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India

Palghar protests: 'We won't back down today'

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After nine days of protests the movement of Indian farmers is hitting the headlines [“Crowds Of Indian Farmers Gather For Days To Protest New Agriculture Laws”](#) on NPR, the *New York Times* headlines [“Indian Farmers’ Protests Spread, in Challenge to Modi”](#), and the BBC highlights [“India farmers: The viral image that defines a protest”](#) with a picture of an armed police officer raising a baton to hit an elderly Sikh farmer. Here we have an on the ground report by Shraddha Agarwal from the [“People’s Archive of Rural India”](#).

On November 26, farmers from Adivasi communities gathered for a rasta roka in Maharashtra’s Palghar district, in solidarity with the ongoing protests in Haryana-Delhi, and with their own 21-demand charter.

“We will not back down today,” said Tukaram Valavi. “We are being attacked by this government. If we ask to be given 10 acres of land where we have been cultivating for years, they give us only 10 gunta [a quarter acre]. If we ask for five acres, they will give us three gunta. How will we eat without our land? We have no money, no work and no food.”

Valavi, 61, who is from the Warli Adivasi community and cultivates three acres in a hamlet of Gargaon village in Wada taluka of Palghar district, was at a protest this week along with (an estimated) 3,000 farmers and agricultural labourers from various villages of Palghar, many from the Warli community.

Together, on November 26, they staged a rasta roko at Khandeshwari Naka in Wada against the three new farm [laws](#) passed on September 27, “aimed at the [transformation](#) of agriculture in the country and raising farmers’ income.” These, the government claims, will open up the [agricultural](#) sector to private investors and global markets. The passing of these laws has since September led to widespread protests by farmers – especially in Haryana, Punjab and western Uttar Pradesh.

With all the attention on the pitched battles farmers have fought on the Haryana and Delhi borders in recent days, the protests by their counterparts in many states – in solidarity with their demands, as well as adding on some local ones too – have received little media attention. In Maharashtra, for instance, at least 60,000 people participated in a series of protest actions on November 25-26 across the state – from Nashik to Palghar to Raigad. Even within these districts, the protests have been dispersed across many centres in different talukas.

In Wada this week, Valavi’s pressing concern – land titles – was among the demands at the rally, which was organised by the All India Kisan Sabha (AIKS). It’s a demand that has recurred at several protests by Adivasi farmers in Maharashtra for some years now. Valavi has been doing the rounds of courts for 15 years to get the title for his plot. “In [our] villages, those who cultivate forest land have faced injustice by the forest department,” he said. “We have to fight these cases in court. We don’t have money to pay for our bail. Where will we poor people bring that kind of money from?”

At the November 26 rally, they had a charter of 21 demands, which the farmers presented at the tehsildar’s office in Wada taluka. Almost everyone who came wore masks or covered their faces with scarfs/handkerchiefs, and a few AIKS volunteers distributed masks and soaps to the protesters.

The 21 demands include a withdrawal of the three recently passed farm laws. The other demands cover a wide range, including stricter implementation of the Forest Rights Act ([FRA](#)) of 2006, adequate compensation for crop

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losses due to unseasonal rains, improving the public healthcare system (in the context of Covid-19), and an end to online classes.

The charter also includes a call for income support of Rs. 7,500 for each family, and 10 kilos of rations for each family member for six months during these pandemic times – a demand many farmers at the rally spoke of.

“Some women from our area have to walk for four hours every day to earn an income,” said 54-year-old Rama Tarvi from Kanchad village, an AIKS activist, whose family cultivates rice, jowar, bajra, and wheat on two acres. “They get 200 rupees after working all day. We have land but the forest department does not let us cultivate it. There is already no work during Covid...”

"The [FRA] plots are our only means of livelihood and yet even during Covid they are making us risk our lives and come out to demand [rights to] our plots that we have cultivated for years," said 50-year-old Suganda Jadhav; her family cultivates rice, bajra, urad and millets on two acres. "We have protested and demonstrated so many times, but the government does not listen. The government has forced us to come out on the streets again."

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Source: Shraddha Agarwal from the [“People’s Archive of Rural India”](#).

PS:

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