

## **Recent Farmers' Movement in Punjab: Organisation, Stages of Mobilisation and Achievements**

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This paper examines the origin of the present Farmers' Movement in Punjab and its spread to Haryana, UP, Uttarakhand and other states of India. Initially the movement was centered on the withdrawal of three farm laws enacted by the Union Government in September 2020 but slowly extended its agenda to make MSP as legally binding for buyers of agricultural produce for all commodities for which seasonal prices are announced by the Government. These farm laws are perceived to operate against the farmers and consumers and would only benefit the corporates. The paper also examines the ways farmers' unions united to form an all India umbrella organisation to conduct the movement in a disciplined way and also gathered support of other rural sections especially women and youth. The various stages in mobilisation for the movement have been examined in the context of non-party mobilisation of farmers and other sections of the rural population. An attempt has also been made to bring out the achievements of the movement along with challenges and its future potentials.

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### **Introduction**

There is a long history of farmers' movements in India especially in Punjab. A glorious and successful movement of farmers' happened in Punjab during 1907. It was led by Sardar Ajit Singh, a prominent freedom fighter and uncle of Shahid Bhagat Singh. It was against *three laws* passed by the colonial government against the farmers who organised a six month long movement which ended with withdrawal of those acts. This is also known as *Pagri Sambhal Jatta* movement on the basis of poem written by Banke Dayal and read at a rally on March 03 1907 at Layallpur (now Faisalabad in Pakistan). The PEPSU Muzara (tenant) Movement 1939-52 fought by peasants resulted in the abolition of *Biswedari* in 1952. The Punjab unit of the All India Kisan Sabha was established in 1943 which fought many battles, the most prominent being against the Betterment Levy imposed by the Punjab Government on the land irrigated by canals in 1959. The Telegana Peasant Struggle (1945-49) was one of the militant movements for land ownership rights and protection of land tenure of tenants. The Tebhaga Movement (1946-47) in Bengal was for raising share of tenants to two-third from one-half and reducing the share of landlords to one-third. In the post-independence period, in wake of land reform legislation enacted in State Assemblies, there were several local mobilisations of tenants on land ownership and protection of tenants' rights. The most prominent amongst these was the

militant Naxalite Movement which started from West Bengal in 1967 and had spread to other places to occupy the land of landlords for distribution among the poor peasants. But in the 1970s a new farmers' movement began to take shape on issues other than land rights and protection of rights of tenants. This movement was concentrated on issues of cheaper inputs and better prices of agricultural produce. Another feature of new farmer movements was that unlike earlier peasant movement, this was not led by any political party. These movements were led by a new set of leadership free from Kisan wings of various political parties (Assadi, 1995; Brass, 1995; Dhanagare, 1995; Gill, 1995; Hassen, 1995; Lindberg, 1995; Nadkarni, 1987; Omvedt, 1995; Gill and Singhal, 1984). These movements have been largely led by the Bharatiya Kisan Union (BKU) especially in North-West India. While in Southern States various names have been given in local languages but with a common agenda based on lower prices of inputs and high prices of output of agricultural produce along with neglect of rural development vis a vis urban areas. Although there have been attempts to develop All-India coordination among the state units, yet the state units have enjoyed a fairly large autonomy on the time and process of mobilisation of the farmers. There is a common understanding among the farmers' unions that there is no differentiation among the different types of farmers and also between the farmers and non-farmers in the rural areas. All sections of rural population are understood to be sufferer of 'urban bias' of development and neglect of the rural areas. The Punjab unit of BKU has been part of the All India Co-ordination Committee(s) from time to time. This paper tries to describe and analyses the ongoing movement of farmers and is divided into five sections in addition to the introduction. Section I is devoted to the origin of the BKU as a new form of farmers' movement and its rise to dominance in Punjab is analysed. Section II deals with the fragmentation and decline of BKU especially after it first split in 1992 and then revival of the movement after the Government of India issued Three Farm Ordinances in June 2020. Section III covers the spread of the farmer movement to other states and the formation of an apex organisation, Samyukta Kisan Morcha, for directing the farmers' movement and to engage the farmers' representatives in dialogue with representatives of the Government of India. Section IV describes the various stages of the movement and their specificities and assesses the overall nature of the movement. The final Section sums up the paper and brings out the achievements and challenges of the movement.

## I

### **Origin and Rise to Prominence of the BKU in Punjab**

The Punjab unit of BKU formerly came into existence in 1980 but its predecessor The Punjab Khetibari Zamindara Union (PKZU) had been established in 1972. Several rounds of struggles (1973, 1974, 1974-75 and 1977-78) were organised in the State under the banner of PKZU. During this period, leadership of the union passed into the hands of young non-party leaders who decided to rename it in 1980 as BKU (Punjab Unit) with active association with

Sharad Joshi, a farmers' leader from Maharashtra BKU. The transition of Punjab BKU, as an organization independent of political parties, had taken place in opposition to the practice of politicians who used the support of farming community to rise in party politics without properly serving the interests of the farming community. This is the reason why the BKU decided not to allow politicians, both from the ruling parties and opposition parties, to use its platform during their struggles especially after 1980. Another factor was the change in the mobilisation strategy of traditional organisers of farmers from the Communist Parties in the state. Earlier they used to organise farmers without any distinction of class or size category to fight against feudal oppression and imperialism. Due to the penetration of capitalism in agriculture following the success of the Green Revolution, there was differentiation of peasantry into rich farmers and agricultural labourers along with the poor peasants with small and marginal holdings. The Communists decided to organise agricultural labourers independent of farmer organisation, in the Kisan Sabha, and decided to build an alliance of agricultural labourers with poor peasants against the rich farmers in their struggles for higher wages (Gill, 2000). In the wake of the changed situation, the organisation of rich farmers was not on the priority list of leftist organisations in the State. At the same time, the non-left political parties like Shiromani Akali Dal and Punjab Pradesh Congress Committee had never seriously put organisation of farmers on their agenda. This vacuum was filled by the BKU in the state to protect the interests of all the farmers without any distinction. The organisers of BKU, with the agenda of protecting interests of all farmers and fight against injustice to all rural areas, developed a new discourse of mobilisation of farming community in the state. This discourse was strengthened on the basis of the policy framework which showed urban bias against rural development. This discourse appealed to the imagination of the entire peasantry which responded favourably to calls of BKU on issues of low prices for agricultural inputs (like diesel, electricity, fertilisers, canal water charges, seeds, etc.) and higher prices for agricultural produce. Very soon, the leftist organisations like the Kisan Sabhas, had fallen in line but with a shrinking base among the farmers given the Sabhas' support of agricultural labourers for higher wages during the sowing and harvesting seasons. The issue of higher wages pinched rich as well as the poor farmers who also employed seasonal labour in the busy seasons. The BKU leadership argued that the farmers could not pay high wages due to high prices of inputs and low prices of agricultural produce which was fixed by various agencies of the government. Within a few years, the left organisations became marginalised and BKU emerged as the dominant organisation in the rural areas of Punjab. After 1978, Punjab was infested with the problem of terrorism and left parties and its cadres took open position against the Khalistani militants who retaliated against them, reducing further the capacity of the left to work in the interests of farmers or agricultural labourers. Since the BKU leadership did not take any position on Khalistani militants, they, therefore, could move around without any fear in the rural areas. They mobilized the peasantry on a massive scale to demand higher prices of agricultural produce especially wheat and paddy in 1983-84. The leadership of

the BKU organised a *gherao* of the Governors (of Punjab and Haryana) during 12-18 March 1984 in which 50,000-60,000 farmers participated. The farmers almost took over the capital city of Chandigarh during this period of *gherao* of Governors Houses. From an organisational point of view it was a very successful movement as it also led to the establishment of BKU units in Haryana. The movement was peaceful and self-dependent. The farmers had moved to Chandigarh on tractor trolleys carrying food and fuel while daily supplies of milk and vegetables continued to be supplied from the neighbouring villages. Earlier the farmers had stopped the entry of staff of electricity board, cooperative and revenue departments of Punjab Government as well as that of police in the villages. The movement was successful in getting several demands conceded. Emboldened by the massive mobilisation of farmers in the villages and the successful *gherao* of Governor Houses of Punjab and Haryana, the Punjab BKU declared that it would not allow the movement of grains out of Punjab from 10<sup>th</sup> June 1984 if their demands for higher prices of grains and low prices of inputs were not met. The BKU movement was running parallel to the militant movement in Punjab. Ultimately the movement became dormant, and remained so for nearly a decade. This was a direct consequence of the military operation - Operation Blue Star - on June 3 1984, which involved military assault at the Golden Temple complex at Amritsar and at other places in Punjab to control the militant movement.

## II

### Fragmentation, Decline and Revival of BKU

During the decade of 1980s due to disturbed conditions in the state and strict conditions relating to holding of public meetings and rallies the BKU could not organise any major mobilisation of farmers. However the union had displayed considerable resilience and survived in the difficult and disturbed situation with army and para military forces occupying the state on the one hand and continued terrorist violence on the other. At local level the BKU continued to be active taking up some issues and airing the grievances of the farming community. But due to internal developments within the state and role of some external factors the Punjab unit of the BKU split into two factions in April 1989. One faction was led by Ajmer Singh Lakhwal and another by Balbir Singh Rajewal and Bhupinder Singh Mann. With growing popularity of the BKU a tussle had started between the union leaders to occupy the top position and exert pressure on the government for getting addressed grievances of the followers. This was accompanied by another opportunity arriving on the scene. With the formation of the VP Singh government in Delhi, an Advisory Committee on National Agricultural Policy was set under chairmanship of Sharad Joshi, a farmers' leader from Maharashtra. Bhupinder Singh Mann and Balbir Singh Rajewal were closer to Sharad Joshi. This intensified the tussle for the top leadership position in the BKU. This fear came to be true when Bhupinder Singh Mann was nominated as a Member of Rajya Sabha in 1990 for six years. This split was also observed at the all India level as well in 1990 with the formation of two Inter-

State Coordination Committees (ISCCs) of farmers' organisation, one led by Mahinder Singh Tikait and another by Sharad Joshi. The ISCC led by Tikait took a position against the Dunkal draft while the ISCC Committee led by Sharad Joshi was in favour of globalisation and freeing of trade of agricultural commodities and hence supported the Dunkal draft. In the due course of time Ajmer Singh Lakhawal drifted towards Akali politics and also became closer to some militant groups. Although initially the Lakhawal faction had a larger support base than the other faction led by Rajewal and Mann, it began to face internal conflict on ideological grounds. A large number of activists began to question Lakhawal about his participation in Akali politics. Ajmer Singh Lakhawal later on got a major benefit by retaining Chairmanship of the Punjab Mandi Board for ten year during the Akali-BJP coalition government of 2007-2017. Lakhawal's dabbling in Akali politics was against the BKU constitution. This also created a split in the Lakhawal faction of the BKU in 1992. The group which separated from the Lakhawal faction was led by radical leftist activists. They named their union as BKU Ekta. This set in motion the process of further splits in the BKU Ekta named after the presidents of the union. By 2019 there were 35 farmers' unions in the state under different names. Although some unions have been joining hands and organizing joint protests at state level, yet they have been contesting with each other for getting a dominant position among the farmers in the area of their operation/region. The united mobilisations on farmers' issues began to take shape in first decade of twentieth century especially after an attempt was made by the Punjab Government to reduce the power subsidy or when there was inadequate supply of electricity at the time of transplantation of paddy or because of problems associated with market clearance of wheat and paddy. Issues such as land acquisition for highways, industrial parks, loan waivers to farmers, conflict with banks/arhtiyas on loan recovery have also seen limited united action of some unions on a common programme. The year 2020 came as a culmination of a move towards unity of action and purpose among different factions of farmers' union. This opportunity was provided by the issuance of Three Farm Ordinances by the Union Government on 5<sup>th</sup> June 2020. Different factions of the BKU and other farmers' unions were very quick to organise protests against these Ordinances. These Ordinances were immediately translated into Punjabi by union activists who printed and distributed them among the activists and farmers' leaders for discussion. This electrified the atmosphere in the rural areas and word began to spread that farmers' land and livelihood have been put under great threat due to of the existence of Ordinances. This generated both fear and anger among the farmers in the Punjab. This led to a large number of demonstrations in villages, towns and cities by some farmers of the state. Very significantly, we see for the first time in Punjab, a large number of young sons of farmers undertaking marches and demonstrations on their motor cycles and tractors. Whilst demonstrating they also played the popular pro-people songs and made commitments on getting the three black Ordinances withdrawn. Many groups of farmers began to make demonstrations in front of houses of elected MLAs and MPs of Akali Dal and BJP, the coalition partners in the Union Government.

Considering the level of anger against the three Ordinances, some factions of farmers' union took initiative to coordinate their efforts for a joint struggle against the three Ordinances promulgated by the Union Government. By 19 September, 2020, this effort resulted in the formation of a Coordination Committee of 32 farmers' unions active in different parts of Punjab. After a call made by some farmers' unions, the focus of protest was shifted from villages, towns and cities at district level to Chandigarh, the state capital. After a major and impressive demonstration against these Ordinances in Chandigarh, members of the major unions held a meeting with the Punjab Chief Minister in July 2020 and urged him not to implement these Ordinances in Punjab State. The Punjab Chief Minister agreed to this proposal and promised to take up this issue in the forthcoming session of the Legislative Assembly of Punjab scheduled for 18-22 August 2020. In the meantime, the Union Government converted these Three Ordinances into Three Acts by getting them passed by the two houses of Parliament in July 2020. The Shiromani Akali Dal, facing erosion of their support base among the peasantry, decided to withdraw its support of the NDA government at the center and asked its sole representative Harsimrat Kaur Badal to resign from the Union Cabinet. The Akali Dal voted against these bills in both Houses of Parliament. After getting approval from both Houses, the BJP led government moved very fast in getting signatures of the President and made the Gazette Notification and converted these bills into Three Acts. These developments facilitated in getting a unanimous resolution to be passed in the Punjab Legislative Assembly on 22<sup>nd</sup> August 2020, that the Three Farm Acts will not be implemented in Punjab. The Punjab Chief Minister took the Leader of Opposition (from AAP) and Akali representatives on the same day to the Punjab Governor for getting his approval. The BJP did not attend the session when this resolution was passed in the Assembly. This resolution had the support of the Punjab Congress, Aam Aadmi Party and Shiromani Akali Dal. In fact all political parties in the state, except the BJP, had committed themselves against repealing these Acts. Thus the three Ordinances and later on these Three Farm Acts not only brought unity among different farmers' unions but also built a consensus among the political parties against the New Farm Acts. These developments opened the way for building a consensus among different sections to oppose these laws and supported the ongoing movement of the farmers. A process of fragmentation of the farmers' movement, which had started in 1992, went into reverse gear of unity in 2020 among the farmers' organisations. There is now consensus among the different unions to get these Three Acts withdrawn along with ensuring lapsing of the Parali Ordinance and not allowing passing of the Amendment of Electricity Act 2003. There is also consensus among farmers' unions to get the legal status of Minimum Support Prices (MSPs) announced for 23 commodities every year. At present farmers get MSP for wheat and paddy in only a limited number of states like Punjab, Haryana, Western UP, MP, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana and Orissa and occasionally for the cotton crop. A recent NSSO survey had revealed that in 2012-13 only 6% of the farmers got the benefit of the MSP. The remaining 94% of the farmers are deprived of the opportunity to sell their produce to private traders at the MSP most of the time. The private

traders usually buy their produce at Rs.350-500 per quintal less than the announced MSP in case of grains and at a much lower prices in the case of oil seeds and pulses. There is a consensus among the farmers' Unions that the New Farm Acts have been enacted to handover trade, marketing and storage to big corporate companies and also to get them involved in agricultural production through contract farming. The farmers' union focused on the issues of withdrawal of these Three Acts, abandonment of the proposed Amendment of Electricity Act 2003, dropping of the Parali Ordinance and introduction of legal status for announcing MSP of all 23 crops. They want reversal of economic policy framework which favours big business in the country towards achieving higher welfare for the common people. With a token of peaceful measures farmers are opposing toll plazas, business interests of Ambani and grain stores of Adani. So from a process of fragmentation of farmers movement in Punjab since the 1990s, a new trend of unification or limited united action began around 2014-15. But in 2020 this trend got a fillip and consolidation after promulgation of the three Ordinances by the Government of India. At the level of ideas or issues, the unions were initially able to arrive at a consensus on getting these Ordinances and later on, the New Farm Acts withdrawn. 32 farmers' unions formed the Coordination Sangharsh Committee to lead this protest movement in the Punjab. The leaders also decided, before the decision to shift the center of struggle to Delhi, to keep this movement peaceful even when there are extreme provocations and strong measures such as *lathi* charges by police or use of water cannons on the demonstrators, or in case of arrest of union leaders. Another point of common understanding was that the movement will not be allowed to be used by any political party for its own political ends. The leaders of political parties would not be allowed to address the farmers' rallies from the stages/platform set by the Kisan Morcha. They expressed the firm opinion to enter into dialogue with the government representatives whenever required. They decided to organise their protests actions at times and places under the guidance of the Coordination Committee. Thus, for the first time since 1984, a unity of Kisan movement in organisation, ideas/thoughts, agenda and action came into existence on an extended scale. This is being admired and appreciated by the social activists of different shades.

### III

#### **Spread of the Movement to other States**

The movement which originated in Punjab in June 2020 began to spread to the neighbouring states by July. In fact, in June 2020 when the Three Ordinances were promulgated and the farmers' union leaders of Punjab understood their potential impact on the farmers of the country, they opened their communication on this matter with farmer leaders in Haryana and UP. The BKU and other farmers' union leaders of Punjab had also sent their representatives to meet their counterparts in other neighbouring states to start mobilisation of farmers in their respective areas. Their purpose was to organise and mobilise for a fight against these Ordinances on a bigger scale. It was clearly understood by these leaders

that mobilisation of farmers in Punjab alone will not be sufficient to get these Ordinances withdrawn. They had visualised mobilisation of farmers on a large scale. Although their past experience had shown that farmers' movements have been largely peaceful, Punjab leaders, in particular, emphasised that the movement has to be kept peaceful under all circumstances. They had, after all, witnessed a violent movement in Punjab during the decade of 1980s and the damage it had done to other social movements in the state. In order to ensure that the movement was kept disciplined, the various farmers' unions had created a Coordination Sangharsh Committee of 32 farmers' Union on 19<sup>th</sup> September 2020 at a meeting held in Moga. The BKU Ugrahan, another farmer union, had also decided to support this Committee in Punjab, given their calls for various actions announced and implemented. On 7 November 2020, a meeting of farmers' organisations from All India was called at the Rakabganj Gurdwara in Delhi, in which 300 organisations participated. In this meeting a 40 member committee was formed and given the name of Samyukta Kisan Morcha (SKM) for coordinated action at the All India level. It is on the insistence of the SKM that a call was given for *Dili Challo, dera Dalo* (move to Delhi, sit there) that the farmers moved towards Delhi on and after November 26<sup>th</sup>, 2020.<sup>1</sup> The unions in Punjab had also created a cadre of volunteers who kept a watch on infiltrators and agents provocateurs during various stages of mobilisations and actions of protests. The union leaders of Punjab had envisioned the same model at the All India level. A primary focus of the mobilisation has been on villages where village committees of organisers were created to arrange volunteers for attending site of actions and also to remain in touch with other sections of the population, especially those belonging to agricultural labourers. The members of village level committees also looked after the needs of families which had left for sites of action outside the village. The village level committees were able to mobilise a large number of persons in support of the Kisan movement in their villages. This had a cascading effect on the urban areas as well, from where a large number of industrial workers and middle class employees came out in support of the movement. When the farmers' unions decided to shift the center of the movement from Chandigarh to Delhi, they decided to move on two routes to Delhi from Punjab. One route was through the Amritsar-Delhi national highway via Ambala and another route was the Sangrur-Delhi highway via Khanouri. The farmers began their march towards Delhi on their tractor trolleys on November 26, 2020. On the Ambala border they faced huge opposition from a large contingent of Haryana Police who had blocked the highway with barriers of big stones and had also fitted water cannons to stop the entry of marching farmers through Haryana. The farmers continued their march after removing the big stones on the highway with the help of tractors and manual support and changed very swiftly the direction of water cannons to the other side. The Punjab farmers succeeded in crossing this barrier because the Haryana BKU, led by Gurnam Singh Chudani, had already broken police barriers on the highway to Delhi at Pipli, near Kurukshetra. After crossing Panipat the farmers of Punjab found that the highway was dug deep by the police to stop further march of the farmers. The farmers filled the road with earth with the help of tractors and continued



their march. At this place, the Haryana police lathi-charged the peacefully marching farmers but this lathi-charge could not stop the march of the farmers towards Delhi. After the police lathi-charge, the farmers halted their march for lunch and offered the policemen food as well. Since the policemen were not carrying any food of their own, they enjoyed the food offered by the protesters and left them alone. After crossing this barrier the farmers reached Singhu border where they were stopped by Delhi Police which offered them Nirankari Ground as a site for their *dharna* in the Northern part of Delhi but the farmers insisted on reaching the Ramlila Ground. The Delhi police did not agree on this, thus, the farmers decided to have sit-in *dharna* at Singhu border on the national highway. The farmers of Haryana joined them next day at this site. Another contingent of farmers, when stopped at Khanauri border, they sat at *dharna* at that place for the night. They were allowed to march towards Delhi next day (27 November) and reached the Tikri border of Delhi where they were stopped by Delhi police. This became the second site of *dharna* by the Punjab farmers. The next day, farmers of UP and Utrakhand led by Rakesh Tikait reached the Ghazipur border of Delhi, the third site of farmers' *dharna*. After a call by Punjabi farmers, a large number of farmers from Rajasthan began to join this movement but were stopped on the Delhi border on the Delhi-Jaipur NH8 national highway. Thus, within a period of four days, Delhi was surrounded on all side by the farmers who were having their sit-in *dharna* at these four sites. Soon, farmers from states like Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Kerala, Odisha, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and other states also joined the farmers' protests at these locations. Thus, the efforts of farmers' leaders from Punjab led to start of an All India movement against the New Farm Acts, Prali Ordinance and the Electricity Act 2003 Amendment Bill. The demand of making MSP legally binding for buyers of all 23 agricultural commodities has been added at the insistence of farmers of those states who do not get announced minimum support price, even for wheat and paddy. The Punjab farmers' leader became a part of SKM which was entrusted with the task of guiding the ongoing movement.

#### IV

#### Stages and Nature of the Movement

The farmers' movement has passed various stages and has the potential to become the longest and largest movement of the century. It has already become larger and longer than the *Pagri Sambhal Jatta* Movement of 1907 in Punjab and which lasted for six months. The present movement began from Punjab in June 2020, starting with spontaneous rallies and flag marches in the villages on motor cycles and tractors, with rallies in towns and at district headquarters by different factions of farmers' unions. It took a formal shape in the form of the Coordination Sangharsh Committee comprising of representatives from 32 unions. This committee led the organisation of joint protest demonstrations. They also organised the rail roko programme to stop plying of trains in Punjab and organised a sit-in *dharna* on the railway tracks, blocked all Toll Plazas on highways, held *dharnas* in front of shopping malls and especially against stores

and petrol pumps owned by Ambani and warehouses owned by the Adani group of businesses. The beginning and spread of the farmers' movement in Punjab can be called the first stage of the present movement. At this stage the leaders of farmers' unions of Punjab established links with their counterparts in the neighbouring states. This stage lasted from the first half of June to 7<sup>th</sup> November 2020. At this stage all the farmers' union came to agree on a common agenda of the movement. The three organisations which did not become formally part of the Coordination Sangharsh Committee virtually agreed on the agenda and action programme in principle. It was a phase of unification of the farmers' movement with leaders with different ideologies and persuasions coming together on a common platform. There was a realisation amongst the leaders that farmers were fighting for their existence to save their land, livelihood and farming. They were able to mobilise a large number of women and youth in the protests at various places and also against the elected representatives of various political parties. The spread and intensity of the movement in Punjab isolated the Shiromani Akali Dal in the rural areas. Earlier, Akali leaders had been praising the Farm Ordinances as harbingers of a new era of prosperity in the agrarian sector of the country. They, now, took a U-turn to oppose these Ordinances. They broke their alliance with BJP led NDA and their sole representative in the Union Cabinet, Mrs. Harsimrat Kaur Badal, resigned from the Union Cabinet. The Akali Dal voted against the New Farm Bill in Parliament. This resulted in acceptance by all political parties in Punjab, except the BJP, to extend support to the farmers' movement. The farmers' unions, while accepting their support, decided not to allow political parties to use their platform for their political activities. The Punjab unions were able to attract the support of trade unions, intellectuals, poets, singers, artists, NGOs and other social organisations. Support to the unions also flowed from the *arhtyas*/commission agents, urban shopkeepers, transporters and college and university students. In the villages, all other sections of population began to support the movement with the slogan 'No Farmers No Food'. In the meantime, both Houses of Parliament passed these bills and converted them into Three Farm Acts after the President of India put his signature on them. At that time, an impression was created that the entire Punjab, except the BJP, had risen against the Three Farm Acts.

The second stage of the movement began from 26 November, 2020 when the farmers reached the Singhu border of Delhi. When the farmers were not allowed by the Delhi police to go beyond the Singhu border, they decided to start their sit-in dharna at that site. They converted their tractor trolleys as their shelters and also created a platform with a tent at a central place for addressing the daily gathering of farmers. They also began to allow personalities who were extending the support to the farmers' cause, to speak from this place. At the dharna sites community kitchens/*Langars* were started for feeding the demonstrators with foodgrains and fuel brought by farmers in their tractor trolleys. The farmers allowed visitors to the dharna and the local poor to eat from the community kitchens at a number of places. With help from some of the NGOs they made arrangements to dig up bore-wells for drinking water and also built temporary toilets. At several places, doctors opened their free medical services and built

temporary hospitals for helping the ailing farmers. The local villagers began to supply milk and vegetables for the community kitchens. The support of local villagers of Haryana became an important factor in sustaining the movement. It also became a valuable factor for the protection of agitating farmers from Punjab and Haryana at Singhu and Tikri borders. The presence of a large number of women and young girls and boys in dharnas changed the image of Punjabi youth from drug addicts to youth with aspirations and hope for future. The participation of men, women and youth in cooking and serving food to the needy created an image of a commune where everybody took food without any distinction of caste, religion, gender or region. This revived the tradition of Guru Nanak Dev's common community model at Kartarpur where three vital components defined it. These components were: *Kirat Karo* (participate in free labour) *Vand Chhako* (share the earnings with fellow beings) and *Naam Japo* (Devotion to God by remembering Him). All became equal through participating in the movement and undertaking social interaction, giving a glimpse of future organisation of society. The independent media took note of it and many journalists started visiting the dharna sites as if they were visiting a newly created pilgrimage sites. The sites began to be visited by singers, artists, writers, intellectuals, trade unionists, ordinary men and women from middle classes. A section of retired civil servants, army men, police officers, engineers, lawyers, teachers, researchers and other professionals took a special interest in visiting the dharna sites and to extend their support to the farmers. They delivered speeches at dharna site stages and contributed in developing a new discourse of hope and aspirations for all citizens in the country. It became an occasion to relate the farmers' movement to rediscovery of the Indian Republic. There were discussions that every section of population must share in the fruits of fast economic development which India had experienced during the last four decades or more. The question of Indian prosperity and wealth of the nation being grabbed by a small section of population (1% or less) became a focal point of discussion. The issues of saving and protecting fundamental rights of all sections of population, irrespective of caste, creed, gender, region or color, also became an important part of this discourse. This had the impact of building unity among people of different religions, castes, regions and gender. This has generated a counter narrative of unity of Indians against the consciously built narrative of Hindu-Muslim divide by the ruling party at the Center. The movement demonstrated how practically, unity among diverse people can be built during such struggles. The farmers' leaders emphasised that they were not only fighting for their own cause but also for the cause of common people who are likely to be hit by handing over trade, storage and export of grains to big private players to the disadvantage of common consumers of food and other agricultural products.

The third stage of the movement began when the Government of India seriously began the process of negotiations with the farmers by constituting a three member committee of central ministers: Piyush Goel, Narinder Singh Tomar and Som Prakash. This committee invited farmers' leaders for talks and held 11 rounds of negotiations between December 3, 2020 and January 22, 2021.

An important feature of these negotiations is that the farmers displayed their deep knowledge of these laws and their implications for the farmers and common consumers, which was much better than that displayed by the ministers. The committee of ministers ended every meeting by saying that they will come back after consultations with their senior leaders in the government. They also held one round of informal talks with Mr. Amit Shah, the Union Home Minister. The farmers' leaders displayed a lot of maturity, patience and unity during the course of these negotiations. The government side offered to accept amendments to these Laws but was not willing to withdraw them. The government side also agreed to allow the Parali Ordinance to lapse and also not to pass the Amendment in Electricity Act, 2003. Despite these concessions, the leaders of farmers' union insisted on withdrawal of the New Farm Acts. They also added another demand that MSP be made a legal condition for all the 23 crops for which it is announced every year so that no buyer, whether private or government, could buy agricultural produce at a price less than the one announced by the Government of India. When negotiations were going on between farmers' leaders and the three Union Ministers, someone approached the Supreme Court of India to intervene in this matter. The farmers refused to be party to this case. The Supreme Court in its hearing stayed the implementation of the Three Acts on 8<sup>th</sup> January 2021 and constituted a four Member Committee on 11<sup>th</sup> January 2021 to talk to the Government of India, the farmers and experts and submit its report within three months. The farmers' leaders rejected this committee and termed it biased against the farmers. One of the member, Mr. Bhupinder Singh Maan resigned from this committee. When the negotiations did not proceed further, the farmers felt that the government committee was taking farmers for a ride without yielding any tangible results, they decided to hold a Tractor March on the Ring Road of Delhi on January 26<sup>th</sup> 2021. This march was to be parallel to the Independence Parade at India Gate. This led to end of the third phase of the movement with talks remaining suspended till this time.

The fourth phase of the movement began on 26<sup>th</sup> January 2021. The farmers had planned to organise a colorful march on the Ring Road of Delhi. They had given a call to farmers from different states to reach Delhi on their tractor trolleys. The artists supporting the movement had prepared a variety of banners displaying slogans and demands of the movement and also bringing out the contribution made by farmers in making the country self-sufficient in food grains. There were also sign boards of Sikh martyrs in various struggles in Sikh history before the arrival of the British and especially during the freedom struggle. A few days before the Tractor March there was controversy with the Delhi police on the planned route of the parade. This was settled on the evening of 24<sup>th</sup> January and it was agreed that the parade will not pass through the Ring Road but take a route in the outer Delhi, passing through villages and suburbs of Delhi territory. This created two problems for the organizers. One related to the cropping up of difference of opinion among different unions participating in the Tractor March. One section, consisting of 2-3 unions which were not part of the Samyuk Kisan Morcha, insisted on holding the march on the Ring Road. This issue cropped up in the evening of 25<sup>th</sup> March 2021 and these unions which were

sitting on the Delhi side of Singhu border insisted on going towards the Ring Road, in the direction of Lal Quila from Mukarba Chawk. They started their Tractor March at 9.00 AM instead of 11.00 AM, the time decided by the Samyukt Kisan Morcha. The police did not stop them from crossing the barricades raised on the Ring Road in the direction of Lal Quila. The second problem that the Tractor March faced was, the march was supposed to start from three different locations of the Singhu border, Tikri border and Ghazipur border and some sections could not be properly informed of the agreed route of the march. In spite of a large number of volunteers guiding the march, many groups lost the route of the march. Similarly, the police personnel at different locations also faced a communication gap about the route of the march. This resulted in confusion over the route agreed by the Delhi police with leaders of the Samyukta Kisan Morcha. During the march, although on agreed route, at several places, police resorted to lathi-charging the farmers, resulting in further confusion and injuries and arrest of several farmers. The dissenting group of farmers' union, marched towards the Ring Road, breaking police barriers without any resistance, were also joined by some followers of the Samyukta Morcha. As this group of farmers moved on the Ring Road, a section among them deviated and moved towards the gate of Lal Quila. This is the location used by Prime Ministers when addressing the nation every year on Independence Day (15th August). There was no police at the gate to stop the marchers. This section of the marchers, as planned, hoisted the *Kesri Nishan Sahib* (Gurdwara Flag) on the Rampart of the Lal Quila. Another section of the marchers moved on the Ring Road towards the India Tax Office where they were stopped by the police firing tear gas shells on them. In this process, one of the marchers on his tractor, was hit by a tear gas shell/police bullet and died on the spot. These incidents were reported by the mainstream media in distorted ways. The *Kesari Nishan Sahib*/the Gurdwara flag hoisted on the ramparts of the Lal Quila, was reported as the flag of Khalistan and incidence of police lathi-charge on peaceful tractor marchers, who by mistake deviated from the agreed route, as incidence of widespread violence by farmers. The farmers' movement was labelled as the Khalistan movement, supported by ISI of Pakistan and Khalistanis from various foreign countries. They were variously described as Maoist, terrorist and anti-nationalist. A few days later the Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi referred to protesters as '*Prajeevi*/parasites'. This created an impression that the movement was hijacked by Sikh separatists. As a result a large number of farmers from UP and other states especially at the Ghazipur border began to leave the dharna site. The BJP leaders, along with a large number of their cadre with the help of police, began to get the remaining farmers evicted by force from the Ghazipur border. At this moment, the video of emotional Rakesh Tikait with tears, went viral. This resulted in the movement of a large number of farmers at night from UP, Uttarakhand, Haryana and Punjab to the Ghazipur border. This emotional appeal saved the movement from getting derailed and divided. A movement which united the farmers of different regions, religions and caste, was saved from getting dissipated and destructed under a conspiracy, by prompt action of the farmers. The movement was also saved from the confusion created through

social media. At this juncture, the government became even more aggressive in dealing with the movement. The government spokespersons and BJP leaders began to take tough postures against the Kisan movement, using tough words for them as Khalistani, terrorists, prajeevi, anti-national, etc. The government cut the Internet connections from the dharna sites for many days so that farmers' version of the 26<sup>th</sup> January 2020 events did not reach the general public through social media. When journalists like Mandeep Singh Punia tried to record farmers' leaders version for their papers/channels, they were arrested and tortured by the Delhi police. Mr. Punia had to remain in police custody for several days after which the court provided him bail. The BJP leaders arranged some attacks on the peaceful dharna of the farmers in the garb of youth of local villages under the police protection. When sabotage efforts and provocations did not work, the government resorted to the construction of cemented barriers with long nails fixed on the stretches of highways towards the Delhi side. This gave the impression that the Union Government was facing foreign invaders on its Delhi borders. This increased misunderstanding and a growing trust deficit between the protesting farmers (*Aandattas*) and the government. The leaders of the movement began to approach common people in villages and started organising Khap Panchayats in UP, Haryana, Punjab and in some other states. These mahapanchayats were different from the traditional caste panchayats as they did include all sections of the rural population without any distinction of caste and creed. The response to this effort was very successful and it provided much needed energy and support to the cause of Indian farmers. This was followed by celebration of important events at dharna sites such as 14<sup>th</sup> April as Ambedkar Day and Baisakhi Day, May Day and other days related to the martyrdom days of freedom fighters.

The fifth stage of the movement was reached at the time of West Bengal Assembly elections held in many phases during March-May 2021. Firstly, the Samyukta Kisan Morcha decided to campaign in the elections against the BJP and in favour of the Trinamool Congress. Earlier they had made a commitment that Samyukta Kisan Morcha will not support any political party or allow their platform to be used by any political party. The success of Trinamool Congress in West Bengal was hailed by the leaders of Samyukta Kisan Morcha. Secondly, the movement began to take up some issues beyond the domain of farmers. These are mainly related to unprecedented rise in diesel and petrol prices. They have also expressed the desire to oppose the BJP in the forthcoming February 2022 elections to the UP Assembly. This has also generated a controversy among the various leaders' of the farmers' union whether to participate or not in the forthcoming Punjab Assembly elections in February 2022 (Deol, 2021). Lately the Kisan Samyukta Morcha has started sending, every day, a group of 200 farmers to register their protest in front of Parliament between 19<sup>th</sup> of July to the 13<sup>th</sup> August 2021. They have also issued a whip to Members of Parliament of the opposition parties, not to allow any parliamentary discussion till the farmers' demand are conceded by the government. This stage is indicative of the fact that the movement is pregnant with the possibility of change in its character and also of objectives to be achieved.

*Nature of the Movement*

This movement, like the earlier mobilisations of the farmers by the BKU, has consciously kept itself away from established political parties to maintain the image of a non-party movement. Although some leaders of the movement have kept close personal relationship with prominent leaders of regional parties, as an organization, the present movement has remained non-party in nature. From the very beginning when the movement started to take shape in Punjab it was decided by the leaders that platform of the movement will not be allowed to be used by any political party. There was a resolve that the leaders of political parties will not be allowed to address gathering/rallies/dharna of the movement for electoral purposes. This has not been allowed to be violated during all the stages of the movement. The leaders of the movement also claim that it is the movement of the entire peasantry, irrespective of the class of landholdings of the cultivators. There are some scholars who characterised it as a populist movement. Lindberg (1995) holds the view that the peasantry is now linked to the market, where to a significant degree, price formation of agricultural produce and inputs prices are influenced by the state which regulate the conditions for the reproduction of the peasantry. This means that the movement is really between the entire peasantry and against Government of India. Since the post liberalisation phase, prices of inputs have been freed and part of the trade in agricultural produce has been handled by private traders. The New Farm Acts intend to hand over marketing, trade and storage to big corporate players even further. That is why this farmer movement is against corporate players like Adani and Ambani, along with policies of the Government of India. At the same time, the movement has also projected the slogan of 'worker-peasant unity' but in practice the participation of agricultural and industrial workers remain tokenistic. The movement is dominated by the peasantry both in terms of leadership and the cadre.<sup>2</sup> The farmer movement's list of demands primarily belongs to the farming peasants and the traditional slogan of 1950s and 1960s, 'land to the tiller' is missing, indicating that it is movement of the land owner cultivators to the exclusion the tenant cultivators. Similarly the participation of a large number of women is a new and welcome feature of the present movement but they are missing from the list of leaders guiding the movement and from the list of leaders who negotiate with the government.

## V

**Summing Up: Achievements and Challenges Facing the Movement**

At the point of writing the movement has completed one year if one counts the start of the movement from Punjab when the three Farm Ordinances were promulgated in June 2020. It has completed nearly eight months when the farmers began their protest morcha on Delhi borders on 26 November 2020. There is stalemate in dialogue on the immediate demands of the farmers related to withdrawal of the three new Farm Acts and providing MSP a legal status. Although there is talk of back-channel negotiations yet the formal talks have not

been resumed. The final account of achievement can be postponed till the time when the movement is finally concluded. In the meantime some achievements can be listed which this movement has made during the various stages of its mobilisations. In the first place, the farmers' movement was able to reverse the trend of its fragmentation and marginalisation which started from 1992 in Punjab towards unification in 2020. This was carried forward by building unity with the farmers of Haryana. The politicians in both Punjab and Haryana have been continuously creating a wedge between farmers of Punjab and Haryana on the issue of sharing river waters of the Punjab. This division was widened during the decade long disturbed conditions in Punjab in the 1980s. The present movement, by reversing this trend of widening differences, fast moved towards developing understanding and cooperation among the farmers of neighboring states. This development ensured two things: one, Punjab farmers were able to pass through Haryana and reach Delhi borders because of support of Haryana farmers; and two, Punjab farmers are able to continue their dharna on the present two sites, Singhu and Tikri, for many months and may continue for longer time in spite of many intrigues and pressures from the government side due to elaborate support of Haryana people in general and farmers in particular. This unification process of farmers reached UP, Uttarakhand, Rajasthan, MP, Maharashtra and other states leading to formation of the Samyukta Kisan Morcha of more than 300 farmers' unions with 40 member representatives of Indian farmers. This movement, at an All India level and specifically in North-West India, was able to ensure a large participation of women in a sustained manner. In the North-West India the women earlier had never participated on such a scale in farmer mobilisations. They were supposed to remain in the villages as a support for looking after households, taking care of cattle and related activities, while men were away on demonstrations. The participation of women at dharna sites, far away from the four walls of the houses, has provided strength in more than one way. This has enriched the movement culturally by providing color to it and adding seriousness by making men more disciplined and for keeping control of their language and behavior at dharna sites. This has crossed gender barriers in cooking of meals for ongoing *langars* where men are seen cooking jointly with the women. This is accompanied by presence of a large number of young boys and girls in the movement. It has improved the image of Punjabi youth from being drug addicts towards those with inspiration and commitment towards well-being of society. These developments have added necessary enthusiasm, seriousness and stability to the movement. At the country level, the movement has built unity of farmers across regions, and between farmers of different religious beliefs and thoughts. The movement has been able to ensure some participation of agricultural labourers from Scheduled Castes. A slogan of 'unity of workers and farmers' is an indicator of the unifying nature of this movement. This has become counter to the slogan of the BJP to divide people on religious lines (Hindu-Muslim divide).

The dharna sites, involving communal gathering and living together of a large number of men, women and youth from different castes, religions and regions display equality among the *dharnaites*. They cook meals together, dine



together and mix with each other without prejudice. It reminds us of Model Community organised by Guru Nanak in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century at Kartarpur (now in Pakistan). The impact of equality in living at dharna sites between men and women, people of different religions and castes is likely to survive, albeit only partially, when people return their villages after the movement is over. This may be termed the civilizing social impact of the movement which will last longer. Different dharna sites are symbol of deepening democracy. Every day lectures are held from stages erected at central places where speakers from different walks of life and persuasions speak in support of the farmers' cause. This opens up the audience of different perspectives of the speakers on issues of the movement. Here one finds a mixture of mature ideas of seasoned leaders of farmers and enthusiasm of youth. This has enhanced the consciousness of participants and greater tolerance towards different perspectives and viewpoints.

The lengthy duration of the movement has thrown up space for budding young leaders who have been able to learn the art of addressing public rallies and provide internet and computer support for dissemination of views and ideas of farmers' leaders. This is an important form social capital which this movement has built for future transformation of rural India. The perspectives of old leaders have changed while working with their counterparts from other religions and regions. New friendships and fellowships have been formed among them. The experience and understanding of how to successfully manage the movement has enriched farmer leaders in their understanding of agrarian issues and crisis in the country. They now have a better understanding of the importance of human and democratic rights, need for united actions by farmers, workers and other sections of working people. They have been able to understand the mode of working of the neo-liberal economic policy and its fall outs. The prolonged period of mobilisation has made the farmers' movement a focal point for dialogue and protest against the issues troubling people in the country. The protest by farmers against the unprecedented rise in fuel prices is indicative of this. In view of weak position of elected opposition parties in the country, the farmers' movement is representing people's opposition to the unjust attitude of the present government. The peaceful nature of the movement has brought great hope among the people that a very powerful government's decisions can be opposed and changed through collective actions. This is also visible from some of the decisions of the courts on various cases against activists and other people. These achievements make this movement historic and a turning point towards which the country was being pushed by the ruling alliance.

The spread of the farmers' movement to several states and a long period of peaceful dharna at Delhi borders spanning nearly eight months meant that more than 550 farmers sacrificed their lives. The movement is confronted with several challenges. The biggest challenge is related to successful conclusion of the movement with such a long period of mass struggle. The mass movement has come to acquire the title of the longest and biggest movement of the century. The continuation of this movement for a further period will act as a great challenge for farmers' leaders. These leaders have convinced the farmers that that it is a movement for the very existence of farmers as a community. A narrative has

developed that the three new Farm Acts will result in the takeover of farmers' land and farming by big corporate players like Adani and Ambani. They made a commitment to the farmers that they will continue to fight till these Acts are repealed, along with making MSP legal for all the 23 crops for which the Union Government makes announcements every year. On this, the government has taken a very hard position with a view that there can be amendments in these Acts through negotiations with the Samyukta Kisan Morcha but these Acts will not be repealed. This has created stalemates and after 22<sup>nd</sup> January 2021 talks have remained suspended. This is creating restlessness among a section of young participants. It is becoming difficult to keep the movement peaceful in the wake of provocative statements of some leaders of the BJP. Although dharna at the three sites of Delhi border is continuing peacefully yet there has been some sporadic tension and clashes among BKU activists and BJP cadre at several places in Punjab, Haryana and Western UP. The human and material cost of continuing the movement is rising with each passing day. The number of farmers who have died due to extreme weather at dharna sites, in road accidents while traveling back and forth from dharna sites or due to illness after returning from dharna, has been rising. In the case of many martyred farmers there is no bread earner left in the family. In other cases, even if some adult persons are there, they lack resources to look after family members left behind. The question of rehabilitation of such families is becoming a serious issue. As yet the farmers' unions neither have the resources nor any programmes for such families. Resolving this issue is being left largely to some NGOs or to the family members left behind. As the number of such deaths grows further, this will add anger in the minds of aggrieved family members and young enthusiastic participants in the movement. Furthermore, there are some radical elements within the BJP who can put pressure on the Union Government to forcibly vacate the peaceful dharna sites at Delhi borders. This will only lead to massive state repression by police and other security forces. Another issue is related to registration of cases against leaders and cadre of the movement who have to hire lawyers to fight their cases. The number of such cases is rising with farmers not allowed to hold such meetings by BJP leaders in Punjab and Haryana.

Above all, the popularity of the movement in the region has generated expectations among the people, particularly that in the post-movement period if the new Farm Acts are repealed, farmer leaders will be able to solve the agrarian crisis facing the farmers. But the leadership does not have any programme to handle the present agrarian crisis. This has started a new controversy among experts (Pritam Singh, 2021) and also there are farmers' leaders (Deol, 2021) who are in favour of the farmers' unions contesting the forthcoming elections in Punjab and UP in February 2022. But there is no consensus on this among the leaders of Samyukta Kisan Morcha. Some of these issues are emotive and divisive in nature which demands attention of the leaders. Also as the movement is becoming prolonged, it is leading to saturation of patience among the youth participating in the movement. They are displaying their anger against all political parties participating in the electoral process. This anger is the greatest against the BJP, heading the NDA coalition at the national level. There are

already some sporadic clashes among young leaders and the BKU at places like Abohar, Barnala and Rajpura in Punjab and at Sirsa in Haryana. At these places the farmers have deviated from peaceful protests towards mild clashes with the BJP leaders when the latter have tried to hold meetings or made provocative statements against the farmers' movement. If this remains unchecked it has the potential to escalate violence which can only cause harm to such a successful and peaceful movement.

On the whole the movement has wonderful achievements at its command. It has been able to solicit support from many sections other than the farmers. These include agricultural and industrial workers, employees of government and banks, writers and artists, students, small traders and commission agents, youth, women, lawyers, retired civil bureaucrats and police officers. A large number of NGOs have joined them in providing medical and health facilities, legal support and livelihood support to martyred farmers' families. The movement has generated a culture of equality at a practical level between persons of different religions, castes, regions and gender. It has created a new public discourse as a counter to the neo-liberal policy framework of development. This movement holds many possibilities for positive development in society and provides a new framework for solving agrarian crisis, saving ground water resources, adapting to the deteriorating environment and for a people-friendly model of rural life. The new discourse and peaceful nature of the movement has attracted the support of Punjabi diaspora, political leaders and intellectuals at a global level. The positive effects of this movement will be felt in India and abroad for years to come. It is of utmost importance that the movement remains focused and steady on its goals and retains the peaceful mode of protest. It has to insulate itself from external pressures and provocations from the ruling classes and from internal conflicts arising from differences on mode of conducting the movement. The movement also needs to control and manage the dissipating patience among the youth and of radical elements within the participating unions.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> This is based on discussion with Jagmohan Singh Uppal, General Secretary, Bharatya Kisan Union (Dacaunda) held on July 14<sup>th</sup> 2021.

<sup>2</sup> This observation is based on my two visits to dharna sites, first on March 9, 2021 at Singhu Border and second on July 18, 2021 at Tikri Border. This has been confirmed by discussions with several activists and leaders of farmers that participation of workers is only tokenistic and very small in number.

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