

By Sidharth Mishra



On return from South Africa in 1915, Barrister Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, enjoying an impeccable reputation as a civil rights activist, was advised by his mentor Gopal Krishna Gokhale to visit countryside to know India. Gandhi's engagement with farmers at Champaran in Bihar in 1917 and at Kheda in Gujarat in 1918, gave a firm direction to Indian freedom struggle and also outlined the role farmers were to play in India's struggle against imperialism.

It's important to recall these movements, as the farmers vacate the borders of the national Capital after having waged an agitation for more than a year against the farm laws brought in by Narendra Modi government, which enjoyed overwhelming majority in Lok Sabha. That an absolutely urban region of the national Capital could become centre of a farmer's agitation was unthinkable till it actually happened.

In that way the agitation of 2020-21 was more widespread than those of Champaran and Kheda and not isolated in nature. It was also an opening for the urban India to come face-to-face with the issues of rural peasantry.

The long queues of cars caught in a traffic jam at borders with suburban towns like Ghaziabad, Noida, Gurgaon, Bahadurgarh and Sonipat gave the commuters a daily lesson on issues like minimum support price (MSP) for the crops and agriculture marketing norms. It also acquainted the urban populace about the largely non-violent and apolitical make-up of the Indian peasantry.

One says apolitical because of the firm refusal to provide platform to any political leader and also refuse the hospitality of the Delhi government. As the agitation peaked last year and farmers marched to Delhi, the Arvind Kejriwal-led Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) government worked overtime to woo them.

As the jam ends, points to mull over

Written by Administrator

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First, to show solidarity with the farmers, the Delhi government refused to notify the huge stadiums in Delhi as makeshift jails, forcing the Centre to turn the DDA grounds in Burari into an open jail for the farmers. Following this, Delhi government machinery moved with alacrity to make these farmers comfortable in the Burari ground, and a huge tent city was set using public funds for the purpose.

They built the tent city, needless to say, keeping in mind the interest of the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) in the assemble polls of Punjab scheduled for 2022. The farmers refused the hospitality of the Centre too, with whom they were negotiating during the initial days of agitation.

The year-long agitation manifested the warmth and self-esteem of Indian peasantry. The tent towns on different borders not only became centres of protest but also urban hearths of rural India. A visit to these shelters evoked the same balminess as any rural home in India would. In fact, they came to sustain several poor families residing on the borders.

During their year-long stay, barring the Nihang incident, there was no instance of unruliness despite a section of media terming to be hub of Khalistanis. Living in close vicinity of Ghazipur border, one can vouch that returning home in night crossing the tent colonies gave a sense of safety rather than any fear.

With the farmers now returning happily, the government must introspect that whether it was correct to leave the national Capital in a jam for more than a year. The man-hours and natural resources like the fuel gases were the biggest loss of this agitation and one wonders if it all be accounted for in of the research studies which would be undertaken on the movement.

With farmers now happily back to their homes, Delhi hopefully would not witness a similar jam for years to come.

(The writer is Author and President, Centre for Reforms, Development & Justice)

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