

# India's Evolving Neoliberal Regime of Dispossession: From the Anti-SEZ Movement to the Farm Law Protests

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## Abstract

What do the protests against the farm laws of the Modi regime tell us about the trajectory of neoliberalisation in India? In this article, we address this question through a comparative analysis of the farm law protests and movements against land dispossession that mushroomed in many parts of India in the wake of the passing of India's SEZ Act in 2005. Both movements have explicitly targeted neoliberal policies that aggressively sought to remove obstacles to capitalist accumulation. However, the two movements are separated by roughly 15 years, and in effect target two distinctly different forms of dispossession—one predominantly coercive, the other predominantly market-driven. This begs questions as to whether the emergence of the farm law protests is indexical of new shifts in Indian neoliberalism? We argue that the answer to this question is a qualified yes. Through comparison and discussion of anti-dispossession struggles and the anti-farm laws protests, carried out in dialogue with the literature on regimes of dispossession, we develop a heuristic periodisation of Indian neoliberalisation and argue that the now-repealed farm laws and the strong farmers' resistance to them are indexical of India moving towards a 'rollover' form of neoliberalism.

## Keywords

India, dispossession, neoliberalism, farm laws, SEZ

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In this article, we use the recent farm law protests as an entry point to analyse changes in Indian neoliberalism over the past 20 years.<sup>1</sup> We do so to add to the emerging literature on India's neoliberal regime of dispossession, a literature that has interrogated the systematic yet variegated ways in which state actors at multiple levels—and in shifting alliances with non-state actors—facilitate and manage the dispossession of segments of the Indian population in the context of neoliberal restructuring. Our approach is comparative as we contrast the farm law protests with movements against special economic zones (SEZ) and land dispossession that mushroomed in many parts of India in the wake of the passing of India's SEZ Act in 2005 (Jenkins et al., 2014).<sup>2</sup> This juxtaposition of movements is in some ways counter-intuitive and departs from the ways in which they have often been contextualised. At the risk of simplifying, the growing body of popular commentary and scholarly work on the farm law protests has tended—as we elaborate below—to compare these with the so-called new farmers' movements (NFM) of the 1980s and 1990s. This comparison is meaningful—and analytically productive—insofar as both movements were crucially concerned with the conditions of agricultural production and trade in agricultural commodities. Similarly, the literature on the anti-SEZ movement has largely compared it to the anti-dam or anti-displacement movements of the 1980s and 1990s, such as the Narmada Bachao Andolan. This comparison too is meaningful insofar as both movements were crucially centred on what is euphemistically called 'development-induced displacement' and dispossession. And it is evidently a productive form of comparative analysis that has generated new insights into India's evolving political economy. For example, Michael Levien's (2018) theorisation of India's transition from a developmentalist to a neoliberal regime of dispossession in the wake of economic reforms demonstrates a theorisation that we are both inspired by and seek to advance here.

Both lines of comparison sketched above crucially bridge the pre-/post-liberalisation divide that we associate with the 1991 reforms of the Indian economy. They thereby enable us to trace important *longue durée* shifts in India's political economy. In contrast, the agenda we pursue in this article operates with a different temporality as we seek to diagnose and shed light on transformations *within* India's neoliberal regime of dispossession. Towards this end, we argue that the comparison between the farm law protests and the anti-SEZ movement is both meaningful and analytically productive. Both movements have explicitly targeted neoliberal policies that aggressively sought to remove obstacles to capitalist accumulation. In the case of the anti-SEZ movement, protesters targeted the emergence of a 'land broker state' (Levien, 2018) that sought to accelerate the commodification of land. In the case of the farm law protests, protesters targeted a business-enabling state that sought to accelerate the commodification of agricultural production and trade; and crucially, in both cases, movements have framed their critique in the language of land grabbing and dispossession, rejecting a development model that, in Jairath's (2020) words, 'is hungry for land but spits out the people that live on it'. Yet the fact that the two movements are separated by roughly 15 years, and that they in effect target two distinctly different forms of dispossession—one predominantly coercive, the other predominantly

market-driven—raises the question: Is the emergence of the farm law protests indexical of new shifts in Indian neoliberalism? We argue that the answer to this question is a qualified yes, although much hinges on how one interprets the government's withdrawal of the farm laws.

Below we first revisit the comparisons that have been made between the farm law protests and the NFM in order to establish a foil for our own argument. We then briefly introduce the anti-SEZ movement, before engaging the debate on India's neoliberal regime of dispossession. In light of this, we offer our comparative analysis of the farm law protests and the anti-SEZ movement. In our concluding discussion, we seek to develop the idea of India's neoliberal regime of dispossession by proposing a heuristic periodisation of Indian neoliberalism since the early 2000s, suggesting that the now-repealed farm laws and the strong farmers' resistance to them are indexical of India moving, albeit unevenly, towards what Peck and Theodore (2019, pp. 258–259) describe as a 'rollover' form of neoliberalism.

## **The Farm Law Protests, the NFM and the Anti-SEZ Movement**

As indicated, the farm law protests have routinely been compared to the NFM (Basu, 2021; Baviskar & Levien, 2021; Pattenden & Bansal, 2021). As is well known, the NFM posited the 'Bharat versus India' distinction as a new primary contradiction and sought to mobilise an ostensibly united rural 'Bharat' against an exploitative, statist, industrialised and bureaucratised urban 'India' (Brass, 1995). There are compelling and productive insights to be gained from undertaking this comparative exercise. As Baviskar and Levien (2021, p. 1342) noted recently, this comparison allows us to appreciate both the novelty of the current protests, as well as some remarkable continuities.

At first glance, the historical continuities between the NFM and the farm law protests stand out. For example, many of the farmers' unions involved in the current protests were also prominent in the 1980s, pressing demands for remunerative prices, cheap input, loan waivers and so on. Geographically speaking, the 'strongholds' of the NFM and the current protests also overlap to a considerable extent, although not entirely. Farm law protests have been most intense in the states of Punjab and Haryana where they began (Jodhka, 2021), spreading further across the north Indian Jat belt into western Uttar Pradesh (Kumar, 2021)—the heartlands of India's green revolution that was also a crucial mobilising ground for the NFM. The demands of the NFM and the farm law protests are also comparable, at least when viewed at a sufficient level of abstraction. These include demands for state-guaranteed supportive conditions of agricultural production, and for equitable terms of trade in and remunerative prices for agricultural produce. Even the mobilising slogan of *kisan mazdoor ekta zindabad* (long live the unity between farmers and workers) that has been so audible in the current protests (Jodhka, 2021, p. 1367) echoes the rallying cries of past movements.

No less significant is how both the NFM and the farm law protests spawned substantial critical debate within and beyond academia about agrarian populism and the role of caste, class and gender in shaping agrarian politics. In the 1980s and 1990s, debates raged over the extent to which one should understand the NFM as essentially kulak lobbies or rich peasant organisations; or whether they could be seen as vehicles of broader agrarian interests across class lines (see Brass, 1995, for an overview). In response to the farm law protests, agrarian sociologists have reinvigorated the debate on the extent to which historically antagonistic agrarian groups across classes, castes and gender have been able to forge new solidarities during the farm law protests; whether they have genuinely succeeded in building a broader social base for agrarian struggles; or whether the enduring structures of caste and patriarchy that the NFM never confronted head-on continue to shape current protests in insidious yet significant ways (Jodhka, 2021; Lerche, 2021; Pattenden & Bansal, 2021; Sethi, 2021; Sinha, 2020).

While other contributions to this special issue pursue one or more of the above lines of comparative inquiry, in what follows we pursue the alternative avenue of comparing the farm law protests and the anti-SEZ movements of the early 2000s. This comparison is inspired by the obvious fact that the farm law protests—as Baviskar and Levien (2021, p. 1344) also note—are situated in a profoundly different political economy than the NFM. While the NFM could arguably be located in the dynamics of late/post-Green revolution agriculture, what stands out about the farm law protests is that they are not just about agriculture:

Rather, they must be located in the totality of India's post-liberalization political economy, and specifically the way exclusionary growth driven by financialization, real estate speculation, and high-end services has afforded few and precarious lifeboats from the sinking (deliberately sabotaged?) ship of agriculture. (Baviskar & Levien, 2021, p. 1344)

Fifteen years ago, the trinity of financialisation, real estate speculation and the setting up of high-end services found their ultimate spatial expression in India's new SEZs. India's 2005 SEZ Act enabled investors to build and operate in special zones carved out from the national territory by providing a 'framework for building hyperliberalised economic enclaves—with minimal taxes, tariffs, and regulations—on the Chinese model, with the avowed purpose of promoting exports, attracting FDI, developing infrastructure, and generating employment' (Levien, 2012, p. 934). Significantly, the land upon which such zones were built was often acquired under the draconian land acquisition act of 1894, under which the state enjoyed the right of eminent domain. The actual takeover of people's land routinely had to be carried out through coercive means as communities threatened with dispossession mobilised to defend their land and livelihoods. Among the dispossessed and their allies in civil and political society, the new SEZs became the epitome of the kind of exclusionary growth that Baviskar and Levien correctly identify as characteristic of India's post-liberalisation political economy, succinctly captured in the popular renaming of SEZs as 'special exploitation zones'.

Juxtaposing the farm law protests with the anti-SEZ movements from 15 years ago arguably enables us to better grasp 'the totality' of India's post-liberalisation

political economy, and particularly the ways in which it has evolved over the past two decades during which India's neoliberal regime of dispossession has moved from a phase of emergence in the 1980s and 1990s to a phase of consolidation from the early 2000s. We now turn to the discussion of this concept.

## India's Neoliberal Regime of Dispossession

The concept of regimes of dispossession originated in the global land grab debate where a variety of analytical concepts have been mobilised to understand observable forms and practices of dispossession. It was coined by Levien in response to the perceived inadequacy of notions such as Marx's 'primitive accumulation'—which was often deployed in these debates without consistency and clarity (Hall, 2013)—and Harvey's (2004) 'accumulation by dispossession', which Levien sees as too broad, too capital-centric and insufficiently capable of capturing the specificities of land dispossession. To Levien, the deployment of state force in overcoming obstacles to accumulation is in fact a centrally defining characteristic of land dispossession. The concept of regimes of dispossession therefore explicitly starts from the state and the political apparatus that coercively redistributes landed wealth upwards. Understood as a socially and historically specific constellation of state structures, economic logics tied to particular class interests and ideological justifications that generate consistent patterns of dispossession (Levien, 2013a, p. 383), the concept of regimes of dispossession is geared towards shedding light on the logics underpinning a state's willingness to dispossess certain populations for certain purposes, at certain historical conjunctures, and with recourse to certain normative or ideological justifications.

In his monograph on a SEZ in Rajasthan, Levien (2018) shows how India has over the past decades undergone a transition from a developmentalist regime of dispossession under the aegis of Nehruvian state capitalism, to a neoliberal regime of dispossession that emerged through state-led economic reforms from the 1990s onwards. This transition has seen a regime in which the state dispossessed people of their land primarily for productive purposes (employment-generating steel towns, dams for power production or irrigation) give way to a new regime in which people are dispossessed of their land in order to commodify it (for real estate and other speculative gambles)—a transition from dispossession for production to dispossession for commodification. The contrast between these two regimes of dispossession is illuminating insofar as it draws our attention to *historical transitions between* patterned forms and practices of dispossession, as well as variation *across contemporaneously* existing regimes.

For the present analysis, however, the regimes of dispossession approach can fruitfully be developed in three distinct ways. First, this approach has justifiably been criticised for being 'limited in its capacity to analyse differing dynamics of dispossession within such regimes' (Kenney-Lazar, 2018, p. 683). The emphasis on the centrality of state force and extra-economic coercion in land dispossession in particular may occlude attention to other dynamics, practices and processes that also drive dispossession, but which do not immediately appear coercive. Vijayabaskar and Menon (2018), for example, make the case for paying greater

attention to market-based instruments of dispossession within the regimes of dispossession framework. Although a total dissolution of the distinction between economic and extra-economic drivers of dispossession would arguably deprive the regimes of dispossession approach of much of its analytical potency, we argue that greater attention to the diversity of less immediately coercive state practices that 'remove obstacles to accumulation' by means other than brute force is warranted.

Second, the idea of a 'neoliberal regime of dispossession' arguably, if inadvertently, signals a certain uniformity, and may occlude attention to transformation *within* a regime over time. In thinking about transformations *within* India's neoliberal regime of dispossession, we find inspiration in the literature on varieties of neoliberalism, which considers neoliberalism as a process rather than an achieved state defined by a set of specific conditions. According to Peck and Tickell, neoliberalism's observably differential impacts and variations across space and time can be explained by the series of relatively discrete phases through which it has proceeded: from the early 'proto-neoliberalism' of the theoretical attack on Keynesianism; to the 'roll-back neoliberalism' of the 1980s and early 1990s focused on deregulation, state-led marketisation and structural adjustment; to the 'roll-out neoliberalism' from the 1990s concerned with regulatory reform, active state-building and the disciplining and containment of those marginalised or dispossessed by the earlier rollback neoliberalism (Peck & Tickell, 2002); to the current phase of 'rollover neoliberalism' defined by authoritarian populism, 'delivered more by force of unilateral action than through democratic consent' (Peck & Theodore, 2019, pp. 258–259). These shifts in neoliberalism may fruitfully be thought of heuristically as discrete phases, but also as different 'faces' of neoliberalisation (Peck & Theodore, 2019, p. 259).

The varieties of neoliberalism approaches sketched above offers relatively generic analytical categories, to a considerable extent derived from historical trajectories in the global north, through which to understand actual processes of neoliberalisation. For our purposes, it nonetheless constitutes a valuable starting point for disaggregating processes of neoliberalisation in India, and for nuancing the ways in which we conceptualise transformations in the neoliberal regime of dispossession over time. It is with this ambition in mind that we proceed with our comparative analysis of the anti-SEZ movement and the farm law protests.

## **Movements Compared**

### *State Structures, Economic Logics, Dominant Class Interests and Ideological Justification*

While it is possible to compare the anti-SEZ movement and the farm law protests along many axes, we limit ourselves to looking at those aspects that have a direct bearing on how we think about regimes of dispossession in the Indian context. We therefore start our comparison by looking at the three components that define a regime of dispossession, namely state structures; economic logics and dominant class interests; and ideological justification. Working through these in reverse

order, we find that the ideological justification offered for both the SEZ act and the farm laws have been remarkably similar insofar as both have been couched in pro-farmer rhetoric. Representatives of the current government have consistently spoken about the farm laws as ‘liberating the farmer’ from the grip of corrupt middlemen and stifling state regulation—about setting the farmer free and, not least, doubling his income in only a few years (Business Standard, 2020). Such ideological justification resonates remarkably with the rhetoric that surrounded the implementation of the dispossession-driven SEZ policy. In West Bengal, which is the case that we know the best, the then chief minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharya spoke of using SEZs to ‘reach the fruits of development’ to the deprived, bringing ‘a smile to the farmers’ face’. He also asked rhetorically, ‘should the son of a farmer always remain a farmer?’ (Majumder & Nielsen, 2017), implying that leaving farmers to pursue an agrarian future would, in fact, be decidedly anti-farmer.

Both the farm law protests and the anti-SEZ movement have critiqued and deconstructed such ideological justifications, insisting that governmental pro-farmer rhetoric is a mere smokescreen for policies that are ultimately dispossessive, anti-farmer and destructive of agrarian lives. Yet there are subtle but significant differences in the ways in which the movements have articulated this critique. In West Bengal and many other states, anti-SEZ movements largely targeted *state* governments and their parastatal arms, such as industrial development corporations, responsible for actually carrying out land acquisitions (Levien, 2013b, pp. 360–361). Sometimes they also targeted specific capitalist investors as ultimately responsible for bringing dispossession to their villages, but just as often criticism of the corporate sector would be subdued, or ambiguous. In West Bengal, for example, farmers protesting the setting up of a Tata Motors factory on forcibly acquired land on occasion smashed Tata Titan watches or dumped packets of Tata Salt during demonstrations (Nielsen, 2018, p. 175). But, they would more often stress that while they were strongly opposed to land dispossession, they had no principled opposition to industrialisation, nor to Tata Motors. Elsewhere in the country, investors such as Mukesh Ambani and Gautam Adani were more vocally criticised by anti-SEZ movements, only mostly in connection with specific SEZ projects, and seldom in general terms.

The farm law protests similarly focused at the state level from July 2020, with protestors in particularly Haryana and the Punjab demonstrating and seeking to elicit a response (and support) from their respective state governments. But they soon changed tactics, took their protests to the national scale, and marched to Delhi in November to press their demand on the central government (Jodhka, 2021, pp. 1362–1363). This made the national capital and the national scale the focal point of the farm law protests. In contrast, efforts to co-organise anti-SEZ protests on a national or even regional scale consistently proved difficult. Anti-SEZ movements would remain ‘parochial’, generally reflecting more localised concerns, and targeting primarily the local state (Bedi, 2013; Nielsen & Bedi, 2017).

Although the farm law protests’ scale-shift may reflect strategic decisions by movement activists when faced with unresponsive local governments, it can arguably also be ascribed to a significant change to the federal structure of the

Indian state under Modi. In spite of the rhetoric of ‘cooperative federalism’ that Modi champions, state power has been centralised and personalised to an unprecedented degree under Modi, as seen in his government’s mode of unilateral decision-making, unwanted and aggressive interventions in states with non-BJP governments, and the rapid hollowing out of regulatory state institutions (Jaffrelot, 2021, pp. 253–309). The farm law protestors’ decision to ‘march on Delhi’ is thus also indexical of how power increasingly lies in the Prime Minister’s Office.

Importantly, and somewhat in contrast to the anti-SEZ movement, the farm law protest has explicitly targeted specific capitalist, singling out billionaires Mukesh Ambani and Gautam Adani in particular. Both hail from Gujarat; both have repeatedly aligned their business strategies to Modi’s policy initiatives and have been greatly enriched by this (Jaffrelot, 2021); and both have been identified by the protesting farmers as the likely beneficiaries of the liberalisation of Indian agriculture that the farm laws would entail. We take this shift from the somewhat ambiguous and project-specific critique of particular capitalist investors by the anti-SEZ movement, to the unambiguous singling out of Ambani and Adani by the farm law protesters as diagnostic of a shift in state-business relations over the past 15 years. The Modi government has in many respects deepened its relationship with Indian tycoons since coming to power—and with a select number of tycoons in particular. Ambani and Adani symbolise precisely this new ‘collusive capitalism’ (Jaffrelot, 2021, p. 146) that the Modi regime pursues, favouring a small number of large capitalists close to the regime, while disfavouring others. The farm law protest’s clear identification of the Modi regime and a small number of nameable capitalists as their targets in other words index the enhanced visibility of the tight interconnections between transformed state structures under Modi, clear neoliberal economic logics, and a set of narrow dominant class interests personified by specific capitalists known for their closeness to the regime.

### *State Response*

Turning to the state’s response to the two movements, we again note both similarities and some significant differences. The response to many anti-SEZ movements were nothing if not brutal. The police crackdown on protesting farmers in West Bengal was notoriously violent, especially in Nandigram where dozens of people were killed and hundreds injured. A comparable fate befell anti-SEZ activists in many other parts of India. The state response to the anti-farm laws movement has not been lacking in brutality either. When farmers travelled through Haryana on their way to Delhi, the police put up barricades, used water cannons and dug up roads to stop them (Jodhka, 2021, p. 1364). Farmers have been lathi-charged by the police several times, and after a year of protests in the capital, movement leaders claimed that close to 700 farmers had lost their lives during the movement (Jaswal, 2021), although few deaths were directly attributable to violent state coercion. At the rhetorical level, we also find that both movements have been the target of concerted and aggressive smear campaigns. Anti-SEZ protesters were widely labelled as ‘anti-development’ or dismissed as ignorant peasants incapable of comprehending the benefits of industrial growth. In Communist West Bengal,



they were occasionally branded as Luddites or Narodniks, or alleged to be Naxalites. The farm law protestors have been subject to an arguably even more aggressive smear campaign. They too have been dismissed variously as simple-minded peasants (*bhole-bhale kisan*) lured by vested interests, or as selfish 'neorich farmers-cum-commission-agents'. But this smear campaign has been wedded to the aggressive nationalism that defines the Modi regime, in which most forms of dissent are classified as anti-national. Hence, farm law protesters have been accused of being anti-national Khalistanis working for the secession of the Punjab from India, supported by external enemies of the nation seeking to defame and destabilise India. The hand of Pakistani forces was also alleged, thereby casting the movement as fifth columnists and a major threat to India's national security (Shukla, 2021).

However, despite the repressive approach to anti-SEZ movements, and despite the UPA government's initial refusal to reconsider the national legislation on SEZs, the UPA soon proved responsive to popular demands that the policy on SEZs be revised. This later resulted in the introduction of the Right to Fair Compensation and Transparency in Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement Bill, 2013. This act addressed the question of displacement and rehabilitation within the UPA's broad rights-based framework and, despite all its flaws, accommodated many of the demands made by anti-SEZ activists by making the compulsory acquisitions of people's lands much more difficult, while also improving the resettlement and rehabilitation of displaced persons (Nielsen & Nilsen, 2015, 2017).

The response of the Modi government has also gradually moved in a more accommodating direction, signalled most clearly by the scrapping of the farm laws. At the same time, the government's commitment to the decision to repeal the laws is open to question. In his speech announcing the repeal, Modi spoke at length about his continued commitment to the country's farmers (especially small farmers), and the many supposedly beneficial policies he had launched towards their improvement. He then lamented his inability to convince the farmers of the benefits of the new legislation. Only a section of farmers had opposed the laws, Modi said, and he had tried his best to explain their purpose and benefits, and to educate and inform them, but to no avail. The same rhetoric is echoed in the statement of objects and reasons in the Farm Laws Repeal Bill, 2021 (GoI, 2021), which similarly stresses the Modi government's history of pro-farmer interventions, the merit of the original farm laws, and the government's inability to 'sensitize' the small group of farmers opposing the bills. In other words, the repeal of the farm laws is attributed primarily to a failure of pedagogy and communication and the stubbornness of a minority of farmers, and not to any inherent structural or social flaws in the laws themselves. This blanket unwillingness to acknowledge or even accommodate the substance of the farm law movement's critique may well indicate that the farm laws will soon be back in one form or another.

### *Dynamics of Mobilisation I: The Farmer Identity*

Lastly, we turn to a comparison of the dynamics of mobilisation, and the ways in which the two movements have dealt with questions of identity, particularly

questions of caste, class and gender. As an obvious starting point, we note how both movements have foregrounded a peasant identity as a *positive* identity to cohere followers and mobilise public support. This is most immediately evident in the farm law protests and its invocation of a potent *kisan* identity, in a context in which the conditions of agricultural production and marketing—and indeed the future of agriculture as such, according to the protestors—are at stake. But it was also evident in many anti-SEZ movements. Nielsen's (2018) work on the Singur movement, for example, shows how locally dominant agricultural castes drew on a shared *chasi* identity and a history of being dedicated owner-cultivators to mobilise in defence of their farmland. This, in turn, allowed them to tap into more widely shared nostalgic ideas about *Sonar Bangla*, or Golden Bengal, in which the lush, green paddy fields, the idyllic villages, and the proud and hardworking owner-cultivator are key signifiers of regional identities.

This invocation of a *positive* peasant identity—strategically or otherwise—stands in marked contrast to the negative view of the peasantry espoused by the government (*bhole-bhale kisan*), and to the decidedly post-agrarian orientation of both the SEZ policy and the farm laws. In the rhetoric of the Bengali Communists mentioned above, SEZs were explicitly upheld as a pathway to post-agrarian futures—a way to ensure that the sons of farmers did not become farmers themselves. In the case of the farm laws, Lerche (2021, p. 1381) has argued that they make it 'abundantly clear to the farmers that they matter very little to the government', and that they 'could well be the end-game for an agricultural sector that has not yet been fully penetrated by non-farming capital' (Lerche, 2021, p. 1383). As Lerche puts it, 'such is the basis for the broad coalition that has emerged against the farm laws' (Lerche, 2021, p. 1383). Both movements have thus sought to reclaim and resignify a farmer or agriculturalist identity as a way of stitching together broad coalitions.

Yet at first glance, these attempts at foregrounding a peasant identity rooted in farming as symbolic rallying points for broad coalitions may appear to resonate poorly with the lived realities of Indian agriculture, where an agrarian crisis that is both ecological and economic is clearly manifest, albeit unevenly so, and where post-agrarian aspirations flourish among many farmers, big, small and marginal alike. Kumar's (2021) work on the Jats in Western UP illustrates this admirably. Here, the *kisan* identity that was such a potent mobilising trope for the NFM has considerably declined over many decades, as a generation of upwardly mobile Jats moved into new urban occupations and economies, and away from farming—a development that is far from unique to UP (Jakobsen & Nielsen, 2020). In the context of the farm law protests, however, Kumar finds that the recent waning of urban economic opportunities and the impact of COVID have led Jat youth to re-embrace the *kisan* identity. Fearing that the farm laws would rob them of whatever farmland they had left (which provided a sense of economic security), Jat youth have re-emerged as *kisan* activists. This invocation of the *kisan* identity, in other words, powerfully indexes the fundamental disconnect between political leaders using the language of post-agrarian aspirations to justify neoliberal policies, and the lived realities of farmers tasked with navigating the difficult and treacherous path towards meaningful post-agrarian futures.

While such reappropriation of the *kisan* identity hardly amounts to a wholesale rejection of post-agrarian aspirations, it arguably illustrates how both movements—and the farm law protests probably more so than the anti-SEZ movement—articulated a specific form of ‘agrarian anger’ (Nilsen, 2018a), spawned by a situation where many rural Indians are increasingly deeply disappointed with life and dwindling opportunities in the countryside, a situation exacerbated by the farm laws. But it is also anger that contains new aspirational projects where people seek to imagine the rural-agrarian in new ways and to recast it as ‘the way of the future’ (Suthar, 2018, p. 17). Integral to this project is, according to Suthar (2018, p. 20), precisely the forging of new rural-agrarian identities. If this reading is correct, the farm law protests may hold the potential to take forward this process of re-imagining the rural-agrarian in ways that break with dominant neoliberal logics.

### *Dynamics of Mobilisation 2: Caste, Class and Gender*

As Lerche (2021, p. 1383) notes, however, our analysis cannot stop with the mere acknowledgement of the existence of broad coalitions. As the history of the NFM amply demonstrates, broad coalitions promoting ‘shared agrarian interests’ may well be home to internal contradictions and forms of dominance along class, caste and gender lines. How have the two movements under study navigated such contradictions?

In his survey of India’s anti-SEZ/anti-dispossession movements, Levien (2013b, p. 362) argues that land dispossession constitutes an urgent threat to rural communities, offering only a singular chance to stave off dispossession. This sense of acute urgency accounts for the rapidity and seeming spontaneity with which movements against land dispossession often emerge. This, in turn means that struggles against dispossession will usually emerge as inherently cross-class and cross-caste, precisely because dispossession expropriates urgently and indiscriminately (Levien, 2013b, p. 370). Many anti-SEZ movements thus brought together different and oftentimes antagonistic agrarian classes and castes in shifting alliances to fend off dispossession. In the case of Singur, for example, landless Dalit labourers joined hands with intermediate caste landowners on a common anti-dispossession platform. The movement also mobilised a considerable number of peasant women, who often marched at the forefront of rallies and took part in agitations. Yet these alliances across castes, classes and genders proved difficult to maintain over time, as the poor, the low-castes and women came to feel excluded and marginalised within movement structures (Nielsen, 2015, 2018; Nielsen et al., 2020). Haryana, where the anti-SEZ movement was strong, is an illustrative case in point. Here, attitudes of social superiority on the part of dominant caste Jats, coupled with pre-existing caste conflicts between Jat landowners and largely Dalit or migrant agricultural labourers, led to the almost complete exclusion of the latter from the movement, relegating their concerns to the margin, and ultimately depriving the movement of a wider social base (Kennedy, 2020).

The farm laws protesters have arguably responded with a comparable degree of urgency as the anti-SEZ movement, albeit for different reasons. While the farm laws would not cause immediate dispossession, the fear that three laws would ultimately constitute, as Lerche (2021, p. 1383) puts it, an ‘end-game’ for non-farming capital in the agricultural sector, led protesters to respond urgently. Additionally, both popular and academic accounts have noted, in a manner comparable to the anti-SEZ movement, the conspicuous presence of women, as well as new and evolving forms of solidarity cutting across caste and class lines. Lerche (2021, p. 1385), for example, emphasises how Dalit-farmer collaboration in the farm law protests goes considerably beyond the mere lip service that the BKU paid to the unity of farmers and labourers/Dalits in the context of the NFM, adding that the current protests may also have led to a normalisation of women’s presence in political spaces (Lerche, 2021, p. 1386). Such observations are supported by Sinha’s (2020) analysis of Punjab. Here, many years of pioneering work by the state’s largest farmer union, the BKU (Ekta Ugrahan), gradually brought together farmers and labourers across castes and classes. The new forms of solidarity this has gradually kindled now find enhanced expression in the farm law protests. Pattenden and Bansal (2021, pp. 27–28) arrive at comparable conclusions, suggesting that the very process of mobilising against the farm laws has thickened ‘ties and solidarities that cross lines of class, caste and gender, and unite all those whose surplus labour is appropriated’, adding that these solidarities—most visible in Punjab’s protest heartlands—provide ‘glimpses of the bases of broad-based alliances that exist in objective terms across the country’. The kind of new rural solidarities and collectivities cutting across established social fault lines that were visible in the anti-SEZ movement thus appear to be even more explicitly articulated in the farm law protests, not merely for the sake of expediency, but as a self-reflexive political strategy. This has kindled hopes that the farm law protests may point towards a new politics for progressive change. Yet doubts about the viability and longevity of these emergent solidarities remain, and they may, as was the case with the anti-SEZ movement, prove to flourish largely in a contingent phase in which the interests of different groups converge sufficiently for them to align.

## **Concluding Discussion: India’s Evolving Neoliberal Regime of Dispossession**

Using a comparison of the anti-SEZ movement and the farm law protests, we have argued for the necessity of developing a more fine-grained analysis of India’s neoliberal regime of dispossession. This, we have suggested, is necessary to more adequately grasp its shifting internal temporality—India’s neoliberal regime of dispossession has arguably evolved over time, and this evolution is consequential. To attune our conceptual apparatus in ways that enable disaggregation of the dynamics of neoliberalisation in India over time, we use this concluding discussion to extend from and link our analysis of changing regimes of dispossession to

a cursory periodisation of the political economy of India's neoliberalisation. We do this in light of the varieties of neoliberalism literature discussed earlier.

### *1991–2004: Incremental Rollback Neoliberalisation*

India never experienced the kind of neoliberal shock therapy that countries in Latin America and Africa witnessed during 1980s, when structural adjustment programmes were imposed to address a crippling debt crisis. Rather, the reforms that were introduced in the early 1990s, and the progress of these reforms into the early 2000s, was carried out 'by stealth' (Jenkins, 1999). This initial period of restructuring is arguably best understood as a form of incremental rollback neoliberalisation, which was shaped in fundamental ways by the desire of Indian policymakers to avoid open confrontations with too many different interest groups simultaneously, who might oppose a full-blown turn to the market. While neoliberal restructuring was indeed opposed from many quarters, the reforms by stealth strategy were largely successful in dispersing and fragmenting resistance. The pace of neoliberal reform only picked up momentum under Vajpayee's BJP-led government (Corbridge & Harriss, 2000), which embedded their reform drive in a branding campaign centred on the image of 'India Shining' that posited neoliberal reforms as 'the prime strategy of social mobility and prosperity in India' (Kaur, 2020, p. 125). However, the 2004 general elections showed that this imagery had lost its lustre: economic growth remained sluggish and unequal, and for most Indians, social mobility and prosperity failed to materialise (Walker, 2008). Popular opposition to neoliberalism was thus fuelled in large parts by its betrayed promises, and it found expression through the ballot and a concomitant change of government.

### *2004–2014: Between Rollback and Rollout Neoliberalisation*

When the Congress-led UPA took power in 2004, a new phase in the trajectory of India's neoliberalisation began. Significantly, it was during this period that India's neoliberal regime of dispossession begins to properly crystallise, but its emergence was marked by contradictory policy imperatives, as was the entire 10-year period of the UPA. On one hand, the UPA remained committed to maintaining and further deepening the neoliberal restructuring of the Indian economy. The hallmark of this commitment was arguably the introduction of the SEZ Act in 2005, which provided the framework for building hyper-liberalised economic enclaves. In this sense, then, the SEZ Act can be considered emblematic of a rollback approach to neoliberalisation, in which the state actively relinquishes powers of regulation and intervention to create new spaces for accumulation by corporate capital. Indeed, the SEZ Act could be interpreted as an expression, on the part of the UPA government, to move beyond reform by stealth to instead put in place the conditions for 'unrestricted private capital accumulation' (Levien, 2012, p. 945). For this reason, dispossession became a defining and evident feature of India's neoliberal regime of dispossession at this point, as well as a rallying point for social movements resisting neoliberalisation.

However, the UPA was also compelled to respond to countervailing forces and imperatives. For Congress, the 1990s had been a decade in which the long erosion of the party's hegemonic position truly came to a head. Leading party figures considered this to be a result of the party no longer being perceived to be a representative of the interests of the country's poor majority. Consequently, Congress put forward a political programme that sought to address the needs of India's subaltern citizens—above all the poor masses in the countryside (Hasan, 2012; Nilsen, 2021). Centred on the idea of growth with a human face, this programme rolled out social policy interventions, in the form of rights-based legislation, aimed at mitigating the marginalisation and dispossession of vulnerable groups (Nilsen, 2018b; Ruparelia, 2013). This encompassed new legislation that made several partial concessions to the demands of social movements resisting dispossession. Hence, as much as the SEZ Act was a partial and contradictory push towards rollback neoliberalism, new laws on compensation and resettlement, and rights-based legislation more generally, represented an equally partial and contradictory move in the direction of rollout neoliberalism.

These contradictory pulls would be central to the unravelling of the UPA. From below, fissures emerged between civil society groups and the government during the UPA's second term. As Chacko (2018) has noted, several activists left the National Advisory Council because of disagreements that flowed from attempts by Prime Minister Singh and Montek Ahluwalia, the head of the Planning Commission, to ensure that market discipline prevailed over activist claims for accountability. The government also cracked down on several movements and NGOs that were perceived to be critical of its developmental agenda. From above, Indian capital more or less unanimously fell in line behind Modi and the BJP. In part, this was because the BJP was rapidly emerging as a clear favourite for 2014. However, it was clearly also a shift propelled by dissatisfaction with the rollout of pro-poor rights-based legislation by the UPA: 'India's capitalists regarded these welfare and social expenditures a wasteful drain on the fisc which squandered the opportunity buoyant revenues offered to control the deficit' (Desai, 2014, p. 53). In short, the UPA project foundered somewhere in between rollback and rollout neoliberalism, and in doing so, it made way for an altogether different approach to advancing neoliberalisation, spearheaded by Modi's BJP.

### *2014–2020s: Authoritarian Populism and Rollover Neoliberalism*

The UPA approach to neoliberalisation was predicated at least in part on making concessions to the demands of social movements through rights-based legislation. In this way, the UPA attempted to construct popular consent around a political project that was still fundamentally committed to neoliberalisation and to draw social movements onto a domain that could more easily be controlled by the state. The Modi regime has adopted a confrontational approach diametrically opposite to this. Since 2014, social movements opposing neoliberal development have, alongside dissenters who question the BJP's policy agendas, aggressively and oftentimes violently been constructed as an 'anti-national' force threatening India from within (Nilsen, 2021). This is clearly evidenced in the state response to the

farm law protests, which tarnished the movement as seditious and deployed coercive force to crush it. The death of several farmers protesting the farm laws in Lakhimpur Kheri where they were brutally run over from behind by an SUV belonging to a leading BJP politician is a particularly tragic and dramatic illustration of the recent shift towards ‘rollover neoliberalism’ under Modi.

The prioritisation of coercion over consent in relation to social movements must be understood in terms of how Modi’s ascent to national power has been achieved through the pursuit of a hegemonic project of authoritarian populism. This project is structured around Hindu nationalist logics, drawing a dividing line between the true Indian people (India’s Hindu majority) and their enemies within, a category largely made up of the Muslim minority and dissenting social and political forces (see Nielsen & Nilsen, 2021). What Modi’s BJP has to a great extent achieved, is to build consent around a project that marries this Hindu nationalism with neoliberal ideology. Hence, under Modi, neoliberalisation is mediated by cultural politics centred on ‘the desire to unhinge the national from its colonial past and the impatience to inhabit the long-promised future’ (Kaur, 2020, p. 18). The new nation that is to emerge from this, Kaur argues, is partly a capitalist dreamworld in which investor-citizens can enjoy social mobility and material prosperity. But it is also ‘an ancient Hindu civilisational culture that assumes new forms but never loses its original essence’ (Kaur, 2020, p. 109). This ideology is fused with an accumulation strategy that bears the imprint of Modi’s close relationship with big business—an accumulation strategy that caters to major corporate interests ‘more by force of unilateral action than through democratic consent’ (Peck & Theodore, 2019, p. 259).

Although this accumulation strategy has failed to revive economic growth, it has certainly served corporate interests very well. The number of Indian dollar billionaires has increased strongly in the last two years, and the richest 98 of these own the same amount of wealth as the 555 million people who make up the poorest 40%. Ultimately, this dramatic deepening of inequality testifies to the increasing power—both structural and direct—of capital under the Modi regime. And the passing of the farm laws is arguably evidence of this power as it manifests in the sphere of agricultural policy, where farmers and rural labourers once again identified on the horizon the spectre of dispossession that is integral to India’s neoliberal regime of dispossession, albeit in a different form. Yet while dispossession therefore remains a constant within the evolving neoliberal regime also in its rollover phase, social forces and movements confronting neoliberalisation now face a much less accommodating government displaying clear authoritarian qualities, and a more strongly embedded collusion between that state and big business. As the farm law protests and the Lakhimpur Kheri incident show, this considerably raises the cost of dissent and resistance.

This brings us to the concluding element in our comparison. Levien has argued that the anti-SEZ movements of the early 2000s exhibited almost every single weakness that one can attribute to social movements. They were defensive; focused on a single issue; largely ephemeral and ad-hoc in organisation; ambiguous in class composition; and promiscuous in ideology. But despite all this, they were also at the time the single largest obstacle to neoliberal capitalism in India. The

farm law protest may appear to suffer from many of the same presumed weaknesses. Nevertheless, it arguably currently constitutes the most important obstacle to the further entrenchment of India's neoliberal regime of dispossession in its rollover form.

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## Notes

1. We conceive of neoliberalism as 'a politically guided intensification of market rule and commodification' (Brenner et al., 2010, p. 184). Processes of neoliberalisation are interconnected across spatial scales, but their trajectories assume different forms in different national contexts. We propose a cursory analysis of phases of neoliberalisation in India in the concluding discussion of this article.
2. Although many anti-dispossession movements were not directed against SEZs, we refer to this heterogeneous movement simply as the anti-SEZ movement.

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