

# In India, peasants aspire to democratic renewal

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Farmers take part in a protest against recent central government agricultural reforms by blocking a highway at the Delhi-Haryana state border in Singhu on December 29, 2020. Sajjad Hussain / AFP

January 26 marks since 1950 the celebration of the Indian Republic, that is to say the entry into force of the Constitution. But this year, the media have continued to broadcast the images of Indian farmers perched on the symbolic Fort Rouge, while a few kilometers away, Prime Minister Narendra Modi delivered his speech to the nation.

In fact, for two months, hundreds of thousands of peasants and farmers have arrived from the Punjab, Haryana, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh (states located in the north-west of the country) and have gathered at the gates of Delhi. Tuesday, they invited themselves to the military parade, a strong act that punctuates their mobilization. Despite clashes with the police and government efforts, according to the independent website Scroll.in, to suppress the demonstrators , the mobilization persists.

Farmers are demanding the withdrawal of three laws adopted without discussion in September 2020, which deregulate the agricultural market and deliver it to large agro-food companies, thus endangering the fragile economic balance of this sector which employs 41.5 % of the population (against 26% for industry and 32.5% for services).

## **Agrarian question and agricultural crisis in India**

This unprecedented social movement puts the agrarian question back at the heart of Indian public debate, generally approached through the prism of the deep crisis that the agricultural world has been going through for thirty years.

86% of Indian farmers are thus affected by the fragmentation of land because they represent small and very small farmers, owning less than two hectares (against an average of 61 hectares in France per farm).



Farmers at a demonstration against recent central government agricultural reforms at the Delhi-Haryana state border in Singhu, January 27, 2021. Money Sharma / AFP

It is also a question of the non-profitability of agricultural activity for the majority of Indian peasants, forced to resort to wage labor in the informal sector in the city (each rural household earns on average 8,059 rupees, or 91 euros per month). ; one of the highest suicide rates in the world, due to the burden of unpayable debt; ecological damage linked to intensive agriculture and the massive use of pesticides.

## **The long-term effects of the green revolution**

This crisis situation is paradoxically the fruit of the successful gamble of the agricultural policy put in place in the 1960s to respond to the famines which still afflicted the country and forced it to import massive amounts of wheat from the United States.

From 1965, the Nehruvian State launched the Green Revolution , an ambitious program to modernize agriculture, with new cultivation methods, the transition from subsistence food agriculture to intensive commercial agriculture, the introduction of new varieties of high-yielding wheat and rice (which replace a wide variety of local cereals, better adapted to drought, and richer in minerals and vitamins, such as sorghum or millet , mechanization of production, electrification pumping systems for irrigation and the intensive use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides.

The states of Punjab and Haryana, at the forefront of the current contestation, are chosen as laboratories for the green revolution, which make them even today the rice and wheat granaries of India, supplying respectively 26% and 32% of national production .

This policy, if it has undoubtedly had a positive impact on agricultural productivity and enabled the country to achieve food self-sufficiency , mainly benefited large farmers and resulted in ecological devastation (soil erosion and pollution). , depletion of the water table, etc.) and public health problems .





In this photo taken on October 29, 2014, Indian workers harvest cotton in a field on the outskirts of Barnala, in the state of Punjab. Natinder Nanu / AFP

Thus, in the southwest of the Punjab, because of the massive use of pesticides, 80% of the water table is polluted and cases of cancer are increasing: the Bathinda Cancer Institute treated 10,648 patients in 2018 against 6,233 two years earlier and every morning the "cancer train" leaves Bathinda station with patients on board going for treatment in neighboring Rajasthan.

More recently, the liberalization of the Indian economy from the 1990s accelerated the phenomenon of capitalization and commodification of agriculture; it has also contributed to the marginalization of the agrarian question within public development policies, by subordinating it to industrialization and urbanization programs.

## **Deregulation and end of state supervision of the agricultural market**

However, the agricultural sector has not been completely given over to the laws of the market. In order to ensure the food security of more than a billion inhabitants, the State occupied - until the recent reform which crystallizes the oppositions - a preponderant place in the functioning and the regulation of the agrarian economy.

Thus, rice and wheat benefited from a Minimum Support Price (MSP) guaranteed by the State under the Agricultural Produce Market Committee (APMC), more commonly called *mandi*.

Within this "seller's market", agro-food distributors had to negotiate the purchase price on the basis of the available supply with farmers, through brokers.

The new laws put an end to this state monopoly by introducing a new trading space, where the price will be directly set by investors and agribusiness on the basis of demand and imposed on farmers, which will result in a general drop in selling prices and the scheduled end of the mandis and MSP system.

## **The stake: the survival of small farmers and land ownership**

Those we met at Singhu border (one of the three places occupied by the demonstrators on the Delhi border) explained to us that their only regular income comes from the sale at guaranteed prices of their harvest of wheat and rice, while they have to wait up to two years

for payment for their sugarcane harvest, forcing them to borrow money from brokers in the *mandi* .

Over-indebted and very precarious, all agree that the current system is unsatisfactory, but the reform, they say , will force them to sell their plot of land to large industrial groups close to power, in particular those of millionaires Ambani and Adani .

However, agriculture in India, much more than a simple economic activity, is a source of identity and land ownership, a mark of social status , especially for the dominant castes, hence the visceral attachment of the demonstrators to the earth, reaffirmed by one of them, “the earth is our mother”, and their determination to hold the siege until the laws are withdrawn.

To this end, each group of farmers came with six months of provisions stored in a trailer attached to a tractor, which also serves as their living space.

## At the forefront of the dispute: the Sikhs

Recognizable by their turban and beard, the Sikhs , the majority in the Punjab, are leading the protest. Born in the XV<sup>th</sup> century and asserting itself as a third way between Hinduism and Islam, Sikhism is the fifth religion in the world by number of members (30 million), but it represents only a small minority of the Indian population (2%).



A Sikh farmer stands next to his tractor during the protest movement against recent central government agricultural reforms at the Delhi-Haryana state border in Singhu, January 27, 2021. Money Sharma / AFP

To galvanize the participants and make them endure the cold winter nights of the Indian capital (several peasants succumbed to it), the movement is largely inspired by the martial ethos of the Sikhs and their history made of struggles against what they perceive as the injustices of the central power.

Sikh socio-religious practices and institutions organize the daily life of the camps. For example, the *langar* , the community dining hall attached to each Sikh place of worship, continuously serves meals free of charge, including to the police officers who mistreated the protesters and to the local population.



The *langar* works through *seva* ( voluntary service ), another pillar of Sikh ethics, which includes food donation as well as the preparation and distribution of meals by an ever-changing army of volunteers.

The ubiquitous symbolism of commensality, the food shared in common across caste and religious barriers, and the social figure of the peasant who feeds the nation (*annadata*) have greatly contributed to the immense popularity enjoyed by the movement well in the past. beyond rural India.

Finally, the Sikh peasants lean on the enthusiastic support of a prosperous and influential diaspora, which knew how to give an international echo to the movement, thus leading Justin Trudeau, the Canadian Prime Minister to speak on the subject, which has caused diplomatic tensions with India.

## Broad popular support

This cultural and religious repertoire specific to the Sikhs does not, however, prevent the participation of predominantly Hindu peasants from the states neighboring Delhi, nor the support of Muslims (who have not forgotten the help provided by the Sikhs during the movement against the reform. citizenship last year), progressive and secularist circles and the Indian left, from which the peasant unions at the initiative of the movement came.

The unity and flawless organization demonstrated by the latter allowed the movement to thwart the attempts of the ruling party, the BJP, to tarnish its image, the media in its pay presenting the peasants in turn as terrorists. or illiterates manipulated by the opposition.



Farmers take part in a tractor rally in New Delhi on January 26, 2021. Money Sharma / AFP

The stakes are high: in addition to the survival of the peasant world, the current movement is fighting for the democratic freedoms of Indian citizens, demanding the release of imprisoned opponents; for the preservation of Indian-style federalism, battered by the centralizing aims of the ruling party ; Finally, he affirms his solidarity with the working class, hard hit by the suspension of labor law since May 2020 in several states controlled by the BJP.

This solidarity between the peasant world and the working world, which materialized on November 26 with the biggest strike in Indian history, bringing together 250 million people

across the country, could well constitute the most serious threat to the ruling Hindu nationalist right and its authoritarian, national-populist and ultra-liberal policies.

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