Rise and Fall of the Bharatiya Kisan Union: The Farmers’ Protests of 2020–2021 in the Making of New Rural Politics

Satendra Kumar

Abstract
In the 1980s, India's farmers' protests including the Bhartiya Kisan Union (BKU) emerged as a strong political force that played an important role in the overthrow of the Congress government in the 1989 elections. However, in the 1990s introduction of the neoliberal economic policies shifted the agrarian economy to non-farm occupations and deepened the ongoing agrarian crisis. By focusing on the BKU and its politics, this paper examines the ways in which agrarian change and crisis coupled with the rise of Hindutva politics weakened the agrarian polity in western Uttar Pradesh over the last three decades. Drawing on ethnographic research in Muzaffarnagar, however, I argue that the farmers’ protests (of 2020–2021) have revived farmers' identity and have renewed the agrarian polity. These protests not only created unprecedented alliances across caste, class, gender, and religion but also brought together farm unions, left, and progressive civil society organizations.

Keywords
New rural politics, BKU, Uttar Pradesh, jats, farmers' protests of 2020, farm bills

Introduction
The farmers’ movement of 2020–2021, which lasted for more than a year has been one of the largest in the recent history of India. It marked a spectacular success in its resistance to neoliberalism and the corporatisation of Indian agriculture.

1 Institute of Asian and Oriental Studies, University of Zurich, Zurich, Switzerland.

Corresponding author:
Satendra Kumar, Institute of Asian and Oriental Studies, University of Zurich, Zurich 8006, Switzerland.
E-mail: satendrakumar1@gmail.com
Hundreds of thousands of farmers marched to and camped at the borders of Delhi, India’s capital, and forced the union government to repeal the three farm laws, which were understood to be a likely ‘death warrant’ for farmers. The three controversial farm laws were passed in September 2020 and were designed to liberalise India’s agriculture markets, but farmers’ unions and other critics alleged that the three laws would advantage big corporations at farmers’ expense. In the thick of the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, farmers sustained their more than year-long protests and finally forced the neoliberal, hard-right Hindu nationalist government of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to back down. By forging new solidarities across class, caste and religion, the farmers’ unions and their leadership attempted to build resistance not only to neoliberalism but also to divisive right-wing politics. Most importantly, the farmers’ mobilisation not only drew the attention of political parties to the farmers’ woes but also significantly shaped the outcome of recently concluded legislative elections in the five states and has generated new rural politics. The farmers’ mobilisation revived the Samajwadi Party (SP) and Rashtriya Lok Dal (RLD), an almost finished opposition in Uttar Pradesh (UP); it also ushered the Punjab politics into a new era by bringing Aam Aadami Party (AAP) into power.

The Punjab farmers were the first to protest the three laws. They began mobilising in early July 2020. From July to September, the farmers’ unions held protests at the village level, marched towards residences of members of parliament MPs, members of the legislative assembly (MLAs) and organised rail blockades and squatted on tracks at many places across the state. On 25 September 2020, the farmers’ unions called for a general strike across Punjab, which was supported by trade and farmers’ unions across India. Farmer groups in Haryana urged their fellow beings to support the strike. Responding to that call, farmers blocked the Rohtak–Jhajjar road. Protests were also held at several places, including Rewari and Yamuna Nagar. But the union government hardly paid any attention to these protests.

Feeling ignored by the union government, farmers decided to march to Delhi. The farmers’ unions of Punjab coordinated with the All India Kisan Sangharsh Coordination Committee (AIKSCC), a platform of nearly 400 farmers’ organisations from across the country. More close contacts were established with the farmers’ groups in Haryana and western UP having a common history of farm unions and struggles. The unions gave a call to reach Delhi between 27 and 28 of November 2020. Under the leadership of Rakesh Tikait, national spokesperson of BKU, farmers from Muzaffarnagar, Meerut, Baghpat, Bulandshahar and Noida marched in their tractor trolleys to and set up their camps at the Ghazipur border in east Delhi, on the road connecting Delhi to UP, where they were also joined by the farmers from Tarai, and Uttarakhand in large numbers, while most of the Punjab farmers camped on the Singhu border and Tikri border.

Throughout the months of December and January, farmers braved biting cold in tents and trolleys. Farmers’ leaders under the banner of Samyukta Kisan Morcha (SKM) participated in a series of talks with the union government but to no avail.

Instead, on the night of 27 January 2021, the BJP government attempted to forcibly remove protesters on the borders of Delhi. The brutality and high-handedness of the government hurt the dignity of farmers across classes and religions and
accelerated the process towards a new farmers’ alliance, and the epicentre of the movement shifted from Punjab to the Jat-dominated villages of western UP and Haryana. Observers were struck by the conspicuous presence of Muslim farmers alongside Jat Hindu farmers in several farmers’ meetings across the region, an unprecedented sight after the 2013 Muzaffarnagar riots that divided the rural western UP along Hindu–Muslim lines. At the time of the riots, it seemed that the Jats had suddenly abandoned the ‘kisan’ identity they had hitherto espoused together with Muslim farmers and, instead, embraced Hindutva, or a Hindu fundamentalist identity. During the farmers’ protests that started in 2020, however, the kisan identity resurged once again.

In this article, I argue that farmers’ politics have had deep roots in western UP, and farmers’ mobilisations have a long history in the region. Nevertheless, the introduction of neoliberal economic policies coupled with the rise of caste and communal politics since the 1990s not only have shifted the agrarian economy towards non-farm occupations but also weakened the ‘kisan’ identity and politics. These new developments led to fissures in the agrarian polity in the region over the past three decades, giving Hindutva an opportunity to gain politically. However, the farmers’ protests of 2020 not only brought agrarian politics to the forefront but also revived the Jats’ kisan identity and renewed the agrarian polity, and on a broader and possibly more inclusive basis than in the past. Perhaps more remarkably, the Bharatiya Kisan Union (BKU) and its leadership have been able to bring together farmers and labourers across class, caste and religion, which changed the electoral equations in the western UP region in the recently concluded legislative assembly elections. The farmers’ movement has generated a new rural politics. Most importantly, the recent farmers’ movement continues to enchant and inspire millions at the margins who have been struggling for their livelihood and dignity.

**Chaudhary Charan Singh: The Emergence of the ‘Kisan’ Identity**

The Jats have dominated landownership in large parts of western UP since at least the mid-19th century. The Jats were owner-cultivators who would take part in all agricultural activities themselves (Stokes, 1978). But they also subjugated a section of Dalits and other lower-caste labourers, especially in the Upper Doab, a fertile area between the rivers Ganga and Yamuna. The expansion of canal irrigation and the subsequent introduction of the Green Revolution further strengthened the Jats’ position. From the 1960s onwards, Chaudhari Charan Singh organised the Jats and other middle castes around their shared identity as kisan (farmers). He was driven by his own background born in a village in a farmer’s family. Charan Singh had seen the plight of farmers and the ways in which moneylenders exploited them, and urban-based political leaders treated farmers and villagers. He observed and realised that intermediate castes were marginalised in national politics, particularly of being a peasant.

Charan Singh started his political career with Congress but left the party in 1967 when he felt disenchanted with the Nehruvian vision of development, which prioritised large-scale industrialisation. Having been influenced by Gandhi,
Charan Singh always gave priority to agriculture and supported cottage, village, small-scale and handmade goods. He relentlessly struggled for the prosperity of Indian agriculture and farmers and to make rural people self-reliant. He stressed on the rural economic development led by agrarian prosperity instead of large industrialisation. He founded the Bharatiya Kranti Dal (BKD) in 1967 and, later, the Bharatiya Lok Dal (BLD) in 1974 (Brass, 1993), which pushed for land reforms that benefitted the middle farming castes such as Jats, Gujjars, Ahirs and Kurmis but eluded the Dalits and other landless caste groups. As the agrarian-based parties, the BKD and BLD argued for increased state investments in agriculture for the benefit of peasant proprietors and small-scale industries to employ the labourers. During his two brief terms as chief minister of UP (in 1967 and 1970), he enacted several policies in the farmers’ interest, including input subsidies for irrigation and electricity, that established him as an undisputed leader of landowning middle castes under the homogenised category of ‘kisan’.

His belief that kisan was the homogenised category in the rural without internal differences of caste and class helped him to develop his ideology of ‘Bharat versus India’. Driven by his kisan ideology, Charan Singh played a pivotal role in reorganising the political economy of agriculture in UP by drafting and enacting different bills for agricultural reforms before and after Independence. He continued to strongly articulate the interests of big and middle farmers during his 24-week tenure as Prime Minister in 1979–1980 until he was defeated by the Congress party in a mid-term election. Thereafter, his political career and farmers’ mobilisation under his leadership gradually declined. Consequently, his party failed to gain anything from the Congress government on the issue of higher prices for agricultural produce. At this juncture, the BKU filled the looming political vacuum in the farmers’ polity.

The Bharatiya Kisan Union: Strengthening of Agrarian Polity

Formed in 1978, the BKU (Indian Farmers’ Union) provided a platform to big and middle farmers across different castes and religions (Gupta, 1997). It represented both Hindu and Muslim Jats but under the banner of ‘kisan’. Led by the Hindu Jat farmer Mahendra Singh Tikait (MS hereafter), the BKU in the 1980s organised several protest movements for cheaper electricity and higher crop prices (Lerche, 2013). In January 1988, thousands of farmers picketed the District Commissioner’s office in Meerut town for over 3 weeks. Among their demands were the waiving of power and water bills, writing off loans and higher prices for sugar cane. The Meerut protest was followed by the historic Boat Club rally in Delhi in October the same year when hundreds of thousands of farmers with tractors and trolleys laid siege to the Boat Club lawns near Parliament in the heart of Delhi and paralysed the city-centre for more than a week. These protests received widespread support across class, caste and religion. The BKU struck a responsive chord in rural Western UP and captured the imagination of large sections of the rural people (Dhanagare, 1988).
The BKU began its career as a clan organisation of Baliyan Jats. In the beginning, it was an informal, loosely structured mass movement organisation of the Jat farmers of the western UP region of the state (Sahay, 2004). In the month of October 1986, MS called a panchayat of his clan farmers in his village Sisauli, which was attended by thousands of Baliyan Jat farmers (Rana, 1994). Realising the strength of numbers, the Baliyan farmers in the panchayat decided to form a farmer organisation, and they named it the BKU and asked MS to lead it. MS the head of Baliyan clan and khap ran the union in an informal manner like a family outfit and patterned it on the traditional sarva khap panchayat. The BKU drew its support from Hindu and Muslim farmers, owing to the social and spatial structure of the region. Particularly, in the districts of Muzaffarnagar, Meerut, Baghapat, Bijnor, Bulandshahar and Noida, the BKU has a strong support base among Jats and is followed by Gujjars and Rajputs. These three are also the ‘dominant castes’ in the region. Jats and Gujjars belong to three different religious communities—Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs. There are Hindu Jats, Muley Jats and Sikh Jats; there are also Hindu Gujjars, Muley Gujjars and Sikh Gujjars. In the case of Rajputs: there are Hindu Rajputs and Muslim Rajputs. While Muley Jats, Muley Gujjars and Muley Rajputs are in substantial numbers, Sikh Jats are a minuscule in the rural western UP region. The Jats, Gujjars and Rajputs own most of the land in the region.

There are many sociocultural and economic similarities among the Hindu, Muley (Muslims) and Sikh Jat farmers. Similar is the case among the Hindu, Muslim and Sikh Gujjars. The same applies to the Hindu Rajputs and the Muslim Rajputs. MS used the common features of these communities and strengthened agrarian politics by building the Ahir, Jat, Gujjar and Rajput (AJGR) alliance in the new agrarian context of the 1980s. The BKU attained its heyday in the late 1980s. By projecting the BKU as an apolitical organisation, it also participated in larger farmers’ mobilisations beyond the region. The BKU collaborated and developed alliances with Shetkari Sanghatana in Maharashtra; the Bharatiya Kisan Sangh in Gujarat; Tamil Nadu Agriculturalists’ Association in Tamil Nadu; and the Karnataka Rajya Raitha Sangha in Karnataka. In fact, it was impossible to ignore or underestimate the powerful effect the farmers’ movements have had on local, regional and national politics in India during the 1980s (Brass, 2000).

However, since the 1990s, farmers’ politics lost its force due to two interconnected phenomena: the introduction of neoliberal reforms and the rise of caste-based and communal political parties. While neoliberal reforms deepened the ongoing agrarian crisis by cutting farm subsidies, communal politics reduced the salience of farmer-based politics. The loss of political co-ordination among farmers since the 1990s can be connected to a process of pluralisation in UP’s electoral politics associated with rise of the SP and Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) and the Hindu nationalist BJP as major political formations. The communal politics of SP and BSP creates conditions amenable to the communal politics of BJP. In the next section, I will discuss how caste-based mobilisation led to the decline of the agrarian polity.
Rise of Caste Politics: Decline of Kisan Identity

While Charan Singh was mobilising intermediary castes under the umbrella of kisan identity and advocating for the rural masses, at the same time, socialist leaders like Jaiprakash Narayan and Ram Manohar Lohia were leading the anti-caste movement around the issues of social justice (Singh, 2015). These two movements came together and culminated into the Janata Party government (1977–1980). But the caste politics trumped the kisan politics in 1990 when the Janata Dal (JD) government headed by V. P. Singh made the boldest claim of all with his decision to implement the Mandal Commission recommendation on reservation of places for backward castes in public sector services under the central government, thereby seeking to consolidate the hold on the backward castes of the Janata Party under his leadership (Brass, 1993). Gradually, the Mandal politics cut into a common kisan identity and eroded the base of the Lok Dal (which was renamed RLD by Ajit Singh, Charan Singh’s son, who led the party after his father’s death).

The Mandal politics produced new leaders like Lalu Yadav and Mulayam Singh Yadav. In UP, Mulayam Singh Yadav founded the SP in 1992, and mobilised the Yadavs, one of the largest agriculturist caste groups, which was the main political partner of Charan Singh and his party BKD in the 1960s and 1970s. Mulayam Singh Yadav was elected as an MLA for the first time in 1967 on a ticket of the BKD, and Charan Singh projected him as a young kisan leader. Later on, Mulayam Singh claimed to be the foster son of Chaudhary Charan Singh. By making this claim, Mulayam Singh tried not only to subsume kisan politics under the caste politics but also sidelined the RLD and BKU. Subsequently, Mulayam Singh credited his personal success to Ram Manohar Lohia and his socialist ideology. Strategically, Mulayam Singh oscillated between both kisan and caste identity and continued claiming the legacy of Chaudhary Charan Singh as well as Lohia. He used both to advance his political career and party. While he began his career as a kisan leader in 1967 with the BKD, after the Mandal turn, he changed into a caste leader and espoused social justice politics preferring caste over kisan identity.

The Mandal era also coincided with the introduction of neoliberal reforms in the 1990s, which had a larger bearing on the economy and society. In the next section, I analyse how the neoliberal reforms restructured the agrarian landscape. More importantly, the agrarian crisis caused by neoliberal reforms changed the character of agriculture and society in ways that proved amenable to the rise of Hindutva in the region.

Liberalisation: The Agrarian Crises and Sociopolitical Restructuring

Neoliberal reforms not only deepened the ongoing agrarian crisis but also transformed relations of production. Historically, landowning cultivators in the region, both Hindu and Muslim Jats, have been jajmans, or patrons, to artisan–service and landless labour castes, who are largely Pasmanda Muslims and Dalits. Landowning cultivators and artisan–service castes (including landless labourers) have been mutually interdependent but with the former exploiting the
latter. Under the *jajmani* system, artisan–service castes (who were usually landless or marginal cultivators) traditionally performed everyday services such as repairing agricultural implements, cutting hair and washing clothes, in exchange for a share in the landowners’ agricultural produce. However, intergenerational partitioning of agricultural land into smaller and smaller plots has now reduced farm output, which is no longer sufficient for the growing needs of both farmer-patrons and their lower-caste clients. As a result, farmers are reluctant to continue paying in kind for ser. They continue to depend on the rural social network, farm production and provisions from village homes. These gradual shifts from farm to non-farm work and from rural to urban lifestyle have eroded kisan identity and simultaneously made a space for Hindutva.

**New Identities and Rise of the Hindutva**

Dislocated from agriculture, upwardly mobile young Jats felt disconnected from their previous generation’s kisan identity and detached from the RLD, which had been stuck in dynastic politics. The grievances and desperation of the younger generations provided new openings for the Hindu right to advance its agenda. The 2013 Muzaffarnagar riots and the BJP’s propaganda of a rising Muslim threat combined with ongoing agrarian change and crises to push Jat farmers to claim a Hindu identity. Organisationally, the decline of the BKU, the electoral reverses of the RLD in the recent legislative (2017) and parliament elections (2014 and 2019) and the feeling that Jats were losing political ground and power to Muslim lower castes were capitalised upon by the parent body of the BJP, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), which offered new leadership opportunities to aspiring young and upwardly mobile Jats.

By giving representation and political offices to the youth who have felt economically stagnant and politically marginalised with the rise of the SP and BSP, the BJP tapped into their political and economic aspirations. With agricultural and village festivals on the decline, the Jat youth embraced Hindu rituals and festivals like Navaratri (fasting for 9 days) and began participating in religious gatherings and events organised by the RSS. Television (TV) channels with Hindu religious programming have become popular.

The BJP and RSS deployed mythical and populist histories to explain the contemporary crisis of the Jats. These narratives emphasised the historic sacrifices made by Jats while fighting against Muslim rulers. They appropriated Jat symbols of pride and glory, organising birth anniversaries and ‘sacrifice days’ for Jat martyrs and freedom fighters. They recast Jat icons like Gokul Jat as figures who fought for the Hindu cause, giving them a communal colour. Such stories were circulated as YouTube videos and in WhatsApp groups among young Jat men. Simultaneously, discourses of ‘Love Jihad’ and concerns about the safety of Hindu daughters, advanced through social media and rumours, made their way into the everyday life of Jat farmers’ families. These were the ways in which Hindutva forces sought to assimilate the Jats into the larger Hindu identity.

However, the growing power of a broader Hindu identity and the expansion of Hindutva ideology have not been able to resolve the inherent contradictions of the new economy, particularly the precariousness of Jats in the new economy. This
sense of precariousness was further enhanced by the introduction of the new farm laws, which forced young Jats to reclaim their kisan identity by participating in the recent farmers’ movement. In the next section, I explain why young Jats are re-embracing a farmer identity even though they have no interest in working on the family farm.

The Farmers’ Protests of 2020–2021: The Resurgence of Kisan Identity

The national elections of 2014 and 2019 and the 2017 UP legislative elections brought the Hindu nationalist BJP government to power at the national and state level. These elections produced a new political leadership in UP, representing the generation of upwardly mobile Jats who are salesmen, insurance agents and field supervisors, and do not associate with the farmer politics of the RLD. This generation wants something, which is different and more respectable than agriculture, which they consider doomed. However, the low-paid and insecure character of the jobs they can find, and their inability to meet minimal living conditions and lead a respectful life in a city, has disenchanted this upward aspiring class of Jats, who continue to depend on resources from their holdings in their village. In these conditions and despite their urban aspirations, land continues to be an integral part of their family livelihood and identity. Land gives them a sense of security even when they work in the non-farm economy and in cities. Comments from two young Jat protesters, who I interviewed, provide a glimpse into this phenomenon.

Jasvinder, a 24-year-old Jat man, enrolled for an engineering degree at a college in 2016 in Meerut. His original plan, he explained, had been to find a job in the software industry: ‘I wanted to work for a multinational company’. After being disillusioned by a futile search, he found a lifeline in the burgeoning fertiliser industry. He started work in 2019 as a field officer and was promoted to supervisor. His work is generally regarded by his colleagues as respectable and contrasts positively with the physical labour carried out by his parents. ‘I earn around Rs 10,000 a month and the work is quite easy’, Jasvinder explained. However, he realises that this meagre salary will not be sufficient to live on once he has a wife and children. Without the support from his small farm in the village, he cannot survive in the city. Consequently, Jasvinder spends weekends in his village, which complements his city life.

In 2018, Anil, 25, began working as a salesman in a Levi’s showroom in Noida. A college dropout, he had failed in his attempt to become a police constable. But he feels that he is a successful salesman. He explained that his ability to navigate between rural and urban areas was critical for convincing his young customers, who are largely from rural areas. In Noida, he lives in a rented room, which he shares with his younger brother, a law student. Anil and his brother bring wheat and other provisions from their family in the village, since Anil’s monthly salary of ₹9,000 is not enough to live on in Noida.

The seeming paradox of urbanised Jat youth participating in farmers’ protests is thus resolved when we understand the dual urban–rural lives and
livelihood strategies necessitated by India’s simultaneous agrarian crisis and jobless growth. The participation of young rural men like Jasvinder and Anil also highlights a major shift in today’s farmers’ protests as compared to the 1980s: instead of pointing to a classical rural–urban divide (‘Bharat vs. India’) (Brass, 1994), attention and invective is now directed at the big corporates, who are perceived as threatening their land, while failing to employ them in the city, and the BJP, which is seen as supporting corporate interests over farmers. By pushing corporate capital and big agribusiness, the farm laws passed in 2020 by the BJP government created fear among the farmers of losing land that remains essential to even diversified livelihoods. This, in turn, disenchanted Jat farmers further with the BJP and laid the groundwork for the reassertion of a farmers’ identity over Hindu identity. These conditions have merged land (farming) and caste identity together by working as a catalyst for reassertion of the farmer identity over the Hindu identity.

**The 2022 Uttar Pradesh Legislative Elections: Revival of the Bharatiya Kisan Union and New Rural Politics**

The farmers’ mobilisation particularly after 27 January 2021 generated the consciousness against the rising communalism in the aftermath of the 2013 Muzaffarnagar riots. The social media image of a tearful Rakesh Tikait became the galvanising force the agitation needed as his words resonated far and wide. Both Hindu and Muslim farmers who worked with the BKU in the past felt humiliated. Rakesh’s appeal not only brought farmers back to the protest sites but also mobilised both Hindu and Muslim and young and old farmers across the region. Young Jat men both Hindu and Muslim who had been working and living in the National Capital Region (NCR) turned up in unprecedented numbers at the Ghazipur border in the support of the farmers’ movement and the BKU leader, Rakesh Tikait. The BKU leadership used this moment to inject new energy into its village-level *sangathan* by organising kisan *mahapanchayats* across the region. The BKU attempted to reach out to its old cadre, particularly the Muslim farmers who drifted away after the Muzaffarnagar riots.

Civil society organisations such as Paigham-e-Insaniyat, a non-governmental organisation (NGO) and the informal collectives started by Bipin Baliaan worked day and night to bring Jat and Muslim farmers and labourers on one platform. They used the farmers’ movement as an opportunity to bridge the two communities. Simultaneously, the BKU initiated reorganising the village-level committees and reviving its cadre across the region, particularly in the sugar cane belt, Muzaffarnagar, Shamli, Baghpat and Meerut. The BKU leadership and activists held village and mohalla-level meetings invoking the common heritage, the memory of Chaudhary Charan Singh and Baba Tikait (MS Tikait) and the common sociocultural practices between Hindu and Muley Jat farmers. A village-level committee consists of Hindu and Muley Jat farmers along with Jatav labourers. For instance, the BKU leadership and activists used the slogan ‘Jai Bhim, Jai Ram’ and also the BKU revived its old slogan ‘Allahu Akbar’. The BKU leadership emphasised that winning the struggle involves solidarities across the
caste divide and to symbolically recognising Dalits as an equal partner. It resulted in getting support from Dalit ‘Bhim Army’ in a crucial moment when the BJP government attempted to remove the farmers from the Ghazipur border.

A similar organisation was also followed in the Gujjar- and Rajput-dominated villages where young Dalits were roped into the village-level committees, and the blue flag of the Bhim Army (and of the Ambedkarites) was erected next to the BKU flag to announce the unity of labourers and farmers. Educated young girls were also included in and encouraged to participate in the committees; a completely unexpected move of the BKU leadership, which has been dominated by middle-aged and old-aged men. Educated young Jats like Jasvinder worked day and night and made the supply regular. The village-level committees collected funds of ₹100 and ₹50 from each farmers’ household. Labourers were also requested to donate the symbolic amount to show their support to the BKU. Other than cash, individual farmers and businessmen across caste groups contributed in kind such as milk, rice, wheat flour, mustard oil and fresh vegetables. Some of the big farmers sponsored a meal of the day and donated the rations required. On a daily basis, the village-level committees organised the collection of and supply of basic necessities, including food items to the Ghazipur border. This daily engagement among Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, landless labourers and women at the village and mohalla level created trust and new solidarities across caste, class, gender and religion. The farmers’ movement of 2020–2021 put a stop to the communal polarisation started by the BJP in the aftermath of the 2013 Muzaffarnagar riots.

While collecting daily necessities, rations and cash for and supplying them to the Ghazipur border, social media came in handy in order to organise teams and transport. Overall, social media played a crucial role in mobilising, protesting, organising and disseminating information during the farmers’ movement of 2020–2021. Young farmers used social media (Facebook, WhatsApp, YouTube, TikTok) to connect farmers with each other as well as with the village-level leaders to the block and district-level leaders. It became a useful and instant medium to reach out to remote villages. In the western UP villages, farmers received hourly updates about the protests, including the farm leaders’ appeals and strategies. At the same time, social media also connected the farmers’ movement with the Jat diaspora spread across the world. By sending and sharing messages and appeals through Jatland.com (an online international Jat community platform) and WhatsApp, the young farmers garnered international financial, political and moral support—not to mention supportive tweets from international celebrities ranging from Rihanna to Greta Thunberg. Thus, the farmers’ movement not only created solidarities socially but also spatially—internationally. The strategic and political use of social media demolished the image of farmers as parochial and bewildered certain sections of the state and urbanphile who accused farmers as ignorant and ‘backward’.

These emerging solidarities not only strengthened civil society institutions but also shaped the electoral politics and the results of the 2022 UP legislative assembly elections. The BJP saw a near-total washout in Muzaffarnagar and Shamli, two districts that were most affected by the sectarian violence of 2013. In Muzaffarnagar, The BJP lost five out of six seats, winning only the urban seat. In
Shamli, the BJP saw a complete washout, where it lost all three seats. In Meerut, too, it won only two of seven seats. This is so significant since the farmers’ movement was primarily concentrated in the sugar cane belt—Muzaffarnagar, Shamli, Baghpat and Meerut. Together, these districts account for nineteen seats. Of these nineteen, the BJP won only six, and of these six seats, three (Meerut South, Meerut Cantonment and Muzaffarnagar) are largely urban seats, where the impact of the farmers’ movement was minimal.

BJP stalwart leaders such as Thakur Sangeet Singh Som (who contested from Sardhana in Meerut), Suresh Rana (from Thana Bhawan in Shamli), Umesh Malik (from Budhana in Muzaffarnagar), Mriganka Singh (daughter of the late Babu Hukum Singh, who contested from Kairana in Shamli), all of whom were among the key accused in the 2013 riots, lost by huge margins of at least 10,000 votes. On several seats such as the Baraut in Baghpat district, Hastinapur in Meerut and Khatauli in Muzaffarnagar, the BJP beat the RLD by a narrow margin of 300, 445 and 500 votes, respectively. Tejbeer (56), a BKU activist and sarpanch of Nangala village in Muzaffarnagar told me, ‘While in the 2017 UP legislative elections all the Jats of our and neighbouring villages voted for the BJP, in this election (of 2022) at least 50%–60% of the Jat voted either to the RLD or SP’. This is a big political development. In the months of March and April 2022, during my fieldwork in Muzaffarnagar, I found the resonance of Tejbeer’s statement in many discussions. A large number of Jat voters returned to their kisan party, RLD. Thus, the farmers’ movement gave a new life and energy to the RLD and revived an almost dying kisan political party.12

Finally, the opposition parties in UP, the SP and BSP, had been almost defunct for 5 years and simply did not play the opposition’s role. Particularly, the SP’s chief Akhilesh Yadav was hardly seen among the people, even during the farmers’ movement. It seems that in the past 5 years, he ran his politics through social media and Twitter. Even during the COVID-19 pandemic, when thousands of workers from UP walked hundreds of kilometres to get back to their villages, the SP and its leadership were found nowhere. More shocking, even when thousands of bodies were floating in the Ganges, Yadav and his party’s leadership were not seen doing any serious relief work among the people. Despite their inaction, the SP won 112 seats, and their vote share has increased by roughly 10%. This clearly indicates that the farmers’ movement generated new rural politics by strengthening the opposition and political parties which lost their mandate. Today, at least, there is strong opposition, albeit one that the farmers’ movement has created.

Besides, the farmers’ movement drew attention to the farmers’ issues and woes. In UP, the BJP government made a public announcement to curb the menace of stray cattle that plunder and ruin the crops. Further, the BJP government raised the sugar cane price after almost 5 years. The government also continued to distribute free rations such as rice, wheat, vegetable oil and salt to poor families across the state.

Most remarkably, the farmers’ movement of 2020–2021 healed communal wounds to some extent and united a polarised western UP society by bringing together big, small, marginal and landless farmers, as well as young ones on one manch (platform) for the cause of farmers. Perhaps, one of the biggest
achievements of the movement. Further, the rising farmers’ identity changed political equations and challenged the BJP’s hegemony in the western UP region in the recently concluded legislative elections. Equally importantly, it sensitised the BKU leadership to reach out to Dalit labourers who had distanced themselves from the Jats and the BKU in the 1980s and 1990s.

There are also fault lines. The BKU has not been able to build alliances with emerging farmers of most backward castes such as Sainis, Moryas and Gadarias who had not been part of the kisan identity popularised by Charan Singh and MS Tikait. Neither the BKU nor the RLD tried to reach out beyond dominant castes. This is one of the reasons why the RLD could not reap the full benefits of the farmers’ movement. The farmers of the most backward castes have emerged as a major political force in the region. The RLD lost this opportunity. Moreover, by projecting Sainis, Moryas and Gadarias as the victims of the dominant landowning farmers, the BJP has weaponised them as new warriors of Hindutva. Besides, the Jats are no longer a politically united group as they were in the 1970s and 1980s. The emerging political competition led by the aspiring middle class within the Jats has produced new leaders like Sanjeev Balyan that has opened a chasm to be exploited by the BJP’s style of politics.

While the recovery of a kisan identity by submerging Hindu–Muslim differences is a positive development, there is no guarantee that these alliances will endure, particularly given the present landscape when the Hindutva brigade incites riots daily using fake ‘memories’ and fabricated ‘history’ of the Hindu victimhood. The emergence of kisan identity does not resolve the question of class or gender equity. Neither kisan leaders nor kisan mobilisation allows transferring of the land ownership to women farmers and redistribution of land. Nevertheless, in the present context of an increasingly totalitarian Hindutva regime, the coming together of farmers is a sign of hope. The farmers’ movement has produced a new rural politics that is based on a broad alliance against corporate capital and Hindutva. The movement has opened a space to reimagine and reconstruct the rural and agriculture. It continues to inspire people’s struggles for social and environmental justice. Most importantly, the revival of grassroots ‘secularism’ in western UP, which is lifting the veil of fear for Muslims, is among the most rewarding benefits of the farmers’ movement in north India.

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Notes

1. Jats are a large agriculturalist caste of north India. After post-Independence land reforms, Jats became the dominant landholding caste in many regions. As Byres emphasises, ‘The Jats are the archetypal working peasantry of northern India’ (Byres, 1988).

2. The riots were precipitated by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its regional leadership, which turned a local caste dispute into an issue that polarised villages into Hindus and Muslims, leading to murder, arson and other violence.

3. Western Uttar Pradesh (UP), along with Haryana and Punjab, was the epicentre of the first Green Revolution of the 1960s and 1970s. It is located mainly between the Ganges and Yamuna rivers. Sugar cane and wheat are the main crops grown here. While Jats, Gujjars and Tyagis have dominated landownership in large parts of the region (Jeffrey, 2010; Jeffrey & Lerche, 2003; Kumar, 2018), the Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Muslims are the numerically larger groups. Among the SCs, Jatavs form the majority, as well as being the single largest caste group in the state.

4. Charan Singh closely followed in the steps of Chhotu Ram, a prominent Jat leader (from Haryana) who is considered as the ‘architect of kisan politics’ Jaffrelot (2003). As early as 1907, Chhotu Ram wrote in *The Imperial Fortnightly* an article entitled, ‘The improvement of Indian village life’ which established the mainstays of the ideology of the kisan (farmer).

5. Hindu, Muslim and Sikh Jats have many socio-economic similarities. The love for land is one of the common features between the three communities. Further, Jats are considered outside of the Hindu *varna* system. Muslim Jats are called ‘Muley’ Jats who embraced Islam in various phases, between the 15th and 17th centuries, and some of them continue to follow syncretic practices, which have been withering away gradually over the past century.

6. In Punjab, there are also Sikh Rajputs.

7. In the 1960s and 1970s, Charan Singh mobilised Ahir, Gujjar, Kurmi and Jat middle peasantry against the upper caste, Rajputs and Brahmins. But in the 1980s, the agrarian landscape transformed and benefitted the Jats and Ahirs through the Green Revolution coupled with the Charan Singh’s agricultural policies. Rajputs were the losers in this period. MS was aware of this process in the western UP region and tried to bring Rajputs also into the agrarian fold/alliance.

8. Muslims are effectively organised by caste and are differentiated in terms of power, with dominant (upper-caste Ashraf Muslims) and subordinated (Dalit Muslims or pasmanda) sections (Ahmad, 2018). ‘Pasmanda’, a Persian term meaning ‘those who have fallen behind’, refers to Muslims belonging to the Shudra (backward) and ati-Shudra (Dalit) castes. It was adopted as an oppositional identity to that of the dominant Ashraf Muslims (forward castes) in 1998 by the Pasmanda Muslim Mahaz, a group which mainly worked in Bihar (Anwar, 2001). The majority of landless labourers are Dalits (SCs) and thus at the bottom of the caste hierarchy. However, some landless labourers and marginal cultivators belong to various artisan–service castes classified as Other Backward Classes (OBCs) that are situated just above the Dalits in the caste hierarchy. Somewhat confusingly, landowning castes like Jats are also listed among the OBCs in India’s official, though often quite contentious, system of caste classification for affirmative action. To take into account the socio-economic differences between castes lumped together as OBCs, in 2015, the National Commission for Backward Classes (NCBC) recommended that the OBCs should be further sub-categorised into Extremely Backward Classes (EBCs), More Backward Classes (MBCs) and Backward Classes (BCs), in rising order of power. According to the NCBC, Jats, Yadavs and Kurmis may be placed in the BCs since they are landowning cultivating castes and socially ranked as middle castes. Meanwhile, castes that have traditionally been artisans and in
service occupations, as well as landless farmers (tenant farmers) and labourers, can be
categorised as EBCs and MBCs. (Above the OBCs lie the forward castes of Brahmins,
Kshatriya, Vaishya and Kayastha.)

9. Rashtriya Lok Dal and its leader Chaudhary Ajit Singh lost in the 2014 and 2019
national elections badly in the western UP region.

10. Many Jat youth shifted away from their austere Arya Samaj roots and became influ-
enced by ‘spiritual’ Hindu sects such as Dera Sacha Sauda or the Radhasoamis, which
are urban-based and have spread to rural western UP.

11. Due to the Green Revolution, farmers’ mobilisation has been stronger in the western
UP region than in the eastern part of UP and also reflected in the 2022 legislative elec-
tion results.

12. Brahmins and Rajputs numerically dominate eastern and central UP and are considered
the natural allies of the emerging Hinduutva being landlords (and upper castes) whose
interests are different from peasant cultivators such as Jats. In fact, both castes (being
landlords) vehemently opposed the farmers’ movement. For instance, Bhartiya Kisan
Union—BKU (Bhanu) from eastern UP and headed by a Rajput, a splinter group of
the BKU (Tikait), announced its support for the BJP’s anti-farmers’ mobilisation after
the January 2021 event. These caste and class dynamics had larger implications for the
2022 state legislative elections in UP. Emerging kisan identity in western UP could not
impact much the landlord unity and upper-caste identity.

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