

Opinion – Populism and Rhetoric Amidst the Farmers' Protest in India

Written by Ajay Gudavarthy

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AJAY GUDAVARTHY, FEB 20 2021

The ongoing farmer's protests have posed a serious challenge to the populist hegemony of the Right in India. Hegemony is converting itself into a myth and then getting reduced to rhetoric. I had argued in my book *India after Modi: Populism and the Right* (2018) that the Right assumed a hegemonic position in India by drawing an equivalence between various disparate, contested and contradictory social demands into moebius of seamless demands. They mobilized a local cultural idiom to project anti-elitist posturing while pushing for regressive traditionalism to reinstate hierarchies of caste and religion; They were 'pro-corporate but anti-modernity' in mobilizing community but pushing for big capital; they mobilized the 'hurt pride' of the social elites and sutured it with the stigma of 'cultural subalterns', which allowed them to draw a continuity between differentially located social groups and produce an optics of a conflict between 'economic elites' and cultural subalterns. This was made possible by producing a political subjectivity that I referred to in the book as 'feeling like subalterns and thinking like the elites.' Subaltern emotions of vulnerability and victimhood were harnessed to protect the interests of the social elites. It produced a certain kind of 'performative dialectics' that could speak to a socially differentiated reality.

In the course of political campaigns and policy framing, the Right institutionalized the gap between what is said and what is done. They have mobilized most campaigns for elections through polarization but kept repeating *ad naseum* that they believed in '*Sab ka Saath, sab ka Vikas*' (everyone's support everyone's development). As soon as Minister Narendra Modi second term started he began to dismantle the central tenets of the constitution. The abrogation of Article 370, formulation of discriminatory citizenship laws through the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) are reflection of such aggressive moves.

At another level, the Right kept switching between one slogan to another, and from one policy focus to the next without the first set of policies fructifying into anything concrete. They began with *Acche din* (Good days), *Swachh Bharat Abhiyan* (Clean India movement), Standup India, India first, *Saaf Niyat Sahi Vikas* (Clean intent, right development) and then squared up with *Atma Nirbhar Bharat* (self-sufficient India). Even before we realized what some of these slogans meant, we were served another set. This was partly to demonstrate the scale and speed of service delivery and at another to cover the failures of previous slogans, campaigns and policies. It was essentially a mode of (to spin on maximum governance, minimum government) saying 'maximum hope, minimum delivery'. But, none of these breached the social hegemony of the Bharatiya Janata Party–Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (BJP–RSS) combine. Both organizations are part of a larger conglomeration that often work together.

Previous rounds of student protests against fee hikes, Muslims against the National Registration of Citizens (NRC)/CAA, and journalists and academics did not converge into producing a counter-narrative. In other words, they remained sectoral, even if they wished to raise larger demands of saving democracy and the Constitution. Different social groups did not see their story in these protests; and the government succeeded in projecting these protests as sectarian and anti-majority. When Dalits protested in Bhima Koregaon, they were dubbed as 'urban Naxal', when Muslims protested they were dubbed as *Pakistani* and *Jihadi*, when students took to the streets they were called from the *tukde tukde gang* (a group of people trying to divide the country) and anti-national.

The incursion by the State had some purchase and it took the shape of a palpable narrative around national

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interests, security and nationalism. But all of this seems to have changed when it came to the farmer's protest. It is not that the ruling regime did not try, they tried hard to press for a sectarian narrative of farm protests being led by Khalistanis, rich farmers, those only from Punjab and Haryana, and they are mostly Sikhs and Jats. But none of these worked and the media could not generate the hysteria that they usually whip up. The Government, unlike its past record, had to agree to talks and was cautious in using force.

Farmers were accused of being terrorists and that only the rich farmers were protesting and not others, and this was effectively countered by the farmers. They projected the imagery that this protest was about the food security of India and against corporate encroachment into agriculture. This went down as a serious challenge to the nationalist rhetoric of the BJP-RSS combine. The placards seen during protests that read 'No Farmer, No Food', said it all. The normative universality of farm protests seems to have subverted the universal claim of nationalism, or to put it differently, the farm protests themselves looked more authentically nationalistic than other forms of nationalism in India.

Among many other things, the farm protests at a deeper level penetrated the seamless continuity in the campaigns of the BJP and managed, in unsaid ways, to expose the duality and rhetoric in the BJP's claims. The link between using a local/ non-metropolitan and non-modern idiom and pushing for the corporate model of growth being damaged got busted. The local was reclaimed by the farmers, and it was pitched against the corporate. It was farmers who authenticated the ideas of 'vocal for local' and being *atmanirbhar*.

The Farmers also recalibrated the equation between 'feeling like subaltern, thinking like elites' in claiming their status as rich farmers but how their struggle converged with the interests of Dalit wage labour and food security of India. Nationalism itself in India continues to have roots in agriculture and rurality. The often-recollected slogans of *Jai Jawan, Jai Kisan* (hail the soldier, hail the farmer) were being embodied by the farmers' and their protests in the national capital. They demonstrated an ability to avoid being framed in the singular – either just as Sikhs or just as Jats. The mode of protest and nature of demand by the farmers allowed for larger support to emerge and puncture the narrative of the BJP, something that previous protests of the students and anti-CAA did not manage.

The government has not yet given up, and has started a smear campaign against global celebrities and their interference in 'internal matters'. But, it looks difficult to reclaim a uber-nationalist discourse against the authentically 'local' and 'indigenous' farmers.

About the author:

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