

COMMENT 205 - Demystifying the Republic Day violence: Assessing political greed within India's farmer protests

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Disha Ravi, a young environmental activist, was [arrested](#) on the 13th of February 2021 on conspired charges of sedition and for threatening India's territorial integrity. Disha's arrest is a recent development in the context of violence that followed in Delhi on the 26th of January 2021.

This violence is a result of three new farm acts which the Government of India had [passed](#) in September 2020. These bills [enable](#) farmers to sell their produce outside the Agriculture Produce Marketing Committee (APMC) mandis. This facilitates private and corporate investments in agriculture, and lets farmers undertake contracts with large private entities.

However, these bills were met with immense [opposition](#) from several organisations, farmers, and political parties. It was speculated that large private players will occupy markets and dismantle both the APMC and its Minimum Support Price (MSP) mechanism. It was also put forth that these laws will allow private players to dictate market prices and exploit small farmers. Another concern is that large firms will impose strong restrictions on both farmers and their products through their financial and legal power – while most farmers (uneducated and poor) lack the resources to even understand the mechanisms involved.

Consequently, a large group of farmers have been protesting since September last year for the complete withdrawal of these laws. However, starting in the end of November, several farmers from Punjab, Haryana and western Uttar Pradesh have staged their protests at Delhi's borders, as they were restricted from entering the capital. This contributed to over [70](#) deaths due to cold weather and the lack of basic facilities.

The government did hold over eleven rounds of talks with farmers; however, it remains firm on not withdrawing these laws. All these dynamics contributed to a [stalemate and delays](#) in implementation by 18 months. During this ongoing stalemate, only a restricted number of [five thousand farmers](#) were granted permission to conduct a peaceful tractor rally in Delhi on India's Republic Day. The protest, however, affected the farmers' cause and legitimacy as it unfolded into a violent manoeuvre. Although a month has passed since the violent outbreak, lessons from this episode seem to remain completely ignored within the academic and policymaking circles.

Substantiating political greed:

Academics have largely substantiated the cause of violence with the greed argument. By the end of [the Cold War](#), several conflict scholars presumed that globalization would erode the strong state structure and the Westphalian world order. Consequently, conflicts and violence were envisioned to emerge in the struggle to control or create new states for [purposes](#) related to greed, economic enrichment, and opportunism.

However, these claims seem exaggerated at best as several strong states witness violence and riots for electoral gains and government formation (as opposed to state creation). A similar dynamic can be traced within the violence on India's Republic Day. Modi, India's incumbent Prime Minister, is hugely [perceived](#) by the public as a strong man whose only intention is to usher welfare and development in India. It is this narrative that [fetches](#) him with his landslide electoral popularity and mandate. Consequently, the BJP (ruling party) has put in every effort to further this narrative and delegitimize any grievance, legitimate or otherwise. Thus, when protestors resisted the new agricultural laws, the BJP portrayed them as Khalistanis,

Communists, and anti-nationals, threatening India's unity. When protestors gathered at Delhi's borders, the National Investigation Agency (NIA) of India even further [linked](#) these protestors to potential riots and secessionist organisations.

However, as the protests' popularity prevailed, the only way to erode their legitimacy and maintain the governments' electoral popularity was to allow the protests to turn violent. This tactic used to retain the governments' legitimacy and electoral popularity is not new to India. Similar cases have been reported in several major protests, wherein the government delegitimizes the protestors for electoral gains. For Instance, the [witnesses of the 2012 Delhi gang rape protests](#) argue how unruly elements, political parties and [members of the government](#) instigated violence in the protests so as to silence dissent and restrict the anti-Congress (then ruling party) narrative.

The trend is clear in the farmers' protests. The Delhi police had permitted the Republic Day tractor parade with [several conditions](#). However, in the days [preceding](#) the rally, borders were reinforced by new protestors with provocative and violent speeches. It is surprising that the Delhi Police did not respond or react to these developments – or to this intelligence information, despite the NIA's report of the protestors' links to secessionist organisations. In addition, several opposition leaders also [alleged](#) that both the police and individuals affiliated with the government were encouraging protestors to turn violent.

Similarly, the violence that unfolded might have comprised several frustrated farmers venting out their anger, or [even](#) opposition leaders, supporting violence so as to question and destabilise Modi and the BJP's political monopoly. Also, there [might be chances](#) that ISI (Pakistan's intelligence agency) and pro-Khalistani organisations instilled unruly elements so as to further violence and anti-Indian sentiments for secessionist purposes. The very presence of these entities indicates that the violence was embedded with strong political opportunism and greed.

However, academics have been less than enthusiastic about exploring the above-mentioned themes. Greed theorists have keenly focused on weak states, and how evident opportunities for economic exploitation, enrichment and gains lead to

violence. However, in the age of social media wherein political polarisation is [intense](#) even within strong states. It is important to assess political greed and the role it plays in the formation/ destabilisation of governments and electoral politics.

Practitioners and political greed:

The Republic Day violence also showcases important limitations regarding policymakers in India and beyond. First and foremost, the violence should make it clear to the Modi government that it can neither centralize power nor micromanage India's politics. The governments' inefficiency in maintaining law and order in Delhi – and also the party cadres' lack of presence and ability to convince protesting farmers (even of those states governed by the BJP) reveals this fact. In this context, it would also be important to glance at Kashmir; the BJP government has further committed itself to govern the region by furthering grievances and transforming local political elites into insignificant entities.

The violence should also lead the BJP to reconsider its strategy of delegitimizing legitimate grievances. BJP's portraying of protestors as anti-nationals due to political greed, as well as the death of agitating farmers, has led [some protestors](#) to join or not regret the violence caused on Republic Day. Nonetheless, the government has not moved from its no-withdrawal position and continues to deter protestors from entering Delhi. Further, Modi's [mocking](#) of these protestors as Andolan jeevis (individuals living their life through agitations), indicates the sheer lack of lessons learned.

Finally, the BJP government has used the Republic Day violence as an excuse to further silence dissent and criticisms. The government shut down the internet in border areas, arrested youngsters such as Disha Ravi, denied protestors their [basic needs](#) of water, sanitation, and the right to movement, and put forth conspiracies linking dissent to secessionist organisations. This indicates the benefits of political greed and explains why governments refuse to learn their lessons or even repair the damage done. These instances of political greed, however, have substantial implications for Europe and the rest of the West as well.

First and foremost, India will blame the violence on pro-Khalistani organisations, and pressure Western states to crack down on several Sikh organisations. Secondly, if the West decides to stand up for democratic values and comment on India's developments, India will react with harsh diplomatic backlash. India's market and geo-political positioning have placed it as the only Asian rival to China for most of the democratic capitalist West. Thus, it is less likely that India is questioned for the violence. The [UK](#) has already dubbed these protests as India's internal issue, and Canada has already taken a [U-turn](#) and praised India for its management of the protests. In this context, even the EU is likely to be a mute spectator, since it is [distancing](#) itself from both the US and China, and is looking at India as a key partner in its new Indo-Pacific strategy.

The farmer protests in India thus indicate the prominence of political greed in violence, and the lack of motivation amongst political or policymaking circles to learn anything from the phenomenon, much less act against the same. Unlike economic greed wherein the violence's instigators question the existence of the state itself, political greed instigators operate within the loopholes of state mechanisms and intend to govern rather than secede from the state. The instigators are by themselves tentative state-actors who incorporate the same tactics to consolidate electoral and political power and are thus hesitant to act against them. As practitioners willingly overlook violence of these kinds, it is now up to academia to conduct further research on how to limit political greed. Such political greed is a prevailing aspect in several strong states. Thus, academics should consider how to strengthen democratic institutions, international cooperation against hatred and misinformation – and how non-partisan state actors in the executive or judiciary can limit violence and political greed; or even how protestors seeking peaceful dissent can avoid agents of political greed from instigating violence and delegitimizing a fair cause.

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