The past week has witnessed raging farmer protests at various sites along the Delhi-UP and Haryana border against the centre’s recently passed farmer bills. Barely recovering from the effects of the pandemic on the agriculture economy, farmers from Punjab and Haryana decided to march to Delhi and put forth their demands to the centre against the three farm bills.
As the farmers reached the capital, the police erected barricades and barbed wires on the highways which have been stormed by protesters. The police used water cannons and tear gas against the agitating farmers and deployed force to block rallies of farmers and tractors from entering the capital.

The sheer disregard and insensitivity with which the government has responded to the protests has been appalling. Beyond concerns regarding the anticipated consequences of the farm bills, the centre's reaction to the protests has also raised concerns over the fundamental freedom to peaceful protest.
The farmers are protesting against the two new union Acts ('Farm Produce Trade and Commerce Act' and 'Contract Farming Act') and one amended Act (Essential Commodities Act) for agricultural markets.

One of the main points of confusion and contention is the ambiguity over the provision of Minimum Support Price (MSP) that the government currently provides to farmers for their crops. The procurement of rice by the government in the states of Haryana and Punjab is nearly 100% which makes the provision of MSP crucial for the survival of farmers.

Though the Modi government has assured that there will be no changes to the provision and standard of MSP, there is a massive gap in communication and consultation between the government and farmers (and farmer unions).

Another major apprehension that
The farmers have raised is that the bills, cumulatively, are promoting corporate interests and facilitating the entry of big corporations into the agriculture market.
The Farmer Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Act or the APMC mandi bypass Act enables farmers to directly trade with private sellers without attracting any tax from the state government on those transactions.

The government has argued that this change is to empower the farmers to choose and sell their crop for the best price, hence, granting more bargaining power and freedom to the farmer.

However, farmers are still not convinced about the intentions behind and proposed benefits of the farm bills.
IN CONTEXT OF A PANDEMIC

Thinking back to the onset of the pandemic in India, the lockdown in the first few months had wreaked havoc for farmers by causing massive disruptions in the supply chain.

Thousands of farmers were stuck with a large inventory of crops at their farms without any cold storage facilities, unable to transport their crops to nearby mandis or cities.

The stern lockdown restrictions, social distancing guidelines, and closure of mandis in various places across the country caused a massive slump in demand for fresh produce. Even after mandis started to open, the low, volatile demand forced farmers to sell their produce at extremely low prices, most often below MSP.

Considering the challenges that the farmers had been already facing due to the pandemic, the current protests symbolise the accumulation of various concerns of the farmers that have been ignored over the past few months or have been unaddressed since years.

Lastly, the government’s much-publicised relief-centric agricultural...
reforms that were announced under the 'Atmanirbhar Bharat' relief package failed to address the core issues that were affecting the farmers of the country.
The government’s step to meet and start a conversation with various representatives of farmer co-operative unions and political parties, in light of the protests, to address their woes with the farm bills is welcomed; however, neglect towards the issues of our farmers, who are the backbone of our economy and existence, has been a historical problem persistent in the approach of every government towards agriculture policies, to some extent.

In the middle of a pandemic, the government should prioritise those sections of the population who are at the mercy of government policies and benefits. It is time that the government makes a consistent effort to keep in touch with the needs of the farmers and reach out to all the stakeholders for discussion before passing bills in the parliament without any deliberation and discussion with opposition parties.
JIGNESH MISTRY is a Pune-based freelance photojournalist. He has been in the field for over 10 years. He started his career as a nightshift news photographer at a daily tabloid during his graduation. Since then, his work has been published at multiple magazines, wire agencies and national newspapers. He is also involved in undertaking photography workshops for students in academic institutions. Currently, he is engaged with the PAIGAM network and is a regular contributor at The Hindu, The Press Trust of India and the International Wire Agencies.

PAIGAM (People’s Association In Grassroots Action and Movement) is an aggregator of activists, researchers, practitioners and organisations that aims to bring together social efforts at the local, national and global levels through media advocacy and action research.

They wish to bring a seamless bridge between academia, activism, policy and public through our media, advocacy, research, grassroots fellowship and mobilization channels.

TEXT BY:
AMAN KHULLAR is a Research Analyst at the Centre for New Economics Studies.