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**Documenting the farmers movement with photographs from the
field: An Interview with former sarpanch of Khassan, Dr.
Narinder Singh Kang**

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The farmers movement in India, in response to the recently passed farm laws by the Government of India, continues with fervor even as it comes up on a year. Support for the agitating farmers have come from diverse groups, both from within India as well as internationally – climate activists, celebrities, and diasporic members of the Sikh and Indian communities. In this context, I interviewed Dr. Narinder Singh Kang with the goal to understand the reasons for this seemingly enthusiastic support as well as Dr. Kang’s general views on the movement. The interview was conducted via Zoom. All IRB protocols of consent were followed.

Dr. Kang is the former *sarpanch*, or elected village head, of Khassan which is in the Jalandhar district of Punjab, India. He is also a lifelong resident of Khassan. Although his children decided to immigrate to North America, he did not. But, he does indeed visit them. In fact, I met Dr. Kang in New Jersey on one of his visits to America. But, those are trips he makes to meet friends and family, not with the desire to live permanently in the United States. Under Dr. Kang’s leadership, Khassan has won a few awards, including Rashtriya Gaurav Gram Sabha Puraskaar for water conservation for the year 2014-2015. This Award was conferred by the Union Minister of Panchayati Raj at Jamshedpur.¹ He is also trained as a medical specialist. Given Dr. Kang’s personal association with Khassan and Punjab, his professional experience as *sarpanch* and the fact that he owns land made him an ideal interviewee for my current project.

I was introduced to Dr. Kang in January of 2017 when I returned to the *Doaba* region for ongoing fieldwork on the topic of international migration from Punjab. Graciously, he agreed to be interviewed for the project. On a trip later that year, I interviewed his wife as well, along with another interview with Dr. Kang. This time,

¹ <https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/archive/jalandhar/khassan-village-gets-national-award-for-water-conservation-230875>

the interviews were video recorded for a documentary film on the topic being developed by filmmaker, Shashwati Talukdar.

In January of 2021, accompanied by his wife, Voninder, Dr. Kang visited the farmers' protest sites. As a landowner, Punjabi and Indian, he felt a sense of duty to pay attention to the farmers agitation and support them. Dr. Kang also invoked his beliefs as a Sikh to reflect on the movement, which he suggested extends beyond the farm laws and is of grave national significance, as a just and a righteous one.

What follows is a selection of photographs on the farmers movement that Dr. Kang had sent me. He had taken these photographs during his visit to the Singhu border, one of the protest sites and border around the Indian state of Delhi (separate from New Delhi, the capital of India). Each photograph is described for its context and meaning as explained by Dr. Kang. With Dr. Kang's consent, I am using his actual name and thus, did not make up a pseudonym for him.

Photo 1 – Polishing shoes

A group of young farmers polishing boots of all participants at the protest site, regardless of religion. It did not matter whether shoes belonged to Hindus, Sikhs, Muslims or Christians, said Dr. Kang.



Photo 2 – Women and men at a movement meeting, main stage

A meeting at the main stage at Singhu border. Attendees arrived from all over India, and not simply Punjab and Haryana.



Photo 3 – Meeting at main stage

This photo is also of a meeting at the main stage, Singhu border. *Sanyukt Kisan Morcha*, Dilli (Bharat) is written in both Gurmukhi and Devnagari scripts. Translated in English, it is *United Farmers Front*, Delhi (India), as written right below.



Photo 4 – Man in chains

The man in chains is symbolic of all farmers in India in chains, bound by government policies that are neglectful of farmers' wellbeing. This representation of the farmers' struggle was made akin to the struggles of revolutionary freedom fighter Bhagat Singh, Dr. Kang reported. Resistance to the farm laws is understood as a similar fight, as if against a colonial government, just like Bhagat Singh had fought against British colonial rule. Thus, even today, "Mother India" continues to be oppressed. The yellow color of the turban, or *pagh*, is symbolic of the color of the *pagh* commonly presumed to have been worn by Bhagat Singh. This photo was taken near the main stage at Singhu border.



Photo 5 – Library

Children attending classes at the library – the central theme of this photograph. The gentleman in the green turban is the teacher for this group of young children. There is no designated teacher as such to perform daily teaching duties. Teaching takes place on a voluntary basis. Before permission is given to photograph the “school,” they must teach first. Teaching is a form of service to God, or *seva*, as defined by the Sikh religion, according to Dr. Kang.



Photo 6 – Elder men sleeping in trolleys

Much has been said about farmers camping out for months at protest sites in extreme conditions - torrential rain, bitter cold or the oppressive heat of the summer months.² In this photograph, elder farmers seek refuge from the brutal cold by sleeping in trolleys wrapped in woolen blankets on a thick bed of hay.



² One example - <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/farmers-continue-protest-at-delhi-border-areas-amid-cold-weather/articleshow/79772147.cms>

Photo 7 – Children at library

Foregrounded in this photograph is a young boy enacting the story taught to him as part of the lesson for the day, while other children continue with class taught by the gentleman in the green turban. Sitting cross legged in the far-left corner wearing a green *shalwar kameez* (tunic and pants) with a white sweater is Voninder Kaur, Dr. Kang's wife. She, too, had taught a class there, reported Dr. Kang.



Photo 8 – Protestor carrying sign

Carried by a protestor, this sign is written in both Gurmukhi and Devnagari scripts urging the people to elect honest politicians, contrary to the greedy and selfish ones, because only then will Punjab prosper.

In Gurmukhi at the upper half of the sign, the following is written –

“Chuno imaandaar, seva bhaavna wale MLA/MP janaab ta hii asli khushal/karzmukt hougii kisani te Punjab chuno-ge lalchi, khudgarz ta kar denge Punjab da khana kharab”

Devnagari is the script in which the same is written on the bottom half of the poster. It reads as follows –

“Chuno agar, imaandar seva bhavna wale MLA/MP janaab tabhii hogii asli khushhaal kisani aur Punjab, chunoge laalchi khudgarz to kar denge Punjab ka khana kharab”

According to Dr. Kang, the photo is indicative of the heightened political awareness in people shaped by the farmers movement.



Photo 9 – Men having breakfast

Men having breakfast at Singhu border. The food is prepared in a makeshift kitchen under the tent.



Photo 10 – Shaheed Sandeep Singh Dhaliwal

In September 2019, Sandeep Singh Dhaliwal, a sheriff's deputy in Harris County in Houston, Texas, was fatally shot in the back of his head during a routine traffic stop. According to an article in *The Guardian*,³ Dhaliwal became prominent after becoming the first officer to maintain his articles of faith while on duty. The Sikh community, as suggested by the poster, sees Dhaliwal as a martyr, or *Shaheed*. At the protest site, Dhaliwal, whose family originated from the district of Kapurthala, was honored in this manner.



This poster on Dhaliwal is a clear testament to the transnational bonds that connect the diaspora Sikh community with those in Punjab (although it should be noted that

³ <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2019/sep/28/texas-police-turban-beard-killed-sikh>. Also see <https://www.click2houston.com/news/local/2019/12/18/man-accused-of-killing-harris-county-deputy-dhaliwal-indicted-on-capital-murder/>

the supporters of the farmers movement in India at least extend beyond Sikhs). Much has been noted about the diaspora Sikh support for the movement. My own interviews with diaspora Sikhs show the same. Interestingly, Sandeep Singh Dhaliwal's name is encased with slogans in support of the farmers movement that are written in Gurmukhi and Devnagari scripts, suggesting an integration of social concerns of "here" and "there."

Photo 11 – Mr. and Mrs. Kang with protestors

Dr. Kang with his wife, Voninder, standing behind the group in charge of maintaining the accounts of donations for the protest. The donors were given receipts as well, he reported. "We donated too," said Dr. Kang. "We went for the country's welfare and agree with the movement too." When I asked for his consent to publish these photographs and whether I could use their actual names, he agreed spontaneously. His refrain continuously throughout the interview, referring to the interview and his unveiled support for the ongoing farmers struggle, was "we are not doing anything wrong."

