

### BJP'S UNEVEN TREATMENT OF FARMERS AMIDST UPCOMING GENERAL ELECTIONS

By  
**Muhammad Ahmad Khan**  
Research Associate  
India Study Centre (ISC), ISSI

Edited by  
**Dr Khurram Abbas**

February 27, 2024

*(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)*



Indian farmers' protests in the country have revealed uneven policies of the government towards the group that makes a major contribution to India's GDP. Farmers from major Indian states-- Punjab, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Madhya Pradesh-- marched against the Centre's policies that benefit the corporate sector at the cost of farmers' rights. They started their '*Delhi Chalo*' march spearheaded by '*Samyukt Kisan Morcha*' (SKM), '*Kisan Mazdoor Morcha*', and '*Kisan Mazdoor Sandharsh Committee*'. Besides, more than 200 farmer unions are also participating in the march. Alongside using force to stop farmers, the government has completed four rounds of talks, but has been unsuccessful in convincing farmers to withdraw their call for a long march.<sup>1</sup> The farmers resumed their march towards Delhi on February 21, which was halted due to the talks suggested by the Centre.<sup>2</sup>

1 Sarah Shamim, "India Farmers March: What are their Demands? Why is govt blocking roads?" *Aljazeera*, February 13, 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/2/13/india-farmers-march-what-are-their-demands-why-is-govt-blocking-roads>.

2 Cherylann Mollan, "Farmers Protest: Protesters to Resume Delhi March over Crop Prices," *BBC*, February 20, 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-68345129>.

## Background

In September 2020, the Indian Parliament passed three acts that later emerged as 'Farm Bills'. The Agriculture Act proposed deregulating the wholesale market that was backed by the government, directly connecting the farmers with the food processors. Farmers feared that if they were directly connected with the food processors, with no government interventions, it would lead to the food processors controlling the crops' prices. Because of that fear, farmers from across the country initiated the '*Delhi Chalo*' march against the 'Farm Bills' that led to the Supreme Court's intervention leading to a stay against the implementation of the Bill.<sup>3</sup> In the 2021 agitations, more than 750 farmers died.<sup>4</sup> Later that year, the Modi regime repealed the Farm Bills and farmers halted their protests.

## Farmers' Demands

Earlier this month, Indian Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman presented an interim budget based on strengthening 'four castes': Poor, Women, Youth and Farmers.<sup>5</sup> While highlighting contradictions in government policies, the leader of *Kisan Mazdoor Morcha*, Sarwan Singh Pandher said, "The government is torturing farmers, and it seems like Punjab and Haryana are not part of India anymore". Announcing the march, the farmers have articulated the following demands:<sup>6</sup>

- Enacting the law that guarantees Minimum Support Price (MSP) to all crops. In 2021, when farmers had withdrawn their protests against the government, the latter had assured to provide MSP for all crops.
- Withdrawal from World Trade Organization (WTO).
- Ban on all Free Trade Agreements (FTAs).
- Pensions for the farmers and farm labourers.

---

<sup>3</sup> "Indian Farmers Protests Against Agricultural Laws," Reuters, November 19, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/markets/commodities/indian-farmers-protests-against-agricultural-laws-2021-11-19/>.

<sup>4</sup> "750 died during farmers protest, No condolence from centre: Farmer Leader," NDTV, November 8, 2021, <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/750-died-during-farmers-protest-no-condolence-from-centre-rakesh-tikait-2602504>.

<sup>5</sup> Smriti Kak Ramachandran, "In Poll year, the interim budget's four poles," *Hindustan Times*, February 2, 2024, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/in-poll-year-the-interim-budget-s-four-poles-101706835629861.html>.

<sup>6</sup> Shamim, "India Farmers March: What are their Demands? Why is govt blocking roads?"

- Compensation for land in various developmental projects and 10 percent reservations in residential plots for the families.
- Scrapping the electricity bill. Farmers fear the privatization of electricity might increase the cost of their crop production.
- Monetary compensation for the families of the farmers who died during the 2020-21 protests. They demand employment for at least one family member of the deceased.
- Establishing the National Commission for Spices.
- The land, forests, and water resources that belong to the tribal communities, should be protected by the government.
- Companies that promote fake seeds, pesticides, and fertilizers must be penalized for improving seed quality.
- 200 days of employment per year for farmers with a daily wage of Rs 700.

Besides these demands, one of the major demands is the implementation of the Swaminathan Commission's recommendations. In 2004-06, MS Swaminathan, an agriculturalist, chaired the National Commission on Farmers and presented five reports. It led to the formation of the National Policy for Farmers in 2007. According to the recommendation by Swaminathan, farmers must be provided 50 percent more MSP than the average cost of production. Moreover, the Swaminathan report recommended that agricultural land must not be used for non-agricultural purposes by the corporate sector.<sup>7</sup> The farmers since 2010, have been protesting to implement the recommendations of the Swaminathan report.

### Government Response

The Modi government has always dealt harshly with farmers. The Delhi-Haryana border is blocked by the police where tear gas was fired on peaceful farmers. Multiple places are blocked with barbed wire. In the recent clashes between security forces and farmers, more than 100 farmers are reported injured, reviving the memory of the previous agitation.<sup>8</sup> Side by side, the Centre has also

---

<sup>7</sup> "Farmers Protests: What is Swaminathan Committee and what did it recommend," *The Economic Times*, February 13, 2024, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/economy/agriculture/farmers-protests-what-is-swaminathan-committee-and-what-did-it-recommend/articleshow/107663624.cms?from=mdr>.

<sup>8</sup> Kusum Arora, "As Over 100 injured, Samyukt Kisan Morcha to protest against attacks on farmers," *The Wire*, February 15, 2024, <https://thewire.in/rights/skm-to-protest-in-punjab-on-thursday-against-attacks-on-farmers-in-haryana>.

proposed negotiations, but the conditions are not acceptable to the farmers. On February 19, the Centre proposed MSP on maize, pulses, and cotton for five years. Farmers' leadership rejected the plan. SKM leader Jagjit Singh Dallewal reacted by saying: "The reason for not accepting the government's proposal is that they said during the meeting that they will buy all the crops of the country, but at the press conference outside, they said a different thing. This means this is some kind of injustice with the farmers."<sup>9</sup>

India is a developing country with 15 percent of its GDP coming from agriculture. Around 70 percent of rural households are directly or indirectly dependent upon the agricultural sector for their basic needs. Around 58 percent of the population is linked to the agriculture sector.<sup>10</sup> But the policies of the Modi government have been unfavorable for the farmers, the backbone of the Indian economy. As the recent *Lok Sabha* elections are looming ahead, with the BJP being seen as the leading party, these farmers' protests can cause serious damage to the BJP's popularity in the affected states including Punjab, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh. As PM Modi promulgates the narrative of '*Viksit Bharat*'- a developed India- he has forgotten the contribution of the agriculture sector in supporting the Indian economy. According to reports, the share of agriculture in India's GDP has declined from 35 percent in 1990-91 to 15 percent in the last fiscal year.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, when these farmers march out for their rights, they are often treated harshly and called '*Khalistanis*'. Sanjay Raut, Shiv Sena leader, expressed grave concerns about the Centre treating farmers in 2020 as terrorists. He said, "Since they are Sikh and have come from Punjab and Haryana, they are being called *Khalistani*. It is an insult to farmers."<sup>12</sup> Indian National Congress (INC) has even promised to provide MSP according to Swaminathan Report - which it had rejected in 2010 - if it comes to making government this time.<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> "Govt's Proposal not in Farmers Interest, says Farmer leaders," The Times of India, February 20, 2024, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/farmers-protest-news-live-updates-shambhu-border-delhi-chalo-march-delhi-traffic/liveblog/107784820.cms>.

<sup>10</sup> 'India at Glance,' FAO in India, <https://www.fao.org/india/fao-in-india/india-at-a-glance/en/>.

<sup>11</sup> "Share of agriculture in India's GDP declined in FY23," The Economic Times, December 19, 2023, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/economy/agriculture/share-of-agriculture-in-indias-gdp-declined-to-15-in-fy23-govt/articleshow/106124466.cms?from=mdr>.

<sup>12</sup> "An insult that farmers treated as terrorists' called khalistani', says Sanjay Raut," The Times of India, November 29, 2020, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/an-insult-that-farmers-treated-as-terrorists-called-khalistani-says-sanjay-raut/articleshow/79474242.cms>.

<sup>13</sup> Shishir Gupta, "Cong Promises Legal MSP to Farmer, had opposed in 2010 during UPA rule," *Hindustan Times*, February 14, 2024, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/farmers-protest-updates-congress-opposed-2010-msp-upa-government-bjp-101707894065063.html>.