

India summoned British Envoy Alex Ellis following the debate in UK Parliament over the ongoing farmers protest in India and the Indian Government's handling of the farmer's protest. [According to the Indian government's response](#), the debate was unwarranted, tendentious and distinctly one-sided as most of the MPs spoke against the Indian government's action on the ongoing farmers' movement. On 8th March, the UK parliament scheduled a debate on *press freedom and safety of protesters in India* after an e-petition entitled "Urge the Indian Government to ensure e-safety of protesters and press freedom" launched by Liberal Democrat Councilor, Gurcharan Singh crossed the 1 Lakh signature threshold required for such a debate in the parliament. The UK law mandates that the petitions that draw over one lakh signatures must be debated in the parliament.



Image source: AFP

The 'alleged' one side debate

The successful e-petition on *freedom of the press and the safety of the agitators* which got 1.15 lakh signatures was introduced by Scottish National Party MP Martyn Day in the UK parliament. The UK avoided debate on the merits of the three farm laws as India is a sovereign state and has all the rights to enforce legislation in its territorial jurisdiction. The

discussion and the debates largely centred around India's handling of the ongoing farmers' protests and most of the arguments made by the MPs included the arrest of the climate activists Disha Ravi, Nodeep Kaur, the temporary internet clampdown, the usage of tear gas on protesters, curtailment of the freedom of press and backlash received by Rihanna and Greta Thunberg for supporting the farmer's protest.

Former Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn dubbed the ongoing farmers protest as the *biggest industrial dispute in history*. According to him, the steps taken by the Indian government during the ongoing farmers' protest such as the usage of tear gas, suspension of the internet and the nature in which the protesters have been attacked has been unprecedented and is giving the impression that globalization was being forced upon them. Among the Indian and Pakistani origin MPs who criticized the Indian government, one of the most vocal critics of the Indian government was British MP Tamanjit Singh Dhesi who expressed a deep sense of anguish.

On the Indian government's decision to block internet connection to protect national security, Pakistan origin British MP Khalil Mahmood stated "democratic values should not be suspended irrespective of any provocation." Indian origin MP Virendra Sharma, having a large Punjabi diaspora under his constituency advocated the rights of the farmers to peacefully protest and also suggested both sides step back and reach an agreement. MP Theresa Villiers from the ruling Conservative party was the only lone supporter of the Indian government's decision to enforce the farm laws. While arguing in support of the Indian government Ms Villiers highlighted that agricultural reform is an issue that has proved difficult across the world over the years and India has got appreciation from International bodies like IMF for taking an action in agricultural reforms. She also reiterated the core purpose of the farm laws "make farming more profitable, to raise the incomes of the people who work in this sector and to promote investment in agriculture to increase yields" as earlier mentioned by the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi.



Image source: DNA

The Indian response

India has condemned distinctly one-sided false assertions in the UK parliamentary debate over India's handling of the ongoing farmers' protests and India has also advised UK MPs to refrain from vote bank politics due to a huge Indian diaspora in the country. The High Commission of India in London also denounced the assertions made by the British MPs. Indian mission pointed out that the foreign media, including British media, has been present and has witnessed the ongoing farmer's protest closely and hence the question of lack of freedom of the media in India does not arise.

Indian diplomatic missions in the UK had reached out to British lawmakers and civil society to provide them with facts related to the farm laws as they aim to provide the right information on the happenings in India. Hence, the Indian High Commission in London and the Indian consulates in Birmingham and Edinburg made available the facts about the three farm laws to the UK government, MPs and civil society before the debate. Still, a dozen cross-party MPs who debated on 8th March gave unbalanced arguments and false assertions according to the High Commission of India in London.

The debates have damaged the reputation of the largest functioning democracy in the world and have raised a question on its institutions. In response, Harsh Shringla Foreign Secretary of India has summoned British High Commissioner to India. In order ameliorate its already tarnished image, India has emphasized that the protest by the farmers should be seen in the context of India's democratic ethos and polity, and the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) has urged to ascertain the facts before giving any comment.



Image source: iStock

Time of great ambition for UK-India ties?

The British High Commissioner to India maintained the UK's view that farmers protest is an internal issue for India but he also emphasized the ripple effect of the farmers' protests in the UK due to the large Indian diaspora in the country. Due to this huge diaspora community in the UK, whatever happens in India have ripples in the UK and these things will surely get debated. As India is growing and becoming more international and even more significant, there is a possibility of such debates about the Indian issues in other parts of the world as well.

UK and India have been working together as a force for good in the UN Security Council

and the bilateral cooperation between the two countries has helped fix many global problems. Even after sharing a close bilateral relationship and the excitement of even closer ties soon did not hinder the UK in any way from raising *difficult issues* with India. While speaking about Prime Minister Boris Johnson's planned visit to India, Nigel Adams Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office Minister revealed the candid discussions on a wide range of issues that will form part of PM Johnson's visit to India. The G7 summit which will be organized by the UK this year in June has invited India as one of the Prime Minister's guest countries. This cooperation will benefit both the UK and India as it will help fix global problems and will strengthen prosperity and wellbeing both in India and the UK. This is a time of great ambition for the UK's relationship with India as both countries are working to advance shared priorities across defence and security, sustainability and climate change, health, trade and investment.

Despite the cordial relations shared by UK and India, both sides will neither hinder to raise difficult issues nor will it tolerate any aspersions as evident by the recent debates in the UK Parliament on the going farmer's protest and the Indian reaction to the same. Thus, the developments around the farmers' protest might affect the strengthening of UK-India ties in near future.

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