

A visual record

A Bengaluru-based documentary film-maker captures the various aspects of the farmers' protest and the camaraderie they displayed at Delhi's borders. BY VIKHAR AHMED SAYEED



PHOTOGRAPHS: BY SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

IN JUNE 2020, WHEN THE NARENDRA MODI government promulgated three ordinances that eventually went on to become the three contentious Central farm laws, Kesari Haravoo, a Bengaluru-based Kannada documentary film-maker, began to pay attention to the nascent agitation by farmers' groups in Punjab and Haryana against the laws. This was not surprising because Haravoo has an abiding interest in agrarian issues especially those concerning the plight of farmers in India. He has made several films on agricultural and environmental themes in his four-decade-long career. His debut feature film, *Bhoomigeetha*, which portrayed the plight of a tribal people and their displacement owing to the construction of a dam won the National Film Award for Environment Conservation/Preservation in 1998.

Haravoo followed the course of the farm laws from the time they were drafted and finally passed in Parliament in September 2020. At the same time, he kept a close watch on the increasing opposition to the laws by farmers. When thousands of farmers from Punjab and Haryana began to converge on Delhi and were denied permission to enter the capital city on November 26 last

A STILL FROM THE FILM 'Kisan Satyagraha: Tremors of Change?' by film-maker Kesari Haravoo (below).





THE FILM SHOWS how the protesters were galvanised early on from the rural parts of Punjab and Haryana. (Right) Women protesters rolling out rotis at the protest site.

year, Haravoo decided he *had* to make a film on the historic movement of the farmers. Crowdsourcing the initial tranche of funds that were required for the filming, Haravoo set off for Delhi along with his cameraman Praveenkumar N. and landed at the protest site of Singhu on December 4.

“I was at the protest sites of Singhu, Tikri and Ghazipur through December as I chronicled the courageous protests of the farmers,” said Haravoo. He returned to the sites in January to film the tense atmosphere that prevailed there around the time of Republic Day when a group of farmers broke through the cordons at the Red Fort in Delhi. Haravoo went back to Delhi for a third time in April this year, and during this trip, he shifted the focus from the protest sites to the agricultural lands in the hinterlands of Haryana and Punjab where he shot extensively in an attempt to under-



stand the impact the three pieces of legislation would have on agriculturists.

Haravoo’s peregrinations with his camera have resulted in a documentary film on the farmers’ protest. While the Kannada and English versions of the 86-minute film are ready, a Hindi version will be completed soon, says Haravoo. The film, which is titled *Kisan Satyagrah: Tremors of Change?*, is dedicated to all the farmers who lost their lives in the course of their gritty protest, and is bookended by two events. The first event was the brutal manner in which farmers were prevented from entering Delhi on November 26, 2020, when they were assaulted with tear gas shells and water cannons. Ironically, this display of state power on a peaceful protest took place on Constitution Day, which is observed on November 26. The film ends with the mowing down of a group of farmers in Lakhimpur Kheri in Uttar Pradesh on October 3, 2021, allegedly by Ashish Mishra, son of Union Minister of Minister of State for Home Affairs, Ajay Mishra. Between these two events, which are separated by almost a year, the film chronicles the farmers’ protest demonstrating the spirited resistance of the participants in the face of the many hurdles and wanton instances of humiliation.

The attempt at delegitimising the protest started as soon as the farmers reached Delhi and camped at its borders. Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leaders called the protesters ‘Khalistanis’. M.L. Khattar, Chief Minister of Haryana, was quick to categorise the protesters as “unwanted elements”. This attempt continued over the next few months. Union Minister Piyush Goel went to the extent of saying that “Maoists and naxalites have infiltrated the protest movement”, while his colleague Ravi Shankar Prasad referred to the protesters as members of the “tukde tukde gang”. Even Prime Minister Modi mocked the protesters as *andolanjeevis* who were inspired by “FDI”, or, in his words, ‘foreign destructive ideology’.

The film shows how the protesters were galvanised early on from the rural parts of Punjab and Haryana, undeterred by the vicious propaganda. Dr Darshan Pal, leader of the All India Kisan Sangharsh Coordination Committee (AIKSCC), says in the film: “Farmers in this country were already fighting on two issues, one is indebtedness and the other is the issue of minimum support price. When these ordinances were promulgated, we immediately asked our economist friends to study it.” The film explains how farmer leaders got the ordinances translated into Punjabi and discussed the issue with peasants at the village level, making them realise that the ordinances will sound the death knell for small, marginalised and landless farmers.

Voices of ordinary farmers, apart from the leadership, form an important component of the film, showing how the minutiae of the ordinances (later Acts) were understood comprehensively by the smallest tiller of the land. A farmer from Agra, for instance, explains the contents of the three laws in detail. He says: “The three laws are not for the welfare of farmers but for the benefit

of corporates. Why are you imposing this on us?” The answer, Haravoo’s film argues, lies in international economic developments and the dense networks forged between global capitalism, the Indian government, and its crony capitalists in India. The World Economic Forum, with its mandate of providing a new vision for agriculture, is an important cog in this complicated transnational push for privatisation of all aspects of agriculture.

P. Sainath, winner of the Ramon Magsaysay Award and India’s foremost agrarian affairs journalist, put it succinctly in the film: “These laws are pretty much an extension of a process that this country embarked on in 1991 in the name of the new economic policies and economic reforms which is the worst abuse of the word ‘reforms’. These are laws that are tailor-made for specific Indian capitalist groups. In fact, I would suggest that some of their representatives had a hand in drafting [these laws] because even before the laws were adopted in Parliament, some of the groups were already building silos for storage [of agricultural produce].” In fact, Modi had stated that the laws were “essential for making of a new India”. By juxtaposing Sainath’s and the farmers’ statements with Modi’s, the film intelligently critiques the Prime Minister’s justifications for the three laws that are revealed to be flawed as the situation on the ground shows in the film.

Haravoo and his cameraman accompanied the tractors on January 26 when farmers took out a ‘tractor parade’ and were thus able to capture the sombre mood that prevailed at the protest sites after a renegade group of farmers burst through the security cordons at the Red Fort and hoisted the Nishan Sahib, the Sikh religious flag. After the violence that took place in the precincts of the national monument, questions were raised about the continuation of the protest, with one faction formally withdrawing from it.

Speaking to *Frontline*, Haravoo recalled the intense distrust that suddenly enveloped the farmers at the protest sites after the events of January 26. “The farmers used to welcome us warmly, but all of a sudden they became suspicious of anyone with a camera. After we identified ourselves, they were convinced that we were not part of the *godis* [lapdog] media that toe the line of the BJP government. After that, they were once again their hospitable self.”

VALUABLE DOCUMENTATION

The farmers’ protest is a historic movement and has many lessons for democracy. Haravoo’s film is a valuable documentation of a people’s movement and the determination and also deep distrust of the agitating farmers and the dismay of the Union government. At one point in the film, a protesting farmer with bloodshot eyes screams, “Modi says that we are not farmers. We are not farmers! There is an insecticide called Lambda 5%, apply it on us and the BJP Ministers and then we will find out who are farmers? There is itching for three days when that insecticide touches the skin!” The powerful scene

captures the indignant mood of the protesters.

While focussing on the larger aspects of the protest, Haravoo does not forget to give the viewer unforgettable visages from the quotidian lives of the protesters, immortalising the beauty and nobility that marked the significant struggle. Impromptu towns had come up at each of the protest sites, and it is revealing to see how the protesters went about their daily lives, interspersed as they were with hectoring speeches and intense discussions. Some of the scenes are evocative: A farmer trims his twirled moustache looking at a broken rear view mirror of a vehicle; a group of Sikhs praying reverently; protesters waiting in line for the food served by the *langar*, a community kitchen; men and women flipping rotis on make-shift stoves; an elderly farmer swaddled in a blanket at the peak of the north Indian winter before retiring for the night in his trolley; a Nihang swathed in his trademark cerulean blue singing as he gently massages a white stallion, and so on.

FEELING OF KINSHIP

Haravoo captures the deep camaraderie displayed by the protesters. And this feeling of kinship stands out in the film. Haravoo observed: “Farmers from Haryana and Punjab, who often squabble over the sharing of the waters of the Sutlej Yamuna Link Canal surmounted their differences as they recognised the larger issue at stake and came together. Dalits and women, who are often victims of the decisions of khap panchayats, a feudal institution in the Hindi belt, also joined the farmers to raise slogans such as ‘Kisan Mazdoor Ekta Zindabad’! I came across several such instances where a Punjabi would be seen holding hands with a Muslim who in turn would be surrounded by a farmer from Bundelkhand or Tamil Nadu. They were all in this together. I relished the unity in diversity that was on display in this agitation.”

When his opinion was sought about the significance of the farmers movement, now that the Central government has decided to repeal the three laws, Haravoo was sceptical of the BJP government’s moves. “This is only the beginning of the victory for the farmers and the responsibility of the agitation has grown tenfold because I have a strong feeling that the large corporates that brought pressure on the government to enact the three laws will not stay quiet. Agriculture is a State subject, and I suspect that similar laws will be introduced in BJP-ruled States,” Haravoo said.

Haravoo’s film is not yet available for viewing on a public platform, but screenings of the movie have been planned in various cities. “I hope to screen the movie on an OTT [over the top] platform soon and also plan to send it to international film festivals,” Haravoo said.

He has already started planning for the second part of the film, which he said would be about the “opportunities and challenges that an Indian farmer faces in practising long-term sustainable agriculture”. This, according to Haravoo, is an important theme “because of deteriorating environmental conditions globally and increasing globalisation and privatisation”. □