

# A tale of two protests

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**The farmers of Haryana and Punjab are worried that this legislation will eradicate the minimum support price (MSP) system and enable big private firms to monopolize farming.**

ARMIN ROSENCRANZ, GOVIND SINGH AND ABHIROOP CHOWDHURY | New Delhi  
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Farmers protest against the Central Government's Farm Laws at Delhi-Haryana's Singhu Border on Nov 28, 2020. (Photo: IANS)

Tens of thousands of farmers have taken to the streets to protest against the farm bills passed during the monsoon session of Parliament. The nation is looking at one of the largest protests on the streets of Delhi and across the nation since the BJP-led NDA

alliance started their second term in 2019. A nationwide strike was organised by the protesting farmers on 8 December. The nation has taken sturdy steps towards modernizing India's agriculture since the initiation of the Green Revolution in the 1960s. Sixty years later, this protest is shedding light on the weak agricultural reforms, as seen from the farmers' perspective.

The recent protests are centered on three farm laws enacted recently. The Essential Commodities (Amendment) Bill, 2020, will remove cereals, pulses, oilseed, edible oils, onions and potatoes from the list of essential commodities and attract private direct investments in the agricultural sector. The farmers of Haryana and Punjab are worried that this legislation will eradicate the minimum support price (MSP) system and enable big private firms to monopolize farming.

In Haryana, there is a tussle going on between paddy farmers and the government. The problems started with the state government's initiatives to restrict the state's water intensive paddy cultivation that is depleting ground water resources. The state government was not just willing to buy crops at the Minimum Support Price (MSP) but was also giving INR 7,000 per acre, and more, to farmers for growing crops other than paddy. Some farmers perceived the state's decision to restrict paddy cultivation as a diktat and not just as an advisory. Farmers had started believing that those who do not accept this state order will be kept away from existing farming-related benefits. This led to a protest by many farmers across different districts of Haryana. The protests included a 3,000-strong tractor march against paddy cultivation restrictions at a Haryana district headquarters in May 2020. The problem of large-scale decline of ground water in Haryana, and in the neighbouring 'green revolution' co-beneficiary state of Punjab, is now rampant.

It is this worrisome decline that made the Haryana government launch schemes like Mera Pani, Meri Virasat (my water, my heritage), urging farmers to shift away from waterguzzling paddy cultivation. The state also expressed full readiness to compensate farmers for losses incurred in this process and for providing the necessary facilitation required for switching away from paddy. The farmers continue to be reluctant since giving up paddy and growing the next-most suited maize crop reduces their earning substantially.

The big picture emerging from this analysis has implications for the entire country, and for our food security. Agriculture may or may not be its cause, but it is certainly at the receiving end of increasing environmental degradation. We have reached a stage where governments at both the state level and the Centre need to work with the farmers to sustain agriculture and secure food availability.

Declining ground water level is only the tip of the iceberg. The shadows of climate change are also looming large over the nation's agriculture economy. The U.N. Food and Agricultural Organization indicates that 59 per cent of Indians are engaged in agriculture and 23 per cent of national GDP is dependent on it. It is expected that

climate change will impact agriculture immensely. Wealthy farmers will be able to withstand the vagaries of climate change better and bounce back sooner compared to poor, marginalized farmers.

The farmers' plight is not only limited to the environmental degradation resulting from unsustainable, chemical-intensive agriculture. Farmers are also prone to the economic policies enacted by the Centre that may put them at the mercy of big corporations. Centre and state governments must work together and take positive, apolitical steps to improve the lives and livelihood of the farmers – who deliver food to the hungry mouths of India's 1.35 billion people.

The writers are, respectively, Dean, Associate Professor and Assistant Professor at Jindal School of Environment & Sustainability, O.P. Jindal Global University, Sonapat, Haryana.