

# **PEDAGOGY OF RESISTANCE AND REFLECTIVE ACTION: EXAMINING THE FARMERS' MOVEMENT OF INDIA IN 2020-21**

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**Abstract:** The farmers' movement of 2020 - 2021 against three contentious farm laws and the corporatisation of Indian agriculture has been one of the largest in the history of post-independence India. These laws can be seen as part of the larger neoliberal policy of the right-wing dispensation that has already been applied to education, public health and other sectors (Kumar, 2022). While the movement has been widely celebrated for its unprecedented alliance of farm and trade unions, cultural and religious institutions, this article aims to study the extensive efforts that were undertaken by the farmer unions to educate the protestors: from the biweekly newspaper *Trolley Times* to the setting up of *Nanak Hut* library to opening a makeshift school at the protest site for the children of protesting farmers, creating a sense of political awareness and the effect it might have on the trajectory of substantive democracy in India.

The first section will focus on radical approaches to learning, with emphasis upon Paulo Freire's conceptualisation of critical consciousness and key aspects of development education, contributing to the study of alternative, participative paradigms that focus on reflection and action toward social transformation. The second section will focus on tracing these ideas in the context of the Indian farmers' movement in 2020-21, and how community-based learning played a crucial role in creating a better sense of political awareness among the protestors. Educational processes in the forms of libraries and a makeshift school were linked to a plan of action towards greater social justice and equity. It also resonated with Freire's conceptualisation of *conscientização* by making the protesting farmers better aware of the structural social and economic inequalities that define their lived experiences and affect their community as a whole.

**Key words:** Indian Farmers; Farmers' Movement; Critical Consciousness; Social Participation; Democratic Learning

**Freire's *conscientização*: reflective action and development education**

Paulo Freire's insistence on progressive literary praxis, radical democratisation of voice and focus on socio-economic and political experiences played crucial roles in late twentieth century education for social justice and democratic empowerment. His work prioritised human agency and called for liberation and radical reconstruction. He argued that we must be educated to understand that our situation is neither determined nor unalterable, it is only limited (Brosio, 2000: 199). Rather than submitting to the decisions made by others, he wanted education to enable 'men' to analyse and re-evaluate constantly, to perceive themselves in a dialectical relationship with social reality and assume critical attitudes toward the world to transform it (Freire, 2005: 30). Education is thus considered as the praxis for liberation, where liberation is conceived as 'both a dynamic activity and the partial conquest of those engaged in dialogical education' (Freire, 2005: viii).

Freire focuses on the idea of a 'reflecting subject' which involves a 'dynamic and dialectical movement between 'doing' and 'reflecting on doing' (Freire, 2000: 23). It marks the essentiality of critical reflection on one's actions or practice. While action without critical reflection is ineffective activism, theory in the absence of collective social action is escapist idealism and naïve consciousness (Freire, 2005). Thus, his approach to education is especially notable when assumed by communities in struggle. As succinctly put by Martin Carnoy, Freire 'believed in the inseparability of learning from political consciousness and of political consciousness from political action' (Freire, 1998: 7). The starting premise for critical education is to enable conditions for learners to engage in interactive experiences where they assume themselves as 'social, historical, thinking, communicating, transformative, creative persons' (Ibid: 25). It is our permanent movement of curious interrogation that creates the capacity to intervene and transform the world. Thus education 'as a specifically human experience, is a form of intervention in the world' (Ibid: 71).

According to Freire, education is not and cannot be neutral. In the introduction to *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Richard Shaull elucidated that ‘education either functions as an instrument that is used to facilitate the integration of the young...into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity to it, or it becomes the practice of freedom’ (cited in Brosio, 2000: 198). His ideas were inspired from Marxist tradition, most notably propounded by Gramsci and Althusser in the twentieth century. Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci (1971) viewed civil society as consisting of political parties, print media, education, and other voluntary associations: its collaboration with the state being crucial to contain class struggle and organize consent. It is institutions like schools, family, church, political parties, media that shape the political and social consciousness of citizens. A similar theorisation, on the lines of Gramsci, was taken further by Louis Althusser (1970) by terming it as ‘Ideological State Apparatuses’ (ISA) constituted of family, church, schools, trade unions, political parties, law, media and the cultural domain of sports, literature and arts which function primarily by ideology and secondarily by coercion.

While it was church that was the most dominant ISA in pre-capitalist times and all ideological struggles were anti-religious and anti-clerical, and aimed against it (since the Reformation), under capitalism it is the educational ideological apparatus which has become the most important. Schools provide students with the required understanding as to the role one has to play in the hierarchical production process as well as the ideology suitable to the ruling class, while at the same time portraying the school as a ‘neutral environment purged of any ideology’. Such instrumental and functional learning approaches dehumanise learners ‘by robbing them of their right to reason, to speak and to act’ (Dale and Hyslop-Margison, 2010: 129). Freire’s pedagogy presents the social order as artificially constructed to serve the ideological interests of the dominant groups. For Freire, education should be a mechanism to liberate people, rather than another instrument to dominate them. Such liberatory education is embedded in existential experience as well as critical reflection on it.

The critical education as advocated by Freire's Marxist pedagogy is a crucial mechanism in deconstructing and challenging unequal socio-economic structures as it exposes the impact of ideology on consciousness and social construction (Dale and Hyslop-Margison, 2010: 129). Freire has termed the transformation of consciousness as *conscientização* (i.e., the deepening of critical consciousness and awareness). It is only after this change in individual consciousness, through increased contextual awareness and understanding how that context shapes identity, that liberation through praxis or reflective action can occur (Ibid). It is such transformative intervention that makes us uniquely human as we can create and recreate material goods, social institutions and ideas (Brosio, 2000: 206).

Democracies, in their true spirit, should provide their citizens with discursive spaces where political options shall be debated, alternative social visions discussed and prevailing social and economic structures critiqued. In recent decades, the politics of populism has acquired new significance (Revelli, 2019). Populist leaders present themselves as representing 'the people' in opposition to 'the elites' who are portrayed as having exploited the interests of the masses. In the context of India, Bello (2019) has elaborated on how the distinctive brand of populism has sought to 'normalise Hindu nationalist discourse, transforming the public discursive space in an attempt to define an exclusive national imaginary' (Rizvi, 2021: 6). While, on the one hand, educational practices have been aligned to Hindutva's sense of cultural and ideological legitimacy, on the other hand neoliberalism has been representing 'a new relationship between government and knowledge through which governing activities are recast as non-political and non-ideological problems that need technical solutions' (Ong, 2006: 3).

In *The Anti-Politics Machine*, James Ferguson (1990) has also argued that by reducing questions of development to technical problems and by promising technical solutions to the sufferings of the oppressed, the hegemonic problematic of 'development' becomes the principal means to depoliticise such questions, enabling suspension of politics even from the most sensitive political operations. This has highly authoritarian tendencies,

according to James Scott (1998), as only those with required scientific acumen (certainly the political elite, leading to the exclusion of citizens from developmental plans or visions) are seen fit to rule, making it the ideology of bureaucratic intelligentsia, technicians, and planners with responsibilities of social transformation as well as changing the cultural level of the population.

Knowledge that is not gained out of scientific experiments is not even considered knowledge and thus leads to neglect of *Metis*, i.e., wisdom of local groups acquired through personal experience. *Metis* (Scott, 1998) is devalued in favour of ‘specialised’ knowledge backed by state authority which changes the ‘balance of power’ between the local communities and the state. In a way, it reminds one of Freire’s description and condemnation of the ‘banking’ method of education, whereby the teacher is considered as the one who knows all while the learner is perceived to be ignorant. On the contrary, Freire envisaged that everyone must become a Subject rather than a mere Object who is acted upon, as persons capable of constructing and reconstructing their own meanings and realities, critical analysis, solidaristic action and responsible citizenship (Brosio, 2000: 203). It is only then that the people become politicised and renounce emotional resignation.

This radical approach to learning has been further explored by development education that ‘explores the intrinsic link between education and development and addresses the fundamental causes of inequality and injustice’ (McCloskey, 2014: 1). It intends to ‘demystify social, economic and cultural relations within the neoliberal system that perpetuates inequality and contribute to the debate on alternative, transformative paradigms that are sustainable, equitable and just’ (Ibid). It focuses on active and participative learning, unequal social relations based on class, race and the differential conditions of the global South by employing various tools like social media, information technology, etc. It seeks to enable critical awareness of one’s situationalities (local as well as global) based on the knowledge of social, economic and political processes. It seeks to develop critical knowledge, skills and values that further encourage action (which is a pivotal outcome of the educational process). Such education aims at social transformation to further

the ideals of equality, inclusion and social justice. This advances Freire's conception of reflective action that brings together theory and praxis which involves critical consciousness of power structures and social relations within society as well as reflective action informed by dialogue.

The next section explores the ways in which active, participative leaning for the purpose of progressive social, economic and political transformations were witnessed during the Indian farmers' movement of 2020-2021, described as one of the largest in the history of post-independence India.

### **Kisaan Andolan: origins of the movement**

The farmers' movement of 2020-2021 was one of the largest movements in the history of independent India, marking resistance to neoliberalism and the corporatisation of Indian agriculture (Kumar, 2022). The protesting farmers camped at the borders of the nation's capital to demand the repeal (now repealed due to the sustained year long struggle of the farmers) of the three contentious farms laws: the Farmers' Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Bill 2020, the Farmers' (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement of Price Assurance and Farm Services Bill 2020, and the Essential Commodities (Amendment) Bill 2020, that were designed to liberalise India's agriculture markets and change the existing regulatory framework of agriculture.

Over forty Indian farmers' unions came under the banner of *Samyukta Kisan Morcha* to protest against these laws. This was especially notable given the Central and state governments constantly asking the farmers to vacate the protest sites in order to avoid the spread of COVID-19. The government brought in COVID-19 control regulations and tried to forcibly clear out the sites of protests, ban gatherings of people and implemented a slew of measures that restricted access to public spaces making it very difficult to organise any kind of mass protests. In spite of COVID-19 regulations being in place and series of enforced lockdowns, the Indian protestors found a way to mass mobilise and storm the capital with demonstrations (Chakrabarti, 2022). Multiple health camps were arranged at the protest sites by the unions to ensure

availability of medical assistance in case of emergencies. Such resilience was especially impressive given that the mass mobilisation of a similar nature against the CAA-NRC had to be suspended due to the pandemic earlier in 2020. Secondly, it was the marginalised sections, especially migrant labour, women and children who were the worst affected by the lockdowns. This made the farmers' mobilisation that constituted significant participation of Dalits and women even more radical and powerful. While initially there were multiple leaders leading different pockets of protestors, after the 26 January 2021 Red Fort fiasco, it was Rakesh Tikait of Bharatiya Kisan Union (BKU) who emerged as the face of resistance. This forces one to look back at the history of BKU and how the organisation had internalised the communal discourse that preceded the Muzaffarnagar riots of 2013. Theoretical work has been done on the political intermediation of the traditional institutions of *khap panchayats* as being central to this process. There have been tensions between *Jats* and Muslims, and *Jats* and Dalits especially in Western Uttar Pradesh. Despite these setbacks in the past, the movement witnessed the coming together of these sections to form a politically productive alliance.

While in Punjab, it was the farmers' unions, workers' unions as well as *gram panchayats* that mobilised protestors on the ground, Haryana witnessed 'resolutions' being passed by *khap panchayats* (caste councils: traditional bodies of governance that affect one's conduct in spheres ranging from marriage, property rights to sexuality and so on) about participation of at least one male member from each household, or else risk facing social boycott. It has been these communitarian social ties (*bhaichara*) that provided the required momentum and solidarity in the state of Haryana. While these institutions have been usually analysed as regressive, conservative 'sovereign' entities based on caste solidarities (Verma, 2019; Chowdhry, 2011; Ramakumar, 2016), these were also fundamental in ensuring solidarity within and across communities during the movement. The significant presence of women and considerable focus on women centric issues was another positive development. While such unprecedented women's participation primarily surged to counter the threat posed to their 'land, livelihood, food security and farming identity by the new farm laws, it was also rooted in the historical

conditions and treatment meted out to them on social, cultural, economic and political fronts' (Sangwan and Singh, 2022: 46). Women activists not only took charge of activities and delivered speeches, but also conducted *Mahila Kisaan Sansad* (Women Farmers' Parliament) to put forth resolutions related to land rights, wages, access to credit, etc. Women asserted their right to protest as well as their right to occupy public spaces. Thus, the success of the movement could be linked to the building of solidarity across caste, class, gender and religion as well as the broader coalition of farm and trade unions, civil society organisations and cultural institutions like the *khap panchayats*.

Similarly, other such instances of solidarity from the protests can be mentioned too: *Punjab Khet Mazdoor Union* (PKMU)'s leadership is primarily from the landless Dalit community and many protestors affiliated to the Union were from Punjab villages where Dalits had once clashed with other communities over common land, one-third of which is meant to be reserved for Dalits. They were reportedly saying, 'We don't own land, but these laws are dangerous for us too. We had a conflict with landowners over our common land, but there is no personal enmity between us' (Singh, 2021). Mukesh Maloud, president of the *Zameen Prapati Sangharsh* Committee added:

“This is not only a fight against the new farm laws. It is a protest against the fascist government that has jailed intellectuals, brutalised Kashmiris and changed labour codes, and brought in the NRC laws” (Singh, 2021).

Thus, the farmers' protest had accommodated Muslims, Dalits and women, thereby changing the very imagination of a farmer. This was in stark contrast to the earlier fragmented nature of the struggles waged by different subaltern classes in India and the limitation of their political imagination that had led to the disorientation of politics of social justice and aided the rise of the Hindutva movement, as argued by Ajay Gudavarthy and Nissim Mannathukkaren (2014).

Importantly, the theoretical division between civil society and political society (see Chatterjee, 2011) seems blurred in such contexts. According to Chatterjee, subjects forming political society (different from the civil society which comprises the middle class, English speaking citizens) make their claims on government not on the basis of constitutional rights, but by temporary political contextual negotiations, that are tenuous, periodically renewed, with no assurance of outcome. Such distinction does not hold up in cases like the farmers' protests where the protests by peasantry (that is a part of the political society) had increasingly taken up the issues of rights, constitution and legality in order to assert what is rightfully theirs, and is no longer only limited to contextual, everyday negotiations. It stemmed from the role of education and consciousness as seen in the powerful visuals of aged protestors studying books of Bhagat Singh, Ambedkar and Marx, and the setting up of various libraries like *Nanak Hut*. Thus Chatterjee's 'subjects' of the political society who were hitherto only accepted as citizens in terms of negotiating their contextual claims with governmental authorities not only successfully challenged the populist politics of the ruling dispensation, but did so in the name of the nature and essence of the constitutionality of the Indian state.

Dip Kapoor's (2014) work has focused on the engagement of development education with political society by focusing on the subaltern social movements of rural India. According to Kapoor, subaltern social movements of the political society inform development education by highlighting the need to embrace indigenous theoretical perspectives to 'expose the links between capitalism, colonialism and contemporary capitalist development and globalization', and elaborate on 'pluri-versal projects of subaltern, rural and indigenous people as pre/existing versions of cultural, political-economic and socio-educational forms of development and ways of being/living and the ongoing capitalist/modernist colonisations and social movement resistances/responses to the same' (Kumar, 2014: 222). The farmers' movement in India, too, developed critical awareness and active engagement with regards to inequalities embedded in capitalism, ecological exploitation and social relations.

### **Learning by doing: critical engagement**

Social movement participants learn ‘by doing’ and in the process create a new culture and knowledge (Isaac et al., 2019: 4). Such movements thereby end up being sites of active learning, cognitive transformation and social development. They contribute to the process of knowledge production by transforming participant protestors’ consciousness, such new knowledge is further circulated to wider audiences and creates grounds for social change.

Such study of critical and democratic educational models utilised by social movements can be understood as a facet of what has been termed as ‘pedagogies of resistance’ (Bajaj, 2015: 154). The term has been explained as encompassing reciprocity, solidarity and democratic decision-making structures (Jaramillo and Carreon, 2014). In the Latin American context, Jaramillo and Carreon have elaborated on how social movements are accompanied and strengthened by ‘popular educational methods that create the conditions for participants to critique and act upon relations of dispossession’ (Jaramillo and Carreon, 2014: 395). It emphasises anchoring the learning process in local meanings and experiences that enables agency, democratic participation and social action that seeks to disrupt asymmetrical power relations. Such learning and educational processes thus contribute to substantial social change. As sites of transformation, these movements provide the space and scope for participants to engage in critical self-reflection.

During the Indian farmers’ movement, too, educational processes in the forms of libraries and a makeshift school were linked to a plan of action towards greater social justice and equity. It also resonated with Freire’s conceptualisation of *conscientização* by making the protesting farmers better aware of the structural social and economic inequalities that define their lived experiences and impact the community as a whole. The protestors, while arguing for required agrarian reforms, simultaneously worked towards positive socio-cultural changes such as the rapprochement of Hindu-Muslim relations, especially crucial for areas like Muzaffarnagar in Uttar Pradesh which witnessed violent communal clashes in 2013. In public meetings, leaders often spoke of brotherhood and unity, farmer-worker unity, unity across caste, anti-

communalism as well as pro-democracy slogans. To commemorate Human Rights Day celebrated on 10 December, the farmers expressed solidarity with activists and intellectuals who had been arrested as well as anti CAA protests by saying that the farmers' movement could not be isolated from the larger political developments in the country.

The inclusive nature of the movement can be starkly contrasted with the sectarian, communal and exclusivist rhetoric of populist politics. Here, particular interests of a group were linked to wider issues of justice. Such empathy and solidarity viewed injustices faced by other groups and marginalised communities as limits to the freedom of all. It was thus a quintessential example of how 'reflective practices, acts of solidarity and participation can occur in authentic ways' (Bajaj, 2015: 160).

Protesting farmers were subjects in a dialogue about the issues that affect their lives: democratic citizens possessing the required dispositions to decide between various political, social and economic possibilities. Their reflective action led to the fostering of democratic critique in a time when dissent is not well tolerated. Diverse pedagogical and communication strategies were adopted to convey key ideas to diverse audiences including multimedia, social media, community education, etc. This became even more important as mainstream media had weaved an anti-protest narrative by branding the protestors as naïve, misguided, anti-national separatists and *Khalistanis*.

In order to counter state propaganda with its own narrative, alternative media became a prerequisite to articulate their demands and engage with the wider audience. This led to the popularisation of *Trolley Times*, a newspaper that came up from the sites of the protest and documented stories and experiences of farmers, discussions among leaders of the movement, issues concerning gender, class and caste, becoming the voice of the protests and a representation of rural and agrarian distress. Such alternative media was utilised as an organisational as well as educational mechanism. Young women created alternative platforms like *Karti Dharti* to increase the reach and impact

of the movement (Sangwan and Singh, 2022:48). The makeshift school that was set up at the protest site of *Singhu* border was attended by more than 150 children from nearby slums. This was also crucial because millions of underprivileged children across India could not attend virtual classes necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic due to various reasons like inaccessible internet connections, inability to afford smartphones, and the burden of household chores, etc. The elderly would share their experiences, customs, culture and suggestions for moving forward with these children, in a way navigating the distinction between home and school. The tent where the makeshift school was conducted was popularly called *Sanjhi Sath*, in order to recreate a familiar village tradition of having a common place to hold discussions on important issues. A library was also set up which displayed works of revolutionaries like Bhagat Singh and Ché Guevara to familiarise the protestors with their ideas.

The tradition of *langar* (community kitchens) is an intrinsic part of Sikhism that focuses on feeding the hungry. The purpose is also to bring the community together by serving the needy. The concept of *langar* became an intrinsic part of the protest as residents from the surrounding areas would supply milk, others distributed medicines and books. We not only witnessed food *langar*, but also other kinds of library *langar*, health *langar* (volunteers were running health check-up centres too) as part of *sewa* (*sewa* is a way of life for Sikhs: it means selfless service, helping others without expecting any reward) of the protesting farmers. The processes involved in such activities reaffirmed participation, by simultaneously cultivating empowerment and mobilisation.

In the backdrop of the farmers' movement, it seems imperative to revisit Spivak's concern regarding the subalterns' ability to speak for themselves. In Spivak's work, the term subaltern signifies 'subsistence farmers, unorganized peasant labour, the tribals and communities of zero workers on the street or in the countryside' (Spivak, 1988: 288). Spivak also criticised Foucault and Deleuze who posited that if given a chance, the oppressed (via solidarity through alliance politics) can speak and know their

conditions. In the context of erstwhile colonies marred with the circuit of epistemic violence of imperialist law and education, Spivak then raises the question: can the subaltern speak? She concludes by positing that there is no space for the subalterns to articulate and make their experiences or interests known to others on their own terms. However, India (some regions more than others) has particularly witnessed a vibrant culture of peasant politics (along with periods of breaks and fissures, certainly), most notably under the charismatic leadership of Sir Chhotu Ram, Chaudhary Charan Singh, Shetkari Sanghatana in Maharashtra led by Sharad Joshi, and the Bharatiya Kisan Union (BKU) in Western Uttar Pradesh led by Mahendra Singh Tikait as well as the latest movement of 2020-21. Not only are the peasants speaking, but they are also being heard, to the extent that laws have been repealed in the latest instance. The protestors were not on the sidelines, rather they were active subjects with the capacity to analyse, articulate and question. Such mechanisms added considerable depth to the movement and enabled it to effectively challenge unequal social, economic and political conditions, finally culminating into the repeal of the three laws.

## **Conclusion**

This article analysed the farmers' movement against the three farm laws that were later withdrawn by the Indian government, by focusing on the nature of organisation and participation. It marked the assertion of *kisani* identity in the social and political spheres by developing informed political agency among the protestors. One can draw parallels with the way Freire wanted the oppressed to inculcate social and political experience through experience, by participating in associations, unions, etc. It was considered to be a prerequisite for political and socio-economic democracy. His conception of education as development of individual and collective identity, democratic participation and cooperation resonated during the farmers' movement that had wider participative democratic implications in times marked by heightened populist rhetoric, communalism, identity politics and widening inequality. As witnessed during the movement, critical consciousness enabled the protesting farmers to become the transforming agents of their social reality.

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