

Marching against apathy

Farmers in villages across the country have felt demeaned and disturbed by the insensitivity of successive governments at the Centre and in the states. The same anguish was felt by the agriculturists who walked more than 160 km from Nashik to Mumbai. The country's politics has ignored farmers. Perhaps it is time that farmers change the politics of the country.

The farmers' march was not a fallout of a single event. They have been pushed into the streets by the cumulative effects of droughts, falling yields — aggravated by low farm-gate prices — purchases not made at the announced MSP, unkept promises of compensation for the failure of the cotton crop, which was attacked by the pink bollworm, the infamous notebandi and disruption of cash flow as a result of the cow slaughter ban. They were opposing land acquisition for the Samruddh Maha Marg and were struck with disbelief at a government report that blamed them for the pesticide-induced deaths in Maharashtra. Do note that the farmers' feelings were not about anger, hate and rage.

The on-farm distress has been compounded by feelings of hurt and betrayal. The heartless government in Mumbai is no better than the Communists who chose to give each marching farmer a red party flag affixed to a stick instead of giving them a pair of slippers each. The visual impact would have made Goebbles proud. The sight of bruised and bleeding farmers' feet was not enough to move the young Maharashtra chief minister from the comfort of his chair and meet the agitating agriculturists halfway.

He waited for the momentum of the march to collapse in the scorching heat of the tarred roads to Mumbai. But the state had misread the farmers again. The resolute agriculturists did reach Mumbai, only to be duped again. Last year's verbal assurances of the farm loan waiver have not materialised and the written assurances, this time, of C2+50 per cent and forest rights for forest dwellers may meet with an identical fate. The marching farmers were described as "urban Maoists" by a party spokesperson. This is almost like John Steinbeck being accused of being a Communist for writing the *Grapes of Wrath* — a saga of uprooted tenant farmers in the midst of the Great Depression of the 1930s.

The farmers' agitation in Maharashtra last year (See 'A dark satire', IE, June 20, 2017) was a precursor to not only last week's display of solidarity but also to the firing by the Madhya Pradesh police on agitating agriculturists in Mandsaur. Farmers buried themselves in the sands of Shekhawati region in Rajasthan. This week also marks the anniversary of the killing of farmers in Nandigram in West Bengal. They had to face the gun for refusing to be cowed down by the Communists who wanted to snatch their multi-cropped land for industry. That revolt led to the overthrow of West Bengal's three-and-a-half decade old Communist regime and catapulted a new party, the Trinamool Congress, to power.

In the 10 long years that the [Nationalist Congress Party](#) and the Congress were partners in crime in Maharashtra, over 36,000 farmers committed suicide in the state. It is true that the state's current chief minister inherited a grand mess. But after over three years in office, he cannot escape accountability.

The story has striking similarities with what has happened at the Centre. Nothing has changed on the ground for farmers after nearly four years of the NDA government, apart from smarter sloganeering and repackaged programmes. The farmer has realised that things were not meant to change. The nearly 2,000 pages of the 14-volume strategy for doubling farmers' income by 2022 is still a work in progress. Promises of acche din, doubling farmer incomes, Rs 15 lakh in each bank account, crop insurance or the promise of C2+50 per cent profit have turned into a horrible

nightmare as the government has reneged on election assurances.

Being in power in the states and at the Centre has its disadvantages. There is no one to heap the blame on but the ghosts of the past. A media that has been made amenable by a combination of coercion and inducements can no longer deflect the public ire from the core issue of livelihoods — that is the message from the string of electoral defeats suffered by the BJP. Across India, young dejected farmers are resigning to their fate, fleeing farms and aspiring for jobs elsewhere.

Lies, deceit and broken promises have become the hallmark of all political parties, particularly the current regime at the Centre. Fed up with the confused and maligned UPA II, farmers — with fond expectations that their aspirations would be fulfilled — had voted in overwhelming numbers for the leadership of [Narendra Modi](#). The last vestiges of hope are fast disappearing.

The farmers' angst is not difficult to gauge. They have decided who not to vote for though they are still undecided about who deserves their vote. Of late, the Congress has not been part of any farmers' movement. Ironically, it may be well-placed to tap into the discontent. I take solace in the words of Steinbeck who responded to the critics by stating: "I want to put a tag of shame on the greedy b*****s who are responsible for this."

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