By AMITA KANEKAR

It was widely reported – in practically all the Indian media reports on the farmers' protest in Delhi of the past week – that the farmers' representatives had refused the central government's hospitality, even water. The protests, against the new farm laws which will open the doors to big corporate players in agriculture while ending the miniscule government support now available to farmers, started in Punjab months ago but garnered no response from the centre. With the protests having converged massively on Delhi now, and promising to become bigger and more widespread, the government has started talks with representatives of the farmer unions, but these talks, of which five rounds are over, have, according to the farmers, offered nothing. Except water, tea and lunch, all of which were refused by their representatives. They made do, instead, with refreshments brought from the langar at the main protest site at the Delhi-Haryana border.

The farmers themselves explained their behaviour variously.

'The tea he's offering has milk from our dairies,' said one of the invitation to tea by Agriculture Minister Narendra Singh Tomar.

'Let them come to our langar instead; we'll serve them jalebis there,' said another.

'How can we eat here, when our friends are sitting on the road?' asked a third.

The reporting of this refusal to break bread with the government by almost every Indian media house – less so by foreign media, despite sympathetic coverage of the protests – is a good indicator of its significance. But what is this significance? At first sight it looks like caste pride, for refusal to eat food from someone considered 'low' is the traditional norm among 'high' castes. But what is often forgotten is that the reverse is also true – accepting food is a traditional sign of being low and needy. Because, in caste society, offering food is not a sign of fraternity, but of high status. Food is shared between equals; this is breached only by charity offered by the high and mighty. In the past, this 'charity' might be of crumbs and left-overs, served in broken dishes or leaves (or coconut shells in Goa), sometimes even placed on the ground, to emphasize the lowness of the receivers; it might be served with more dignity on rare Hindu religious occasions, but only to be followed by elaborate rituals of purification, as in some Goan temples and households. Offering food outside one's own close community is thus both a gesture of elite benevolence and of enforcing the caste hierarchy, and refusing this means refusing a position of subservience.

It is notable also that this governmental benevolence is not for all. Protesting is not uncommon in India, indeed, given how the mechanisms for justice function, it seems that no

day can go by without people – workers, students, tribals, those in danger of losing homes or livelihoods, and so on – being on protest somewhere or the other. But they are not usually treated with respect. Many are ignored, others face state violence, some might be arrested, or at least have charges slapped on them, as in the Chandor protests. The anti-CAA protesters, for example, were never invited for discussions over tea; they were villified as anti-nationals. The farmer protests are clearly seen by the government as more damaging than others, at least partly because of the sheer numbers who have gathered – reported to be over a lakh now, and blocking some major routes into Delhi – and the fact that they cut across both caste and class, from small/medium farmers and agricultural agents, to landless labourers. Hence the invitations and assurances, however half-hearted.

At the heart of the farmers' refusal to break bread, though, is the concept of langar. This word has been made world-famous today by the Sikh community, though it is of Persian origin and popularised by the Sufis first, meaning a kitchen serving free food to the needy. The Mughal emperors also ordered the opening of langars in times of war or natural calamity. The difference between these and the langars started by the early Sikh gurus is that the latter were deliberately intended to break caste barriers by community dining. Everybody, regardless of caste, religion, gender, or anything else, ate in the Guru's langar. Even now, when Punjab is witness to violent caste discrimination, with caste being upheld by some Sikh communities themselves, the universal essence of the Sikh langar still lingers, with a reputation for feeding those most in need, like the Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh, the war-affected in Afghanistan and Syria, the anti-CAA protesters in Delhi, and so on.

I have eaten at various religious kitchens, and remember the langar of Amritsar's Golden Temple as being different. It was not the vast and mixed crowd that was dining there; crowds of strangers often eat at religious sites these days, and it is difficult to read an urbanised person's caste position from their appearance. It can be different when you are recognised, as when an adivasi family, dressed traditionally, was first shooed away at the Ranakpur Temple in Rajasthan, and then – when other diners protested – served on the floor instead of at the tables where others dined. The crowd eating at the Golden Temple seemed anonymously urban, but what was still striking was how each one, upon finishing their food, took their steel plates and glasses – yes, steel; not leaves/paper/plastic to be thrown away into heaps of garbage all around – to the row of sinks outside, cleaned them, and stacked them in gleaming piles, to be used by others. And how other visitors were volunteering in the kitchens, and also in serving food. So one was both a provider and a receiver of food, and a cleaner as well. It felt different, like a glimmer of a new society that had almost, but not quite, been born.

And the langars of the protesting farmers in Delhi share this culture. Many different people

are contributing the provisions, preparing the food and serving it, and welcoming all – all those protesting, of every caste, class, gender and religious background, and also police and passers-by, and people living in the shanties nearby – to partake of it.

In that sense, the success of the farmers' protest in Delhi is important for all of us. Not just because the laws that they are fighting against will worsen the existing situation of rural debt, food inflation and mass malnutrition in India. Not just because many Goans too are up in arms against the same authorities today, in an attempt to save land and livelihoods, forest and future, and are also facing callous indifference, meaningless assurances, and even threats. But because the farmers' protest is connected to a humane and egalitarian culture worth remembering, one of the many local cultures that challenge the prevalent casteist and exploitative one upheld by Delhi.

With thanks to Amandeep Sandhu for some of the information here, and in memory of Dadu Mandrekar – friend, teacher, writer, and fighter against Goa's many casteisms, both traditional and modern.

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