

The Paradox of Mobilization Capacity: Coalition Formation in Divided Movements

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Abstract. Prior studies show that shared characteristics or incentives can foster collaboration among social movement organizations. Yet, in divided movements, where organizations are anchored in distinct social constituencies shaped by historical inequality and conflict (e.g., race, ethnicity, or class), coalitions remain rare even when interests align. In such movements, organizations face two enduring barriers to collaboration: fears of domination by more powerful organizations and the risk of losing legitimacy with their core social base and the broader movement. Drawing on the Indian farmers' movement, where hundreds of organizations formed coalitions in 2017 despite persistent caste, class, and ideological divisions, I examine the conditions that weaken these barriers. Using process tracing and evidence from interviews (~200), participant observation (~20), and secondary sources, I argue that organizations' capacity to mobilize from their respective social constituencies has a paradoxical effect on collaboration in divided movements. When organizations mobilize at scale, their capacity to dominate others and their susceptibility to pressure from their own base increase, thereby inhibiting collaboration. Conversely, when mobilization capacity is low, barriers weaken, facilitating coalition formation. This study identifies a collective action dilemma in divided contexts: strategies that strengthen individual organizations can simultaneously weaken the overall movement.

Introduction

In the 1970s and 1980s, large-scale mobilizations brought the farmers movement to the national stage in India. Organizations across regions demanded greater influence over agricultural policy to improve income opportunities while confronting police repression. Despite shared economic pressures and risks, the movement remained divided along caste, class, and ideological lines. Repeated attempts to build coalitions collapsed. But between 2014 and 2022, a comparable wave of mobilizations emerged with a remarkable degree of unity, characterized by coalitions comprising hundreds of organizations from diverse social and regional backgrounds. These coalitions successfully placed demands for better output prices and relief from growing debt on the political and media agenda and secured policy change against the government that has driven the authoritarian turn in the world's largest democracy since 2014. The emergence of these powerful coalitions, despite the persistence of divisions within the movement and widespread conflict in the broader countryside, raises the question: What conditions facilitated coalitions in the recent phase of the Indian farmers' movement, and what does this case tell us about coalition formation in divided movements more generally?

Most existing work explains coalition formation as arising from shared characteristics or from incentives created by external threats and opportunities. Convergences in identity, interests, or ideology, or ties across organizations, can enable coalitions by producing shared commitments, goals, or values (Van Dyke and Amos 2017). Political or economic threats may compel coalition building by uniting organizations around shared risks (Staggenborg 1986). Political opportunities,

such as alliances with political elites, can incentivize collaboration by increasing the perceived chance of success (Brooker and Meyer 2018).

In divided movements, organizations are anchored in distinct social constituencies shaped by historical inequality and conflict. In such settings, coalitions often remain elusive even when goals and interests align (Lichterhan 1995). Two barriers constrain collaboration. First, organizations may fear domination by more powerful actors. Power asymmetries intensify conflict and raise concerns that stronger organizations will set the movement agenda to their own advantage (Barkan 1986). Second, collaborating across divides may weaken an organization's legitimacy with its own social base and marginalize it within a movement that prioritizes organizing around distinct constituencies (Tilly 1999; Gillham and Edwards 2011). The key analytical question, then, is when and how these barriers weaken—an issue that existing scholarship has largely left unaddressed.

Drawing on a process-tracing design and data from fieldwork and secondary sources, I argue that in divided movements, organizations' mobilization capacity—the size of the constituencies they can mobilize—has a paradoxical effect on coalition formation. I demonstrate that farmer organizations experienced a marked decline in mobilization capacity between 1990 and 2017, and that this decline weakened barriers and made coalitions feasible. Specifically, I show that as organizations became less capable of mobilizing large segments of their caste groups, their ability to shape movement agendas diminished, reducing fears of domination among other organizations. Reduced mobilization capacity also lowered accountability pressures from organizations' social bases, giving leaders greater flexibility to engage in low-risk collaborations. A small number of organizations that mobilized beyond particular caste and class lines also gained prominence,

legitimizing collaboration and serving as bridge builders in a setting where no dominant organization could sanction them. While police repression and adverse economic policies occasionally intensified coordination already underway, their presence across multiple phases of the movement indicates that they were not the primary drivers of coalition formation. Support from political elites, however, reinforced organizational competition and divisions rather than facilitating collaboration.

Coalition building across enduring social divides remains one of the central challenges of collective action. Movements as diverse as the Civil Rights Movement, the women's movement of the 1970s and 1980s, and contemporary environmental mobilizations have faced persistent barriers to collaboration (Morris 1984; Luders 2010; Roth 2010; Lewis Jr. et al. 2021). In many cases, difficulty sustaining coalitions has limited their capacity to secure policy change or mount resilient challenges (Ferree and Roth 1998; Gelb and Shogan 2005). By examining when and how barriers to collaboration weaken despite enduring divisions, this study offers a way to navigate what Bystydzienski and Schacht (2001) describe as the "wilderness" of cross-divide collaboration. In doing so, it identifies a collective action dilemma: strategies that build independent organizational strength may intensify divisions and fragment collective efforts, whereas collaboration among individually weaker organizations can generate durable and politically consequential power.

Barriers to collaboration in divided movements

Existing scholarship largely explains coalition formation as emerging from shared characteristics or from external threats and opportunities that create incentives for collaboration. Shared identities or interests can foster collaboration by engendering common values and goals, and deliberate framing processes can cultivate collective identities (McCammon and Campbell 2002; Ganz 2009). Individuals with ties across organizations can act as “bridge builders,” affirming shared commitments between disparate organizations (Rose 2000). Political threats such as police repression can push divided groups to sidestep their differences to manage shared risks or rally against a common opponent (Chang 2008), while adverse economic policies can create a sense of shared loss that helps bridge gaps between organizations (Obach 2004). Openings in the political system, such as the presence of elite allies or favorable policy shifts, can encourage coalitions by increasing the perceived chances of success (Van Dyke 2003).

However, when organizations are anchored in distinct social constituencies shaped by historical inequality and conflict, they often begin from divergent and sometimes even adversarial positions, making common ground difficult to activate or sustain (Gamson 1990). Limited alignment among organizations can also hinder the development of shared resource infrastructures critical for coordinating responses to threats and opportunities (Almeida 2018). Further, the impact of such external shocks may vary across organizations, as prevailing relational dynamics and broader social context shapes interpretation and perception (Kadivar 2013): what one organization perceives as an opportunity may appear as a threat to another (Zajak and Haunss 2022). Studies find that even when organizations have overlapping interests or goals, coalitions across divides are

rare (Lichterhan 1995; Lewis Jr. et al. 2021). How can we then understand coalition formation in divided movements?

Typically, organizations within the same social movement are assumed to compete for resources, members, and attention while drawing from a common pool of potential supporters (McCarthy and Zald 1977). Nothing in this framework prevents one organization from appealing to another's social constituency if doing so is advantageous. In divided movements, however, organizations are anchored in groups marked by long-standing inequality and conflict (Schock 2015). These socially embedded ties shape how organizations interpret one another's actions and define allies and adversaries (Beamish and Luebbbers 2009). Because organizations depend on support and legitimacy from their own social bases, cross-boundary appeals carry reputational and relational costs. Collaboration therefore requires navigating constraints that limit when and how organizations can align, even when alignment would be strategically beneficial.

Specifically, there are two enduring barriers to collaboration in divided movements. First, *fears of domination* arise because organizations tied to distinct social constituencies shaped by historical conflict and inequality can reproduce broader social cleavages within the movement. These cleavages can foster strong us–them dynamics, raising concerns that powerful actors will set agendas or monopolize gains (Barkan 1986; Bystydzienski and Schacht 2001). Second, *legitimacy risks* emerge when collaboration with other organizations threatens an organization's standing with its own base or within the broader movement (Tilly 1999; Gillham and Edwards 2011). Leaders remain accountable to their core social base; crossing these social boundaries can invite sanction, enable rivals to discredit them, and jeopardize their standing within the movement.

Both these barriers operate as boundary mechanisms that regulate how divisions within divided movements are sustained (Lamont and Molnar 2002). The enforcement and salience of these mechanisms may vary across contexts (Tilly 2004). When barriers weaken, interactions between organizations can create space for collaboration despite enduring divisions in the broader context (Emirbayer and Goodwin 1994). Organizations can identify ways to collaborate while maintaining their differences (Strolovitch 2008; Whittier 2018), including low-risk partnerships that allow coordination with minimum alignment (Baldassarri and Diani 2007). Over time, such coordination can foster understandings, ties, or institutional arrangements that mitigate conflict and stabilize collaboration (Lichterhan 1999; Armstrong 2002; Ghaziani and Baldassarri 2011). Collaboration across divides therefore becomes possible not when barriers disappear, but when they *weaken*. The next section develops a theoretical account of one such condition.

The paradox of mobilization capacity in divided movements

I argue that within divided movements, organizations' mobilization capacity—the size of the social constituencies they can mobilize—shapes the strength and enforcement of the two barriers to collaboration (fears of domination and legitimacy risks), producing a paradoxical effect on coalition formation. When organizations can mobilize large numbers from their core social constituencies, they heighten fears of domination among others. Organizations with greater numbers can influence movement agendas and policy outcomes and can credibly claim to speak on behalf of the movement (Lipsky 1968). High capacity also intensifies legitimacy pressures. Leaders who represent large constituencies are visibly accountable and face strong incentives to

defend group-based interests to maintain recognition from their own social base and the broader movement (Bandy and Smith 2005). Simply put, high mobilization capacity may strengthen individual organizations, but that very strength can reinforce division and conflict in movements organized across enduring social divisions.

In contrast, when organizations can mobilize only a small segment of their respective groups, they lack the ability to shape movement dynamics or to credibly threaten others' interests, which reduces fears of domination (Jha 2022). Competition between organizations may still emerge, especially where organizations operate in the same regions, but limited mobilization keeps such conflict localized rather than movement-defining (Oliver 2017; Okamoto 2003). Organizations are also less able to enforce dominant norms or activate boundary-sanctioning behavior, relaxing expectations about who can organize—and how (Ray 2000; Fligstein and McAdam 2011). Thus, by weakening the barriers to collaboration, relative organizational weakness can reduce divisions and expand the possibilities for collaboration in divided movements.

Case, Methods and Data

The Indian farmers movement

The Indian farmers' movement operates within a countryside characterized by profound social, economic, and ecological diversity. Indian agriculture sustains the livelihoods of more than 650 million people living in 600,000 villages.¹ Agrarian production in India spans 15 agro-ecological

¹ Government of India report:
https://mospi.gov.in/sites/default/files/Statistical_year_book_india_chapters/Ch_8_SYB2017.pdf

zones.² This ecological diversity produces highly varied cropping patterns across regions, and the sale and purchase of crops are shaped by nearly 7000 local political economy contexts.³ Average landholdings vary across states, but nearly 90 percent of farmers cultivate less than two hectares.⁴ The broader agrarian sector includes landowning cultivators, tenant farmers, sharecroppers, and agricultural laborers whose interests do not always align with each other. Most importantly, the Indian countryside is deeply shaped by the caste system—a pernicious, hierarchical, and heterogeneous social order that directly shapes land ownership, inter-group relations, and rural politics (Jodhka 2022; Pandey 2025). Caste networks serve as key resources for political organizing, including within the farmers’ movement. Farmer organizations often draw support from specific caste constituencies, even when framed in class or ideological terms. The farmers’ movement is thus a divided movement, composed of organizations anchored in distinct caste, class, and ideological constituencies shaped by historical inequality and conflict.

During the 1970s and 1980s, when the farmers’ movement first came onto the national stage with large-scale mobilizations, organizations reflected what is typically expected in divided movements. They engaged in “competition for domination, more than coordination” (Nadkarni 1987, p. 100). Organizations representing relatively higher-caste, landowning cultivators regularly opposed the interests of laborers, smallholders, and those lower in the caste hierarchy, and often undermined groups with party or explicit ideological affiliations (Banaji 1994). Rivalries were intense even among organizations from the same region and those that had overlapping goals or

² <https://krishijagran.com/explainers/indias-agro-climatic-zones-a-comprehensive-overview/>

³ These local political economy contexts are shaped by district- and state-level governing institutions and by government-regulated agricultural markets (APMC mandis), which number roughly 7,000 across the country. <https://www.indiabudget.gov.in/budget2015-2016/es2014-15/echapvol1-08.pdf>, <https://krishijagran.com/explainers/indias-agro-climatic-zones-a-comprehensive-overview/>

⁴ <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleaseIframePage.aspx?PRID=1910357®=3&lang=2>

were similar in caste hierarchy (Singh 1992; Bentall and Corbridge 1996). After repeated efforts to build coalitions failed during this period (Rana 1994; Omvedt 2005), India's conflicting "multiple rural selves" were thought to prevent a unified movement from forming (Varshney 1998, p. 5).

However, between 2014 and 2022, there was a resurgence of large-scale mobilizations, marked by a notable degree of unity from the outset. Around 30 organizations began coordinating soon after the new central government took office in 2014 to protest the Land Acquisition Bill (Singh 2020a).⁵ By early 2017, at least three inter-state farmer networks⁶ were active, and inter-group collaboration was rising within states. These efforts culminated in the formation of the All India Kisan Sangharsh Coordination Committee (AIKSCC) in July 2017, which eventually brought together nearly 200 organizations.⁷ In November 2020, five other networks joined AIKSCC to form a supra coalition,⁸ the Samyukta Kisan Morcha (SKM), which represented more than 400 organizations from 20 states, spanning diverse caste, class, and ideological groups.

The formation of these large, diverse coalitions is striking because the underlying divisions within the movement persist. Organizations remain divided along caste, class, and ideological lines (Lerche 2021; Singh 2022). Inter-caste and class conflict within the broader Indian countryside also continues: according to the National Crimes Records Bureau of India, there were 13,942

⁵ By 2015–16, coordination expanded through the Sukanu Samiti in Maharashtra, a network of 32 farmer groups in Punjab and 18 in Haryana.

⁶ These were the All-India Kisan Coordination Committee (AIKCC), the Rashtriya Kisan Mazdoor Mahasangh (RKMM), and an informal alliance among leaders from Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra, and Uttar Pradesh.

⁷ In July 2017, two inter-state networks, AIKCC and an informal network between leaders from Uttar Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, and Maharashtra, formed the AIKSCC.

⁸ These included 32 Punjab-based organizations, 18 organizations from Haryana, 65 affiliated with the RKMM, and some with the Bharatiya Kisan Union (Tikait) (BKU-T), and Bharatiya Kisan Union (Ekta Ugrahan) (BKU-EU).

agrarian and 4,984 caste-based conflicts just between 2016 and 2020. These coalitions therefore emerged despite enduring divisions and conflict, making the farmers' movement a particularly revealing case for studying collaboration across entrenched social divides. This case also extends theories of coalition formation to a movement in which organizations are anchored in distinct and conflictual groups, rather than the shared partisan or ideological milieus emphasized in much of the existing literature. It also broadens the scope of research beyond its predominant focus on North America and Europe to India, where political mobilization is intense and social divisions endure, yet coalition dynamics remain understudied.

Process-tracing framework

The unit of analysis in this study is coalitions within the Indian farmers' movement, composed of socially diverse organizations from across India. To explain why and how coalition formation emerged in 2017 but not earlier within the same case, I employ a process-tracing design suited to within-case temporal comparisons (Mahoney 2012). Specifically, I use the 1970s and 1980s as an analytically comparable baseline, when divisions were similarly entrenched but coalitions did not form, and compare this period with the post-2014 phase when coalitions did emerge. The inferential leverage comes from tracing the temporal sequence and variation across time for all possible explanations, and adjudicating which explains best the timing and scope of the outcome.

As theorized above, my primary proposition is that coalition formation in divided movements occurs when barriers to collaboration are low. I identify fears of domination and legitimacy risks as the two key barriers linking enduring social divisions and coalition formation. I further argue

that low mobilization capacity operates as a facilitating condition that enables the reduction in barriers to collaboration. Therefore, the proposed causal sequence is as follows: low mobilization capacity reduces fears of domination and legitimacy risks, which in turn makes coalition formation possible. Throughout my analysis, I pay attention to whether reductions in barriers preceded sustained coordination rather than emerging as its consequence.

Additionally, I assess police repression, adverse economic policies, and political opportunity as alternative explanations. These factors warrant empirical scrutiny because of their presence prior to coalition formation. I evaluate them by tracing how they evolved across both periods and assessing whether they independently account for coalition formation in the Indian farmers' case.

Data collection

Explaining coalition formation within the Indian farmers' movement requires evidence on how organizational leaders described their own and others' mobilization strength, how relationships among organizations evolved over time, how collaboration was negotiated with their social bases, and how state responses and policies shaped their activities. Such information is not available in any systematic form. There is no comprehensive record of farmer organizations, leaders, or protest events in India, and even identifying relevant organizations required navigating multiple linguistic and regional contexts. Data collection was further complicated because part of the fieldwork coincided with the Covid-19 pandemic and periods of intense state repression. During these times, travel restrictions, arrests, surveillance shaped leaders' movement and therefore their accessibility, and the conditions under which conversations could take place. As a result, assembling a

theoretically meaningful sample across diverse regional and social settings required deliberate and strategic selection.

Beginning in the summer of 2018, I identified key actors involved in the AIKSCC to map the emerging national coordination network and assess the geographic and social diversity it represented. I then selected organizations from two sharply contrasting regions—Tamil Nadu and western Uttar Pradesh—both with long histories of caste and class conflict among farmer groups. Conducting interviews in these regions was crucial for understanding how organizations anchored in very different local contexts came to coordinate at the national level, as well as the prevailing inter-organizational dynamics within each state. As the movement progressed, especially after early 2020, I followed leaders to protest sites and public meetings in Delhi, Chandigarh, Bangalore, and Chennai. Delhi became a central node because AIKSCC was headquartered there and the 13-month long SKM protest camps starting in November 2020 brought together organizations from multiple states. During this period, I compiled a list of nearly 600 individuals across more than 150 organizations in 21 states using interviews, police archives, and participant lists from coordination meetings. I used this list, along with referrals from the field, to diversify the sample and capture cross-sectional and temporal variation.

My position as a member of a middling agrarian caste from a north Indian state occasionally facilitated access and eased interactions with farmers and leaders, many of whom shared similar caste and class backgrounds. As a Hindi speaker, I engaged directly with my interviewees from several northern states, but for those from southern states and Punjab, I worked with translators who understood both the language and the agrarian context. In interactions with civil society actors, journalists, bureaucrats, academics, and politicians, many of whom occupied higher caste and class positions, I foregrounded my identity as a U.S. based researcher. Throughout the fieldwork, I remained attentive to how caste, class, language, and institutional affiliation shaped access, exchange, and interpretation.

Ultimately, this study draws on interviews, participant observation, and secondary sources. Between July 2018 and April 2023, I conducted 207 informal, conversational interviews (135 in person and 72 by phone) with farmer leaders (N=109), farmers (N=61), civil society members including journalists, academics, and movement volunteers (N=23), and politicians and bureaucrats (N=14). Over half lasted 60–90 minutes and the rest 20–30 minutes. My sample includes members of 40 organizations across 12 states⁹ and spans across caste and class groups. It covers leaders or organizations who identified as Marxist, Socialist, apolitical, or nationalist, as well as those representing medium and large farmers (N = 11), small and medium farmers (N = 19), and marginal farmers and laborers (N = 10). Several of the leaders I interviewed have been active in the farmers' movement for more than a decade and were involved in coalition formation. Additionally, I engaged in participant observation at 19 meetings and protest events, including

⁹ Uttar Pradesh, Punjab, Haryana, Karnataka, Maharashtra, Uttarakhand, Tamil Nadu, Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand, Delhi, and Rajasthan. A few of the organizations had presence across multiple states, for instance, All India Kisan Sabha, All India Kisan Mahasabha, All India Kisan Khet Mazdoor Sangathan.

multi-organization coordination meetings and repeated visits to the protest camps near Delhi. These sites allowed observation of interactions across organizations and conversations with participants beyond leadership circles. Interview accounts were also corroborated with secondary sources including media, government, and academic publications, and public protest databases like the Armed Conflict Location Event Data Project (ACLED).

Empirical analysis

Indian farmers' case: Weakening of the barriers to collaboration

This section demonstrates how fears of domination and legitimacy risks manifested and declined within the movement from the 1970s to the formation of the AIKSCC in July 2017. It also traces how the gradual weakening of these barriers created space for collaboration and paved the way for sustained partnerships within the movement.

Decline in fears of domination

In the 1970s and 1980s, organizations rooted in regionally dominant, landowning cultivator castes across several states, including Jats in Uttar Pradesh and Punjab, Kammas and Vellalas in Tamil Nadu, Marathas in Maharashtra, and Lingayats and Vokkalingas in Karnataka, came to lead the movement at different points in time, heightening fears of domination among other groups (Nadkarni 1987). These organizations exerted significant influence over state and national governments and secured concessions on electricity and output pricing, irrigation, and rural credit

(Gill and Singhal 1984; Kripa 1992; Gupta 1997; Dhanagare 2015). The agenda of these organizations became inseparable from the broader movement; the concerns of marginalized castes, labor, tribal, and small-farmer organizations were sidelined (Alexander 1981; Herring 1983; Gill and Singhal 1984; Lindberg 1994). Accordingly, if organizations lose the ability to shape the movement's agenda, we should observe a corresponding decline in fears of domination.

During my fieldwork, I found that the previously powerful organizations no longer command the authority required to provoke fears of domination. A longtime leader of a national-level laborers' and small landholding farmers' organization that had historically opposed several of these once-dominant groups described the shift in power dynamics: "No organization in the country is as powerful as they were in the past. Tikait [leader of a powerful organization from Uttar Pradesh] would go to Maharashtra and become popular even there. Joshi [leader of a powerful organization from Maharashtra] in Gujarat. Everyone now stays in their respective areas." His comparison underscores how, in the past, certain leaders could travel well beyond their home states and shape mobilization dynamics elsewhere, an influence that no organization now appears to command. When I specifically asked whether these organizations had the ability to shape their own agendas or influence those of others, he responded, "How will they influence others' when they can't get their own agenda met?" A leader from a marginalized caste group in Maharashtra attributed the earlier lack of unification to the dominance of powerful organizations and contrasted that period with the present:

Sharad Joshi [leader of a previously powerful organization in Maharashtra] used to keep influencing the issues of others. We were opposed to his vision of commercial farmers...

This is why there is no point in even asking why no unification took place in the past. It was not possible because of such leaders' narrow vision and politics for the rich. Today there is no Sharad Joshi. We do our protests separately and put our issues on the agenda.

None of the other leaders I spoke with believed their organization had the ability to shape the movement's outcomes. A leader whose organization is supposedly spread across several states explicitly acknowledged the limits of his organization's power:

I am a national convener of an organization spread in 10 states. But what does existing in 10 states even mean? It means we are there in some villages of a district, but a state typically has 25–30 districts and thousands of villages. We need to also read the reality before asserting ourselves.

Leaders of organizations that had recently staged relatively large protests also admitted their efforts had yielded no tangible results, casting doubt on their ability to influence the movement agenda. However, they blamed political elites for the lack of progress. One mentioned, "Politicians have no moral obligation to help farmers. Whatever work we have gotten done in our area is through our efforts. I will admit that it is not enough, but if we were to not speak up even this much won't happen." Another noted, "The government cleverly escapes by making false promises and farmers lose any hope for change."

Muzaffarnagar provides a particularly important site for examining whether fears of domination have declined over time. The district has a history of caste and class conflict, and the Bharatiya

Kisan Union–Tikait (BKU-T), anchored in the Jat caste, remains one of the most influential organizations in the area. In the 1970s and 1980s, BKU-T led violent mobilizations and was implicated in inter-group conflict as recently as 2012. Given this history and its continued local strength, one might expect fears of domination to persist. Yet leaders from five organizations anchored in distinct caste groups¹⁰ whom I interviewed in the district emphasized their autonomy and denied ongoing fears of domination. One explained, “We are small [in size] compared to [BKU-T], but when they [leaders of BKU-T] come to my villages, they call me first.” Another observed, “We [Organization of Dalit farmers and laborers] tried once to work with [BKU-T] on an issue, but they were not interested... But now... they also need our support.” This shift was evident also among relatively similar landholding cultivator groups that had historically competed with BKU-T. One such leader remarked, “Tikait has no basis in our area,” indicating that BKU-T no longer holds a legitimate claim to leadership beyond its own constituency. Even a BKU-T leader acknowledged that interfering in other groups’ activities is no longer acceptable.

In the 1970s and 80s, the movement had effectively come to reflect the dominance of landowning cultivators from regionally dominant castes. I therefore assessed whether a similar caste or class group now defined the movement’s direction. Leaders consistently rejected this interpretation. Instead, they pointed to the presence of prominent organizations across states anchored in distinct groups as evidence that no single group claims movement-wide leadership. For example, the three relatively large organizations that often came up, BKU-T, Bharatiya Kisan Union-Ekta Ugrahan (BKU-EU), and All India Kisan Sabha (AIKS), represent a wide variety of groups: dominant-caste landowning farmers (apolitical), small to marginal farmers (Maoist), and tribal farmers and

¹⁰ Jats, Dalits, Tyagis, Gujjars, and Rajputs.

laborers (Marxist), respectively. Additionally, many leaders emphasized the localization of organizations' influence. A Jat leader from Haryana explained, "We are active on the ground in four districts. Sonipat, Jind, Rohtak, and Jhajjar. We have grip only in Sonipat;" different groups lead other districts. A leader from Uttar Pradesh explained that even a relatively large organization such as BKU-T has its influence in a select few villages in its home district. Simply put, no single social group dominates within the movement, and the influence of most organizations is confined largely to its own region and constituency.

The evolving relationship between farmer and labor organizations further illustrates the complexity of the rebalancing of power within the movement. Labor issues have figured less prominently in the recent phase of mobilization, but several leaders explained that this reflects "practical considerations" rather than renewed fears of domination. Many labor leaders described a fundamental shift in the relationship between farmers and labor organizations. One noted, "Our [laborers'] voices are being heard...issues of debt and wages were central part of the AIKSCC agenda," while acknowledging that under the SKM, labor concerns have received less attention. Another leader emphasized that if the earlier divisions had persisted, labor organizations would not have been able to participate so visibly in both coalitions. Indeed, I find that a large share of organizations that are prominent within the AIKSCC have links to less powerful groups, including agricultural laborers and small-farmer organizations.¹¹ Thus, while organizations representing less powerful groups still struggle to shape the agenda to their benefit on their own, the decline in domination fears has enabled a more pragmatic, if unequal, coexistence.

¹¹ For instance, 15 of the 22-member Working Group Committee formed to manage the AIKSCC's operations cater to small farmers or those from marginalized caste groups.

Decline in legitimacy risks

Maintaining legitimacy within the wider movement and among organizations' core social base requires adhering to established identity norms and social boundaries. In the 1970s and 1980s, the dominance of caste-based mobilization, reinforced by powerful organizations, marginalized those not anchored caste groups. Such organizations were often labeled as “outsiders” or civil society actors rather than as farmer organizations (Nadkarni 1987; Omvedt 2005). Further, even dominant organizations faced internal legitimacy challenges when their social base resisted cross-caste collaboration. The BKU-T's attempt to build a broader network in the early 1980s, for instance, collapsed amid inter-group rivalries and opposition from its own members (Singh 1992). Leaders who crossed social boundaries risked sanctions from powerful organizations and backlash from their own base. If these legitimacy risks have weakened over time, we should expect leaders to face fewer sanctions within the movement and less resistance from their core social base when crossing boundaries.

I find that the movement now admits actors who would previously have been delegitimized or pushed to the margins. While most organizations still mobilize from specific caste groups, in many states at least one or two are led by urban, professionally trained individuals with backgrounds in electoral politics, unions, or other social movements rather than in caste or village networks. For instance, in Madhya Pradesh, a Brahmin engineer leads an organization of small and marginal farmers. In Punjab, a Brahmin doctor with roots in working-class movements mobilizes farmers around land and labor rights. In Uttar Pradesh, a Khatri and former member of the legislative assembly heads one of the state's largest organizations. In Maharashtra, a Jain-Bania

parliamentarian leads an association of medium and large farmers, and a Dalit-Maratha leader leads tribal farmers in Vidarbha. In Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, a Bania doctor with roots in student and labor movements leads a small-farmer organization. In Tamil Nadu, a lawyer and former electoral candidate heads an organization of marginalized farmers and agricultural laborers. In Delhi, a political scientist and a lawyer jointly run a campaign to bring farmers' issues to national media and political attention. Activists long involved in development, environmental, and rights-based work have also become central through platforms promoting sustainable agriculture across India.

Interviews with these non-traditional leaders reveal how they interpret their entry as evidence of the weakening of the legitimacy that dominant-caste organizations once enforced to control who could credibly represent farmers. One of them explained:

When the popularity of the stalwarts like Tikait [BKU-T leader in the 1980s] reduced in farmers' politics, the space for us increased. Previously, the bar of authenticity to become a leader was extremely high. You had to be an actual farmer to become a leader, then only farmers or other organizations would accept you as leaders. But now, if you care for farmers, you can be a genuine leader.

Another leader similarly affirmed that in the past, to be a leader, "you had to have some recognition, at least within your area or caste, as a person who is connected to the village." This description contrasts with that of those who reside in urban areas but sympathize with farmers. Underlining this point, a journalist and a farmer leader recalled that even Sharad Joshi, a Brahmin

and former United Nations bureaucrat, secured legitimacy as a leader only after taking up farming himself in the 1970s. Another leader likewise observed, “Civil society members working for farmers had to work in the shadows of [caste] organizations. Now you can have your own organization.”

Non-traditional leaders consider their participation legitimate as well as necessary for the movement’s goals, highlighting their growing recognition and engagement. Many are against caste-based mobilization; they urge farmers to “stay away from those who divide them based on caste [referring to traditional organizations]” and emphasize that the only relevant caste is “Kisani [farming],” a frame that cuts across social divides. Their activism has also expanded the movement’s bridging capacity. In Karnataka, the Alliance for Sustainable Horticulture and Agriculture, a civil society organization based in an urban center, campaigns against genetically modified crops alongside factions of the previously powerful Karnataka Rajya Ryotha Sangha (KRRS), which led militant mobilizations in the 1980s. In Punjab, a doctor-led organization focuses on land and wage rights for agricultural laborers and marginal farmers, echoing and extending earlier leftist efforts that previously powerful organizations once viewed suspiciously. While many expressed discomfort with the growing prominence of non-traditional actors, some explicitly acknowledged their strategic value. One leader explained, “It is important for the movement to have all kinds of leaders. Educated people who live in the city know better how powerful politicians work, because they also live there.” Another noted that, lacking caste or village networks, these leaders have legitimacy to give “appeals of unity that resonate widely.” The continued presence and prominence of such organizations indicate that actors not anchored in caste-based networks are no longer easily delegitimized or pushed to the margins.

Since organizations led by non-traditional leaders are not anchored in a single caste group, they face little internal pressure when collaborating across divides. Their presence has helped normalize collaboration as a legitimate strategy within the movement. More strikingly, even organizations historically associated with caste bases now display greater flexibility. As one dominant-caste leader explained, “Caste is the reality on the ground... But my organization does not represent [my caste]. Even BKU cannot afford to stand for Jats.” His comments suggest that while organizations still rely on caste networks for mobilization, leaders no longer feel compelled by their own supporters to act as exclusive caste representatives. Another leader who regularly appeals beyond his caste remarked that “[caste] conflict between organizations automatically doesn’t exist when everyone is responsible for their own area.” Although leaders admit that such cross-boundary appeals often attract only limited support, they do not describe facing significant backlash from their own constituencies for making them.

Leaders’ expanding autonomy and strategic flexibility is further visible when we look at left-leaning organizations attempting to bridge historically opposed classes. One leader asserted, “We cater to the idea of Kisan and Mazdoor because we do not think there is a separation between agricultural workers and peasants.” When pressed about tensions between landowners and laborers, he dismissed the concern: “Only those who align with me on the broader thought process come into my organization, so we don’t have any conflict.” Another leader acknowledged softening redistributive demands to broaden participation: “We go soft to accommodate more people... We must wait for the right time.” While such strategies do not always attract large followings, they do not appear to provoke the kind of internal backlash that would once have

constrained leaders from pursuing them. Cross-boundary appeals are now treated as strategic choices rather than betrayals of group interests.

A related indication of declining internal legitimacy pressures is the growing personalization of authority. Several long-serving leaders mentioned that they face much less pressure from their base and noted that leadership matters more than group identity. Reflecting this shift, leaders in many states have associated their own names with their organizations. For instance, in Uttar Pradesh, there exist BKU-Ambawta and BKU-Balraj; in Punjab, BKU-Rajewal and BKU-Kadian; and in Karnataka, KS-Puttannaiah and KRRS-Chuki. When I asked how this personalization of authority was possible, one leader explained that “the morality and behavior of the leader” now define organizational dynamics more than the identity of the core constituency.

Weakening of barriers and coalition formation

The need for coalition within the farmers’ movement was not new. In the 1970s and 1980s, organizations recognized shared concerns and attempted to build coalitions around them. What changed, however, was not the presence of shared issues but the environment in which organizations pursued them. As fears of domination and legitimacy risks weakened, the costs of interaction declined, making more sustained and repeated coordination possible across a range of concerns, particularly in three areas. The first was farmers’ income and debt, long-standing features of agrarian politics. Second, leaders relied on one another for protection from police repression, sometimes preemptively. As one leader explained, “Organizations working in secluded areas are easy to suppress. Such injustices [police repression] won’t happen, if they have achieved

strength through alliance with others.” Third, collaboration functioned as a means of visibility and learning, with leaders attending one another’s events to exchange knowledge and signal unity. Although new issues emerged over time, the incentives for cooperation remained similar; what differed was that declining barriers made sustained collaboration feasible.

In this context, collaboration first emerged through informal, low-risk interactions, primarily among heads of organizations, thereby avoiding direct confrontation between organizations’ social base. As one leader explained, “We had already been working towards farmers’ unity... but things became more concrete only in the early 2000s. We initiated meetings between several leaders, mostly from those that come from Left ideology, but others also came. It was open to everyone.” Long-time observers of farmers’ politics confirm that such cooperation started well before the movement’s resurgence in 2014 and long before the formation of AIKSCC and SKM. These interactions were not an effect of coalition formation itself but part of a gradual shift in inter-organizational dynamics. A retired professor who has worked with organizations for more than a decade observed, “Many leaders have formed networks for different issues...When they come to [state capitals], you will see them giving memorandums or standing in front of the media together.” A senior journalist added, “Leaders know each other personally and whenever an opportunity arises, they join hands.” As barriers declined, collaboration shifted from risky and contested to routine and sustainable.

Through repeated engagement, leaders learned how to collaborate without sacrificing autonomy, a lesson that proved critical for building sustained coalitions. Over time, this ad hoc coordination served as a practice ground in which alliances were tested, and dependable partners were identified

without any binding commitments. Several leaders described how this approach conserved resources and reduced organizational risk. One explained that trying to expand by absorbing other groups was often counterproductive:

The main way in which organizations expand their base is by connecting with notable people in an area. These people [notables] ask for a position within the organization, so they get appointed as the district or mandal [sub-district] head...But soon they [notables] realize that if they are the ones doing all the work for the organization in the area, why should they work under someone else? They break away and form their own organization [of their caste network].

Ad hoc engagements were pragmatic and sustainable; they facilitated the benefits of collaboration without a loss of autonomy. One leader highlighted the mutually beneficial nature of relationships in his district: “If someone I know has a problem in an area where another organization is active, I can ask them for help. If they have someone facing issues in my area, they can reach out to me.” Another noted, “We know who has strength in which area of the district. Instead of going there to mobilize on our own and spending our resources, it is easier to reach out to an existing organization and work with them.”

Several leaders, however, cautioned against reading too much into these practical interactions. Leaders were careful to distinguish such coordination from ideological convergence or organizational merger. A leader emphasized, “People think that just because we come together, we are similar or we all have become Left. That is not true. We are as different as the earth and

sky.” Another leader remarked, “If you were to sit in our meetings [SKM], you would know about the strong differences we have with each other.” A third emphasized that such diversity was expected: “There are different types of farmers...isn’t it only natural that organizations are different from each other. We have a different set of problems based on area, climate, politics, and policy.” These statements underscore that collaboration rested not on finding common ground as such, but on recognizing and managing persistent differences.

The lessons learned through years of such engagements forged a wider strategic understanding that became central to coalition politics: work together around minimum common issues while maintaining organizational independence. The structure and mode of operation of AIKSCC and SKM reflect this principle. When government–movement interactions intensified by the end of 2014, some leaders could leverage ties with groups in other states to scale up coordination. After the police killed six farmers in June 2017, two networks—one left-leaning and another ideologically broad—accelerated efforts to unite, forming the AIKSCC in July 2017. As contention deepened in 2020, the AIKSCC and allied groups extended the principle of minimum commonality and autonomy to a wider front, creating the SKM in November 2020. The AIKSCC and SKM adopted a common minimum agenda only after their formation, confirming that they grew out of relational dynamics enabled by declining barriers and refined through years of ad-hoc collaboration.

Reduction in farmer organizations’ mobilization capacity

This section demonstrates that the weakening of barriers to collaboration was preceded and enabled by a broader decline in organizations' mobilization capacity. It also contextualizes this decline by identifying two factors that may have contributed to it, thereby clarifying the temporal sequence through which it unfolded.

During the 1970s and 1980s, several organizations, especially those mobilizing regionally dominant castes, commanded extensive networks. For instance, the BKU-T's influence spanned Western Uttar Pradesh and Haryana, mirroring the spread of Hindu Jat caste networks (Gupta 1997; Singh 1992). In Punjab, the BKU-PB drew support from Jat Sikh networks (Gill and Singhal 1984), while in Maharashtra the SS reflected the concentration of Marathas (Omvedt 1988; Arora 2001; Dhanagare 2015).¹² Mobilizing these cohesive caste-based networks, these organizations conducted protests at unprecedented scales. The farmers' movement during this period has been described as "the only movement... capable of regularly organizing mass rallies involving hundreds of thousands of people" (Omvedt 1988, 14). The BKU-T mobilized over 500,000 farmers in 1988, while the KRRS, Shetkari Sangathan (SS) Tamil Nadu Agriculturalists Association (TNAA), and BKU-PB each drew more than 100,000 participants on multiple occasions (Nadkarni 1987). If organizational capacity has indeed declined since this period, we should expect to find evidence of a reduction in the size of caste networks affiliated with organizations and a corresponding drop in the scale of protests.

I find that all powerful organizations of the 1970s and 1980s have fragmented into smaller entities; they no longer command their previous mobilization capacity. A leader who has been active for

¹² In South India, the KRRS relied on the Vokkalinga and Lingayat caste networks (Nadkarni 1987; Assadi 1994) and TNAA mobilized Kammas and Vellalas (Alexander 1981; Harriss-White 1981).

more than two decades stated that most such organizations are now “small, spread across the country.” Leaders from Uttar Pradesh attest to a very high degree of fragmentation of the BKU-T; some said there were over 50 factions. Notably, 20 of the 30 currently active organizations in the state were previously part of the BKU-T; of these, nine have Jat leaders, indicating that Jat caste networks have been divided between smaller organizations. A Jat farmer leader who has been active since the 1980s explained, the “BKU-T first began as a farmers’ union in the 1980s but soon turned into a full Jat union and then eventually a union of a single Khap (sub-caste) within Jats.” The BKU-T’s transformation from a farmers’ organization into a sub-caste organization depicts the decline in its capacity to mobilize from its own group. One leader pointed out that some organizations do not even enjoy support from their villages:

In Punjab you may still find organizations that cover at least 3-4 villages. In our area there are organizations only for name’s sake. They have one leader with a following of 40-50 individuals. The leaders’ own village people don’t fully support them.

I also found widespread fragmentation in Punjab; many organizations had splintered into smaller groups and found it difficult to mobilize their networks at scale. Of the 32–34 currently active organizations, 20 are offshoots of BKU-PB, reflecting the deep breakdown of Jat Sikh networks. AIKS, a relatively large organization that mobilized agricultural laborers from Dalit and non-Jat Sikh castes in Punjab, also fragmented. Of the currently active left-leaning organizations in the state, five or six were previously part of the AIKS. Further corroborating the decline in organizations’ capacity to mobilize people from their respective social constituencies, a longtime observer of farmers’ politics in Punjab said, “Many organizations...have their activities limited to

the block or mandal level [sub-district levels]...Leaders are struggling to have farmers as part of their organizations.”

A leader observed that “There are now more than 25 organizations active in Maharashtra, and most were part of Shetkari Sangathan.” She also suggested that in addition to the network fragmentation, Marathas no longer align with farmer organizations because “they believe that they can attain success at a faster pace by entering politics...Even their demands have changed. They want reservations.” Even Swabhimani Shetkari Sangathan (SSS), one of the largest offshoots of SS, has fragmented several times. When I asked the SSS leader to comment on his ability to mobilize farmers, he said, “Farmers are now more divided than before,” alluding to the fragmentation within the Maratha caste networks.

Organizations in South India have experienced similar divisions of caste networks. A farmer leader in Karnataka mentioned that “After the death of the main leaders of KRRS, the organization split into groups that fight among themselves.” The breakdown of the KRRS marks the division of the Vokkaliga and Lingayat networks. Similarly, the TNAA, the largest organization in Tamil Nadu in the 1970s and 1980s, splintered into more than 30 organizations. One TNAA leader mentioned that with this change, “The center of farmers’ protests has shifted from Coimbatore to Trichy, Tanjore, and Erode,” indicating that the dominant Kammas and Vellalas castes are less active in farmer organizations.

Most organizations (and thus protests) are much smaller than in the 1970s–80s. In 2018, at the peak of the recent farmers’ movement, the BKU-T’s Kisan Kranti Yatra drew only 20,000

participants after 10 days of continuous mobilization, and I observed much smaller turnouts at their protests in Delhi and Muzaffarnagar;¹³ it previously attracted as many as 500,000. In Tamil Nadu, TNAA protests, which once drew over 200,000 from Coimbatore district alone,¹⁴ now attracts an average of 1,000 people according to the president of one of its factions; it experiences occasional peaks of 5,000 at conferences and public meetings. Another leader from the same state mentioned “we got connected with only 426 farmers to go to Delhi.”

Successor factions in other states have overtaken their parent organizations in prominence, but even they fall short of their past mobilization capacity. In Punjab, the BKU-EU has eclipsed the BKU-PB, once a top mobilizer and the largest organization in the state. A long-time observer explained, “If other farmer organizations of Punjab are able to mobilize 300–400 to sit on a dharna [sit-in], [BKU-EU] can bring 3,000–4,000 people,” which is far below the BKU-PB’s historic draws. In Maharashtra, the SS has similarly ceded ground to its faction, the SSS, which now organizes the largest farmer gatherings in and around Kolhapur district. These shifts illustrate both the fragmentation of major organizations and the substantial decline in their collective capacity to mobilize at scale.

Protest event data collected by ACLED from media reports indicates that the scale of recent protests is significantly smaller than the 1970s and 1980s. Since 2016, most farmer protests have attracted fewer than 1,000 participants; only 22 had 10,000 or more attendees, and none surpassed

¹³ *Hindustan Times*. 2018. “Kisan rally: Nearly 20000 farmers march to Delhi with 15 demands, city borders barricaded,” October 2. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/kisan-rally-thousands-of-farmers-to-approach-delhi-with-15-point-agenda-police-barricade-borders/story-p9sWPhYzBFX512XzJtj9RK.html>

¹⁴ Kasturi Rangan. 1972. “A state in India angers farmers.” *New York Times*, June 25. <https://www.nytimes.com/1972/06/25/archives/a-state-in-india-angers-farmers-roads-blocked-to-protest-rise-in.html>

50,000. Prior to the formation of the farmers' coalitions, protests drew over 10,000 on only five occasions. The largest reported gatherings, two long marches conducted by the AIKS from Nashik to Mumbai in Maharashtra, drew 30,000–40,000 farmers. For over half of the protests in the ACLED dataset, protest size was not mentioned. This may reflect biased news reporting against farmers (Mudgal 2011), but the decision not to report on the size of these protests could also indicate that scale is no longer a notable characteristic of farmers' protests.

Protest applications submitted to Jantar Mantar, the most prominent protest site in New Delhi, provide additional evidence that the scale of farmer protests has declined. Since this dataset was collected from police archives rather than news media, it provides a complete overview of protests, increasing confidence in my inferences. Analyzing expected protest size data for 196 applications submitted by more than 50 farmer organizations to protest at Jantar Mantar reveals that the gatherings ranged from 20 to 5,000.¹⁵ Most applications expected fewer than 500 attendees, and only 14 applications reported 1,000. The AIKS reported the largest gathering at 5,000 people. These records indicate a nearly hundredfold decrease from the largest protest organized in the 1980s (by BKU-T in 1988) in Delhi (Gupta 1988).

The timing of this decline aligns closely with two long-term shifts that reshaped rural India's political and economic landscape. First, caste-based parties and political decentralization have realigned caste loyalties away from farmer organizations and toward political elites since the 1990s

¹⁵ Applications submitted to the police included the size of the protests; they are legally required to provide information on organizers, demands, and size (for more information on how permit systems work in India, see Singh, Hemrajani, and Ahuja 2023; Ahuja and Singh 2023). The police restrict how many people can be mobilized at Jantar Mantar. The official amount has varied over time from 5,000 to 1,000; higher numbers may be allowed at police discretion. I also checked with the officers at Ram Lila Maidan, another state-designated site that allows up to 50,000 people and found that farmer protests rarely go over 10,000.

(Jaffrelot 2000; Chhibber 2001; Jaffrelot and Kumar 2012; Singh and Hemrajani 2018). Second, economic liberalization, climate change, land fragmentation, and rural out-migration have made full-time farming less viable, compelling rural households to diversify their livelihoods (Picherit 2012; Chakravorty et al. 2016; Das Gupta 2016; Chuang 2019). These transformations were already underway by the early 1990s, following the last wave of mass mobilizations in 1989. Farmer leaders recall that ad hoc engagements among organizations began in the late 1990s and early 2000s. The transition from informal collaboration to sustained coalitions was an uneven, protracted process of learning and strategic adjustment that was facilitated by the decline in organizations' mobilization capacity, which reduced both fears of domination and the risks associated with crossing boundaries.

Alternative explanations

This section evaluates the three alternative factors in terms of their timing and sequence in relation to coalition formation. The first is police repression: the AIKSCC was founded right after the police killed six farmers. However, governments frequently resorted to repression in the 1970s and 1980s, yet no coalitions were formed. In 1981, ten farmers were killed and hundreds injured in Maharashtra; in 1980, twenty were killed in Karnataka; and in 1987, eight were killed in Uttar Pradesh (Nadkarni 1987; Hasan 1994).

Second, adverse policies can facilitate coalitions by creating shared experiences of loss or threat, and land policy has often been among the most contentious of these. The introduction of the Land Acquisition Bill in 2014-15 could therefore have served as a unifying trigger for collaboration. Yet

issues related to land have been contentious in India since the 1950s, including several episodes of large-scale violence between farmers and other actors (Karmakar 2017; Levien 2018).¹⁶ If struggles over land were sufficient to align divided organizations, why did such coalitions not emerge during the 1970s and 1980s? Moreover, escalating suicide rates and the continual decrease in income due to unfavorable policies (Vaidyanathan 2006; Ramakumar 2022) serve as stark reminders of the persistent threat of economic losses faced by Indian farmers. Despite these enduring adversities, coalitions did not emerge until 2017.¹⁷

Third, political opportunities can also foster collaboration, especially when elites extend support or create openings for influence. The political environment was more favorable to farmer organizations in the 1970s and 1980s. Several politicians, including prime ministers and chief ministers, publicly endorsed their cause and contributed resources to their organizations (Gill and Singhal 1984; Gupta 1997). Yet this proximity to political elites did not translate into unity. On the contrary, it often deepened rivalries: leaders who emphasized being apolitical openly discredited those who cooperated with parties and politicians (Nadkarni 1987; Dhanagare 2015).

While none of the alternative explanations appear to be the primary drivers of coalition formation, two of them were important enablers once barriers had weakened. The show of unity and solidarity among farmer organizations after six farmers were killed in 2017 prompted several groups to accelerate efforts to achieve broader unity, which ultimately culminated in the formation of the

¹⁶ Land Conflict Watch. 2024. *Land Beneath the Panels: Examining Renewable Energy Land-Use Conflicts to Foster a Just Energy Transition*. <https://www.landconflictwatch.org>; Daksh, *Access to Justice Survey 2015–2016*. <https://www.dakshindia.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/Daksh-access-to-justice-survey.pdf>.

¹⁷ The Three Farm Bills are not a valid alternative explanation because coalition conditions already existed: AIKSCC formed in 2017, three years before the Farm Bills, and SKM later emerged as a supra-coalition built on AIKSCC and other networks.

AIKSCC. This incident also legitimized AIKSCC's initial group's outreach to a wider audience in search of cooperation. Similarly, the Land Acquisition Bill of 2014 and the three farm laws of 2020 acted as important catalysts, pushing organizations to reconsider the kinds of configurations needed to strengthen the movement's power. The SKM was formed when networks created to challenge the three farm laws came together. Nonetheless, the effect of these factors was contingent on a prior weakening of barriers; similar episodes of repression and adverse policies in the 1970s and 1980s, when divisions remained entrenched, did not produce comparable coalitions.

Conclusion

This paper examines coalition dynamics in divided movements using the case of the Indian farmers' movement. The evidence indicates that organizations' declining capacity to mobilize within their respective social constituencies was the primary driver of coalition formation. Mobilization capacity peaked in the 1970s and 1980s, when farmer organizations could still rally people from their respective caste groups, and then declined sharply from the early 1990s. This decline in organizations' mobilization capacity reduced fears of domination and legitimacy risks that hindered collaboration within the movement, first enabling ad hoc engagements and eventually paving the way for coalitions in July 2017. Police repression, adverse policies, and political opportunities enabled ad hoc engagements on some occasions *once* the barriers to collaboration were reduced, but these factors existed even prior to coalition formation and therefore cannot explain why coalitions emerged.

This study offers three implications for social movement coalitions in divided contexts. First, it advances a barriers-to-collaboration framework that shifts analytical attention from identifying shared characteristics to examining the factors that sustain division and the conditions under which these divisions weaken. In the Indian farmers' movement, organizations repeatedly attempted to form coalitions in earlier decades in response to shared grievances and policy threats. Shared interests and incentives were therefore not absent; what varied was whether organizations could act on them. Fears of domination and legitimacy risks operated as recurring constraints, limiting collaboration even when alignment appeared possible. The case thus suggests that shared characteristics or incentives alone may not generate coalition when barriers remain high. Efforts to forge common ground in the presence of high barriers may even intensify antagonisms, as organizations prioritize accountability to their own constituencies. As such, only when barriers to collaboration decline do shared interests become actionable bases for collaboration within divided movements.

Second, the study offers insight into how collaboration takes place in divided movements. The organizations that formed the AIKSCC and later the SKM continued to represent distinct caste, class, and ideological constituencies. Leaders emphasized negotiating a minimum common agenda rather than aligning their broader set of demands, noting that they remained "as different as the earth and sky." Organizational boundaries were maintained, autonomy was preserved, and distrust did not fully disappear even as coordination deepened. Collaboration did not require organizational integration or the dissolution of differences as typically expected, yet it proved both feasible and durable over an extended period.

Finally, this work contributes to broader debates about movement power (Dixon et al. 2013; Jasper 2019; Han, Campbell, and McKenna 2023). Specifically, it shows that organizational strength does not automatically translate into movement power. In the 1970s and 80s, farmer organizations with greater mobilization capacity gained concessions for themselves but intensified competition and weakened the broader collective. During the recent wave of mobilization, when individual organizations became weaker, coordination became more feasible and produced broader and inclusive collective action (Singh 2020; Behl 2022). These coalitions organized what has been described as the world's largest strike, sustained protest encampments for over a year, and maintained participation across groups despite the deaths of more than 700 farmers and severe repression.¹⁸ These coordinated efforts ultimately contributed to the repeal of the three anti-farmer laws promulgated by an authoritarian and negligent government. The case highlights a collective action dilemma intrinsic to divided movements: independently strong organizations may weaken the collective by reinforcing divisions, while collaboration among independently weaker organizations can convert fragmentation into collective power.

¹⁸ <https://www.cnn.com/2021/03/06/opinions/india-farmer-protests-mandeep-rai-dhillon>,
<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/11/30/human-cost-india-farmer-protest-agriculture>

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