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Challenging Agrarian Narratives and the reflective Nature of Farmers' Movements in Western Uttar Pradesh

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Abstract

The intersectional nature of social movements is an emerging area of study for researchers. This paper examines how caste, class, gender, and religious dimensions intersect and shape the contemporary Farmers' Movement in Western Uttar Pradesh. A recent upsurge in discontent over three central government bills has contributed to new mobilizations in this region. Earlier research on farmers' movements often reflected limited awareness and low technology among farmers, constraining activity to specific localities. By contrast, recent movements have expanded beyond local boundaries, leveraging social media, digital technologies, and independent journalism to organize and disseminate information.
This study analyzes the evolving patterns of the Western Uttar Pradesh farmers' movements to illuminate the sociological dimensions of both Social Movements and New Social Movements. The paper has two primary objectives: (1) to analyze how caste, class, gender, and religion influence the trajectory of the recent movement in Western Uttar Pradesh; and (2) to examine emerging trends and shifts in the nature of the movement. Employing an intersectionality framework, the analysis explains how these social dimensions intersect to shape the structure, practices, and direction of the farmers' movement in Uttar Pradesh.

Keywords: Agrarian narratives, Intersectionality, Digital Technologies, Social Media, Three Farmers' Bill

1. Introduction

In India, farmers and peasants form the backbone of the agricultural sector, supporting the livelihoods of nearly 42.3% of the population. The distinction between peasants and farmers lies primarily in their production objectives. Peasants engage in farming for subsistence, producing primarily for their own consumption, whereas farmers cultivate crops not only for personal use but also for the market, selling surplus production in local markets (mandis) to generate additional income. Typically, only relatively affluent farmers and better-off peasants with substantial landholdings possess a marketable surplus, benefiting disproportionately from higher prices for crops such as wheat, sugarcane, cotton, and tobacco. Consequently, wealthier farmers, who wield both economic and political influence, are often viewed as the primary drivers and participants of farmers' movements in India (Dhanagare, 2008).
Defining ―farmer‖ and ―peasant‖ in India can be challenging, as the categories frequently overlap. Before independence, most rural populations engaged in subsistence farming and identified as peasants.

Peasant movements during the pre-independence period primarily targeted landlordism and local rural exploitation, often confronting zamindars rather than colonial authorities. Post-independence, the Indian National Congress established clear political dominance in the first general election (Kothari, 1964), while socialist mobilizations, including anti-caste campaigns and farmers' protests against state policies, shaped agrarian politics. With the Green Revolution, farmers increasingly produced surplus crops for market exchange, and by the late 1970s, farmer agitations focused on prices and related economic concerns, signaling a shift from radical land reform struggles to interest-based mobilizations (Nadkarni, 1985).

India's agrarian distress has deep historical roots. The Green Revolution of the 1960s primarily benefited northwestern states, while neoliberal reforms from the 1990s onward often marginalized small and marginal farmers. Earlier movements, such as the 1988 Bharat Bandh and peasant actions led by the Bharatiya Kisan Union (BKU), provided organizational models but were often constrained by narrow caste and regional affiliations. From the 1970s through the 2010s, farmers' movements evolved in response to changing agrarian relations, state policies, and political contexts. Organizations such as the BKU, led by Mahendra Singh Tikait, and the Shetkari Sanghatana under Sharad Joshi represented primarily middle and affluent peasants (Hasan, 1989; Assadi, 1994), with demands focused on higher procurement prices, loan waivers, and subsidies.

These movements signaled a shift from earlier radical struggles toward interest-driven mobilization (Brass, 1994). Neoliberal reforms of the 1990s and 2000s intensified agrarian distress, prompting resistance against corporate encroachment and the erosion of state support (Byres, 1981; Lerche, 1999). Although often fragmented along caste and regional lines, these decades laid the organizational and ideological groundwork for later mobilizations, culminating in the 2020–21 farmers' movement (Arora, 2013).

The 2020 movement was unprecedented in scale, inclusivity, and organization, though internal contradictions persisted. Economic class influenced participation significantly: middle and upper-class farmers, particularly from the Jat community, with larger landholdings and dependence on government procurement policies, were the most vocal participants. The movement was triggered by the passage of three agricultural laws in September 2020—the Farmers' Produce Trade and Commerce Act, the Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement on Price Assurance and Farm Services Act, and the Essential Commodities (Amendment) Act—which were perceived as threats to the minimum support price (MSP) system and as facilitating corporate exploitation.

Small and marginal farmers, constituting over 85% of India's agricultural population (NSSO, 2019), often lacked the resources to participate in prolonged protests, while landless agricultural laborers, many from Dalit and Adivasi communities, remained largely absent from leadership, although they supported the movement locally. This highlighted persistent class-based stratification in rural India. While leadership emphasized MSP and market access, critical issues such as land redistribution and labor rights remained peripheral.

The social dynamics of the protests were highly complex. An intersectional perspective is essential to understand how multiple axes of identity and power influenced participation. Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality explains how overlapping social identities create unique forms of discrimination and privilege (Crenshaw, 1989). Applying this lens to the 2020–21 farmers' movement illuminates the interactions of caste, class, gender, religion, and regional identity, which simultaneously

fostered solidarity and generated tension within the mobilization. Such an approach is crucial for comprehending leadership patterns, participation dynamics, and exclusion within contemporary Indian agrarian movements.

1.Intersectionality and contemporary perspective

1.1How does caste structure influence the formation, dynamics, and outcomes of farmers' movements?

The answer to this question is very rigid. According to many social scientists, any comprehensive analysis of Indian society is incomplete without an examination of the caste structure. Caste is a Portuguese word that means race, lineage, or breed. The British use this term to describe hierarchical social groups in the Indian context. During Colonialism, the Indian caste system was a major British challenge. This caste system also affected the Indian peasantry. Before independence, the depressed people conflicted with landlords for their labor to maintain their peasant identity. During the British period, the conflict between peasants was mainly on tenacity issues. The study of intellectuals shows that the caste with socio-economic dominance has the privilege of land in rural areas. Later, Andre Beteille discussed the caste system structure in agrarian society, including landlords, peasants, and landless laborers. Caste remains a central organizing principle in Indian rural society, shaping land relations, power dynamics, and collective action. Although its influence may be transformed by economic and political change, it is neither obsolete nor irrelevant —rather, it adapts and coexists with new social forces, deeply influencing the structure and dynamics of agrarian life (Beteille, 1974).

Many social scientists have observed that the caste system has always hindered the rural agrarian mobilization process in India (Moore Jr, 1967; Singh 1974; Omvedt 1981; Sahay 2004). Singh (1974) claimed that the caste system in eastern Uttar Pradesh created many problems related to land grab movements. Similarly, Omvedt (1981) found that in rural India, mobilizing people across caste lines for social change or transformation is impossible. They are an impediment to agrarian unity and mobilization.

In the 1970s, while Charan Singh was mobilizing intermediary castes under the umbrella of kisan identity and advocating for the rural masses, socialist leaders, such as Jaiprakash Narayan and Ram Manohar Lohia, were simultaneously leading the anti-caste movement around social justice issues (Singh, 2015).

Farmers' leaders were sympathetic to the struggles of farmers against exploitation by industrial and merchant capital. However, they differed sharply on many issues, including ideology. These differences have most often emerged from the concrete experiences of Dalits, who are suspicious of the real intentions of farmers' movements (Nadakarni, 1987).

Therefore, caste remains one of India's most enduring structures of social hierarchy. The leadership of the 2020 Farmers' Movement was dominated by Jat Sikhs and Jat Hindus, traditionally considered the dominant agrarian castes in Punjab, Haryana, and Western Uttar Pradesh.

Dalits, who constitute about 32% of Punjab's population and are often landless laborers, participated in the protests but were rarely given leadership positions (Jodhka, 2021). Organizations such as the Zameen Prapti Sangharsh Committee (ZPSC) highlighted this marginalization and called for greater inclusivity. Moreover, some Dalit activists expressed concerns that the movement did not adequately address caste-based land inequities. The slogans and demands remained centered on farmer-owner issues, sidelining the plight of tenant farmers and agricultural laborers.

Lerche (2021) argues that caste remains a structuring principle of agrarian relations — determining access to land, labor, political power, and social status — and must therefore be understood as part of the broader class–caste nexus that underpins both exploitation and resistance in the countryside. Furthermore, he highlights the caste as foundational to agrarian inequality, as well as the caste within the protest: alliances and exclusions, and caste transformation limits.

Dalit laborers and landless agricultural labor from lower castes were part of the movement, but their participation is constrained by resources, social norms, and the nature of caste-class relations. For instance, because protest participation (e.g. staying at morchas) requires time, financial cost, etc., many laboring households (mostly lower caste) find it difficult to join in large numbers. The protests show new forms of solidarity that cross caste lines, using inclusive language and turning shared economic threats into political unity. However, this solidarity is incomplete and constrained by caste-rooted social, economic, and institutional inequities. Caste is not ignored; rather, it is being renegotiated: Dalits are demanding dignity and inclusion, even as dominant castes attempt to maintain leadership and control (Jodhka, 2021).

Baviskar and Levien (2021) point out that caste is not only about material inequality but also about identity, rights, and social recognition. This shapes how grievances are expressed, what demands are made, and what political claims are legitimate. The introduction warns that while broad-based mobilization is hopeful, it is too early to assume that protests alone will fundamentally overturn caste inequalities. Leadership remains largely from the dominant castes; laborers from lower castes have less voice in many structures. Caste concerns not only about material inequality but also about identity, rights, and social recognition. This shapes how grievances are expressed, what demands are made, and what political claims are legitimate. The protests show some promise in building cross-caste solidarity, but that solidarity is fragile and partial: persistent inequalities, historical power relations, and institutional access.

Caste remains a deeply entrenched and dynamic force shaping agrarian relations, land ownership, leadership, and mobilization in rural India. Despite efforts toward cross-caste solidarity in the 2020 farmers' movement, dominant agrarian castes continued to control leadership and discourse, while Dalits and landless labourers faced structural barriers to full participation. As scholars like Lerche, Jodhka, Baviskar, and Levien show, caste is not merely an economic hierarchy but also an axis of identity, power, and recognition. Any transformative agrarian politics must therefore confront caste-based inequalities directly to achieve inclusive and enduring social and political change.

1.2 From Fields to Frontlines: Class Politics in the 2020 Farmers' Uprising

At Independence, India inherited a highly stratified agrarian order marked by landlordism, tenancy, and bonded labour. Early state policy sought to dismantle zamindari through land reforms and tenancy legislation. While these reforms weakened the landed aristocracy, they did not fundamentally alter rural class relations; instead, they facilitated the rise of a new class of rich peasants and capitalist farmers from dominant castes who consolidated landholdings and benefitted from state support (Byres, 1981; Lerche, 1999).

This emergent agrarian bourgeoisie occupied an ambiguous position — neither traditional landlords nor subsistence peasants — and became the backbone of rural political mobilisation. Their increasing political voice in the 1960s and 1970s coincided with the institutionalisation of electoral democracy and the state's need to forge alliances with rural elites. The Congress Party's populist appeals to peasants in the 1950s–60s thus overlapped with the structural empowerment of rich farmers as a class. This class would later spearhead organised farmers' movements (Brass, 1994). The Green Revolution (mid-1960s onwards) deepened class differentiation within the agrarian sector. State-led investments in irrigation, high-yielding varieties, subsidised inputs, and procurement policies disproportionately benefited larger landholders who could afford new technologies and had access to institutional credit (Frankel, 1971). The result was a widening gap between capitalist farmers and small/marginal peasants. Rich farmers used their growing surplus to invest in mechanisation, diversify crops, and enter agrarian markets as commercial producers. They were increasingly integrated into state structures through cooperatives, marketing boards, and panchayati institutions. In contrast, marginal farmers and landless labourers remained dependent on wage labour and vulnerable to market volatility. This agrarian class differentiation laid the groundwork for a new kind of farmers' politics — one led by prosperous farmers seeking favourable price policies, subsidies, and state support rather than land redistribution. These farmers' movements reflected not a revolutionary challenge to capitalism but a class project to negotiate better terms within it (Byres, 1981; Brass, 1994).

The 1980s witnessed the rise of powerful farmers' movements across India — including the Bharatiya Kisan Union (BKU) in western Uttar Pradesh, the Shetkari Sanghatana in Maharashtra, and similar organisations in Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. These movements reflected the political assertion of the rich peasant and capitalist farmer classes. Mahendra Singh Tikait's BKU mobilised primarily middle and upper-tier Jat farmers demanding higher procurement prices, loan waivers, and electricity subsidies (Hasan, 1989). Similarly, Sharad Joshi's Shetkari Sanghatana (founded in 1979) represented the interests of commercial farmers in Maharashtra, focusing on remunerative prices, free markets, and state withdrawal from agricultural trade (Assadi, 1994). These movements' class character was evident in their ideological framing: they were not aimed at overthrowing existing property relations but at securing state policies favourable to the agrarian bourgeoisie. Joshi, for instance, argued that Indian agriculture suffered from ―urban bias" — state policies that taxed rural producers to subsidise urban consumers and industry — and demanded that farmers receive prices on par with global markets (Joshi, 1987).

While these movements sometimes articulated demands that benefited smaller farmers, their leadership, organisational base, and ideological positions were rooted in the interests of middle and rich peasants. As Brass (1994) notes, they were ―movements of the relatively privileged,‖ seeking redistribution within capitalism rather than radical structural change. The Shetkari Sanghatana is a particularly illustrative case of class-based mobilisation. The class base of Shetkari Sanghatana was predominantly commercial farmers producing cash crops like sugarcane, cotton, and soyabean — groups with significant marketable surpluses and exposure to price fluctuations. Their grievances differed from those of subsistence farmers: they demanded freedom to sell at global prices, reduction of state controls, and infrastructure for export markets.

Sociologists like Assadi (1994) have argued that Shetkari Sanghatana embodied a distinctly capitalist agrarian class project, aligned with neoliberal policy currents. While it mobilised under the banner of ―farmers,‖ its demands primarily reflected the interests of a segment integrated into markets and seeking greater accumulation opportunities.

Arora (2013) argues that agrarian movements cannot be analysed solely through cultural or regional lenses; class position determines both the content of demands and the organisational strategies employed. The category of ―farmer‖ in Indian politics is not homogenous but stratified by class (Brass, 1994; Arora, 2013). Movements that appear unified often mask deep internal divisions, with dominant segments steering the agenda. This insight is crucial for understanding both the achievements and limitations of agrarian mobilisations.

The farmers' protest of 2020–21 against three central farm laws — concerning agricultural marketing, contract farming, and stock limits — can be seen as the latest iteration of this class-based trajectory. The core demands of the movement — repeal of the laws, guarantee of Minimum Support Price (MSP), and protection of the mandi system — reflect the interests of middle and large farmers, particularly in Punjab and Haryana, who have historically benefitted from state procurement and input subsidies. However, the movement also displayed efforts to broaden its base. Unions sought to frame their struggle as defending the livelihoods of all farmers, including smallholders. They argued that corporate consolidation would ultimately harm marginal farmers and accelerate land dispossession. This discursive strategy sought to bridge class divides, though the movement's leadership and organisational capacity remained concentrated among wealthier farmers. The farmers' protest also witnessed participation from landless labourers and marginal peasants, particularly through allied organisations and left-wing unions. Yet their demands — often focused on land redistribution, wage security, and employment — did not always align perfectly with the MSP-centric agenda of larger farmers. This tension echoed the historical contradictions of ―farmer‖ continues to encompass divergent class interests, even within unified movements (Brass, 1994; Arora, 2013). From the post-Independence land reforms to the Green Revolution and the rise of farmers' movements in the 1980s, class has remained a central axis shaping agrarian mobilisation in India. The emergence of capitalist farmers as a politically assertive class transformed the nature of peasant politics from struggles over land redistribution to demands for favourable state policies and market conditions. The 2020–21 farmers' movement stands firmly within this lineage: a mass mobilisation rooted in the interests of middle and rich farmers, yet seeking to build broader coalitions and frame its demands in universal terms. Understanding its class dynamics is essential to understanding both its power and its limits — and to situating it within the evolving history of India's agrarian politics.

1.3 Tracing Gender Dynamics in the 2020 Farmers' Movement

In the absence of men, women have historically played a pivotal role in farming and agrarian labour (Lahiri and Adhikari, 2016; Jodhka and Kumar, 2017). According to data from the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MoSPI, 2020), in 2018, 73.4 per cent of rural working women were primarily engaged in agriculture, compared to only 55 per cent of rural working men. These figures highlight the indispensable role women play in sustaining India's agricultural economy and underscore the importance of discussing women farmers as central actors rather than peripheral contributors. Women's presence at the protest sites along the Delhi borders—Singhu, Tikri, Ghazipur, and others—disrupted long-established norms about who occupies political space in rural India. Their participation extended beyond physical presence; they performed gendered labour within the protest camps and reframed claims about land, labour, and agrarian identity. The entry of women into the protest space also enriched the cultural repertoire of the movement. Musical forms traditionally associated with women became part of the protest's expressive strategies, and embodied performances transformed in gesture, posture, and orientation. As Kopal (2025) points out, these transformations were deeply significant, as they allowed ordinary women to articulate their lived experiences and aspirations through cultural expression.

The protests were gendered both in practice—through roles, rhetoric, and organisation—and in meaning, through visibility, claims-making, and policy demands. Women undertook a range of responsibilities: from providing kitchen and medical support to defending the frontlines during clashes and delivering formal speeches at events such as the Mahila Kisan (women farmers) meetings and parliaments organised at the protest sites (Al Jazeera, 2020). Crucially, their participation was not merely supportive. Many women openly declared themselves farmers, challenging legal and cultural definitions that equate the term ―farmer‖ with land ownership and male household heads. Women also acted in overtly political capacities: they organised the Mahila Kisaan Sansad (Women Farmers' Parliament), delivered speeches, negotiated with unions, and coordinated security teams. This dual role—combining reproductive and political labour—illustrates how gendered work, often invisible and taken for granted, was in fact central to the movement's endurance (Digital Commons, 2021).

Their presence at the protest sites also challenged prevailing stereotypes of rural Indian women as apolitical and confined to the domestic sphere. Elderly women in traditional attire, young women carrying placards, and women addressing crowds from microphones collectively created a new repertoire of political visibility. This visibility served two key functions. First, it was tactical: women were often perceived as less likely targets of police violence, which sometimes allowed them to occupy protest spaces with relative safety. Second, it was symbolic: women embodied claims about food security, family survival, and intergenerational continuity in agriculture. They transformed their bodies and domestic skills into political capital, asserting both vulnerability and agency.

A core gendered demand that emerged during and after the protests concerned legal recognition. Women sought policy reforms to redefine the term ―farmer‖ to include landless cultivators, sharecroppers, and women who perform the majority of agricultural work without formal land ownership. Activist groups such as MAKAAM (Mahila Kisan Adhikaar Manch) highlighted the paradox that, although women contribute a substantial share of agricultural labour, they own only a small fraction of agricultural land. These groups leveraged the momentum of the farmers' movement to demand reforms in land registry systems and entitlement policies to ensure that women tillers are included as rightful farmers. Thus, the movement not only opposed the controversial farm laws but also articulated broader gendered claims concerning property rights, welfare entitlements, and labour justice. International and Indian media platforms featured several prominent women leaders and organisers, helping reframe the public image of the movement. However, scholarly critiques have noted certain ambivalences. Media narratives sometimes exoticised or sentimentalised women's presence—focusing on images such as grandmothers knitting at protest sites—thereby reducing their political demands to depictions of resilience rather than recognising them as substantive claims for rights and recognition. Most farmer unions lacked women in leadership positions, reflecting broader patterns of gender imbalance in rural governance. Nevertheless, the protests created new spaces for feminist solidarities and cross-gender alliances.

1.4 Religious Dynamics in the 2020 Farmers' Movement

Post-Independence agrarian politics in North India combined economic grievances with social identity claims. Leaders who mobilised peasants often tried to construct a broad ―kisan‖ (peasant) identity that transcended caste and religious differences, while simultaneously drawing on the social capital of dominant local communities (for example, the Jats in western UP and Punjab). This strategy allowed leaders to appeal across communities while relying on pre-existing networks of caste councils, khaps and community leaders for organisation and discipline. Scholarly work on agrarian populism shows this dual logic — universalist ―peasant‖ appeals anchored to particular social bases.

Chaudhary Charan Singh was India's quintessential peasant politician: land-reform legislator, agrarian ideologue and electoral leader of a rural constituency in western Uttar Pradesh. Two features of his

politics are relevant to the religion question. First, Charan Singh sought to make ―kisan‖ identity the principal axis of political mobilisation — he emphasised agrarian rights, land reforms and economic policy for cultivators rather than mobilisation on explicitly religious lines. Second, while Charan Singh himself came from a caste-based social milieu (he drew support from Jat and other peasant castes), he was critical of overt caste-and-communal politics insofar as they divided peasant solidarity; his rhetorical and programmatic emphasis remained agrarian interest rather than religious or communal mobilisation. Scholars assessing Charan Singh's legacy stress his attempt to subsume caste cleavages into peasant claims and his avoidance of explicit sectarian appeals as a deliberate strategy for building a broad rural coalition. This does not imply religion was absent: local ritual, faith-based networks and community institutions continued to influence recruitment and legitimacy. But Charan Singh's public stance and organisational practice made economic-class identity the principal frame — a stance that militated against making religion the overt organising principle of peasant mobilisation in his politics. Mahendra Singh Tikait, leader of the Bharatiya Kisan Union (BKU), rose to prominence in the 1980s by mobilising large numbers of farmers from western UP and neighbouring areas. Tikait's leadership illustrates a different but complementary pattern: mobilisation grounded in dominant caste (Jat) networks and khap institutions, which often deployed cultural symbols and selective religiosity to build solidarity. Tikait cultivated a populist, charismatic leadership style and used mass rallies and the symbolic language of honor, community and moral economy to galvanise farmers for price demands and loan waivers. Although his protests were framed as economic, cultural and religious idioms (temples, deities, caste assemblies) were frequently present in mobilisational settings, serving to moralise grievances and broaden resonance among rural constituents. Importantly, Tikait's BKU largely remained non-sectarian in the sense of avoiding pan-national religious appeals; its identity was agrarian and caste-anchored rather than doctrinal. Intellectual treatments of BKU's rise emphasise how caste and community institutions were mobilised for ostensibly economic claims.

Hasan (1989) claimed that political mobilisation in rural North India cannot be reduced to class alone: patterns of dominance (landholding, caste hierarchies, local elite control) combine with organisational innovation to produce particular political outcomes. She analyzed how dominant peasant castes used organisational forms to consolidate power and how mobilisation often reconfigured, rather than erased, social hierarchies. Social identities (including religious identity when locally salient) are part of the repertoires through which agrarian mobilisation is organised, even when the movement's explicit demands are economic. Hasan and other scholars have argued that the farmers' agitation combined long-term agrarian grievances with institutional coordination and symbolic repertoires drawn from regional histories — a pattern she had already mapped in her earlier rural studies. Her readings emphasise that the presence (or absence) of overt religious framing depends on local social structure, leadership strategies and political opportunity: religious idioms may be activated where they strengthen mobilisation, but the core claims remain economic and institutional (e.g., MSP, mandi protection).

The 2020 movement exemplified a hybrid: economic demands animated by organisational forms and regional religious cultures — especially Sikh networks — that aided mobilisation and resonated internationally. Zoya Hasan's analytical lens dominance and mobilisation helps explain why: where regional social structures (Punjab's Sikh majoritarianity; western UP's caste networks) make religious idioms useful, leaders and rank-and-file will employ them without transforming the movement into a religious crusade. Sikh identity played a prominent role in the protests, especially in Punjab. The use of Sikh religious symbols, the presence of gurdwaras, and the invocation of Sikh history of resistance provided a moral and logistical backbone to the movement.

The 2020–21 farmers' protest in India re-energised debates about the social composition of peasant movements and the role of religion in political mobilisation. At one level, the movement presented itself

as an economic and rights-based agitation against three farm laws; at another level, religious identity (especially Sikh identity) and memory provided symbolic repertoire, networks and practices that amplified recruitment, morale and political messaging. To understand this contemporary dynamic we must look back at the post-Independence history of agrarian politics — particularly the politics of Chaudhary Charan Singh and the mobilisations led by Mahendra Singh Tikait in the 1970s–1980s — and engage Zoya Hasan's careful ethnographic and historical account of rural mobilisation in western Uttar Pradesh. Religious diversity was evident in the presence of Muslims, Hindus, and Christians in protest sites, though this diversity was not always acknowledged or represented equally in leadership structures.

2. Emerging Trends and Changing nature of farmers' movement 2020

The protests not only challenged state policies but also reshaped the repertoire of social movements by blending traditional forms of collective action with new media strategies, youth-led initiatives, and global solidarity networks. This paper explores the emerging trends and changing nature of the 2020 farmers' movement through a sociological lens, focusing on media and social media dynamics, the role of youth, and other critical dimensions, while grounding the analysis in key social movement theories.

Media representation played a pivotal role in shaping public perceptions of the farmers' movement. Mainstream media outlets often framed the protests through polarized lenses — portraying them as either legitimate expressions of agrarian distress or as politically motivated disruptions (Time, 2021). This aligns with what Snow and Benford (1988) describe as ―framing processes‖ in social movements, where narratives are contested and reframed to influence public opinion and mobilize support. However, the farmers and their supporters did not passively accept dominant narratives. They actively constructed counter-publics through independent media collectives, YouTube channels, and grassroots reporting platforms. This alternative media ecosystem challenged state narratives and highlighted farmers' voices, experiences, and demands. Such actions resonate with resource mobilization theory, which argues that the success of social movements depends not only on grievances but also on the effective acquisition and deployment of resources — including media platforms and communication channels (Jenkins, 1983).

One of the defining features of the 2020 movement was the strategic use of social media as both a resource and an arena of struggle. Platforms like Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook were crucial for organizing logistics, disseminating updates, and building transnational solidarity. Hashtags such as #FarmersProtest, #StandWithFarmers, and #NoFarmersNoFood trended globally, drawing attention from international media, diaspora groups, and celebrities (Bainiwal, 2021).

From a sociological perspective, this illustrates the extension of resource mobilization theory into the digital sphere. Social media offered activists inexpensive, scalable tools for mobilization and communication, enabling them to bypass gatekeeping by mainstream media. At the same time, the state's pressure on platforms to remove accounts or restrict content revealed the contested nature of digital public spheres and highlighted how political structures shape opportunities and constraints — a key insight of political opportunity theory (Tarrow, 1998).

Moreover, social media amplified collective identity formation. Visuals of elderly farmers braving the cold, communal kitchens (langars) feeding thousands, and tractor rallies reinforced a shared sense of

belonging and moral purpose. According to Polletta and Jasper (2001), collective identity not only sustains participation but also provides meaning, turning protests into moral and cultural struggles, not merely political ones.

Youth involvement was a transformative dimension of the 2020 farmers' movement. Students, young professionals, and activists participated in large numbers, bringing technological skills, cultural creativity, and organizational energy. They played critical roles in managing social media campaigns, creating multilingual infographics, offering legal aid, and producing cultural content — from protest songs to spoken-word poetry — that resonated widely, especially among urban audiences (Narula, 2022). This phenomenon aligns with collective identity theory, as youth participation redefined the movement's identity from being a rural, elderly male-dominated protest to a more inclusive, intergenerational, and intersectional coalition. It also reflects new social movement theory, which emphasizes the increasing role of identity, culture, and post-materialist values in contemporary mobilizations (Melucci, 1989). Youth participation also broadened the protest's tactical repertoire. Digital ―Twitter storms,‖ creative street art, flash mobs, and online teach-ins complemented traditional tactics like sit-ins, marches, and tractor rallies. These hybrid tactics exemplify what Tilly (2006) describes as the ―repertoires of contention‖ — sets of practices that evolve historically as movements adapt to new contexts.

Despite its scale and impact, the farmers' movement was not monolithic. Differences over strategies, demands, and negotiations occasionally surfaced among unions from different regions and crop systems. Yet, a remarkable degree of unity was maintained through federations like the Samyukt Kisan Morcha, which coordinated collective decisions and communication. This capacity for coalition-building demonstrates how resource mobilization is not merely about material assets but also about forging organizational linkages and trust (McCarthy & Zald, 1977). The state's response ranged from negotiation and selective concessions to policing and digital regulation. Internet shutdowns near protest sites and legal actions against activists reflect attempts to limit political opportunities — consistent with the political opportunity structure perspective, which emphasizes how state actions shape the trajectories of social movements (McAdam, 1996).

International support added another layer of complexity. Diaspora communities mobilized rallies and campaigns abroad, while international celebrities amplified the protests' visibility. While this increased pressure on the Indian government, it also triggered nationalist backlash, highlighting how global attention can both empower and complicate local struggles (Time, 2021).

The 2020 farmers' movement reveals several emerging trends that signal a shift in the nature of agrarian protest. First, it illustrates the hybridization of protest repertoires, combining conventional tactics (sit-ins, rallies) with digital strategies and global advocacy. Second, it underscores the centrality of media and counter-media, showing that narrative control is as crucial as physical presence. Third, it highlights the growing role of youth in shaping the movement's discourse and methods. Finally, it demonstrates how political opportunities and constraints — from state responses to platform policies — shape movement trajectories in the digital age.

Conclusion and Discussion

The 2020–21 farmers' movement marks a watershed in India's agrarian history, not only for its unprecedented scale and longevity but also for its complex articulation of historical continuities and new social, cultural, and political dynamics. Rooted in deep structural issues within India's agrarian economy, the movement reflected both continuity with past mobilisations and significant transformations in modes of protest and political expression. Historically, the evolution from peasant-based subsistence agriculture to market-oriented farming, especially after the Green Revolution, reshaped rural class relations and enabled rich and middle farmers to emerge as key political actors. Like earlier movements led by figures such as Mahendra Singh Tikait and Sharad Joshi, the 2020–21 protests were driven primarily by these groups, whose demands — including the repeal of the three farm laws, a legal guarantee of Minimum Support Price (MSP), and protection of the mandi system — reflected their class interests.

At the same time, the movement exposed the persistent influence of caste in shaping agrarian politics. Dominant agrarian castes, notably Jat Sikhs and Jat Hindus, occupied leadership positions and set the agenda, while Dalits and landless labourers — despite their significant role in the agrarian workforce — remained marginalised due to social hierarchies, economic precarity, and limited resources (Lerche, 2021; Jodhka, 2021; Baviskar and Levien, 2021). Efforts toward cross-caste solidarity were visible but remained fragile and partial. Gender dynamics added another layer of complexity: women played crucial roles in protests and asserted their identities as farmers, challenging patriarchal norms. Yet, their underrepresentation in leadership revealed the persistence of gendered power structures.

Religion, too, shaped the movement's repertoire and identity. Sikh religious narratives and gurdwara networks provided organisational strength and moral legitimacy without transforming the movement into a sectarian mobilisation. Simultaneously, the use of digital platforms, innovative communication strategies, and youth participation transformed traditional protest repertoires, extending mobilisation theories into the digital era.

The farmers' ability to sustain a long, coordinated, and non-violent movement, build coalitions through the Samyukt Kisan Morcha, and attract international solidarity underscored the evolving nature of agrarian mobilisation. Yet, the protests also reproduced historical patterns of class dominance and caste-based exclusion. The hybrid character of the movement — combining traditional and digital strategies, local demands and global solidarities, and economic concerns with social justice claims — signals a transformation in rural protest. Future agrarian politics will continue to confront these contradictions, balancing class interests with demands for caste justice, gender equity, and democratic participation.

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