these movements become so prominent in the first place? The answer to these questions lies in understanding how Indian farmers accumulate, and their relations with the state, large capital and each other. We argue that the initial confrontation with the state as the Green Revolution unfolded across the country was followed by *a rapprochement* at the local level. We argue furthermore that the cross-class alliance of farmers that carried the protest wave of the 1980s and 1990s was fractured by a growing diversification of economic activities between capitalist farmers and what was once known as the middle peasantry. And finally, we argue that the New Farmers Movements of the 1980s and 1990s were led by the dominant sections of the countryside – male capitalist farmers who predominantly came from the ranks of rural India's dominant castes such as the Jats of Uttar Pradesh, the Lingayats and Vokkaligas of Karnataka, Marathas of Maharashtra, Gounders of Tamil Nadu, and Reddys and Kammas of Andhra Pradesh (eg. Nadkarni 1987). Women and Dalits and agricultural labourers were not only largely absent, their desire for higher wages was anathema to the movement leadership's search for better terms of trade. Its profits depended most fundamentally on their exploitation – as providers of labour on the land and reproductive labour in the home.

New Farmers Movements in the 1980s sought to improve the terms of agricultural trade. The Green Revolution had placed government policy at the centre of village economies. It set output prices for key agricultural commodities and provided subsidies for key inputs such as seeds, chemical fertilisers, and electricity to power borewells. The gains were unevenly spread, but all commercial farmers benefitted from improved terms of trade. And most farmers were now commercial farmers, although many were such on coercive terms (Bharadwaj 1985). Even some farmer-labourers identified with the movement, but generally only if they were from the dominant caste (Pattenden 2006).

The contradictions within were palpable. Mobilisations to push up farmgate prices were more likely for cash crops like sugar that were grown by better-off farmers, than foodgrains for which higher prices would increase the living costs of poorer net food buying households (eg. Nadkarni 1987). Unsurprisingly the interests of agricultural labourers did not figure in the deeds of the New Farmers Movements because lower agricultural wages meant larger profits for petty capitalist farmers. Dalit labourers interviewed by one of the authors in north Karnataka in 2002 saw the KRRS as the organisation of those who employed and oppressed them, and who kept separate cups for them in cubby-holes behind the doors of village teashops.[v] Dalits were told to participate in mass rallies: loaded onto tractors and deposited in front of the dais. If they had refused to attend, they would have been barred from the fields and unable to earn the wages they needed to survive.

Movements on the Wane

Why did new farmers movements fade away in the 2000s? We propose three key reasons. Firstly, the clash with the state, which had still been raw in the 1980s due to the Green Revolution-inspired

spurt in commercialisation and the diffusion of a more input-heavy agriculture that pitted the bulk of the farmers against the government over the terms of trade, now lacked its initial edge. It had softened over time, in part because the widespread fiscal decentralisation that took place in a number of states in the early 2000s led many capitalist farmers to take up Gram Panchayat seats and chase petty infrastructure contracts - particularly in drier villages where agriculture was less remunerative (Pattenden 2016).

Secondly, and more critically, better-off farmers in many areas had diversified their cropping patterns, cultivating high-value crops or shifting surpluses into petty agribusiness ventures, land and real estate - [vi] part of a growing unevenness of patterns of accumulation in the Indian countryside (Lerche 2014). While the interest of some larger farmers waned, those who continued to grow less profitable crops still hollered for mobilisation, but lacked the social power to carry mass organisation. Degrees of diversification had always shaped New Farmers Movements' social bases: villages where better-off farmers had not diversified into petty agricultural input and output trading had unsurprisingly always generated a more united front (Banaji 1994).

A third reason for the waning of the movement was that labour was no longer so dependent on capitalist farmers for their livelihoods that they could be cajoled to attend demonstrations. Access to non-agricultural labour had increased – both through commuting to nearby towns and through seasonal or temporary migration to distant cities – part of a broader re-working of India's socio-political dynamics that was reflected in increased Dalit political assertiveness around this time (Jaffrelot 2003). These dynamics were gendered, with men accessing far greater levels of non-agricultural labour, and a considerable feminisation of the relations of domination and exploitation in many villages (eg. Da Corta and Venkateshwarlu 1999).

The Fall and Rise of Farmers' Protests: A cross-class alliance against big capital and the state.

New Farmers' Movements' social bases shrank in the 1990s. Alongside structural causes, divisions emerged as this or that faction flirted with electoral politics. The leadership increasingly emphasised opposition to transnational capital and neoliberal globalisation – an external enemy that helped to paper over the cracks within.[vii] More fundamentally, neoliberal globalisation posed a very real threat to farmers by opening the door to transnational capital to appropriate a greater share of the value they produced. Then, as now, India's mostly petty capitalist commercialised farmers were united against corporate capital. The BKU and KRRS both took part in international networks such as Via Campesina and Peoples' Global Action, participated in international protests against neoliberal globalisation (Madsen 2001), and launched 'Operation Cremate Monsanto' by digging up Bt Cotton trials.

If we fast-forward to the present, the partial rapprochement with the state that softened antagonisms between the state and a section of wealthier farmers has been over-shadowed by the broad-based antagonisms of the current legislative reforms and its unfettered neoliberal agenda. The current legislative changes extend and expand transnational capital's agenda of further prising open India's markets. The two opponents of the earlier wave of New Farmers Movements (the state and big capital) have been fused together as never before, sharpening the scope for a cross-class alliance in the countryside against the state and large capital. This does not mean that the contradictions within have gone away.[viii] The exploitation and domination of Dalit and other labourers in the fields of Punjab and elsewhere of course continues, but this seems to be *a moment* when progressive forces should primarily target the alliance between large capital and the Indian government.

The New Laws: Uneven Impacts

The article now turns to how the new legislation may shape class alliances in the Indian countryside. It assesses the uneven impacts on different social classes and different regions, and how it sharpens contradictions between farmers on the one hand, and the state and transnational capital on the other. The first act, the Farming Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Act 2020 (henceforth FPTC Act) incentivises private investment in agricultural markets through deregulation. Trade would be tax-free and buyers could operate without licenses or registration (Hussain 2020). Lower transaction costs in private yards will undermine the Agricultural Produce Marketing Committees (APMC) mandis and the system of public procurement (Rawal et al 2020).

The most direct impacts of undermining the APMCs will of course be primarily felt in those regions and among those farmers who currently sell a substantial share of their produce to them. But agricultural markets' increased spatial and temporal unevenness and volatility, we argue, will have a broader impact and hurt smaller farmers the most. And in undermining the system of public procurement, the FTPC will also undermine the Public Distribution System (PDS), which provides poorer households with foodgrains at a fraction of open market prices. Landless households and farmer-labourers who depend on the PDS to make ends meet will face upwards pressure on living costs and downwards pressure on real wages. This is likely to be exacerbated by the other two legislative changes: The Essential Commodities (Amendment) Act 2020 and the Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement on Price Assurance and Farm Services Act 2020, or the Contract Farming Act 2020. The former will further heighten food price volatility while the latter will help agribusiness corporations to expand their operations by providing a uniform national framework on Contract Farming that undermines states' capacity to regulate (Singh S. 2020).[ix] While certain to increase agribusiness TNCs' share of the value produced in Indian agriculture, we also argue that it is more likely to benefit larger farmers than smaller ones.

The geographical unevenness of the protests is partly explained by farmers' uneven access to APMCs by region, crop and class.[x] In Punjab and Haryana, the heartlands of the current protest wave, over 80% sold their kharif paddy crop above MSP in 2012-13– way above the all-India figure of 26% (Bhattacharya 2021). Here, access to MSPs has also benefitted both smaller farmers, and a broad-based agrarian alliance has emerged as a result (Sinha 2020). Analysis of the reasons why there has been relatively little agitation in some states like Madhya Pradesh that have high levels of sales to APMCs is beyond the scope of this paper, but Punjab's long history of Farmers' Movements is part of the explanation, along with its proximity to the national capital and relative caste-class coherence with farming dominated by Jat Sikhs.[xi] Parts of the country retain greater caste fractures and even steeper social hierarchies (Harriss 1999), while others have seen recent mobilisation dampened by party-based patron-client relations.[xii] In such places collective action is harder to build and requires more external support.

In some regions the smallest farmers can only access (effectively privatised) APMCs through powerful intermediaries with links to political parties, or are excluded. In some states the share of agricultural produce sold through APMCs is in the lower single figures (Das 2020), and one controversial estimate suggests that as little as 6% of Indian farmers sell through APMCs (GoI 2015).

This is most probably an underestimate (Khera et al 2020) and it also overlooks the FTPC's broader implications for price volatility for both farmers and consumers. The FTPC Act will strengthen the hand of private traders, and is likely, in conjunction with Essential Commodities (Amendment) Act (see below), to heighten hoarding and price manipulation. All farmers will be vulnerable to increased market fluctuations, but larger farmers are better placed to negotiate price volatility and spatial

price differentials. Those with more diversified cropping patterns, and who already primarily trade privately, are likely to gain. In Maharashtra the Shetkari Sanghathana supports the Acts (as it supported TNC interests in the 1990s) because the predominantly Maratha capitalist farmers that are its social base occupy advantageous positions in private markets. This, though, does not negate the antipathy of a swathe of larger farmers, particularly in states with higher levels of procurement through APMCs. As Shrimali (2020) has suggested, many larger farmers like to adopt an array of accumulation strategies that might encompass some horticulture, some contract farming and the security of grain production with assured MSPs. So even those who *might* gain from the Acts in net terms may still resist them as they object to constraints on their range of economic strategies. Those larger farmers who double up as commission agents for the APMCs, meanwhile, are more likely to lose out overall (Sinha 2020).

Smaller farmers, especially those routinely under pressure to clear loans to middlemen, are often compelled to sell cheaply at harvest time. And when the vagaries of over-production trigger sudden price drops in unregulated markets, larger farmers live to fight another day and have the time to recoup losses. But for smaller farmers, who borrowed money for inputs, the losses can morph into long-term interest burdens leading to land being mortgaged or sold. Such fears are palpable among smaller farmers at Tikri and elsewhere.

Going forward, the FPTC Act's capacity to galvanise a durable cross-class alliance against the reforms primarily lies in its undermining of the Public Distribution System. Although it largely only exists because Indian labourers are underpaid, the PDS plays a critical role in the material conditions of many of India's poorest citizens (Dreze and Sen 2013). And if the APMCs go out of business, the supply of PDS foodgrains will break down. The PDS would then most likely be replaced with lower-value cash transfers – something that the Central Government has long been angling for (GoI 2015).

The amendments to the Essential Commodities Act are likely to exacerbate rising food costs by restricting the regulation of prices of essential food items. This will increase the scope for private traders, processors and exporters to work markets to their advantage, and may increase hoarding (Sarkar and Bhattacharya 2020). Greater volatility of farmgate prices and essential commodities will harm smaller farmers and net food buyers the most.

Another ingredient in the mix for those who struggle to make ends meet is the capacity of the Contract Farming Act 2020 to further nudge up the cost of living. Although liberalising agricultural markets may sometimes benefit net-buyers of food when cheap imports put downwards pressure on food prices, the countervailing pressures are often greater and this particular legislative change, by increasing contract farming and export-oriented TNC-channelled production, may well reduce the share of India's arable land that is used for food crops, and for the Indian market. And the liberalisation of prices for commodities like oilseeds facilitated by the Essential Commodities (Amendment) Act may also increase the possibility for cultivating oilseeds for biofuel (Shrimali 2021), thereby further cutting into India's domestically produced supply of foodcrops.

The clearest winners from the changes will be large agribusiness capital, who would be able to ratchet up their share of the value produced in the Indian countryside through procurement, processing, storage, transportation and retail. Increased volumes of international agricultural trade will flow to a large degree through the 'big four' global grain traders[xiii]. And the reduced share of agricultural value appropriated by middlemen and smaller traders will increase the share of agribusiness corporations and help ease up the size of their margins. In addition, growing levels of contract farming tied to purchases of TNC-controlled seeds and chemicals would increase their domination of these parts of agricultural commodity chains (Das Gupta 2019, 59-65).

And, again, smaller farmers will lose proportionally more. Larger famers are more likely to gain alongside large agribusiness corporations as they are better equipped to supply exports windows. They are also more likely to get involved in contract farming. There are indications that corporations prefer to avoid tie-ups with the smallest farmers as the transaction costs are too high (Sharma 2015) – not that this would necessarily benefit them as the implications of increased contract farming are not clear-cut. While a study from Karnataka points to higher incomes on contract farms, it also shows that slightly larger farms are more likely to be involved (Kumar and Kumar 2008). A detailed recent study of contract farming in Maharashtra, meanwhile, indicates that contract farming largely reproduces existing dynamics of simple and expanded reproduction among petty commodity producing farmers (Vicol 2019), while others argue more unequivocally that contract farming contributes to the dynamics of socio-economic differentiation (Shrimali 2020).

A cross-class alliance on the ground?

The earlier wave of farmers' movements subsided because of changes in relations between farmers and the state, relations among farmers, and relations between farmers and labourers. Some larger farmers became part of the state as Panchayat members and Presidents. A growing diversification of farmers' fortunes and accumulation strategies eroded the common ground, and labour in most parts of India was no longer beholden to larger landowners in the way that it had been.

These dynamics are no longer playing out the same way. Broad-based farmer opposition to the state has returned, amplified by the government's dogged commitment to corporate interests, and the contradictions between petty and large-scale capital that this throws up. The diversification of farmers' accumulation strategies has not necessarily abated, but the more notable story is the growing convergence of socio-economic stresses experienced by the majority of Indian farmers who are not only unable to accumulate through agriculture, but unable to make ends meet and forced to take up other forms of petty self-employment and wage-labour as what Bernstein (2006) calls classes of labour. This poorer majority of farmers have more in common with landless labourers than capitalist farmers, and especially so due to the material deprivations caused by Covid-19. What is more, the landless Dalit labourers who were once cajoled into attending farmers' movements have more political space than they once had, especially where their families access non-agricultural employment and can make ends meet beyond the socio-political dynamics of villages' economic hierarchies.

Navsharan Singh's (2017) finely grained study of agrarian politics in parts of Punjab pinpoints three movements that show concrete examples of the ever-present inter-related struggles of class, caste and gender-based inequalities: those for Dalits' access to communal land, against the rape of Dalit women, and for compensation for the suicides of small farmers and labourers. These relate to structural inequality, and to processes of domination and exploitation in everyday relations of society, production and exchange – the core, in varying forms, of any alliance of the majority.

The Zameen Prapti Sangharsh Committee (Committee to Take Back the Land) was set up in 2013 to enable Dalits to claim common lands earmarked for them since 1961, but often denied them by dominant Jat Sikh landowners. Common lands are significant in socio-political as well as socio-economic terms: they reduce dependence and open some political space for Dalit labourers who can grow some fodder and foodcrops, graze their livestock and go to the toilet without being obliged to run the gauntlet of sexual harassment and violence. The ZPSC's focus on land places it in the long tradition of agrarian movements of small farmers and labourers for redistributive land reform (eg. Alavi 1973), and related more recent mobilisations.[xiv] .

Two other organisations and their periodic collaboration provide evidence of 'new solidarities and political alliances of the oppressed' (Singh 2017, 30). In 2014 the Punjab Khet Mazdoor Union (Punjab Agricultural Labourers Union) and the BKU-Ekta Ugrahan mobilised together in Bathinda in the southern Punjab. Demands focused on attempts to prevent the loss of communal lands, compensation for lands that had been appropriated, the provision of homestead lands, and compensation for suicides by small farmers and landless labourers, which are generally linked to deteriorating socio-economic conditions.

In the village of Matoi, Dalit women led the struggle against the alienation of common lands and sexual violence. When dominant Jat farmers pushed back, one Dalit woman said 'I am not afraid….we have a toilet in the house, my brother works in Malerkotla as a casual labourer, and my father will get green fodder from his Muslim friends. We don't need these people [Jat landowners]. We never will' (Sethi 2014 cited in Singh 2017, 35). This reduced dependence is key to the emergence and sustaining of cross-class cross-caste anti-patriarchal struggles. And struggles around Dalit access to land and violence against women are core aspects of what is meant by a progressive rural politics. They fuse issues of gender, caste and class in ways that challenge structures of patriarchal and casteist violence, exploitation, and the appropriation of natural resources.

During repeated visits to protest sites in late 2020, Sangeet Toor (2020) noted women's growing participation in the mass mobilisations around Delhi – particularly those from small farmer and labouring families. She refers to the presence of a number of groups with different social bases but overlapping socio-economic concerns such as the ZPSC and the Farmer-Worker Suicide Victim Farmers Committee (Kisan Majdoor Khudkushi Peerat Parvar), an alliance of small farmers, farmer-labourers and the landless whose long-running socio-economic pressures have become more acute during Covid-19's disruptions of markets and production. A report by Punjab Agricultural University revealed that of the total 2890 farm suicides in two districts of Punjab, 61% were farmers and 39% were agricultural labourers (Padhi 2012).

And in these protest 'convergence spaces',[xv] the very process of mobilising thickens ties and solidarities that cross lines of class, caste and gender, and unite *all those whose surplus-labour is appropriated.* And as the primary providers of reproductive labour in rural Indian households, women feel the 'simple reproduction squeeze' more than anyone. Women at the protest sites referring to growing indebtedness to microfinance institutions due to Covid-19's squeezing of rural incomes is one example of how they do so.

All commercialised farmers, including smaller farmers, benefit from MSPs and APMCs. The same was true during the first wave of NFMs that focused on better terms of trade. But this article started out by asking if there is a shifting centre of gravity in the Indian countryside – one that may come to be dominated by smaller farmers and landless labourers rather than by the petty capitalist farmers who led the KRRS and the BKU in the 1990s. And on this, as has been noted here, there is some evidence on the ground – particularly in Punjab. Although most farmers' organisations, as before, are dominated by better-off farmers, farmer-labourers and the landless are also taking part, and one of the largest farmers organisations, the BKU (Ekta Ugrahan), has made conscious efforts to forge relations across class and caste divides, and has supported specific labour union agitations. It has also called for mostly female Dalit labourers to be included in a compensation package for a failed cotton crop (Sinha 2020). The decision of the BKU-EU to *sometimes* step over caste lines is pragmatic -Punjab has the largest proportion of Dalits of any state, which increases the need for, and value of, cross-caste alliance[xvi]. And its (related) partial step over class lines stems in part from the fact that its core social bases are mostly among smaller farmers in southern parts of Punjab that have been particularly affected by high indebtedness, falling water-tables, and high incidences of cancer and

suicides (Grover et al 2016). Smaller farmers fear no longer being able to make a living from farming, losing their land and having to turn increasingly to wage-labour. They can also perhaps relate more readily to the conditions of labourers than they once did.

While in north Karnataka in the early 2000s the accumulation strategies of larger and smaller farmers were diverging, in Punjab the experiences of small farmers and labourers have been converging. And while Dalit labourers turned their backs on all dominant caste farmers in Karnataka in the early 2000s, in Punjab they are sometimes sharing platforms with poorer dominant caste farmers. Incipient signs of a changing centre of gravity indeed, but as yet only in relatively isolated pockets. Singh (2017, 40) argues that Punjab has experienced relatively high levels of agrarian distress linked to ecological stress, flat-lining yields, widespread indebtedness, increasingly polarised control over land, and downwards pressures on wages. Such dynamics are present in other states, including in those where farmer incomes are lower and suicide rates higher, without galvanising cross-class/caste organisations. The tendency for potential alliances of landless labourers and farmer-labourers to be undermined by caste has not receded in most contexts despite the weakening of traditional forms of capital-labour ties in the countryside due to commuting and migration to cities. The KRRS had support from farmers who hovered on either side of surplus and deficit, but those farmers who also routinely worked as labourers only supported the KRRS if they were Lingayats or Vokkaligas (Pattenden 2006). And today in Punjab, the erosion of caste divisions goes hand-in-hand with Jat reactions to Dalits, including in relation to the ZPSC's claims for common lands - a reminder that elements of cross-caste alliance are still fragile.

Similar organisations to the ZPSC have come and gone in other parts of the country without any broader consolidation of a new class alliance in the countryside across caste lines linking labour and small farmers. There is nothing inevitable about the shift in agrarian politics this article discusses, and the conditions are riper in parts of Punjab than they are in most of the country, but these episodes of resistance speak to the widespread *potential* for such a process of change – rendered more visible by the crude pro-corporate tilt of the New Delhi government, and more palpable by the spike in material deprivation wrought by the Covid-19 pandemic.

The public cross-class, caste and gender solidarities in Punjab's protests' heartlands provide glimpses of the bases of broad-based alliance that exist in objective terms across the country. There have also been broad-based mobilisations in other states in recent years – long marches and claims for land that echo much earlier mobilisations of the less wealthy sections of the population. The bulk of the rural population are likely to lose out from the current reforms and their recent memories of material deprivations will have sharpened their consciousness of the threats that lie ahead. And if the argument about a resettlement of the balance of rural class forces is to hold water, and if the centre of political gravity is to change, then it will come from the third and particularly the fourth socio-economic quintile in the countryside looking downwards for alliances rather than upwards. These reforms seem set to accelerate processes of socio-economic differentiation in ways that will harm the middling sections of rural Indian society as well as its poorer sections. The heightened external contradictions, in other words, are re-aligning those within – narrowing the social base of the dominant sections and broadening those of the labouring class majority. Whether that translates into a politically significant alliance of classes of labour in the Indian countryside along the lines sketched here is very much an open question. It depends in large part on the familiar constraints of caste division, vertical social relations, political manipulation, and the strains of simple reproduction that limit the capacity to act politically.

Rural India was long dominated by landlords who shared in the imperial theft of the country's wealth. By the 1980s and 1990s one might argue that it had come to be dominated by petty

capitalist farmers. Today, there are signs that the clear majority of the rural population that depend on petty commodity production and labour in India's fields and beyond are realising how much they have in common. Even if transnational capital and its Hindu nationalist vanguard cannot be kept at bay for now, the vision of their future decline may well be crystallising, to be realised another day not so far from the present. While the more powerful sections of society do their best to maintain their own unity and coopt and divide 'subaltern classes', there is little they can do when the middle sections of society join hands against them with those at the bottom.

Notes:

[i] This article was written before the severe Covid-19 wave that peaked in April and May 2021.
[ii] While in a draft of this paper we underlined the political implications of increased non-agricultural wage-labour, we are indebted to a personal communication from Jens Lerche that encouraged us to make the links between access to land and wage-labour much more explicit.
[iii] A reference to the possible discomfort of those within the *Sangh Parivar* who remain attached to *swadeshi*.
[iv] Many large agribusiness corporations are US-based and China's economic rise is reinforcing US ties with India.
[v] Interviews with Dalit agricultural labourers in Dharwad district, March-July 2002; September 2006 to June 2007.
[vi] Based on specific fieldwork evidence (Pattenden 2006) and data collected by the Karnataka Agriculture Price Commission, which shows some decline in oilseed production and some growth in fruit production (2016, 3-6).
[vii] The Shetkari Sanghathan's support for liberalisation was an exception.
[viii] For example, many Dalit/labourer organizations from Punjab initially refused to join the farmers' protests due to conflicts over paddy transplantation wages (Bansal 2020).
[ix] The Act does mention 'price assurance', but this does not guarantee that the prices would not be below MSP or above the producer's costs.
[x] For example, procurement for paddy and wheat averages about 40 percent of the marketed surplus while the procurement for coarse cereals is below 5 percent.
[xi] It also has one of the highest proportions of Dalits, which raises questions about cross-class alliances (see below).
[xii] The latter point draws on a personal communication from Dr Prakash Kammaradi (retired Professor UASB, ex-Chair Karnataka APC) 13 June 2021.
[xiii] Bunge, Cargill, ABD and Louis Dreyfus.
[xiv] Interview with Vijoo Krishnan, Joint Secretary of the All India Kisan Sabha. Available at: https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/blink/meet/this-land-is-your-land/article25687591.ece?fbclid=IwAR2A2SRNsZx7etjmQ88mqHrUNv0e1sojJtxydJBCVHn9XIuIr9AmY6nnz9M. Last accessed: June 14 2021
[xv] The term has been used by Paul Routledge.
[xvi] Dalits constitute 37.4% of Punjab's rural population compared to 18.4% in India overall.

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