Corporate Agriculture's War against the Family Farm: Tears, Water, Gas and Cannons But India's Farmers Stand Firm

By Colin Todhunter
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Region: Asia
Theme: Biotechnology and GMO, Law and Justice

People are often kept in a state of confusion, unable to recognise the manipulations at play. It is essential to grasp the bigger picture to understand the true motives behind policy manoeuvres. This clarity unveils the policy landscape as a calculated strategy, designed to serve the interests of particular stakeholders.

Take the three repealed farm laws in India. They were part of a broader strategy to **corporatise Indian agriculture** and aimed to drastically reduce the public sector's role, making it a facilitator for private capital that could then colonise the space left open by the state's withdrawal. Despite the laws' repeal, working on behalf of foreign and domestic capital, the Indian government continues to pursue similar objectives through other means.

In late 2021, the Indian government announced that three important farm laws, which would have introduced neoliberal shock therapy to the agriculture sector, would be repealed after a one-year farmers' mobilisation against the legislation.

It is apt to revisit these repealed laws because the underlying agenda that shaped them persists.

1) The Farmers' Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Act, 2020. This aimed to allow farmers to sell their produce outside the government-regulated APMC (Agricultural Produce & Livestock Market Committee) mandis (wholesale markets). This law sought to create additional trading opportunities beyond the existing markets, supposedly giving farmers more options and better prices for their crops.

2) The Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement on Price Assurance and Farm Services Act, 2020. This was designed to provide a framework for contract farming. It would have allowed farmers to enter into agreements with agribusinesses, processors or large retailers for the sale of future farming produce at pre-agreed prices.

3) The Essential Commodities (Amendment) Act, 2020. This aimed to deregulate the production, storage, movement and sale of several major foodstuffs, including cereals, pulses, oilseeds and onions. It would allow these items to be removed from the list of essential commodities, except under extraordinary circumstances. (The Essential Commodities Act of 1955 empowers the government to regulate the production, supply and distribution of certain goods to ensure their availability to consumers.) _

Critics argued the legislation would weaken the APMC system, potentially leading to the dismantling of the minimum support price (MSP) mechanism. Farmers feared losing price guarantees and being exploited by private corporations. Opponents were also concerned that small farmers might lack the bargaining power to negotiate fair contracts with large agribusinesses.

There were also concerns about potential exploitation and the absence of adequate safeguards for farmers in disputes. The law pertaining to essential commodities faced criticism for potentially enabling hoarding and price manipulation.

Despite the repeal of the three laws, the powerful interests behind the legislation have not gone away. The goal to capture and radically restructure the sector remains.

The government is pursuing alternative strategies to achieve similar aims. These new approaches, while less direct, could potentially implement many of the changes originally proposed in the repealed legislation.

Below is a screenshot of Google news stories appearing on the protests of Indian farmers in the last few weeks. There were 30 pages of such stories, all appearing in 2024. The search did not allow for more than 30 pages. These stories document farmers' grievances, government failures to deliver on promises, water cannons and tear gas attacks on unarmed farmers as they intended to peacefully march to Delhi and so on.

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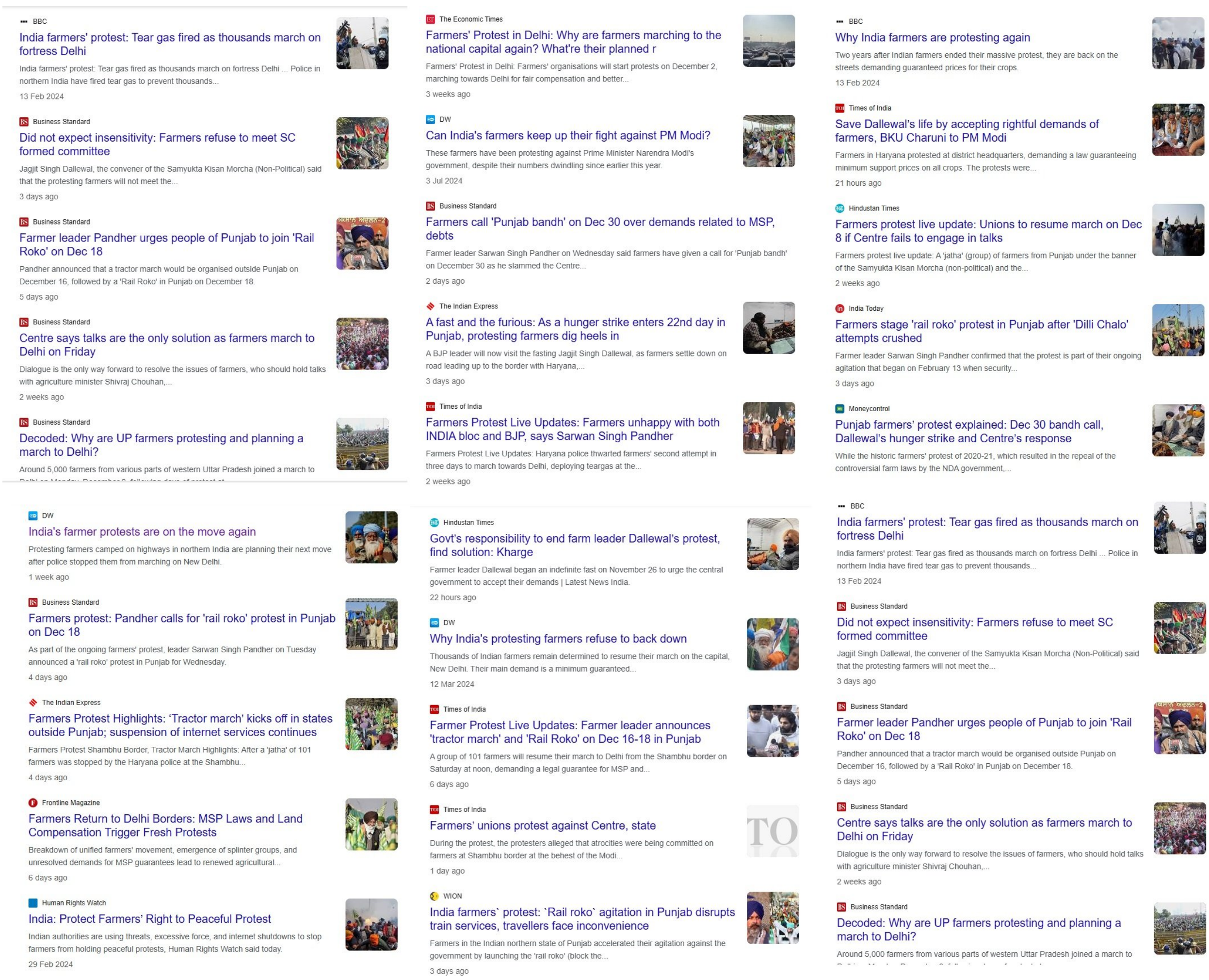

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Jagjit Singh Dallewal, the convener of the Samyukta Kisan Morcha (Non-Political) said that the protesting farmers will not meet the...
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Farmer leader Pandher urges people of Punjab to join 'Rail Roko' on Dec 18
Pandher announced that a tractor march would be organised outside Punjab on December 16, followed by a 'Rail Roko' in Punjab on December 18.
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Centre says talks are the only solution as farmers march to Delhi on Friday
Dialogue is the only way forward to resolve the issues of farmers, who should hold talks with agriculture minister Shivraj Chouhan,...
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Decoded: Why are UP farmers protesting and planning a march to Delhi?
Around 5,000 farmers from various parts of western Uttar Pradesh joined a march to

The Economic Times
Farmers' Protest in Delhi: Why are farmers marching to the national capital again? What're their planned r
Farmers' Protest in Delhi: Farmers' organisations will start protests on December 2, marching towards Delhi for fair compensation and better...
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DW
Can India's farmers keep up their fight against PM Modi?
These farmers have been protesting against Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government, despite their numbers dwindling since earlier this year.
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Business Standard
Farmers call 'Punjab bandh' on Dec 30 over demands related to MSP, debts
Farmer leader Sarwan Singh Pandher on Wednesday said farmers have given a call for 'Punjab bandh' on December 30 as he slammed the Centre...
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The Indian Express
A fast and the furious: As a hunger strike enters 22nd day in Punjab, protesting farmers dig heels in
A BJP leader will now visit the fasting Jagjit Singh Dallewal, as farmers settle down on road leading up to the border with Haryana,...
3 days ago

Times of India
Farmers Protest Live Updates: Farmers unhappy with both INDIA bloc and BJP, says Sarwan Singh Pandher
Farmers Protest Live Updates: Haryana police thwarted farmers' second attempt in three days to march towards Delhi, deploying teargas at the...
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BBC
Why India farmers are protesting again
Two years after Indian farmers ended their massive protest, they are back on the streets demanding guaranteed prices for their crops.
13 Feb 2024

Times of India
Save Dallewal's life by accepting rightful demands of farmers, BKU Charuni to PM Modi
Farmers in Haryana protested at district headquarters, demanding a law guaranteeing minimum support prices on all crops. The protests were...
21 hours ago

Hindustan Times
Farmers protest live update: Unions to resume march on Dec 8 if Centre fails to engage in talks
Farmers protest live update: A 'jatha' (group) of farmers from Punjab under the banner of the Samyukta Kisan Morcha (non-political) and the...
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India Today
Farmers stage 'rail roko' protest in Punjab after 'Dilli Chalo' attempts crushed
Farmer leader Sarwan Singh Pandher confirmed that the protest is part of their ongoing agitation that began on February 13 when security...
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Moneycontrol
Punjab farmers' protest explained: Dec 30 bandh call, Dallewal's hunger strike and Centre's response
While the historic farmers' protest of 2020-21, which resulted in the repeal of the controversial farm laws by the NDA government,...

DW
India's farmer protests are on the move again
Protesting farmers camped on highways in northern India are planning their next move after police stopped them from marching on New Delhi.
1 week ago

Business Standard
Farmers protest: Pandher calls for 'rail roko' protest in Punjab on Dec 18
As part of the ongoing farmers' protest, leader Sarwan Singh Pandher on Tuesday announced a 'rail roko' protest in Punjab for Wednesday.
4 days ago

The Indian Express
Farmers Protest Highlights: 'Tractor march' kicks off in states outside Punjab; suspension of internet services continues
Farmers Protest Shambhu Border, Tractor March Highlights: After a 'jatha' of 101 farmers was stopped by the Haryana police at the Shambhu...
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Frontline Magazine
Farmers Return to Delhi Borders: MSP Laws and Land Compensation Trigger Fresh Protests
Breakdown of unified farmers' movement, emergence of splinter groups, and unresolved demands for MSP guarantees lead to renewed agricultural...
6 days ago

Human Rights Watch
India: Protect Farmers' Right to Peaceful Protest
Indian authorities are using threats, excessive force, and internet shutdowns to stop farmers from holding peaceful protests, Human Rights Watch said today.
29 Feb 2024

Hindustan Times
Govt's responsibility to end farm leader Dallewal's protest, find solution: Kharge
Farmer leader Dallewal began an indefinite fast on November 26 to urge the central government to accept their demands | Latest News India.
22 hours ago

DW
Why India's protesting farmers refuse to back down
Thousands of Indian farmers remain determined to resume their march on the capital, New Delhi. Their main demand is a minimum guaranteed...
12 Mar 2024

Times of India
Farmer Protest Live Updates: Farmer leader announces 'tractor march' and 'Rail Roko' on Dec 16-18 in Punjab
A group of 101 farmers will resume their march to Delhi from the Shambhu border on Saturday at noon, demanding a legal guarantee for MSP and...
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Times of India
Farmers' unions protest against Centre, state
During the protest, the protesters alleged that atrocities were being committed on farmers at Shambhu border at the behest of the Modi...
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WION
India farmers` protest: `Rail roko` agitation in Punjab disrupts train services, travellers face inconvenience
Farmers in the Indian northern state of Punjab accelerated their agitation against the government by launching the 'rail roko' (block the...
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The government seems to be playing for time while new legislation is devised and memoranda of understanding are signed with foreign agrifood corporations with no democratic oversight. It is difficult to sustain large-scale protest movements, and the government seems to be relying on this. Moreover, the protesting farmers have yet to achieve the momentum and international support received during the 2020-21 protest.

Protests Against Reintroducing Farm Laws

In a recent press release, the AIKS (All India Kisan Sabha/All India Farmers Union) calls for nationwide protests against attempts to bring back the farm laws. In particular, it demands the Union Government withdraws its National Policy Framework on Agricultural Marketing.

The AIKS says the draft 'National Policy Framework on Agricultural Marketing', circulated by the Union Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers' Welfare for public suggestions, reveals the:

> "… conspiracy to sacrifice farmers' interest and maximise corporate profits. Petty producers will be adversely hit and pushed out of agriculture."

It remarks that the draft reveals that the government has opted not to address any of the serious demands raised by the farmers' movement, including legalising MSP, increasing public investment in agriculture and pro-farmer credit facilities.

While the draft pays lip service to the fact that agricultural marketing is a state subject under Article 246 of the Constitution, the AIKS says that the spirit of the draft is to dismantle the power of the state governments and abolish state supported market infrastructure and erode the role of the APMCs, leaving small and medium farmers vulnerable to exploitation by private trading cartels.

The major suggested reforms in the draft include the establishment of private wholesale markets, direct farm gate purchases by corporate processors and exporters, replacement of traditional market yards with corporate controlled warehouses and silos and introducing a unified statewide market fee and trading license system.

The AIKS states:

> "It is significant that big business houses, including Reliance and Adani, have constructed extensive warehouse infrastructure and private railway networks in areas such as Sirsa, Haryana and Ludhiana, Punjab."

The draft proposes that big corporations can purchase produce directly from farmers, bypassing APMC market yards. Additionally, handing over storage infrastructure to private corporations eliminates a critical safety net for farmers during price volatility and facilitates corporate exploitation by denying farmers any space for bargaining prices.

According to the AIKS:

> "Big Business is virulently against MSP because its strategy is to procure produce at the cheapest rate, do value addition, brand and market it by ensuring exorbitant profits. This way, Big Business is exploiting farmers as well as consumers. In the name of market efficiency, the Centre is creating a conducive atmosphere for Corporate loot of

agriculture."

It adds that the stranglehold of big business houses is also evident in the suggestions for deepening financialisation via futures and option markets. The AIKS argues this will also permit corporations and international finance capital to dominate and control the domestic food industry.

The AIKS says it will fight tooth and nail the efforts by the government to surrender Indian agriculture on a platter to transnational corporations. It demands that the government withdraw this draft and engage in meaningful dialogue with farmers' organisations and state governments.

The AIKS calls upon all its units to actively take part in the SKM-led protests of burning copies of this policy on 23 December 2024 in districts across India.

The Samyukta Kisan Morcha (SKM) is a coalition of 40+ farmers' unions. It was formed to coordinate non-violent resistance against the three farm acts.

The SKM states that the farmers' movement sees through the plan to withdraw government support from agriculture and hand over farming, mandis and public food distribution to corporations led by Adani, Ambani, Tata, Cargill, Pepsi, Walmart, Bayer, Amazon and others.

In 2018, a charter was released by the All India Kisan Sangharsh Coordination Committee (an umbrella group of around 250 farmers' organisations). It wanted the government to take measures to bring down the input costs of farming, while making purchases of farm produce below the minimum support price (MSP) both illegal and punishable.

The charter also called for a special discussion on the universalisation of the public distribution system (PDS) and the non-approval of genetically engineered seeds without a comprehensive need and impact assessment.

Other demands included no foreign direct investment in agriculture and food processing, the protection of farmers from corporate plunder in the name of contract farming, investment in farmers' collectives and the promotion of agroecology based on suitable cropping patterns and local seed diversity revival.

These demands remain on the table. The response? Tear gas, concrete road barriers and water cannons.

Meanwhile, foreign players like Bayer attempt to shape the narrative of Indian agriculture being 'backward' (see Bayer's 'Backward' Claim: A Bid to Reap Control of Indian Agriculture), and the government demonstrates to global agri-capital and domestic stakeholders like Adani and Ambani that it is being tough on farmers in order to maintain 'market confidence' and attract foreign direct investment (aka takeover of the sector).

For more in-depth insights into the issues discussed in this article, check out the author's ebooks here and here, which both contain extensive sections on the corporatisation on India's agrifood sector.

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*Renowned author **Colin Todhunter** specialises in development, food and agriculture. He is a Research Associate of the Centre for Research on Globalization (CRG).*

Colin Todhunter's book Sickening Profits: The Global Food System's Poisoned Food and Toxic Wealth provides further insight into the issues addressed above. It can be read here.

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