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**Class In Itself? Caste For Itself?**  
**Exploring the Latest Phase of Rural Agitations in India**

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## Class In Itself? Caste For Itself? Exploring the Latest Phase of Rural Agitations in India

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### 1 Introduction

Over 25 years into India's liberalisation, agriculture is in deep crisis. Structural reforms such as land redistribution have failed. Rising input costs and falling output prices, dwindling government support and increasing market instability, decreasing size of landholdings and falling productivity have led to reduced farm incomes, making agriculture altogether unviable. Agriculture contributes not more than 15% of the gross domestic product (GDP); however, it continues to engage nearly 60% of the workforce. In the absence of growth in the rural non-farm sector, people have had little option but to fall back on agriculture.

Simultaneously, agrarian agitations are seemingly entering a new phase in India. In the pre-independence period, strong class-based farmers' movements played an important role in national liberation. This momentum continued upto the Green Revolution period of the 1970s–80s. This was followed by the new farmers' movements in the 1990s which organised around non-class issues, primarily support prices for agricultural commodities. In a departure from both, 2015–17 has witnessed two distinct kinds of spontaneous and widespread mobilisations across rural India.

On the one hand, the period 2015–16 has observed a series of popular agitations by (hitherto land-owning, elite) dominant castes of India across diverse provinces, primarily the Patidars in Gujarat, Jats in Haryana, and Marathas in Maharashtra. While the nature of the movements spanned "mute" rallies to vandalism, their motivations were along similar lines—a sense of victimhood owing to their dwindling fortunes in the context of a heightened agrarian crisis, alongside the assertion and rise of the lower castes further threatening the former's hegemony over the village economy and society. Their demands include positive discrimination in education and employment, and abolition of the legislation protecting the lower castes and indigenous peoples against violence (predominantly committed by these dominant castes).

On the other hand, 2017 is witnessing a series of farmers' agitations across India (across nine provinces thus far and steadily growing) demanding mass loan waivers, increased support prices for farm produce, and structural reforms in agriculture. The desperation of farmers is in plain sight as they resort to fire sales, destruction of crops, naked parades and brandishing skulls of dead farmers, in protest. While the governments tried to scuttle the momentum of these movements in various ways, the rising leadership of the left therein has turned tides in political discourses surrounding rural India.

Existing social movement theories have failed to anticipate and/or explain such emerging movements. Are these movements a symptom and/or outcome of right-wing political currents, or do they beckon a return of a class-based, left-wing action mandate is a puzzle that needs to be resolved. This paper seeks to delineate the journey, nature and scope of the movements across rural India during 2015–17, and unpack the staged debate of class *versus* caste at the heart of these agitations underway in India.

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This first section of the paper is an introduction to the subject of our research. In the second section, we will provide a brief overview of the old and new farmers' movements in India as an insight into the history of class mobilisation herein. In the third section, we will examine the wave of dominant caste movements in the country through the specific case of the Maratha Morchas in Maharashtra. Our insights are drawn largely from fieldwork conducted in the region of Marathwada in Maharashtra state, the site of the origin of Maratha Morchas. In the fourth section, we will attempt to understand the longstanding and immediate causes of the agrarian crisis. We will also present a timeline of the farmers' agitations in the last two years. In the fifth section, we analyse the twin movements—one led by dominant caste groups and the other led by farmers and try to understand the links, if any, between these two social movements. Further, we will also try to characterise the nature of these two movements. In the last section, we will present some key findings of the paper.

## **2 Old and New Farmer's Movements in India**

Beginning with the original work on estimates of capitalistic production in agriculture, based on the Farm Management Studies of the early 1950s and the observations of Daniel Thorner on the emergence of 'new agriculture' and 'gentleman farmers' in the late 1960s, Indian academia witnessed a long-drawn debate on the mode of production prevalent in the Indian countryside in particular and economy-wide in general. The debate also analysed the class structure prevalent in Indian agriculture, which was assumed to have a direct relationship with peasant movements. It was clear that the tendencies towards proletarianisation remained unrealised in Indian agriculture (Patnaik 1976). Politically, though leftist peasant and agrarian movements continued to raise the voice of both rich and poor peasantry as well as agricultural labourers; the contribution of various classes towards peasant movements was different (Shah 2004: 54).

In an important paper, Alavi (1973) proposed the famous 'middle peasant' thesis arguing the special role of the middle peasantry in agrarian unrest because of their relative economic independence in the agrarian structure of the village. Dhanagare (1983) and Das (1983) accuse the "middle peasant" thesis of conceptual weakness and empirical untenability. Dhanagare goes on to say that the middle peasant category has been a transitional and fluid category in India and their 'economic independence' is overemphasised. We must note here that while it is true that leftist movements like All India Kisan Sabha, from the colonial period were led by the 'middle peasant' class, there was a large participation of both rich and poor peasantry as well as agricultural labourers across different agrarian contexts (see Bhalla 1983; Dhanagare 1983; Singh 1992).

In the period of post-green revolution and progressive differentiation of agrarian classes, the earlier basis for agrarian unrest and peasant movements in India grew weaker. Most contemporary farmers' movements do not fit in the classical conceptual division of various classes and their respective interests in the process of agrarian change. Gail Omvedt (1994) characterises the contemporary peasant-farmers' movements as non-class, 'new' social movements with a larger mandate and potential than the classical Marxist movement in history. According to her, these 'new' movements combined with environmental, women's and caste movements signify an advanced stage of social movements in India. Going further, Bhalla (1983) proposes that the objective basis for a united peasantry against a common enemy has ceased to exist in a commercialised agriculture and 'landless labour' has emerged as a distinct class which has the potential to lead agrarian struggles in a vanguard role alongwith other small peasant classes.

Bentall and Corbridge (1996) identify the new trends in agrarian movements in India with respect to the emergence of what they call 'new agrarianism' in parts of the country. The rise to dominance of '(countryside) Bharat vs (town) India' within the discourse of agrarian and farmers' movements in India delineates the qualitative shift in the balance of power amongst the ruling classes of the country. While such developments discredit the 'middle peasant' thesis, these movements also testify to the profound political-economic changes in the village society after the green revolution. This 'new agrarianism' is led by the class of rich and dominant farmers riding on the success of green revolution.

On the political orientation of the new farmers' movements, Lindberg (1995) analyses the objective linkages between cultural nationalist currents in Indian politics and the susceptibility of the backward-looking, community-oriented ideologies which reign these farmers' movements. Brass (1991, 1994, 1997) strongly argues against the 'new' populist farmers' movements in India which have consolidated their strength during the 1990s. He asserts that the 'peasant essentialism' and 'cultural otherness,' which form the basis of new peasant movements are discursively linked to the 'new' right.

On a different note, Jaffrelot (2000) analyses the two historical strategies in anti-upper caste politics in North India, one, involving and mobilising the peasants (kisans) represented by Chhotu Ram (in Punjab, north-west India) and Swami Sahjanand (in Bihar, east India) among others; and another, through mobilisation based on caste identity led mostly by socialists like Rammanohar Lohia. While the peasant-led movement de-emphasised caste-based disparities in agricultural work and land holding, the caste-based movements explicitly recognised the interests of the lower castes in anti-upper caste struggles. With limited land reform benefits on their side, many peasant-proprietors had used the green revolution technology which gave rise to a new consciousness among the (mostly) middle-caste peasantry. The rise of leaders like Charan Singh gave the movement a new turn. Charan Singh emphasised on two aspects of the peasant movement in the country. *First* is the primary contradiction between the urban-dwelling India which has no concern for the agriculturalist classes and the peasantry as a whole. *Second*, since the peasant class represents a coherent interest group against urban India, caste distinctions and affiliations had little role to play. This latter strategy was also a result of the dominant status of Jats who were supposed to lead the peasantry against the powerful urbanites in Delhi. In this peasant-proprietor model, landless labourers were to be paid merely subsistence wages and village society was assumed to be a harmonious and moral unit (p. 92). Other leaders like Devi Lal (Lok Dal) and later Ajit Singh (Rashtriya Lok Dal), and Mahendra Singh Tikait (Bhartiya Kisan Union) have followed similar ideology and strategies as attributed to the early Charan Singh-led movement. As proposed earlier, the conservative strand in the peasant movement in India (at least in north India) has consolidated itself in recent times, though it had its ideological basis in the original mobilisations of peasants based on village India vs urban India. The political victory of reservation (affirmative action) politics based on caste identities has also weakened the hold of peasant leaders over a 'cohesive' unit of rural agriculturalists now since the benefits from quotas are both universal for the Other Backward Classes (OBCs) group but also differentiated within the social group. However, the 'new' peasant movement, as identified above, has been consistently upholding the interests of the middle-caste (now dominant) peasant-proprietors mostly with respect to subsidies from the state. Dhanagare (2010) locates the rise of "new" farmers' movements under two contradictions produced by the green revolution during the 1970s. One, the contradiction between high productivity and still-low profitability in agriculture and two, the contradiction between high productivity and high poverty in rural India even during the aftermath of Green revolution.

An interesting study is the Sharad Joshi-led Shetkari Sangathna in Maharashtra. Sharad Joshi agreed with a Charan Singh-like diagnosis of the dominant urban-rural contradiction in India. He formulated a "one-point programme" relating to agricultural prices and also led a formation of Interstate Coordination Committee (ICC) on this issue. The Shetkari Sangathna, however, during the 1990s, comprehensively supported the economic reforms programme arguing that market forces would restructure the agricultural economy, raise productivity and lead to better prices for farmers ending a long period of "urban bias". This, in turn, fragmented the farmers' movement not only in Maharashtra but also in other parts of India. Currently, though remunerative prices have remained one of the core demands of the farmers' movement, the fatal compromise by Sharad Joshi and Shetkari Sangathna has also marginalised such movements in the political realm. It is clear that the 'new' peasant-farmers' movements do not share the old transformatory ideology but encompass a large canvas of issues and interests mostly based, still, on an overarching peasant identity.

### 3. Maratha Mobilisation and Its Many Contradictions

The caste system is a defining feature of social organisation in India. In the words of Ambedkar, it is a system of ‘graded inequality’ with ‘an ascending scale of reverence and a descending scale of contempt’ (Ambedkar 1930). He portended that the redemption of Indian society lay above all else in the annihilation of caste (Ambedkar 2014 (1936)). The Indian caste system is characterised by four *varnas* and a multitude of *jatis* (castes). The four *varnas* are the Brahmins (priestly class), Kshatriyas (warrior class), Vaishyas (trading class) and Shudras (service class). A peculiar feature of the system is the existence of a class of outcastes, who are outside the caste system and have been victims of “untouchability” from other caste groups. The law of the land now proscribes untouchability and provides certain affirmative action benefits to the ex-untouchables, often known as Scheduled Castes or Dalits—the oppressed ones. The general incidence of poverty among the Scheduled castes (Dalits) is significantly higher than the caste-Hindu population. The higher poverty ratio for rural Dalits is also a signifier of the associated unfreedoms of rural agrarian social structure. Owing to the peculiar agrarian social structure prevalent in rural India, a majority of Dalits are involved in agricultural labour with little to no access to good quality productive land and other resources. Dalits, in fact, constitute more than half of the total rural wage labour in India.

Given the political economy of caste-relations, M N Srinivas identified the presence of “dominant castes,” which share certain common features: numerical strength, control over land and political resources, cultural dominance in region of residence, etc. In the last one year, a number of agitations led by such dominant castes in various states/regions of the country have come in to being. The most significant of these agitations are the ones led by Jats in Haryana in February 2016, Patidars/Patels in Gujarat in July 2017, and Marathas in Maharashtra during August 2016–August 2017. The major plank of these groups includes a demand for their inclusion in the affirmative action policies of the government (to secure their economic prospects hampered by agrarian distress), and if not, then withdrawal of reservation benefits from others, especially the Scheduled Castes (to secure their sociocultural hegemony)!

In this paper, we will examine the specific case of the Maratha Morchas in the Marathwada region of Maharashtra, India. The immediate trigger of the demonstrations was the news of a brutal gang rape and murder of a Maratha teenage girl in Kopardi village of Ahmednagar district, North Maharashtra region, Maharashtra. The accused were allegedly all young, local Dalit men. News of the incident spread like wildfire and immediately sparked unrest in the district. While the public outrage in Ahmednagar saw the participation of multiple caste groups/organisations and political parties, the phenomena of the Maratha Morchas, as we now know them, began in the unconnected and neighbouring region of Marathwada (see Fig 1). Thus, a month after the rape and murder incident, various districts of Marathwada organised and thereafter, unleashed a series of *Maratha Kranti Muk Morchas* (Maratha Revolutionary Silent Demonstrations) across Marathwada, extending to the whole of Maharashtra. Between August 2016–August 2017, 58 such district-wide rallies have been organised across the state with an average attendance of 250,000–300,000 people. The demands of the protestors included capital punishment for the accused in the rape case, reservations (affirmative action) for Marathas and abolition/amendments to the law criminalising violence committed by the upper castes against the ex-untouchables and tribals, among other things. The order of these demands, however, reversed with every successive Maratha rally.

Marathwada, located in the centre–south of Maharashtra, has remained a highly impoverished, drought-prone region with low levels of economic growth and human development (GoM 2013). Agriculture continues to be the main occupation, in the absence of any major urban or industrial centres. However, kingly rule until Indian independence and state neglect of the region since then has resulted in little development of agriculture, industry or infrastructure (Kate 1987). Marathwada has also been a bastion of state and communal violence against Dalits as also the site of transformational action by powerful anti-caste social movements. This is an indicator of the long ensuing conflict between Dalits and caste Hindus in a general environment of livelihood crisis and the fight for social



justice. Thus, Maratha Morchas are a poignant flashpoint in this protracted struggle for dominance and dignity in Marathwada.

**Fig 1: Districts and Sub-Regions of Maharashtra State, India**



Post-independence, Maharashtra's politics has been dominated by the Maratha–Kunbi caste group which comprise nearly 30% of the population. This domination was achieved on the back of numerical strength, support from the rural landowning class and cultural propaganda of Maratha identity and pride. Mehta (2014) notes,

(Marathas) own 75-90 per cent of land in Maharashtra. They control 86 of the 105 sugar factories, 54 per cent of educational institutes and over 71 per cent of cooperative bodies. And since 1962, 55 per cent of (members of legislative assembly) MLAs and 12 of the 17 Chief Ministers have risen from this caste.

However, this Maratha hegemony stands threatened in the face of changing power equations. At the political level, the Marathas have suffered their first certain defeat in the national and state assembly elections of 2014, abetted by the growing distrust between the Maratha elite and larger community or “the neo-rich and newly impoverished” resulting in a fragmentation of Maratha politics, and competition for new political alliances (Deshpande and Palshikar 2014).

There has been a clear class stratification within the Marathas, since pre-independence (early 1900s) if not earlier (Kate 1987). This has only widened and intensified post-independence as the Maratha elite that captured power patronised big capital, neglected agriculture and failed to accelerate expansion of secondary and/or tertiary sectors (Palshikar and Deshpande 1999), which

is particularly true for Marathwada. The deepening agrarian crisis in Marathwada on the back of three consecutive years of severe drought has resulted in a tragic rise of farmer suicides, loss of health, wealth, status, and patience with the political class (Teltumbde 2016). Whilst small and marginal Maratha farmers are the worst hit, big farmers too are under strain. In the state and Marathwada, the dominant Maratha political elite has had a vested interest in the continued neglect of agriculture to ensure the uninterrupted supply of cheap labour for sugarcane harvesting in Western Maharashtra apart from the changing structure of the economy, global agrarian trends and urbanisation (Palshikar and Deshpande 1999). The income deficit and decreasing profitability of farming as an occupation is pushing farmers to consider non-farm avenues for their children. However, while government jobs are highly competitive and steadily shrinking, the private sector only provides low-pay, precarious employment to those with a second-rate education, which is what the vast majority can avail and afford in India (Johari 2015). More so, the poorer Marathas have never benefitted from the chain of educational institutes run by Maratha elite across Marathwada and the state itself (Guru 1994).

The dwindling fortunes and control of the upper castes are alongside the unprecedented assertion and progress of the lower castes (Teltumbde 2016). For instance, lower caste and especially, Dalit youth in the villages of Marathwada driven by anti-caste ideology, no agricultural land or household asset to fall back on, and positive discrimination in public education and employment are increasingly availing opportunities to escape the drudgery of exploitative farm labour and village society (Teltumbde 2016). Those who have stayed back are either landowning families or have small businesses or wage employment in nearby market towns. Either ways, those outside and within the village are investing in land, renovating houses, contributing and amplifying cultural festivals/family ceremonies, apart from seeking power in the village by fielding and promoting candidates in local elections. Anti-caste ideological consciousness has transformed the lifestyle, worldview and interpersonal dynamics of Dalits in search of self-respect, modernity, rationality, democracy and dignity. Marathas, on the other hand, are trapped in an imagined glory of martial valour and feudal hegemony dating back to the Maratha regime of the 17th century.

Apart from the class divisions, there are caste divisions within the Marathas too, primarily between the Kshatriya Maratha and peasant Kunbi Maratha, which too bear significance in this disenchantment. At the village level, Marathas exercise tight control over the mobility and clout of the Kunbis, if any (Deshpande 2004). The peasant community themselves never minded the alliance with Marathas for in an impoverished region like Marathwada, political capital was the only way to get around (Guru 1994). Despite there being little disparity between small-marginal landholding Kunbis, from other lower castes and/or Dalits with similar-sized landholdings, Kunbis politically and socially chose to ally with the exploitative Marathas than opt for an alliance of the poor based on common material interests.

The Maratha elite, in the past few years, has chosen to direct this alienation within its ranks towards a politics of “backwardness” and “reservations/affirmative action” on the one hand and vilifying Dalit assertion and reservation on the other. The path drawn out by the Maratha political elite to knit back these increasingly disparate Maratha segments is by contesting the existing plank of affirmative action in India itself—either the state accepts them as backward (on economic and educational grounds) else it rolls back reservations altogether (which is implied in the demand for the first) (Teltumbde 2016). This position, while ironic, betrays two flaws of the dominant Maratha politics—its inability to accommodate other social groups or diversify its social representation, and its unmistakeable caste arrogance betrayed in finding its soft target in Dalits.

While the mobilisation of Maratha Morchas were rooted in class issues, this solidarity in the context of a larger disjunction has only been possible for its shared disdain-cum-envy for Dalits who are making new intrusions in the public sphere (Kumar 2016). These intrusions are seen as abetted solely by the institution of reservations in education, employment and Panchayati Raj, apart from the cultural assertions and constant evocation of and recourse to legal/constitutional



avenues against upper-caste violence, fuel the Maratha antagonism. Thus, the Maratha Morchas were a political spectacle engineered by the professional class and cultural organisations in their bid to maintain power and domination and more so, keep the Dalits within control. The massive turnout in the rallies was aimed at countering Dalit assertion socially and politically by evoking fear of an impending Maratha retribution.

In the overall crisis of secure and sustainable livelihoods, of shrinking state social security cover and shifting socio-cultural power axes, such dominant caste uprisings such as the Maratha Morchas and others of its ilk represent a cultural distortion of the growing dissent and disillusion against the neo-liberal state-market alliance. Since the minority feudal landlord class cannot legitimately stake a claim to state resources in a democracy, they are using the plank of caste identity to mobilise a majoritarian movement for state patronage and greater social control in local contexts.

#### **4. Agrarian Crisis and Farmer's Agitations in 2017**

The agrarian crisis in India has been long in making. In the early years after independence, the land and agrarian reforms programme was never considered seriously. In fact, agrarian reforms failed miserably in most parts of the country. The green revolution was a strategy that was self admittedly "building on the best". The strategy was inherently biased towards certain crops, classes and regions. Both socially and economically, the green revolution created newer contradictions of its own. The economic liberalisation agenda of the early 1990s was driven by a certain understanding of agricultural development. This understanding was centred on international competitiveness, export orientation and withdrawal of government support structure to the agricultural sector. In this period, however, the rate of growth of food grain production went down considerably. The withdrawal of government subsidies and support structures while opening up to international markets also left the farmers to fend for themselves when prices fluctuated wildly, particularly in certain commercial crops such as cotton. The public investment in agriculture has gone down while private investments have not caught up in the same degree. In this overall scenario, a large section of the majority small and marginal farmers have realised that their farms are not viable anymore. However, it is very important to note that there is no generalised agrarian crisis in the country. The crisis has affected different classes differently and the overall burden of older structures compounded by economic liberalisation is borne by small and marginal farmers, who comprise almost 93 per cent of the total number of farmers in India.

As discussed above in section 2, while the old farmer's movements was centred on class-based issues demanding greater structural changes in the rural economy of India, the new farmers' movement was focused on more specific issues such as procurement prices for farm produce, organic farming, amongst others. However, these movements declined in influence steadily in the aftermath of the liberalisation of the Indian economy in 1991. It is against this backdrop that the current phase of farmers agitations, beginning 2017, gains significance. After a hiatus of some decades, India has once again begun to witness organised, nationwide mobilisations of farmers. Given that the agitations are still underway, we will discuss the immediate triggers, forms of organisation, demands and impact of the movement.

The rural-urban conundrum bears itself out in the economic and political realms of India. The largest and oldest political party, namely the centrist and secular Congress party has largely been seen as pro-rural party. Whereas its most significant opposition and the current ruling party, the Hindu, right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), is considered a largely pro-urban party. While the Congress has pursued rights-based developmental policies to secure the livelihoods, health and nutrition and education of the vast expanse of rural poor however nominal, the BJP won a historic mandate in the national polls of 2014 on the promise of overhauling the economy for greater employment and economic prosperity. Ever since coming to power, it has introduced big-ticket reforms such as "demonetisation" to arrest the flow of black money, bring small enterprises into the ambit of the formal economy and induce greater

digitalisation of the economy; a universal “Goods and Services Tax” (GST) in a bid to simplify tax regimes and increase tax compliance. Both these reforms, however, have taken their toll on the economy in general and agriculture and its allied industries in particular.

Demonetisation, by way of a sudden and completely unexpected announcement rendered high-currency Indian notes (₹ 500 and ₹ 1,000) invalid and replaced them with new notes (₹ 500 and ₹ 2,000). It created a crisis in procuring the new notes and disposing off old. Most of all, it created a crisis for most Indians (ordinary citizens) who keep cash as a form of liquid asset, and wiped away the liquidity base of small enterprises and particularly, agriculture. Demonetisation was announced in early November 2016. 2016 and 2017 were years of bumper crop across India on account of bountiful rain, in a country where agriculture continues to be rain-fed. Demonetisation had created a cash crunch in agricultural markets which created a crisis in giving farmers good prices for their farm produce. There was muted protest at the time of harvesting the winter crop in India with the press reluctantly showcasing photos of tomatoes being thrown along the roads for the lack of economic procurement prices. This protest, however, snowballed after the monsoon crop too failed to garner decent prices, leaving farmers with a severely reduced capacity to undertake the next sowing.

In two states, Uttar Pradesh and Punjab, wherein elections to the provincial governments were due in 2017, farm loan waivers became a strong enough electoral mandate for parties to include it in their poll promises. The winning parties in both these states had to announce waivers on forming the government due to public pressure. Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh witnessed the most aggressive mobilisation by farmers. They took to the streets, imposed curfews, destroyed farm and dairy produce in the hordes, and blocked food supplies to the cities. In Madhya Pradesh, the protest turned ugly, with one dead and several injured in police firing in the protests. In Maharashtra, on the other hand, ironically the protests were initiated by a coalition partner of the ruling party in the province of Maharashtra and the centre in New Delhi. However, this coalition partner was soon ousted by protesting farmers from the representative committee deputed to bargain with the provincial government and the left organisation, All India Kisan Sabha (AIKS), took over the mantle. They successfully bargained for a farm loan waiver amounting to ₹ 340 billion in Maharashtra alone, resulting in a waiver of ₹ 150,000 per individual farmer. AIKS had another successful run in the Shekhawati region of Rajasthan province. The waiver bill they secured in this one sub-region of a province alone amounted to ₹ 200 billion. The support base and participation of the a two-month long agitation culminating in a 13-day finale extended to include common citizens, businessmen and traders in the district towns to various local service providers’ unions (including filtered drinking water and milk transporters’, bus/ambulance/auto-rickshaw/tempo transport and Disc Jockeys’ unions) to the overwhelming presence of women in enforcing the shutdowns of towns and cities (Mishra 2017).

Unlike the farmers’ agitations elsewhere in 2017, the protest in Rajasthan extended to all sections of rural society. This was primarily triggered by the imposition of the GST which had affected local, small-scale businesses adversely, resulting in an overall crisis for the rural economy. Furthermore, the right-wing government at the centre had, in its wake, ushered a phenomenon of cow patriotism in the country. Slaughtering a cow (revered by the Hindus) or suspicion of transporting cows for slaughter is being met with brutal violence (murder, more specifically) by cow vigilante groups on the hunt for transgressors. Such acts, far from being disavowed by the government, have been on the rise across the northern half of India. This has further hit the rural economy and farmers in particular, as the sale of cattle (a liquid asset in times of distress) has become virtually impossible. This features in the list of demands/concerns furthered by protesting farmers in Rajasthan.

In a separate context from the above states, Tamil Nadu (on the southern tip of India) suffering from a long-drawn water crisis witnessed farmers agitate over 41 days in March-April 2017. Farmers camped in the national capital and protested in unique ways (carrying skulls of farmers who committed suicide due to the water crisis, conducted mock funerals, pretended to eat mice and snakes, and tonsured their

heads to capture the government's attention (Jandial 2017). They returned to protest in late July over unfulfilled demands.

The farmers' agitations of 2017, in a way, combine the issues of both old and new farmers' movements. Their most vehement and immediate demand concerned the waiver of farm loans to enable new borrowing for the upcoming cropping season. This demand was accompanied by the assertions on the need to strengthen the Minimum Support Price offered by the Indian state to farmers. The larger structural demand placed by the farmers before the governments has been the implementation of the recommendations of the National Commission on Farmers Commission's (2004–06), also known as the MS Swaminathan Commission after its revered chairman—the Indian father of the green revolution. The Commission's recommendations were centred on land rights and redistribution, sustainable and equitable irrigation reforms, accessibility to and robustness of farm credit and insurance systems, measures for productivity growth and food security, and greater social security for agriculturalists to prevent suicides (*Indian Express* 2017).

While this wave of agitations may have found their immediate release in the post-demonetisation context, they are a culmination of accumulated problems inherited from the past. As pointed out earlier, the structural problems facing agriculture in India, such as irrigation, land inequality, social structure and its relationship with labour forms etc., have found no resolution in the last 70 years since independence. The non-profitability of farming is a net result of policy failures in the early years and a premature and ill thought process of opening up after 1991.

## 5. Understanding the Rural Agitations of 2015–17

A distinct link between the Maratha Morchas and peasant agitation of Maharashtra province has been their primary site of rise and action. The caste-based movements mostly arose in the drought-prone area of Marathwada region whereas the peasant agitation arose in the fertile and relatively industrialised and prosperous Western Maharashtra region. This distinction has everything to do with the political economy of the respective regions. In the drought-prone Marathwada, with sparse industrialisation and urbanisation, agriculture and its allied sectors continue to be the mainstay of the local political economy. However, a weak agriculture (on account of frequent droughts, lack of irrigation infrastructure and infertile land) requires surplus appropriation through extra-economic means. This reinforces the need to perpetuate caste ties and bondage. The local Maratha elites are facing a double crisis of legitimacy and challenge from lower castes, particularly Dalits. Unlike Western Maharashtra elites, they don't have longstanding non-agricultural economic and political networks. This implies that at least at the local level they still need to assert themselves through social and cultural action.

The Maratha Morchas often tried to utilise the peasant identity of the *kunbi*-Marathas to bolster the social basis of their movement. The dominant Maratha politics represents only a tiny fraction of the Maratha and *Kunbi* population. In fact, the families that control the land, educational institutions, sugar cooperatives and businesses in Western Maharashtra are too few. The fact that the origin of these agitations is largely in the Marathwada region points to a deeper unrest brewing in the Maratha community over land, agriculture and newer opportunities in the non-agricultural sector. The Marathwada region was under the rule of Nizam of Hyderabad before independence. The region was characterized by *ryotwari* land tenures at least since the year 1853 but remained backward because of a deeply unequal social structure and negligence of the Nizam towards Marathwada. The region is ecologically dry but has marginally improved in parameters of irrigation in recent years compared to other backward regions of the state. The dominant groups in Marathwada were gradually co-opted by the political current located in the regions of Western Maharashtra. In recent times, the region, hence, shows simultaneous signs of limited agricultural prosperity and extreme backwardness in terms of social structure.

The issues that were brought to the forefront at a later stage in the Morchas included demands for farm loan waivers and the implementation of the Swaminathan Commission recommendations for

calculating the cost of production. Even if we consider a set of demands that concerns a larger section of the Marathas—farmers’ issues, jobs and livelihoods—as “genuine”, these demands would never bear fruits because the movement has been captured and co-opted by established landed and business interests led by dominant Marathas. The present leaders or future beneficiaries of the movement, in line with their class interests, would never allow economic issues to take centre stage.

The spate of Maratha rallies in Maharashtra also tells us something about the limitations of caste politics of the kind practiced in the state. While the poorer Marathas have been successfully mobilised, their coming together was possible only because of the *explicit anti-Dalit call* of the mobilisation. At almost every rally, anti-Dalit rhetoric was at the centre. Questions have been raised against the celebration of Ambedkar Jayanti and putting up blue flags outside Dalit neighbourhoods and houses. Many of these themes remind Dalits and progressive observers of the days of the *Namantar* movement and brutal memories of Marathwada riots. In a way, the Maratha Morchas are a continuation of the right-wing new farmers movements which gained ground since the 1990s.

The Western Maharashtra Maratha elite are also facing a political crisis which is unprecedented in the history of the state. For the second time in the history, the Marathas seem to have lost political power to other social groups, notably the Brahmins and OBCs. This tendency started out in the 1990s with factionalisation within the larger Maratha politics and the strengthening of the Hindu right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in the state which focused majorly on OBCs as a vote bank. The new Dalit politics also gained a lot of ground, politically. The ordinary Maratha farmers have experienced rising input prices, unstable output prices, dwindling support for marketing and storage and other issues in the post-liberalisation period as faced by other social groups. The fact remains that the state of Maharashtra has witnessed the biggest numbers of farmers’ suicides in the last three decades. More than 3 lakh farmers have committed suicide in India since 1995 of which about 61000 were from Maharashtra. A majority of them belonged to Maratha caste. There is an undeniable case of acute crisis of livelihoods and incomes in agriculture.

## 6. Concluding Observations

The caste-based movements of 2015–16 have an element of class and agrarian distress. With the breakdown of farmers’ organisations and withdrawal of the state from agriculture, the farming class chose to regroup as consolidated caste vote banks to garner the attention and patronage of political parties. The resounding victory of the incumbent conservative, Hindu right-wing, Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to the centre and majority of provinces in India, feeds into such feudal mobilisation. However, a deteriorating political economy fraught with graded social dominations and inequalities is witnessing the boiling over of the countryside, which simultaneously propels the farmer agitations underway in India.

Rather than going into the overdone debate of class and caste, we would only like to highlight the emerging tensions within Jaffrelot’s formulation of caste politics versus peasant politics. The neat division between the two types of politics never really existed in the rural areas, and it is more of an analytical distinction. However, with a stagnation looming over agriculture and no resolution in sight, while the older social structures remain as strong as ever, the lines of distinction between the two movements are highly blurred. The dominant castes, in the name of caste, are able to mobilize a lot of agitational potential from within the larger classes of small and marginal farmers. This preponderance of caste feeling, in say the Maratha Morchas, is a challenge to rural and farmers’ movements in terms of organization and mobilization towards a larger class politics.

At the same time, the recent successes of the farmers’ movements in Maharashtra (and Rajasthan) signify the role of organization and leadership. In both the cases, the historical presence of leftist peasant organizations (such as AIKS) and contemporary assertion of its leadership have played a crucial role in mobilization of farmers on structural issues.

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