

Letter to the Unknown Indian Kisan

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Abstract

This letter is an expression of gratitude, from two students of social movements in India who are currently working in the USA, to the thousands of unknown Indian *kisans* (peasants). In 2020-21, peasants from across the country protested and participated in a movement widely known as anti-farm law movement—which was, in turn, triggered by the passage of three laws, together known as the farm laws, that aimed to liberalize agricultural commodity production and marketing. But what started out as a movement with a limited purpose soon morphed into a statement against the high-handedness of the Indian state. Through this letter, we pay a tribute to the farmers who drew inspiration from diverse intellectual strands including Gandhism and Ambedkarite philosophy to craft a profound statement to highlight the precarity experienced by the farmers and in defense of India's democratic ethos.

Keywords

peasant movements, India, agrarian distress, agricultural incomes, democracy

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Dear Indian Kisan,¹

We wish you a happy Gandhi *Jayanti*, the 151st birth anniversary of the Mahatma. We write this letter as a modest token of our appreciation for your efforts to make India a more humane place. As we speak, the Panchayat office in your village would be hoisting the Tricolor with much fanfare; the Sarpanch would be making a thumping speech about the stellar role that M.K. Gandhi played in India's freedom struggle against the British Raj; and kids in the local government school, dressed in neatly pressed uniforms would be rendering patriotic songs.

Yet, as India commemorates the 'apostle of peace and non-violence' and revels in the imagery of Gandhi, the round spectacles, the *lathi* (stick), and the slightly hunched but firm stride; it is, with seeming alacrity, moving away from his lessons of *satyagraha* (passive resistance), *ahimsa* (non-violence), and tolerance for all religions, deeming them to be effete. Another facet of Gandhi that has been forgotten is his abiding concern for farmers throughout his political life. He explained in *Hind Swaraj* (1909), "To me, India means millions of farmers on whom depends the existence of its princes, and our own." It is no surprise then that even as Gandhi and Gandhism have faded from public memory, so has the rural and the farmer. In a rapidly urbanizing India whose economy is propelled by the services sector, it is easy to forget that our food and clothing still come from agriculture and that it still employs more than 60% of the population. Nonetheless, the fact is that like Gandhism, farming has become a relic, to be revered and commemorated but not seen as belonging to today's India.

Thus, it is indeed curious that while the nation is shunning Gandhism in favor of a more 'masculine' worldview, the "*ghar mein ghus ke maareng*" (we will kill the enemy in 'his' own home) attitude, you, and your sisters and brothers are embracing it with a passion. Is it bravado? A sense of nostalgia? Or just plain expediency? Whatever be the case, you demonstrated an amazing grasp of the core ideals of Gandhism during the recently concluded anti-farm law movement, when 40,000 of your friends camped on the outskirts of India's national capital Delhi, demanding that laws that aimed to liberalize agricultural commodity production, trading, and marketing be scrapped.

Much like Gandhi, you showed that through passive resistance, unflinching commitment to nonviolence in the face of relentless provocations, and a clever and creative use of mass media and social media, it is possible to overcome a powerful government, enjoying brute control over the state machinery. Through a murderous pandemic, a cold winter, abuses by the leaders of the ruling political party, mockery on popular news channels and on the social media by powerful and influential people, you constructed a compelling case for why the new farm laws would break the back of the already precarious farmers. You of all people would know the devastation that a 'free market' can wreak upon the farming community.

As your brothers and sisters from outside a handful of states like Punjab, Haryana, and Western Uttar Pradesh have argued, declining input subsidies, absence of state guarantees for commodity prices, the lack of state-backed commodity procurement, exposed them to

¹ Bharatiya = Indian; Kisan = peasant

high costs of production, collapse of commodity prices, and declining profits from agriculture. Combined with declining public investments in rural education and health, this has meant that farming has become increasingly unremunerative, unable to meet even the basic needs of the farmer. This scenario has pushed many of your fellow-farmers towards distress migration and, in extreme cases, even suicide. Therefore, if you distrust the market and oppose 'reforms' that further liberalize agricultural commodity production and trading, you have a very good reason to do so.

While you showed a great understanding of Gandhism, we feel that you did one better. One of the great intellectual debates during India's freedom struggle was between Gandhi and B.R. Ambedkar. Notwithstanding his commitment to peace, nonviolence, and religious tolerance, Gandhi was resistant to upending the caste system. He argued for reforming the caste system to make it accommodative of the oppressed castes through gestures like letting them into temples or by cleaning toilets; failing to recognize the fundamental violence embedded within that system. Dr. Ambedkar on the other hand argued for the abolition of the caste system, recognizing that the inherent violence of the structure was the reason why oppressed castes were routinely dehumanized and subjected to bestial violence.

These two schools of thought have often been at odds ever since. However, in Delhi during the anti-farm law protests, you and your friends showed impressive intellectual dexterity in blending these two strands. While you drew on Gandhian principles to stage a largely peaceful protest that shunned religious discrimination and majoritarianism, you also borrowed from Ambedkar to ensure that Dalits, women and Adivasis (indigenous communities) had spaces to make their voices heard. You argued that the concerns of these marginalized groups, even if not always directly related to farming but more often to land rights, improved wages, and protection from violence, were farmers' concerns. You also displayed tremendous generosity of spirit by allying with workers and the urban poor. In your unique worldview, farmers' struggles for dignity and a decent livelihood were not theirs alone; they were intertwined with those of other marginalized peoples. It wouldn't be an overstatement to say that this large-hearted and astute gesture helped you gather the strength needed to defeat a better-resourced government machinery.

Further proof of your intellectual dexterity was witnessed when you brought together ideological opposites, and sections of society that have traditionally stayed away from street movements. Thus, on the one hand, your anti-farm law movement witnessed the Marxists, the market centrists, and even those affiliated to the Hindu right-wing making common cause. On the other hand, you succeeded in drawing participation from sections of the population like the urban middle-classes and the salaried professionals. You made the anti-farm law into a truly inclusive platform that embodied the hopes, aspirations, and concerns of a vast swathe of India's population. In the process, you brought to life, Angela Davis's words that "movements . . . are most powerful when they begin to affect the vision and perspective of those who do not necessarily associate themselves with those movements" (Davis, 2016, 47).

While the anti-farm law movement garnered a lot of national and international attention, your struggles did not start with it. Even way back in late 19th and early to mid-20th centuries, the Indian peasants rose up in arms and shook the foundations of those in power. Whether it be the Deccan Riots of 1875 or the Telangana Armed Struggle of 1946-51 or the *Karza Mukti* (freedom from debt) Movement of the 1980s, your predecessors showed a

willingness to put up a fight against an oppressive state. More recently, during the *Kisan Long March* when 40,000 of your sisters and brothers trekked over 250 kilometers from Nasik to Mumbai, India, you gave a demonstration of what true discipline is all about. Not once during the entire march did you resort to violence. Upon reaching the outskirts of Mumbai, when you found out that your arrival had coincided with kids' public examinations, you decided to forego rest and instead march for another 3 hours to the final destination in downtown Mumbai. You showed that even through your pain and exhaustion, you were not willing to disrupt other peoples' lives. That lesson in discipline is hard to emulate. Recent years have been marked by numerous such protests by farmers, across various parts of the country. All of these protests were underpinned by angst among you and your friends about the deep-seated crisis in Indian agriculture, a crisis that is marked by rising costs of cultivation and living, unremunerative prices, lack of alternative sources of rural livelihoods, and dwindling state support, and the reduction of every human use value to an exchange value.

This letter is our small gesture of gratitude to you. We are living in a time when opposing the government is hazardous. Upon those who dare to protest, the entire might of the state machinery, including an alphabet soup of investigative agencies, is unleashed. Troll armies and motormouths on the internet and television news studios let loose the choicest of abuse and mockery, including issuing threats of rape and murder. Towering voices of dissent such as Sudha Bharadwaj, Stan Swamy, Varavara Rao, and many others have been cast in prison over trumped-up charges that did not stand up to legal scrutiny. Coupled with these obvious efforts to stifle dissent is the relentless electoral success of the current government led by the Bharatiya Janata Party and its allies. These electoral triumphs have forced many to ask if spaces for dissent in India were dead. You have answered this question with an emphatic NO. You have shown, that through tenacity, creativity, humaneness, and intellectual agility, it is possible carve out spaces where dissent and disagreement can thrive. You have also proved that dissent and civility can coexist, that one need not be at the expense of the other.

You and the other farmer brothers and sisters have crafted a new idiom of protests. This is important not just for Indians but also for those in other countries, which have also been witnessing similar moves against dissent, by strongarm governments. As Noam Chomsky put it, the farmers' movement is a "beacon of hope in dark times" (quoted in Kandikuppa and Gupta, 2022). Through your efforts, you might have very well saved Indian democracy and pushed it, even if only marginally, towards a more humane discourse. This is no small feat. And for this, we would like to express our sincerest gratitude.

We hope that you have a prosperous year ahead, that your tribe grows, and that you will continue to inspire us to find our better selves.

Yours respectfully,
Sandeep Kandikuppa
Pallavi Gupta

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Pallavi Gupta is a feminist political geographer and a faculty in the Department of Geography, University of Hawai'i, Manoa. Her research lies at the intersection of infrastructure studies, Dalit studies, and Feminist and labor geographies. Pallavi's most recent project turned a critical lens at India's flagship cleanliness program, the Swacch Bharat Abhiyan and looked at the simultaneous ubiquitousness and invisibility of caste from this program.

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