

The Farmers' Movement and the Promise of a New Social Order

Note for circulation and discussion – by Krishna Gandhi

Introduction

By Farmers' Movement, I mean the nearly 6-month long farmer movement at the Delhi borders demanding the repeal of the 3 new farm laws. But at the same time, I wish to remind the reader that this farmer movement is the culmination of a series of farmer movements our country has seen since the 1970s that questioned the unequal terms of exchange between agriculture and other sectors of the economy. Further, since this movement is taking place in a globalised world, we also need to study the farmer/peasant movements in other countries of the world.

By Social Order, I mean the social, economic and political organisation of the society. This also includes the value systems that govern people's interactions with each other. The various transactions that people enter into with each other through the market or outside of it form an integral part of the social order. It is understood that the knowledge systems that explicitly or implicitly inform or provide a basis for these mutual interactions must necessarily be an essential component of social order.

The current farmer movement at Delhi borders has been looked at with much hope by many thinkers and activists as having the promise within it of a radical movement for the establishment of a new social order. This is despite the fact that, in general, the new farmer movements in post independent India have sought to look at the problems faced by the farming community as also the solutions thereto, almost exclusively in economic terms. The demand for fair or just prices for crops was and is the central demand of the new farmer movements. What will be the mechanism by which it will be accomplished was the major and perhaps the only question that was at the root of dissensions within the movement. While large sections within the movement asserted that it is the duty of the governments at the centre and states, to ensure that farmers get just prices through its policies and concomitant market interventions, a significant section led by Sharad Joshi advocated that it is only the market mechanism, devoid of all government interventions, that can ensure that farmers get fair and just prices. This division within the farmer movement continues to this day. The present farmer movement at the Delhi borders, broadly belongs to the

same formation that believed that it is the duty of the govt to ensure that farmers get fair and just prices. Hence it has been demanding the repeal of all the three new farm laws and the continuation of the APMC system. Of course, as a way out of the deadlock over the repeal of the three new farm laws, it has put forward the new demand that the government legally enforce minimum support prices for all the 23 crops notified by it. This new demand has universal appeal, with even the groups claiming allegiance to Sharad Joshi supporting it. However, the spokesmen of Samyukt Kisan Morcha leading this movement claim that the government has categorically refused to discuss it so far.

The nation state and the current farmer movement

It has been widely accepted that the current government at centre is a puppet in the hands of a coterie of home-grown monopoly capitalists, who would have all the country's resources laid at their feet by this ever obedient servile govt. They want to have a free run over the economy that would catapult them to the ranks of the mightiest corporate entities of the world. For which, they aspire for the political transformation of to a completely centralised autocratic system, something which has been time and again hinted at by the ruling powers through terms such as "Presidential system", "One nation, one election, once in 5 years", "Change the constitution" and so on. Already "One nation, one market" and "One nation, one proof of identity – Aadhaar" are in place. Although Aadhaar law mandates it for availing govt subsidies only, nevertheless it has been made de facto mandatory for all government services, financial transactions and by even private sector. The narrative of Hindutva and majoritarianism has been sought to be further strengthened through CAA-NRC and repeal of article 370 in Kashmir. Federalism has been sacrificed. This is evident not only in the way the three new farm laws have been foisted on the country, but also in the betrayal of commitments to states of GST revenue sharing and the management of Covid-19 pandemic. All these point to only one thing: the imminent establishment, sooner than later, of a dictatorship that will help realise the global ambitions of a few state sponsored monopoly capitalists.

It is in this context that the farmer movement led by Samyukt Kisan Morcha (SKM) at the Delhi borders needs to be understood. Today, the government and the ruling party is increasingly relying on a false narrative centred on such terms as "nation",

“national security”, “sedition” to suppress dissent and drum up support for its anti-people policies. “People” is increasingly being substituted by an abstraction called “nation”, a vehicle to realise the global ambitions of the home-grown monopolists. All policy making is centred on making the “nation”, that is the nation state powerful, at the expense of the people and their rights. Under such a dire scenario, where even the ant-CAA protests could not succeed, the farmer movement has been successful in putting the government at the centre on the defensive. It has exposed the autocratic, anti-federal, anti-people centralisation of power in Delhi and has been able to win over the sympathies of a large section of the urban population. It has also been successful in directing public anger against the blatant favouritism of the present government towards a couple of corporate houses.

The economic nature of the farmer movement

Despite all the above, the farmer movement under SKM has not gone beyond the economic demand for government backed legally enforced MSPs for all the notified 23 crops. It has not even clearly articulated a demand for more federal powers for the states even though it has condemned the manner in which the central govt encroached upon the powers of the states in enacting the three new farm laws. Also, while it has actively campaigned against the ruling party at the centre in the recent state assembly elections notably in West Bengal, there does not seem to be an overt move to play the role of the kingmaker in Indian politics by appealing to the opposition parties / regional parties to come together to put up a united front to take on the ruling party. The strategy of campaigning for the defeat of the ruling party will be continued in the elections next year to the Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand assemblies too, it has been announced by the SKM spokesmen. But there is no sign of engagement or coordination with opposition parties for this purpose. In short, the farmer movement, limiting itself to demands only of economic character has not consciously crossed the boundaries of an economic movement. While there is no denying that the realisation of these economic demands would have a far-reaching impact on the current social order in India, yet a clear conscious articulation of the promise of a new social order is absent in the farmer movement led by SKM. This is in keeping with the character of the farmer movement led by BKU since the 1970s in Punjab, where they had steadfastly refused to create an independent political front of

their own unlike the farmer movements of Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Maharashtra, all of which started as non-political movements but formed their own political parties and participated in state assembly elections. Even the movement under the leadership of Mahendra Singh Tikait in Uttar Pradesh had occasionally betrayed political ambitions by hobnobbing with Jat political heavyweights of Haryana and Western Uttar Pradesh like Devlal and Ajit Singh and some of its top leaders like Rakesh Tikait contested in elections. Although the Punjab BKU in the past has tried to influence elections by supporting one party against another, it has always called itself a pressure lobby that seeks to ensure that farmer interests are protected. The leading spokesman of the present SKM and founder leader of Punjab BKU, Shri Balbir Singh Rajewal only recently reiterated that all political parties are uniformly anti farmer and called them "ek hi thaily ke chatte batte" (broadly meaning "birds of the same feather"). This is in keeping with the "non-political" credentials of the Punjab farmer movement and makes it clear that outwardly and explicitly, the leadership of the farmer movement at Delhi borders, is reluctant to go beyond the economic demands already raised.

The distinguishing features of the current farmer movement

In spite of all this, it is important to note some features of the ongoing farmer movement that distinguishes it from preceding farmer movements. The SKM leadership itself is conscious of this and enumerates some of these as follows:

This farmer movement is explicitly national in character. Not only farmer organisations of Punjab, but also farmer organisations of other states like Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu and to a lesser extent of other states of India are participating in the movement. The leadership of the movement is in the hands of a 32-member body of Samyukt Kisan Morcha, with representations from many states and all the decisions are taken by consensus.

Another unique feature is its collective leadership, which has survived all attempts by the government to create split in the leadership. The absence of a single charismatic leader, which was mostly the case with the state level farmer movements of the past, seems to actually work to the advantage of the movement.

1. For the first time, the farmer movement has been able to get broad sympathy from not only the whole of rural population, but also the urban population.

2. The Sikh community has unitedly come forward to support the farmer movement by taking upon itself the responsibility to arrange services like health, temporary housing, and feeding hundreds of thousands agitating farmers at Delhi borders.
3. The Khap panchayats of Western Uttar Pradesh and Haryana have played a major role in sustaining the movement after the setback suffered at the Republic Day tractor rally of 26th January 2021.
4. Another remarkable feature is that for the first time, the farmer movement has generated wide international attention and support. Not only the Sikh community throughout the world, but even activists and public figures of foreign countries have supported the movement. The sheer size of the gatherings at the national capital's borders had compelled international media attention towards the farmer movement. All this has restrained the government from using excessive force to disperse it.

Community mobilisation and the current farmer movement

Of all the above, the complete support extended by the Sikh community is by far the most important and distinguishing feature of the current movement. This support has been instrumental in sustaining the movement all through these six long months. There can be different approaches to the question of why the Sikh community has extended its support: this can be analysed in terms of class, caste, religion and so on. But to me it appears that the whole Sikh community identified itself with the movement and was provoked to actively support it from a sense of moral duty. No less important is the support the movement received from the Khap panchayats of Western UP, infusing a fresh lease of life into the movement after the debacle of 26th January tractor rally. The Khap panchayats (communities) rushed to support it when a call was given by Rakesh Tikait, an important leader of the Balian khap, to rescue the movement from forceful eviction by the police forces on the intervening night of 26-27 January. Later on, many Khap panchayats sprang into action in Western UP, Haryana, Rajasthan etc.. to express their solidarity with the movement, seen as the victim of state repression.

What defines a community?

Both these cases, the mobilisation of the Sikh community as well as the Khap panchayats, cannot be explained in class terms. The mobilisation was not along class lines, it was along community lines. This distinction is important because class is

basically an economic concept, whereas what defines a community is the bond the members of the community share, that is based on a code of social conduct, a moral order, passed on from generation to generation. A community is a broader and a richer concept compared to a class and may, in fact encompass many classes. Class consciousness has been discussed by Marxists and it has been placed at an exalted footing compared to community consciousness due to a number of reasons, the most important being, that a community is rooted in the past and its traditions. Secondly, religion, termed as the "opium of the masses" by Marx, on many occasions plays a key role in shaping a community consciousness. But it is not necessary that religious consciousness be the same as community consciousness. For example, the Jat community in north India is distributed across at least three religions – Hindu, Muslim and Sikh and yet they share some common set of values and mutual affinities. Similarly, the Gujjar community is spread among followers of Hinduism and Islam. At the same time, it is true that within the same religion, many caste communities exist. At a broader level, community consciousness can arise from many factors like shared race, language, geography, history and culture. Several sub-nationalities exist in India like Bundelkhandis, Uttarakhandis, Kannadigas, Bengalis, Malayalis and so on. Whether they constitute a community is open to debate, as is the question as to what defines a community. In the case of the Sikh community, the community consciousness seems to be largely shaped by shared ethnicity, language and religion. Whatever be the case, what seems important and pertinent in the context of the ongoing farmer movement, is the idea of a community defined by a shared code of social conduct deriving from a moral order and a tradition of upholding those moral values over long periods.

One thing is certain: the farmer movements in India (especially the current one) have disproved the Marxian notion that the peasantry is a sack of potatoes and therefore incapable of collective action. What has contributed to this collective action, its continued sustenance and mass appeal? It is community participation. The non-farmer members of the community identified themselves with their agitating fellow members, crossing barriers of class, caste and even religion and that propelled this huge mobilisation. The basis for this identification is the shared code of social conduct based on a moral order, that binds the members of the community to one another

and which the community has cherished over generations. We may call this code of social conduct as the shared dharma, the internalised values of public morality of the community.

The materialistic interpretation of the success of community mobilisation over class mobilisation

Is there a materialistic interpretation for the success of community mobilisation versus class mobilisation? Marx had proclaimed that the dynamics of class struggle determines the development of societies, but his predictions were not borne out by history. The Russian revolution was not strictly a class struggle. The Chinese revolution was a liberation movement against Japanese occupation, led by the peasantry. In the liberation struggles of most third world countries, despite their being motivated by Marxist ideology, it was the peasantry that formed the vanguard of the struggle. Why this was so, and why we see hardly any revolution led by the working class, has perhaps to do with the fundamental fallacy of the Marxian proposition that it is the ownership of the means of production, that is, the ownership of property, that sets apart the exploiting class from the exploited. The history of colonisation by European nations showed that it was through the mechanism of unequal exchange that capital was extracted from the colonies. When these colonies became attained freedom from their colonial masters, the capitalist class of these newly independent countries in turn used the unequal exchange mechanism to extract capital from primary producers (basically, peasantry) to follow the model of development of the European colonisers. Thereby internal colonies came into existence within the newly independent countries of the third world ("Bharat" versus "India"). So, the promised revolutions led by the proletariat (working class) never came about. And it was the newly propertied peasantry of these erstwhile colonies that donned the leadership of the fight against imperialist capitalist class. In this new era where unequal exchange through the market is the dominant form of exploitation, the entire population dependent on agriculture for their livelihoods, cutting across distinctions based on property ownership, forms a natural community potentially united against exploitation by imperialist capital.

Why the Asiatic Mode of production, the village-based economy in India, thrived for millenniums, has something to do with the equal terms of exchange that existed

among the members of the village community and also between the village and the rest of the world. These village communities were bound by a social code of conduct, a moral order, whose material basis was the fair exchange of goods and services among the various members of the community. The British rule put an end to this village economy, with the introduction of the zamindari system in agriculture, and the destruction of the village industries based on the artisanal mode of production. This may appear as an oversimplified and overrated view of village life in pre-British times. Of course, we have to also understand why, if everything was so wonderful about community life in Indian villages, social inequalities based on caste became entrenched and suffocating. Nevertheless, this objection does not diminish the argument that the material basis for the sustenance of village communities over millennia was the fair and equal exchange of goods and services among its members. The management of the day-to-day affairs of the village was effected through the village panchayat, with every decision arrived at by consensus. Every caste also had its own community organisation, the caste panchayat, which resolved disputes among its members. So, it appears to me that there is a grain of truth in the assertion that for centuries India was a land of village republics, with kings and emperors and their reigns coming and going with hardly any impact on the function and internal dynamics of village communities.

The nation state versus the community

Coming back to the present, we are now faced with the two contradictory entities, the nation and the community. On one side, there is the unholy nexus between the home-grown monopoly capitalists and a Hindutva motivated political class, both of whom are trying their best to use the idea of nation, an abstract concept from which people and their problems have been clinically separated and discarded, as the vehicle for their global ambitions. On the other side are the traditional communities, having their own traditions of collective action, independence (from the state), autonomy and swaraj, based on their own conceptions of a moral order, a social code, a common dharma to which they adhere. Most often, these communities are also bound together by common economic interests arising from the existence of an eco-system of fair exchange of goods and services within the community. The juggernaut of imperialist capitalism, (here we make no distinction between domestic and foreign) through the

projection of the idea of a powerful nation that is sterilised of all human content, would like to eliminate all opposition to its advance. Those traditional communities nurtured and sustained on a shared moral code (dharma) are likely to resist the onslaught of such a nation state and thus could act as umbrellas offering protection to people's movements. The mobilisation of support to the ongoing farmer movement by the Sikh community and the Khap panchayats are examples.

The nation state has to be forcefully withered away

I am fully convinced that in today's world, the nation state is the most anti-people and anti-social construct, a huge weight on the chests of ordinary people preventing them from standing on their own feet. It represents the combined might of the collaboration between imperialist capital and the populist, backward-looking and dictatorial political class. All revolutions in the past whose leadership saw the capture of state power as the means to transform people's lives for the better ended up as bitter disappointments in the long run. Hence, the notion that the state can be a vehicle for people's progress stands discredited. This is certainly true of a nation state run by a political class with imperial ambitions. Therefore, the role of nation states in a globalised world must be minimised, not maximised as is being done at present. Various social thinkers including Marx thought that the full creative potential of the human society will be realised only when the state withers away. He had prophesied that a communist state will finally wither away by itself. But history has proved otherwise. Hence it is foolhardy to wait for the state to wither away by itself. People's action must be directed to the elimination of the nation state altogether or at least reduce its role to the minimum. An ecosystem of self-governed communities will replace the nation state. I see the glimpses of such a community emerging from the Sikh tradition.

Will competitive capitalism replace the nation state?

Many adherents of the liberal thought that emerged from the western tradition believe that competitive capitalism is the answer to the excessive might of the nation state. For many of whom, the books of Ayn Rand are the gospel of competitive capitalism. In this tradition, it is greed and one-upmanship that drives human progress. Greed has been exalted to the realm of virtue. Individuals acting in self-

interest without any concern for others in society, except as determined by the rule of law enforced by a minimalist state, are the driving force of human progress. But I find it very difficult to digest the idea that a civilized society can be built on the foundation of individual greed as its definitive virtue. In this western liberal conception, societies function best when they are composed of atomistic constituents, individual human beings, without any role for communities or community life. Communities, as carriers of tradition and value systems, are seen as hindrances to the development of a society based on competitive capitalism. However, of late, some soul searching seems to be happening among the champions of liberalism. Notably, Raguram Rajan, economist of repute, in one of his recent interviews said that economics has to take into account the role communities play in economic development. Diehard liberals are opposed to the very concept of a welfare state. According to them, the state should totally exit from extending health services and provision of education, drinking water etc... to the citizens, and private enterprises motivated by profit, should provide such services. However, the recent Covid 19 pandemic has exposed the hollowness of these arguments. The public perception today is that it is the duty of the state to protect its citizens in times of such calamities. Keynesian economics originated as an answer to the great depression of 1930s.

However, the nation state has failed miserably in coming to the rescue of citizens in this crisis. Even the US, considered by many liberals as the model of a competitive capitalism based on private enterprise, has failed to protect its citizens from the devastation of this epidemic. I am saying this just to prove that competitive capitalism is not the alternative to statism. Anyway, competitive capitalism of the Adam Smith variety never existed in reality, it is just an axiom in economics. The growth of capitalism in the world was always uneven and was marred by outright plunder and unfair competition. Today, the growth of capitalism in the world has reached a stage where nation states are mere captives of MNCs rampaging over the world in the pursuit of relentless accumulation and domination. Democracy has become shambolic and is a pretext for the rule of a few cliques composed of Adanis, Ambanis, Gates, Musks, Zuckerbergs, Bezos and men of their ilk. Sustainable environment friendly growth based on fair distribution of wealth is a casualty. Gandhiji said that nature can satisfy the needs of all people, but not the greed of even a single person.

And the greed of these persons is playing havoc with both nature and human society. Some diehard liberals, enamoured of the development of South Korea, Singapore and even the US, would have us believe that this state of affairs has come about as a natural progression of the dynamics of competitive capitalism and therefore must be welcomed! They are happy with an oligopoly of MNCs ruling over them. Swaraj or self-rule is farthest from their thoughts.

Conclusion

So the only way out of this dire predicament is the forced withering of the nation states and their replacement by an ecosystem of communities that are self-governing. Only then will the full potential for human creativity be realised. The less the power to the nation states, the more is the power to the people. But people must not just be an atomistic collection of individuals. Human societies developed as communities before empires and nation states came into being. We have to resurrect communities to counter the oppressive dominance of nation states. Only then will swaraj take root. Thousands of communities driven by their own dynamics of swaraj will then start to bloom. The ultimate resolution of the twin problems of the market and the state facing the people will be possible only when the nation states disappear and communities flourish. And, of course, communities can flourish when a code of social conduct, a moral order, and a sense of dharma or public morality binds their members, which is internalised by them. Let us work towards that goal.

SUMMARY

The new six-month old farmers' movement has been able to put the central government on the defensive in the face of relentless drive toward centralization of power and strengthening of the nation-state using a false narrative centred on such terms as "nation", "national security", "sedition". Its strategy has been to pressurize the government into submission and acceptance of its demands.

The movement has raised two major demands -withdrawal of the three new farm laws and legal guarantee of minimum support price for all the 23 commodities for which MSP is announced by the government. The second demand has universal appeal for all farmers. The demands are economic. Although pointing out that agriculture is a subject to be addressed by the States, the movement has not explicitly followed this up by opining on federal politics.

However, this movement stands apart from earlier ones because of (i) the support it has gained from all sections of people, (ii) the total support from the entire Sikh community, (iii) the participation of khaps and panchayats, and (iv) the international attention it has gained.

Community participation is significant. "Community" is a concept much broader and richer than "class". Consciousness can arise from many factors like shared race, language, history and culture. In this movement the idea of community arising from a shared moral code of conduct deriving from a moral order and tradition upholding those moral values is important.

The materialistic basis of the movement may be seen in the post-British order generated by sustained unequal exchange characterising the colonial order and post-independence social order treating peasant societies as internal colony. In this era where unequal exchange, initially forces and then through the market is the dominant form of exploitation The entire population dependent on agriculture for their livelihoods, cutting across distinctions based on property ownership, forms a natural community potentially united against exploitation by imperialist capital. As against this the stability of pre-British India as a collection of village republics may be seen in the more, or less equal internal and external exchange at all levels of polity.

Today, we are faced with the two contradictory entities, the nation state and the community. On one side, there is the unholy nexus between the home-grown monopoly capitalists and a Hindutva motivated political class, both of whom are trying their best to use the idea of nation, an abstract concept from which people and their problems have been clinically separated and discarded, as the vehicle for their global ambitions. On the other side are the traditional communities, having their own traditions of collective action, independence (from the state), autonomy and swaraj, based on their own conceptions of a moral order, a social code, a common dharma to which they adhere. The former is the most anti-people and anti-social construct, a huge weight on the chests of ordinary people preventing them from standing on their own feet. People's action must be directed to the elimination of the nation state altogether or at least reduce its role to the minimum.

People lived in communities, not as atomistic individuals as in the modern nation states, before empires and nation states came into being. Swaraj can take root only with resurrection an ecosystem of communities to counter the oppressive dominance of nation states. Thousands of communities driven by their own dynamics of swaraj will then start to bloom. The ultimate resolution of the twin problems of the market and the state facing the people will be possible only when the nation states disappear and communities flourish. Communities can flourish when a code of social conduct, a moral order, and a sense of dharma or public morality binds their members, which is internalised by them. I see the glimpses of such a community emerging from the Sikh tradition.

RESPONSES

GIRISH

I am in general agreement with the ideas expressed in Gandhi's note. I will make some brief comments:

1. I think the demand for repeal of the three new farm laws in itself is also more than a purely economic demand. Accompanied with it is both (i) the awareness that the laws will create a situation, which will destroy family farming

and farmer families, and (ii) opposition to control by corporates. Moreover, the movement has also expressed the fear that this will destroy the value of brotherhood.

2. It is important that the international attention comes from associations, which cite their own experience of corporate takeover and destruction of family farming. These associations are also supporters of the idea of food sovereignty.
3. The idea of nation states is of course much older than globalization. Its older role is mainly to provide a reasonable and mutually agreed code for distribution of spoils of imperialist exploits. Rabid nationalism has arisen earlier only when this agreement developed fissures for whatever reasons. Nationalism in the era of globalization seems different. In US, or in Europe it is based on mobilization of those who have a feeling of relative deprivation to others – its aim is to correct the imbalance. The nationalism seen in India seems to have quite a different role to play – to silence the majority, the internal colony, and provide a free run to the forces of global and national capital for more intensive expropriation and control of wealth generated from the labour and knowledge of the majority. We have a fairly sound understanding of this process from a knowledge (science) point of view in lokavidya thought. It is the “resurrection of eco-system of communities” that needs to be imagined in some detail.