

A tale of two States

With farm distress becoming a major electoral issue in the run-up to the 2019 Lok Sabha election, **Vikas Pathak** visits two pockets of rural India, Mandsaur in Madhya Pradesh and Jodhpur district in Rajasthan, and finds that the political instincts of the rural voter are not necessarily rooted in agriculture

A few farmers sit huddled near a statue of Sardar Patel at Balaguda village in Mandsaur, Madhya Pradesh pouring out their woes over steaming cups of tea. The statue marks the entry point to the Patidar-dominated village.

One of them, Manoj Patidar, who has just returned from the Mandsaur wholesale market, says that the goods and services tax (GST) and rising prices of diesel have made agriculture a loss-making activity. "If the Shivraj Singh Chouhan government stays for another five years, we will have to sell our lands," says the tall farmer, his wry smile deepening the lines on his weather-worn face.

In another place and State – in Rajasthan – separated by distance as well as priorities, Chhatar Singh Rathore of Tena village in Shergarh tehsil in Jodhpur district has a very different concern.

He runs a roadside dhaba on National Highway 114, which connects Jodhpur to Jaisalmer. His main complaint concerns what he believes to be the wilful disregard of Rajput sentiment. Rajasthan Chief Minister Vasundhara Raje, who is seeking a second consecutive term in office, he says, has humiliated Rajputs by not backing their opposition to the film *Padmaavat*, and also marginalising Manvendra Singh, son of former Union Minister Jaswant Singh, who is a Rajput.

With not much farming visible in the entire region, caste is the primary marker of social identity, unlike in Madhya Pradesh, where locals display a clear sense of identity as farmers. The contrast between Mandsaur and Shergarh points to the differences between two worlds. While both are rural, one is agrarian and the other is dominated by an array of non-farm activities.

On November 30, all eyes were on New Delhi where there was a massive protest by farmers who had gathered from all over the country in the thousands. Opposition leaders such as Congress president Rahul Gandhi, Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal, and CPI (M) general secretary Sitaram Yechury spoke. This event came in the wake of another landmark protest held more than a year ago.

In the middle of last year, farmers' organisations had taken out a rally that touched Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Gujarat and Rajasthan, among other places. The participants also visited Mandsaur, where, a month earlier, five farmers had been killed in police firing. Weighed down by debts, the agitating farmers were demanding loan waivers.

As politics heats up in the run-up to the 2019 Lok Sabha election, the Opposition sees farmer anger as having the potential to dent the prospects of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which has performed well in most State elections held since it came to power in 2014. The reading is not far off the mark. The BJP scraped through in its stronghold of Gujarat in the 2017 Assembly elections, as a result of urban votes. The Congress, on the other hand, did well in rural Gujarat.

However, one was able to get an idea of the situation while travelling through Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan over the last month. In a complex picture, the rural cannot always be conflated with the agrarian.

Long list of woes

Madhya Pradesh today presents a picture of rural discontent that is cementing an amorphous farmers' identity – a sort of occupational consciousness – that the ruling BJP will have to be wary of in the future. But the same does not hold true in Rajasthan, where the rural sector is involved in an array of occupations – from stone mining and animal husbandry to forays into the hospitality sector through highway and city restaurants. There is nothing like a farmer's identity across the vast, parched, swathes of India's largest State by land area.

It takes half an hour to reach Pipliya Mandi, the epicentre of last year's farm unrest, on the road from Mandsaur to Neemuch town in Madhya Pradesh. Mukesh Patidar, a soyabean farmer in his mid-30s, has come to the mandi (wholesale market) to buy agricultural implements. "My village, Chilot Pipliya, which is about 17-18 kilometres from here, saw one farmer become a shaheed (martyr) last year," he says. He adds that soyabean farmers are a distressed lot, with a long list of grievances.

If the fertilizer DAP (Diammonium Phosphate) cost ₹800-900 per 50 kg in 2013-14, it is now priced at ₹1,440 for 45 kg, he says. Potash, which was priced at ₹450 per 50 kg one-two years ago, now costs ₹900 kg, he adds.

"We use tractors to prepare our fields for the crop. They run on diesel, which has gone up from ₹50 a litre to around ₹70 a litre," Patidar says. "And labour charges have also gone up from ₹150-200 to ₹300 a day now. Why will they work for less? They are getting grain at ₹1-2 a kg."

He predicts that the BJP will lose votes in villages around Pipliya Mandi this time. Dilip Patidar, a farm activist who also runs a shop selling various



On the ground: "Madhya Pradesh today presents a picture of rural discontent that is cementing an amorphous farmers' identity." Farmers at a '72 hour satyagraha', in Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh, in 2017, to protest the killing of six farmers in police firing in Mandsaur • A.M. FARUQUI



agricultural goods, says the GST has made things difficult for farmers. He says, "The GST on pesticide is 28% now. These were taxed at 0-4% earlier. Look at the motor that pumps water to fields. It was taxed at 6% earlier but attracts 12% GST now. The pipe to connect the motor to the fields attracted no tax earlier but attracts 12-18% GST now."

All this has made farm inputs dearer. Of the entire area under soyabean cultivation in India, about half is in Madhya Pradesh, the soyabean State of India. The Malwa region, of which Mandsaur is a part, accounts for more than half of M.P.'s cultivation of the kharif crop. Fields are prepared by tractor in the summer months. Renting is the norm for small and medium farmers and tractors are rented out for ₹700 per hour, up from ₹500 because of diesel price hikes. The cost of soyabean seeds, Dilip Patidar says, is ₹5,400 per quintal. Labour charges for sowing as well as harvesting have gone up, he adds.

Electricity bills too have shot up. While it is possible to run a diesel engine instead of an electric motor to pump water into the fields, with diesel prices going up, it is becoming an expensive proposition now as with diesel becoming more expensive, with costs are ₹200 per hour.

The soyabean produce is transported to the mandis (wholesale markets) in Pipliya Mandi, Mandsaur and Neemuch. Here again, transportation is more expensive because of the rise in diesel prices. The present minimum support price (MSP) for soyabean is ₹3,399 per quintal, but it sells in mandis at ₹2,800-3,100 per quintal.

"In 2013-14, the mandi prices had gone up to ₹4,500-5,000 per quintal," says Mukesh Patidar. He blames "faulty" export-import policies for the fall in prices.

Mandi prices keep fluctuating on a demand-and-supply basis, and vary each day. Says a wholesale trader at the Mandsaur Mandi who refuses to be identified, "These are like the stock market. It is partly the luck of the farmer and partly his ability to read trends that determine the price he gets for his produce."

"Look at onions. When prices begin to rise, they import these and the prices fall again," says Dilip Patidar.

Indeed, the interests of farmers and consumers are at odds. When the prices of farm produce rise, the commissions of wholesale traders and other intermediaries in the supply chain push up the retail prices of farm produce. When prices fall, food price inflation ceases to

be a problem but farmers face losses, rendering agriculture unprofitable as an occupation.

For example, at the Ajmer vegetable wholesale market, tomatoes were selling at ₹8 a kg. On the previous two days, 1 kg was selling at ₹10 and ₹12, respectively. Just 2 km away at the retail market, it was selling at ₹20.

The dip in farm fortunes is visibly impacting the politics of Madhya Pradesh, a traditional BJP stronghold, with the Congress clawing back in the villages. The troubles of increased documentation, paperwork and bank payments, – seen by many as a part of the formalisation of the sector and cleaning up of the system – have also annoyed farmers.

The M.P. government has put in place a subsidy scheme called Bhavantar Bhugtan Yojana (BBY), under which the government promises to plug the gap between market prices and the minimum support price (MSP). But to avail it, a farmer has to register himself at an authorised office and produce the required documents at the grain and vegetable market when he goes to sell his produce.

Says Sunil Solanki, a farmer: "Our soyabean crop gets a subsidy of ₹500 a quintal. But for this we have to submit a copy of our documents to the mandi merchant, who submits our farmer code numbers to the official market committee and then credits the money to our accounts, a process which takes between 10 and 15 days." The government subsidy under the BBY, he adds, takes two to three months to get credited to a farmer's bank account. Unlike farmers elsewhere, farmers in M.P. are not paid in cash as everything is digitised.

In other words, say several farmers, they pay in cash for labour, for renting tractors, and to transport the produce, but get paid by bank transfer. The time lag results in a cash crunch. They complain of long queues at markets and banks. Sensing this as an opportunity, Congress leaders have begun to promise cash payments to farmers if voted to power, according to local residents.

Economist Utsa Patnaik says that the coming together of farmers across classes – the poor and the rich – was long overdue. She says: "There has been a

concerted attack on agriculture over the last few decades under the influence of neoliberal policies. There has been a mistaken belief that we should displace farmers and promote industrialisation, and the displaced will be absorbed by industry. The experience of Europe was different. Rather than being absorbed in industry there, the displaced were exported to North America, Australia and South Africa, and they captured the resources there after subduing indigenous people. We don't have that option."

She adds: "The open trade policies have exposed farmers to the highs and lows of global prices, which they cannot withstand. The meaning of priority sector has also changed under the influence of neoliberal policies, and farmers are unable to access low-interest loans. They have to borrow from private lenders at high interest rates and end up in a debt trap. It is only now that people have begun to notice the farm unrest that was waiting to burst forth."

Other sources of income

Few farmers can be seen at the Ajmer wholesale vegetable market after 11 a.m. They come here at 3 a.m. and leave after selling their produce – in return for cash payments – by 9-10 a.m. The mandi lacks the scale of operations or the frenzied activity of, say, the Surat wholesale market or even Azadpur Mandi in Delhi.

The reason is not hard to find. This correspondent's journey through Rajasthan, across 2,100 km, covering Jaipur, Tonk, Ajmer, Sawai Madhopur, Nagaur, Pali and Jodhpur districts, showed farm activity present only in the villages close to Tonk.

Rasoolpuri village, which has high Gujjar and Meena populations, was farmland where mustard is grown.

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UTSA PATNAIK, Economist



A girl fetches water drawn from a hand pump on the outskirts of Harsoli village, in Rajasthan – a task she does thrice a day. • R.V. MOORTHY



Here, farmers complain about rising diesel and fertilizer prices and the limited supply of water, which is available only from 10 p.m. to 4 a.m. The produce, they say, sells at ₹3,200 a quintal, much below the MSP of ₹4,200.

Farmers at a tea stall just outside the village say they will vote for the Congress as they are fed up of having their concerns brushed aside.

But most of rural Rajasthan is a very different world. Villages, even around Jaipur, for miles on end have hardly any farm activity. The better off among villagers have diversified into non-farm activities such as dairy and poultry, while the poor are into animal grazing or work as labourers in construction activities and other sectors.

A 40-minute drive on the Jodhpur-Jaisalmer highway leads to the Balesar-Shergarh belt, an arid, sparsely populated area dotted with Rajput-dominated villages. A detour from the highway down a narrow, broken road reveals what substitutes for farming in this region: stone-mining for the construction sector is in full swing on both sides of the road.

Meghlaia is a village with Meghwal (Scheduled Caste) and Rajpurohit families. The latter, who describe themselves as 'gurus of Rajputs', are Brahmins by caste.

Stone-mining is a key source of income for the villagers. In addition, they also sow bajra (millet) after the first rains in June-July, but the yield is subject to the vagaries of the monsoon rains.

Caste is the marker

Like many other Rajputs who have opened restaurants or dhabas because there is not enough water for farming, Chhatar Singh Rathore of the Rajput-dominated Tena village too runs one on the road towards Jodhpur.

Says Rathore, "Many people in my village run restaurants on the highway. The richer Rajputs also own restaurants in Jodhpur. There are 10 restaurants in the city run by people from my village."

He tries to summarise his village's sources of income: "Our previous generation saw many people join the Indian Army. You will find many ex-servicemen here. This generation has taken to the restaurant-catering sector in a major way. That apart, many from the village have migrated to Surat to join the cloth industry where they specialise in designing and packing. Some even race horses in Dubai."

The Rajput community in the State has gravitated towards the hospitality sector, with heritage hotels and havelis

dotting the State. Many are owned by richer Rajput families. They have a traditional feel and visible 'Rajput markers' such as photographs of men in traditional attire holding a sword or rifle. A lot of them try to attract foreign tourists.

This non-farm rural world is in sharp contrast to that of M.P., where an occupational identity centred on farming is being forged. In Shergarh tehsil of Jodhpur, caste remains the prominent identity marker, with cultural issues occupying centre stage.

Rathore is unhappy with the Rajasthan government for not standing behind Rajputs on the film *Padmaavat*. He complains that Vasundhara Raje got the entrance to the Raj Mahal Palace in Jaipur sealed to target former royal Diya Kumari, and also humiliated the family of BJP veteran Jaswant Singh.

In Tibna village, about 90 km from Jodhpur, water supply poses an acute problem. Sarpanch Bhawani Singh Rathore points to a dry hand pump which is wrapped in a sack cloth. The village has houses placed wide apart, and is populated longitudinally, one house after another for a few kilometres. It has just 300 families, says the sarpanch, of which 150 are Rajput. Other than water, villagers also complain about the lack of school teachers in the local government school. However, despite their various frustrations, they do not think of themselves as aggrieved farmers. Caste remains the key marker of identity and status.

"You find three types of scenarios," says political analyst and author Sajjan Kumar. "The first is Madhya Pradesh, where agriculture is linked to the market, with cash crops such as soyabean and cotton. Here, farming is under stress because of a fall in market prices and the impact of demonetisation. The second is seen in agrarian States such as Bihar and Uttar Pradesh (excluding western U.P.). Their agriculture is not linked to the market, with mainly food crops such as rice and wheat being produced. An arid State such as Rajasthan presents a third scenario, where agriculture is not central to rural life."

He explains the significance of these diverse realities: "An occupational identity, where people identify as farmers, is emerging in States of the first kind, such as M.P., Maharashtra and Gujarat. In States such as U.P. and Bihar, while agriculture is central to rural life, caste and religion remain dominant identity markers in the absence of strong market linkages of agriculture. In Rajasthan, in the near absence of agriculture as a key rural vocation, identity markers are still tied to caste."

Rathore's sentiments lend credence to this hypothesis. "I have no problem with [Prime Minister] Narendra Modi. He says we should sell pakodas if we can and I have been doing so at my restaurant," he says. "My problem is with Vasundhara Raje. Rajputs will try to ensure a victory for Manvendra Singh at Jhalrapatan. What is a Rajput without self-respect?"