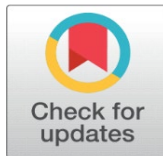
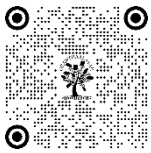


AGRARIAN MOVEMENT AND AGRICULTURAL LABOURERS OF PUNJAB: CHALLENGES AND WAY FORWARD

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ABSTRACT

The depiction of migrant labourers in transit has reignited discourse surrounding our adopted economic model and the substantive security afforded to our labour class. The imposition of COVID-19 lockdowns further imperilled agricultural labourers, shedding light on their predicaments—previously marginalized within mainstream deliberations. While contentious farm laws and labour codes dominated discussions, the plight of agricultural labourers remained eclipsed by the predominant focus on farmers and urban labourers.

Our contention lies in the unprecedented participation of labourers in the farmers' protests, rallying under the unifying slogan "Kisan Mazdoor Ekta Zindabad" (Long Live Farmer-Labourer Unity). Nonetheless, this solidarity predominantly stemmed from a broader spectrum of support for the farming community, rather than from a specific focus on the challenges faced by agricultural labourers.

This article endeavours to explicate the potential ramifications of the recently repealed triad of farm laws on agricultural labourers, elucidating their present vulnerabilities. Moreover, it seeks to unravel the underlying reasons behind the relatively subdued participation of these labourers in protests and the marginalization of their issues within the recent farmers' movement. Finally, it offers recommendations aimed at ameliorating the circumstances of agricultural labourers.

Keywords: Agrarian Unrest, Farmers' Protest, Agricultural Labourers, Farm Laws

1. INTRODUCTION

The triumphant farmers' protests of 2020–21 in India epitomized significant resistance within the working class. Although farmers have faced persistent challenges since the liberalization of the economy in 1991, the crisis has deepened under the Modi government. One respondent poignantly likened the situation to the government placing already ailing farmers in intensive care against their will—a metaphor capturing the worsening of their plight.

The rural and agrarian crises, along with the intricate dynamics between farmers and agricultural labourers, have had profound repercussions on the livelihoods of the latter. Notably, the robust Mandi-Market system and the socio-economic and political influence of farmers in Punjab, Haryana, Western Uttar Pradesh, and northern Rajasthan created fertile ground for a mass movement (Rajalakshmi, 2021). The introduction of three farm laws was perceived as a direct assault on the identity and survival of farmers. Initially led by Punjab's academics, intellectuals, and farm unions, the discourse around these laws eventually gained nationwide traction. However, this discourse primarily cantered on

'landowning,' 'Jatt,' 'male,' and 'farmers,' inadvertently marginalizing the voices and involvement of agricultural labourers for a variety of reasons.

To address this gap, a study was conducted using qualitative research methods to analyse the challenges faced by agricultural labourers. Primary data was collected from protest sites at the Delhi borders through participant observation and content analysis. Drawing on robust qualitative insights from these protest sites, this paper explores the current status of agricultural labourers, the potential impact of the now-repealed farm laws on them, the barriers to their participation in the farmers' movement, and possible paths forward.

2. CURRENT STATUS OF LABOURERS

India is home to approximately 54.6% agricultural workers (Sood, 2013), with over 3.5 lakh recorded farmer suicides over the past three decades. Unfortunately, nationwide investigations into the conditions of agricultural labourers have been relatively scarce. A recent study by Punjab Agricultural University (PAU) revealed 7,303 agricultural labourer suicides in 2,400 villages across six districts of Punjab between 2000 and 2018 (Singh, 2021). In Punjab, two-thirds of agricultural labourers belong to the Scheduled Castes, who collectively own less than 3.5% of the state's agricultural land (Moudgil, 2019).

Beyond these grim statistics, agricultural labourers face numerous socio-economic challenges on a daily basis. Even during the farmers' protests, contradictions emerged whenever the organic concerns of labourers were raised in these platforms of resistance. The introduction of the Green Revolution in Indian agriculture significantly reduced reliance on human labour (Singh, 2009). As a result, the already existing agrarian crisis in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh—combined with the influx of migrant labourers into Punjab—has further diminished opportunities for local agricultural workers, leading to decreased employment and lower wages.

Although the traditional 'siri' bonded labour system is on the decline, employment opportunities for migrant labourers are not limited to agriculture alone, intensifying competition for available agricultural work. The closure of industries in Punjab—which could have absorbed some of this labour force—has only worsened the situation (Singh & Bhogal, 2021). Issues such as limited job availability and delayed payments have also hindered agricultural labourers' participation in the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, 2005 (MGNREGA). The rapid privatization of healthcare and education has further deprived this group of access to essential services.

Ongoing incidents of class conflict, production disparities, sexual harassment, gender-based violence, and caste-based discrimination have deepened the divide between agricultural labourers and landowning farmers. Dalits, in their continued struggle for access to panchayat land, often face severe resistance from upper-caste landowners who use their social and political influence to suppress these efforts. The movement for land rights led by the Zameen Prapti Sangharsh Committee (ZPSC) highlights the acute violence, social ostracism, and hostility faced by Dalit agricultural workers (Bajpai, 2016).

The precarious economic condition of agricultural labourer families significantly contributes to their vulnerability, with an average debt of ₹68,329 burdening each agricultural household in Punjab (Singh et al., 2017). With job opportunities shrinking across the state, these families struggle to generate income amidst rising daily expenses. Wage labour remains their primary source of livelihood. A recent PAU study found that 91.65% of families of suicide victims relied on wage labour (Singh, 2021).

Alarming, only 0.04% of these families had engaged in MGNREGA work, and a mere 4.48% had secured government employment, indicating the severe lack of social security available to them. To manage financial hardships, many agricultural labourers resort to borrowing. Of the 7,303 agricultural labourers who died by suicide in Punjab between 2000 and 2018, most had taken loans from non-institutional sources such as moneylenders, large farmers, armed forces personnel, shopkeepers, friends, and relatives. Only 7.37% of their total debt came from institutional sources such as commercial banks and cooperative societies (Singh et al., 2021). The immense psychological stress—compounded by socio-economic hardship—has tragically led many labourers to end their lives, further alienating them from participation in farmer organizations, labour movements, or political parties.

3. AGRICULTURAL LABOUR IN THE RECENT FARMERS' MOVEMENT

Throughout the genesis of the farmers' movement in Punjab, agricultural labourers made considerable sacrifices in support of the farmers. Prior to November 26, 2020, while some farmers continued their agricultural work, the burden of labour largely fell on agricultural workers. Mobilization efforts for the *Delhi Chalo* ("Go to Delhi") movement and other calls were primarily led by larger farmers, leaving day-to-day operations to the labourers. Even after the farmers left for

Delhi following the wheat sowing season, ongoing tasks such as fertilization and irrigation were carried out by these labourers as the protests continued.

While agricultural labour unions supported the *Delhi Chalo* call given by the Samyukta Kisan Morcha (SKM) farm unions, only a handful of full-time union workers actively participated. Despite global coverage—images of water cannons, tear gas, and road blockades circulating widely—a strong pro-farmer sentiment emerged, drawing support even from leaders and workers of the ruling party. However, this global pro-farmer sentiment failed to encompass the local agricultural labourers and their concerns.

These labourers, much like women farmers, were unable to voice their occupational and identity-related issues. Their meagre wages, lack of social security, caste-based oppression, gender-based abuse, and other pressing concerns remained unaddressed in these forums. Their participation was often shaped by a broader narrative that attracted urban middle-class citizens and others from non-agricultural backgrounds.

Various push-and-pull factors, coupled with resolutions passed through village panchayats and protest committees, imposed fines for non-compliance, pressuring agricultural labourers to join the protests. Instances such as a Dalit *Siri* at the Singhu border symbolized the presence of labourers, yet their roles mirrored those they held in their villages—organizing water, food, security, and other logistical tasks. Notably, events like *Kisan Mazdoor Ekta Diwas* (Farmer-Labourer Unity Day) delegated responsibilities to labourers, yet underscored their exclusion from the mainstream of the movement.

Critical decision-making bodies—from stage secretaries to fund committees—failed to accommodate agricultural labourers.

(Sabrang, 2021)

4. POTENTIAL IMPACTS OF FARM LAWS ON AGRICULTURAL LABOURERS

Debates among academics regarding the agricultural crisis have primarily centered on landowning farmers, largely overlooking agricultural labourers. According to the 2011 Census, agricultural labourers constitute 54.6% of the total workforce engaged in the agricultural sector. The farmers' movement that emerged in Punjab, Haryana, Western Uttar Pradesh, and Rajasthan was catalysed by the passage of three farm ordinances by India's central government. However, extensive discussions, papers, reports, and articles surrounding these laws have focused almost exclusively on farmers, neglecting the significant agricultural labour force. The implications of these laws extend beyond farmers and are likely to impact the broader rural workforce of India.

1. FARMERS' PRODUCE TRADE AND COMMERCE (PROMOTION AND FACILITATION) ACT, 2020:

The implementation of this Act threatens the relevance of Agricultural Produce Market Committees (APMCs) across the country. The Act aims to create alternative trade opportunities outside APMCs. These state-managed markets ensure government accountability and offer farmers remunerative prices. The closure of APMC mandis could potentially lead to the abolition of Minimum Support Prices (MSPs) for various crops, as studies suggest a direct correlation between mandis and MSPs. The absence of APMC mandis may also result in the automatic shutdown of the Public Procurement System (PPS). Without government procurement for distribution through the Public Distribution System (PDS), private players may exploit farmers through contract farming, thereby disempowering tillers. A recent example from Haryana highlighted a disparity in mustard prices offered by private traders versus government-run APMCs, negatively affecting both market prices and the availability of essential commodities through the PDS (Ministry of Agriculture & Farmers Welfare, 2020).

2. FARMERS (EMPOWERMENT AND PROTECTION) AGREEMENT ON PRICE ASSURANCE AND FARM SERVICES ACT, 2020:

If implemented nationwide, this Act could bind farmers to private companies, making them vulnerable to exploitation. The contract farming model may significantly reduce rural employment by favouring cost-effective mechanization over human labour. This could potentially trigger a rise in rural unemployment, worsening the condition of a workforce already impacted by industrial closures (Ministry of Agriculture & Farmers Welfare, 2020).

3. AMENDMENTS TO THE ESSENTIAL COMMODITIES ACT (ECA), 2020:

The proposed amendments reflect the government's intentions and foreshadow possible repercussions. The removal of certain essential commodities from the scope of this Act could lead to unregulated hoarding and price manipulation by corporations. These changes may sharply increase the cost of living for the poor, forcing them to purchase essential goods at significantly higher market prices (Ministry of Agriculture & Farmers Welfare, 2020).

5. CHALLENGES WITHIN THE MOVEMENT

On December 8, 2020, during a meeting with farmers' leaders, Union Home Minister Amit Shah expressed concerns that repealing the farm laws might set a precedent, prompting demands to revoke other controversial legislations. Around the same time, the government abolished 29 labour laws and introduced four labour codes, widely deemed exploitative and discriminatory by experts and trade unions (Pandey, 2020). In that meeting, Shah acknowledged the possibility of labourers protesting these labour codes, potentially compelling the government to withdraw them as well. This attempt by the state to sow fear backfired, instead empowering labourers. It fostered the belief that if the farm laws could be repealed, similar agitation might lead to the repeal of the labour codes. Slogans such as "*Kisan Mazdoor Ekta Zindabad – Long Live Farmer-Labourer Unity*" echoed throughout the protests, though critical concerns lay beneath this facade of unity.

Farm unions faced criticism for failing to adequately include agricultural labourers in the protest. The initial charter of demands, drafted on November 29, 2020, listed the repeal of the labour codes as its third point. However, as discussions between farmer leaders and the central government advanced, this demand was dropped. Negotiations instead focused solely on the three farm laws, minimum support price (MSP), the electricity amendment bill, and the pollution draft bill. Consequently, agricultural labourers became peripheral to the movement—much like non-farm workers or the urban middle class. Despite the interconnectedness of issues and the detrimental effects of the farm laws on labourers' lives, their concerns received insufficient attention.

The slogan "*Apni hi zameena te mazdoor banana*" / "*You will be forced to become labour on your own farm*" implicitly discredited the livelihoods of labourers. This rhetoric, often emphasized by farm unions during mobilization, suggested that becoming a labourer was a fall from grace. Early on, there was a lack of literature from farm unions attempting to engage labourers in the movement. During the protest, affluent landowners explicitly dismissed the participation and relevance of labourers. Some upper-caste landlords asserted that only *kisans* (farmers) were capable of leading the cause, revealing caste-based prejudices. This exclusion was rooted in caste hierarchies—Jatts were reluctant to acknowledge any debt to Dalits.

Since the majority of agricultural labourers are Dalits, existing caste conflicts in Punjab worsened. During the previous year's COVID-19 lockdown, upper-caste farmers boycotted Dalit farm labourers. In the following season, village panchayats passed resolutions capping payments to labourers for rice sowing. Wage disparities and gender-based abuse further excluded Dalit landless women labourers (Singh, 2021). The main argument for omitting labourers' demands from the SKM charter was the movement's focused scope: the repeal of the three farm laws and legal backing for MSP. SKM acknowledged that even if these objectives were achieved, the broader agrarian crisis—including nationwide indebtedness—would remain unaddressed.

Issues such as droughts, floods, environmental degradation, corporate exploitation, chemical overuse, and land rights for landless people, women, and tribals remained untouched. SKM's limited mandate made it unlikely that other sections, such as agricultural labourers or women farmers, would find representation. Despite the movement's principled and peaceful stance—which countered accusations of extremism—the exclusion of labourers' demands called for alternative modes of inclusion. Notably, there was no single agricultural labour union within SKM's decision-making body.

At an intellectual level, very little literature unpacked the impact of these laws on agriculture comprehensively. Though the laws deeply affected agricultural labourers and the poor, they were narrowly framed as '*Kheti Kanoon*'—Farm Laws. The lack of accessible literature and awareness among labourers and unions hindered their ability to sustain long-term participation in the protest. The economic vulnerability of agricultural labourers, reliant on daily wages, further restricted their presence at protest sites.

As the farmers' protest gained momentum and financial support, several labour unions increased their involvement. Ideally, farmers could have shared food grains with rural labourers during the Delhi *morcha*, reinforcing *Kisan-Mazdoor Ekta*. However, deep-seated caste structures obstructed such unity, continuing to fuel conflict between Dalits and landowning Jatts.

Art and cultural expression, influential tools during the movement, also failed to include Dalits, labourers, and women. Songs often glorified upper-caste male landowners and their land, side-lining the experiences and struggles of agricultural labourers (Pawariya, 2021). Even core slogans and anthems cantered around farmers, with little acknowledgment of the broader labourer base. Though events marking social justice and working-class solidarity were held, they were often confined to particular commemorative days.

The state continued promoting the farm laws as beneficial reforms addressing the agrarian crisis, even suggesting they would create private sector opportunities. This narrative aimed to alienate labourers from the movement by suggesting that land redistribution from farmers to Dalits was imminent. These tactics failed to gain traction, pushing the state to resort to harassment through police and government agencies. Attempts to fracture solidarity between farmers and labourers became visible in engineered conflicts—such as Jat-Muslim tensions in Muzaffarnagar, Dalit-Jat conflict in Haryana and Rajasthan, and Dalit-Jatt strife in Punjab

6. SOLUTIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

The plight of agricultural labourers is often overshadowed by the broader term "farmers' crisis," which neglects the specific demands and rights of agricultural workers. While the slogan '*Kisan Mazdoor Ekta*' (Farmers and Labourers Unity) is widely echoed, in practice it often translates to '*Kisan Ekta*' (Farmers' Unity), with limited attention to labourers' concerns. Until farmers' unions actively address the core issues faced by agricultural labourers, this unity will remain elusive, resulting in low participation from this demographic in protests. Farmers are not adversaries but allies in the struggle against fascism.

The challenges faced by agricultural labourers can be categorized into primary and secondary issues:

PRIMARY ISSUES

1. **LAND REFORMS AND THE CASTE QUESTION:** In Punjab, landowner farmers—primarily upper-caste Jatts—own a significant portion of agricultural land, while the majority of agricultural labourers, largely Dalits, remain landless. Initiating radical land reforms, similar to those implemented in Kashmir, is crucial. Measures such as land ceiling limits and equitable distribution, as seen in the Jammu and Kashmir Agrarian Reforms Act, could serve as a model for Punjab. This redistribution should include Panchayati land, prioritizing the landless rural population.
2. **DEBT BURDEN AND SUICIDES:** The alarming number of suicides among agricultural labourers, primarily due to crippling debt, demands immediate attention. Radical land reforms—alongside land ceilings and debt waivers—are essential to mitigating this crisis.
3. **CASTE DISCRIMINATION:** Farmers' unions must actively address and raise awareness about caste discrimination prevalent in rural Punjab. Including agricultural labour unions in decision-making processes and negotiations with the government is essential. Initiatives to challenge casteist narratives in music and media and promote pro-people art should be encouraged (Singh et al., 2021).

SECONDARY ISSUES

1. **MINIMUM WAGES AND PUBLIC DISTRIBUTION SYSTEM (PDS):** Enforcing minimum wage laws is critical to ensuring fair compensation for agricultural labourers. Equally important is the strengthening and expansion of the PDS to reach a broader segment of society.
2. **SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT:** Providing free education and healthcare services to labourers' families can empower them socially and economically, increasing their bargaining power. Establishing agriculture-based industries can reduce exploitation by multinational corporations and create rural employment (Singh et al., 2021).

Addressing these primary and secondary issues collectively requires a comprehensive approach involving government policy, proactive engagement by farmers' unions, and meaningful legislative reform. By advocating for land reforms, combating caste discrimination, ensuring fair wages, and promoting social and economic development, a more inclusive and impactful movement can emerge—one that truly embodies the spirit of *Kisan Mazdoor Ekta* (Farmers and Labourers Unity).

There have been several protests and demonstrations by agricultural labourers in Punjab following the farmers' protest. It is striking to witness the resilience and determination of these workers, especially during recent protests outside Chief Minister Bhagwant Mann's residence. These demonstrations symbolize a powerful cry for justice and fair treatment, reflecting the critical issues directly impacting their lives.

THE DEMANDS OF THESE LABOUR UNIONS HIGHLIGHT KEY ASPECTS ESSENTIAL TO THEIR LIVELIHOOD

1. **FAIR INCREASE IN LABOUR WAGES:** Calling for a reasonable rise in wages for both farm and non-farm labour recognizes the need for equitable compensation that reflects the true value of their work.
 2. **EMPLOYMENT GUARANTEE AND MINIMUM WAGES:** Advocating for employment guarantees under MGNREGA for all adult family members, along with a demand for a daily minimum wage of ₹700, underscores the importance of income stability.
 3. **LAND DISTRIBUTION AND DALIT RIGHTS:** Addressing discriminatory landholding patterns and advocating for equitable land distribution offers much-needed opportunities for Dalits and other landless individuals, promoting justice and inclusion.
 4. **DEBT WAIVERS AND SUICIDE PREVENTION:** Highlighting the devastating impact of the debt trap—which has led to widespread distress and suicides—the demand for loan waivers seeks to ease the financial burden on labourers.
 5. **ACTION AGAINST CASTE-BASED ATROCITIES:** Calling for strict action against caste-based violence highlights the need for a safer and more equitable society, free from discrimination and oppression (Rahi, 2025).
- These protests demonstrate not only the unity and determination of rural and agricultural labourers but also their growing organizational strength. The defiance of Section 144 and the sheer size of the gathering reflect a steadfast commitment to their cause. The involvement of multiple labour unions and the organization of community kitchens (langars) highlight their solidarity and preparedness for sustained protest.

NOTES

A commonly used term for APMC – Agricultural Produce Marketing Committees. <https://frontline.thehindu.com/the-nation/agriculture/farmers-protests-movement-agitation-haryana-up-new-farm-laws/article33904173.ece>
<https://www.indiaspend.com/fist-for-farm-how-punjab-dalits-are-fighting-for-their-right-over-common-land/>
 Term used for bonded labour in Punjab, Haryana, and northern Rajasthan. Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, 2005. Zameen Prapti Sangharsh Committee (ZPSC), a state-wide movement advocating for Dalit land rights. SKM (Samyukt Kisan Morcha) is the central body of farmers' unions in dialogue with the Government of India. It was formed on November 7, 2020, to coordinate nationwide protests against the three farm laws. <https://www.groundxero.in/2021/11/17/bjps-attacks-on-agrarian-shudra-unity-amidst-farmers-protest/>
<https://thewire.in/government/jammu-and-kashmir-land-policy-reform>
<https://sabrangindia.in/> — Farmers announce Kisan Mazdoor Ekta Diwas on February 27. <https://pib.gov.in/> — Three Bills Aimed at the Transformation of Agriculture and Raising Farmers' Income Introduced in Lok Sabha; to Replace Ordinances Promulgated on June 5, 2020. <https://labour.gov.in>

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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None.

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