

Indian Farmers



Surrey University <sogs197080@gmail.com>

11 Feb
2021

to mgulatiwb,

Cc GretaThunbergMedia, sgcentral,

Dear Mohinder,

Further to your letter dated 06 February 2021 to Greta Thunberg, in your capacity as Former Chief Operating Officer United Nations Sustainable Energy for All, we would like to enlighten you on some basic facts.

Firstly, let us introduce ourselves:

We are a group of friends who studied at the University of Surrey (UK), affectionately referring to ourselves as Surrey old Graduates (SoG's). Majority of the group attended University of Surrey (UK) in the 1970's and 1980's and were born in or have family ties with India. The group started weekly group zoom sessions to allow us to socialise safely during the first wave of Covid. In witnessing the abhorrent way elderly farmers demonstrating peacefully were being treated, the group decided to organise crowd funding to support the Indian farmers. The group consists of members from diverse professions, social groups, religious beliefs, but united in our desire to provide humanitarian and compassionate support. The group has no specific political or religious affiliation; simply, we are open minded individuals.

We are certain that Ms Thunberg does not need our help or support and is unlikely to be intimidated by your credentials or former perceived high office. Indeed, as acknowledged by you, Greta has shown great resolve and maturity beyond her tender age to speak up and raise awareness of the environmental neglect and continued damage inflicted by our generation. We are bewildered why you feel her intervention in raising awareness of the plight of Indian farmers is politically driven and not in the interest of safeguarding the environment. Sustainable farming to meet our current and future food needs is at the core of environmental concerns. We, therefore, applaud and thank the likes of Greta and other internationally renowned campaigners, celebrities, and young role models for raising awareness in solidarity and encouraging open debate.

Whilst there is no doubt that Indian Farming laws and general economic structures need tremendous overall reform, it is paramount that these are openly debated with the widest consultation to ensure proper adoption and protection of majority of those to be impacted. As you are undoubtedly aware, no meaningful change has ever been achieved by underhandedly deciding the rules and regulations and enforcing these on the majority.

In your letter to Greta, you made many baseless accusations and claims we could debate with you on a point-by-point basis, but this would be futile, and do not merit debate. Notwithstanding this, we urge you to provide evidence for the following assertions/implications made by you:

- The new farming laws will improve environmental use of farmland, and initiatives provided for conserving water and reduce environmental damage caused by burning crop residues.
- Only a minority of farmers or farming communities are unhappy with the laws, bearing in mind the regional gross farming produce.
- The farmers are naïve therefore these laws are to prevent their future continued exploitation.
- Industrialisation of farming by private sector will result in greener sustainable farming, especially bearing in mind the unique farming eco-structure within India.
- Provide examples of where corporate India has protected environmental interests of the community over and above its own need for short-term profitability.
- Did you provide input when these laws were framed? If yes, then did you meet with farmers to express your views?
- In 2011-12, investment in agriculture as a percentage of total investment stood at 8.5%. rose to 8.6% in 2013-14 and then fell, staying flat at between 6% and 7% since 2015 hence farmers sinking into debt (source: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-india-55413499>) How will these reforms address this lack of investment in agriculture.

One would have thought that with over a third of Lok Sabha MPs self-identifying as an 'agriculturalist', there would have been a more nuanced parliamentary debate on the farm laws and the concerns expressed by protesting farmers. According to the latest data available on the Lok Sabha website, 7.15% of MPs list 'farming' as their occupation, while 37.24% say they are 'agriculturalists'. It seems absurd that when over a third of the Lok Sabha knows and understands the sector, because they are or have been engaged in farming or agriculture personally, that India is seeing such continued opposition to the recent farm laws <https://thewire.in/agriculture/lok-sabha-mp-agriculturalists-disconnect-parliament-farmers-protest-farm-laws>

We eagerly await your response and look forward to your comments and meaningful insight based on facts and detailed research of the issue, rather than politically biased uninformed lengthy statements.

This is a critical moment for maintaining democracy in India vis a vis the historic farmers plight and we are inspired by the courage and bravery of those on the ground. We urge and applaud influencers, people like Greta to continue putting the spotlight on exploitation of poorer members of society and those peddling misinformation for political agenda, despite the continued environmental damage.

Yours Mistrustingly Curious

SoG's

11 Feb. 2021

The original Letter to Greta Thunberg

Mohinder Gulati
Former Chief Operating Officer
United Nations Sustainable Energy for All

Dear Greta,

I had admired your courage, commitment, and capturing the global imagination on climate justice when you stood up at the 2018 UNCCC. As Chief Operating Officer of United Nations Sustainable Energy for All until 2015, I was deeply involved with global advocacy and building consensus for Sustainable Development Goal-7 and Paris Climate Agreement. When I heard you in 2018 and 2019 my heart warmed up since we had been advocating that the youth would drive the change for a better future, and you emerged as a torch bearer of that trust. However, I am writing to you with some disappointment that you have started using your well-earned bully pulpit to wade into political issues, such as farmers' protest in India, which may not be as simple and as straightforward as you may have been led to believe.

I would like to apprise you of four key issues that you should carefully consider for an informed opinion on the subject.

1. **Emissions from crop residue burning.** Farmers demanded, and regrettably the Government of India agreed, to withdraw penalties for burning crop residue. Indian farmers, mostly around Delhi in the states of Punjab, Haryana, and Uttar Pradesh, burn about 100 million tons (Mt) a year of crop residue which generates 140 Mt of CO₂, 12 Mt of other noxious gases and 1.2 Mt of particulate matter choking a population of about 50 million in the area. Crop residue burning also destroys the nitrogen and carbon potential of the soil, kills the microflora and fauna beneficial to the soil, removes the large portion of the organic matter, and unavoidably leads to increased use of chemical fertilizers. Smog in Delhi forces young children to skip school and stay indoors, 2.2 million children suffer irreversible lung damage. Your embassy in Delhi can inform you how they gasp for air during that period. Do you support farmers demand to let them continue to burn crop residue and add to emissions?
2. **Food wastage.** Every year in India, about 67 million tons of food is wasted, which has been estimated to be around US\$14 billion and could feed 100 million people. Up to 40 per cent of the food produced in India is wasted, according to the United Nations Development Program, and about 21 million tons of wheat (2.5 Mt GHG)–equivalent to gross annual production of Australia- is wasted annually. FAO estimates show that two-third of food is wasted in post-harvest transportation, storage, processing and distribution before it reaches the consumer. If food wastage was a country, it would be the third largest emitter after the US and China. Embedded carbon in the wasted food in India is about 60 Mt of CO₂ equivalent. India desperately needs to modernize its agriculture, strengthen market linkages, and invest in the whole supply chain. This cannot, and should not, be done by the governments and should be left to a competitive, efficient and well-regulated

private sector. Do you support India to continue with the current archaic systems and waste food that could feed 100 million hungry every year?

3. **Water Crisis.** A severe water crisis is looming large in India. About 85% of irrigated agriculture in India depends on groundwater. India extracts about 230 km³ of groundwater every year of which 90% is used for irrigation. World Bank estimates show that by 2030, 65% of Indian groundwater would be considered over-exploited i.e. extracting more than is recharged by nature. Fifty years ago, farmers in Punjab and Haryana valiantly rose to the challenge of food insecurity and started growing rice in a semi-arid agro-climatic zone to feed the country. It has come at a very heavy environmental cost of severe depletion of groundwater, deteriorating water quality, excessive use of chemical fertilizers and cancer-causing pesticides. India is now food surplus and needs to create incentives to make agriculture less resource intensive and demand driven. Agitating farmers want the government to lock into the current system of growing resource intensive and chemical ridden agriculture. Do you support that
4. **Corruption-controlled agriculture markets.** You may not be aware but the current system forces farmers to sell their produce through government-established market yards where they have to pay a brokerage of about 2 to 3% and market tax of about 5 to 6%. Market Committees collect this tax supposedly for “rural development”, are controlled by politicians, and their accounts are not audited for years. The revenue is often swindled by corrupt politicians controlling these Committees. The new laws give a choice to the farmers to *either* continue to sell in the existing market yards *or* sell to anyone anywhere in the country and that too without paying any tax.

There are other strong vested interests benefitting from the status-quo. Government procures large quantities of wheat and rice for the public distribution system and pays a pre-announced minimum support price (MSP). Out of about 210 Mt of wheat and rice produced in the country, the Government procures about 85 Mt for sale to the poor at *one-tenth* of the procurement price. About 52% of this procurement is made from only three states Punjab, Haryana and Uttar Pradesh- the hub of agitating farmers. More than 90% of the farmers in rest of India do not benefit from this system. Normally, the market price is lower than the MSP. This is what creates a great opportunity for the broker-mafia. Brokers and politicians purchase wheat and rice from farmers in other states at a lower price (about 60% of MSP) and pay them in cash, bring it to government procurement stations in Punjab, Haryana and UP, sell it at a higher price (MSP) and get paid by check. This is counted as their agriculture income which is tax-exempt. So these brokers, often politicians or campaign financiers, not only earn the huge arbitrage but also convert the cash (generally crime money) to legitimate tax-free income. New laws would bring in transparency and make it difficult to legitimize crime money. No wonder farmer agitation is so well funded. I feel the innocent farmers may not even know the source of this questionable “philanthropic” funding. I wonder if you would support a system of legitimizing crime and corruption money in the hands of corrupt politicians and their cronies.

Farmers in Punjab, Haryana, and part of Uttar Pradesh have a legitimate apprehension which needs to be addressed through dialogue and not intransigence of either party. India has adequate institutions of Parliament, Courts, Media, and public opinion to allow peaceful protests and open dialogue to solve its myriad problems of poverty and development. I am sure, eventually a satisfactory solution would be found not only for the agitating farmers of a few states but also for the remaining 90% farmers of India who would stand to gain from the new laws.

You are doing a great service to the cause of climate change, an existential threat to humanity that needs to be addressed urgently. We need global consensus for implementation of the Paris Agreement and Sustainable Development Goals. Walking into the thicket of local political issues, often mired in a battle with corrupt and vested political interests, would undermine your ability to keep the moral high ground to exhort World Leaders into action for a sustainable future. I would urge you not to expend your political and moral capital on controversial local political issues.

I am sending a copy of this letter to the United Nations Secretary-General H.E. António Guterres for his information.

I look forward to your continued advocacy of a sustainable future.

With warm regards

Mohinder Gulati
mgulatiwb@gmail.com
6th of February, 2021