

## From New Delhi by Susan Maitra

### Rumbles from rural India

*Angry farmers rose in Meerut to challenge a smug government in February, and promise that it is only the beginning.*

**D**uring February a new regiment, the western Uttar Pradesh-based Bharatiya Kisan Union (BKU), entered the growing ranks of organized and increasingly angry farmers. Though the BKU agitation is over for the time being, the prospect of expanded farmer mobilization in the coming months makes it likely that the lid may finally be blown off the open secret of Delhi's vice-regal relationship to 80% of India's population who live and work in backwardness and poverty in the villages and rural areas.

From Jan. 27 through Feb. 20, from 50,000 to, at its high point, 600,000 farmers under the banner of the BKU occupied the Divisional Commissioner's office in Meerut. It was one of the biggest and best disciplined agitations since the farmers' movement came on the scene during the 1970s. The action put the BKU, formed in 1978 and led by a Jat farmer, Mahendra Singh Tikait, firmly on the map.

"These people who read in English schools and sit in cities have not looked to us for the last 40 years and have no right to rule us," Tikait told a roaring crowd in Meerut, drawn from Punjab, Rajasthan, Jammu and Kashmir, and Bihar as well as Uttar Pradesh (UP). "They have to listen to us now."

The protest in Meerut was over a charter of 35 demands that had been the basis for a series of local actions throughout 1987. In an interview, Tikait described their "minimum demands": "Better educational facilities, remunerative prices for farm produce, including sugar cane on the basis of sugar recovery, and drought re-

lief where justified. We know corrupt government employees won't allow cash relief to reach us, so let the power bills be waived. Those who don't use power for irrigation should get subsidized fertilizer."

Significantly, the protest has arisen in western UP, one of the regions that benefitted from the Green Revolution in the 1960s and 1970s, and, as a food surplus area, has become a mainstay of the nation's food supply.

In spite of smokescreens about farmers who "cashed in" on the Green Revolution and are now demanding more, and government statistics on power and poverty, India's farm economy is in serious trouble. It is not some sudden crisis, though drought has helped to push it to the fore. The problem is a lack, across the board, of basic infrastructure: power, water, transportation, storage, marketing systems, and low-cost credit.

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As a consequence, productivity has stagnated, even in the most advanced areas, and farm production remains generally in a quasi-subsistence mode. The farmers' bitter complaint that the cost of production has gone up faster than either yields or product prices, is but a reflection of the stagnation of productivity.

The BKU agitation, for instance, centers on power. Not only is the supply irregular and at odd hours, but the

farmers are made to pay in money, time, and physical labor for every moment it is there at all. When transformers break down at the local substation, the farmers must disconnect them and carry them to the state electricity board workshop at their own cost. There, the farmers have to bribe officials to get them repaired before carting them back again. As many as 400 transformers have been simultaneously out of order in UP, for as long as 2-4 months, according to a member of the UP state legislature.

On top of that, the farmers are billed not by actual power used, but by flat rates according to the horsepower of their equipment!

Or, take low-cost credit. For reasons of bureaucracy and political corruption, it is impossible to get credit in a timely fashion. Farmers are driven to the moneylender, suffering 20-25% rates of interest to get their crops into the ground on time. The "low-cost" government loan (at 10%!) can only partially pay off the moneylender.

Even where the basics are adequate, a lack of transport and marketing infrastructure prevents producers from diversifying their output.

The BKU lifted their siege of Meerut after 25 days, with state and central governments refusing to entertain their demands. Both the Congress government in UP and the ruling party's central spokesmen tried to dismiss the affair as narrow and selfishly motivated, "not a general farmers movement." It is the type of imperial response that can only fuel the fire.

There is no doubt that the farmers' vow of further action is not hollow. And, perhaps because they spurn the politicians almost universally (Tikait refused to allow any of the prominent well-wishers on the podium in Meerut), the farmers promise to become an increasingly potent political force in their own right.