

SDC 2018 Annual Meeting Abstracts

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Title: Exit, Loyalty, or Voice? Agrarian Distress, Farmers' Movements, and the Quest for Sustainable Development in India



Our goal is to understand how Indian peasants and farmers conceptualize 'sustainable development' in the face of severe agrarian distress: do they just want to 'exit' farming or do they want to exercise their 'voices' to envision a different form of agriculture and development? Our paper addresses the conference theme of 'agriculture for development.' India is home to about 150 million farming households. About 120 million of these households belong to the categories of small and marginalized farmers, whose smallholdings generally lack access to irrigation and credit. Some policy experts have stated that these households need to exit from farming and become absorbed by the manufacturing sector. While we agree that exit may be one of the options available to distressed farmers, we draw upon Hirschmann's work to suggest that many Indian farmers think that another option is available to them: voice. One means of expressing voice is through the formation of social movements. Farmers' movements were weak in many parts of India during the post-1991 liberalization era. However, 2017-18 have witnessed a resurgence of farmers' movements. In this paper, we use qualitative sociological methods (telephone interviews with thirty experts who are knowledgeable about Indian agriculture and social movements) to understand how Indian farmers' movements conceptualize sustainable development within the context of a democratic society. Our study shows that though currently mobilized Indian farmers privilege voice over exit as a strategy to deal with agrarian distress, the manifold social divisions (such as linguistic group, caste, class, religion, and gender) present challenges to the emergence of a strong and unified nationwide narrative that has mobilized at the grassroots level and effectively persuades policymakers to implement sustainable development models in local, regional, and national contexts. To our knowledge, there is no extant scholarly study that examines these present-day Indian agrarian mobilizations and their quest for 'voice' and sustainable development in the face of agrarian distress. We hope that our readers, drawn from policymaking, scholarly, and activist circles, will find our study useful in their quest to better understand the 'voice' of Indian farmers who are seeking to make development models more sustainable.