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## Sociological Contours of Protest for Quest of food in India Today

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**Abstract:** Our relationship with food systems today is increasingly treating food as a priced commodity. And the nation-wide agitation especially at Delhi borders is exactly against such advancements in our relation with FOOD. It has also raised critical concerns over the direction in which agricultural reforms should go, the nature of these three bills and the process through which they were passed in Parliament. Therefore, this protest has brought to focus multiple critical concerns: Structural and Agrarian crisis, Ecological crisis, Legal Delusion of three farm reform laws, Economic repercussions at local, national and global levels, Structural Crisis and food sovereignty and role of Media. It is not possible to share views on all the issues related with it, therefore this paper discusses three dimensions to ponder upon such as: Sociology of food, ecological linkages and cultural integrity in disguise.

**Keywords:** Structural and agrarian crisis, ecological crisis, new farm bills, sociology of food

The human relationship to food is inextricably linked to land, water, animals and sustenance of life on Earth. Our relationship with food systems today is increasingly treating food as a priced commodity. It is resource intensive, industrialized, export-oriented and dominated, and shaped by an amorphous entity called the market where production and consumption of food is dictated by a few large corporations. And the nation-wide agitation especially at Delhi borders by the farmers from Punjab, Haryana and UP is exactly against such advancements in our relation with FOOD. India has the world's largest number of food insecure people and, ironically, the largest number of farmers (OECD/FAO 2014). At the other end of the socio-economic scale there are obesity, hypertension, diabetes and other non-communicable diseases brought on by overconsumption of processed food, fast-foods, and imported fruits and vegetables. Strategically, such food sovereignty movements pursue grassroots mobilization to demand that the state play an active role in developing policies that ensure the right of small-scale farmers and indigenous peoples to exist as food providers and guardians of the global socio-ecological resource base.

The Government of India passed three farm reform bills- The Farmers' Produce Trade And Commerce (Promotion And Facilitation) Bill, The Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement on Price Assurance and Farm Services Bill, and The Essential Commodities (Amendment) Bill, in the Monsoon Session of the Parliament. The passage of these bills has led to widespread protests by farmers across the

country. Even as the Central government and its spokespersons work overtime to sell the benefits of the three new farm laws to the Indian public, the farmers protesting on Delhi's borders have made it clear that they will not retreat till these laws are repealed.

What are the three agri reforms Bills in contention?

What are they for?

Who is protesting?

What is government's stand over it?

Most of us have answers to such obvious questions on this issue on the basis of numerous debates, discussions, articles and in depth readings on our specific area of interests relating to it. No doubt it exposed deep fault lines and new possibilities in the politics of representation, reform and Centre-state relations. It has also raised critical concerns over the direction in which agricultural reforms should go, the nature of these three bills and the process through which they were passed in Parliament. They shed light on the need for a renewed politics of trust to truly reform agriculture towards the concern of Food Sovereignty in India.

Therefore, this protest has brought to focus multiple critical concerns:

- Structural and Agrarian crisis: Current situation of land ,Agricultural Workforce and trends of crop production mainly of wheat, paddy and sugarcane
- Ecological crisis: depleting water levels, melting glaciers
- Legal Delusion of three farm reform laws
- Economic repercussions at local, national and global levels.
- Structural Crisis and food sovereignty
- Role of Media: portrayal of farmers, interest of ruling party and major corporate houses, privacy of users in social media under scanner etc etc

It is not possible to share views on all the issues related with it, therefore I have just chosen three dimensions to ponder upon such as : Sociology of food, ecological linkages and cultural integrity in disguise.

## 1. Sociology of food:

- 1) What is your favorite meal or food?
- 2) How do you eat?
- 3) How do you select what food to buy, from where to buy online or offline?
- 4) Is there anything you will not eat?

Whatever your answers may be for these questions, they build up a huge chain of relationships with other individuals, groups and societies across the globe.

In 1992 *Current Sociology* published a special issue on the sociology of food, which also came out as a book entitled *The Sociology of Food: Eating, Diet and Culture*. The issue was one of the earliest, if not the first, publications showing that food has become a significant area of sociological research. Since then, sociology of food flourished, as did research on food in anthropology, history, geography, and of course within food studies.

Therefore Sociology of Food has become a hot topic to analyze such relationships and what, why, how, when of it. Also it has gained popularity because:

- From a sociological perspective, food marks social difference.
- From politico-economic perspective there exist contrast inequalities in localization and Globalization of food supply
- Food technologies and debates over it
- Health concerns related to what and how much we are eating
- Food is a lens through which to discuss the structural injustices of societies
- Food is a source of inquiry for the cultural sociologist because of its heavily symbolic character.
- Food strengthens social bonds and signifies information about our identities, habits, taboos, and culinary heritage.
- Food creates a vantage point to analyse symbolic meanings and materiality; issues pertaining to gender, race and ethnicity; socio-economic inequalities, power relations and social processes at different scales, from family dynamics to global systems.

### Jean Pierre Poulain: The Food System Perspective

The French sociologist Jean-Pierre Poulain published his book *The Sociology of Food: Eating and the place of food in society* in 2002. He stated that eating must not be viewed as a biological requirement but rather must be studied as a social act. According to Poulain, food is the foundation of socialization since meals teach people the rules of social interaction. Thus, food not only fulfils a biological role but also contributes to the formation

of individual and collective identity. Drawing from Levi-Strauss's differentiation of foods, Poulain suggests that food is a product of both natural and cultural processes (Poulain 2016).

The food system perspective classifies food-related activities into cultivation and harvest, production, distribution, preparation, consumption and waste disposal. This classification of food systems was proposed by Poulain who believed that each step structured the organization of human beings in groups. For example, in rural India, agriculture is the main source of income and thus the distribution of work is based upon the requirements of the season. Men and women occupy different roles such as sowing, harvesting, collecting water etc. based on their gender. Thus, agriculture organizes society in a particular manner and determines people's roles and functions.

### **Conflict theorist Approach**

A conflict theorist might be interested in the power differentials present in the regulation of food, exploring where people's right to information intersects with corporations' drive for profit and how the government mediates those interests.

Or a conflict theorist might be interested in the power and powerlessness experienced by local farmers versus large farming conglomerates, such as the documentary *Food Inc.* depicts as resulting from Monsanto's patenting of seed technology.

### **Structural Functional Approach**

A structural-functional approach to the topic of food consumption might be interested in the role of the agriculture industry within the nation's economy and how this has changed from the early days of manual-labor farming to modern mechanized production. Another examination might study the different functions that occur in food production: from farming and harvesting to flashy packaging and mass consumerism.

The consumption of food is a commonplace, daily occurrence, yet it can also be associated with important moments in our lives. Eating can be an individual or a group action, and eating habits and customs are influenced by our cultures. In the context of society, our nation's food system is at the core of numerous social movements, political issues, and economic debates. Any of these factors might become a topic of sociological study. **Pierre Bourdieu** (1930-2002) was a French sociologist who wrote extensively on the relationship between consumption and cultural capital. Bourdieu also proposed a differentiation between a "taste of necessity" and a "taste of luxury".

Therefore sociology of food focuses on a variety of such social ramifications of food, related to gender, family meals, health, inequality, food waste, food packaging, food technology. And ironically all these are the focus of concern we all have been witnessing during the recent farmers' protest nationwide in India.

## **2. Ecological linkages:**

The main problem of the new farm laws is it fails to tackle the root cause of this sector's problems. The laws don't mention environment but the farm crisis today ecological roots. Land has been left depleted by monocultural cultivation of high-yield seed varieties under the green revolution scenario. The increase in agricultural productivity has come at a tremendous cost to the environment," said Thomson Jacob, a policy consultant at the Centre for Biodiversity Policy and Law in Chennai. Jacob says these include loss of soil nutrients, excessive irrigation, water scarcity, indiscriminate application of some nutrients and pesticides and

loss of agro-biodiversity. Farmers today are dealing not only with the legacy of the Green Revolution but the added impacts of climate change. Those working in the agricultural sector, which employs over 40% of India's labor force, grapple with drought and flooding. We can find significant connection between the Chamoli tragedy (happened just few days ago) and the farmers' agitation therefore. The thing is you don't need a daily dose of data to be able to say that the whole glacier belt is in serious danger. The waters that feed the Ganga, The Indus, The Brahmaputra, the Salween, the Mekong, the Yangtze and the Yellow river are all going to face initially a huge rush of water, flash floods and avalanches, followed eventually by drought. It is not just India, but also China, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Myanmar too are affected. And with some 25000 glacier lakes, expect repeats of the Uttarakhand tragedy. The presence of a large number of forces in the sensitive Ladakh area is not doing any good either. This and other concerns like Asian Brown Cloud (ABC) causes unusual weather patterns, which means the farmers are going to have to deal with erratic weather.. Therefore, farmers depending on water will find less rain, less river water, polluted air, depleting ground water across Punjab in particular, burning of agricultural waste, all may not allow crops to grow. Over it if the spectre of corporate-led industrial farming becomes a reality, it could further amplify the environmental crisis in the countryside

**3. Cultural Integrity in disguise:** Last but not the least, the latent consequence which can be noticed sociologically in this farmers' agitation is the appearance of cultural integrity in disguise. We can see crowd comprising people of all age groups, gender, caste, class, religion at farmers' protest. The presence of people from all age groups, gender, caste, class, religion, regions has exemplified the inherent spirit of Indianness i.e. unity in diversity, which is troubling the ruling government deep into their veins and hence making unconstitutional, illegal and unjustified arrests of the activists fighting for the cause. Also an important umbilical cord between farmers and their land is based on strong kinship ties attached to the same relation where land symbolizes mother and getting away with it is a matter of *anakh*/pride for them.

Have you ever wondered :

Why in farmers protest at Delhi, people are offering Langar (community kitchen), of you name everything: food of different cuisines, washing machines, warm clothes, fuel, water etc?

You might think

- its need of the hour
- its due to tenets of Sikh religion
- for politics
- for ethics
- for fun, adventure

As soon as you start to think about various issues or activities in perspectives that differ from your own, you're entering the realm of the sociological imagination .

To conclude Albert Einstein's following quote aptly describes the future path in this regard

*"We cannot solve a problem from the same consciousness that created it; we must learn to see the world anew" (Albert Einstein)*

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