Twitter Thread by Baz Ramaiah



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Why have 300 million people been protesting in India? A few people have asked me about this so thought I'd offer a handy summary thread (1/22)

Small farmers make up 60% of India's working population and are routinely romanticized as the backbone of the country. Nonetheless, decades of policy have given them a raw deal (2/22)

From the 1960s, innovations in agriculture (like pesticides and GM seeds) massively increased food production in India. But they also increased the need for small farmers to take out loans to pay for expensive seeds and equipment so they could produce competitively. (3/22)

These loans, with punitive repayment programmes, have dragged much of the farming population into debt spirals that have led to increased poverty, loss of dignity and, most notably, 300,000 suicides (4/22)

Against this background of farmer disempowerment, the ruling party in India, the BJP, tried to stealth pass three bills that would liberalise the agricultural sector and make farmers even worse off than they are right now (5/22)

In response, small groups of farmers started organizing in the Punjab in August. Following suit, smaller local protests sprung up around the country in the ensuring months. Large unions began mounting bigger demonstrations in September (6/22)

What's interesting about the bills is that they screw over poorer, small farmers as well as wealthier ones. By attacking the whole sector, the government has forced cross-strata solidarity that has allowed these protests to be as big and well-organised as they are. (7/22)

By November, with protests ignored, tens of thousands marched on Delhi and were violently suppressed outside the city with tear gas and water cannons. Unperturbed, around 300,000 protestors set up camp outside Delhi and have been there ever since. (8/22)

At the same time, the major unions of India declared a 24-hour general strike, leading to 250 million joining industrial action in solidarity with the farmers (9/22)

All of this forced the government to the table where they capitulated on some of the most unpopular elements of the new bills. But this was deemed insufficient by the movement's leaders and protests continued (10/22)

Farmers around Delhi (and throughout the country) have continued to block roads using tractors. They have been supported by thousands who were drawn into activism by India's Citizenship Amendment Bill in 2019 that discriminated against Muslims. (11/22)

Camped outside Delhi, farmers have been running Sikh langar to ensure everyone is equally fed and watered. The largely pro-government press in India have accused the protestors of being unpatriotic and contributing to COVID-19 by being camped together (12/22)

However, the plunging COVID-19 statistics in the country tell a different story. And India was a country that was born less than a century ago out of protests against unchecked and unjust power. Nothing could be more Indian than opposition to oppression. (13/22)

Anyway, protests escalated in the middle of January when 100s stormed the symbolic Red Fort in Delhi, where the Indian flag was first hoisted on India's independence in 1947 (14/22)

At the same time, huge protests brought one of the most densely populated cities on the planet to a standstill. Farmers have since started to go further and engage in hunger strikes in their thousands until their demands to have the bills completed repealed are met (15/22)

Throughout the process, the BJP have been showing off their fascistic tendencies. Indian media stations are heavily dependent on government advertising revenue so have acted as broadcasters for the establishment's anti-protest messaging (16/22)

Military tactics have been used by the police to try and disperse peaceful protestors and to sow dissent. Police have used facial recognition software to hunt leaders. Most shockingly, the internet has been routinely suspended throughout Delhi and the state it is based in (17/22)

India currently leads the world in suspension of internet access, especially after blacking out Kashmir for nearly a year. It's hard to deny that the BJP are practicing anti-democracy – in a country that proudly touts itself as the world's largest democracy. (18/22)

So what next? India's new budget, announced yesterday, features nothing to appease farmers directly. The promise of increased public spending on roads and hospitals may give the economy a boost, shifting aggregate demand in a way that tempts wealthier farmers to desist (19/22)

Equally, India's new vaccine programme may be used as a carrot to lead some of the protestors back home in exchange for medical support. (20/22)

But, both these outcomes are unlikely. 70% of Indians are vaccine-sceptical and the commitment of farmers to these protests has endured remarkable challenges already. Numbers in the air are unlikely to do much to their resolve (21/22)

How can we help? The protests are showing the world the power of organized labour and exposing the BJP as authoritarian . We need to support the protestors by describing the BJP as anti-democratic and fascist as comfortably as we do the ruling parties of other countries. (22/22)