

# Many MPs Are 'Agriculturalists', but Why the Disconnect Between Parliament and Farmers?

One would have thought that with over a third of Lok Sabha MPs self-identifying as an 'agriculturalist', there would have been a more nuanced parliamentary debate on the farm laws and the concerns expressed by protesting farmers.



Parliament House. Photo: Reuters

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It is more than a little ironic that as India witnesses its biggest farmer protest in decades, nearly 40% of the current Lok Sabha MPs claim to be “agriculturalists”.

As the agitation enters into the sixth month – and perhaps its most delicate moment, in the wake of the Republic Day controversy – one of the questions that needs to be asked is who the actual farmers are. The ones sitting inside parliament and passing laws or the ones protesting on the streets?

According to the latest data available on the Lok Sabha website, 7.15% of MPs list ‘farming’ as their occupation, while 37.24% say they are ‘agriculturalists’.

Of the 39 members of parliament who identify one of their professions as farming, 25 belong to the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

The data also show that out of the 203 MPs who identify themselves as agriculturalists, 143 belong to the BJP.

It is important to note that some parliamentarians identify themselves as having more than one profession – for example, being a farmer and an agriculturalist. Lok Sabha representatives from Bhiwandi and Bhavnagar, Kapil Patil and Bharatiben Shiyal, identify as both a farmer and an agriculturalist.

In other cases, MPs list farming and an unrelated profession. For example, home minister Amit Shah identifies as a farmer and a social worker.

From the self-identification of the members of parliament, we can see that at face value, the representation of farmers and agriculturalists in the Lok Sabha, through profession alone, accounts for 7.15% and 37.24% respectively.



Parliamentarians in the Rajya Sabha after opposition MPs staged a walkout during the monsoon session of parliament, September 22, 2020. Photo: RSTV/PTI

It seems absurd that when over a third of the Lok Sabha knows and understands the sector – because they are or have been engaged in farming or agriculture personally – that India is seeing such continued opposition to the recent farm laws.

One would imagine that being farmers themselves, many of the concerns raised by the agitating farmers should have been echoed by the parliamentarians. A farmer who is in parliament or protesting outside it would naturally find some commonalities in the problems that they face.

However, in the Lok Sabha, MPs of the ruling party ignored the demands of the opposition for referring them to a parliamentary committee. And in the Rajya Sabha, the Bills were hastily passed by a voice vote with little formal discussion or deliberation.

This begs the question – why was there no discussion? If nearly half the Lok Sabha is in the farming and agricultural sector, one would imagine that at least some of the concerns

raised by protesting farmers would resonate with the parliamentary agriculturalist. The farmer in parliament could not be a mute spectator to such impactful laws, unless of course, the “Protesting Farmer” and “Parliamentarian Farmer” are different.

In a representational democracy such as India, one can imagine that the domain specialists in any particular field would be consulted to understand the potential implications of any proposed law. It is in fact common for parliament to seek the opinion of experts when it comes to enacting special laws. An interesting example to study in this regard would be the Plant Variety and Farmers Rights Act, which led to consultations between both the farmers, in the parliament, and outside, as well as with seed patent-holding corporations like Monsanto.

Any liberal democratic system usually allows for the collective voice to be represented, and this collective voice can only emerge if there is discussion and deliberation. This plurality of voices ensures that any legislation will have some representation of a fellow parliamentarian by way of either experience, profession or representing constituents, and there will be discussions by these members about the specific Bills. A liberal democracy ensures that even those parliamentarians who oppose a Bill can raise their concerns.

However, the current Indian government has certainly not displayed any level of comfort with dissent of any sort, and in what seems to be a unique feature, it has sought to overpower the voices of MPs through not-so-subtle means of constitutional chicanery when the weather seems unfavourable.

One is then left to wonder whether this unison in passing the Bills was due to the agreement of the “Parliamentarian Farmer” with the Bill or reflects a rather worrisome picture of the steady death of deliberation in parliament. The farmers at the borders of Delhi and the farmers in parliament represent a growing identity crisis between the “governing” and the “governed”. The farmer at the border is someone who is supposed to be represented by the farmer in parliament. It then becomes a question of their identity and experience.



Farmers protest against the farm laws in Shambhu, Punjab, September 25, 2020. Photo: Reuters/Adnan Abidi/File

One possible explanation is that, hypothetically-speaking, the farmer or agriculturalist in parliament generally would have land tracts large enough to ensure they are in a better negotiating position to make contract farming a viable option. And, more importantly, farming may not be their only source of income.

In the same vein, the farmer at the border is someone who likely has smaller landholding and often their only livelihood is farming. For farmers outside the wheat-rice belt, this also means they are subsistence farmers. A majority of Indian farmers are a part of this demography of small landholding subsistence or cash crop growing agriculturists. The ones in parliament don't necessarily draw their means of sustenance from agriculture or farming. There is a clear distinction between the farmer in the parliament and the one at the border. While both are farmers, there is little shared experience between the two.

If there is one thing to take away from the current protests, it's that the farmer who sits inside parliament is not the same as the one who is protesting today.

When future historians study India of 2020, it could perhaps be a time period underscored by two remarkable paradoxes which will potentially underscore by the unravelling of India's identity.

The first paradox is underscored by the fact that the farmers of parliament brought laws to reform the agricultural sector, only to have their farmer brethren reject them in unison.

The second – and more important paradox – is that Indians, whose shared cultural DNA stems from Mahatma Gandhi, have forgotten their right to resist laws collectively. Which is to say if the parliamentarians genuinely claim to be farmers, they should be resisting the manner in which the law was passed at the very least.

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