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'Food Can't Be Traded'

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

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‘Food Can’t Be Traded’
Civil Society’s Discursive Power in the Context of Agricultural Liberalisation in India

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Résumé

Les accords de libre-échange bilatéraux et régionaux se substituent de plus en plus à l’Organisation mondiale du commerce dans les négociations commerciales. Par conséquent, les organisations de la société civile opposées à la libéralisation du commerce ciblent également cette nouvelle génération d’accords commerciaux. Cet article examine le cas de militant•e•s préoccupé•e•s par les questions agricoles et alimentaires en Inde qui se sont élevé•e•s contre le Bilateral Trade and Investment Agreement (BTIA) et le Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), négociés par l’Inde avec l’Union européenne et des pays d’Asie et d’Océanie, respectivement. Parmi eux et elles se trouvaient des membres de La Via Campesina – un mouvement d’agriculteurs et agricultrices comprenant 182 organisations à travers le monde, de la Right to Food Campaign – une coalition engagée dans la réalisation du droit à l’alimentation en Inde, et du Forum against Free Trade Agreements – une plateforme de discussion sur les accords de libre-échange. En nous appuyant sur l’analyse de discours, nous montrons que les acteurs et actrices de la société civile sont capables d’exercer une forme diffuse de pouvoir, même lorsqu’ils et elles sont essentiellement exclu•e•s des arènes formelles de négociation telles que le BTIA et le RCEP. Ils et elles y parviennent notamment (1) en faisant campagne en dehors des arènes de négociation, (2) en élaborant un récit alternatif sur le commerce régional et ses implications pour l’alimentation, et (3) en attribuant de nouveaux rôles aux participant•e•s au processus d’élaboration des politiques.

Classification JEL : F13 - Politique commerciale; organisations commerciales internationales, F52 - Sécurité nationale; nationalisme économique, Q17 - L’agriculture dans le commerce international

Mots-clefs : acteurs et actrices de la société civile, discours, sécurité alimentaire, accords de libre-échange, économie politique

Abstract

Bilateral and regional free trade agreements increasingly substitute for the World Trade Organization in trade negotiations. Accordingly, civil society organisations opposed to trade liberalisation target this new generation of trade agreements as well. This paper examines the case of activists concerned about agricultural and food issues in India who raised their voice against the Bilateral Trade and Investment Agreement (BTIA) and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), negotiated by India with the European Union and Asian and Oceanian countries, respectively. Among them were members of La Via Campesina – a farmer movement

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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. Drawing on discourse analysis, we show that civil society actors are able to exert a diffused form of power even when they are essentially excluded from formal arenas of negotiation such as the BTIA and RCEP. They do so in particular by (1) campaigning outside the negotiating arenas, (2) framing an alternative narrative about regional trade and its implication for food, and (3) assigning new roles to participants in the policymaking process.

JEL classification: F13 - Trade policy; international trade organizations, F52 - National security; economic nationalism, Q17 - Agriculture in international trade

Keywords: civil society actors, discourse, food security, free trade agreements, political economy

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Agriculture is life. Agriculture is food.

Food cannot be traded. Food is life for us.

– Fatima Burnad

Introduction

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, 235-236). 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.

The first part of the paper details the framing of the research by (1) discussing scholarship on activism against regional trade policymaking and (2) explaining analytical and methodological choices. The second part analyses the discursive practices of activists engaged against the BTIA and RCEP in India. The conclusion wraps up our findings and draws some implications.

Framing the research

Literature review

What power do civil society actors have to influence major issues of international politics? Scholarship in international relations has analysed the power of civil society actors in various ways. Power is clearly an elusive and controversial concept, not the least as a result of being essentially contested since its empirical validation cannot avoid prior normative assumptions (Lukes 2005). Conventional theories of international relations are focused on a state-centric understanding of power defined as diplomatico-strategic attributes and military resources. They thus tend to neglect civil society actors. Yet, a number of theorists stress that power is more dispositional, relational and multidimensional, and would thus be more inclined to take civil society actors onboard (Barnett & Duvall 2005; Guzzini 2009; Katzenstein & Seybert 2018). Moreover, scholars in global political economy situate power relations in the broader framework of capitalism, with diverse emphasis on a structural understanding of its power focused on the constraining environment in which strategic interactions may take place. This includes the rise of neo-liberalism as a political discourse supporting a programme of large-scale reforms driven by the opening of market access at both the domestic and international level. From this perspective, the potential influence of civil society actors in trade policymaking is also part of the picture (Hannah 2011; 2014; 2016a; 2016b; Hopewell 2015; 2017; 2018; Eagleton-Pierce 2016; 2018; Scott 2016; Hannah, Ryan & Scott 2017). Drawing on concepts such as epistemic communities (Adler 1992; Haas 1992) or on Bourdieu's field theory (Bourdieu 1975; 2011), those studies emphasise the structural dimension of power by analysing the ability of activists to comply with dominant frameworks of knowledge and social structures that shape global trade relations. Such studies mainly focus on international and mainstream non-governmental organisations (partly) conforming to dominant trade rules and acting as expert knowledge providers. In our case, the focus lies more specifically on activists who adopt a critical stance on liberal trade.

Two strands of scholarship address the ability of civil society actors to impact regional trade policymaking. First, a number of studies in global governance have examined the implication of non-state actors in negotiating processes, particularly concerning participation in consultation and policymaking mechanisms. Second, social movement studies have analysed in various ways the mobilisation strategies used by civil society actors in such circumstances. While governance studies analyse the power of civil society actors as decisional or institutional, social movement studies

give additional insights into their potential ability to change existing courses of action with more emphasis on the discursive or productive dimensions of power. This is what we turn to now.

Activists' decisional power

Global governance studies gained importance in the 1990s in addressing certain aspects of a 'fundamental world political change', such as the internationalisation of regulation measures, the diffusion of authority beyond the nation-state, the change in governance norms and the broader distribution of governance resources (Dingwerth 2008, 1, 4). Studies in global governance take particular interest in civil society actors when they analyse the democratisation of global institutions such as the World Bank, the United Nations and the World Trade Organization (e.g. Esty 1998; O'Brien et al. 2000; Scholte 2002; 2004; 2007; 2011; Wilkinson 2002; Nanz & Steffek 2004; Held & Koenig-Archibugi 2005; Lipschutz 2005; 2007; McKeon 2009; de Vasconcelos 2011). According to Steffek and Nanz (2008, 1), a normative turn has characterised European and global governance studies with such an interest in making a diagnosis of a democratic deficit affecting the European Union and international organisations. As a result, they have made a number of proposals for alternative democratic formats, such as representative-parliamentary institutions, accountability mechanisms and enhanced political deliberation. Against such concerns about the democratic quality of international and regional politics, the participation of civil society actors in global and regional governance mechanisms is contemplated in relation to its democratisation potential. This also applies to studies addressing civil society actors' decisional power through consultative mechanisms related to regional trade policymaking. While mainly addressing European and North American agreements, they also analyse negotiations related to African, Caribbean and Pacific countries, and Latin America.

According to Dür and de Bièvre (2007, 79), civil society actors' participation in European consultation mechanisms related to regional trade policymaking can be characterised as 'inclusion without influence': non-governmental organisations 'do not dispose of resources with which they can threaten or enhance political actors' chances of re-election or re-appointment'. Although non-governmental organisations are part of the 'Civil society dialogue' – a body which allows members of the European Commission, non-governmental organisations and business representatives to make contributions to the European trade policy – their concerns about European free trade agreements are not taken into account by the European Commission, which maintains the same negotiating line (Dür & de Bièvre 2007, 91). Altintzis (2013) has analysed another European advisory mechanism called the 'Domestic advisory group' – a consultation body created in relation to the implementation of the free trade agreement between South Korea and the European Union. A 'new opportunit[y] for civil society and public interest groups to establish and engage in a constant discussion and exchange of ideas with a view to promote social goals through trade policy' (27), the Domestic advisory group can however only deliver recommendations, thus limiting civil society actors' ability to have a direct impact on regional trade policymaking (33-34).

More recently, a paper by Orbie, Martens and van den Putte (2016) has situated the relative weakness of consultation mechanisms included in negotiating processes for free trade agreements as regards the various aims for which such mechanisms are created. European consultation mechanisms appear generally to be created as a means to legitimise free trade agreements with an instrumental purpose, even if another goal may prevail in the future (48). Participation in consultation arenas can thus empower activists, although legitimisation concerns play a large part in the creation of such participatory mechanisms. According to Orbie et al. (2016, 526), 'civil society mechanisms may legitimise the underlying neoliberal orientation of the

agreements through co-optation of critical actors'. Civil society actors however adopt 'a constructive position' by accepting to engage in participatory mechanisms in order to gain results for their cause, while remaining critical of the functioning and impact of the mechanisms (Orbie et al. 2016, 526). Activists are thus aware that they may legitimise formal negotiations, but nevertheless attempt to exert institutional power by this means.

According to Xu (2016), a certain number of aspects constrain activists' participation in consultation mechanisms during negotiations for European free trade agreements. First, only a limited number of issues are covered by the consultations. Second, a lack of clear criteria of participation in consultation mechanisms leaves states free to have a hand in the selection of participants. Finally, without any binding capacity, consultation mechanisms are generally limited to arenas dedicated to dialogue and governments can ignore civil society actors' recommendations emanating from such participatory spaces.

A few scholars also draw comparisons between consultation mechanisms in Europe and in the United States of America. For instance, Velut (2016) has identified shared shortfalls in consultation mechanisms in Europe and in the United States related to the negotiations of the Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement and the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership. First, consultations are generally organised before negotiating rounds instead of during and after trade talks, which diminishes the ability to have a direct impact on decisions. Second, civil society actors are granted an advisory function and negotiators are free to ignore their recommendations. Finally, a limited number of matters – environmental and labour concerns especially – are the object of civil society actors' consultations. According to Velut, such shortfalls indicate that 'the democratic governance of EU and US trade policymaking' has room for improvement (14). For their part, Aissi and Peels (2017) consider that a deeper institutionalisation characterises mechanisms in the United States, whereas a case-by-case approach is adopted by the European Union. Although consultation mechanisms in Europe and in the United States appear always more inclusive than in the past, a challenge remains in order 'to maintain mechanisms for transparency, dialogue and accountability' (Aissi & Peels 2017).

Activists from African, Caribbean and Pacific countries are at the centre of a paper by Montoute (2016) on consultative mechanisms related to the agreement between the Caribbean Forum and the European Union. According to her, such 'deliberative democratic framework' is insufficient to allow civil society actors to challenge the negotiating process, in contrast to a more progressive model of 'participatory democracy' she calls for (299). She has highlighted in particular the following limits: civil society actors lack information, the mechanisms lack accountability and transparency, actors from civil society and from the private sector have unequal access to the procedure and are, in the end, unable to have an impact on negotiations (315).

Finally, a contribution by Vieira (2016) addresses civil society actors' consultation in the case of Brazilian and Mexican foreign policymaking. A major aspect of Vieira's analysis is the distinction made between 'participation' and 'influence' of civil society actors (350). Access to consultation mechanisms appears as an insufficient guarantee for civil society actors' impact on the final decision taken by officials. Civil society actors' proposals have instead to be taken into account at a later 'analytical stage' – characterised by intra-governmental deliberations – if they want to have an influence on negotiations (351-352). Considering that 'procedural legitimacy equals nothing', the author sees democratisation of policymaking as a result of provisions for including civil society actors' proposals at the 'analytical stage' as well (375).

While governance studies underline some shortfalls in consultation mechanisms related to regional trade policymaking, they tend to appraise civil society actors'

participation as supporting democratisation of commercial negotiations and enabling their capacity to exert, to some extent, decisional power. Besides such a tendency to exaggerate decisional power, governance studies are often at pains to distinguish between diverse dimensions of power likely to characterise the influence of non-state actors on the global stage. Actually, as argued elsewhere (Graz 2013; 2019), ambiguity plays a crucial role in global governance as it confers authority to new actors on a number of new issues without, however, the plain attributes of sovereign rights.

Activists' discursive power

Studies on social movements and transnational activism is another body of scholarship addressing civil society actors' engagement in regional trade policymaking. *Activists beyond Borders* (Keck & Sikkink 1998) is a pioneer study in this regard, which prompted a large body of literature on transnational advocacy networks (Risse, Ropp & Sikkink 1999; della Porta & Tarrow 2005; Carpenter 2007). Drawing from constructivist approaches, it focuses on the influence of activist networks, 'distinguishable largely by the centrality of principled ideas or values in motivating their formation' (Keck & Sikkink 1998, 1). Keck and Sikkink have shown in particular that civil society actors are able to combine national and transnational resources to have an impact on state policies. For that purpose, they have relied in particular on a so-called boomerang pattern of influence to overcome situations in which governments are out of reach or unresponsive to groups whose claims may nonetheless resonate elsewhere: when the links between government and domestic civil society actors are severed, 'domestic NGOs [non-governmental organisations] may directly seek international allies to try to bring pressure on their states from outside' (Keck & Sikkink 1998, 10). Such power is primarily understood from its normative dimension and its ability to impact on state decisions by framing ideas and norms. The authors have stressed that transnational advocacy networks are increasingly important players in policy debates at the regional as well as the international level (Keck & Sikkink 1999).

Drawing from the literature on transnational advocacy networks, some studies address the discursive power of civil society actors in regional trade policymaking in the American and European context. A number of them analyse the development of transnational worker networks against the North American Free Trade Agreement during the 1990s (Compa 1993; 2001; Hellman 1993; Kidder & McGinn 1995; Carr 1996; 1999; Rosen 1999; Ciccaglione & Strickner 2014). Some put particular focus on alliances between environmental and labour coalitions that combine what Audley (1997) has described as 'accommodating' and 'aggressive' behaviour strategies. Similarly, Dreiling (2001) has examined 'the anti-NAFTA labor-environmental alliance' as the origin of future fair trade campaigns. In the same vein, DeSombre (1995) has used the terms 'Baptists' (the environmentalists) and 'bootleggers' (strictly, illicit purveyors of alcohol; more loosely, capitalists) to describe how civil society actors may in some cases build a *contra nature* alliance.

Other studies also focus on the campaign against the Free Trade Area of the Americas that brought environmental, labour, indigenous, and women's activist groups together in the Hemispheric Social Alliance (Macdonald & Schwartz 2002; Ayres & Macdonald 2006; 2009). According to Legler (2000), constraints characterising transnational coalitions like the Hemispheric Social Alliance add to national limitations already faced at local and national levels by social movements. A similar analysis has been performed by Saguier (2004; 2007) who has underlined the difficulty of guaranteeing a democratic internal organisation and a partial inclusion of grassroots groups. In his view, however, activists belonging to the Hemispheric Social Alliance are able to create a common alternative frame that allows them to act collectively and organise resistance against neo-liberalism. Such ability to shape a counter-

agenda to neo-liberalism has been called into question by Doucet (2005, 278) who has suggested that the alternative democratic vision of the Hemispheric Social Alliance failed to confront 'the discursive framework provided by contemporary political and democratic imaginaries'.

According to Grugel (2006, 209), although American regional governance offers new opportunities for transnational activism in Latin America, civil society actors are still limited in their collective action by a weak institutional inclusion in the Free Trade Area of the Americas and in the Mercado Común del Sur, as well as a difficulty for many social groups to scale up their activities to regional and transnational levels. A more optimistic account has been made by Newell and Tussie (2006) as well as by Icaza, Newell and Saguier (2009) who have observed that a variety of mobilisation strategies are adopted by environmental, labour and women's groups. A notable difference appears between, on the one hand, mainstream environmental activists involved in established consultative mechanisms and, on the other hand, poorer groups using 'a range of community-based informal strategies of corporate accountability in order to secure social and environmental justice' (Newell 2007, 248). In the wake of Keck and Sikkink, Spalding (2007) and von Bülow (2010a; 2010b; 2010c) have taken a closer look at the internal dynamics of social groups. According to Spalding, activists against the Central American Free Trade Agreement in El Salvador adopt two distinct strategies: 'critic negotiators' agree to participate in formal arenas in order to reform the negotiating process, whereas 'transgressive resisters' favour confrontational tactics. For her part, von Bülow (2010a, 25) has shed light on the relative fragility of activist networks and how strategies of transnationalisation depend on domestic roots and a variety of 'organisational pathways' and 'ideational pathways' to address the challenges of coalition building and search for common frames, respectively (27). In brief, activists exert discursive power in order to promote their cause in various arenas, depending on their access to policymaking processes and resources.

Existing studies in social movements focused on activism against bilateral trade agreements negotiated by the European Union discuss similar issues. For instance, Maes (2009) has taken the case of the agreements with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations and Korea to discuss the preference of activists for a gradual approach including guarantees on environmental and social protection, national autonomy, access to information, and consultation. A further insight has been given by García (2017, 563) in his analysis of how activists act as 'interest networks' and adopt various 'modes of political participation'. Another case in point is the laborious negotiations between 15 Caribbean countries and the European Union. According to Girvan, despite many successes registered in demystifying trade agreements (2010, 110), a number of constraints remain, in particular regarding the risk of co-optation, the barrier of technical language and the lack of a strong political base (2012, 759-760). For her part, Trommer (2011, 123) has taken the case of commercial negotiations between the European Union and West African countries to show how activists based in Europe ally with counterparts from African, Caribbean and Pacific countries to become 'activists beyond Brussels' and frame debates in development terms so as to gain the support of African negotiating partners. Here again, a challenge of democratic representation characterises such activists' coalition (Teivainen & Trommer 2017). Finally, it is worth noting Del Felice's (2012) analysis of activism against a commercial agreement between Central America and the European Union. According to her, activists are able to agree on a common message regarding fair trade and coordinate civil society actors. The emancipatory potential of global civil society is acknowledged, although taken with a pinch of salt: marginal voices are excluded as the price paid to reach a compromise (302). In another paper (Del Felice 2014), the author analyses activists' discursive practices and their ability

to frame debates in development terms to impact decision makers and influence negotiating processes.

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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. For their part, governance studies give valuable insights on how civil society actors are likely to gain some decisional power in such negotiations.

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). India and its 'robust and sometimes raucous civil society' (Taneja & Kassim-Lakha 2017, 236) constitutes no exception. According to Choudry (2014, 107), the scholarly neglect of Asia can be explained by 'the disconnect between mass mobilisations and international trade union/NGO [non-governmental organisation] networks in struggles over bilateral free trade and investment agreements'. As Choudry has pointed out, 'since most of these more militant mobilisations [against free trade agreements] have taken place in Asia and Latin America with little sustained movement action in Northern countries, these struggles have also escaped attention in activist, scholarly, and broader public circles' (115). 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. Agricultural and food concerns are also part of civil society actors' mobilisations against the World Trade Organization (Sharma 2007; Edelman 2009) and it looks all the more likely that farmer associations and food activists are involved in struggles against free trade agreements.

A notable exception to such a geographic and thematic gap is Rose's (2013) analysis of how the food sovereignty movement – led by La Via Campesina – responded to the institutionalisation of trade liberalisation and the commodification of natural resources. Drawing on a neo-Gramscian approach, Rose has argued that such strategies reflect 'a combination of opposition and proposition', including criticism of the World Trade Organization as a single negotiating forum on the one hand, and the promotion of peasant rights at the United Nations through existing human rights mechanisms on the other hand (194-195). He has not addressed, however, activism against bilateral and regional free trade agreements. In a similar vein, the political sociology approach used by Thivet (2015; 2019) has appraised the international mobilisation of the peasant movement, La Via Campesina, in France, Brazil and India. With a focus on the linkages between the local, national and international level, on which to build a unified transnational network for the peasant cause, she has shown that the internationalisation of the movement can impact activists' discourse and identities. Her research is not, however, focused on the formation of regional trade policy preferences.

A recent study by Brenni (2019) also provides an insightful comparison of discourses and strategies of indigenous and peasant movements in several international arenas from a perspective that combines constructivist scholarship in international relations with international and ecological political economy approaches. Here again, however, the study focuses on the case of seeds and international biodiversity governance, rather than on the formation of regional trade policy preferences.

Finally, among authors interested in activism centred on food concerns, Dunford (2017) has explained how La Via Campesina, as a democratically organised peasant

movement, formulates its claims in terms of 'food sovereignty' and can thus have an impact on global political discourses. An example of this actor's influence is the incorporation of 'food sovereignty' in a declaration by the United Nations on the rights of peasants and other people working in rural areas. Although Dunford has highlighted the role of grassroots groups from the Global South in setting and developing global norms, his study does not focus on the influence of such actors in the context of regional trade policymaking.

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? This is what the next sections of this paper will address.

Analytical and methodological approach

A definition of civil society

The actors which we focus on in this research are civil society actors. 'Civil society' – Aristotle's *koinona politike* – initially means community and does not differentiate between state and society (Khilnani 2001, 17). Later translated as *societas civilis* in Latin and further developed by John Locke and the Scottish theorists of commercial society, the concept acquires a new meaning in Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's understanding which distinguishes between the state and civil society (Khilnani 2001, 14, 17, 23). A revival of the idea, based on Alexis de Tocqueville's conception that civil society guarantees the stability of liberal democracy, forms the basis for a redefinition of civil society 'as a substantive category, embodying a set of determinate institutions that exist distinct from, or in opposition to, the state' (Wickramasinghe 2005, 468, 471). By the end of the 20th century, neo-Tocquevillian ideas are transplanted in the Global South by international agencies, promoting partnerships between private, state and civil society actors as well as development initiatives led by non-governmental organisations (Wickramasinghe 2005, 473, 478). As Willetts (2011, 25) has pointed out, civil society is also considered in a broad sense at the United Nations:

> At the United Nations, the term civil society has been used to refer to all sectors of society taking part in political debate. … Its usage generally implies a desire to engage with a wider range of groups, with the inference that NGOs [non-governmental organisations] are only part of civil society.

Civil society has been called 'an omnibus concept' because of its changing meaning according to usage contexts (Viterna, Clough & Clarke 2015, 173). A number of assumptions are associated with civil society, ranging from a normative meaning – 'civil society as civilised' – to a functional understanding – 'civil society as democratising' (Viterna, Clough & Clarke 2015, 173). In the wake of Viterna, Clough and Clarke (2015, 175), here we take civil society in its structural meaning as a 'third sector' according to the following definition:

> We define the third sector as a sector of organised human action composed of collective actors beyond the family and distinct from the state and the market. This concept captures all of the actors conventionally referred to as civil society, in addition to the many nonstate, nonmarket actors that are often excluded from civil society analyses.

Activists and civil society actors are here used interchangeably. A drawback in conceptualising civil society as a third sector is the introduction of a false separation between the state and civil society. As Colàs (2002, 32) has argued, civil society

should not be viewed as a benign sphere of collective action outside the state system, but rather as a 'space of contested power relations where clashing interests play themselves out through analogous but unequal modes of collective agency'. Randeria (2007) has shown the importance of 'ambiguous alliances' between activists and the Indian state, which clearly raises the difficulty of considering civil society as a group separated from the state. Although conceptualising civil society as the third sector presents shortcomings, such structural definition avoids normative assumptions and prescriptive bias by taking into account a broad range of actors.

Activists at the centre of our analysis are part of La Via Campesina, the Right to Food Campaign and the Forum against Free Trade Agreements. All three are social movements in what Tarrow (2011, 9) defines as 'collective challenges, based on common purposes and social solidarities, in sustained interaction with elites, opponents, and authorities'. La Via Campesina, the Right to Food Campaign and the Forum against Free Trade Agreements are analysed in this paper as Indian social movements belonging to civil society. However, if such actors adopt a clear stance against agricultural liberalisation, this is not necessarily representative of 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.

Analytical approach

As seen in the previous section, a number of studies examine civil society actors and non-state actors' discursive power. According to Holzscheiter (2005, 723), 'the capital of NGOs [non-governmental organisations] resides in the discourses they represent and their abilities to promote these discourses within state-centred and state-created frameworks for communicative interaction'. As 'discursive entrepreneurs', non-governmental organisations are able to display ideational capabilities in order to produce change and thus exert a form of power (726). Although Holzscheiter's concept of discursive entrepreneurs helps to appraise civil society actors' capacity to have an impact on global governance, it applies to a category of non-governmental organisations that dispose of a certain amount of expertise or information. Grassroots groups may either lack such knowledge or refuse to soften their claims as a way to appear as credible challengers of the dominant discourse. According to Dryzek (2006, 85, 123), non-state actors 'act reflexively', i.e. are conscious that their actions have an impact on the discursive field. A consequence is that non-state actors are better positioned than market and state actors to challenge dominant discourses (123).

Discourse analyses have gained ground in the humanities and social sciences over the last few decades. In contrast to mere content analysis examining *what* the use of language refers to, discourse analysis is more specifically focused on *how* a language is used to make sense of things referred to. From this view, a discourse analysis unveils the implicit meanings of statements and the context of their enunciation (Krieg-Planque 2012, 42). As Doty (1993, 302) has pointed out, language has a productive power in its capacity to shape 'subjects and their worlds':

> A discourse, i.e., a system of statements in which each individual statement makes sense, produces interpretive possibilities by making it virtually impossible to think outside of it. A discourse provides *discursive spaces*, i.e., concepts, categories, metaphors, models, and analogies by which meanings are created. (Doty 1993, 302)

Such power consists of giving meaning to actors and the world. As emphasised by constructivist and post-structuralist approaches in international relations, discourse has a productive power as it can 'make intelligible some ways of being in, and acting towards, the world', in particular by authorising certain subjects to speak and act, defining knowledgeable practices, organising social spaces and producing a common

sense (Milliken 1999, 129). In the same vein, Epstein (2008, 4, 6) views discourses as 'sense-making practices' carving out a space of meaningful objects and creating particular social identities.

A great deal of civil society actors' power thus 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 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.

In brief, civil society actors can compensate for their lack of decisional power with a discursive power to influence the direction and, if possible, the outcome of domestic policy formation in international negotiations. In line with constructivist and poststructuralist approaches in international relations that underline the importance of normative structures and how identities constitute the interests of state and non-sate actors, Fairclough disentangles various dimensions of such discursive power. He differentiates between ways of acting according to different genres, ways of representing as concrete discourses on a part of the world, and ways of being as the particular style used by an actor and constituting her/his social or personal identity.

Our analytical approach will be further developed in section 4. In Table 1, we give a first overview of how activists' discursive practices are coded in the course of the analysis.

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

Hypotheses

Such 'ways of acting', 'ways of representing' and 'ways of being' prompt the following three hypotheses that guide our subsequent analysis.

- The discursive power of civil society actors is weak when their 'ways of acting' are confined to 'outside spaces' and informal textual genres (H1).

  Civil society actors' access to formal arenas is hampered by the lack of consultation mechanisms related to negotiating processes for the BTIA and RCEP. Access to formal textual genres is similarly limited by the absence of transparency characterising negotiating rounds for the BTIA and RCEP. Activists are therefore unable to join forces with actors who have access to 'inside spaces' and formal textual genres.

- The discursive power of civil society actors is strong when their 'ways of representing' are alternative discourses to the dominant narrative on agricultural liberalisation (H2).

  Activists belonging to La Via Campesina adopt a clear stance against agricultural liberalisation and activists belonging to the Right to Food Campaign insist on a complete implementation of feeding policies in India. Activists from La Via Campesina and from the Right to Food Campaign also engage against the BTIA and RCEP by participating in activities held by the Forum against Free Trade Agreements – a discussion platform on free trade agreements. Civil society actors' discourse disputes the dominant narrative on the benefits of agricultural liberalisation.

- The discursive power of civil society actors is strong when their 'ways of being' are associated with claims for new roles for actors engaged in negotiating arenas (H3).

  Democracy has become a central concern for activists and many public campaigns around the globe, be it the Arab Spring, the Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong, the World Social Forum, or village-level women's movements against discrimination in India (Kumar 2000; Riker 2002; Norman 2017; Youngs 2019). A strong inclination toward democracy leads activists engaged against the BTIA and RCEP in India to demand a democratisation of negotiating arenas for the BTIA and RCEP through the assignment of new roles to actors participating in policymaking processes.

Such ways of acting, of representing and of being reflect the three dimensions of the discursive power of activists that we will analyse in this study.

Methodological approach

The BTIA and RCEP have triggered a number of mobilisations among civil society actors since their launches in 2007 and 2013, respectively. The chronological boundaries of the study are thus the years 2007 to 2017.

We use qualitative discourse analysis to examine civil society actors' 'ways of acting', 'ways of representing' and 'ways of being'. Such qualitative analysis helps understand the nuances of civil society actors' narrative and fits well with the relatively small number of documents produced by civil society actors engaged against the BTIA and RCEP in India.

The analysis of activists' ways of acting is based on newspaper articles and press releases available on the Internet. The website bilaterals.org, which gathers information about free trade agreements negotiated all around the world, proved to be especially useful in this regard. The analysis of civil society actors' discursive practices is based on two additional corpora: 10 appeals and declarations and 12 face-to-face and phone interviews.

As seen above, the set of 10 appeals and declarations addressed by activists to Indian and foreign negotiators was for the most part collected from bilaterals.org; and one declaration was shared by an interviewee (People's Resistance Forum against Free Trade Agreements and Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership 2017a). Civil society actors belonging to La Via Campesina and/or the Forum against Free Trade Agreements appear among the signatories of the 10 appeals and declarations. Six of the statements are related to the BTIA (Mital et al. 2008; ActionAid - India et al. 2010; Forum against Free Trade Agreements 2010a; 2010b; 'Appeal to Manmohan Singh' 2012; Anthra et al. 2013) and four are related to the RCEP (Adivasi Aikya Vedika et al. 2014; 'Declaration from the People's Convention against FTAs and RCEP' 2017; People's Resistance Forum against Free Trade Agreements and Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership 2017a; 2017d).

Among the 12 interviews, four of them were conducted with activists from La Via Campesina (Anonymous 2018; Dube 2018; Y. Singh 2018; Subramaniam 2018), three with individuals engaged in the Right to Food Campaign (Shrivastava 2018; Sinha 2018; Srivastava 2018) and five with members of the Forum against Free Trade Agreements (Barria 2018; Bhutani 2018; Gupta 2018; Sengupta 2018; Vissa 2018).

Our selection strategy is based on a 'non-probability sampling approach', taking the form of 'the snowball, or chain-referral, sampling method' (Tansey 2007, 770). According to Tansey (2007, 770), such a method 'involves identifying an initial set of relevant respondents, and then requesting that they suggest other potential subjects who share similar characteristics or who have relevance in some way to the object of study'. A first round of interviews was organised at the beginning of April 2018. We identified activists – for the large part from the Forum against Free Trade Agreements – with information available online and contacted them by e-mail. Most of them accepted our invitation for a face-to-face interview between 15 April 2018 and 6 May 2018 in New Delhi. During the interviews, the respondents often spontaneously offered to 'connect' us with their own contacts, giving us access to what Beaud and Weber (2010, 31) have called a 'field of inter-knowledge' ('milieu d'interconnaissance'). Activists were then contacted by e-mail and phone at the time of the fieldwork in order to arrange additional interviews. According to Beaud and Weber (2010, 86), arriving in the field without being too prepared allows for an increased receptiveness from the political scientist and 'unexpected meetings'. Last minute planning gave us opportunities to arrange such unexpected interviews, which

were often highly insightful. A second round of interviews was organised after returning to Switzerland. Activists were contacted by e-mail and phone in order to arrange phone interviews. The second group of interviews took place between 7 May 2018 and 12 July 2018.

These 12 interviews are part of a larger set of 47 interviews conducted within a collaborative research project called 'Where is transnational regulation determined? Development priorities and trade agreements beyond and within the Nation-States', co-directed by Prof. Jean-Christophe Graz, from the University of Lausanne (Switzerland), and Prof. Smita Srinivas, formerly at the Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relations (New Delhi). The collaborative project was funded by a Scholars Exchange Grant from the Indo-Swiss Joint Research Programme in the Social Sciences. As a broader research question guided the data collection, interviews initially had a larger target, including agricultural policy experts and Indian officials from different institutions and ministries. Even if the analysis is eventually based on accounts given by activists only, interviews with experts and officials provide insightful side information regarding the exclusion of civil society actors from formal negotiating arenas for the BTIA and RCEP.

It is furthermore worth noting that class and gender relations can play a significant role in holding interviews with experts in male-dominated areas (Meuser & Nagel 2009, 34). As Beaud and Weber (2010, 40) have highlighted, 'fields [of research] are not easy or difficult in the absolute, but in connection with the researcher's social status'.[2] An inexperienced, female researcher can have difficulty accessing interviewees but also be considered as 'acceptably incompetent' (Gurney 1985) and as such be informed about relevant information. While a number of interviews with policy experts and Indian officials were held jointly by a junior female researcher and her senior male supervisor, all interviews with activists (both male and female) were attended by the junior female researcher alone, who felt that she did not experience such a gender bias. Actually, her status as a foreign, inexperienced researcher appeared to work as an advantage rather than a disadvantage. A researcher conducting fieldwork in an unfamiliar area can benefit from 'the asset of strangeness' ('l'atout de l'étrangeté') according to which 'it will be without doubt easier for you to do research in unknown universes because their strangeness creates distance, it forces you to see with new eyes phenomena that you would have neglected if you had been familiar with these fields' (Beaud & Weber 2010, 37-38). Adopting a detached stance became easier with the supposed 'strangeness' of the Indian field. As Beaud and Weber (2010, 82-83) have also noted, 'in a traditional situation of research, of a change of scenery, the position of the benevolent and curious stranger corresponds perfectly to what has to be done', as it leaves the researcher free to ask numerous questions about apparently obvious practices. Activists similarly adapted their discourse to such supposed ignorance, making for example sure that we were aware of India's federal system or feeding policies. As a junior, female researcher, this certainly supported our interlocutors' benevolence and desire to help, as well as their indulgence (Beaud & Weber 2010, 82). However, the interviewees sometimes asked for a personal opinion and/or advice, a role-reversal characteristic of the interview situation during which 'the interviewee can become a questioner' (Beaud & Weber 2010, 188).

Regarding the format, we used semi-structured interviews, which allow '[the] narrow[ing] down [of] some areas or topics' appearing relevant during the discussion while ensuring that particular subjects are covered (Rabionet 2011, 564). After some introductory remarks on the nature of the project, activists were asked to detail their affiliation and function in the movement. We then asked them about the relation between the BTIA/RCEP and food concerns. A number of questions on the activists'

[2] All quotations from Beaud and Weber have been translated by ourselves from French.

mobilisation practices followed – with a distinct focus on the 'People's summit' held in Hyderabad from 22 to 26 July 2017. 'Prompts' (McCracken 1988, 24) and so-called 'example questions' (Leech 2002, 667) were used along with discussions in order to obtain details about the aspects mentioned by activists.

As Tansey (2007, 766-767) has pointed out, such semi-structured interviews help 'establish the decisions and actions that lay behind an event or series of events'. We were thus particularly interested in hearing activists detailing their engagement during the People's summit in Hyderabad in order to better understand their ways of acting. Similarly, activists' account helped us appraise their ways of representing and of being, insofar as such interviews put particular emphasis on their 'inner perspectives' and 'how people have organised the world and the meanings they attach to what goes on in the world' (Patton 2002, 340-341).

Setting the stage

The activists

La Via Campesina

During the 1980s, a new generation of autonomous farmer movements emerged in Latin America in parallel to the withdrawal of the state from rural areas (Martínez-Torres & Rosset 2010, 149). These peasant organisations progressively built a continental network, which expanded to Europe (Holt-Giménez et al. 2010, 204). In 2003, La Via Campesina brought together 70 farm leaders from around the world in Belgium for its first 'international conference', at which the participants agreed to collectively defend their rights in the context of agricultural liberalisation (Martínez-Torres & Rosset 2010, 157). Nowadays the international movement claims to represent 'millions of peasants, small and medium size farmers, landless people, rural women and youth, indigenous people, migrants and agricultural workers from around the world' (La Via Campesina n.d.).

As for La Via Campesina's structure, it consists of different entities: (1) every three or four years, the 'international conference' allows representatives of the member organisations to define the movement's political direction; (2) an 'international coordination committee', held twice a year, assesses compliance with the agreements issued at the international conference and analyses the situation in the individual regions; (3) an 'international operative secretariat' assumes the coordination of the actions; (4) ten 'international working commissions' also carry out work on particular issues (Martínez-Torres & Rosset 2010, 164-165). Additionally, each of the nine regional units of La Via Campesina can count on a 'regional secretariat' (Thivet 2014, 193).

Twenty-three associations are part of La Via Campesina's 'South Asia' section: four from Bangladesh, 13 from India, four from Nepal, one from Pakistan and one from Sri Lanka (La Via Campesina 2017, 33-34). Among La Via Campesina's Indian member organisations are Bharatiya Kisan Union and Karnataka Rajya Ryota Sangha, two important farmer movements created in 1978 (Brass 2013, 201) and 1980 (Thivet 2016, 4). Bharatiya Kisan Union and Karnataka Rajya Ryota Sangha are 'new farmers' movements', composed for the large part of medium and rich farm holders, addressing the question of fair agricultural prices on the global market (Brass 2013). After entering into La Via Campesina in 1996, Karnataka Rajya Ryota Sangha actively contributed to shape the global farmer movement alongside founding member organisations (Thivet 2016, 4). Also, it became a 'gatekeeper', accepting or excluding peasant movements from South Asia that wanted to join La Via Campesina (Borras

Jr 2008, 275). Activities of La Via Campesina in India are organised by the All India Coordination Committee of Farmers Movements and its counterpart in South India, that is, the South Indian Coordination Committee of Farmers Movements (S. Dube).

The Right to Food Campaign

In 2001, a coalition of 56 civil society organisations based in the northern Indian state of Rajasthan, the People's Union for Civil Liberties, asked for recognition of the right to food – considered as part of the 'right to life' enshrined in the Constitution – as a legal entitlement (Banik 2016, 36). As a consequence, the benefits of eight already existing food-related programmes were converted by India's Supreme Court into legal guarantees (Right to Food Campaign 2008, 15). Following this case, a range of civil society organisations began a campaign focusing on the implementation of the right to food (Right to Food Campaign, n.d.). The Right to Food Campaign defines itself as 'an informal network of organisations and individuals committed to the realisation of the right to food in India' (Right to Food Campaign 2001). As for the 'right to food', it consists of 'a fundamental right to be free from hunger and undernutrition' (Right to Food Campaign 2001).

According to the 'Collective statement' (2007, 3-4) of the Right to Food Campaign, basic organisational principles allow for the good coordination of the movement: (1) a 'general council', held annually, 'act[s] as an open forum where every person or organisation involved in the campaign has an opportunity to be heard and to participate in the collective decision-making process'; (2) a 'steering group' assumes the direction of the activities and designates one of its members as convener of the network; (3) a 'secretariat', composed of a remunerated worker, facilitates the annual convention and ensures external and internal communication. As for financial aspects, member groups are responsible for their own funding and the secretariat depends on individual donations (Right to Food Campaign n.d.).

Activists from the Right to Food Campaign adopt 'a hybrid strategy', combining advocacy for the legal recognition of the right to food with demands for a long-term implementation of this right through existing feeding policies (Hertel 2015, 72). For example, the movement attempted to influence the drafting of a National Food Security Act, debated between 2009 and 2013 by India's members of parliament: activists asked for a comprehensive feeding policy including extended provisions both in terms of food rations and monitoring safeguards, although the final law mainly gave a legal character to existing food programmes (Hertel, Tagliarina & Buerger 2017, 453-454). As a network active in the enactment and implementation of food-related legal guarantees in India, the Right to Food Campaign cannot dedicate a lot of attention to foreign policymaking. At the 9th ministerial conference of the World Trade Organization in 2013, the movement admittedly engaged in discussions about food stockholding; but it does not have enough resources to mobilise in relation to bilateral and regional free trade agreements (D. Sinha).

The Forum against Free Trade Agreements

After the launching of negotiating rounds for the BTIA in 2007, a coalition of activists created a discussion platform on free trade agreements – the Forum against Free Trade Agreements (S. Bhutani). The Forum against Free Trade Agreements defines itself as a 'network of India's civil society organisations, trade unions and peoples' movements that work together to highlight people's concerns on free trade agreements' (Forum against Free Trade Agreements n.d.).

A 'coordination committee' composed of seven to 12 members organises a large part of the activities of the Forum against Free Trade Agreements (A. Jafri). All committee members are volunteers and do not rely on any facilities or staff (A. Jafri). One of the members assumes the function of coordinator of the movement (A. Jafri). Civil society actors can freely attend the events held by the network, consisting in 'a very

loose organisation' without a fixed membership (A. Jafri). Farmers actively participate in the activities of the Forum against Free Trade Agreements, which also includes women's collectives and academics (S. Bhutani). Activists from La Via Campesina and from the Right to Food Campaign regularly attend the events held by the movement (S. Bhutani).

Although a national network above all, the Forum against Free Trade Agreements also collaborates with civil society actors from foreign countries. A number of international non-governmental organisations act as 'brokers' (von Bülow 2010c, 3) in that they facilitate contacts between the Forum against Free Trade Agreements and civil society groups active abroad. Among them are the international research and advocacy organisations, Third World Network and Focus on the Global South, as well as La Via Campesina (S. Bhutani & A. Jafri). The Third World Network, Focus on the Global South and La Via Campesina adopt the function of '*translators*, who produce and diffuse information within and across boundaries', i.e. the less institutionalised political role of 'brokerage' conceptualised by von Bülow (2010c, 5).

The agreements

The Bilateral Trade and Investment Agreement

A 'strategic partnership' between India and the European Union – including among others, economic cooperation – was proposed by the European Commission in 2004. An 'India-EU Strategic Partnership Joint Action Plan' (2005) ensued, confirming the intention of establishing a bilateral agreement (Wouters et al. 2014, 850). At the Helsinki summit in 2006, both parties agreed to begin commercial negotiations in a number of areas: 'trade in goods', 'trade in services', 'investment', 'public procurement', 'technical regulations', 'intellectual property', 'competition policy' and 'dispute settlement provision' (Sachdeva 2008, 360). Twelve negotiating rounds for a 'Bilateral Trade and Investment Agreement (BTIA)' were then held between 2007 and 2013, the latter being the date on which negotiations stalled 'due to a mismatch of the level of ambitions' between India and the European Union (European Commission 2018b).

According to Khorana and Garcia (2013, 690), a 'comprehensive coverage' and 'growing economic interactions between the parties' are the BTIA's core characteristics. A divergence of interests between both negotiating parties can also be noted: India aimed at enhancing access for its goods and services to European markets, whereas the European Union hoped that its companies would be able to better enter Indian banking, retail and government procurement sectors (Khorana & Perdikis 2010, 192). As a consequence, a number of 'stumbling blocks' appeared at the negotiating table: (1) India asked for a greater reduction of tariff lines in Europe as compensation for India's lower development level, (2) the European Union asked for a complete liberalisation of services and investment, while India preferred to focus on particular areas, (3) India did not want to expose its retail and manufacturing industries to commercial liberalisation, (4) European agricultural subsidies and tariffs were especially high, hence India's opposition to agricultural liberalisation, (5) India feared a competition policy clause in the BTIA, (6) India insisted that it would not accept a liberalisation of government procurement because it represented a danger for its medium and small sectors, and (7) European businesses were confronted with Indian market access barriers, whereas Indian companies faced a multitude of regulatory frameworks, differing between European countries (Khorana & Perdikis 2010, 192-198).

The Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership

At the East Asia summit in 2005, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations – which brings together Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Singapore, Thailand, the Philippines and Vietnam – initiated a series of confidence-building meetings with Australia, China, India, Japan, New Zealand and South Korea (Dupont 2013, 109). A few years later, all member countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (2011) agreed on a 'Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP)', building on agreements already bilaterally concluded with trade partners. At the 21st summit of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations in 2012, negotiations were launched for the RCEP with Australia, China, India, Japan, New Zealand and South Korea (Association of Southeast Asian Nations et al. 2012). 'Trade in goods', 'trade in services', 'investment', 'economic and technical cooperation', 'intellectual property', 'competition', 'dispute settlement' and 'other issues' were the areas of negotiation mentioned (Association of Southeast Asian Nations et al. 2012, 2-3). Twenty-seven negotiating rounds were then held between 2013 and 2019, the latter being the date on which India announced its decision not to continue to participate in the process (Roy Choudhury 2019).

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). After India left the negotiating rounds for the RCEP, participating countries still represent 30% of the world's population and almost 30% of global gross domestic product (Tani 2020). As a consequence, the RCEP can be categorised as a 'cross-regional mega-deal', characterised by a broad 'geographic scope and economic scale', besides a 'wide array of issue areas and "behind the border" provisions' (Velut 2016, 2-3). Although being comparable to mega-agreements like the Trans-Pacific Partnership, the RCEP exclusively focuses on trade in goods, comprises 'WTO consistent' instead of 'WTO plus' clauses, addresses a small number of non-tariff issues and presents a geographic scope restricted to East and South Asia as well as Oceania (Wilson 2015, 349). 'ASEAN demands for a flexible and non-intrusive agreement' are indeed the result of domestic protectionist aims and distrust in relation to complete tariff liberalisation (Ravenhill 2016, 29). According to Palit (2017, 420), the RCEP is thus a 'development friendly' agreement avoiding '"21st-century" trade issues (e.g. labour, environment, government procurement, state-owned enterprises)' that developing countries are generally reluctant to adopt. A number of 'sticky issues for negotiation' are however cited by Basu Das (2015, 72-75): (1) India, Japan and Korea were eager to continue to protect their agricultural sector, (2) different countries were sceptical about committing to a liberalisation of services, (3) participants' diverse development stages – both in terms of gross domestic product and human development – implied unequal levels of competitiveness, and (4) the RCEP drew on bilateral agreements differing in their degree of comprehensiveness.

Although the RCEP first appeared as a means to consolidate India's 'Look East' policy (Panda 2014), a number of 'pain points' were progressively raised at the negotiating table by New Delhi: (1) a surge in cheap industrial imports coming from China could endanger India's economy, (2) India did not agree to eliminate its agricultural and industrial tariffs, (3) India asked for a liberalisation of services, a measure to which many countries were opposed, (4) India also demanded the adoption of stricter rules of origin, and (5) clauses about intellectual property were viewed as detrimental to India's export of generic drugs (Priya 2016). An example of India's critical attitude toward the RCEP was its absence from the ministerial meeting in 2015, announced at the last minute (Yoshimatsu 2016, 703). A growing opposition to the RCEP also arose among actors of the Indian industry and government members (Mishra 2018). At the 3rd RCEP summit in 2019, India announced its decision not to join the RCEP because of 'issues of core interest that remained unresolved' (Roy Choudhury 2019).

Analysing activists' discursive practices

Acting

'Genres' or 'ways of acting' are actions associated with different genres of discourse (Fairclough 2003, 26). Del Felice (2014, 151) has distinguished 'between genres commonly used within formal governmental structures, that is, used by governments, and those that are used outside of them', i.e. 'between texts of formal spaces (technical reports, statistics, legal texts) and texts of non-formal spaces (posters, pamphlets, declarations)'. Formal genres are thus linked to formal arenas, and non-formal genres are related to non-formal arenas. According to Cornwall (2002, 17), activists can enter 'invited spaces', i.e. 'spaces … into which people (as users, citizens or beneficiaries) are invited to participate by various kinds of authorities, be they government, supranational agencies or non-governmental organisations'. But civil society actors can also build 'created spaces', i.e. 'spaces that emerge more organically out of sets of common concerns or identifications [and] may come into being as a result of popular mobilisation, such as around identity or issue-based concerns, or may consist of spaces in which like-minded people join together in common pursuits' (Cornwall 2002, 17). Building on Del Felice (2014, 151), we consider 'invited spaces' as a category belonging to formal arenas and 'created spaces' as an equivalent to non-formal arenas. Combining activities in both formal and non-formal arenas allows 'a broader politicization of the negotiations', as well as ability to diversify genres of text (Del Felice 2014, 155). Activists engaged against the BTIA and RCEP could not associate formal and non-formal arenas of mobilisation due to their almost complete exclusion from formal negotiating spaces. Also, their access to documents from formal arenas was extremely limited, which hampered their capacity to combine formal and informal genres of text.

The formal spaces and texts

Activists' access to formal arenas generally takes the form of involvement in consultation mechanisms (Goetz & Gaventa 2001; Cornwall 2002; Gaventa 2006). A consultation for the BTIA was held by India's Ministry of Commerce and Industry after the beginning of the negotiations in 2007: among the participants in the event taking place in Kerala, fish workers asked for the exclusion of 40 fish subspecies from the agreement (Pillai 2007). According to R. Sengupta, a core member of the Forum against Free Trade Agreements, farmers were also occasionally consulted about duties on agricultural commodities. As regards negotiations for the RCEP, a number of consultation sessions with civil society actors were held during the 16th, 17th, 18th and 19th rounds of trade talks (New Zealand's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade 2016; 2017a; 2017b; 2017c). Activists 'coordinated' the consultation of the 19th negotiating round for the RCEP in Hyderabad in July 2017: after asking for such a meeting to be organised, they provided a list of civil society actors interested in attending the event and communicated in advance the concerns that they wanted to debate (S. Gupta). Twenty-eight civil society actors participated in the consultation in Hyderabad on 25 July 2017 (India's Ministry of Commerce and Industry 2017). Yet, as soon as the consultation began, many country delegates left the room (R. Sengupta) when each civil society organisation had three minutes to ask questions to negotiators, who for their part had 15 minutes to respond (S. Gupta). 'It was … a one-way discussion [and] it [did not] become a real dialogue where you have a possibility to develop an understanding', as S. Barria recalled consultation held in Hyderabad. While some activists chose to join the consultation, others 'd[id] not recognize this as a consultation' (People's Resistance Forum against Free Trade Agreements and Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership 2017d) and boycotted a process that they were afraid of legitimising (S. Bhutani). Activists thus

adopted the two different mobilisation strategies described by Spalding (2007, 85): 'critic negotiators' actively engaged in the limited consultation space and attempted to reform the policy process from within, contrary to 'transgressive resisters', who were completely opposed to the consultation process and deployed confrontational tactics. According to Spalding (2007, 103), both mobilisation strategies are complementary. This came true in Hyderabad, where activists attending the consultation conveyed details collected at the formal meeting to allies mobilised outside (K. Vissa).

Figure 1 – Activists at the consultation held during the 19th negotiating round for the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (Don't trade our lives away 2017)

Almost completely excluded from the formal arenas of negotiation for the BTIA and RCEP, activists were also confronted with the lack of access to formal documents such as draft chapters of the agreements and impact analyses. A collaboration with activists engaged against free trade agreements abroad allowed civil society actors in India to address this issue (S. Bhutani). According to Pomeroy (2016, 721), alliances between activists from different countries are indeed a common strategy in order to overcome 'an asymmetry of information between diplomatic representatives and non-governmental actors'. bilaterals.org, a platform created in 2004 as a response to the global increase in bilateral free trade agreements, also provided civil society actors with both formal and non-formal texts. As a 'collaborative clearinghouse on the internet where people [can] find and post their own information and analysis about bilateral free trade agreements' ('About Bilaterals.Org' 2015), bilaterals.org can be described as 'a hyper-organisation that exist[s] mainly in the form of [its] website, e-mail traffic, and linked sites' and amplifies activists' capacities of mobilisation (Bennett 2005, 218). Civil society actors thus gained access to leaked chapters from the BTIA and RCEP, although such documents are often out of date (S. Barria) and do not cover all the areas of the negotiations (S. Gupta). Activists also criticised the technical character of formal texts:

> Not only should the texts be made public, but they need to be stripped of the legalese and technical language and made clear in a language that can be understood by the affected people – including translation to

> local languages. (People's Resistance Forum against Free Trade Agreements and Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership 2017d)

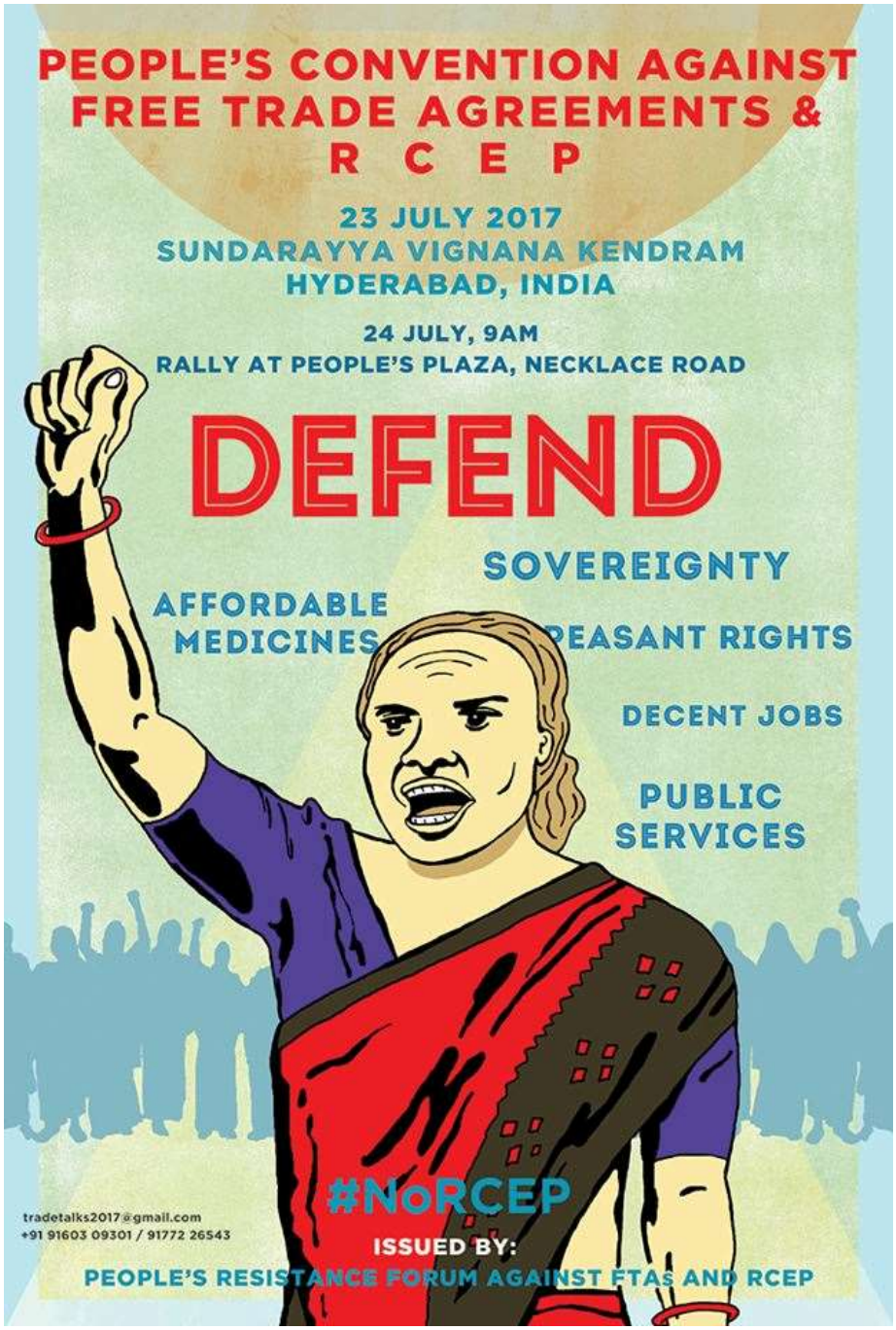
As a result of the 'technification' of the negotiating process, i.e. the growing reliance on technical jargon during debates, civil society actors experienced difficulty participating in and making a contribution to discussions (Girvan 2010, 100-101).

The non-formal spaces and texts

According to Gerard (2014, 12), activism against the Association of Southeast Asian Nations can take place in four created spaces: 'parallel activities, protests, the production and dissemination of critical knowledge, and campaigns targeting other governance institutions'. A fifth created space – 'lobbyism' – has also been identified in the case of advocacy against the free trade agreement between the European Union and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (García 2017). Activists engaged against the agreements between the African, Caribbean and Pacific countries and the European Union engaged in a sixth created space: 'media work' (Del Felice 2014, 155). Although civil society actors in India relied on parallel activities, protests and media work, they did not – or only occasionally – produce and disseminate critical knowledge, conduct campaigns targeting other governance institutions or lobby negotiators.

As explained by Gerard (2014, 138), parallel activities 'mimic a variety of official events, including workshops, forums and even the drafting of agreements' and 'are intended to make officials aware of the perspective of CSOs [civil society organisations] relative to official proceedings, in the hope that these activities may influence policymaking'. A number of parallel activities were held after the beginning of negotiating rounds for the BTIA in 2007. Activists for example organised a 'round-table on RTAs [regional trade agreements] and FTAs [free trade agreements]' (Forum against Free Trade Agreements 2008), a 'Briefing meeting on EU-India FTA' with a member of India's parliament, D. Raja, and the European parliamentarian, Franziska Keller (Forum against Free Trade Agreements 2010c) and a conference entitled 'Impact of India-EU FTA on Indian Economy' with representatives of different Indian political parties (Sengupta 2013). A series of civil society events also took place before the 19th negotiating round for the RCEP held in Hyderabad in July 2017: 100 representatives of people's movements from southern Indian states gathered in Bangalore in April (Forum against Free Trade Agreements 2017) and a capacity-building meeting was planned at the last moment, a few days before the launching of the official talks (Business Line 2017). Activists grouped under the 'People's Resistance Forum against Free Trade Agreements and Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership' also organised a 'People's summit' in Hyderabad in parallel to the 19th negotiating round for the RCEP. A 'Round-table on IP [intellectual property] and access to medicine', a 'Dalit consultation', a 'People's convention' and different thematic workshops – about agriculture, labour, e-commerce, public services, fisheries and global trade – thus took place from 22 to 26 July (People's Resistance Forum against Free Trade Agreements and Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership 2017b). Six hundred civil society actors attended the People's convention in Hyderabad on 23 July. According to S. Barria, a member of the Forum against Free Trade Agreements, the People's convention fulfilled the function of 'a space [for] cross-discussion … that allows to see the comprehensiveness or the variety of concerns that different people are seeing with the same negotiations'. Activism against bilateral free trade agreements in Asia indeed builds on 'an understanding of the comprehensive threats posed by these agreements' (Choudry 2014, 113). At the end of the People's convention in Hyderabad, participants agreed on a document containing common claims and entitled 'Declaration from the People's convention against FTAs [free trade agreements] and RCEP' (2017).

Figure 2 – Poster advertising the 'People's convention' (People's Resistance Forum against Free Trade Agreements and Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership 2017c)



A number of protests against the BTIA and RCEP were also held by activists. Civil society actors demonstrated in New Delhi (and surrounding areas) during the 6th, 9th and 12th negotiating rounds for the BTIA (Forum against Free Trade Agreements 2009; *News Worms* 2010; Shankar 2012) and in parallel to the 6th negotiating round for the RCEP (All India Coordination Committee of Farmers Movements 2014). Five

hundred activists also attended a mass rally in Hyderabad on 24 July 2017: after gathering at People's Plaza, in the centre of the city, protestors marched along the Necklace Road boulevard to I-max circle (*Indo-Asian News Service* 2017). A particular genre of text corresponds to those demonstrations: the banner or placard displaying a slogan.

Another created space consists in the production and dissemination of critical knowledge that challenges current policies (Gerard 2014, 145). A few members of the Forum against Free Trade Agreements were engaged in such activities. For example, R. Sengupta, a researcher at the Third World Network – an international research and advocacy organisation – is (co-)author of papers about the BTIA's consequences on development issues such as gender (Sengupta & Gopinath 2009; Sengupta & Jena 2009; Sengupta & Sharma 2009; R. Singh & Sengupta 2009) and government procurement (Sengupta 2012). Also, S. Barria, a researcher at Public Services International – a global union federation for workers in public services – is co-author of a report analysing the BTIA's effects on gender dynamics in fisheries (Barria & Mathews 2010). As an independent lawyer and researcher based in New Delhi, S. Bhutani (2011; 2016; 2017), coordinator of the Forum against Free Trade Agreements, assessed in different contributions the BTIA and RCEP's impacts on agriculture in relation to intellectual property clauses. Although such papers and reports are 'useful in informing CSOs [civil society organisations] concerned about the potential impact of such agreements' (Gerard 2014, 146), these research works were never submitted to negotiators, and hence are of limited importance.

Activists did not count on campaigns targeting other governance institutions in their fight against the BTIA and RCEP. A call for action headlined, 'Last chance to prevent onslaught on people's rights and livelihoods' (ActionAid - India et al. 2010) constituted an exception to that observation. It consisted of a joint declaration issued after the 8th Asia-Europe People's Forum, which took place in Brussels from 2 to 5 October 2010. Asian and European civil society actors addressed the letter against the BTIA to the European Commission and the government of India, in anticipation of the 11th EU - India summit planned for 10 December 2010 in Brussels. As of 6 December 2010, 227 civil society groups and 95 individuals had signed the statement. Apart from this example, Indian activists did not have much recourse to foreign governance institutions and generally focused on advocacy activities inside their country.

A similar comment can be made in the case of lobbyism since activists almost never relied on it. The only case of lobbying activities that we are aware of dates back to 2009, when Danièle Smadja, ambassador and head of the delegation of the European Commission to India, Nepal and Bhutan, agreed to meet three members of the Forum against Free Trade Agreements after the demonstration against the 6th negotiating round for the BTIA in New Delhi (Forum against Free Trade Agreements 2009).

Activists, however, engaged in media work fairly frequently. Civil society actors' parallel activities and demonstrations were generally accompanied by a press conference and/or a press release. Also, they drew on alternative channels of information, a strategy regularly adopted in order to compensate for a weak coverage in mainstream media (Bennett 2005, 222). Besides benefiting from the visibility given by social media like Facebook and Twitter, activists could count on reports from Newsclick, a channel of video news defining itself as 'an alternative to the corporate media' ('About Us' n.d.). As an example, Newsclick advertised (*Who Benefits from RCEP* 2017) and covered (*'Can't Trade with Our Lives and Livelihood'* 2017) the People's summit held in Hyderabad.

As Table 2 shows, activists were almost completely excluded from formal spaces and had limited access to formal texts. Civil society actors consequently focused on non-

formal spaces and non-formal texts. Parallel activities, protests and media work were the created spaces in which they were most often mobilised.

Table 2 – Activists' ways of acting

	Spaces	Texts
Formal	Consultation processes including civil society actors are extremely limited as regards the BTIA and RCEP.	Leaked chapters are not representative of the BTIA and RCEP and are characterised by technical jargon.
Non-formal	Parallel activities allow activists to discuss their concerns about the BTIA and RCEP.	A document entitled 'Declaration from the People's convention against FTAs [free trade agreements] and RCEP' (2017) contains common claims expressed by activists participating in a parallel event to the 19th negotiating round for the RCEP.
	Protests are held by activists on the fringe of negotiating meetings for the BTIA and RCEP.	Banners and placards are used by activists during demonstrations to display slogans.
	The production and dissemination of critical knowledge can be observed in a few cases.	A small number of reports are issued as a way to inform activists about the BTIA and RCEP's impacts on development issues.
	Campaigns targeting other government institutions do not belong to activists' mobilisation practices against the BTIA and RCEP.	A call for action headlined, 'Last chance to prevent onslaught on people's rights and livelihoods' (ActionAid - India et al. 2010) constitutes an exception – activists from Asia and Europe address this declaration against the BTIA to the European Commission and the government of India.
	Lobbyism does not consist in a strategy adopted by activists, although an exception is the meeting between Danièle Smadja, ambassador and head of the delegation of the European Commission to India, and three members of the Forum against Free Trade Agreements in 2009.	
	Media work is a fairly frequent activity against the BTIA and RCEP.	Press releases and reports from alternative media accompany activists' mobilisation practices against the BTIA and RCEP.

Representing

After analysing activists' 'ways of acting', we move to the 'discourses' or 'ways of representing part of the world' that they adopted. This section focuses on the narrative produced by civil society actors on food and regional trade negotiations. As

Del Felice (2014, 151) has pointed out, 'discourses draw from economic theories and move through policy paradigms which guide decisions'. As we will see below, activists engaged against the BTIA and RCEP mainly adopted what Said and Desai (2003, 66-72) have described as an 'isolationist' approach based on the necessity to re-empower the state and abolish the World Trade Organization. After highlighting that agricultural liberalisation has a negative impact on both food producers and consumers in India, civil society actors proposed to focus on Indian food policies rather than on regional trade.

A threat to food security

According to Said and Desai (2003, 67), 'isolationists' base their discourse on the fact that 'it is almost impossible to make global trade work for the poor [and that] trade [is] a Trojan Horse through which multinationals and their political representatives spread their power. The results are a loss of jobs in the North, poverty and loss of sovereignty in the South, and environmental degradation all round. What is good for the corporation is bad for everyone.' Activists who engaged against the Agreement on Agriculture – a treaty of the World Trade Organization – also conveyed a discourse differing from the global narrative on agricultural liberalisation:

> … CSO [civil society organisations] advocates … play an important intermediary role in linking the global discourse on the AoA [Agreement on Agriculture] and economic liberalisation with the agrarian crises in India. They remain critical in providing a counter-discourse to the current wisdom in policy circles that favours trade liberalisation. (Sharma 2007, 48)

Activism against the agreement between the Caribbean Forum and the European Union similarly highlighted 'the flaws of the neo-liberal paradigm driving the negotiations' (Montoute 2016, 315). Civil society actors engaged against the BTIA and RCEP conveyed such a 'counter-discourse' to a dominant narrative presenting agricultural liberalisation 'as an opportunity for food security' (Clapp 2015). The dominant discourse on global trade indeed rests on three arguments: (1) following David Ricardo's theory of comparative advantage, it postulates that international trade allows efficiency gains, increased food supplies and higher incomes, and thus a better availability of and access to agricultural commodities; (2) it also draws on the conception of trade as a 'transmission belt' that balances food deficits and surpluses across countries; and (3) finally, it refers to the negative impacts that trade restrictions have on food security (Clapp 2015, 9). In contrast, activists from La Via Campesina and from the Right to Food Campaign consider the BTIA and RCEP as threats to food security. Both groups conveyed slightly different – but complementary – discourses, as the former focus on food producers and the latter on food consumers.

Activists from La Via Campesina are critical of agricultural liberalisation. Among the dangers posed by the BTIA and RCEP, farmers cited a massive reduction of import tariff on agricultural commodities, an introduction of intellectual property protection that prevents peasants from saving seeds between two sowings, and access to government procurement for foreign companies, that compromises Indian food policies ('Appeal to Manmohan Singh' 2012). Activists especially feared that the opening of government procurement endangers India's minimum support price (a market price subsidy for 25 agricultural commodities granted to farmers) and the Indian public distribution system (a national scheme offering subsidised agricultural commodities to households below the poverty line) ('Appeal to Manmohan Singh' 2012; Banik 2016, 32, 36). Agricultural liberalisation also gives advantages to farmers in countries where subsidies are high, allows unfair competition in livestock and dairy sectors, favours land grabbing and implies that multinational companies can sue governments through a mechanism called 'investor-state dispute settlement'

(People's Resistance Forum against Free Trade Agreements and Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership 2017a).

'India's rural livelihoods', considered as 'the mainstay of Indian people', are thus viewed as threatened by agricultural liberalisation ('Appeal to Manmohan Singh' 2012). With two-thirds of the Indian population rural and more than 40% of employment belonging to the agricultural sector (The World Bank 2017), a number of interviewees highlighted farmers' vulnerability to economic liberalisation. For example, Y. Singh claimed that 'agriculture … is a way of life [and] farmers … are just surviving', K. Subramaniam deplored that 'small peasants … can be destroyed by free trade agreements', and S. Dube expressed concerns about agricultural imports 'practically killing our farmers'. Activists thus drew attention to the 'agrarian crisis', a situation in which small producers are no longer able to practise farming in a cost-efficient way (Mazoyer & Roudart 2002, 583).

Agricultural liberalisation is not only viewed as threatening farmers' livelihood but also consumers because 'food security' depends on 'self-sufficiency in food production':

> The UPA [United Progressive Alliance] government is in the middle of considering a food security bill, but on the other hand, it is willing to trade away our ability to produce food and our self-sufficiency in food production. The government of India cannot ensure that 1.2 billion people will be fed affordably by importing food. Importing food for our food security will be the end of India's rich agricultural heritage not just because over 65% of the population makes its living through agriculture, but because self-sufficiency in food production is also fundamental to our national security. ('Appeal to Manmohan Singh' 2012)

Figure 3 – Farmers belonging to Bharatiya Kisan Union demonstrating against the Bilateral Trade and Investment Agreement in New Delhi (La Via Campesina 2012)

Activists from the Right to Food Campaign also consider agricultural liberalisation as detrimental to food security in India. According to them, the BTIA and RCEP have an impact on the amount and quality of the food at the disposal of India's population. Agricultural liberalisation can imply a shift toward cash crops for export (cotton, soya, castor oil, gherkins) at the expense of nutritious staples (pulses, millet) (D. Sinha). Civil society actors also feared food imports of low nutritional value:

> Trade affects us every time it is taking the control of local communities away from production and food and their resources. We think it affects food security and nutrition as well. … [H]aving seen the experience of the West, countries like India don't have to go through that same process of nutrition transition. (D. Sinha)

With large food companies bringing in commodities of bad nutritional value, India is also viewed as threatened by a nutrition transition towards developed countries' diets, high in fat, sugar and refined food (Popkin 1993, 138). By criticising food corporations' market-based and poorly nutritious products, activists denounced the increased reliance on private actors to ensure food security.

Moreover, activists from the Right to Food Campaign denounced 'ready-to-use therapeutic food', a category of food consisting in 'an edible lipid-based paste that is energy dense, resists bacterial contamination, and requires no cooking' (Manary 2006, 83). As an example, D. Sinha cited Plumpy'nut, a peanut paste commercialised by the French company, Nutriset, which the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) aimed at introducing in India as a medicine against acute childhood malnutrition. D. Sinha explained how the Right to Food Campaign managed to prevent the use of Plumpy'nut, a patented product, and instead promoted already-existing local medicines. A. Shrivastava similarly deplored that ready-to-use therapeutic food placed children's health in the hands of 'a lobby of manufacturers [driven by] commercial interests'. Activists from the Right to Food Campaign were thus sceptical about big companies' nutritional food, which they viewed as not an answer to childhood malnutrition, but as a commercial strategy. In the literature, such commercial practices are analysed in terms of 'nutritionism', a 'framing of food and health' characterised by 'a reductive focus on and a reductive interpretation of nutrients' (Scrinis 2013, 16; 2016, 20-21). Big food and beverage companies appear as experts in appropriating the 'ideology of nutritionism', in order to better position their products on the global market (Scrinis 2013; 2016; Sathyamala 2016; Clapp & Scrinis 2017).

A number of interviewees affirmed that liberalisation can even compromise food policies and thus demonstrated a strong commitment to Indian public programmes. According to K. Srivastava from the Right to Food Campaign, introducing cash transfers in place of food rations in India's public distribution system could have a negative impact on the quality and quantity of food at the disposal of the population. A. Shrivastava also criticised 'the corporatisation of the whole food and nutrition debate' in India:

> Given the scale of this [Indian food] programme, there have always been some corporate interests which have been trying to find their way into getting hold of supplies for the schemes.

A 'corporatisation' of food policies could, for example, imply the poor coverage of non-economic areas and food rations of lower quality (A. Shrivastava).

Activists belonging to La Via Campesina and the Right to Food Campaign adopted a clear isolationist discourse and considered the BTIA and RCEP as threats to food security. According to La Via Campesina, agricultural liberalisation deepens the agrarian crisis and thus threatens farmers' livelihood. For the Right to Food Campaign, agricultural liberalisation has a negative impact on the amount and

nutritional value of the food at the disposal of consumers. As a consequence, both groups advanced alternative frameworks to agricultural liberalisation, described below.

A national alternative

'Immediately halt EU-India FTA [free trade agreement] negotiations' (Mital et al. 2008) and 'immediately halt India's engagement in all FTAs including RCEP negotiations' (Adivasi Aikya Vedika et al. 2014) are examples of activists' strong stance against agricultural liberalisation. Both La Via Campesina and the Right to Food Campaign were sceptical about the BTIA and RCEP. Activists advanced alternative frameworks to agricultural liberalisation, that they considered as more appropriate in order to ensure food security: farmers from La Via Campesina promoted 'food sovereignty', whereas members of the Right to Food Campaign referred to the 'right to food'. The two alternatives coincided with 'isolationist' anti-capitalist activism, relying on 'the re-empowerment of the nation-state', and claiming for 'state control over food, water and public services, localisation and subsidiarity, re-regulation and "weakening or dismantling" of multilateral economic institutions, and establishment of new structures which put people before profits' (Said & Desai 2003, 68).

Activists from La Via Campesina are not only sceptical about the BTIA and RCEP, but about a move toward economic liberalisation, which they see as excessive. By criticising agricultural liberalisation, farmers echoed a long-standing disapproval of agreements negotiated at the World Trade Organization, already mentioned in La Via Campesina's 'Seattle Declaration' (1999):

> A profound reform of the WTO in order to make it respond to the rights and needs of people would mean the abolition of the WTO itself! We do not believe that the WTO will allow such a profound reform. Therefore, the Via Campesina, as an international movement responsible for the agricultural sector, demands that agriculture should be taken out of the WTO. Perhaps more appropriately, let's take the WTO out of agriculture.

A later statement by La Via Campesina (2008) affirmed that 'all bilateral and bi-regional free-trade agreements … are of the same nature. They lead to the plundering of natural resources and only serve transnational companies at the expense of all the world's peoples and environment'. Activists from La Via Campesina thus considered bilateral and bi-regional agreements as the continuation of agricultural liberalisation which began at the World Trade Organization – a view shared by farmers engaged against the BTIA and RCEP:

> Most importantly, the Government of India must put an end to illogical trade liberalisation in agriculture (whether through FTAs [free trade agreements], WTO [World Trade Organization] or through its own policies) that only serves to weaken our national capacity to ensure the wellbeing of our people and ecology. ('Appeal to Manmohan Singh' 2012)
>
> … RCEP kind of Agreements must be totally opposed. … We could not stop the WTO, let us at least stop the RCEP.
>
> …
>
> RCEP should not be reformed but has to be rejected because it relies on and pushes a corporate model of agriculture that no amount of tweaking will change. (People's Resistance Forum against Free Trade Agreements and Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership 2017a)

According to the general secretary of the All India Coordination Committee of Farmers Movements, Y. Singh, agricultural liberalisation goes even further under bilateral and bi-regional free trade agreements than at the World Trade Organization:

> But FTAs [free trade agreements] are more dangerous than WTO [World Trade Organization] because in FTAs there're so many clauses more harmful than WTO. In WTO we have tariff line and we have some opportunity to oppose something to other countries but in FTAs nothing is there.

As Y. Singh highlighted, free trade agreements are characterised by a broad coverage and an absence of safeguards like minimal tariff lines for agricultural products, in force at the World Trade Organization.

'Food sovereignty' is the alternative framework to agricultural liberalisation promoted by La Via Campesina in order to ensure food security. As 'the right of each nation to maintain and develop its own capacity to produce its basic foods respecting cultural and productive diversity', food sovereignty appears to be 'a precondition to genuine food security' (La Via Campesina 1996). According to McMichael (2005, 286), agricultural liberalisation and food sovereignty are not antithetical in La Via Campesina's conception:

> Food sovereignty represents an alternative principle to food security, as currently defined by the corporate food regime. But it is not the antithesis of food security, rather, food sovereignty is a premise for genuine food security, since 'food is first and foremost a source of nutrition and only secondarily an item of trade' (Via Campesina, 2002, p. 8).

A number of interviewees concurred with this idea by mentioning that it would be unrealistic for La Via Campesina to engage against all forms of commercial exchange (Anonymous), that farmers 'are not against trade "per se"' (K. Subramaniam) and that members of the movement decide on a case-by-case basis what free trade agreements have to be fought (S. Dube).

Activists from La Via Campesina in India considered food sovereignty as 'the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems' (All India Coordination Committee of Farmers Movements n.d.). An identical definition appears at the beginning of the 'Declaration of Nyéléni', a common statement emanating from the Forum for food sovereignty organised by La Via Campesina and other civil society associations in Mali in 2007. Also, farmers in India combined food sovereignty with a number of concrete measures such as national protection for family agriculture, clear rules for companies, agricultural market control and agrarian reforms (All India Coordination Committee of Farmers Movements n.d.).

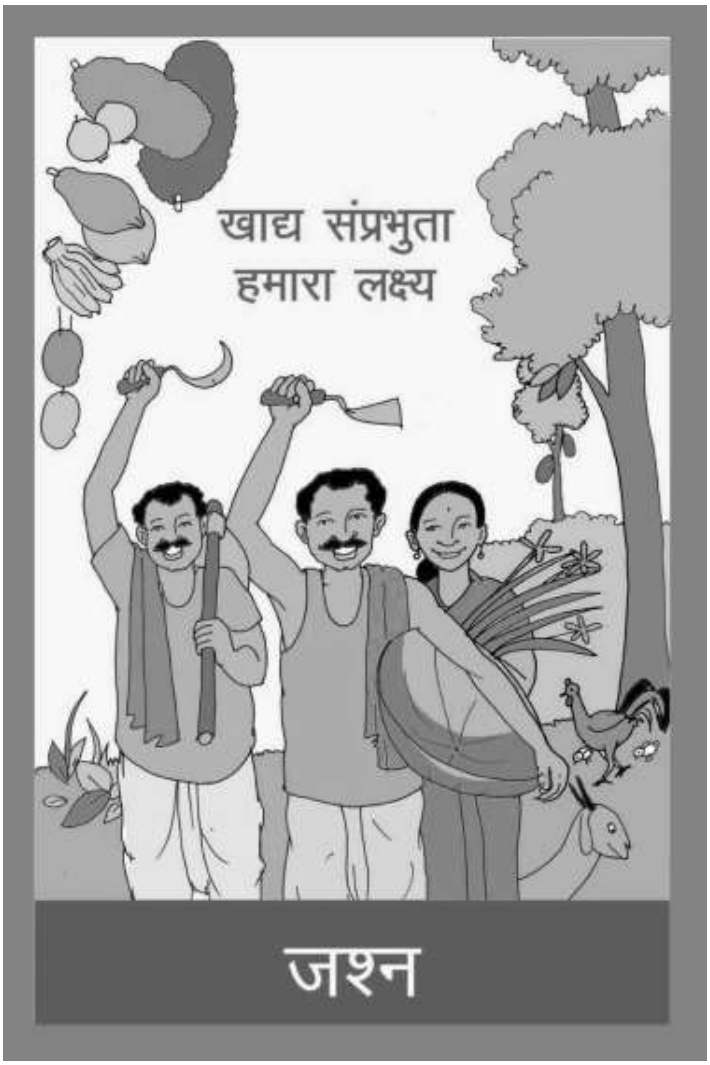
Food sovereignty, as defined by Indian farmers, comprises an internal dimension – 'the right of a people to freely choose its own political, economic and social system' – and an external dimension – 'southern countries[′] right to develop their agriculture' (Claeys 2012, 849). Concerning food sovereignty's first dimension (internal), it is expressed as the ability of a community to control agricultural resources (in particular land and seeds), which ensures farmers' livelihood (Anonymous). But it also alludes to the possibility for a community to grow crops which cater for the local taste (Anonymous) and to provide consumers with diverse and nutritional food (K. Subramaniam).

An interviewee (Anonymous) made reference to food sovereignty's external dimension by associating food sovereignty with 'seed sovereignty' and 'state sovereignty', conditions considered as necessary in order to counter a move toward life patenting promoted through international legislation such as the Act of the International Convention for the Protection of New Varieties of Plants (1991). According to the same

interviewee, farmers could be harmed by similar clauses on patented seeds included in the RCEP. 'If trade makes the government of India lose its sovereignty, farmers lose their food sovereignty', added K. Subramaniam. Such a view confirms that food sovereignty is closely inter-related to a national prerogative to preserve India's agriculture from commercial commitments considered as excessive.

Activists from La Via Campesina in India attached great importance to food sovereignty's external dimension, i.e. food sovereignty as a prerogative of the Indian state. Although the international agrarian movement 'started claiming food sovereignty as a human right, to be held by communities, peoples, or regions' (Claeys 2015, 455), farmers in India continue to expect the state to support them in achieving food sovereignty. This echoes 'the still uncertain balance' between La Via Campesina's engagement at the local or national level and its advocacy work at the international level (Thivet 2016, 25).

Figure 4 – 'Food self-sufficiency is our aim' (Right to Food Campaign n.d.)



Activists from the Right to Food Campaign also promote an alternative framework to agricultural liberalisation in order to ensure food security: the 'right to food'. As

defined in the foundation statement of the Right to Food Campaign (2001), the right to food consists of '[everyone's] fundamental right to be free from hunger and undernutrition'. According to D. Sinha, co-convener of the Right to Food Campaign, it is a 'right to food and nutrition' because 'food is not just about dealing with hunger in the sense of having anything to eat but also what the body needs as appropriate, adequate food by age, gender and so on'. Also, K. Srivastava, co-convener and member of the Right to Food Campaign's steering group, added that the elimination of malnutrition is included as well in the right to food.

A number of conditions are necessary for the enforcement of the right to food:

> Realising this right requires not only equitable and sustainable food systems, but also entitlements relating to livelihood security such as the right to work, land reform and social security. We consider that the primary responsibility for guaranteeing these entitlements rests with the state. … In the present context, where people's basic needs are not a political priority, state intervention itself depends on effective popular organisation. We are committed to fostering this process through all democratic means. (Right to Food Campaign 2001)

As the definition of the right to food indicates, such a legal provision comprises two aspects. Activists consider it as a non-derogable and immediately actionable entitlement arising from India's 'right to life', but also as the corollary of a set of economic and social legal provisions, e.g. the right to work and the right to social security, implemented on a progressive basis (Hertel 2015, 72). Such a conception coincides with the evolution of the Right to Food Campaign's activities: after a first period (2001-2008) characterised by advocacy for legal recognition of the right to food, a second period (2009-2013) saw civil society actors ask for the implementation of the right to food and defend already-existing entitlements like India's public distribution system (Pande & Houtzager 2016, 3, 6-7). According to Hertel (2016, 617), activists are successful in 'translating the rich idiom of Indian constitutional law into bureaucratic practice by pushing for a progressive implementation of the RTF [right to food] through improvement in the functioning of existing social welfare program'.

A central role is given to the Indian state by activists from the Right to Food Campaign. For them, the onus is on the state to ensure the right to food. Civil society actors intervene in a second phase, because of the state's inability to fulfil its function. As D. Sinha explained,

> the focus of the campaign from the beginning has been also on putting pressure on the state, on what the state should be doing to ensure that there is no hunger and that malnutrition is reduced.

Activists from the Right to Food Campaign also criticised the ineptitude of the Indian state to preserve its food and nutrition policies from agricultural liberalisation. D. Sinha deplored that

> nobody is even looking at trade policies from a nutrition perspective to see what spaces you are giving in. So the big question in any of these trade policies – in FTAs [free trade agreements] or in the WTO [World Trade Organization] – is the policy space that we are also losing on what we can do for food security and nutrition.

Accordingly, activists claimed for 'those spaces [to] be re-opened' (D. Sinha). Food security has thus to be ensured through Indian public policies rather than commercial commitments viewed as excessive.

As Table 3 shows, food security is at the centre of activists' discourse. Civil society actors considered agricultural liberalisation as a danger for food security and advanced 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.

Table 3 – Activists' ways of representing

	La Via Campesina	**Right to Food Campaign**
Link between agricultural liberalisation and food security	Agricultural liberalisation endangers food security because it deepens the agrarian crisis and thus threatens farmers' livelihood.	Agricultural liberalisation endangers food security because it has a negative impact on the amount and nutritional value of the food at the disposal of consumers. Agricultural liberalisation also compromises food and nutrition policies.
Alternative framework in order to ensure food security	Food sovereignty comprises an internal dimension – 'the right of a people to freely choose its own political, economic and social system' – and an external dimension – 'southern countries[']right to develop their agriculture' (Claeys 2012, 849). Food sovereignty's internal dimension consists in a community's ability to control agricultural resources (thus ensuring farmers' livelihood) and to grow culturally appropriate, diverse and nutritional crops (thus meeting consumers' food needs). Food sovereignty's external dimension refers to a national prerogative to preserve India's agriculture from commercial commitments considered as harmful.	As a constitutional entitlement, the right to food has to be ensured through India's existing food and nutrition policies. Activists' role consists in pressuring the Indian state to implement the right to food and to preserve its food and nutrition policies from agricultural liberalisation.

Being

Having examined activists' 'ways of acting' and 'ways of representing', we now turn to the 'identities' or 'ways of being' appearing in civil society actors' discourse. Activists' ways of being are operationalised as (1) 'identity formation' and (2) 'subject-positioning' (Del Felice 2014, 151). Identity formation consists in shaping identities for the different subjects mentioned in civil society actors' narrative. Subject-positioning refers to how activists consider the relations of opposition and partnership between the subjects mentioned in their discourse. Civil society actors engaged against the BTIA and RCEP in India shaped three social identities in their narrative: (1) India's civil society, (2) the Republic of India, and (3) India's negotiating partners during trade talks. We will see below that activists' ways of being

were associated with claims for important and new responsibilities for India's civil society and Indian negotiators. In contrast, India's negotiating partners were depicted as too influential actors and were asked to give more room to activists and Indian negotiators. By suggesting new roles for actors engaged in negotiating arenas for the BTIA and RCEP, civil society actors clearly exercised a strong discursive power.

India's civil society

'Civil society' is the first actor appearing in activists' discourse. India's civil society is embodied in the personal pronouns 'we' and 'us'. It is defined as 'trade unions, people's movements and civil society organisations' (Mital et al. 2008), 'civil society groups and the general public' (Forum against Free Trade Agreements 2010a; 2010b), 'civil society and mass organisations' (Forum against Free Trade Agreements 2010a) or 'various sections of the society; civil society organisations, farmers' organisations, trade unions, academics, industry associations, students, and others' (Anthra et al. 2013).

As a European concept exported to the Global South, civil society has led to a number of criticisms. According to Chatterjee (2001), it cannot apply to developing countries, where the concept of political society better accounts for interactions among social groups and between social groups and the state. 'Civil society during the colonial and early post-colonial period remained confined to the English educated upper-caste elites [and the] subaltern populations were excluded from its sphere', as Sahoo (2008, 133) has added in the case of India. Although globalisation has led to an expansion of civil society activism and a better consideration of marginalised groups by activists, class war is still relevant today (Sahoo 2008, 133).

Activists engaged against the BTIA and RCEP made use of the notion of civil society in a broader and more inclusive manner as compared with its contemporary European meaning. A connection is made between civil society and 'India's people', 'Indian people' and 'Indian society' (Anthra et al. 2013). Activists considered civil society as India's population as a whole when referring to 'mass organisations, networks and NGOs [non-governmental organisations]' (Anthra et al. 2013), 'farmers organizations and social and people's movements all over the country' (People's Resistance Forum against Free Trade Agreements and Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership 2017a) and 'the majority of Indians', 'the masses' ('Declaration from the People's Convention against FTAs and RCEP' 2017).

Moreover, activists aimed to represent a broad diversity of actors and, for example, mentioned 'representatives of trade unions, farmers, women, dalits, adivasis, health groups and other peoples organisations, small and medium enterprises, cooperatives and hawkers' (Forum against Free Trade Agreements 2010a). A longer list is provided by the 'Declaration from the People's convention against FTAs [free trade agreements] and RCEP' (2017) issued at the 19th negotiating round for the RCEP in Hyderabad:

> At this People's convention on 23 July 2017 in Hyderabad, more than 600 of us have gathered from across India, not only as individual citizens but also as representatives of various organisations and communities. We represent peasants, agricultural workers, animal rearers, plantation workers, women farmers, fishworkers, trade unions, industrial and mining workers, street vendors, informal workers, sex workers, insurance and bank employees, public services employees, students, IT engineers, science teachers, lawyers, environmental and social activists, HIV-positive persons, women's organisations, Dalits, adivasis, and Denotified-tribes. Together, these diverse sections make up a vast majority of Indians.

Above all, activists spoke for 'the most vulnerable sections such as Dalits, adivasis, small farmers, unorganised workers, denotified tribes, minorities, women and children' ('Declaration from the People's Convention against FTAs and RCEP' 2017), a range of actors especially affected by the BTIA and RCEP. As a diverse group, civil society is no less united under banners such as the 'Forum against Free Trade Agreements' and the 'People's Resistance Forum against Free Trade Agreements and Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership'.

Activists considered themselves as the spokespersons of a broad and diversified – but cohesive – civil society. However, such a strong identity contrasted with how civil society actors positioned themselves in relation to other social entities appearing in their discourse. Activists highlighted both their dependence on the Republic of India and their exclusion from negotiating processes by the Republic of India and India's negotiating partners.

Among the many names associated with civil society, 'NGOs [non-governmental organisations]' appear in only one declaration (Anthra et al. 2013).[3] Activists instead called India 'our country' (Forum against Free Trade Agreements 2010a) and indicated a strong attachment to Indian institutions in expressions such as 'our public distribution system', 'a democracy like ours' ('Appeal to Manmohan Singh' 2012) and 'our own government', 'our Supreme Court' (People's Resistance Forum against Free Trade Agreements and Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership 2017a). A range of national prerogatives was also endorsed by activists who referred to 'our import duties', 'our export restrictions', 'our national budget' (Forum against Free Trade Agreements 2010a), 'our policy space' (Forum against Free Trade Agreements 2010b) and 'our exports to EU', 'our national security', 'our ability to diversify, to develop value added products and industries and services related to agriculture', 'our markets', 'our national capacity to ensure the wellbeing of our people and ecology' ('Appeal to Manmohan Singh' 2012). Activists indeed considered government officials as allies that they only 'challenge[d]' for the people's sake and 'never against the government' (S. Gupta).

Civil society actors addressed their appeals to high-ranking officials such as Anand Sharma and Nirmala Seetharaman, successive commerce ministers, and Manmohan Singh, prime minister. Activists expressed apprehension about the BTIA and RCEP: 'we are deeply concerned' (Mital et al. 2008), 'we are writing to you to express our serious concerns', 'we note with grave concern' (Forum against Free Trade Agreements 2010b) and 'we want to bring to your attention a critical perspective shared by all of us' (Anthra et al. 2013). As observers of a process over which they did not have any control, civil society actors 'call for', 'demand' (Mital et al. 2008), 'request' (Forum against Free Trade Agreements 2010b) and 'appeal to' ('Appeal to Manmohan Singh' 2012; Anthra et al. 2013) government officials to act and improve such a critical situation. Activists thus appeared as applicants toward Indian officials, able to answer their queries.

'Since the launch of the EU's corporate driven Global Europe strategy … , five rounds of formal talks have occurred without any public access to the Indian government position, commissioned studies and negotiating texts', affirmed activists (Mital et al. 2008). Access to information was denied to activists, a neglect considered as anti-democratic:

[3] 'NGOs' originates from the UN Charter of 1945 as a broad and undefined concept (Willetts 2011, 7). After remaining diplomatic jargon for decades (Willetts 2011, 22), 'NGO' has acquired a contemporary meaning of 'voluntary group of individuals or organisations, usually *not affiliated with any government*, that is formed to provide services or to advocate a public policy' (Karns n.d., emphasis added).

> Both the GoI [government of India] and the European Commission have consistently refused to share information with civil society groups and the general public undermining the basic tenets of democratic process, policy making and law. (Forum against Free Trade Agreements 2010a)

A lack of consultation initiatives was also denounced by 'completely side-stepped' activists (Mital et al. 2008) whose analyses and protests 'have [been] persistently ignored and sidelined' (ActionAid - India et al. 2010). Activists' almost complete exclusion from negotiating arenas appeared all the more illegitimate as civil society actors aimed to represent India's people in their entirety and diversity.

A consequence is that activists made a claim for access to formal documents – through information release – and access to formal spaces – through consultation processes and their inclusion as 'key constituents' (Mital et al. 2008). In doing so, civil society actors adopted a confident position and called upon authorities on their behalf. According to them, during trade talks for the BTIA and RCEP, the negotiating parties and especially India were accountable to civil society. Such an assertive role clearly differs from activism against agreements between African, Caribbean and Pacific countries and the European Union, characterised by civil society actors' rationalised language and retiring stance (Del Felice 2012, 320-321).

Figure 5 – Activists at the 'People's convention' in Hyderabad (IndustriAll 2017)

The Republic of India

A second actor appearing in activists' discourse is India – characterised by its core democratic institutions. According to the Indian constitution, India consists of 'a sovereign socialist secular democratic republic' (*Preamble of the Constitution of India* 1949).[4] Civil society actors concurred with this definition and criticised the fact that 'the GoI [government of India] has ignored and sidelined the parliament, state governments, citizens of India … . No consultations, public discussion of the pros and cons, release of government studies, government positions and submissions have

[4] 'A sovereign democratic republic' became 'a sovereign socialist secular democratic republic' because of the 47th amendment of 1976.

taken place with these constituencies. This makes a mockery out of the federal polity and the democratic ethos of India' (Forum against Free Trade Agreements 2010b).

Activists deplored that delegates from the Indian ministry of commerce did not consult other ministries concerning the agreements under negotiation. According to R. Sengupta, if members from the ministry of agriculture were asked for inputs on agricultural items to be protected against the BTIA, they were never consulted on the agreement's broad framework. As S. Gupta added, ministries concerned by food and health are never included in the debate.

Also, activists noted that government delegates did not request the advice of Indian parliamentary members and asked that 'all current proposals are debated and discussed in parliament' (Mital et al. 2008). In particular, they demanded that government delegates 'take on board the critical concerns expressed by … the Parliamentary Standing Committees on Commerce and Agriculture' (Anthra et al. 2013). In India, parliamentary committees are commissions centred on a matter that is being examined in depth and in direct or indirect association with civil society actors ('Committees of Rajya Sabha' n.d.). Activists here refer to 'standing committees', which are long-lasting commissions, contrary to 'ad hoc committees', appointed in particular circumstances.

Another democratic institution dear to activists is federalism. According to Jenkins (2003, 78), during the negotiations at the World Trade Organization for the Agreement on Agriculture, federated states concentrated on domestic priorities whereas 'the external dimension of agricultural policy … [was] left to the discretion of a relatively tight circle within the Government of India'. Civil society actors also criticised the almost complete exclusion of federated states from the BTIA and RCEP negotiating processes. In particular, they denounced that 'many of the subjects that the GoI [government of India] is negotiating are state and concurrent subjects in the constitution, yet consultations with states and the parliament has been neglected' (Forum against Free Trade Agreements 2010a). 'State and concurrent subjects' here refer to the 'Seventh schedule' in India's constitution. In this law, the central and state governments' competences are defined: the 'Union list' comprises the 97 prerogatives of the central government, the 'State list' contains the 66 prerogatives of the federated states and the 'Concurrent list' includes the 47 prerogatives common to the central and state governments (Hardgrave & Kochanek 2008, 146). Activists thus appealed to the authorities to 'complete a federal process of consultation with the state governments, including the sharing of draft texts, and reach a consensus with the states' (Forum against Free Trade Agreements 2010b) and 'consult with state governments and gain their consensus especially on areas under state and concurrent lists (such as agriculture, health)' (Anthra et al. 2013).

Activists depicted India as a nation composed of its democratic institutions, which ensure the interests of India's people. Here again, the rather strong identity of the Republic of India contrasted with its weak position in relation to its negotiating partners. Civil society actors highlighted that India belonged to the group of 'developing countries' (Anthra et al. 2013; Adivasi Aikya Vedika et al. 2014; People's Resistance Forum against Free Trade Agreements and Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership 2017a) and that economic recession affected its poorer regions (Forum against Free Trade Agreements 2010a). India's huge trade deficit was also mentioned (Anthra et al. 2013).

'There is an urgent need for an informed public debate on the feasibility and development outcomes of the GoI [government of India]'s FTA [free trade agreements] strategy as a whole', affirmed activists (Forum against Free Trade Agreements 2010a). By asserting this, civil society actors called into question government officials' ability to adopt agreements compatible with development goals. Activists even feared that 'the proposed FTA [free trade agreement] will … erode

government policy space that is essential to manage trade and investment in the interest of pro-development, social and gender-just and environmentally sustainable outcomes' (ActionAid - India et al. 2010). But far from protecting India's 'government policy space' for development, Indian negotiators 'blindly follow the aggressive trade policy laid out by the erstwhile UPA [United Progressive Alliance] government', much to civil society actors' regret (Adivasi Aikya Vedika et al. 2014).

India's negotiating partners

The last actor to appear in activists' discourse is the group of India's negotiating partners during debates on the BTIA and RCEP. Civil society actors depicted European partners as a '27-European country bloc' (Forum against Free Trade Agreements 2010a) able to protect its economic sector by means of non-trade barriers (Forum against Free Trade Agreements 2010b), heavy subsidies ('Appeal to Manmohan Singh' 2012) and high standards and technical barriers (Anthra et al. 2013). Australia and New Zealand's agricultural subsidies, as well as China, Japan and South Korea's advanced manufacturers are also mentioned (Adivasi Aikya Vedika et al. 2014).

Activists thus highlighted the disparity between India and its foreign partners. India's negotiating partners are all the more powerful due to an alliance with 'multinational companies [that] dominate global services trade and investment' (Forum against Free Trade Agreements 2010a) and 'supermarket giants' (ActionAid - India et al. 2010). Accordingly, negotiating parties adopt 'corporate-driven, export-oriented trade strategies … [that] prioritise the interests of global capital and profit maximisation over people's right and livelihoods' (ActionAid - India et al. 2010). Besides agreeing with and defending capitalist interests, negotiating parties even include 'the industry and transnational corporations [as] the "super-stakeholders" … in the process' (People's Resistance Forum against Free Trade Agreements and Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership 2017d).

Action verbs were used to describe foreign countries' initiatives during discussions on the BTIA and RCEP. India's negotiating partners '[are] pushing for', 'demanding' (Forum against Free Trade Agreements 2010a), 'insisting' (Forum against Free Trade Agreements 2010b), 'refus[ing]' (Anthra et al. 2013) and 'ask[ing] for' (Adivasi Aikya Vedika et al. 2014). Actors from the private sector are similarly able to influence the course of the discussions since they 'have been granted privileged access to policy makers on both sides, allowing them to effectively *set* the FTA [free trade agreement] agenda' (ActionAid - India et al. 2010, emphasis added). As a consequence, foreign countries and companies appear to be leading the debate, whereas India adopts a more passive position.

Activists thus highlighted the asymmetries of power at stake during the negotiating processes for the BTIA and RCEP. Eager to change a balance of power detrimental to India – and its people – and favourable to foreign interests, they asked for a democratisation of the negotiations. 'We want democratic governments to retain the sovereignty to make laws and policies in the interests of the citizens, particularly the more vulnerable sections – whether it is import tariffs, subsidies, minimum wages or protections for its people and environment', demanded civil society actors ('Declaration from the People's Convention against FTAs and RCEP' 2017).

A 'moral responsibility' is also attributed to negotiating parties:

> We also assert that every RCEP Participating Country holds the moral responsibility to open up the 'secret' talks, and we stand in solidarity with people's organisations in all RCEP nations. (People's Resistance Forum against Free Trade Agreements and Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership 2017d)

Activists asked for a democratisation of India's commercial policymaking but also demanded that all foreign partners better include civil society actors in the

negotiating process. According to S. Barria, it is precisely the better inclusion of civil society actors in the negotiating process – rather than specific concerns related to commercial provisions – which is at the centre of the 'Declaration from the People's convention against FTAs [free trade agreements] and RCEP'.

As Table 4 shows, activists assigned important and new responsibilities to India's civil society and Indian negotiators. India's civil society appeared as a broad and diversified – but cohesive – group, representative of India's people and illegitimately excluded from negotiating arenas. Accordingly, activists advanced that civil society should be included in negotiating processes for the BTIA and RCEP. The Republic of India was 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 asked 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 – were considered as having a moral responsibility to give more room to civil society and India.

Table 4 – Activists' ways of being

	Identity formation	**Subject-positioning**
India's civil society	A broad and diversified – but cohesive – group, representative of India's people and illegitimately excluded from negotiating arenas	Dependent on Indian negotiators in order to access negotiating arenas
Republic of India	A powerful entity composed of core democratic institutions – the government, the parliament, the federated states and civil society – but economically fragile	Able to adopt a more assertive position during negotiating processes in order to better protect its developing economy
India's negotiating partners	A block of developed countries allied with big multinational companies	Have a moral responsibility to give more room to civil society and India

Conclusion

This paper aimed to respond to the following question: Do activists concerned about agricultural and food issues in India have the discursive power to influence regional trade policymaking? Such enquiry provided a way to address a geographic and thematic gap in scholarly studies on activism against regional trade policymaking as activists from Asia are almost absent from the literature and civil society actors which advance agricultural and food-related matters remain understudied. Our focus on food activism in India helped fill this double gap. Our case study, which focused on activists from La Via Campesina, the Right to Food Campaign and the Forum against Free Trade Agreements, brought insight into how these three Indian social movements engaged in regional trade policymaking such as the BTIA and RCEP between 2007 and 2017. The exclusion of civil society actors from formal negotiating arenas for the BTIA and RCEP does not mean that such engagement is powerless. This has led us to emphasise activists' discursive, rather than decisional power. We analysed such a power by drawing from Fairclough's (2003) and Del Felice's (2014) concept of 'discursive practices' and their various dimensions understood as 'ways of acting' (spaces and textual genres), 'ways of representing' (the discourse about

regional trade), and 'ways of being' (how particular social entities are characterised and positioned in relation to other subjects through such narrative). Our findings prompt us to make the following responses to our three hypotheses.

- Activists' 'ways of acting' are confined to 'outside spaces' and informal textual genres. Accordingly, the discursive power of civil society actors is weak (H1).

  The findings supporting this first hypothesis show the difficulties that activists had to access 'inside spaces', through inclusion in consultation mechanisms, and that compelled them to remain almost exclusively in 'outside spaces', such as parallel activities, protests and media work. Civil society actors were similarly denied access to formal documents – legal and other technical texts – and could 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 (H2).

  Here again, our findings provide evidence likely to substantiate our hypothesis. Activists adopted a discourse in which the BTIA and RCEP appeared 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 advanced frameworks that they considered most appropriate to ensure food security than agricultural liberalisation: farmers from La Via Campesina promoted 'food sovereignty', whereas members of the Right to Food Campaign referred 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 presented 'alternative agendas' for regional trade policymaking that implied that market aims are subsumed under agricultural and food policies. Civil society actors were 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 (H3).

  This third hypothesis is also supported by the evidence gathered in our analysis. Activists engaged against the BTIA and RCEP shaped 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 have assigned important and new responsibilities to India's civil society and Indian negotiators. Both actors were considered as excluded from or insufficiently included in negotiating arenas for the BTIA and RCEP, in which they should legitimately have had a central role. Accordingly, activists asked 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 appeared as necessary for activists. Such a claim for 'democratisation' echoes critiques of free trade agreements' anti-democratic aspects (Graz 2013, 93).

To sum up, the power of activists' discourse is relatively weak in their ways of acting (H1), in contrast to their relatively strong ways of representing (H2) and of being (H3). 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). As Holzscheiter (2005, 726) has pointed out, activists can become powerful 'discursive entrepreneurs' by displaying ideational capabilities and have an impact on global governance. Activism against the BTIA and RCEP in India may thus challenge the dominant narrative on regional trade policymaking. Although the discursive impact of grassroots groups does not equal the influence of certain expert-driven international non-governmental organisations on global governance, these movements '*indirectly* affect[…]' political decisions (Sharma 2007, 48) by framing a counter-discourse that can reach actors engaged in formal arenas. According to Del Felice (2014, 162), it is similar 'changes in the discursive context [that] make[…] some decisions possible, against others'. However, assessing the degree of activists' discursive impact on negotiators remains difficult. This highlights a limit of our analysis in that it focuses exclusively on civil society actors and does not take officials' responses into account.

Ultimately, our findings show that activists' discursive practices are particularly powerful in two ways. First, civil society actors address the BTIA and RCEP as comprehensive agreements which endanger people's livelihood. As a consequence, they ally with counterparts concerned about agricultural and food issues, but also with grassroots groups defending access to healthcare, labour protection or women's rights. Activists are thus able to broaden the scope of their mobilisation to include a variety of civil society actors. Although such alliances can mainly be noticed at the domestic level, associations between Indian and foreign groups also happen on several occasions, for example at the 19th negotiating round for the RCEP in 2017. Building ties with foreign activists appears as a strategy to better oppose regional trade liberalisation and it would be highly interesting to observe if such international collaborations between civil society actors will develop in the future.

Second, activists show a strong connection with India's political actors and institutions. They address appeals and declarations directly to government officials, advocate food sovereignty and the right to food as national alternatives to agricultural liberalisation in order to ensure food security, and ask for India's assertive position during negotiating processes. By doing so, civil society actors may create a 'street heat dynamic'. Building on Keck and Sikkink's 'boomerang effect', Edelman (2009, 110) has coined the concept of 'street heat effect' as a means to analyse activism against the 3rd Ministerial Conference of the World Trade Organization in 1999 in Seattle. It refers to the ability to 'sway[…] developing-country … delegates to the demonstrators' positions and led them to stand up to pressures from more powerful governments'. Activists engaged against the BTIA and RCEP may indeed allow India to become more influential at the negotiating table by supporting its claims against European and Asian countries.

To conclude, this study provided detailed evidence of the power that civil society actors can exercise in trade policymaking dynamics. While its focus was confined to the engagement of three civil society organisations with food policy issues targeted by negotiations of regional free trade agreements from 2007 to 2017, the conditions under which such groups can make use of their discursive power are likely to find some echoes in the new wave of farmers' protests driven by the farm bills voted by the Parliament of India in September 2020. The study did not just highlight the importance of better including civil society actors in political economy analyses, but in trade policymaking processes altogether. A number of scholars have been working toward that end by addressing civil society actors' participation in global standard-setting (Graz & Hauert 2011; 2019) or by studying their ability to adapt local technical health innovations to India's and global market rules (Srinivas 2012; 2014; 2016;

2018a; 2018b). By highlighting activists' discursive power in the context of agricultural liberalisation in India, we aim at bringing insight into a field of research where much remains to be explored.

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