

# Aesthetics of a ‘Mediated’ Rebellion: Performativity and Food Justice in India’s Farmer’s Protests

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## Abstract

Farmer’s protests in India captured the imagination of the world in an unprecedented manner. International media covered the protests and it reflected the gross inequalities existing in the country. This paper argues that the protests attracted attention world over, owing to a unique hermeneutics employed by it. The study is an attempt to decode the facets of this approach and how it has impacted the history of public uprisings in the country.

## Keywords

Farmers’ protests, Hermeneutics, Food justice, Performativity, Mediated rebellion

## Introduction

India, with its rich culinary history is home to varieties of food grains and pulses. It is one of the most gastronomically diverse countries in the world. From the earliest references to food in the country, i.e. in the Vedas, the cultural roots of the entity is established. “From food, All creatures come to be. By food they live./ in food they move,/ into food they pass:?” (Taittiriya Upanishad). Thus, in India, Brahman/God is food.

Fast forward to the twenty first century, India is touted as the next economic super power yet battling starvation deaths at the other end. In fact, in the 2019 global Hunger Index, India ranks 102 out of the 117 countries listed. ‘Hunger amidst plenty’ in India, is a phenomenon that scholars have been trying to decode for a long time. The National Food Security Act 2013 was a welcome move by the government to ensure freedom from hunger among its citizens. However, those who fell outside the gambit of ‘citizenship’ were not included in the Public Distribution System.

The production of food in the country underwent drastic changes in the twentieth century, with the green revolution. However, farming sector in India

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has been undergoing a crisis for a while now, indicated by the burgeoning number of farmer suicides in the range of an appalling 30,000 people in a span of 10 years. This led to widespread dissatisfaction in governmental intervention in the progress of the farming sector. Despite hard labour, the farmers were at the mercy of the elements as well as the wavering price system. Unsurprisingly, a deep-seated, long-term dissatisfaction surrounding the political economy and agricultural policy of the country was perceptible among the farming community.

It is at this juncture of surplus production of food grains and the curious case of mass starvation that the Government of India launched three new Bills in the Parliament, collectively known as the Farm Bills. These bills proposed, to ensure justice to the farmers, avoid exploitation by middlemen as well as promised greater freedom to the farmers to sell their products nationwide. These bills, were vehemently opposed by the farmers themselves as they saw this as a ploy to support the corporates to exploit the farmers. Proposing to bypass the 'Mandi System', crafted as supportive of the farmers in every clause, the farmers accused that the bills hide corporatisation of India's farming sector, obliterating local distribution systems. The brewing dissatisfaction led India's farmers to the streets for the first time in 2018, followed by a series of protests in Mumbai, Delhi and other major cities.

This paper proposes to look at the aesthetics of farmer's protests in India as an invocation of India's community based agricultural legacy juxtaposed with the profit-oriented monopolisation of corporates. The politics behind the veracity of the government's claims as well as the grievances of the farmers is better left to agricultural economists. This paper looks at the performance of these protests as a mythical battle, a *dharma yudha*, to protect the legacy of India's agrarian past from its government aided destruction by corporate giants. Media attention garnered by the protests internationally was largely thanks to its unique aesthetics.

Shiney Varghese writes for the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy website.

Images of turbaned farmers cooking meals for the *langar* (traditional community meals), women farmers explaining why they are striking, and Punjabi youth rapping and taking to social media have been streaming in from India for weeks as protests mount against three recently passed central government bills. Not only *The Guardian* and *Democracy Now* but also the *Wall Street Journal*, *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* have reported on the strike, and Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has extended his support to the striking farmers. But in India, the national

mainstream media, with a few exceptions, have been trying to paint the striking farmers either as misguided, as coming under the sway of opposition parties, as “Separatist, Khalistan elements” or as “anti-nationals,” a term used to criticize anyone who questions central (federal) government policies (Shiney Varghese n.d.).

The government in power, with its proclaimed adherence to ancient Indian knowledge systems and traditional values, could not immediately counter the farmer’s protest that operated more or less on similar ideological moorings. The protesting community seemed to have zeroed in on the crux of the dominant discourse, i.e., working with rhetoric- visual as well as archetypal. As images of the wrinkled and rugged faces of old farmers braving the harsh Delhi winter, some of them sacrificing their lives to the cause, started circulating in international and local media, the government found itself in an unprecedented whirlpool of conflicting loyalties.

Centralisation of food to the rhetoric of the protest worked against the interests of the government. India is one of the few countries in the world where agriculture is still a community led activity. In most other countries, an industrialised monoculture governs agricultural production in the modern times. Large scale mechanisation of food production leads to the destruction of diversity as well as increase in capital investment of agriculture. It also depletes the soil of its natural fertility through excess use of fertilizers and chemicals.

Local farmers are at a disadvantage when compared to their capital surplus corporate competitors. Image of the farmer holds a certain value in the cultural architecture of the country. Any move against the ‘bread givers’ of the country, goes antithetical to the proclaimed value system promulgated by the ruling government, that harps eloquent about bringing back the ‘lost glory’ of ancient India. Thus, the protest was successful in creating an existential crisis at an ideological/discursive level for the dominant system.

Food justice movements sprouted all over the world to tackle the menace of over mechanisation of food production and its unjust distribution. Food Justice Organisation ‘Just Food’ defines food justice as “Communities exercising their right to grow, sell, and eat healthy food. Healthy food is fresh, nutritious, affordable, culturally-appropriate, and grown locally with care for the well-being of the land, workers, and animals.”

## **Position of food in India**

Winson (1993) refers to food as an “intimate commodity” that is literally taken inside the body and imbued with heightened significance. Not only is it a physiological necessity, but food practices — what scholars often call *foodways* — are manifestations and symbols of cultural histories and proclivities. As individuals participate in culturally defined proper ways of eating, they perform their own identities and memberships in particular groups.

In Indian culture, food is given supreme importance in both physiological as well as cultural engagements. The gift of food is considered to be the best gift and the provider of food must be respected and protected at any cost (Achaya 23). It is this age-old dictum, which the right-wing government has been promulgating as an agenda, that it found itself at odds with.

Food has become a topic of contention in contemporary India with cow vigilante groups as well as an attempt to glorify vegetarianism in the country. A well-designed sectarianism and hierarchy are in place with respect to food materials as well as its processes. At this juncture, going against the food producers would be a suicidal for the prospects of any government in power.

## **Hermeneutics of the Protest**

The possible reasons for the farmer protests in India capturing the world’s imagination are plenty, a few of which are approached critically in this paper. There were several factors about the performance that made it unique such as,

1. Apolitical nature of the struggle: Despite continuing pressure from various opposition parties, the protesters managed to keep the struggle farmer-centric and free from partisan interests. They united under the banner of farmer organisations like Samyukta Kisan Morcha (SKM) and All India Kisan Sangharsh Coordination Committee (AIKSCC) and not under the aegis of established political parties.

Beamish and Luebbers (2009) defines an activist alliance as a collaboration and involvement in joint planning and action among different groups. According to this definition, those involved in the alliance do not need to share a collective identity but can have similar values to form ties around one or more issues.

Simin Faedee, in her recent article on the farm protests delineates the composition of the protesting community.

The recent wave of farmers protests in India, has its roots in years of nationally oriented land rights and environmental justice struggles, as well as fragmented but continuous peasant mobilizations organized by different leftist political parties in the late 2000s and early 2010s. Unlike the previous uprisings, small and marginal farmers, landless labourers and Adivasis (tribal groups) form an important part of this movement. Being united with the rich farmers, their interests and demands are not uniform and represent, on the one hand, India's agrarian crisis and on the other hand wide inequalities that exist across India's rural population. (Faedee 2022)

Unlike previous farmer's agitations, the composition of the protesters changed in the current uprising and has significantly broadened the ideological moorings of the protest. For the first time in the history of farm protests in India, the All India Kisan Sangharsh Coordination Committee (AIKSCC) was able to bring the farmers from different states under the same banner as well as Dalit, tribal and women farmers. Despite their varying needs, they were able to finalise on two common demands, minimum support price for agricultural products and total loan waiver for farmers. Several political parties tried to cash in on the large-scale public uprising without any positive response from the protesters.

The idealistic nature of the farmer's cause was accentuated by their decision to keep it away from partisan politics.

2. Image of the 'Farmer': National and international media were inundated with images of the haggard, wrinkled faces of elderly protestors braving rain and shine to preserve their rights. The battle was always between the helpless farmers and the mighty State that churned out anti-farmer laws one by one, the latest being the destructive Farm Bills. Sympathy for the underdog who was representative of the common man of India knew no bounds. Thus, the movement succeed in keeping it 'about the farmer' till the demands were met with.

The metaphoric deployment of the image of the farmer, the '*annadatas*' of the country, elicited an unprecedented response. In the 2018 march to Mumbai, the farmers were given a warm welcome by the locals, offering them food and free fuel, free treatment for the farmers who fell sick and even legal support. Somehow, it was recognised that farmer's woes were not theirs alone, and the pressing need to support them who showed the nerve to leave their hearths and homes to fight a battle for justice.

This spontaneous outflow of support was later channelised during the *Dilli Chalo* march in 2018 as well as in movements like The Nation for Farmer's Group. Student organisations in the country that were constantly hounded by the government sided with the farmers and joined the protest in the national capital. Thus, the protests constantly remained 'farmer centric' and escaped being a political drama.

After the government had agreed to repeal the bills in 2021, the farmers celebrated victory day. P. Krishnaprasad, a farmer representative from Kerala and the Finance Secretary of All India Kisan Sabha said to a reporter,

In the 75 year history of India, this sort of a large movement was never witnessed by the country. Two things were proved by this struggle. One is that the farmers realised that who are the real enemies of the farmers, it's not the government per se, or the political parties per se, but they are the corporate companies, who are not giving good price for the farmer's products. The governments are creating laws in favour of the companies. So, the farmers should come and unite against the companies. The second important thing about this agitation is the unity of the farmers. Farmers must understand, as they have now, that they are really farmers, as a class. They are not Yadavs, or Sikh or Hindu or Muslim or Dalit or Gujjar, that is not their identity, their identity is that of the farmer. (NDTV)

This response testifies the clarity the farmer groups had and the organisation skills displayed. It truly became a 'national' agitation with the participation from most of the states and became an unprecedented celebration of the farmer identity.

However, at a later stage, the protest model has been extrapolated to include other 'fights for justice' such as Indian wrestler's demand for a corrupt and abusive official to be expelled. The wrestlers requested support from the farmers, who happily joined the protests at Jantar Mantar. Thus, the farmer's protests have become a metaphor for all idealistic fights for justice in the country, giving it a moral as well as ideological authenticity.

3. Invocation of a folk/agrarian idea of India: The unique style of performativity adopted by the protesters was essentially agrarian, folk as well as hitting the right cords of nostalgia. In the highly mythologised everyday culture of India, where even the cow is venerated for being the provider of milk, exploitation of the farmers translated as doom for the country. The protesters were cautious about the unique brand of resistance they were creating.

From the very beginning, the protesting farmers did not allow the highly polarised media moguls to telecast the protest and create fake news. Instead, they created a YouTube channel and updated the public about the progress of the protest. The byte hungry media were left without a clue and were shown their way out.

The farmers invoked the hermeneutics of an essentially folk, agrarian culture characteristic of the 'bread basket states of India', Punjab and Haryana. Tractors fitted with DJ system blared loud Punjabi Bhangra music while the farmers complemented with their brisk dance moves, braving the harsh Delhi winters. Several Punjabi artists and singers joined in the protests, providing entertainment to the protesters.

The protesters also held out banners during the talks with the ministers, that read 'Yes/No', suggesting that their demand was simple and straightforward, unlike the discursive acrobatics of the ruling government. Thus, the farmers were able to place themselves as the complete 'Other' to the dominant forces, winning the battle of minds.

When the protesters were finally successful in repealing the farm laws, they left with the accompaniment of dancing and music. Rakesh Tikait, farmer's leader said on the occasion "The farmers have got back their respect. The poor farmers who were suppressed in villages, and rural areas have gotten a voice to express themselves, they can now speak for themselves." (Al Jazeera)

Ravish Kumar, senior Indian journalist said at the venue that "while the government tried to smuggle in laws harmful to the farmers, hidden in legal jargon, they could not fool the farmers. Rising in protest in this way was something even political leaders could not do, for fear of revenge measures. This courage and idealism set the protests apart" (NDTV)

These factors reinforced the image of the protest as a '*dharma yudha*' or a war for justice and became representative of the fading images of hope left in a largely polarised country.

4. Use of Food as a trope: At every step of the struggle farmers emphasised that they were the creators of food for the entire country. If the bread givers were forced to leave their farms to lead strikes on the roads, harvests during the coming year will be bad, leading to an economic crisis. The country was again reminded of the transience of this mirage called development and how dependent we were still, on the mercies of the weather and the soil. The farmers were consistent in

their use of food as a symbol as they refused to eat the food served by officials when invited for compromise talks.

In another metaphorically significant move, the farmers refused to consume the food offered by the government during their discussions with the officials at *Vigyan Bhavan*. From the very outset, the protesters had set up *langars* or community kitchens at the protest sites projecting an image of the self-sufficient Indian farmer, also as a nod to the Gandhian ideal of the self-sufficiency of India's villages. In the rare interviews they gave the national media, the farmers expressed their worry about the plight of next year's harvests as they had left the farms unattended.

Old and tired farmers cooking and having food that was produced by themselves at the farm was a striking image that became symbolic of the entire protest movement. The fact that the farmers were demanding nothing but their right to lead decent lives by ensuring minimum support price for their produce, was clear in their singularity of purpose and the uniquely agrarian hermeneutics of the performance of protest that invoked India's agrarian culture.

### **Conclusion**

The paper examined the symbolic significance of the methods of protest employed by Indian farmers in their struggle against oppressive government policies. Through critical discourse analysis of newspaper reports, video footages as well as comments of the protesters, it was observed that a unique hermeneutic model of protest was employed by the farmers, the philosophy of which was rooted in India's agrarian culture. The struggle was cautiously kept farmer-centric and apolitical, that garnered it a moral authenticity in the country, rendering it the archetypal *dharmayudha*, a battle for the cause of justice. This new hermeneutic model of protest has become a cornerstone in the history of protests in India and has been invoked and emulated subsequently by citizens of the country in diverse situations.

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