

Agrarian Populism And A 'New' Farmers' Movement In India: A Study Of The Bharatiya Kisan Union

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Abstract

The Bharatiya Kisan Union (BKU) is an integral part of the story of 'new' farmers' movements and agrarian populism in India. This paper seeks to situate the BKU in the larger debates on agrarian movements in India, and then illustrate the cultural and ideological mechanisms used by the BKU to mobilize and propagate. At the outset, the paper attempts to delineate a working definition of a 'new' farmers' movement, and what sets it apart from other agrarian movements. This is done through a discussion of the history, structure and composition of agrarian movements in India. Along with a discussion on the genesis of the BKU, the paper also seeks to highlight the political economic determinants behind such a movement, along with the role of the state as well as the trajectory of developmental modernity in post-colonial India. A large section of the paper is devoted to the traditional, cultural and ideological strategies employed by the BKU to mobilize a heterogeneous support base to form a populist movement. The paper concludes with a section on the wane of the BKU in the '90s and the shortcomings of populist movements in the Indian agrarian context.

Introduction

India has been a witness to various manifestations of populism in the post-independence era. The Dravidian parties of Southern India have been studied for their unique, personalistic brand of populism that also focused on welfare (Subramanian, 2007). In the 1970's Indira Gandhi's reign heralded the beginning of a nation-wide populist regime which subsumed the polity in the leader ('Indira is India and India is Indira') (Jaffrelot and Tillin, 2017). A concurrent and competing form of agrarian populism arose during the period that was led by a section of the 'new' farmers' movements. The Bharatiya Kisan Union was one of the principal lynchpins of the 'new' farmers' movements in India. This paper is an exploration of the Bharatiya Kisan Union's success in mobilization through ideological mechanisms based on culture and identity and how this is symptomatic of the broader populist farmers' movements in India as well as lending to the organization certain specificities.

The principal debates regarding farmers' movements in India have been centered on the composition (class-based or otherwise) of the farmers' movements, their principal participants in the various stages, the leadership etc. Not without good reason though, for it is important in any endeavour dealing with Indian farmers' movements to delineate the category of farmers' movements from the rest of agrarian movements in the country. This is no easy task, and can be accomplished only to a certain degree.

A further difficulty arises (which is not unrelated to the one mentioned above) in distinguishing the farmers' movement as old or new. For A.R. Desai, the classification is done along the lines of pre- and post-independence farmers' movements and the movements termed peasants' struggles and agrarian struggles respectively. The agrarian movements are subdivided into those by rich farmers and landlords and those by the agrarian poor or agrarian proletariat (Desai 1986). For Gail Omvedt the classification is done on the basis of 'old' and 'new'. The 'old' are termed peasants' movements while the latter as farmers' movements (Shah 2004).

However, it is not easy to differentiate between peasants and farmers and neither is it easy to determine which amongst them had the dominant role in the movements, whether in colonial or post-independence times. In some cases, the poorer peasants joined in later than their well-to-do counterparts and then stayed on even when the richer sections abandoned the struggle. There were instances of co-optation of the poor peasants, poorer tenants and landless labourers in movements which did not ameliorate their condition. The classification cannot be done on the basis of the date of Indian's independence because some movements like the one in Telengana went on both during and after Independence (and laid the bedrock of subsequent Maoist movements, comprised of the lower castes and the landless) (Mohan 1973). The implementation of the land reforms was a landmark moment which promised to change the Indian agrarian structure forever. However, it has a sketchy record. For conceptual clarity in this paper the 'new' farmers' movements shall be those that happened during and after the Green Revolution of the 1960s. Of course this classification too isn't watertight as there are movements which had their genesis before the Green Revolution and went on after that. But a distinct growth in market oriented capitalist farming could be seen amongst the well-off sections of the agrarian populace in the course of the Green Revolution and hence it can be considered a watershed moment which determined the course of future farmers' movements (Shah 2004). The 'old' farmers' movements would include the Champaran and Kheda Satyagraha led by Mahatma Gandhi, the Telengana movement, the Mopallah rebellion in Kerala, the movement in the United Provinces (led by the Indian National Congress), the Tebhaga movement in Bengal, the Bardoli Satyagraha etc. The 'new' movements would include the movements started by organizations such as Bharatiya Kisan Union, Narayanaswamy Naidu's Tamil Nadu Agriculturalists Association (Tamilaga Vyavasigal Sangham) in 1966, the Punjab Khetibari Zamindara Union which was formed in 1972 (and became the Punjab unit of the Bharatiya Kisan Union in 1980), the Shetkari Sangathana formed by Sharad Joshi in Maharashtra in the 1970's and the Karnataka Rajya Ryota Sangha (KRRS) under the leadership of M.D. Nanjundaswamy in the 1980's (Mittal and Dutt 1976) (Pouchepadass 1980) (Wood 1974).

The structure and composition of farmers' movements

The movements mentioned above were not mere agitations, and led to the formation of pressure groups lobbies with serious political clout. However, these were not revolutionary movements aimed at changing the very structure of agrarian India and their progressive potential is debatable. They wished to work within the existing structure and pull the terms of trade back towards agriculture. The leaders movement tried to build a sense of unity based on occupation as well a sense of rural India being pitted against the urban. A threat was palpable from industrial state-led capitalism that was adopted since Nehruvian times and the social changes wrought by such a change in the economy challenged the dominant sections of the agrarian population. There was a need to include poorer peasants and landless labourers and try to fulfill a few of their demands. A principal aim of the movements, in addition to price issues, was to counter the disdain of bureaucrats and the urban bourgeoisie and evoke their fear and their respect. Countering the corruption of government officials was another important objective (Nadkarni 1987).

The Green Revolution resulted in the increase of surplus produce of smaller and middle peasants too due to availability of High Yielding Varieties (HYV), irrigation etc. The lynchpins of these movements were small, middle and rich farmers engaged in the cash economy by selling outputs and buying inputs. The solidarity that the new farmers' movements could engender was also because they viewed the category of class as a weapon of the urban bourgeoisie imposed on them to divide rural India. Indeed both Sharad Joshi and Nanjundaswamy claimed any division of the rural population along the lines of class was an urban conspiracy. Also, there was some improvement in capitalist agriculture in the nation as the increase in surplus meant that more and more farmers were linked to the market. In a way a lot of these movements like the Bharatiya Kisan Union were built to retain the benefits and support entitled to the farmers during and after the Green Revolution like high procurement prices, easy credit, low electric tariff etc. There was a fear that the Indira Gandhi regime might favour industrialization over agriculture. It was compounded by the fact that whereas the industrial bourgeoisie and the urban executive class had the scope to increase their profit and income the land ceilings imposed during land reforms came in the way of the farmers increasing their profit. Some of the common demands of these movements were – continued high remunerative prices, guaranteed supply of inputs at fair prices, free housing for the labourers, food-for-work program etc. (Nadkarni 1987)

There was a dominance of middle and upper caste farmers like the Lingayats and Okkaligas in Karnataka. The same farmers that unite against the state also unite against attempts at socio-economic

justice by the lower class and lower castes. Several organizations have organized massive demonstrations against the distribution of land to Dalits. However, these movements are facing resistance from subaltern struggles based on both caste and class as old feudal ties wear away (Omvedt 1980) (Omvedt 1981).

It is not as though contradictions did not exist. The issue of the wages of agricultural labourers was ignored based on the assumption that better remunerative prices would automatically result in better wages. Any attempt at standardizing the agricultural wage rate was resisted. For marginal farmers, destitute share-croppers and landless labourers high output prices for the farmers meant an increased price for the food grains that they had to buy in the market (since the movements had little to say about the improvement of the services like PDS provided by the state). Indeed, the expansion and proper implementation of state-provided provisions like PDS would have reduced the dependence of the weaker sections on the rich and middle farmers. Also, inclusion of landless labourers and poorer peasants was a double-edged sword for if the peasants and labourers were to realize whose class interest was being served the movements could collapse (Nadkarni 1987).

In terms of ideology the movements were seen to be following a sort of Gandhian conservatism, Lohiaite socialism and the liberalism of the anti-caste struggles. There were also combinations of these. The farmers' movements also had some similarities with the New Social Movements of the 1980s. The anti-state stance adopted by these organizations (which united them) was of widely different nature. For Nanjundaswamy and the KRRS it was a stance against the technology-driven Nehruvian socialism which was countered with Gandhian romantic conservatism and Lohiaite socialism. Sharad Joshi did not follow this anti-developmental line and was a firm believer in the modern farmer's need for technology and resources. Joshi was also in favour of market liberalism and setting up links with private traders and bypassing the state agencies. The BKU and the KRRS in spite of their anti-statist stance demanded intervention from the state in rural areas for infrastructure, health etc. (Omvedt 2005)

The farmers' movements were at the peak during the time of Sharad Joshi's Gherao of the Raj Bhavan in Punjab. After Operation Blue Star their clout declined but a number of the leaders were associated with the short-lived V.P. Singh-led National Front government. After the furor over the Mandal Commission reports focus shifted towards communal politics and also towards the demands of backward castes and hence the farmers' movements started losing its potency. After the liberalization of the economy there were some very noticeable splits in the various organizations of the farmers' movements on the question

of whether liberalization was to be supported or not. There was a strong anti-Brahmin sentiment carried by some of these movements, especially in the South with KRRS, the Shetkari Sangathana and Tikait's BKU. Urban capitalism was linked with Brahmannical exploitation (Bentall and Corbridge 1996).

It is thus not surprising that the farmers' movement has ended up being divided on issues of technology, globalization and liberalization. The Nanjundaswamy faction of the KRRS adopts an anti-globalization based on its Gandhian ideology. Corporations such as Monsanto and Cargill and the WTO-IMF-World Bank triad are linked by them to neo-colonialism. Genetically Modified seeds are opposed to protect the traditional varieties. On the other hand the Sharad Joshi led Shetkari Sangathana portrays the Indian farmer as trying to match the global productivity levels by using technology. Patents are seen as liberating knowledge from the clutches of the Brahmannical state (Omvedt 2005).

History of the Bharatiya Kisan Union

The Bharatiya Kisan Union began its life as the Bharatiya Kranti Dal (BKD) which was founded by Chaudhary Charan Singh. He was one of the earliest non-Congress chief ministers (of UP, twice) and was also the Prime Minister of India for a short period after the Janata Dal government collapsed. The BKD was a political party that was started to counter the hegemony of urban India that was looking to modernize India at the fastest pace possible, considering its rural populace to be a burden. It was also a counter to the corruption of the Congress-led regimes. The BKD had a largely agrarian base and was supported by the middle peasants and the intermediate castes. Unlike the BKU which had its base in western Uttar Pradesh the BKD had its roots in Haryana and Punjab. But the BKD went into a decline over the 1980's due to the decisions of Charan Singh (Brass 1993).

The spark that fuelled the rise of the Bharatiya Kisan Union was lit by the government of Uttar Pradesh when it decided to raise the electricity tariffs from Rs. 22.50 to Rs. 30 per horse-power per month. Sukhbir Singh, the Chaudhary of a 'khap' (clan) of Tomar Jats, decided to take action against this and convened a gathering of farmers. Mahendra Singh Tikait, the Chaudhary of the Baliyan khap, decided to emulate this model and launch an agitation against the raising of prices. A meeting called by him in October 1987 in Sisauli (Tikait's village) marks the birth of the BKU. He actually dethroned Chaudhary Sukhbir Singh (who was the father-in-law of Tikait's daughter) as the de-facto heads of the farmers of the region (Sahay 2004) (D. Gupta 1988). The agitation was buoyed by the widespread support of farmers. Things reached fever pitch when thousands of farmers (the number might have been a lakh

according to some accounts) 'gheraoed' the Karmu-Khera sub-station in Shamli and the government was forced to pay heed. The tariffs were brought down to Rs. 25 from Rs. 30 (Bentall and Corbridge 1996) (D. Gupta 1988). Other notable events when the mobilization of the BKU became noteworthy was the Meerut agitation of March 1988, the agitation demanding justice for the Muslim girl Naiyma which was followed by the gherao of the Bhopa police station, the agitation at the Delhi Boat Club in September 1988 etc.

The methods employed by the BKU were similar to those used by farmers' group across the nation. Entry of government officials was barred into the villages where they were dominant. They refused to repay the loans back to the state. 'Gherao' was another popular means of agitation. Tikait also tried to attain the image of a Gandhian satyagrah for the BKU's agitations. It involves continued protests on a moral bulwark till the state is forced to change its ways. The government finds it difficult to employ excessive force when faced with non-violent protests, for it might backfire on the government. Similarly, arresting the agitating members may be self-defeating too for it just fulfills the aims of the BKU to engage in 'jail bhara' campaigns, again a Gandhian concept. However there have been deaths of farmers at police firings as well as death of policemen at the hands of farmers (Bentall and Corbridge 1996) (Sahay 2004).

It is of no surprise that the Bharatiya Kisan Union rose from the districts of western Uttar Pradesh like Bijnor, Bulandshahar, Ghaziabad, Meerut, Moradabad etc. Over 70% of the population was engaged in agriculture. During the colonial times it had developed a fairly robust agricultural infrastructure. Unlike eastern Uttar Pradesh and some other parts of the country the agrarian population was not sucked dry by the zamindari system. The region also benefited in a lot of ways from the Green Revolution (Sahay 2004). Statistics show that the percentage of labourers as a part of the agrarian population decreased and the percentage of cultivators increased in the years immediately after the Green Revolution. Also, the landholding patterns changed too. The landholdings of the middle and rich peasants went down and the landholdings of the small and marginal cultivators went up (marginal here are those who possess less than or equal to 2.5 acres of land). Furthermore, the percentage of farmers engaged in cash crop cultivation was also quite high in this part of UP. New technology introduced during the Green Revolution, thus, benefitted the small farmers of western UP as they were engaged in capitalist agricultural production for the market. The wage rate of agricultural labourers which had worsened after independence also showed some rise during the period (Singh 1987). The Jat farmers were not owners of very large landholdings and did not employ much agricultural labour. However, there were a considerable number of landless labourers too (Sahay 2004).

Modernity, development and agrarian populism

Development emerges unchallenged as the primary discourse of contestation in the post-colonial era. The interaction between state and society through this contestation is reflected in the populist opposition (which is hegemonic in its own right) to the state. Modernity, a particular bone of contention between the two, is Western in a discursive sense and is carried on through development in the post-colonial nation as a progression towards a particular 'telos' in a planned manner and is instrumental in the constitution of a post-colonial state. Modernity's homogeneity, however, is contested, not only in intellectual circles (that are themselves products of modernity) but also by societal groups with alternative, not wholly Western modernities (Gupta 1997).

The advent of modernity in India, while being considered a positive facet, was also apprehended to be the cause a conservative and reactionary from India's hinterlands, primarily due to the jaundiced view of Indian societies by the Colonial scholars. There was a flurry of studies carried out on Indian society of the 1950's to understand how Indian societies dealt with modernity. It was found that overall there was a positive reception to it in the 1950's (the nature of modernity emerging however was not studied). But by the 1970's the post-Independence euphoria had melted away. The post-Independence development process had failed to do away with persistent poverty, especially in the rural areas. The rural poor had not been adequately benefitted by the land reforms and Green Revolution and had to face the brunt of high prices, land alienation and destitution. However another class of peasants fighting for secure tenancy rights had succeeded and had become landed agricultural proprietors. Along with the landlords who had subverted the Land Reforms and had become capitalist farmers they became the backbone of the new farmers' movements. This class had been the beneficiaries of the various Green Revolution initiatives like High Yielding Variety (HYV) seeds. (D. Gupta 1988)

Here it would be worthwhile to look at another theoretical perspective on modernity in India. The fact that the advent of modernity in India had led to negotiations by 'tradition' with it was conspicuous by its absence in the work of many scholars in India. Lloyd I. Rudolph and Susanne Hoeber Rudolph had illuminated the kind of changes that traditional institutions in India underwent. The Rudolfs divided post-Independence India into two halves. The first one started immediately after Independence till Jawaharlal Nehru's death in 1964. This also included the Emergency years, 1975-1977. During this period the state could exercise a control of agency due to the fact it could run its writ over the country without opposition from the traditionally dominant sections of the society. These were periods of 'socialism' of the Nehruvian variety. The focus was on rapid industrialization to catch up with the West,

the modernization of agriculture and its increased productivity. The era was called by the Rudolphs as the era of 'command politics'. But after this period came the era of 'demand politics'. This was the era of the reigns of Indira Gandhi, Morarji Desai, Rajiv Gandhi and Charan Singh. Various sections of Indian civil society like students, farmers, women etc. became increasingly dominant and started eroding the power and influence of the state to run its writ. Concessions had to be made to the various interest groups by whichever political party was in power at the Centre or State level for continued rule. This was often done with the help of what are usually referred to as 'populist' policy decisions. The rise of organizations like the BKU is categorized under 'demand politics' by the Rudolphs and is traced by them to the Green Revolution and its resultant prosperity for a section of India's agrarian populace. These sections that were beneficiaries of the Green Revolution are referred to as 'bullock capitalists'. These were self-employed agriculturalists who were engaged in independent cultivation and who possessed between 2.5 and 14.99 acres of land (Rudolph and Rudolph 1987).

In this context, agrarian populism emerges as a phenomenon that is involved in a competition with the developmental populism of the Indian state. Populism has many contested definitions, and has been defined as an ideology, a form of political strategy and also as a discourse (Gidron and Bonikowski, 2013). An ideational approach defines populism as:

“[populism is] a thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite,' and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people” (Mudde 2004, 543)

For the purposes of this paper populism is an ideology and practice that involves the 'masses' being led by a charismatic leadership that garners hegemonic consent from vertically differentiated classes through redistributive claims. Populism pits the 'people' against a state that failed to neutralize class antagonisms and incorporate them by falling short of economic expectations. Indira Gandhi's 1971 electoral victory heralded the advent of populism, which was later appropriated by oppositional groups like the Bharatiya Kranti Dal (BKD) of Chowdhury Charan Singh and later the Bharatiya Kisan Union of Mahendra Singh Tikait (Jaffrelot and Tillin, 2017).

The focal point of this opposition was the casting of the state as a Western, industrial, urbanized, elite entity as against the ordinary, rural, traditional agrarian population. The failure of rural developmental schemes was blamed on the 'urban bias' of the government, which ensured that urban areas were developed in a Westernized model at the cost of the rural. However, it would be worthwhile to bear in mind that the BKU and Tikait were not looking for rural India to be an idyllic Gandhian village republic.

Rather, they had 'demands' that they were determined had to be fulfilled by urban India and the state like continued subsidies, a stemming of the decline in rural investment and a return to large public investments etc (Sahay 2004).

The Kisan Union was constituted by landed farmers who had benefitted from the Green Revolution and were bent on maintaining the subsidies and assistance they received. They used state corruption as a rallying cry against the state and used collective acts like protests, gheraos as tools against the state represented by corrupt officials. The Kisan Union had a backbone of landowning Hindu Jat farmers who were successful in the very Gramscian feat of bringing together disparate groups cutting across caste and class lines under its banner. This was especially seen in overcoming religious barriers by stressing on religious piety and appointing Muslims to important posts in the organization.

Differential treatment in terms of education, electricity and repayment of loans (that only landed farmers could access) between urban and rural areas was often alleged. A central argument was that the terms of trade were stacked against agriculture as the state was partial towards industrialization due to its developmental trajectory.

The poverty-stricken, soiled look of the peasants was used as a signifier that represented the moral yet powerless, voiceless masses as compared to the decadent officials of the state. This happened to the extent where even members of well-off peasant households preferred kurta-pyjamas over shirts and trousers of the urban (and possibly linked to state). These signifiers thus helped gel solidarity of moral 'Bharat' in opposition to decadent 'India' by minimizing the visibility of hierarchical differences. The powerlessness of the peasant was linked to his 'swabhimaan' (self-respect) which was seen in terms of the danger posed to the women of his family, covertly articulated in purely patriarchal terms as control over women's sexuality. This threat was often seen to be presented in the form of rapacious representatives of the state, as in the case of Nayima, a Muslim girl who went missing.

The difference between 'Bharat' and 'India' were further represented in form of the collective strength of the peasants arrayed against the bureaucratic power of the state. Unsuccessful rural development schemes were seen to be the result of state corruption and a tilt in favor of industry in a developmental trajectory that had a different 'telos' to the alternative modernity of the peasants. Thus 'development' as a hegemonic discourse that was foundational for the government became now a tool for societal opposition in the form of a critique of industry-centered development (A. Gupta 1997).

Economic determinants

Despite the ideological positing of the Bharat-India dichotomy as the core of their operations, the BKU also had a number of economic demands. They included: 1) To pressurize the Agricultural Prices Commission from the inside (through interpretation) to increase output prices; 2) To push for higher minimum support prices; 3) To do away with obstacles that inhibit the mobility of agricultural products between states; 4) Guaranteed supply of electricity at low tariff rates; 5) Loan waivers etc.

Western UP is a region of farmers which grew sugarcane and wheat commercially and thus had intimate ties with the market. These were farmers for whom land reforms and agrarian class struggles were not as important as output prices (Bentall and Corbridge 1996). However it should also be borne in mind that the rich farmers were facing problems as unlike predicted India's industrial output could not develop and the growth in agriculture started tapering off. There was a consistent rise in input prices (D. Gupta 1988). The logic that for a prosperous future India needs its agrarian sector to support the industrial sector and have the terms of trade turn against agriculture was obviously not accepted by these farmers. The reversal of the terms of trade against their interests is what spurred on the organizations like the BKU. Urban India and the state were perceived as the new colonizers that replaced the British and are looting the 'real' India dry. The economic rationale that the organizations like the BKU used was that even the rural landless were exploited by these new colonizers as wage rates were depressed due to falling output prices (Nadkarni 1987).

Accusations of 'urban bias' seem to stand on spurious ground when checked in the light of empirical investigation. If there indeed was any urban bias it was in the 1950's. From the inception of the Green Revolution the state has spent massive amounts on agriculture for infrastructure building, extension of research etc. By the 1990's the area of highest expenditure of the state's Exchequer was fertilizers in the form of subsidies. This point towards reasons other than economic ones for the massive mobilization of the BKU (Tyagi 1987).

Those sections of the agrarian society that did not depend on output prices but more on agricultural wages were justifiably skeptical of their wages increasing on the basis of increased output prices. Also, these poorer sections with scarce landholdings or no landholdings at all were dependent on the market for the purchase of food grains and any rise in the output prices would affect food grain prices too. The BKU did not seem to have their interests at heart (Nadkarni 1987).

However, even amongst this section of the agrarian populace the BKU exercised some influence. Investigations have thus proven that economic determinants alone cannot explain the kind of support that the BKU got.

The ideological glue – culture and tradition in leadership and organization

The solidarity amongst the constituents of its agrarian support base was one of the bedrocks of the BKU's success. This was immediately evident in two ways. One was the communal harmony between Hindus and Muslims that Tikait and the BKU consistently insisted upon during its heydays. This communal 'bhaichara' was insisted upon not only by the leaders but at the grassroots level too. The religious demographic characteristics of western UP may also have played a part in this 'bhaichara'. Districts in western UP has a higher proportion of Muslims as a percentage of the total population than the rest of UP and considerably higher than the rest of the country. In certain districts they are more than twice or thrice the national percentage. The secularism of the BKU was thus strategic too as communal conflicts could have separated its support base and worse, would have left them vulnerable to the machinations of different political parties. The BKU's commitment to communal harmony was evident in its rally in Meerut in January 1988 which is widely acknowledged as one of its most spectacular show of strengths. Meerut had witnessed communal riots a year before the rally but the BKU was seen to be tried to mend ties. Cries of 'Har Har Mahadev' by its supporters were usually accompanied by cries of 'Allah-O-Akbar' and these usually marked the end of BKUS meetings. Tikait also tried to ensure that presence of Muslim leaders like a future Imam of the Jama Masjid in meetings who would deliver speeches (D. Gupta 1988).

But even more than secularism the main foundation of the BKU's support base lay in caste solidarity that criss-crossed religious boundaries. The pre-dominant community in the region are the Jats, followed by the Gurjars belonging to both Hinduism and Islam. Most of the villages are arranged accordingly. These two main communities are sub-divided into khaps or clans. Mahendra Singh Tikait as has been mentioned before belonged to the Baliyan Jats and was the Chaudhary of the Baliyan Khap. Sukhvir Singh whom he ousted belonged to the Desh Khap of the Tomar Jats (Sahay 2004).

This caste solidarity is instrumental in constructing an ideology required to mobilize for the movement. The Jats take pride in themselves as 'sons of the soil'. Unlike certain upper castes (eg. Brahmins) who do not have any links to the agricultural fields due to caste-based restrictions, the Jats had built their symbolic universe around agricultural activity. They look down upon the Brahmins and although they are religiously devout studies on their religion has shown them to have a practical, meritocratic, almost

utilitarian approach. The Jats look upon themselves as an honest, salt-of-the-earth authentic people in contrast to the sly urbanites, rapacious bureaucrats etc. The Jat ideology is also influenced considerably by Gandhian ideals that portray the Indian village as being 'authentically Indian'. The self-sufficient Indian village that Gandhi romanticized finds a lot of appeal amongst the people of this region. The village serves as a timeless signifier in which the Jat farmer can trace back his lineage and his very identity. In addition to the economic impetus this mythical and socio-cultural symbolic universe played an important role in the BKU's movement (Bentall and Corbridge 1996).

The 'primordial loyalties' that fuelled the BKU is also very evident in its institutions and institutional practices. Mahendra Singh Tikait never envisaged the BKU operating as a standard political party or having a modern organizational structure like a union. The BKU was organized entirely along the lines of caste, khap and panchayat as institutions. Traditional practices, mythological figures, religious slogans etc. played quite an instrumental role in increasing cohesion and providing motivation. The passing around of the 'hookah' was traditionally considered to increase 'bhaichara' and was liberally used by its members to cement ties between people of different castes and religions in meetings. Lighting a flame in ghee, blowing the traditional 'ranasinga' etc. had the pride of place in the ideological-symbolic universe of the BKU. The panchayat was treated as an institution with divine sanction that serves to arbitrate social relations in the corporeal realm. The space of panchayat meetings was an egalitarian one with no differences between the Chaudhary and the rest and everyone had the right to express their opinion.

Mahendra Singh Tikait took the helm of the BKU in the form of a Chaudhary of a khap and not as a leader. This is another aspect of the BKU which reflects a conscious attempt to organize along traditional institutional lines. The Chaudhary of a khap is usually the eldest male offspring of any family of a clan. Tikait never represented himself as a leader to the farmers of the region. The reverence and respect given to him was because of his stature as a Chaudhary to whom is attributed such virtues as high moral character and humility. Leaders (or netas) are looked upon with suspicion by the farmers for they are associated with corruption and the venality of political parties. Tikait comported himself in a manner that ingratiated him with his support base, his mannerisms and language replete with simplicity and the colloquial touch of the region. His food and his attire too were of a similar vein. This strategy of Tikait worked wonders in mobilizing people for the cause. His status as a Chaudhary also helped him bring other Chaudharys into the BKU's fold. (Sahay 2004). However, although people were willing to go the extent of laying down their lives for Tikait his position was not impregnable. He was always under the scrutiny of the farmers in terms of activity and performance. In addition, other Chaudharys could have tried to usurp his position (as Sukhvir Singh allegedly tried to) (D. Gupta 1988).

The leadership has been called 'charismatic' by certain scholars (A. Gupta 1997) but others have contested this. To begin with, the term 'leadership' here cannot be equated in terms of the Western concept of 'charisma' due to the very nature of Tikait's leadership, as elaborated above. Tikait has tried to inculcate the image of a Gandhian leader and has contrasted his style of leadership with the inauthentic 'Indian' leadership that has been borrowed from the West. He has also tried to reinforce this Gandhian image with the operational tactics of the BKU. To this end Tikait during the heydays of the BKU had religiously avoided being seen sharing the stage with political leaders.

However, it should also be borne in mind that the members and supporters of the BKU were people though based in rural India were not out of touch with urban India because they were connected to the agricultural markets and its circuitous path ran across towns and villages. Jat farmers came to urban townships like Meerut not only to buy and sell but also to gather information. The newspapers in the vernacular medium like Jansatta were of great importance to these farmers as sources of information too were urban-based (Bentall and Corbridge 1996).

Fractures in the coalition

However, there was animosity of the Jats (and thus the BKU) with other dominant castes like the 'thakurs'. It would perhaps be erroneous to perceive the BKU as having recruited to its cause people from the entire hierarchical caste and class edifice of rural India. In addition to the upper castes like Brahmins, the Dalits resisted Jat dominance too. Farmers of the BKU allegedly behaved as a cartel when it came to agricultural labourers. This led Dalits to join the Mazdoor Union which was formed in 1987. The two groups had an antagonistic relationship and there were incidents where BKU-affiliated farmers committed violent acts against Dalit labourers. There was also the matter of wage rates; lower wage rates were beneficial to the Jat farmers but severely detrimental to the landless labourers. It is noteworthy that the BKU resisted wage rates standardized by the state (Bentall and Corbridge 1996).

The unity that the BKU had fostered was limited because of the inherently hierarchical rural society in Western U.P. as well as the unequal benefits of development. It was claimed that land redistribution had benefitted everyone equally and that everyone was a 'mazdoor' (laborer) and alternatively, everyone is a farmer. The tension between landless laborers and landowning cultivators was also often the tension between backward castes and 'harijans' and this class-caste antagonism could not be easily contained. The state was considered to be on the side of the labourer which is quite similar to the stand-point of land-owning farmers as a class-for-itself. Clashes between harijans and BC farmers are trivialized as conjugal clashes with the harijans playing the role of the wife. In a particular instance, the patriarchal

nature of the BKU led it to challenging the elected head of the state based on his lineage. This patriarchal nature is also seen in the way in which domestic violence goes unquestioned (A. Gupta 1997).

1990's and its aftermath

Chaudhary Mahendra Singh Tikait and the BKU were both extremely careful to not be seen as associating with any particular political party as this carried negative connotations of corruption, lust for power etc. Devi Lal, the chief minister of UP in those days was given respect as a son of a 'kisan' but the ambitions of politicians were not indulged or entertained, whether it be Ajit Singh, son of Charan Singh himself or H.L. Bahuguna, another Chief Minister of UP. Many political parties like the Congress and the Lok Dal tried to woo them but did not succeed.

However, in 1991 the BKU decided to ally with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). This decision did not sit well with the Muslim farmers supporting the BKU as during that time the Ram Janambhoomi movement was at its peak (to be followed of course by the infamous Babri Masjid demolition). The communalism that the BKU had tried so steadfastly to avoid made its way into the support base of the BKU and weakened it. This was one of the many factors that led to its decline in the 1990s.

Among the other decisive factors that came into being with the dawn of the 1990s was the liberalization of the economy. This caused a great split of the united front that the farmers' organization like the BKU, the KRRS, the Shetkari Sangathana etc. had been putting up. While some like the KRRS continued with the Gandhian conservatism/Lohiaite socialism others like the Shard Joshi led Shetkari Sangathana welcomed liberalization. Also was the decisive the various identity-based movements based on caste, gender etc. The rise to power of the Samajwadi Party and the Bahujan Samajwadi Party led to a questioning of the united, harmonious picture of rural India that organizations like the BKU had tried to propagate (Omvedt 2005).

Conclusion

Through this paper it could be stated with some amount of confidence that the organizations in the new farmers' movements of India cannot be analyzed on the basis of class or economic determinants alone. Through the exploration of the cultural markers of the BKU it can be said that cultural practices and traditions were at the very least equally important in mobilization for the movement. However, this sort of organization or movement could perhaps be subjected to the scrutiny of a certain kind of ideological analysis.

If we are to look at the Bharatiya Kisan Union as exemplifying the farmers' movements in India then certain insights into the analysis of the movement is available from the post-Marxist theoreticians like Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. Although they are seen as championing the new social movements and the identity based movements of the 1980s here perhaps we can use them for a critique of the Bharatiya Kisan Union. According to Laclau and Mouffe whenever an attempt is made to enclose of a theoretical construct or an ideological field within clearly defined boundaries then there arises a possibility that that element which is excluded from this hegemonic discursive move would re-emerge as an antagonism that destabilizes the whole bounded structure. This line of theorization has its basis in the works of French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan. Drawing from Lacanian psychoanalysis Laclau, Mouffe and others have tried to place ideology at the centre of analysis of politics, society and also social movements (Laclau and Mouffe 2001).

We can perhaps gain a fresh insight into the BKU and through it the larger farmers' movements in India by following these lines of thinking. The organizations like the BKU never accepted class as a category of analysis. But the divergence of the class of landless labourers and poorer peasants into movements across India in opposition to rich farmers is indicative of the class antagonisms that exist in rural India. The BKU and others have also tried to portray the caste relations between the communities like the Jats and the Dalits as harmonious and being equal partners in the fortunes of rural India. However, one finds that these categories which were either excluded or suppressed as come back to haunt the BKU. The skirmishes between the dominant castes and the various Backward Castes and Scheduled Castes which the BKU sought to downplay as conjugal fights led to an erosion of their support base in the early 1990's with the rise of the parties like Samajwadi Party and Bahujan Samaj Party. These parties explicitly focused on caste hierarchies in Indian society.

In the case of religion we find that the united, harmonious front presented by the Hindus and Muslims repressed perhaps antagonistic relations between the two and this found expression in the disenchantment of the Muslim supporters after the BKU joined hands with the BJP. Thus we find that the attempt to enclose and put forth a hegemonic, enclosed ideological/discursive field by the BKU is destabilized by the very categories or social antagonisms that it tried to exclude.

The populism that defines these movements therefore also comes under the scanner of ideological analysis. Slavoj Zizek in a critique of Ernesto Laclau writes, "...in populism, the enemy is externalized/reified into a positive ontological entity (even if this entity is spectral), whose annihilation would restore balance and justice; symmetrically, our own - the populist political agent's - identity is also

perceived as pre-existing the enemy's onslaught" (Žižek 2006). Jacques Pouchepedass had also hinted at this aspect of the need of an external enemy to create an ideological edifice of 'us versus them' populism of the farmers' movements in India, especially those that incorporated Gandhian thinking like the BKU (Pouchepadass 1980). But as shown above, this brand of populism often serves to only paper over antagonisms internal to the societies themselves.

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