

## **The Ongoing Farmers' Struggle is Your and My Struggle, for Right to Life**

We are moved and inspired by the courage, determination, love and fraternity shown by the Indian farmers from Punjab, Haryana and many more states joining now in the farmers movement. In fact even in states like Bihar where there is no MSP for a long time, we witnessed the churning and farmers from Bihar joining the movement. The zeal and resistance of the farmers movement show that Indian citizens cannot be suppressed by bringing in laws and policies that make farmers, middlemen and small businesses destitute in the hands of the big corporations with the connivance of the Indian Government.

The Indian State in the last few months, when people were struggling to battle Covid-19 pandemic has brought in drastic changes in Environment Impact Assessment, new anti-labourer laws, anti-farmer laws, amendments in the Essential Commodities Act (ECA), which directly gives control of land, forest, water and on agricultural produce to the big corporations. From the weighty rhetoric of 'Atmanirbhar Bharat' to the bringing in of these laws, policies it is clear that the Government is all set in selling the country, labour of its people at a despicable price to big corporates and businesses. Lakhs of farmers rallied in 2018 demanding a one-time loan waiver and detailed discussion on the Swaminathan Commission recommendations in Parliament, as the country has been witnessing hundreds of thousands of farmer suicides over past few years. Such demands were thrown away and instead today draconian anti-farmer farm laws are brought in.

The Agricultural Produce Market Committee Act (APMC) and the Contract Farmers Act provide no legal recourse for farmers or anyone in the agricultural economy. No legal complaint against Central and State Governments, corporations or any other such agency or representative can be filed in any court of law, thus granting them complete impunity against any crime being committed towards farmers, labourers, working class, women, dalits.

Through these laws private sector will be allowed to form their own Mandis, fix their own cost price, hoard food, draft contracts with no checks and balances. The farmers have made it clear that APMCs cannot compete with Private Mandis, because eventually the APMCs will die as private Mandis have more bargaining power, which has started to happen in Madhya Pradesh. They have also made it clear that the removal of checks and balances on stock piling of food will not only allow the private sector to hoard as much agricultural product it wants but will also dismantle the existing public distribution system, which has prevented starvation of poor, marginalized persons who lost their livelihood due to the lockdown of Covid-19. Through amendments in ECA, cereals, potatoes, onions, vegetable oils have been removed from list of essential commodities, surrendering its legal right over the control on hoarding, price and distribution to corporates. Government is legally allowing the Corporations to buy product at cheap rates from farmers, hoard them, create an artificial scarcity and sell at exorbitant prices. This can lead to food crisis and even famines, experienced in Bengal in 1943. It shows that the Hindu right wing politics is actually genocidal politics whether by establishing communal tension or by creating food crisis.

The laws will pave way for dismantling whatever minimal is available, of the Minimum Support Price System. Farmers want legal rights to sell their produce at-least at MSP and want the government to declare MSP for all agricultural produce. There has to be legal assurance and remedy, regarding the MSP on all crops.

As feminists we stand in complete solidarity with the farmers' movement and demand immediate repeal of these new oppressive, draconian farm laws. This is a crucial political moment when the farmers' movement is moving beyond Singhu and Tikri border to different corners of the country and we work not only in solidarity but with the struggle. We believe that being the food producers of the country farmers should have complete autonomy over agricultural production. The Farmers struggle is our struggle. If they lose autonomy over agriculture, food production, it means we as common citizens too lose autonomy over food, what we eat, what we can buy.

Being part of women's groups who have been instrumental in making laws against domestic and sexual violence; who have fought and are still fighting long battles in courts and on streets; who have time and again emphasized the question of autonomy of individuals in deciding their personal, social, political choices; who have been working relentlessly for recognition of care work and domestic work along with agricultural and industrial work done by women, we demand that the protesting farmers will decide upon the laws that can save us from the impending agricultural and societal crisis.

Saying this, we particularly want to focus on women farmers, who labour equally or more than men in agricultural production but still do not enjoy ownership of land, property and resources. Women's work in agriculture has always remained unpaid, unrecognized. They drive tractors, sow seeds, till the land, reap harvests but all these work are done as part of the family. Researches and reports corroborate that there is huge gender inequality even in households that own lands in terms of accessing healthcare, education, distribution of household work, owning resources. Land inheritance, selling and buying, all State benefits, Constitutional guarantees are transactions between men. According to Centre for Land and Governance Index women only own 12.8% of operational land holdings. Recent statistics released by University of Maryland and National Council of Applied Economic Research state that women constitute over 42% of agricultural labour force in India but own less than 2% of agricultural land. Land ownership is directly related to violence and power, and researches show that women not owning properties or land have led to domestic violence on women and caste atrocities.

We know that despite many amendments in the Land Distribution Act, women and specifically women from oppressed castes do not enjoy land entitlements. Caste and gender politics play out severely in rural hinterlands in every state, which have debarred not only women but also Dalits and indigenous communities from claiming ownership on lands. Over 81% of women in farming are from Dalit and Adivasi communities (ILO 2019). Land rights of women cannot be seen in isolation from land rights of Dalit and Adivasi communities, thus bringing back the issue of land reforms and re-distribution.

We particularly salute and stand with the women farmers in the protest who have always faced great difficulty in availing themselves of farm loans, loan waivers, and government help in electricity, fertilizers, seeds etc. to the extent that when a debt ridden husband has died by suicide, she faces tremendous hurdles in transferring the land to her name. The women farmers at the protest site show that India's agricultural economy depends on women peasant cultivators who work as unpaid labourers in family. They are the real farmers managing farm and domestic work, as men migrate to cities in search of better employment. Many women in the protest sites are also unpaid agricultural labourers, marginalized farmers working in fields of dominant caste, land holding farmers.

Peasant struggles and movements globally and in India historically show how women have played crucial roles as organizers and have been rebel themselves. It is women who have been at the forefront of

marches, have negotiated with police, have been most militant during brutal repression by State. It is women farmers historically who have risen and fought against the feudal structure of Indian society, by demanding land reforms, equal land distribution and claim against looting of land and production by big companies, landlords. Women farmers from different caste-class locations standing at the protests today is thus not only about claiming their identity as farmers, but a testimony of centuries of struggles where women farmers have been subjected to unequal distribution of work in the domestic sphere and in agricultural production, though never being the owners of agricultural production.

As feminists we realize that the present farmer's struggle is a struggle against present and future hunger situation. If these laws are not repealed, it will not only deepen the agrarian crisis, it will also leave the citizens of this country mere puppet in the hands of big corporations. From farmers suicide to farmers agitation today, it is a clarion call for all of us to join the agrarian agitation. It is time we realize that the agrarian agitation, the situation of the economy is no singular matter but a societal and humanitarian crisis. That is why we see farmers demanding release of political prisoners, for activists, students falsely accused in north-east Delhi riots; activists falsely accused for Bhima Koregaon violence of 2018 and those who are fighting for civil and democratic rights today. The frontiers of Delhi which saw many Muslim women, students creating Shaheen Bagh, which in turn created many other Baghs in the country, today see farmers from different states claiming an uncompromising stand. Many of them are fighting cold, Covid-19 and have also met death. In spite of the disease and deaths, they are cooking, sharing food not only among themselves but with the police, even after being attacked with tear gas and water cannons.

The farmer's movement speaks of our own fights for democratic rights, right to material and political self-determination. The climate change, water crisis, food crisis that the country is facing today is a crisis of humanity. As citizens of this country, who have been fighting CAA-NPR-NRC, who have been vocal against demonitisation, GST, who are facing joblessness, health crisis it is our responsibility to support and take part in the farmers' movement as it is for us, for our well-being the farmers have taken streets.

As feminists in solidarity with the farmers' movement, we demand:

- 1. Immediate repeal of the 3 draconian anti-farm laws**
- 2. Amendments in laws, policies that can ensure easy passing and inheritance of agricultural land to women**
- 3. Land reforms and re-distribution of land that give land ownership to women, Dalits, Adivasis, the tillers of the soil**
- 4. Access of women farmers to credits, loans, seeds, technology**

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