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**Farmers' Movement in India**  
**Part I**

## **On the Farmers' Movement**

*Editorial Team*

*Special Issues on Farmers' Movement in India*

The *Sikh Research Journal* (SRJ) is meant to build bridges between scholars in the field of Sikh and Punjabi Studies, academics from other disciplines, members of the Sikh community, South Asians and others. The farmers' movement, just as it has catalyzed issues and concerns beyond the details of the design of a set of laws, inspired members of the editorial team to embody and extend this objective, with a set of special issues on the many aspects of the movement. The editors of these special issues include three members of the SRJ core editorial team, all based in the US, and three guest editors based in India. We embark on this journey with the specific aim to be a bridge between academic analysis and lived experience by including voices of academics, activists, and community members on the issue of the farmers' agitation. Our backgrounds and our motivation are briefly described at the end of this introduction.

The special issues on the farmers are a product of a very particular vision on the part of a group of individuals engaged with the issue to offer a platform highlighting the massive resistance to the recently passed farm laws by the government of India, a resistance in which the Punjabi farmers occupy a prominent space. The farmers fear that the new laws, passed in September 2020, will eliminate the minimum guaranteed price for agricultural produce – commonly referred to as minimum support price (MSP) – despite the government's assurances to the contrary; permit stockpiling of agricultural produce by corporations; and expand contract farming without much in the way of safeguards for the farmers. According to the farmers, the new laws will only serve to accelerate their impoverishment, with far reaching impacts on the socio-cultural-political fabric of the Punjab. Resistance to the laws emerged on the Indian national scene in late November 2020, although it had been ongoing in Punjab since the introduction of the central government's ordinances on June 5, 2020, which preceded the parliamentary passage of the reforms as new laws. Almost half a year later, the movement continues to thrive without any sign of the farmers relenting. Their demand stands as is – “kaale kanoon rad karo” or “take back the black laws!”

As this is being written, the movement has support among farmers from other states in India as well, because movement participants and supporters perceive the laws as detrimental to the wellbeing of all on whom they will be imposed and

those who will be affected indirectly in the long run as a result of their implementation. Thus, farmers from Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, Kerala, Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat have joined in the resistance. The movement has received support from landless laborers, Dalits, and those against the National Register of Citizens and the Citizenship Amendment Act as well. Women, too, have featured prominently in this movement, in ways that have signaled attention to deeper issues of structural gender inequalities. Additionally, the mobilization has spanned national boundaries, drawing in unexpected allies, including solidarity statements from grassroots farmers' and human rights organizations in the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom, as well as Rihanna and Greta Thunberg's more-publicized tweets of solidarity.

In response to sustained resistance, including international support, the Indian government has taken increasingly harsh steps to quell the movement, often seeking to construct the movement participants and supporters as seditious and/or separatists, and to control media coverage, in order to mobilize popular support against it. The detentions of journalists and activists like Mandeep Punia, Noddep Kaur, Disha Ravi further exemplify such efforts. Yet, despite accounts and images of pain and injury, the movement has also produced hope and song. In these months, those in the movement, many with long term experience of grassroots organizing in the Punjab, have shown their ingenuity, foresight, creativity and resilience in leading this mobilization. The movement builders' agency is palpable and inspiring.

Thus, we the editors of the special issues on the farmers' movement offer a short primer for those hoping to better understand the movement from multiple vantage points. The essays, articles and visual documentation presented will be published over three consecutive issues of SRJ, this issue being the first of three. The section of the Journal on the movement, while not exhaustive, provides background and examines several dimensions of the ongoing struggle. This inaugural issue is a preview of a more robust set of academic, artistic and community voices to be presented in future issues on the movement.

A particular feature of the special section is contributions in the Punjabi language. The purpose of this linguistic extension, not a regular feature of the SRJ, is threefold. Firstly, it fits with the goal of the editors of the special issues to include community voices, and especially make accessible those voices that otherwise would not be. Secondly, and by way of that, including pieces in Punjabi will capture local voices that would otherwise not be heard on the global stage. Thirdly, this feature can create a space for engagement between ground level local viewpoints and academic voices for a better understanding of a movement as it

continues to unfold. Through this we hope to further illuminate the multiple dimensions of this thriving movement.

The editorial team for these issues comprises of:

**Shoma Choudhury Lahiri** is Assistant Professor at the Department of Sociology at St. Xavier's College, Kolkata. Her interest in social movements can be traced back to her doctoral research in the villages working alongside the activists of Kerala Sastra Sahitya Parishad attempting to understand the interventions of the People's Science Movement in Kerala. She has been intrigued by the fact that sociology in India has been neglectful of social movements, being largely oriented towards a consensus model. Considering that the socio-political landscape of India in recent times has seen a wide variety of agitations and social movements, such as citizenship rights, religious rights, right to dissent, against sexual harassment, that have raised significant questions, it is imperative to document, analyze and assess their impact. Her interest in the ongoing farmer's movement also arises from the fact that it is multi-dimensional as well because the movement has gone beyond its locale and is forming alliances with other social movements and civil society groups to mobilize public opinion in other parts of the country. She is watching closely as the movement unfolds and is interested in understanding its long-term impact.

**Shruti Devgan** is a Visiting Assistant Professor of Sociology at Bowdoin College. As a Punjabi Hindu, Devgan's cultural affinity with Sikhs led her to embark on research on diasporic memories of the 1984 anti-Sikh violence. Her research in turn informs her engagement with the farmers' protests in India. Sikh farmers, mostly from Punjab, have been at the helm of the movement. She is especially interested in the transnational networks that are fueling the protests and sees echoes of the diasporic mobilization that followed in the immediate aftermath of the events of 1984. Even though the violence was unfolding in India, the outrage and sadness resonated with Sikhs globally. In addition to several other developments taking shape in India today, there has been a vilification of Sikhs and a call to recreate the genocidal violence of 1984. Devgan has been closely observing social media platforms, especially Twitter, to see the strong reactions such calls are evoking in the Sikh diaspora. She understands transnational Sikhs' support for farmers, driven by a haunted past, as a means to reclaim and reshape the present and future. She stands in solidarity with farmers and their remarkable resistance to the tyranny of Modi's Hindu nationalist and neoliberal regime.

**Diditi Mitra** is Associate Professor of Sociology at Brookdale Community College. The seeds of her engagement with the ongoing farmers struggle in India were sown with her dissertation project on immigrant Punjabi-Sikh yellow taxi drivers in New York City. That was two decades ago. Since then, Mitra's theoretical and empirical frames have expanded to understand the factors that incentivize international migration from the Punjab. Thus, she has embarked on fieldtrips to the Punjab, working in collaboration with filmmaker Shashwati Talukdar, with the aim of understanding the local contexts that shape Punjabi (predominantly Sikh) immigrant journeys. For Mitra, the farmers' movement is part of that story about immigration from the Punjab. Through this history of engaging with immigrant Punjabi-Sikhs and the people in Punjab itself, Mitra has come to identify with Punjab, the place and its people. Navigating the many twists and turns of the movement, Mitra hopes that the farmers succeed in securing their rights and dignity as well as lead India towards the promise of Independence.

**Nirmal Singh** is Assistant Professor of Political Science and Public Administration at Doaba College, Jalandhar (Punjab), India. He holds a Ph.D. in Political Science from Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar. His interest in the farmers' movements arises out of his experience as a border area resident, as an academic researcher and a state/provincial supervisor of various national surveys, including national farmers survey. His initial exposure is a product of academic contribution to a paper on National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) and another comparing the state of agriculture in India and Pakistan. In 2015, while working for a paper on violence in Punjab during the phase of terrorism from the 1980s to mid-1990s, his interest grew further in the farming community and its issues. His recent publication maps Dalit leadership in political parties of Punjab perceived as the party of farmers or Sikhs, particularly Shiromani Akali Dal. Being a resident of the border district of Punjab, he is well aware of the plight of farmers, particularly of farmers whose land is located across barbed wired fencing. He has closely watched how farmers have been suffering from government apathy, its agencies and the impact of various laws. He supervised national surveys held in Punjab between 2011 and 2018. In all these surveys and for border area research project, he travelled extensively throughout Punjab to measure people's perceptions on farm issues, law and order, various government laws and schemes. He opines that the recent unprecedented farmers movement cuts across boundaries of religion, caste, geography, professions, communities, nationalities, etc. This movement sets the global and historical benchmark as a peaceful and a well coordinated protest against the laws of the central government.

**Dona Suri** is a retired journalist. She has spent 35 years working in newspapers and broadcast media in India – 30 of those years in Chandigarh. She retired as associate editor of the Chandigarh edition of *Hindustan Times*. Her interest in the farmers movement is through her work with a small charitable organization, active in the villages of Punjab's extreme southeast corner. Her work with the organization began in 1995, aiming to help rural children stay in school after the suicide of one or both parents. Between 1990 and December 31, 2020, the organization documented 3196 cases of suicide by farmers and agricultural laborers in a small area of just 146 villages. Debt is the thread that ties these victims' cases together. Initially, the organization focused on farmers, but in time there was a realization that focusing on farmers alone was insufficient because farmers troubles and their pauperization were connected to those of the entire village-laborers, shopkeepers, artisans, and other residents. It has become clear that this pauperization flows from government policies. The centrally legislated agricultural laws that have evoked such strong opposition reflect a long-evolving shift in the Union government's attitude toward the focus of the Indian economy and agriculture's role in it. The recently enacted farm bills, that have pushed the farmers agitation into the forefront of India's socio-political scene is deeply concerning for both the organization and the rural families that it will impact.

**Elizabeth Weigler** is a User Experience Researcher, and holds a PhD in Anthropology from the University of California, Santa Barbara. She has watched the protests unfold through the eyes of the diaspora in North America and the UK. Growing up in Wisconsin, the community there inspired her to pursue the study of Sikh history and transnationalism, first in Pune, India starting in 2008. The heartbreaking terrorist attack on the Oak Creek Gurdwara in 2012, and the Sikh community's empowering resistance to white supremacy was a catalyst for her PhD research. She works with grassroots organizations that seek to foster community-based knowledge as a means of civic change, primarily through history and heritage. This special section comes from Elizabeth's initial role on the SRJ's editorial board - to promote the incorporation of community voices, and to communicate the value of academic work to community members. Her goal is to provide a holistic understanding of the people and policies that move the Farmers' Protest - from the longitudinal and measured understanding of an academic perspective, to the emotive appeals of those educated in the realities of their own lives.

A final note: this special section owes a debt of gratitude to a number of "behind the scenes" editorial contributors and commentators. To reiterate, we recognize that the issues raised here will not be exhaustive, especially in light of the

evolving nature of the contemporary movement. Rather, we hope that these and subsequent essays will act as a space for dialogue and understanding as well as a catalyst for future research. We seek to always keep in mind the realities of those on the front lines of these protests, who foresee a disproportionate burden of these laws on their daily lives.