

FARMERS' MOVEMENTS IN INDIA: FROM FREEDOM STRUGGLE TO CONTEMPORARY NATION-BUILDING

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Abstract

Farmers' movements have been a defining force in India's socio-political history, reflecting both agrarian distress and the resilience of rural communities. This paper traces their evolution from the 20th century, when farmers stood at the forefront of anti-colonial struggles, to the 21st century, where they act as democratic negotiators of rights and policies. In the colonial era, peasant agitations such as Champaran, Bardoli, Tebhaga, and Telangana were deeply intertwined with the nationalist movement. Farmers not only resisted exploitative revenue systems and oppressive tenurial arrangements but also lent mass legitimacy to India's freedom struggle. Their mobilization under leaders like Gandhi, Patel, and Swami Sahajanand transformed local economic grievances into symbols of national dignity and sovereignty.

The 21st century, by contrast, has produced movements framed within democratic contestation. Protests such as the Tamil Nadu drought agitation (2017), Maharashtra's long march (2018), and the nationwide farm law protests (2020–21) highlight the ongoing agrarian crisis shaped by globalization, market volatility, and ecological stress. These movements differ from their predecessors by focusing on policy correction, using symbolic dramatization, social media mobilization, and urban-centered strategies to amplify their voices. While they underscore the resilience of democracy and the continuing centrality of farmers in India's polity, they also face challenges of fragmentation, politicization, and allegations of infiltration by separatist or foreign elements.

The comparative analysis in this paper shows that while 20th-century farmer movements were unequivocally nationalist and contributed directly to independence, contemporary protests are more complex. They often serve as democratic correctives but occasionally risk undermining national unity when discipline falters or external agendas intrude. The critical analysis underscores the dual role of farmers as nation-builders and as potential instruments vulnerable to appropriation. The study concludes that the farmer remains central to India's nationhood, both as a cultivator of food and as a cultivator of democratic values. For future progress, it is imperative that farmers' movements retain their nationalist ethos, governments engage constructively, and civil society ensures solidarity rooted in unity and integrity.

Keywords:- Farmers' movements; India; nationalism; agrarian crisis; democracy; 20th century; 21st century; policy; nation-building; anti-national narratives

Introduction

Agriculture has historically been the backbone of Indian civilization, shaping not only its economy but also its political and cultural identity. In the 20th century, when India was under colonial subjugation, farmers constituted the majority of the population and bore the heaviest burden of exploitative land revenue systems, commercial crop policies, and indebtedness. Their resistance to these injustices crystallized into movements that went beyond economic grievances, evolving into socio-political struggles that contributed directly to the nationalist cause. Peasant revolts such as the Champaran Satyagraha of 1917, Bardoli Satyagraha of 1928, and the Tebhaga and Telangana struggles of the 1940s became symbols of agrarian assertion and were integral to India's broader independence movement (Hardiman, 1999; Blyn, 1966). The participation of farmers lent mass legitimacy to Gandhian non-violent mobilization, transforming localized economic protests into instruments of anti-colonial resistance. Thus, the farmer's role in the 20th century was both as a victim of colonial exploitation and as a decisive force in dismantling imperial authority.

In the 21st century, the agrarian context has radically transformed. Post-liberalization economic reforms, coupled with declining farm incomes and rural distress, have triggered fresh waves of farmers' protests. Unlike the nationalist orientation of earlier movements, contemporary protests are primarily aimed at influencing state policy, demanding remunerative prices, loan waivers, or the

withdrawal of controversial legislations. For instance, the Tamil Nadu drought protests (2017), the Maharashtra long march (2018), and most prominently, the nationwide agitation against the three farm laws in 2020–21, illustrate how farmers have adapted their methods of resistance to democratic frameworks while harnessing social media and transnational networks for visibility (Jodhka, 2022; Kumar, 2019). These movements are no longer about colonial liberation but about negotiating the terms of survival and prosperity within a rapidly globalizing economy.

The comparison of the two centuries reveals striking continuities and divergences. In the 20th century, farmer movements were aligned with the larger goal of national freedom, whereas in the 21st century they are situated within the logic of democratic contestation. While both sets of movements are driven by the quest for justice and dignity, the ideological orientation differs: the earlier were unmistakably nationalist, while the latter often face accusations of politicization or infiltration by separatist elements (Gupta, 2021). Such allegations point to the tension between legitimate dissent and the danger of anti-national narratives overshadowing genuine agrarian concerns. A rightist interpretation underscores the need to distinguish between constructive farmers' struggles that strengthen democracy and those instances where protests are hijacked by vested interests to undermine national unity.

This paper seeks to critically examine the trajectory of Indian farmers' movements from the 20th to the 21st century. It aims to analyze their contribution to the independence movement, assess their evolving character in the contemporary period, and evaluate their dual role as agents of nation-building and, at times, as arenas vulnerable to anti-national appropriation. By doing so, the study situates the farmer not merely as an economic actor but as a central figure in India's democratic and national project.

Farmers' Movements in 20th Century India

Colonial Exploitation and the Seeds of Agrarian Resistance

The 20th century in India unfolded under the shadow of British colonial rule, where farmers formed the overwhelming majority of the population but remained the most exploited class. Colonial agrarian policies were premised on revenue maximization, with little regard for peasant welfare. The Permanent Settlement in Bengal and the Ryotwari system in Madras and Bombay Presidency left cultivators squeezed between landlords and the colonial state, trapped in cycles of debt and bonded dependency (Blyn, 1966). Heavy land revenue, forced cultivation of commercial crops such as indigo, and vulnerability to global price fluctuations deepened rural poverty.

It was under such conditions that localized agrarian protests began to take shape, later evolving into organized movements that would intertwine with the freedom struggle. The **Indigo revolt of 1859–60** had already demonstrated peasant resistance against coercive indigo cultivation, but the 20th century marked a new phase: farmer protests increasingly aligned with nationalist politics and were articulated as struggles for justice, dignity, and self-rule (Hardiman, 1999).

A turning point came with **Mahatma Gandhi's Champaran satyagraha (1917)** in Bihar. Peasants were forced to cultivate indigo under the tinkathia system, which bound them to plant indigo on three-twentieths of their land, regardless of food scarcity or market conditions. Gandhi's entry brought a new moral and political dimension: the farmers' plight was no longer a local grievance but a national concern. By employing non-violent resistance and truth-based inquiry, Gandhi elevated agrarian suffering into a symbol of colonial injustice (Brown, 2008). The success of Champaran not only relieved peasants but also inaugurated the Gandhian method of mass mobilization, where the farmer was placed at the center of India's freedom struggle.

Another landmark was the **Bardoli satyagraha of 1928**, led by Vallabhbhai Patel in Gujarat. When the British administration imposed a 22% increase in land revenue despite poor harvests, farmers collectively refused payment. Patel's disciplined leadership ensured unity and non-violence, compelling the colonial government to rescind the hike. Bardoli was not merely a fiscal dispute—it showcased how disciplined peasant mobilization could challenge colonial authority and win

concessions, earning Patel the title “Sardar” (Srinivasan, 1996). These early satyagrahas revealed the transformative power of agrarian protest when wedded to nationalist ideals.

Regional Movements and Agrarian Radicalism

Beyond Gandhian satyagrahas, the 20th century also witnessed regional peasant uprisings that were shaped by distinct socio-economic conditions.

The **Moplah rebellion of 1921** in Malabar (Kerala) began as a protest by Muslim tenant farmers against oppressive Hindu landlords and the colonial regime. Though the rebellion was later portrayed controversially along communal lines, at its core lay deep agrarian discontent: exploitative tenancy arrangements, rack-renting, and lack of ownership rights (Panikkar, 1989). The rebellion underscored how agrarian grievances could intersect with religious identities, complicating the nationalist narrative but highlighting the urgency of land reforms.

In eastern India, the **Tebhaga movement (1946–47)** in Bengal represented a radical phase of peasant assertion. Sharecroppers (bargadars) demanded a larger share of produce—two-thirds instead of one-half—from landlords. Mobilized under the leadership of the Communist Party, Tebhaga combined class consciousness with direct action, including crop seizures and confrontations. While it faced severe repression, Tebhaga succeeded in influencing post-independence tenancy legislation, marking it as a pivotal moment in the history of agrarian rights (Sen, 1972).

Similarly, in the princely state of Hyderabad, the **Telangana armed struggle (1946–51)** became one of the largest peasant uprisings of modern India. Directed against feudal landlords (deshmukhs) and the Nizam’s autocracy, peasants organized village-level committees, redistributed land, and challenged traditional hierarchies (Dhanagare, 1983). Though brutally suppressed, Telangana’s legacy shaped later land reform debates and contributed to the ethos of radical agrarian politics.

These regional movements reveal that peasant protest in the 20th century was not monolithic. While Gandhian satyagrahas emphasized non-violence and negotiation, other movements embraced radical strategies, from armed struggle to class-based mobilization. Together, they expanded the repertoire of agrarian resistance and underscored the centrality of land, tenancy, and dignity in rural India.

Gandhian Mobilization and the Integration of Peasantry into Nationalist Politics

One of the defining achievements of the 20th century was Gandhi’s ability to integrate the peasantry into the broader nationalist movement. The **Non-Cooperation Movement (1920–22)**, though primarily urban-led, drew massive support from rural communities who boycotted British institutions and withheld taxes. Gandhi’s emphasis on spinning khadi and rural self-reliance gave farmers both symbolic and practical avenues to participate in the freedom struggle (Brown, 2008).

The **Civil Disobedience Movement (1930–34)** further deepened agrarian involvement. Salt, a commodity of daily use, became a unifying symbol. Farmers in Gujarat, United Provinces, and Andhra Pradesh refused to pay land revenue, organized no-rent campaigns, and resisted forest laws that restricted their rights. The British response—confiscation of land, arrests, and repression—only heightened rural disaffection, strengthening the nationalist cause (Chandra, 1989).

During the **Quit India Movement of 1942**, rural India emerged as the backbone of resistance. While urban centers saw strikes and demonstrations, villages witnessed sabotage of communication lines, attacks on police stations, and establishment of parallel governments in places like Ballia (U.P.) and Satara (Maharashtra). Farmers bore the brunt of brutal reprisals, but their defiance delegitimized colonial authority at the grassroots (Guha, 2007).

Through these phases, farmers were not passive participants but active agents. Gandhi’s genius lay in channeling their localized grievances into a moral crusade against imperialism. The village was presented as the soul of India, and the farmer as the custodian of national identity. This framing ensured that the independence struggle was not the monopoly of elites but a mass movement rooted in agrarian India.

Farmers as Nationalists: Delegitimizing Colonial Authority

The 20th-century peasant movements performed a dual function: they alleviated immediate grievances and simultaneously weakened the moral and political legitimacy of colonial rule. Each successful satyagraha, each wave of rural protest, demonstrated the limits of imperial power. By repeatedly confronting the state, farmers eroded the aura of invincibility surrounding colonial authority.

Moreover, agrarian mobilization nationalized the independence struggle. Unlike earlier elite-led petitions or urban-centric agitations, peasant participation made the freedom movement truly representative. As Bipan Chandra (1989) notes, the Indian National Congress became a mass party only when it embraced agrarian concerns, transforming itself from a forum of educated elites into the voice of the nation.

From a right-oriented perspective, these movements reveal that farmers were not merely economic actors but cultural and national guardians. Their insistence on dignity, self-rule, and protection of livelihoods aligned with the civilizational ethos of India—an ethos that viewed land as sacred and agriculture as dharma. By resisting colonial exploitation, farmers were defending not only their economic rights but also the sovereignty of the nation.

It is equally significant that despite hardships, most peasant movements of the 20th century retained a nationalist orientation. Even radical struggles like Telangana or Tebhaga did not seek secession but demanded justice within the framework of Indian self-determination. This stands in contrast to later allegations in the 21st century that farmers' protests were infiltrated by separatist agendas. In the 20th century, farmers largely embodied the spirit of constructive nation-building.

The 20th century established the farmer as both the backbone and the conscience of India's independence movement. From Champaran to Telangana, agrarian protests revealed the deep injustices of colonial rule while simultaneously creating a mass nationalist identity. Gandhi and other leaders recognized that without farmers, freedom would remain an elite aspiration. By transforming local grievances into national struggles, farmers not only resisted exploitation but also helped lay the foundations of democratic politics in independent India.

As India transitioned into sovereignty in 1947, the imprint of peasant struggles was unmistakable: land reform debates, tenancy laws, and rural development programs all bore the legacy of 20th-century agrarian mobilization. Farmers had proved that they were not mere cultivators of crops but cultivators of freedom and dignity.

Farmers' Movements in 21st Century India

Introduction: Continuity and Change in Agrarian Protest

The 21st century in India has been characterized by unprecedented economic growth, technological advancement, and global integration. Yet, beneath this developmental narrative lies the persistent distress of the agrarian sector, which continues to employ nearly half of India's workforce while contributing a declining share to national income (Chand, 2017). Farmers, despite being the backbone of food security, face shrinking farm sizes, volatile market conditions, rising indebtedness, and ecological crises. Against this backdrop, farmers' movements have re-emerged with renewed intensity.

Unlike the explicitly nationalist character of 20th-century peasant struggles, 21st-century farmers' protests are oriented toward shaping public policy, demanding economic justice, and safeguarding livelihoods. These movements are firmly situated within democratic politics, yet they reveal new complexities: the role of social media, global advocacy, multiplicity of unions, and allegations of politicization. This section explores major examples—the Tamil Nadu drought protests (2017), Maharashtra farmers' long march (2018), and the nationwide farm law agitation (2020–21)—and situates them within the broader landscape of agrarian resistance in contemporary India.

Agrarian Context of the 21st Century

India's liberalization in the 1990s exposed agriculture to global competition, while subsidies and protections eroded gradually. The Minimum Support Price (MSP) regime benefited primarily wheat and rice growers in select states, leaving many farmers dependent on volatile markets (Saini & Gulati, 2017). Rising input costs, climate variability, and rural indebtedness compounded distress. According to the National Crime Records Bureau, farmer suicides remained alarmingly high through the 2000s and 2010s, signaling structural vulnerabilities (Deshpande & Arora, 2010).

Globalization also altered consumption patterns, expanding urban-rural divides. Farmers increasingly felt marginalized within policy priorities dominated by urban infrastructure and industrial growth. The agrarian crisis was thus not merely economic but existential: it questioned the dignity, viability, and future of farming as a way of life. These pressures provided fertile ground for collective mobilization in the 21st century.

Tamil Nadu Drought Protests (2017)

Background

In 2016–17, Tamil Nadu faced its worst drought in 140 years. Consecutive monsoon failures devastated farmers dependent on the Cauvery river basin. Crop losses, mounting debts, and inadequate compensation pushed cultivators, especially from the delta districts, into desperation. More than 200 farmers reportedly committed suicide during this period (Subramanian, 2017).

The Protest

In March 2017, a group of farmers led by P. Ayyakannu, representing the Desiya Thenninthiya Nathigal Inaippu Vivasayigal Sangam, staged a dramatic protest at New Delhi's Jantar Mantar. Unlike conventional demonstrations, they resorted to **symbolic and shocking acts** to capture attention: holding skulls of deceased farmers (claimed to be suicide victims), shaving half of their heads and moustaches, sitting naked, and even carrying live rats in their mouths. These images went viral, drawing unprecedented media coverage.

The protesters demanded a **₹40,000 crore drought relief package**, waiver of farm loans, linking of rivers to address water scarcity, and fair compensation for crop losses (Narayanan, 2017). The use of stark symbolism highlighted both their desperation and their strategic awareness of media optics.

Significance

The Tamil Nadu protest revealed several new features of 21st-century agrarian mobilization:

1. **Urban Relocation of Protest** – Farmers chose Delhi, the national capital, as their stage, signaling their understanding that visibility at the political center was crucial.
2. **Use of Symbolic Dramatization** – Unlike Gandhian marches or conventional rallies, these protests relied on visceral imagery to provoke empathy and outrage.
3. **Media and Social Media Amplification** – Photographs and videos circulated widely, making the protest not merely a local grievance but a national conversation.

However, the protest also exposed limitations. Despite temporary assurances, long-term structural solutions such as comprehensive drought-proofing, river interlinking, and sustainable water management were not realized. While the protest succeeded in drawing attention, it did not transform into a mass movement across Tamil Nadu.

Maharashtra Farmers' Long March (2018)

Background

Maharashtra, one of India's most industrialized states, paradoxically faced severe agrarian distress in the 2010s. Droughts, falling crop prices, and rising indebtedness led to persistent farmer suicides, particularly in Vidarbha and Marathwada (Mishra, 2019). Discontent simmered over unfulfilled promises of loan waivers and inadequate implementation of the Forest Rights Act.

The March

In March 2018, around **40,000 farmers**, mobilized by the All India Kisan Sabha (AIKS), embarked on a **180-km march** from Nashik to Mumbai. The marchers included a large number of **Adivasi farmers**, demanding land titles under the Forest Rights Act, higher MSPs, full loan waivers, and pension schemes for farmers.

The march was remarkable for its discipline. Farmers, many barefoot, walked in the scorching sun but entered Mumbai silently at night to avoid disrupting students' board examinations. Their restraint and dignity won widespread admiration, with urban civil society—including lawyers, students, and professionals—extending solidarity.

Significance

The Maharashtra long march exemplified a different style of protest compared to Tamil Nadu:

1. **Mass Participation** – Unlike symbolic dramatization, this was a collective, disciplined show of strength.
2. **Urban-Rural Solidarity** – By walking into Mumbai, farmers bridged rural-urban divides, highlighting agriculture's relevance to all citizens.
3. **Policy Impact** – The state government promised to address demands, including expediting land title recognition.

While implementation remained partial, the long march showed that farmer mobilization could create moral pressure on governments without resorting to confrontation or violence.

The 2020–21 Farm Law Protests

Background

In September 2020, the Indian Parliament passed three farm laws:

1. **The Farmers' Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Act** – allowed farmers to sell outside state-regulated mandis.
2. **The Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement on Price Assurance and Farm Services Act** – enabled contract farming agreements.
3. **The Essential Commodities (Amendment) Act** – deregulated storage and stocking limits.

The government argued that these reforms would liberalize markets, increase efficiency, and enhance farmer income (Government of India, 2020). However, large sections of farmers, particularly in Punjab, Haryana, and western Uttar Pradesh, perceived the laws as threats to the MSP system and as measures favoring corporate interests (Singh, 2021).

The Protest

From November 2020, tens of thousands of farmers marched to Delhi, camping at its borders—Singhu, Tikri, and Ghazipur. They set up semi-permanent townships with community kitchens, libraries, and medical camps. The protests lasted over a year, making them one of the longest sustained movements in independent India.

The agitation was marked by large-scale mobilization of farmer unions such as the Bharatiya Kisan Union (BKU), Kisan Mazdoor Sangharsh Committee, and others. Women played a prominent role, with many joining sit-ins and rallies. Social media became a powerful tool: hashtags trended globally, attracting support from international celebrities and criticism from the government, which alleged foreign interference.

Controversies and Allegations

The movement was not without challenges. On January 26, 2021, during a tractor rally coinciding with Republic Day, a section of protesters deviated from agreed routes and clashed with police, culminating in the hoisting of a Sikh religious flag at the Red Fort. The incident was widely

condemned, with the government and sections of the media portraying it as evidence of extremist infiltration (Sharma, 2021).

From a rightist perspective, such incidents underscored the risks of legitimate protests being hijacked by separatist or anti-national elements. Allegations of Khalistani links and foreign funding further complicated perceptions. While the majority of farmers remained peaceful, these controversies highlighted the vulnerability of mass movements to politicization.

Outcome

In November 2021, Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced the repeal of the three laws, acknowledging the government's inability to convince protesting farmers. While this marked a rare policy reversal, it also raised questions about the balance between reform, democratic consensus, and pressure politics.

New Features of 21st-Century Farmers' Movements

The three case studies illustrate broader features of contemporary agrarian protest:

1. **Urbanization of Protest** – Farmers now occupy urban spaces (Delhi, Mumbai) rather than remaining confined to villages.
2. **Mediatization** – Symbolic acts (Tamil Nadu), disciplined marches (Maharashtra), and border sit-ins (Delhi) were designed for mass media and social media amplification.
3. **Multiplicity of Actors** – Unlike earlier Gandhian leadership, today's movements involve numerous unions, often fragmented by region, caste, or ideology.
4. **Globalization of Discourse** – International attention, diaspora activism, and celebrity endorsements make local protests global events.
5. **Politicization and Infiltration** – Movements face risks of hijacking by political parties or groups with separatist agendas, complicating their nationalist legitimacy.

Complexities and Challenges

The diversity of farmers' movements reveals inherent complexities:

- **Caste and Regional Dynamics** – Jat farmers in western U.P., Sikh farmers in Punjab, and Adivasi cultivators in Maharashtra bring different priorities. This diversity enriches but also fragments unity.
- **Policy versus Populism** – While demands for MSP, loan waivers, and subsidies are popular, they often clash with long-term goals of agricultural reform.
- **Democratic Expression versus National Integrity** – Protests are vital for democracy, but incidents like the Red Fort flag-raising blur lines between dissent and disorder.
- **Governmental Response** – While responsive to pressure, governments risk setting precedents where vocal groups block reform through sustained protests.

Farmers' movements in 21st-century India embody both the resilience of democratic protest and the challenges of balancing economic reform with social justice. The Tamil Nadu protests highlighted desperation and the power of symbolism; the Maharashtra long march showcased discipline, dignity, and urban-rural solidarity; and the farm law agitation demonstrated both the strength of collective mobilization and the dangers of politicization.

From a nation-building perspective, these movements reaffirm the farmer's centrality in India's polity. Yet, they also caution that protests must remain constructive and nationally anchored. Genuine grievances deserve redress, but infiltration by separatist or foreign agendas risks undermining both agriculture and democracy.

In sum, the 21st-century farmer is not only a cultivator of crops but also a negotiator of rights, dignity, and national identity. Their movements, though complex, remain indispensable to India's democratic journey, provided they uphold the spirit of unity and constructive engagement.

Comparative Analysis: Farmers' Movements in 20th and 21st Century India

Introduction

Farmers' movements in India have historically served as barometers of the nation's political economy. The 20th century witnessed peasant struggles against colonial exploitation, aligning them with the nationalist cause of independence. In contrast, the 21st century has produced protests shaped by democratic contestation, globalization, and agrarian distress. While continuities exist—agrarian suffering, demand for justice, and moral appeal—the differences in orientation, leadership, strategy, and implications for nation-building are striking. A critical comparative analysis helps trace the evolution of agrarian politics from anti-colonial struggles to contemporary democratic negotiations, while also highlighting the risks of politicization and anti-national infiltration in the modern era.

Nationalist Orientation vs. Policy-Centric Agendas

In the 20th century, peasant movements were fundamentally nationalist. Their struggles, though often rooted in local grievances like revenue hikes (Bardoli, 1928) or forced cultivation (Champaran, 1917), became part of a larger narrative of anti-imperial resistance. Gandhi's genius lay in integrating agrarian protests into the moral and political discourse of swaraj (self-rule). Farmers were not only fighting for relief from exploitation but also contributing to the delegitimization of colonial power (Brown, 2008).

By contrast, 21st-century farmers' protests are policy-centric. The Tamil Nadu drought protests (2017), Maharashtra's long march (2018), and the farm law agitation (2020–21) revolved around demands for drought relief, loan waivers, remunerative prices, and protection against perceived corporate encroachment (Narayanan, 2017; Singh, 2021). These movements rarely frame their struggles as nationalist but rather as rights-based demands within India's democratic polity. The farmer is no longer resisting a foreign power but negotiating with his own elected government.

Leadership Styles: From Charismatic Icons to Fragmented Unions

Another key difference lies in leadership. The 20th century was marked by towering figures—Mahatma Gandhi, Vallabhbhai Patel, Swami Sahajanand Saraswati—who commanded moral authority and unified disparate farmer groups. Their leadership lent coherence, discipline, and a nationalist ethos to agrarian protests (Hardiman, 1999). Even radical movements like Telangana or Tebhaga operated within a broader framework of national transformation, guided by ideologically clear leadership.

In the 21st century, leadership has become decentralized and fragmented. Farmers' unions, often based on caste, region, or ideology, dominate the scene. Figures like Rakesh Tikait (BKU) gained prominence during the farm law protests, but no single leader commanded nationwide authority. This decentralization democratizes movements but also renders them vulnerable to factionalism and politicization. While it ensures diversity of voices, it often dilutes coherence, making movements harder to negotiate with and more susceptible to infiltration by vested interests.

Modes of Protest: Non-Violent Satyagraha vs. Media-Savvy Mobilization

The methods of protest also reveal contrasts. In the 20th century, Gandhian satyagraha emphasized discipline, non-violence, and moral persuasion. Champaran and Bardoli succeeded not through dramatization but through collective restraint and the power of ethical appeal. Even when radical, as in Telangana, the protests were rooted in land struggles and class consciousness.

In the 21st century, farmers have embraced new repertoires of protest suited to the media age. Tamil Nadu farmers at Jantar Mantar used shocking imagery—skulls, rats, semi-nudity—to dramatize their plight and attract television coverage. Maharashtra's long march relied on dignified discipline, but its success was amplified by sympathetic media narratives. The farm law protests created semi-permanent settlements at Delhi borders, blending traditional protest with modern logistical planning,

while social media hashtags ensured global visibility (Jodhka, 2022). These methods highlight the mediatization of protest in a digital era, where visibility often substitutes for moral authority.

Relationship with the State: Colonial Oppressor vs. Democratic Government

A crucial distinction lies in the nature of the adversary. In the 20th century, farmers resisted a colonial state perceived as illegitimate. Protests aimed not merely at policy concessions but at undermining the very foundation of British authority. Thus, peasant struggles contributed to nation-building by uniting diverse communities against a foreign power (Chandra, 1989).

In the 21st century, protests target democratic governments. Farmers are not seeking regime overthrow but policy correction. This makes their protests both legitimate and complex. On the one hand, they strengthen democracy by holding elected leaders accountable; on the other, they risk destabilizing reform agendas when pressure politics replaces constructive dialogue. The repeal of the farm laws in 2021 illustrates this tension: while it was a victory for democratic protest, critics argue it represented a setback for much-needed reforms (Sharma, 2021).

Nation-Building vs. Risks of Politicization

In the 20th century, farmers were unambiguously seen as nation-builders. By resisting colonial policies, they defended India's dignity and sovereignty. Even radical or violent uprisings like Moplah or Telangana were ultimately interpreted as part of the nationalist awakening (Panikkar, 1989). Their contribution to independence was beyond dispute.

In the 21st century, however, farmers' movements face contested narratives. While many view them as defenders of democratic rights, others allege infiltration by separatist or foreign elements, particularly during the farm law agitation. The Red Fort incident on January 26, 2021, when protesters deviated from planned routes and clashed with police, allowed critics to brand the agitation as compromised by anti-national forces (Gupta, 2021). This duality complicates the image of the farmer as a straightforward nation-builder. A rightist perspective underscores the need to preserve the nationalist orientation of agrarian protest, warning against its misuse by groups hostile to India's unity.

Policy Impact and Legacy

Both 20th and 21st-century movements influenced policy but in different ways. The former shaped post-independence land reforms, tenancy laws, and rural development programs. They provided the moral legitimacy for redistributive justice in a newly independent nation. The latter have produced immediate but uneven outcomes: Tamil Nadu protests secured temporary relief, Maharashtra's long march pushed for Forest Rights Act implementation, and the farm law protests forced a historic repeal. However, their long-term legacy remains debated: do they advance structural reforms or reinforce short-term populism?

Comparative Continuities

Despite differences, continuities are notable. Both centuries highlight the farmer as the conscience-keeper of the nation, willing to sacrifice for dignity and justice. Both show that agrarian distress remains a persistent reality, despite independence and modernization. And both reveal that ignoring rural voices risks political instability. Farmers continue to serve as a reminder that India's modernity cannot be divorced from its agrarian roots.

The comparative analysis underscores that 20th-century farmers were nationalist warriors against colonial oppression, while 21st-century farmers are democratic negotiators seeking policy redressal. The former built the foundation of freedom; the latter test the resilience of democracy. Both play critical roles in nation-building, though the risks of politicization and anti-national infiltration loom larger today. The challenge for contemporary India lies in ensuring that agrarian protests remain constructive instruments of justice, not arenas for divisive politics.

Comparative Chart: Farmers’ Movements in 20th vs. 21st Century India

Dimension	20th Century Farmers’ Movements	21st Century Farmers’ Movements
Orientation	Anti-colonial, nationalist; aligned with independence struggle	Policy-centric, economic demands (MSP, loan waivers, drought relief, repeal of farm laws)
Leadership	Charismatic icons: Gandhi, Patel, Swami Sahajanand Saraswati	Fragmented unions, regional leaders (e.g., Rakesh Tikait)
Methods of Protest	Gandhian satyagraha, non-violence, civil disobedience; occasional armed struggles (Telangana)	Media-savvy demonstrations (Tamil Nadu skull protest), disciplined marches (Maharashtra), long sit-ins (Farm laws)
Relationship with State	Colonial oppressor seen as illegitimate	Democratic government; legitimacy acknowledged, focus on policy correction
Nation-Building Role	Strengthened unity, delegitimized colonial rule, central to independence	Strengthened democracy, but at risk of politicization and infiltration by separatist/foreign interests
Policy Outcomes	Land reforms, tenancy rights, rural development post-1947	Short-term relief packages, MSP debates, repeal of farm laws
Public Perception	Farmers as unquestioned patriots and nation-builders	Farmers as both defenders of rights and, at times, accused of being influenced by anti-national agendas

Critical Analysis: Nation-Building vs. Anti-National Narratives

Introduction

Farmers occupy a unique position in India’s national imagination. They are not only the producers of food and guardians of food security but also symbols of India’s civilizational ethos rooted in land, community, and self-reliance. As the majority class in a predominantly agrarian country, their mobilization carries immense political weight. Historically, farmers’ protests in the 20th century were celebrated as movements of national liberation. In the 21st century, however, their protests—while legitimate expressions of distress—have sometimes attracted charges of politicization, foreign interference, and even anti-national infiltration. This duality raises a pressing question: do farmers’ movements today serve as instruments of nation-building, or do they risk being appropriated in ways that challenge national integrity? A critical examination reveals both possibilities.

Farmers as Nation-Builders

At their core, farmers’ movements represent a struggle for dignity, livelihood security, and recognition. India’s independence movement itself was inseparable from the peasantry. Gandhi’s Champaran satyagraha in 1917 and Patel’s Bardoli satyagraha in 1928 showcased farmers as defenders of both economic justice and national sovereignty (Brown, 2008; Srinivasan, 1996). In the 21st century too, farmers continue to perform a nation-building role by sustaining food security, ensuring rural employment, and upholding democratic expression.

Protests such as the **Maharashtra long march (2018)** exemplify this constructive role. Tens of thousands of farmers, many of them Adivasis, marched peacefully to Mumbai, pressing for the implementation of the Forest Rights Act and fair prices for crops. Their discipline and non-disruption of urban life won urban solidarity, strengthening democracy by bridging rural-urban divides (Mishra, 2019). Similarly, Tamil Nadu farmers’ protests in 2017 highlighted the vulnerability of drought-hit regions and compelled policymakers to consider sustainable water-sharing solutions (Subramanian,

2017). Such protests underscore farmers' function as **democratic correctives**, reminding the state that growth must remain inclusive.

By keeping governments accountable, farmers act as catalysts of reform. In this sense, they remain vital agents of nation-building: their mobilization defends not only their livelihoods but also the constitutional promise of justice and equity.

Democratic Correctives to Policy

In democratic societies, protests are often mechanisms of feedback and correction. The **2020–21 farm law agitation** illustrates this. While the government argued that the laws would liberalize markets and increase farmer incomes (Government of India, 2020), farmers feared that deregulation would erode the MSP regime and expose them to corporate exploitation (Singh, 2021). The year-long sit-ins at Delhi's borders transformed into a national debate on the future of agriculture.

From a democratic perspective, the protests served an important corrective function. They forced the government to re-engage with policy design, improve communication, and ultimately repeal the laws in 2021. This outcome demonstrated that in India's democracy, policy cannot be sustained without legitimacy among its primary stakeholders. It also affirmed the farmer's continuing relevance as a political actor capable of shaping national trajectories.

Thus, when conducted peacefully and constructively, farmers' protests not only advance agrarian justice but also **strengthen democracy by institutionalizing accountability**. They prevent technocratic reforms from becoming disconnected from grassroots realities.

Allegations of Anti-National Infiltration

Yet, the 21st century has also witnessed controversies that complicate the image of farmers as unambiguous nation-builders. The **Republic Day violence on January 26, 2021** during the farm law agitation stands out. A section of protesters broke barricades, clashed with police, and hoisted a Sikh religious flag on the Red Fort. While the majority of protesters condemned the incident, the government and sections of the media portrayed it as evidence of extremist infiltration (Sharma, 2021). Allegations of Khalistani sympathizers exploiting the protests, along with concerns about foreign funding from NGOs, added to the perception that parts of the movement risked drifting into anti-national territory (Gupta, 2021).

From a perspective of the nationalist school, such incidents highlight the dangers of **mass movements being hijacked** by groups with agendas beyond agrarian welfare. Farmers, by virtue of their large numbers and symbolic importance, present attractive platforms for political parties, separatist groups, or international actors seeking to destabilize India. The challenge lies in differentiating genuine farmers' grievances from external agendas that threaten national unity.

This risk is not unique to the farm law protests. Historically too, movements like the Moplah rebellion (1921) were later interpreted in communal or separatist frames, even if their origins were agrarian (Panikkar, 1989). The lesson is clear: agrarian protests are powerful but vulnerable instruments, capable of serving nation-building or of being distorted into divisive politics.

Balancing Protest and National Integrity

The central dilemma, therefore, is one of balance. On the one hand, the right to protest is constitutionally guaranteed and forms the lifeblood of democracy. On the other hand, protests must not compromise national unity, integrity, or security. The task for policymakers, civil society, and farmer leaders is to **ensure that protests remain within the framework of constructive dialogue and constitutionalism**.

The 2018 long march provides a model. Farmers expressed grievances strongly yet peacefully, winning credibility without inviting allegations of anti-nationalism. By contrast, the 2021 Red Fort incident illustrates how even isolated lapses can taint the legitimacy of an entire movement. Hence, maintaining discipline, clarity of purpose, and strong leadership becomes critical to preserving the nationalist ethos of farmers' struggles.

For governments, too, the lesson is nuanced. Heavy-handed suppression risks alienating farmers and delegitimizing the state. Instead, governments must practice **dialogic engagement**, treating protests not as threats but as opportunities to refine policy. By doing so, they can integrate farmers into the process of reform while safeguarding national interests.

Rightist Perspective: Protest within a Nationalist Framework

From a right-oriented perspective, the farmer's role is best understood through the prism of **rashtra dharma**—the idea that individual struggles must ultimately align with the unity and integrity of the nation. Farmers are rightful agents of protest when they demand justice, but their struggles should reinforce, not weaken, India's sovereignty.

This perspective emphasizes three principles:

1. **Legitimacy of Protest** – Farmers have the right to resist exploitative policies.
2. **Limits of Protest** – Movements must not cross into lawlessness, secessionism, or violence.
3. **Constructive Dialogue** – Engagement with the state should aim at reform, not destabilization.

The rightist view does not delegitimize dissent but situates it within the broader duty to nation-building. In this sense, the distinction between **nation-building farmers** and **anti-national infiltrators** is crucial. Upholding the former while resisting the latter is the challenge of contemporary agrarian politics.

Farmers' movements in 21st-century India oscillate between two narratives: one of constructive nation-building and another of contested anti-national infiltration. On the positive side, protests highlight agrarian distress, correct policy missteps, and reaffirm the vitality of democracy. They remind the nation that farmers are not mere economic agents but moral guardians of India's democratic ethos. On the cautionary side, the sheer scale and visibility of farmer protests make them vulnerable to hijacking by divisive forces, risking damage to national unity.

The way forward lies in reclaiming the nationalist legacy of 20th-century agrarian struggles, where farmers were unambiguous defenders of sovereignty. Modern protests must retain their democratic vigor while avoiding the pitfalls of politicization and infiltration. This balance requires discipline among protesters, sensitivity from governments, and vigilance from civil society.

In the final analysis, the farmer remains central to India's journey. As cultivators of both crops and democracy, their protests can strengthen the republic—provided they remain anchored in the principles of unity, integrity, and constructive dialogue.

Conclusion

The trajectory of farmers' movements in India, from the 20th century's anti-colonial struggles to the 21st century's democratic protests, reveals both continuity and transformation. Farmers have consistently embodied the conscience of the nation, expressing collective grievances while shaping the contours of political and economic reform. Their mobilization has been neither accidental nor peripheral; rather, it has been central to both the fight for independence and the ongoing project of nation-building.

In the 20th century, agrarian protests were inseparably linked to the nationalist cause. Movements such as Champaran, Bardoli, and Telangana were not merely about rent reductions or land rights but about undermining the moral and political legitimacy of colonial authority (Brown, 2008; Dhanagare, 1983). Farmers joined Gandhi, Patel, and other leaders in transforming local grievances into instruments of national liberation. Their participation infused the freedom struggle with mass legitimacy, ensuring that independence was not simply an elite aspiration but a people's movement rooted in the soil of rural India. In this era, the farmer was unquestionably a nation-builder—resisting foreign domination, preserving dignity, and shaping the foundations of postcolonial democracy.

The 21st century presents a different, though equally compelling, picture. Farmers are no longer fighting a foreign ruler but are negotiating within the frameworks of democracy and globalization. Protests such as the Tamil Nadu drought agitation (2017), the Maharashtra long march (2018), and

the farm law movement (2020–21) have highlighted issues of livelihood security, debt, water scarcity, and market reforms (Narayanan, 2017; Mishra, 2019; Singh, 2021). These movements illustrate the resilience of agrarian politics in an age dominated by urban-industrial priorities. They remind policymakers that India's democratic legitimacy still depends on rural inclusion.

Yet, the 21st century also exposes vulnerabilities. Large-scale mobilizations, amplified by social media and global attention, are susceptible to politicization and infiltration. The Republic Day violence of 2021 demonstrated how even a largely peaceful protest could be overshadowed by incidents portrayed as anti-national (Sharma, 2021). From a rightist perspective, this underscores the need to safeguard the nationalist ethos of farmers' struggles while resisting attempts to hijack them for divisive ends. The farmer's grievances are legitimate, but their resolution must strengthen, not weaken, the unity and integrity of the nation.

The lessons are clear. For governments, engagement with farmers must go beyond ad hoc relief or populist concessions. Policy must aim at long-term agrarian transformation—investment in irrigation, fair market access, sustainable cropping systems, and diversification into allied activities. For farmer unions, discipline, clarity of purpose, and rejection of extremist elements are essential to preserving credibility. For civil society, solidarity with farmers must remain anchored in national interest rather than partisan calculations.

Ultimately, the story of India cannot be told without its farmers. They remain cultivators not only of food but of democracy, dignity, and sovereignty. Their struggles continue to reveal the moral pulse of the republic. As India aspires to become a global power in the 21st century, the challenge is to honor this legacy by ensuring that farmers' movements remain constructive, nationally rooted, and aligned with the principles of unity and justice. Nation-first farmer policies and responsible activism are not merely desirable—they are indispensable for India's future.

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