



'FOOD CAN'T BE TRADED'

Civil Society's Discursive Power in the Context of Agricultural Liberalisation in India

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Key Highlights

- Activists compensate for their lack of decisional power with a discursive power that provides an alternative narrative and assigns new roles to actors engaged in the negotiating process.
- As activists have limited access to consultation mechanisms and technical information, they convey their claims by engaging in parallel activities, protests and media work.
- Civil society actors consider agricultural liberalisation as a threat to food security and advance alternative frameworks based on the re-empowerment of the nation-state. According to La Via Campesina, food security can be ensured through food sovereignty; for the Right to Food Campaign, food security depends on the right to food.
- Activists argue that India's civil society should be better included in free trade agreement negotiations and that the Republic of India should adopt a more assertive position at the negotiating table. By contrast, civil society actors ask for India's negotiating partners to give more room to civil society and India during free trade policymaking processes.
- The study does not just highlight the importance of better inclusion of civil society actors in political economy analyses, but in trade policymaking processes altogether.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Hundreds of thousands of farmers have converged on Delhi since September 2020 to protest against a legislative reform adopted by India's parliament to liberalise agriculture (Mahajan 2020). Above all, demonstrators fear the demise of the government's guaranteed purchase of agricultural commodities (Parija & Prakash 2020). Despite several rounds of talks between farmer representatives and government officials, no agreement could be reached (Dasgupta 2021) and the mobilisation is still ongoing as we are writing these lines.

Civil society actors in India have long been committed to opposing agricultural liberalisation. During the 9th Ministerial Conference of the World Trade Organization in Bali in 2013, farmers and right-to-food activists from India attended the street demonstration and lobbied the Indian delegation. Deadlocks in multilateral negotiations at the World Trade Organization prompted a global surge in bilateral and regional free trade agreements (Urata 2016, 235-36). In turn, civil society actors also started targeting this new generation of

partnerships. For example, 500 farmers, Dalits, women and actors from diverse grassroots groups joined a mass rally held in Hyderabad in 2017 in parallel to the 19th negotiating round for the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), a free trade agreement between 16 Asian and Oceanian countries (The Times of India 2017). The demonstrators called for a halt to the negotiations, which they considered as 'an onslaught on the lives, livelihoods and rights of the majority of Indians' ('Declaration from the People's Convention against FTAs and RCEP' 2017).

Agricultural and food concerns are at the centre of activists' engagement against free trade agreements. However, existing studies on activism against free trade agreements have tended to overlook civil society actors from Asia

and groups committed to agricultural and food concerns. In order to address such a geographic and thematic gap in the literature, our analysis focuses on activists from India concerned about agricultural and food issues. They belong to La Via Campesina – a farmer movement including 182 organisations around the world, the Right to Food Campaign – a coalition committed to the realisation of the right to food in India, and the Forum against Free Trade Agreements – a discussion platform on free trade agreements. La Via Campesina has always opposed agricultural liberalisation as promoted by the World Trade Organization and campaigned for ‘food sovereignty’. For its part, the Right to Food Campaign attempted to influence the drafting of a National Food Security Act between 2009 and 2013. The Forum against Free Trade Agreements has been highlighting free trade agreements’ consequences for civil society in India since 2007. All three Indian social movements are part of civil society but do not necessarily reflect the commitment of other civil society groups in India. The results of our analysis therefore apply only to La Via Campesina, the Right to Food Campaign and the Forum against Free Trade Agreements.

Activists’ engagement against free trade agreements is analysed in the context of negotiating processes for the Bilateral Trade and Investment Agreement (BTIA) between India and the European Union and for the RCEP. The BTIA and RCEP are particularly important agreements for India. The

European Union is India’s main trading partner (13.5% of India’s global trade) (European Commission 2018a) and in 2016, the RCEP would have covered 25% of global gross domestic product, 30% of global trade and 45% of the world’s population (Priya 2016).

Civil society actors are almost completely excluded from the formal arenas of negotiation for the BTIA and RCEP, which brings us to analyse their power in discursive – rather than decisional – terms. Accordingly, activists’ power is conceptualised as ‘discursive practices’ (Fairclough 2003, 26; Del Felice 2014, 151) and articulated in ‘ways of acting’ – activities against the BTIA and RCEP, ‘ways of representing part of the world’ – discourses on agricultural liberalisation, and ‘ways of being’ – identities shaped through discourses.

A GEOGRAPHIC AND THEMATIC GAP IN EXISTING STUDIES

Two strands of scholarship address the ability of civil society actors to impact regional trade policymaking. First, global governance studies give valuable insights on how civil society actors are likely to gain some decisional power in such negotiations. Second, social movement studies provide fruitful analyses of how activists may challenge dominant ideas by exerting a discursive power in regional trade negotiations, all the more important for civil society actors excluded from consultation arenas and formal fora of negotiation.

A geographic and thematic gap characterises scholarly studies on activism against free trade agreements. The geographic gap appears in that activists from Asia are almost absent from a body of literature that mostly focuses on Europe and on the Americas. Asia experienced, however, ‘the emergence of a vibrant civil society’ as a reaction to neo-liberal economic policies and illiberal democracies at the beginning of the 21st century (Kingston 2017, xx–xxi). For its part, the thematic gap in existing scholarship consists in privileging environmental and labour issues rather than agricultural and food-related struggles that nevertheless involve millions of activists around the globe.

The following research question aims at addressing such a geographic and thematic gap: Do activists concerned about agricultural and food issues in India have the discursive power to influence regional trade policymaking?

ANALYSING ACTIVISTS’ POWER AS ‘DISCURSIVE PRACTICES’

A great deal of civil society actors’ power results from their discursive practices. In the wake of Del Felice (2014, 151), we draw on critical discourse analysis (Fairclough 2003) to develop our analytical framework. This allows us to appraise the discursive power that civil society actors are likely to have on the formation of regional trade policy preferences. From the assumption that language is an essential part of social life, Fairclough (2003, 26) has disentangled discursive

Table 1: Activists’ discursive practices

Discursive practice	Operationalisation
‘Genres’ or ‘ways of acting’	Actions taken by activists (1) in formal spaces (consultation mechanisms) by means of formal texts (technical reports, statistics, legal texts) and (2) in non-formal spaces (parallel activities, protests, the production and dissemination of critical knowledge, campaigns targeting other governance institutions, lobbyism, media work) by means of non-formal texts (posters, pamphlets, declarations)
‘Discourses’ or ‘ways of representing’	Policy paradigms adopted by activists about (1) the link between agricultural liberalisation and food security and (2) alternative frameworks in order to ensure food security
‘Styles’ or ‘ways of being’	Identities (1) formed through activists’ discourse (India’s civil society, the Republic of India, India’s negotiating partners) and (2) positioned in relation to each other

Source: Authors’ compilation

Table 2: Findings of the analysis

Discursive practice	Findings
'Genres' or 'ways of acting'	Activists are almost completely excluded from formal spaces and have limited access to formal texts. Civil society actors consequently focus on non-formal spaces and non-formal texts. Parallel activities, protests and media work are the created spaces in which they are most often mobilised.
'Discourses' or 'ways of representing'	Food security is at the centre of activists' discourse. Civil society actors consider agricultural liberalisation as a danger for food security and advance alternative frameworks based on the re-empowerment of the nation-state. According to La Via Campesina, food security can be ensured through food sovereignty, consisting in a community's ability to control agricultural resources and production, as well as India's capacity to preserve its agriculture from commercial commitments considered as harmful. For the Right to Food Campaign, food security depends on the right to food, a constitutional entitlement implemented through existing food and nutrition policies.
'Styles' or 'ways of being'	Activists assign important and new responsibilities to India's civil society and Indian negotiators. India's civil society appears as a broad and diversified – but cohesive – group, representative of India's people and illegitimately excluded from negotiating arenas. Accordingly, activists advance that civil society should be included in the negotiating processes for the BTIA and RCEP. The Republic of India is depicted as a powerful entity composed of core democratic institutions – the government, the parliament, the federated states and civil society – but economically fragile. Civil society actors consequently ask for India to take an assertive position during negotiating processes in order to better protect its developing economy. By contrast, India's negotiating partners – described as a block of developed countries allied with big multinational companies – are considered as having a moral responsibility to give more room to civil society and India.

practices in three distinct ways in which social practices evolve.

First, 'genres' or 'ways of acting' consist of how a discourse is part of a wider action and can take different written and oral forms. Regarding the case discussed in this study, ways of acting are about the individual actions taken by activists against the BTIA and RCEP, which are likely to be characteristic of particular textual genres.

Second, Fairclough uses the notion of 'discourse', not only in its abstract sense of any semiotic meaning, but also in its more concrete understanding of particular 'ways of representing'; this refers to the assumption that representations 'are always a part of social practices – representations of the material world, of other social practices, reflexive self-representations of the practice in question' (Fairclough 2003, 26). We will see that such ways of representing help appraise civil society actors' narrative on regional trade and agricultural/food concerns.

Finally, the author describes as 'style' the manner in which discourse also constitutes 'ways of being', as the use of language is intrinsically linked to 'particular social or personal identities'. Such ways of being will

here be understood as social identities characterised and positioned in relation to other subjects through civil society actors' narrative.

Activists' discursive practices are analysed through 10 appeals and declarations issued by civil society groups (2008-2017) and 12 face-to-face and phone interviews with civil society actors (2018). In Table 1, we give an overview of how activists' discursive practices are coded in the course of the analysis.

ACTING, REPRESENTING AND BEING: ARE ACTIVISTS POWERFUL?

Activists' 'ways of acting' are confined to 'outside spaces' and informal textual genres. Accordingly, the discursive power of civil society actors is weak. The findings show the difficulties that activists have to access 'inside spaces', through inclusion in consultation mechanisms, and that compel them to remain almost exclusively in 'outside spaces', such as parallel activities, protests and media work. Civil society actors are similarly denied access to formal documents – legal and other technical texts – and can only draw on informal textual genres, such as

declarations, banners and press releases.

Activists' 'ways of representing' are alternative discourses to the dominant narrative on regional trade liberalisation. Accordingly, the discursive power of civil society actors is strong. Activists adopt a discourse in which the BTIA and RCEP appear as threats to both food producers and consumers in India. In this narrative, regional trade policymaking endangers India's food security. This clearly constitutes an alternative to the dominant discourse on agricultural liberalisation 'as an opportunity for food security' (Clapp 2015). Activists advance frameworks that they consider as more appropriate in order to ensure food security than agricultural liberalisation: farmers from La Via Campesina promote 'food sovereignty', whereas members of the Right to Food Campaign refer to the 'right to food'. Both alternatives coincide with 'isolationist' anti-capitalist activism, relying on 'the re-empowerment of the nation-state', and arguing for state control over food and public services (Said & Desai 2003, 68). According to Graz (2004, 603, 613), civil society actors advocate 'alternative agendas promoting more radical shifts in the

global trading order', possibly making the balance of global trade policymaking tilt toward more political and social concerns and less market integration. Activists engaged against the BTIA and RCEP in India similarly present 'alternative agendas' for regional trade policymaking that imply that market aims are subsumed under agricultural and food policies. Civil society actors are thus able to politicise regional trade policymaking through their narrative.

Activists' 'ways of being' are associated with claims for new roles for actors engaged in negotiating arenas. Accordingly, the discursive power of civil society actors is strong. Activists engaged against the BTIA and RCEP

shape three social identities in their discourse: (1) India's civil society, (2) the Republic of India, and (3) India's negotiating partners during trade talks for the BTIA and RCEP. Our analysis shows that activists assign important and new responsibilities to India's civil society and Indian negotiators. Both actors are considered as excluded from or insufficiently included in negotiating arenas for the BTIA and RCEP, in which they should legitimately have a central role. Accordingly, activists ask India's negotiating partners to give more room to civil society and India during regional trade policymaking processes. A rebalancing of forces between participants in support of civil society and the state thus appears necessary for activists. Such a claim for

'democratisation' echoes critiques of free trade agreements' anti-democratic aspects (Graz 2013, 93).

In Table 2, the findings of our analysis are summarised. The power of activists' discourse is relatively weak in their ways of acting, in contrast to their relatively strong ways of representing and of being. Civil society actors can thus exercise a form of discursive power in trade policymaking related to the negotiations of the two regional free trade agreements examined in this study (BTIA and RCEP).

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