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Final Reflections on the Farmers' Movement

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Special Issue on the Farmers' Movement in India

The end of the yearlong farmers agitation on November 19, 2021, led mostly by farmers from Punjab and Haryana at the borders of Delhi marked a tremendous success in its resistance to legislation of the central government and corporatization of agriculture in India. The movement defeated forces internal to India that favored agro-industries as well as larger global policy-making that favors the same. In India, such policies date back to at least the 1990s and the shift to "liberalize" India.[1] As documented in the two previous issues published by *Sikh Research Journal*, the farmers' movement witnessed participation from a cross section of the Indian population, cutting across societal, professional and geographical barriers. The farmers even traveled to various states of the country to influence state legislative elections of 2021 in an effort to defeat the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Although those efforts were successful only in some instances, the movement was able to create an alternative vision for the people of the nation. The movement brought together actors and groups with disparate interests and goals. Many observers have found those unexpected alliances and extensions in the movement to be noteworthy. Also, the success of the farmers' movement can be attributed to Punjab's long history of peasant struggles.[2]

However, it would be naïve to think that the success of the movement in influencing the repeal of the "three black laws" has spontaneously resolved the issues that plague the lives of farmers and laborers. Certain fundamental issues that affect the lives of farmers remain unresolved. As Das Gupta, Mehrotra and Bakshi demonstrate in their essay "Who is the farmer," it is important to pay close attention to the definition of the farmer for effective policymaking concerning the agricultural sector of Indian society. The authors critique the dominant meaning of the "farmer" and offer empirically based alternatives for the design of effective policies. Navsharan Singh's essay, "Mainu Rang De Basanti Chunniya," rightfully directs attention to the sizeable involvement of women in the resistance launched

[1] Paramjit Singh and Ronki Ram (2022). "Making sense of agrarian distress and peasant struggles in Punjab." *Sikh Formations*, Vol 17, no. 4
[2] ibid

by the farmers. At the same time, Singh notes that elder men still constituted a majority of the agitating farmers. Here, while women participated in the movement, elder men's numerical dominance alludes to fissures along gender lines. By so doing, one gathers from Singh's essay the contradictions underlying the farmers' movement, with a preservation of gendered hierarchies on the one hand, and on the other hand, women's role as active agents. Nirmal Singh's essay points to yet another source of difference among the members of the constituency that fought against the "black laws," i.e. the issue of caste. In "Dalits and Farmers' Movement in India," Singh questions the alliance between Dalits and Jats. The essay has much to contribute to a nuanced understanding of the success of the agitation. These are only a handful of issues that still require attention. There are many more. One of those is the apprehension that the government might surreptitiously design and implement policies that basically reach the same goal – "liberalize" Indian agricultural sector. The apprehension is a legitimate one given that corporatization of the agricultural sector is pushed by interests in the global order.[3] The trajectory of resolution of these issues will only be revealed with time

Despite the splits within the movement and its other limitations, it is reasonable to assert that the farmers' movement will continue to inspire many social movements in the future. Notably, the movement was able to mobilize across gender, caste and class relations, even if such cooperation was secured under duress. That groups with several irreconcilable interests could be brought together to achieve political unity for a bigger cause is an important lesson from this movement. Further, the farmers' agitation is significant to further scholarship on social movements. It allowed us to not only focus on a region, the crisis, discontents and divisions within, but also brought back attention to agrarian concerns, a topic that has been largely neglected.

The Editors

Shruti Devgan
Shoma Choudhury Lahiri
Diditi Mitra
Nirmal Singh
Dona Suri
Elizabeth Weigler

[3] ibid

Dalits and Farmers' Movement in India

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Abstract

The farmers and laborers were two primary stakeholders who comprised a majority of protesters at the most recent farmers movement on the borders of Delhi, the capital of India. While the farmers are mainly the land-owning upper caste communities known as Jats (Sikhs in Punjab and Hindus in other northern states), the laborers belong to generally landless lower castes (referred to as Dalits). The farmers' movement saw overwhelming use of the slogan *Kisan Mazdoor Ekta Zindabad* (Long Live the Unity of Farmer and Laborer). Both groups provided strength to the farmers movement which eventually succeeded in repealing the three farm laws passed by the central government of India. However, the relationship between farmers and laborers has a dark side too. The interests of both groups are opposed to each other's because Jats want to continue their domination over Dalits, including keeping them underpaid and as bonded laborers. The Dalits are gradually asserting themselves. They hope to become landowners by acquiring villages' common land that are reserved for Dalit communities. In this essay, I reflect on this point of convergence and divergence in the interests of farmers and laborers and ponder its significance for the organization of agriculture in Punjab.

Introduction

While the farmers are mostly upper castes (Jat Sikh in Punjab and Jats in the Hindi belt), the farm laborers belong to marginalized scheduled caste (SC) communities widely referred to as Dalits. The Dalits are "...a group of 200 million people relegated below the 3,000-year-old Indian caste system. Members of higher castes—Brahmins, Kshatriyas, and Vaishyas—maintain control of knowledge, resources, and power…"[1]. In sharp contrast to all of India where Dalits comprise

[1] Suparkash Majumdar, "Modi's Farm Bills and Their Repeal Will Do Nothing for This Group", *Foreign Policy* December 6, 2021, accessed April 30, 2022, https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/12/06/india-farm-bill-dalit-bonded-labor-modi-bjp-landlord/.

16.6 percent of the population, Census-2011, reported that the group accounts nearly for 32 percent of the total population in Punjab. The demographic strength of this group, who are an important source of labor, make them a crucial stakeholder in the agricultural sector. Also, as per the 2011 Census, there were 1.1 million labor workforce in Punjab of which roughly half were engaged as farm laborers.[2] "Agriculture contributes not more than 15% of the gross domestic product (GDP); however, it continues to engage nearly 60% of the workforce. In the absence of growth in the rural non-farm sector, people have had little option but to fall back on agriculture."[3] The decadal growth of the Dalit population in the state is almost double than the entire state. More than two-thirds of the Dalit population (73.3 percent) in Punjab live in the rural areas.[4] Yet, 71 percent of Dalits work in agriculture. They own just 9 percent of the total agricultural land. They are mostly laborers. Some of them also work as bonded laborers.[5] A large number of them work as daily wagers in Agriculture Produce Marketing Committees (APMCs). They are paid cash wages mostly on a daily basis and in some cases, meager monthly salaries. "These daily wage laborers not only work in the farms, but are employed in great numbers at the APMCs to clean, sort, load and unload grains at the *mandis*. If the *mandi* system and the APMCs disappear…", they would be equally affected with farmers.[6] This is the reason that they remain deprived of banking services. Being landless, they cannot pledge any property because it is an impediment to acquisition of loans from commercial banks. They are forced to rely on non-institutional sources to get credit even to meet emergency expenses, like weddings and medical services. In order to meet those expenses, Dalit laborers borrow money from their landowning employers. Because most laborers are unable to repay the loans, the burden falls on their children. The children end up working

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[2] Vivek Gupta, "Why are the Dalit landless farm labourers of Punjab protesting the new agri laws?", *Gaon Connection*, December 14, 2020, accessed https://en.gaonconnection.com/why-are-the-dalit-landless-farm-labourers-of-punjab-protesting-the-new-agri-laws/.

[3] Anisha George and Awanish Kumar, "Class in itself? Caste in Itself? Exploring the Latest Phase of Rural Agitations in India", Conference Paper No. 38, the 5th International Conference of the BRICS Initiative for Critical Agrarian Studies, October 13-17, RANEPA, Moscow, Russia.

[4] Government of Punjab, "Scheduled Castes Sub Plan, 2020-21", Department of Social Justice, Empowerment and Minorities: Chandigarh.

[5] Suparkash Majumdar, "Modi's Farm Bills and Their Repeal Will Do Nothing for This Group", *Foreign Policy* December 6, 2021, accessed April 30, 2022, https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/12/06/india-farm-bill-dalit-bonded-labor-modi-bjp-landlord/.

[6] Vivek Gupta, "Why are the Dalit landless farm labourers of Punjab protesting the new agri laws?", *Gaon Connection*, December 14, 2020, accessed April 30, 2022, https://en.gaonconnection.com/why-are-the-dalit-landless-farm-labourers-of-punjab-protesting-the-new-agri-laws/.

for the same landowning farmer, not to mention that their children's educational pursuits remain incomplete because they generally work alongside their family in the agriculture fields. This is the predicament of the laborers contrary to that of the landowning farmers who employ them. The landowners are much better placed in all aspects of their lives-social, economic and political.

Although Dalits joined hands with the farmers in the movement, the sense of victory felt by the farmers at their repeal was not something of great joy for Dalits because more than 90 percent "…of the agricultural labor force-, …own only small amounts of land or no land at all".[7] "In Punjab, upper castes, mostly Jat Sikhs, dominate the farming landscape. Only 3.5% of private farm land belongs to Dalits who make up 32% of the population, according to the agriculture Census of 2015-16. The national average is 8.6% of farm land for 16.6% of Dalits."[8]

The central government of India faced one of the biggest and a year-long protest around the borders of Delhi. The three laws[9] galvanized not only farmers to launch a massive resistance against the central government, but also mobilized society at large to show sympathy and support to the farmers movement. Initiated in Punjab and slowly moved to the borders of Delhi, the farmers' protests eventually extended to other states of India as well, such as Kerala, Assam, Uttar Pradesh and Karnataka. The protest movement mobilized "farmers in an increasingly nationwide pushback against Prime Minister Narendra Modi's proposal to overhaul the way many of the country's 146 million farms do business."[10] The farmers believed this overhaul of the agricultural sector "…will lead to lower prices and pave the way for corporate takeovers of their small farms, which average less than three acres in size."[11] The movement witnessed participation from diverse sections of the society namely, teachers, students, small businesses, professionals such doctors and engineers, labor unions, employees unions, Dalits, Diaspora, artists, actors, singers etc. The

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[7] Suparkash Majumdar, "Modi's Farm Bills and Their Repeal Will Do Nothing for This Group", *Foreign Policy* December 6, 2021, accessed April 30, 2022, https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/12/06/india-farm-bill-dalit-bonded-labor-modi-bjp-landlord/.

[8] Manu Moudgil, "Fist For Farm: How Punjab's Dalits Are Fighting For Their Right Over Common Land", *India Spend*, August 8, 2019, accessed https://www.indiaspend.com/fist-for-farm-how-punjabs-dalits-are-fighting-for-their-right-over-common-land/.

[9] Farmers' Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Bill, 2020; Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement on Price Assurance and Farm Services Bill, 2020; and Essential Commodities (Amendment) Bill 2020.

[10] Emily Schmall, "Indian Farmers Protests, in Challenge to Modi" *The New York Times*, October 22, 2021, accessed May 8, 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/04/world/asia/india-farmers-protest-pollution-coronavirus.html.

[11] Ibid.

most famous slogan of the recent farmers' movement was *Kisan Mazdoor Ekta Jindabaad* (Long Live the Unity of Farmer and Laborer).

This broad solidarity across the nation created much trouble for the central government.[12] Through the protests, the farmers had not only shown displeasure toward the farm laws, but also expressed anguish against the corporate houses that are venturing into the farm sector. It is the threat of loss of land at the hands of corporate houses perceived by the farmers which unified both farmers and laborers in this movement.[13] "Many farmer unions branded the acts, hurriedly approved by the Indian parliament in September 2020, as anti-farmer, arguing that removing a local market system set up by the government would have left farmers at the whim of corporations. Farmers have also urged the development of a minimum support price law to ensure that corporations do not have too much control."[14] This unity crossed national boundaries bringing together those in India and abroad. In the end, the union government was compelled to repeal the farm laws, a victory that was celebrated enthusiastically.[15]

At the same time, it would be naïve to look at the solidarity between farmers and laborers as evidence of erasure of their long established hierarchical relationship in the rural society of Punjab. I assert that the unity of farmers and laborers forged and projected in the movement was superficial. The landless Dalits laborers were either felt compelled to offer support or coerced to join the protest movement as they had no other way out due to their utter dependence on farmers for earning livelihood and economic sustenance. In the following section, I expand on my assertion.

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[12] Emily Schmall, "Indian Farmers Protests, in Challenge to Modi" *The New York Times*, October 22, 2021, accessed May 8, 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/04/world/asia/india-farmers-protest-pollution-coronavirus.html.

[13] Ranjini Basu, "The Threat of CorporateInterests Is a Key UnifyingFactor in the Farmer Protests", *The Wire*, Jan 21, 2021, accessed May 18, 2022, https://thewire.in/agriculture/farmers-protests-agriculture-laws-corporate-interests.

[14] Suparkash Majumdar, "Modi's Farm Bills and Their Repeal Will Do Nothing for This Group", *Foreign Policy* December 6, 2021, accessed April 30, 2022, https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/12/06/india-farm-bill-dalit-bonded-labor-modi-bjp-landlord/.

[15] Kusum Arora, "From Students, Dalits to the Punjabi Diaspora, Volunteers Made the Farmers' Protest a Success", The Wire, November 21, 2021, accessed May 2, 2022, https://thewire.in/agriculture/from-students-and-dalits-to-the-punjabi-diaspora-volunteers-made-the-farmers-protest-a-success.

Dalits and Farm Protests in Delhi

Jat farmers were at the center of the farmers movement in Delhi movement and they are also the oppressors of Dalits whom they employ as farm laborers as well as own as bonded farm laborers. Not only do the Jats employ/own members of the local Dalit population, but migrants from other states are kept as bonded farm laborers too in Punjab. This is not a new practice. Rather, it has been going on for decades.[16] In some cases, it has been found that they keep their bonded laborers tied in iron chains in order to prevent them from escaping.[17] It is this power, they used to coerce support from Dalit farm laborers as a way to add numerical strength to the movement.[18] The Jats instructed Dalit families to send at least one member to Delhi farmers protest. The Dalits, of course, joined hands with the farmers due to dependence on farming for their livelihood. They are socio-economically disadvantaged. "Despite being a noteworthy size of workers and population of agricultural laborers, their socioeconomic conditions have deteriorated over time and have reached a level that raises alarm."[19] Their sources of income are limited as well.[20] Therefore, their very existence is entirely contingent upon laboring in agricultural land owned by upper caste landowners. Corporatization of agriculture would diminish the need for manual laborers as a result of mechanization of farm work. Consequently, Dalit landless farm laborers of Punjab perceived their socioeconomic trajectory intricately connected with that of the Jat landowners and decided to participate in the movement.[21]

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[16] Manjit Singh, "Analysing the Effectiveness of the Programmes for the Eradication of the Bonded Labour System", Report on Bonded Labour in Punjab, Centre for Education and Communication: New Delhi, 2007, accessed May 17, 2022, http://cec-india.org/libpdf/1437547414Effectiveness-of-the-Eradication-of-Bonded-Labour---Punjab-2007.pdf

[17] "Punjab: Three Childern among five members of bonded labourers' family rescued in Amritsar", *The Times of India*, July 22, 2021.

[18] Suparkash Majumdar, "Modi's Farm Bills and Their Repeal Will Do Nothing for This Group", *Foreign Policy* December 6, 2021, accessed April 30, 2022, https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/12/06/india-farm-bill-dalit-bonded-labor-modi-bjp-landlord/.

[19] Anurag Chaudhary and Sukhpal Singh, "Socio-Economic Conditions of Agricultural Labourers in Punjab", *Indian Journal of Agricultural Economics*, Volume 76, Number 3, 2021.

[20] Sanjoy Chakravorty, S Chandrasekhar, and Karthikeya Naraparaju, "Income Generation and Inequality in India's Agricultural Sector: The Consequences of Land Fragmentation", Indira Gandhi Institute of Development Research: Mumbai, 2016 accessed May 24, 2022, http://www.igidr.ac.in/pdf/publication/WP-2016-028.pdf.

[21] Vivek Gupta, "Why are the Dalit landless farm labourers of Punjab protesting the new agri laws?", *Gaon Connection*, December 14, 2020, accessed April 30, 2022, https://en.gaonconnection.com/why-are-the-dalit-landless-farm-labourers-of-punjab-protesting-the-new-agri-laws/.

It should be noted that government attempts to redistribute land more equitably have also failed. In order to promote more equal land distribution among different castes, the central government established the Punjab Village Common Lands[22] (Regulation) Act in 1961. This Act reserved 33 percent of agricultural village common land for Dalits. But with the Act's poor implementation, the upper caste farmers continue to retain overwhelming control of all common land of the villages including the reserved land. The rich and upper caste farmers secure annual leases of common land by fielding proxy Dalit farmers who are mostly their employees. So, the annual auction of common land is only a formality.[23] It is in fact the main bone of contention between farmers and laborers. The farmers and Dalits have been involved in clashes with each other over the issue of 33 percent share of the common land reserved for the Dalits in the villages of Punjab. The clashes were mainly occurred in the villages of Malwa region of Punjab over the past five years.

Surprisingly, the Dalit panchayats (local self-government at village level) announced support to the farmers movement. The Dalits, who till the common land of the village, are not necessarily concerned about earnings from the land, but sense a kind of pride in owning the land. Ownership would mean full autonomy where they can farm without any fear of economic, physical and sexual exploitation. Hence, Dalits are now demanding for the right to lease the common land with terms of fixed 33 years. This dynamic makes "Most of the interests of Dalit rural laborers and their dominant farming caste employers opposed to each other. As recently as 2020, during the covid-19 lockdown, farmers would often seek to lower wages or rely on machinery instead of labor, to save money, creating even more hardship amongst the laborers."[24] During the lockdown, migrant farm laborers went back to their home states leading to scarcity of labor in Punjab. The farmers reduced wages for local Dalit laborers. It was significantly less in contrast to what was being paid to migrant laborers. The situation led to a point where farmers got resolutions

[22] Technically village commons lands are part of Government land which actually recorded in the name of the government in the registry. State laws used different terms and provide institutional mechanisms for management of village commons. Some states have enacted laws for use and management of grazing lands among others and endowed Gram Panchayat with the responsibility of management and protection. Common land tenure is mostly linked to access and user rights with limited management rights in India.

[23] Suparkash Majumdar, "Modi's Farm Bills and Their Repeal Will Do Nothing for This Group", *Foreign Policy* December 6, 2021, accessed April 30, 2022, https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/12/06/india-farm-bill-dalit-bonded-labor-modi-bjp-landlord/.

[24] Jens Lerche, "Jat Power and the Spread of the Farm Protests in Northern India" *The India Forum,* March 21, 2021, accessed April 30, 2022, https://www.theindiaforum.in/article/jat-power-and-spread-india-s-farm-protests.

passed by panchayats for paying fixed wages to local farm laborers. The farmers announced social and economic boycott of those Dalit laborers who would defy the panchayat resolutions. It widened the already extant social rift between these two groups of stakeholders.

Despite the divergent interests, the leaders of the farmers movement sought support from "…the unions representing mainly the regular urban workers, supporting their claims for the repulsion of the present anti-labor laws" and "rural laborers and Dalit organizations into their campaign, with some success." As a result, The Bhim army, a radical Dalit activist group from Uttar Pradesh and the radical Dalit grassroots movements for Dalit land rights in Punjab, the Zameen Prapti Sangharsh Committee (ZPSC) joined the protesting farmers in Delhi.[25] Another left-leaning organization Krantikari Pendu Mazdoor Union (KPMU) from Punjab also joined protesting farmers to forge farmer-laborer unity. The Dalit leaders vowed to fight in unity with farmers against the three farm laws passed by seemingly dictatorial government.[26] The leaders of the Dalit rights organisations in Punjab were of the view that agriculture is the base of Punjab's economy. So, the three 'black' agricultural laws would not only ruin upper caste farmers but also farm laborers. They remarked that "The fight is against fascism. It is the need of the hour that farmers, laborers and minorities along with other marginalized sections should join hands to defeat a fascist government that the BJP is leading."[27] Thus, apprehension of subordination by a "Hindu Caste Nation" motivated the Dalits to also take part in the movement.[28]

Taken together, "Farmers from marginalized communities in Punjab believe that they will be the worst sufferers of the newly enacted laws which seek to facilitate contract and large farm-based agriculture."[29] Some Dalit organizations such as Sat Guru Ravidas Dharm Samaj, Ludhiana (Punjab), were of the opinion that the three farm laws of the central government would prove detrimental to the economic progress of the Dalits. They felt that all the gains would be lost due to implementation of farm laws. The leaders of the Dalit organizations opine that they

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[25] Ibid.

[26] The Indian Express, March 1, 2021.

[27] Avtar Singh," Dalit labour unions joining farmers' stir on Delhi border", December 03, 2020.

[28] Abhay Kumar Singh, "Why Are Dalits Supporting Farmers? Chandra Bhan Prasad Explains", *The Quint*, Feb 12, 2021, accessed April 30, 2022, https://www.thequint.com/news/india/dalit-solidarity-with-farmers-protests-chandra-bhan-prasad-explains.

[29] Ravi Kaushal, "How Dalits Became Part of Farmers' Movement in Punjab", *News Click,* December 23, 2020, accessed April 30, 2022, https://www.newsclick.in/How-Dalits-Became-Part-Farmers-Movement-Punjab.

do not face such caste discrimination in Punjab as is faced by their counterparts in the states of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and others.[30]

It is this entire context of Jat-Dalit relationship that should be considered in understanding "kisan mazdoor ekta" in the recently concluded farmers movement in India.

Conclusion

Despite the opposing interests of farmers and laborers that exist in reality over the issues of farm wages as well as lease of the common land in the villages. The slogan, *Kisan Mazdoor Ekta Jindabad*, of the farmers' movement serves as a trendsetter from Punjab. The movement capitalized the unity and awareness of farmers and laborers. In this way, it attempted to remove earlier shortcomings of farmers' movements. So, farm movements in other States like Uttar Pradesh can take their cue from Punjab's social engineering of farmers movement to include farm laborers who are equal and important stakeholders in the farm sector. "Farmer-laborer unity must be inculcated and practiced. It is crucial to sustaining the movement."[31]Apart from this alliance with laborers, the farmers movement can further evolve by "presenting a kind of template for future struggles. Having deliberately aligned their movement with agricultural laborers, they are now trying to join forces with workers of organized as well as unorganized sectors. The leaders of this movement have opened new vistas for joint mass agitations."[32] But analysis of this unity must grasp it in all its complexities in which it was created. Only then will it be possible to better understand the farmers movement and its impact on the agricultural sector of Punjab and possibly, India.

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[30] Ibid.

[31] Shivam Mogha and Sunil Choudhary, "Why the Farmers' Movement Can't Ignore Landless Dalits of Western UP Anymore", *The Wire*, April 14, 2021, accessed April 30, 2022, https://thewire.in/agriculture/why-the-farmers-movement-cant-ignore-landless-dalits-of-western-up-anymore.

[32] Satyendra Ranjan, "Farmers' Protest: A Roadmap for the Opposition", *Economic and Political Weekly,* Vol.56, Issue No. 18, (2021).

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Who are farmers in India after all?
A conceptual exercise and a policy question

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Abstract

Definitional exercises are by nature political and nowhere does this come across more clearly than in attempts to define farmers in India. Any such effort is bound to be contentious but nonetheless necessary for understanding the nature of Indian state and its policies. This article is one attempt at understanding 'farmers' as informed by current debates on the topic and our combined field experiences. We identify three groups of farmers, each of whom control and contribute three different factors of production. This heterogeneity among farmers is crucial to understand the farm laws and which of these groups is best served by such a policy direction and more importantly, which group is not.

Introduction: The conceptual issue

Over the decades, the literature[1] on how farmers in India have been defined and should be defined has been growing. Such variety in the definition of farmers have in fact come from economists,[2] sociologists, political scientists, journalists or even

[1] Bernstein (2010) used the term farmer and defines it as those who own land and other means to farm. Eric Wolf (1969) and James Scott (1985) refers to the term peasants. T. J. Byres (1981) used the term capitalist farmers. In the context of India, Utsa Patnaik (1976) used peasants and categorises them through a complex relation between capital and labour. Daniel Thorner uses the term kisan which literally may mean farmer, but it included those cultivators who 'live primarily by their own toil on their own land'. Harriss-White (2008) raises a definitional question about the term "farmer" and employs the term agro-commercial capital.

[2]. The definition of a 'agricultural household' defined by the National Sample Survey (NSS) Situation Assessment Survey of agricultural Households (SAAH) in 2013 and 2019 is the following "Agricultural households are defined as an 'agricultural production unit' which produced field crops, horticultural crops, livestock and the products of any of the other specified agricultural activities, with or without possessing and operating any land and receiving value of agricultural

Bollywood for that matter.[3] Regardless, all such exercises in attempting to define the farmer have and will always continue to be contested. Since the farmers' protests that began in 2020 and ended in 2021, this question of defining farmers has come into sharp focus. An article written by Harish Damodaran and Samridhi Agarwal (2021) featured in the *Indian Express* is part of that larger spotlight on the topic. A month later, another article was published in the same newspaper as a reaction to this one. It was authored by Ishan Anand, Arindam Banerjee and Anirban Dasgupta (2021). The former argued that agricultural policy should focus on those who earn at least half of their income from agriculture and call them the 'serious farmers'. For the remaining 70 percent of rural households, the authors proposed a different set of policies. The latter disagreed with the point, drawing attention to the heterogeneity of Indian agriculture, and argued that both caste and class should be considered in defining a farmer.

All whose income are considered agricultural income and thus exempted from taxation by the Indian government can be technically considered a farmer[4]. This definition is put forth in government categorizations. As social scientists, we define the social category 'farmer' based on both theoretical engagement and empirical observation. In this essay, we build on the debate spotlighted in the two articles aforementioned. Next, we juxtapose this with findings from our own fieldwork on this topic.[5] All combined, we reflect on the question of who is a farmer? Broadly, analysis of all the data leads us to identify three groups of farmers. Each one of these three groups control and contribute three different factors of production. One controls land, another contributes labor and yet another controls capital. Who is the farmer? It is an important question in this backdrop of identification as farmers that is emergent from the ground. Thus, how one defines farmers is a significant question that is conceptually relevant for the scholarship generated on the topic. This question of definition is additionally crucial for the purpose of designing policies that are impactful for "farmers." It is to that aim of academic pursuit as

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produce from agricultural activities more than Rs 3,000 and Rs. 4,000 in 2013 and 2019 respectively". It is widely used by economists, agricultural scientists, policy makers, development professionals.

[3] Food and Agriculture Organization uses the terminology family farms rather than farmer, Lowder et al, 2021

[4] Under Section 10(1) of the Income Tax Act, 1961, any income generated from any agricultural activities are exempted from being taxed by the Government.

[5] Fieldwork has been conducted in four regions, National Capital Region, Karnataka, Gujarat and Chhattisgarh in 2018 and 2019. We will be resuming fieldwork in 2022.

well as policy goals we reflect on the meaning attributed to "farmers: and use our research to address some of the key concerns involving the agrarian question.

Defining the farmer

Ownership of land by households is an important way in which farmers have been defined, as recently seen with the policy of PM-Kisan[6]. According to Damodaran and Agarwal, ownership of land is not sufficient qualification to be a farmer. Rather, it is only those with a landholding of at least 1 hectare where more than half of the total income is derived from farming (crop production and animal husbandry) qualify as "serious" or "regular" farmers. Using data from Situation Assessment of Agricultural Households (SAAH) report for the year 2018-19 to which this definition of "serious" or "regular" farmers was applied, Damodaran and Agarwal arrived at an approximate figure of 40 million "regular" farmers in India. Based on this definition, they argued how certain agricultural policies may not cater to those farming households who own less than 1 hectare. Firstly, they proposed that farm policy should focus on the serious farmer group rather than the numerically bigger group of farmers who are "non-serious" or part-time farmers. Presumably, this will make public policy more logical and efficient. Secondly, since the part-time farm households constitute seventy percent of rural dwellers and would not benefit from policies addressing farm income, a viable solution for them lies in thinking of employment opportunities beyond the farm but related to agriculture. Consequently, policies that aim to increase income in allied activities like packaging, processing, transporting, warehousing and so on would be more effective in benefiting all. For the part-time farmers that essentially involves value adding tasks related to farming that can potentially provide more employment and better income. However, the point to note here is that 70 percent of households own land and are actual cultivators, even if the income from self-cultivation does not account for 50 percent of their annual income. They play the critical functions of tilling, weeding and harvesting their land and other's land either as a tenant or as a wage labor. Whereas the 30 percent of farmers who are defined as serious farmers do not necessarily cultivate their land. Still as per Damodaran and

[6] Any policy that defines kisan as anyone who owns land, ends up excluding tenant cultivators, agricultural labourers, women cultivators or other marginal groups who are the main cultivators but, in several cases, do not have title deeds, or may not own land. The landless in India are numerically as big a group. According to the Census (2011) out of the total 263 million persons (26.3 crore) households are involved in farming activities, 119 million persons are land-owning farmers. The rest, 144 million are landless workers and peasants (Dogra 2020).

Agarwal's conceptualization, the latter group is regarded as "serious" farmers. Whereas those farmers who cultivate their land despite the rising cost of cultivation, poor access to credit and subsidized inputs and poor returns on crops are not recognized as serious farmers. We disagree with this understanding of farmers, that centers the debate around land ownership and disregards cultivation as a central characteristic.

Yet another category of people who have been regarded as farmers are those who contribute labor to agriculture, despite owning and cultivating their small or marginal land holdings[7]. Bernstein's concept of classes of labor refer to those unable to reproduce themselves as capital and who struggle to secure their reproduction on a day-to-day basis. Hence, these classes variously combine insecure and exploitative forms of labor commodification, self-employment activities with small-scale farming to ensure daily survival, according to Bernstein (2010). A disproportionate number of Dalits, tribals and women fall in this category (Mehrotra 2022). To understand the majority of India's farm households, let us engage with Anand, Banerjee and Dasgupta who demonstrate that land is not the only critical factor in defining a farmer. In fact, it is by bringing in aspects of labor and non-class variables, like caste and gender, can we understand the diverse reality around Indian farmers. Anand, Banerjee and Dasgupta strongly disagree with Damodaran and Agarwal's perspective.

First, Anand, Banerjee and Dasgupta develop this point by using evidence from Jharkhand where farmers pursue livelihood diversification that does not undermine the importance of landholding and farming in their lives. Rather, livelihood diversification includes a combination of self-cultivation with working in brick kilns, others' farms, or even migration to towns for seasonal work. Income from such pursuits are used to mitigate low income from agriculture. At the same time, food and nutrition security of these cultivating households is dependent on their marginal and small landholdings because buying food from markets is highly costly and are often inaccessible. Hence, we argue that policies must treat such people as farmers as well. Otherwise, it will adversely impact food security of the nation at large. Secondly, and most crucially, the marginal farmers contribute between 19 percent to 30 percent of the total surplus marketed food grains (Banerjee, Dasgupta and Anand) which is the backbone of food security and food sovereignty of India[8]. Thirdly, Anand, Banerjee and Dasgupta note that Damodaran and Agarwal's

[7] Utsa Patnaik (1976) categorized them as poor peasant.

[8] A similar finding has been made at a global scale, where the small farms (less than 2 hectares) are reported to produce 35 percent of food for the world (Lowder et al. 2021).

conclusions are derived from one specific year's report. Therefore, at best they present a snapshot which does not consider the wider regional variations regarding the history of development and diversification of livelihoods (for more details see Lerche 2014). They refer to the state of Kerala where small-scale spice cultivators and rubber growers draw a viable income from agriculture and should be considered "serious" farmers despite their holding size. Once again, land holding emerges not as the defining feature in defining the farmer.

Fourthly, we find Damodaran and Agarwal's piece problematic because it constructs farmers as a homogenous category based on landholding size, with no acknowledgement of class differentiation. The ground reality is that farmers are differentiated along the axis of caste, class and even gender. It is a point supported with empirical data from Mehrotra's (2021) work on Uttar Pradesh and Das Gupta's (2019) empirical analysis of the agrarian structures and policy in Chhattisgarh, Gujarat, and Karnataka. Such a way to define farmers would lead to further disadvantaging historically discriminated castes if public policy were to exclude them from subsidies and price support in the name of focusing only on "serious" farmers. In fact, this might just be another way to further pushing them out of agriculture which would lead to their rapid proletarisation. Such proletarisation is indeed underway in India. Between the census of 2001 and 2011, India has seen a huge increase in landless farm workers, adding a 37 million more to the rural worker pool (Dogra 2020, Census 2011). This is another illustration of how development policies in India have failed to provide rural workers with employment opportunities outside of agriculture. Hence, we are skeptical of an understanding of the farmer that ties it to land size exclusively and thereby proposing a policy regime that envisions the classes of labor that depend on agro-industries for productive jobs. Instead, we emphasize that the classes of labor provide something invaluable to agriculture and, in turn, agriculture provides a social safety net for a sizable population – a fact borne out by the phenomenon of reverse migration during the Covid pandemic (Sengupta and Jha 2020). We agree with Anand, Banerjee and Dasgupta to conclude that surely policies need to be rethought to meet the demands and requirements of farmers. But excluding the majority of farmers from farm policies by a conceptual exercise of redefinition just because they primarily contribute labor is certainly not the way forward.

Understanding Farmers

In the context of the afore discussed discourse on agriculture and farmers, we try to grapple with the following question - how do we understand farmers? Over the years, our individual and joint research findings on defining farmers have become more aligned with the perspective put forth by Anand, Banerjee and Dasgupta. For example, Mehrotra's extensive research focusing on one end of the spectrum indicates the diversity that is found amongst small farmers in India who can be categorized as petty capitalists, petty producers or classes of labor. At the other end of the spectrum, Dasgupta's research showcases the dominant proprietary classes, the petty bourgeoisie, rural proprietary classes and its factions–capitalist farmers, big farmers, landlords and an emerging class of agrarian capital (Das Gupta 2019). More recent research undertaken by Mehrotra and Das Gupta discusses a completely different category of farmers. They are the "nouveau riche rural capitalists" who claim to be farmers based on the capital they invest in agriculture. This class accumulates but does not necessarily own land. This finding shows that it is no longer necessary to own land to be considered a farmer, neither is it necessary to cultivate it. In fact, there might be a reverse flow of capital – from industry/ services to agriculture. We noted presence of women among the owners of farmhouses and nurseries. In many cases, even the livelihood of these farmers does not depend on agriculture. In several other cases, the farmer is entirely absent from the site of production. To reiterate then, the category of farmer is in actuality extremely heterogenous. Therefore, any attempt to identify agrarian classes must consider regional specificities, development history and how class identities interact with identities, such as caste and gender.

Three Empirical Observations

We make three key observations about agrarian transformation based on fieldwork since 2018:

Firstly, in terms of development, India was divided between Bharat and India, former rural and lagging in development, the latter urban and developed. This divide resulted from policies which favored the urban, put resources towards industrialization, and treated agriculture as a bargain sector, following the Western model of development. But recent agrarian transformations, with new entrants into the agrarian scene have closed the gap between the rural and urban, creating a space for the "rurban," a category coined by Dipankar Gupta (2015). Farmhouses, organic crops and high value crops characterize this "rurban" life.

Secondly, capitalist farmers, unlike the nouveau riche rural capitalists, who emerged from the Green Revolution were primarily rural, whose starting point was land ownership from which surplus was generated and subsequently, invested in technologically advancing production. The investment made agriculture much more profitable for them. Interestingly, and quite contrary to classical political economic analysis, the nouveau riche class have generally transferred surplus from non-agrarian to agrarian sectors. They are mainly high value crops and organic crops (for more details, see Das Gupta and Mehrotra 2021). It is a rather intriguing social phenomenon.

Thirdly, neoliberalism has created multiple opportunities of which investment in farms has proved to be a particularly lucrative one. Converting premium land located near major highways, metropolitan areas and ports of the country through methods such as lease and 'operations contract'. They are in high demand, such as land along the Surat-Mumbai highway that has been converted into farms, orchards, nurseries, with or without a residential farmhouse. This attractive opportunity is being optimized by capital investments from India as well as abroad. Amongst them, women are at the forefront as observed in Chhattisgarh, National Capital Region and, in fewer instances, in Gujarat.

It is important to pay close attention to these observations from our fieldwork in defining the farmer because definitional exercises and policy designs are intricately linked. This link, we believe, is obvious. The recent policy debate around the farm laws and the subsequent farmer protests of 2020 demands our attention to reflect on the question of which of these three kinds of farmers do the laws propose to serve? Why did such a large section of farmers in India's most agriculturally developed region rise up in a long-drawn protest against these laws? We will reflect on these questions from the perspective of the heterogeneous understanding of farmer and highlight the importance of such an understanding by demonstrating how the current policy regime is excluding most and catering to the interest of a few, who contribute capital in agrarian production.

The audience for agricultural policy – who are they?

We agree with several scholars, including Anand, Banerjee and Dasgupta, that farmers are not a homogeneous category. Farmers are differentiated based on their access to the means of production. Non-economic variables, such as gender and caste, also impact class positions of farmers. There are wide differences between farmers with regards to land size, tenures, labor contracts, wages of workers hired,

inputs used, capital invested, mechanization of agricultural operations and access to the market. Farming systems in the diverse agro-ecology of India are varied too. Given the diversity of farmers and farming, it is reasonable to assert that "one-size" agricultural policies will not meet the needs of all types of farmers and farming systems.

However, in recent years, Indian agricultural policymaking seems to be disconnected from the diverse reality of rural India. In pursuit of a modern market-led agricultural sector populated by dynamic capitalist farmers and corporates, policymakers hurriedly introduced the 2020 three farm laws amid the pandemic. The legislation sought to liberalize agricultural markets and to further encourage trade of agricultural commodities outside the control of Agricultural Produce Marketing Committees (APMC). It would allow farmers to directly sell their produce to private and corporate sector without the intervention and regulation of APMCs. It is worth noting that contract farming rules and regulations legislated by the various state governments in India till date are framed within the APMC Acts of the respective states. It, thus, makes the marketing committees also overseers of contracts between individual farmers and the procuring companies. The legislation also sought to remove some important agricultural food grains, oilseeds and potato from the list of essential commodities. The liberalization of agricultural markets, according to the Indian government, would benefit farmers by giving them higher prices as well as encourage crop diversification with simultaneous expansion of markets.

For us this discussion raises the following essential question: who are "farmers" in the eyes of the government and for whose benefit are these laws enacted? We think that it is the nouveau riche capitalists, capitalist farmers and private and corporate agribusinesses who are the primary beneficiaries of the policies that incentivize privatization, marketization and commercialization. These policies would have disproportionately advantaged the classes that control capital and land, while pushing those who contribute labor to the margins. Crop diversification is linked to marketization. Moving from food crops to commercial crops and then to high-value crops is crucial to accrue more profit from agricultural production. Such a shift permits capture of metropolitan markets within India and foreign markets where demand for high-value crops is concentrated. Of course, crop diversification has been on the policy table for the past two decades, but it only existed at the level of specific states ruled by the Bharatiya Janta Party (BJP) (Das Gupta 2019). These classes of farmers have also benefitted from subsidies for warehouses, solar energy, greenhouses, private irrigation, access to credit and so on. The proposed crop

diversification in 2020 laws is taking the same to a national level. On the other hand, seventy percent of farming households who own less than one hectare and are in fact serious contributors to agricultural production do not figure in the new vision of Indian agriculture painted by the policymakers. The survival of these small and marginal farmers hinges upon intermittent and seasonal employment outside of self-cultivation, to cope with high costs of cultivation, low prices of crops, interlocking of factors and credit markets. Interlocking of factors ties them to traders and moneylenders in pre-harvest contracts to sell crops at low rates. Thus, they are precluded from taking advantage of high crop prices offered by an open market. In the absence of interlocking, they are still unable to attract high prices for their produce either due to the small marketable surplus or their inability to bear the high transportation and storage costs. As a result, they end up selling their crops to commission agents within the village immediately following harvest. They face several challenges – lack of land and capital, access to and adaptation of technology – which is in no way resource neutral (Byres 1981). Most modern technology are intensive in capital and energy, and hence expensive which makes it hard for the small farmers to adopt them. On the margins, women, tribals and Dalits struggle to make ends meet. Even with periodic cash transfers from the government through schemes, such as PMKISAN, can small farmers survive in a market-led system on the proceeds from land alone? The answer is a resounding "no." Their capacities are diverse and so are the challenges they face as well as their needs. Presumably for this reason, the government and perhaps even a section of academia is of the view that small and marginal farmers are only a hindrance to the efficiency and growth of Indian agriculture. They expect them to exit agriculture sooner or later.

Hence, the question we pose is two-fold – firstly, what will become of Indian agriculture and diverse food grains and crops without small farmers? They produce thirty percent of all the food. Additionally, they are the most skilled when it comes to tilling the soil. Yet, they have no rightful claim to be a farmer, nor are their needs and interests considered central for agricultural policy making. Secondly, if indeed the state wants the small "inefficient" farms to disappear, what is the exit option for small farmers that policymakers have in mind? We have seen that the slow pace of structural transformation in India has indeed shown the failure of the state and the market to create adequate skill-appropriate employment opportunities within the non-agricultural sector for the rural poor (Bakshi and Modak 2017, Bakshi forthcoming). It is, therefore, crucial for policymakers to develop a clear path for economic prosperity for this group.

Finally, it seems as though Indian leadership is in a rush to transform agriculture as per the rules of neo-liberal market forces; in that vision, those who contribute land and labor have been sidelined from the policy domain. In contrast, it is capital that evidently is placed favorably vis-à-vis the state. Now, one can understand the massive "farmers" protest launched by rural landowners and labor. Their solidarity was to make themselves visible and heard by the neoliberal Indian state.

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Mainu Rang De Basanti Chunniya[1]*:*
Women in the Farmers' Movement

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Thousands of yellow and green dupattas were the omnipresent symbol of the women's stirring presence at the borders in Delhi where farmers had set up camps all through 2021. Led by the farmers' unions, with the Punjab unions at the forefront, a convoy of tractor trolleys and trucks – thousands of them, extending for several miles – made its way into the capital city of Delhi on November 26, 2020. The farmers were seeking repeal of the three farm laws which the government had passed undemocratically. Women were part of this convoy. They came waving their union flags and braving the police barricades, water cannons and tear gas attacks.

Prevented by police barricades from entering Delhi, the farmers decided to camp right where they were stopped. Soon they set up mini townships at four different entry points to the capital, naming them after the well-known heroes of independence and land reform movements against the British rule. They put up signage of villages they came from and built little homes in the trolleys. Within days they opened libraries and reading rooms, several health clinics, installed laundromats, hot water heaters, mini workshops for repair of tractors, phone battery charging stalls, and a large number of community kitchens. Fresh vegetables and tankers of milk came from the farmers of neighboring state of Haryana every day. There was plenty of food for everyone at the community kitchens. "We are here to stay, we will leave only when the government repeals these draconian laws," they said.

These were women and men from small and marginal farming households overwhelmingly. In India roughly 85 percent of the farm holdings are small and marginal. It amounts to less than 2 hectares of land, with 70 percent less than 1 hectare and average landholding being only 0.5 hectares per household.[2] "We will

[1] Color my head scarf yellow.

[2] Figures as per the agriculture census of 2015-16 cited in http://www.ruralagrarianstudies.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/State-of-Rural-and-Agrarian-India-Report-2020.pdf

fight over and over again and generation upon generation, but we will not let our land go," they said. The government introduced three farm bills in the Parliament in 2020 - the Farmers' Produce Trade And Commerce (Promotion And Facilitation) Bill, the Farmers' (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement on Price Assurance and Farm Services Bill and the Essential Commodities (Amendment) Bill. Together, these bills proposed relaxed restrictions on purchase and sale of farm produce, on stocking under the Essential Commodities Act of 1955 and outlined a framework on contract farming.[3] The farmers feared that the laws will make smallholder farming unsustainable and force small and marginal farmers to give up their land and become casual or contract laborers in the cities. They were determined to fight this out and women were part of this fight. "How can we stay back when our land and livelihoods are threatened by the three laws," they would often say.

The farmers stayed for 13 months in the camps they had set up before the farm laws were repealed on November 29, 2021. It was then that the farm unions decided to adjourn the protest and return to their villages.[4]

Women at the morchas

The leadership of the farm movement is predominantly elder male, with decades of experience of mobilizing farmers on local demands. There are over 32 farm unions in Punjab alone and they were all at the protest sites. A few of these Unions have women's wing which are led by women, but by and large women are not in leadership positions in those unions.

However, women quickly acquired a very significant position in the protest movement. They worked quietly at the backend - collecting food and funds, talking to the press, and mobilizing support among the families in the villages and townships near the campsites at Delhi borders. In the buildup to the farmers' march to Delhi

[3] The Bills were introduced on September 14, and were passed in Lok Sabha on September 17, and in Rajya Sabha on September 20, received the President's assent on September 24 and notified in the Gazette on September 27, 2020. In a matter of less than two weeks, completely suspending any democratic process and consultation, the Farm Bills were allowed to effect a fundamental transformation in the existing regulatory framework in agriculture in favour of big business.

[4] Only days before the protest completed one year at the borders of Delhi, on 19th November, the Prime Minister of India declared repeal of the three laws.

led by the unions in Punjab, women's role in mobilizing support through the use of folk form *Jago* (wake up) - going around in the village late at night, singing and giving the message of the protest - was exemplary. As the movement became protracted, women's roles and responsibilities kept on expanding. They were given the responsibility to manage the stage and deliver speeches. During harvest seasons when the men had to return to the villages to harvest and take the crop to the *mandis*, women took over the protest sites. In these times, there were more women at the borders with added responsibilities of keeping the *morchas* alive.

While for many women from Haryana and Western Uttar Pradesh, it was their first time in a protest, it was not the case with women from Punjab who were present in very large numbers at the *morchas*. Farmer and agriculture labor women have a long history of mobilization which goes back to at least three decades. They have been part of farmers' protests demanding compensation for farmers' who died by suicide failing to cope with mounting farm debts and for crop failure due to faulty seeds provided through government outlets. They have been at the forefront against forcible land acquisition and in struggles for Dalit rights over village commons led by left farm and agriculture labour unions. Women have been a part of the farmers' unions, and the left unions especially, have been influential in bringing women into the public domain.[5]

[5] Rural women's mobilization is deeply connected with many aspects of Punjab's left legacy and a very vibrant progressive rural cultural movement in the state which can be traced back to the late 1960s. There is rich music, poetry and also theater in rural areas. There are scores of rural theater troupes in Punjab, and we saw them regularly at the borders performing where the farmers were protesting. Many of these rural theater troupes are part of an umbrella organization - *Punjab Lok Sabhyachar Manch*, a people's cultural platform committed to building a just society through progressive cultural movement. These troupes do political theater. Women are both part of the audience and the lead performers. Another very interesting tradition in Punjab is the all-night cultural programmes in the villages, a tradition which began during the years of militancy in the 1980s when Punjab remained under night curfew - from 9 pm to 5 am – for years. A progressive left cultural tradition emerged in rural Punjab in this period. People would collect at a central point in the village before 9 pm and watch cultural programmes all night under the open sky. This tradition continued in the villages even after militancy ebbed. Women were mobilized for these cultural programmes as a conscious strategy and women see themselves as part of the movements.

Women were making history with their sweat and labor

At the four camps on Delhi borders, the unions set up protest stages. These platforms featured speeches by union leaders but also cultural performances including music, drama, poetry and folk singing, most of the day and into the evenings. These performances highlighted various themes – the agrarian crisis, rural indebtedness, apathy of the government officials, conditions of public schools and hospitals and women's oppression. Women and men gathered every day to hear the farm leaders, cultural activists and learn about the happenings in the country. The protest stage and the camp settlements turned into schools for women where they learnt about their own oppression, but also about the others whose rights were being taken away. The reference to labour codes, the increasing hold of agri-corporates on the rural economy, falling incomes and increasing costs of farming, joblessness and the struggle of *dalit* labour rights activists, like Nodeep Kaur and Shiv Kumar,[6] were common themes of discussion.

On 18th January, 2021, Sanyukt Kisan Morcha (SKM) dedicated one full day to celebrate women farmers' contribution to the movement. This was the first women farmer's day. Many more were to follow in the next few months. Women speakers took the stage and talked about three farm laws and its impact on women. Farmer women were also joined by many other working-class women on this day. There were para teachers, childcare workers, informal employment workers, nurses, *anganwadi* workers and also women from farm suicide victim families. It was on these stages that women started talking not only about farm crisis but also about patriarchy and discrimination, not so much using these concepts, but examples from their everyday lives - why are the families not happy when a daughter is born or why do we prefer sons over daughters or why do we have domestic violence in our families were some of the questions raised by the women.

On 8 March 2021, the unions celebrated International Women's Day at the *morchas*. Thousands of women workers and farmers gathered to mark women's struggles for emancipation. With over fifty thousand farmer and farm labor women

[6] Nodeep Kaur and Shiv Kumar, young dalit labour activists were mobilising contractual industrial workers employed in the small factories in the vicinity of farmers' camps in support of the farm movement. This attracted the ire of factory owners and they were arrested, brutally tortured, and slapped with serious charges, including murder. Nodeep Kaur also faced custodial sexual violence. For more details https://www.article-14.com/post/why-govt-ditched-due-process-for-nodeep-kaur-shiv-kumar and https://www.article-14.com/post/dalit-labour-leader-shiv-kumar-tortured-in-custody-govt-doctors

present, it was perhaps the biggest women's day gathering on planet earth on that day. The song of *basanti* dupattas was in the air *color my chuniya basanti* [7]- a modified version of *mera rang de basanti chola* (color my cloak yellow) – the well-known Ram Prasad Bismil song associated with Bhagat Singh, Rajguru and Sukhdev as they walked to the gallows – reverberated in the air. The new version was about women coming out of the confines of home to claim that women's place was in the struggles. Women leaders and activists spoke about the exemplary role of women in the ongoing farm struggle and the corporate attack on their livelihood, of their exploitation in the big corporate farms where women laborers were not even paid the statutory minimum wage, they challenged the official policy of facilitating market subjugation of farming communities and their forced relocation to cities as perennial casual labor.

From the podium women talked about the forgotten role of women in previous farm movements – from Tebhaga[8] to Telangana[9] to Anti Betterment Levy struggles[10] of the 1950s and 60s. They said that women always fought with men for the rights of the tillers but they were asked to go back home to cook *chapatis* after the movements were over. The failure of the leadership of earlier movements to pay attention to what the women were saying to help transform gender social relations was on women's watch. They threw back the challenge at the present leadership to recognise that the ongoing farm struggle would only be half as strong and half as vibrant if women had not joined the movement.

In July 2021, the SKM held a *Kisan Parliament* in the heart of Delhi as the Indian parliament met for the Monsoon Session for two weeks. Two full days of the farmers' parliament were dedicated to women farmers' issues when women ran the mock proceedings of the House. These two days saw a massive mobilization of women from different states of India – from Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and Telangana in the South to the western state of Maharashtra and the central and northern states of Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh and Haryana. The women farmers held spirited sessions foregrounding women's demands. It was

[7] The modified song written by poet Sarbjot Singh can be heard here https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vL2bHbjcvek

[8] For a quick reference about the movement, please see https://thewire.in/history/bengal-tebhaga-movement-sharecroppers

[9] For a brief summary https://feminisminindia.com/2020/08/12/women-armed-revolution-telangana-peoples-struggle/

[10] For a brief introduction see: https://peoplesdemocracy.in/2020/0823_pd/anti-betterment-levy-struggle-punjab

evident in the farmers' protest that women who were not even recognized as farmers in policy and society created a space in the movement for articulating a gender perspective. Women's formidable presence was also successful in breaking the convention that politics is a male arena of activity. The layer of masculinity attributed to the farmers movement dissolved with women's presence as women became visible everywhere.

New issues from a new location

The farmers' protest began with the demand for repeal of the three farm laws. But soon women brought new issues to the farm movement and from a new location. Agrarian crisis in its plurality is writ large on the body politic of rural India – landlessness, falling incomes, rising costs of farming, mounting farm debts, ecological crisis manifesting in the degradation of environment, health, water, lack of employment in farm sector, especially for women, and increasing hold of the corporate giants on the lives of farmers. This is part of the everyday experience of rural farming communities.

The crisis also erupted in the form of suicides of farmers and agricultural labour who were unable to repay the farm loans. In January 2021, just a month after the farmers' *morcha* began at the borders, women farmers and labourers from the families of farm suicides in Punjab joined the protest at the Tikri border's Bibi Gulab Kaur stage. As they came, they brought with them the pictures of their dead relatives. Some even held two pictures. From the stage where they had assembled, when they held the grainy pictures high, it was like a wave of corpses rising. It was evident that while the entire farming families come under crisis with suicides, the suicides affect women profoundly. The women narrated how they are left to pick up the threads which men suddenly drop – to carry on the responsibilities of farming, repay the loans, demand compensation from the state and prevent forcible evictions from their land. Some of the women from farm suicide families have been organizing under the farmers unions and also under *Kisan Mazdoor Khudkushi Peerat Parivar Committee* (KMKPPC) – Committee of Farmers and Labourers Suicide Victim Families which was formed in 2017 and has been actively campaigning for compensation and rehabilitation of families of suicide victims.[11] But they continue to face state apathy. The farm labour suicide families

[11] KMKPPC was founded by Kiranjit Kaur, a young university student whose father had committed suicide. She went from village to village, collecting data on women whose husbands,

suffer even more as there is no state compensation for the suicide of the landless. These women brought their daily struggle for survival to the *morchas* and demanded that they be heard. State apathy towards them was called out by the unions.

Since the Green Revolution took off in Punjab, rural women have been written out of policy. They have experienced complete neglect and total stagnation in their employment and wages, unable to get employment in farm operations even for jobs which men have vacated as they migrate to the cities. The farm work which men and women do is very different. There is a strict gender divide in tasks. In Green Revolution areas with mechanized farming, agricultural wage labor is scarce in all seasons, and women's work is even more scarce. In Punjab for instance, women are almost entirely out of operations associated with the wheat crop; they find rice planting at times for a few days. It is only in cotton picking, which is not yet mechanized, that they find some paid work. The vegetable and citrus growing belt generates additional days of wage work, but the entire work put together does not exceed 150 days in a year.[12] This includes labor under the government's National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme.

The nature of the work in rural areas has also changed, especially for women. Overwhelmingly, it is contract work, piece rate, which is given to men who engage their wives and children in these operations. Rates are per hectare of rice planted, quintal of cotton picked, hectare of hay baled, and so on. The daily wage rates on vegetable and fruit farms, where women are concentrated, are almost one-third lower than the stipulated minimum wage. When men migrate to nearby cities and towns, both as skilled laborers and as unskilled workers on construction sites and other odd jobs, women stay behind to look after the children and desperately seek opportunities for wage work. If agricultural work is scarce, non-farm work is even more so. The women are landless and asset-less, representing the most marginalized section of agricultural wage workers.

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sons, fathers or fathers-in-law committed suicide. The Committee terms farmer suicides as institutional murders and seeks state accountability for every suicide.

[12] These estimates are based on author's field surveys in many parts of Punjab for an ICSSR project 2019, unpublished.

Women's presence expanded farm movement's claims on the state

Women came to the *morcha* bringing with them their varied experiences of being farmers without land, having lost husbands, fathers, or sons to deaths by suicides, of their fights against sexual violence and the impunity it enjoyed, of their struggles for more work and better wage. With women's rousing participation in the movement, the farm movement's claims on the state expanded. The experience of women of the agrarian crisis is far more intense and their past sustained work and activism validated their experience and their present-day demands. With women's presence, the movement was no longer about state protection through MSP, but they added the demand of gender justice, land to the landless, guaranteed minimum wages for farm jobs, equal wage for farm operations and much more.

The farm movement which captured the public imagination and brought crucial issues of democratic social change to the forefront of the country's attention was shouldered by women who sat determinedly at the camps and fought the state's war of attrition with their calm confidence. Women's stirring presence gave us reason to hope that the leading role played by women in the farm protest will spill over to cultural fronts bringing to the fore gender equality in and outside of the home.

Sikh Spiritual-Political Dynamics in the Farmers' Movement

Jasleen Kaur, *Research Fellow Sikh Research Institute*

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The ongoing farmers' movement in India cannot be understood without understanding Sikh identity, thought, and practice. While the movement is of the farmers, it is fueled and sustained by Sikhi, the faith and its people. However, there is a significant move to push a narrative that erases Sikh identity from the movement.

What makes a Sikh? Sikh identity is not only rooted in an individual's religiosity but also in their collective politics; both are centered on love and justice principles. There is accountability to the self and the community. There is inspiration drawn from Sikh historical events and from the Guru Granth Sahib, a scripture that is also a charter. This charter opens with a declaration of IkOankar—One creative and pervasive Force—and the original impetus for the Sikh paradigm: 1Ness in the realm of 1Force.

This movement transcends particular religious observation and political ideology. There are leftists, conservatives, farmers' unions, and Khalistanis. There are people of all religions, castes, and professions. There are Sikhs of every kind of religiosity and politics. It is the larger Sikh psyche that holds all these elements together which has moved farmers to display fearlessness, love, and a sense of community over the past six months. Refusing to fall for the state's attempt to divide, they continue to build solidarity.

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The Sikh homeland is Panjab—even today, Panjab is referenced in art, music, and poetry, not as the Indian *state* but as *des*, the *country*. 80% of the global Sikh population still resides in post-Partition truncated Panjab, and many are farmers. Panjab is India's breadbasket, producing 70% of its wheat and 50% of its rice while making up only 1.5% of India's area. Panjabi Sikhs overwhelmingly led the Indian

independence movement and overwhelmingly suffered life imprisonment and death. Movements become mass mobilizations from Panjab by the Sikhs, with "physical, intellectual, and monetary" (Sikh phrase *tan*, *man*, and *dhan*) support from its diaspora as well.

In 1947, when the Indian state was born, Sikhs made up 50% of Indian Army officers, 38% of the air force, and 33% of combat soldiers. The *nishan sahib* raised at the Red Fort on January 26, 2021 is not new. Sikhs fighting for Indian independence flew the same flag; the current Indian Army's Sikh Regiment flies the same flag. Panjab has been a center of revolution throughout history, and Sikhs have led that revolution. Sikhs fought the oppression of the Mughal state, the Afghan invaders, the British Empire, and Indian prime ministers. Sikhs organized against Indira Gandhi, and now, against Narendra Modi. The powerful and lasting sense of Sikh sovereignty is being drawn upon as farmers fight for their livelihoods.

Panjab started the farmers' protest 64 days before its launch at the outskirts of Delhi. Panjabi folks and celebrities organized and mobilized. The farmers' unions continue to play an important role, but the *people* made this protest a movement. And this movement has primarily been led by Sikhs. Of the 35 farmer leaders, 32 are from Panjab, and all of them—at every single stage, regardless of political ideology—use Sikh vocabulary. When they open their speeches with "*Vahiguru ji ka Khalsa, Vahiguru ji ki Fatih*," they identify with what assures victory for the Sikhs: Awe-struck Wisdom and the Sikh collective. When they raise the slogan "*Jo Bole So Nihal*," meaning "Whoever responds will be elated," those who respond answer the call with "*Sat Sri Akal*," meaning "Revered Deathless is Eternal."

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The Sikh consciousness has resulted in *langar* (nourishment for sustenance) for protestors and local populations alike, makeshift schools for underprivileged children, and ad hoc libraries full of revolutionary texts. There is mutual upliftment and a sense of radical community and responsibility to one another regardless of differences.

Yes, there *are* differences. Not every union, Sikh, or protestor agrees. The state's focus on Khalistan within the movement attempts to discredit it with a bogeyman. Khalistan was a popular separatist movement in the 1980s and 1990s, and there remain those who are still loyal to it through nonviolent and constitutional means.

They participate in many movements, not just this one. The reality is that there are voices of all types in this movement. Just like the Leftists and the Naxalites, the Khalistanis are part of a much larger coalition for farmers' rights.

Many flags fly within this movement, but the Sikh flag consistently invokes Banda Singh Bahadar, a Sikh warrior who overthrew the oppressive Mughal state; he led the land revolution in Panjab by establishing the Khalsa Raj in 1710. Sikh memory is important in the homeland and the diaspora. The solidarity protests that took place globally, spearheaded by the big-hearted diaspora, amplified the movement and created further solidarity and coalition-building. Within India, many non-Sikhs and non-Panjabis started identifying themselves as Khalistanis in this movement as a gesture of larger Sikh vision and counter-narrative.

What does the future look like? Everyone understands that repealing the laws is one goal. What is beyond that?

For the farmers, conversations center around what reform looks like in farming in light of the Global South's issues while avoiding implementing a system that looks like American corporate farming.

For Panjab, it is about developing new political leadership that knows how to legislatively right the historical wrongs against the Sikhs and Panjab while being inclusive of all Panjabis. The next members of Parliament and members of the Legislative Assembly must know how to navigate farming and human rights issues.

For Panjab, it is about developing new political leadership that knows how to legislatively right the historical wrongs against the Sikhs and Panjab while being inclusive of all Panjabis.

For Sikhs in India, it is about organizing to establish an egalitarian society. The future lies in coalition-building, while preserving identity and ideals, with those who have votes to make a new kind of national government. For the first time in India's history, there is conversation about regional parties coming together. Sikhs within and outside of Panjab must figure out how to create policy and legislative relationships, with the possibility of a third alliance outside of the Congress Party or the ruling BJP. If this does not happen, the Sikhs will once again be scapegoated by the state, though that scapegoating will look different from the 1984 genocide.

For Sikhs in the diaspora, it is about amplifying the narrative, supporting the causes, voicing and articulating dissent without censorship, and building allyship with other movements.

For India, it is about having a genuine, open, and fair dialogue with all its religions, ethnicities, and gender identities to create a federal India.

The farmers' movement is not only about farming or fighting against crony capitalism and neoliberalism. It is the real opposition. It is about *seriously imagining the possibility of nation-building in India*. It is a collective fight against labels used to divide its citizens against one another. Women and women's organizations transformed the farmers' protest into a global movement, resulting in a widespread fight against those labels. This has never happened before. The future could mean a genuine attempt to nation-building without communalism, with an understanding of and respect for the diverse identities that make up the subcontinent.

If even a fraction of those who come out of this movement find their way into leadership positions, it will change the political landscape of the Sikhs, Panjab, and India.

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Artistic Response to the Farmers' Protest 2020-21

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Abstract

Artists are an inseparable part of society. They tend to express emotions through different genres of art, such as painting, sculpture, art installation, cartooning and digital art to name a few. I witnessed this kind of artistic expression during the recently concluded farmers protest in India. Artists played an important role in documenting and narrating the movement as it unfolded from the very first day of the movement until the farmers returned back to their homes in November-December of 2021. The artists were not just from India but from various places around the world. Through their art, the artists showed their support for the farmers. This essay aims to bring to the reader some of those ways in which the artists supported the farmers.

Introduction

Artists and their art are an integral part of society.[1] They are inspired by social movements to create art as well as play a seminal role in affecting positive social change. Artists represent social issues creatively through various genres like paintings, sculptures, and art installations. They do so even when the issues and their representation cause discomfort among people. In this way, artists express their solidarity with the people. Artists' engagement with the farmers protest is an excellent example of this expression of solidarity.

The farmers protest in India came under national spotlight on 26th November 2020 when farmers, mostly from Punjab and Haryana, marched towards the national capital Delhi in thousands. They demanded a repeal of the newly legislated farm

[1] Okoronkwo, Joy & Chukwu-Okoronkwo, Samuel. (2013). Art, Society and Culture: Inseparable Tripartite Phenomena.

laws[2] under a "*Dilli Chalo*" (March towards Delhi) campaign. Farmers were apprehensive about the laws because they would lead to abolition of the Minimum Support Price (MSP) guaranteed by the government on selected crops and leave the farmers at the mercy of large corporations. The farmers instantly rejected the laws. They camped out on the highways of New Delhi and its outskirts and refused to move until the government overturned the laws. In fact, thousands of farmers lived at the protest sites for the entire duration of the movement which lasted for about thirteen months.

From the first day of the protest until its conclusion, the artists made a significant contribution in narrating the story of the difficulties faced by the farmers. Artists from India and from all around the world interpreted the struggles of the peasants in their own unique ways. In this essay I provide a few glimpses of this work.

Artists and their Artwork

Artists have used various styles and mediums to narrate the difficulties encountered by the farmers from the start of the protest till its conclusion. Artists not only from different parts of India, but the world, interpreted the struggle of the peasants in their own unique ways.

[2] Farmers' Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Act, 2020; Essential Commodities (Amendment) Act, 2020; and Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement on Price Assurance and Farm Services Act, 2020.

Figure 1

We the People, Kanwal Dhaliwal, 2021, Mixed media

Courtesy of Artist Kanwal Dhaliwal

Figure 1 entitled "We the People" is by Kanwal Dhaliwal, an eminent artist who resides in London. Here, Dhaliwal shows the Indian tricolour flag with a tractor at its centre. Dhaliwal has painted faces against the backdrop of the Indian national flag to represent everyday, hard working men and women farmers. The tractor symbolises their livelihood which revolves around farming. By using the tricolor national flag as a backdrop, the artist is representing farmers' patriotism and loyalty to the country which they fulfil by nourishing the nation and growing food.

Figure 2

Untitled, Parveen Kumar, 2021, Acrylic colour on canvas

Source: https://ruralindiaonline.org/en/articles/from-punjab-to-singhu-painting-a-protest/

In Figure 2, we see the work of Parveen Kumar, an artist from Ludhiana. He used a 28x6 feet long canvas painted with acrylic paint to depict the various incidents of protest. It was painted on the 48th day of the protest. He began to paint this canvas in Ludhiana and brought it to Singhu Border to complete it while sitting amidst protesting farmers. In this painting, Kumar shows the various ways in which the agitation progressed until January 10, 2021. The artist depicts the farmers sitting on a railway track in the very first scene of the painting. It is then followed by a second scene that shows the farmers' journey by road to participate in the protest. Along with this, he shows the farmers entering Haryana where the government officials attempted to stop them by digging the roads and spraying water cannons on them. The artist has also used the symbols, such as a snake with a lizard in its mouth. One possible interpretation of this imagery is that this is a representation of the high-handedness of the Union Government in imposing laws without considering farmers' needs or preferences. Kumar expressed a desire to be part of the community of farmers.[3] He completed the painting in fifteen days and it is now part of his collection.[4]

[3] https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/haryana/ludhiana-artist-showcases-farmers-protest-in-18-ft-long-painting-197469

[4] An interview with artist Parveen Kumar on 22.03.2022.

Figure 3

Untitled , Satish Acharya, 2021, Cartoon

Source: https://www.cartoonistsatish.com/farmer/

Some artists used cartoons and satire to depict the deployment of police to block protestors from reaching the capital. In these cartoons, they represented incidents such as when the authorities used tear gas and water cannons to impede the farmers' arrival into the capital. It was the government's strategy to counter the farmers' agitation. In Figure 3, cartoonist Satish Acharya shows the police using violence and force to brutally suppress the farmers. The cartoon also shows an older farmer offering food to a member of the police force despite having been physically assaulted by them. The farmer's use of the word "son" presumably symbolises the nurture and care that farmers extend towards people without distinction and prejudice.

Figure 4

Farmers Protest, Kishore Meena, 2021, Cartoon

Courtesy of Cartoonist Dr. Kishore Meena

Similarly, in Figure 4, cartoonist Kishore Meena uses political satire to represent the double standards of the government. The cartoon shows cops ridiculing the farmers. The cartoon shows a Sikh farmer holding a newspaper with a headline that reads: "The paths are open for the farmers," and signed off by the Indian Prime Minister, Narendra Modi. The cops are belittling the farmer by saying: "How did you like Mr. Modi's sense of humor?" The farmer appears to be in shock. According to Meena, cartoons are the easiest and most accessible visual form because it attracts everybody's attention. Cartoons can convey important and intense messages in an accessible manner. Meena further goes onto assert that cartoonists play an important role in reminding citizens of their duties through the unique medium of cartoons.

Figure 5

Untitled, Ravi Ravraj and Gurdeep, 2020, Canvas painting

Source: https://www.dw.com/en/why-are-indias-farmers-protesting/a-56480047

Two young freelance artists Gurdeep and Ravi Ravraj from Patiala also showed their support to the farmers with their artwork. Figure 5 shows one of their contributions. The 25 feet long painting depicts the pain and struggle of the farmers. The motivational quote on the top of the mural says "*Saanu gudti naluye di, naslaan de raakhe haan"* which means "We are baptised by (Hari Singh) Nalwa,[5] we are the protectors of our race." It took them ten days to finish the painting. Ravraj had said that because this was not an ordinary protest, they did their part by expressing their opinions through art.

[5] Hari Singh Nalwa was one of the most truthful commanders in the army of Maharaja Ranjit Singh and was the Governor of Peshawar, Kashmir and Hazara.
Nalwa attained fame after defeating the Afghans and establishing control over various regions along the boundary of Afghanistan. He also prohibited Afghans from entering Punjab through the Khyber Pass, which was one of the main routes from where invaders used to come in India from c. 1000 AD till the early 19th century. https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/hari-singh-nalwa-sikh-warrior-afghanistan-7472991/ retrieved on 22.03.2022.

Figure 5a (Closer view of Figure 5)

Untitled, Ravi Ravraj and Gurdeep, 2020, Canvas painting

Source: https://www.facebook.com/nooreart/photos/1150496592035336

Figure 5a focuses on a specific aspect of Ravraj and Gurdeep's painting. It shows the courageous spirit of the farmers who are ready to use their tractors to fight a bulldozer, symbolic of the corporate sector. The tractor bears the flag that came to symbolize the farmers' protest. The farmers marching behind that tractor represent various Indian states, showing the pan-Indian nature of the movement. Farmers from across India participated in the protest with enthusiasm and determination.

Figure 6

***Kankaan di Lori*, Ravi Ravraj, 2020, Oil on canvas**

Courtesy of https://twitter.com/RaviRavraj

In Figure 6, we see another painting by Ravi Ravraj, this time focusing on the farmers' relationship with their crop. The artist represents this relationship by drawing an analogy between a father and his new born child. The farmer as the father is shown holding his new born crop with utmost care and affection, just as a parent might look at their infant with intense love and passion. The "soft and pastel" shades in monochromatic tone add to the depth of the theme depicting an inseparable relation of a farmer with his crops. The grey shade represents the sadness of farmer about the current situation.[6]

[6] An interview with artist Raviraj on 23.03.2022.

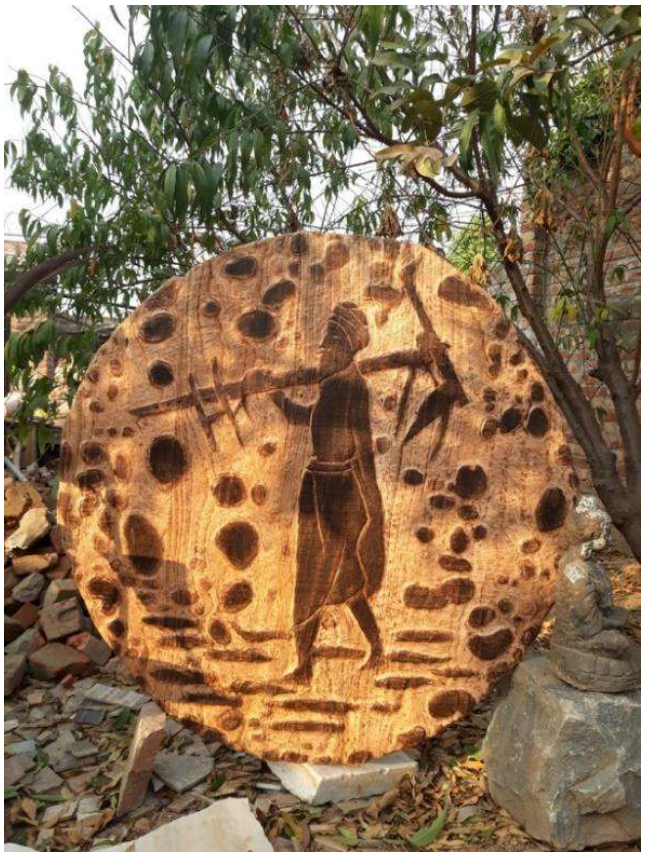

Figure 7

Food Giver, Jaswinder Singh, 2021, Wood sculpture

Source: https://www.tribuneindisa.com/news/ludhiana/artist-makes-roti-to-support-farmers-193914

In Figure 7, we see a five feet circular shaped wood with an impression of roṭī (Indian flatbread) and an image of a farmer carrying plough. The wood sculpture entitled "Food Giver" was made by Jaswinder Singh who hails from Khanna, a village in Punjab. Singh's purpose here is to show the direct link between farmers and food. It is the artist's way to bring attention to a popular slogan of the protest – "No Farmer No Food." The slogan gained much attention during the farmers' protest. In the sculpture, the farmer is shown going to his fields carrying a plough which represents his/her hard work. With this sculpture, the artist pays a tribute to the farmers who struggle hard in the fields to grow crops as well as extends his support to the protesting farmers.

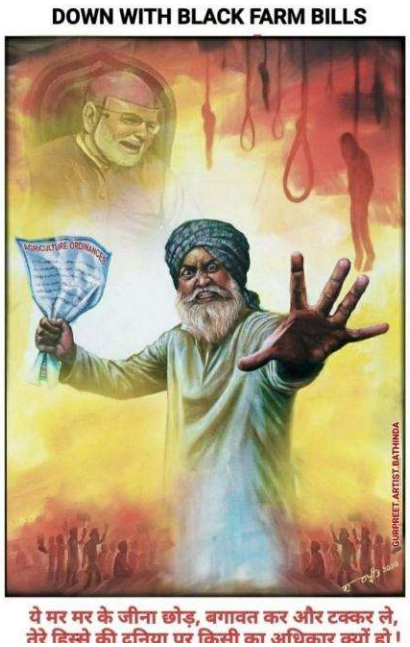

Figure 8

***Bas hun hor nahi*, Gurpreet Singh, 2020, Oil painting on canvas**

Source: @Gurpreet.artist (Instagram Account)

The artist Gurpreet Singh, who is also a social activist from Bathinda, created a number of posters to depict the farmers' story. In his paintings, he hopes to show the destruction that the farmers would have to face if the three farm laws were implemented. He also organized an exhibition of his paintings about the journey of the farmers' protest at Singhu Border.[7] His paintings and illustrations represent the innermost pain and suffering of farmers, something which they might not be able to express in words. In Figure 8 above, the crushed paper in the farmer's hand and his angry expression represents farmers' vehement and spirited opposition to the three farm laws. In the background, the silhouette of farmers committing suicide and the hanging body of the farmer are representative of the helplessness felt by farmers. In the left-hand side of the painting, we see what appears to be the mask of Indian Prime Minister worn by his influential subordinate minister. This likely represents the indifference with which these leaders responded to the farmers' angry protests.

[7] Bhasin, Sukhmeet, "Bathinda artist using paintings to highlight farmers' issues" *The Tribune,* February 2, 2021

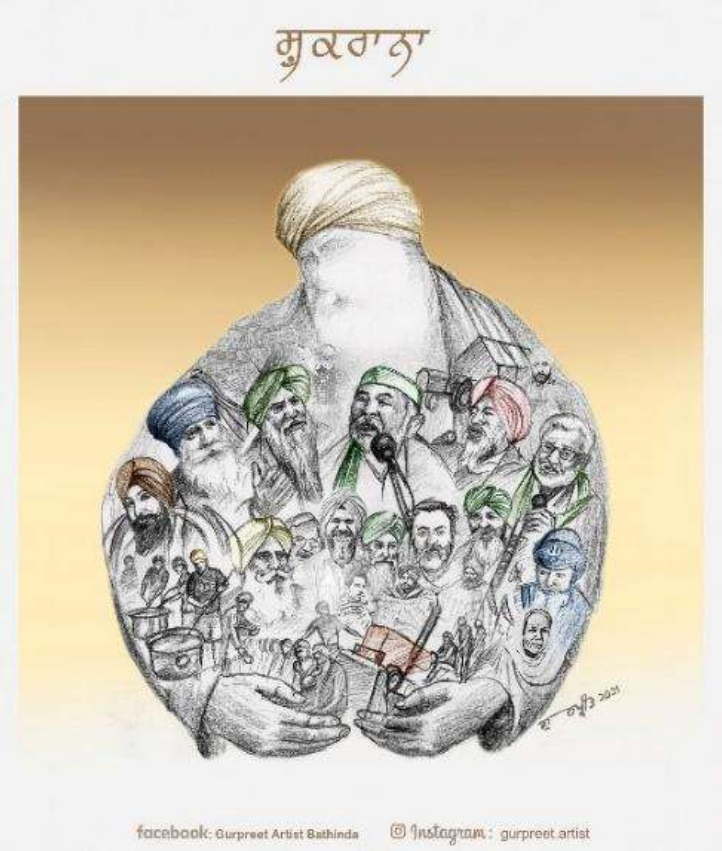

Figure 9

***Shukhrana*, Gurpreet Singh, 2021, Mixed media**

Source: @Gurpreet.artist (Instagram Account)

In Figure 9 entitled "*Shukrana*," Gurpreet has depicted the victory of farmers after the Indian government repealed the three farm laws. With this illustration, the artist expresses his gratitude to the first Sikh Guru, Sri Guru Nanak Dev. Guru Nanak is shown holding the leaders of the farmers' protest. The artwork also includes glimpses of the main aspects of the movement including the *langar* or community kitchen that the farmers ran during the movement. The artist is expressing his gratitude to Guru Nanak for giving farmers' forbearance to withstand the tyranny of the Indian state.

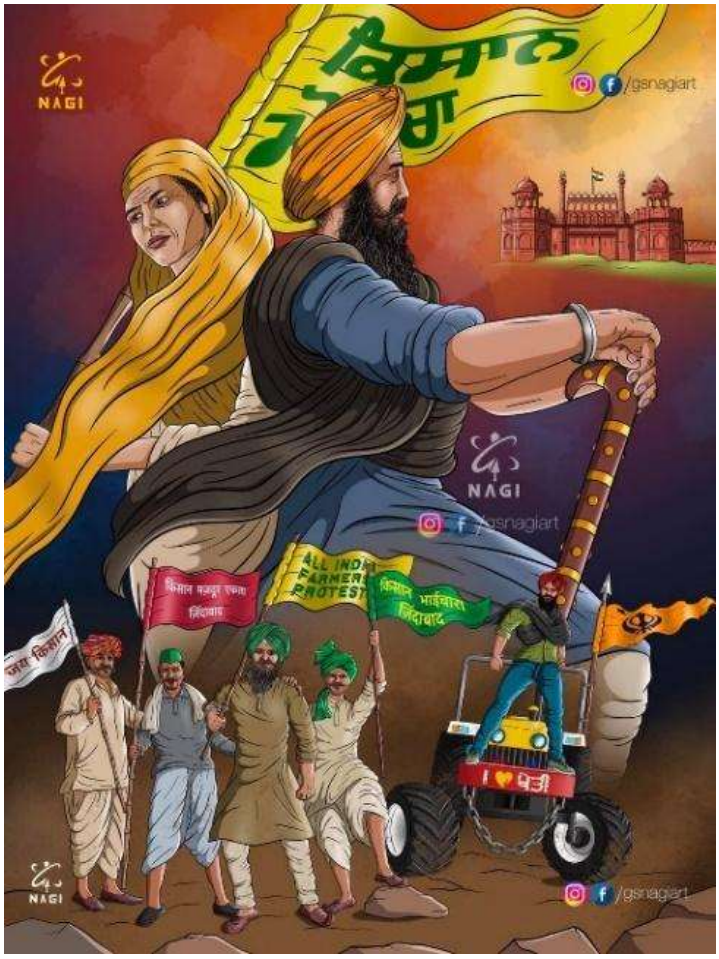

Figure 10

Gurjinder Singh, Digital Art, 2021

Source: https://www.facebook.com/gsnagiart/

In Figure 10, we see Gurjinder Singh Nagi's digital illustration that represents his dedication to the cause. It also shows the unity among farmers from various parts of India. The bright and vibrant colours symbolize the energetic spirit of farmers. Their bold stature shows their strength in tilling the soil and standing up to oppressive laws. The farmers who are shown holding flags of the farmers' protest look determined. In the background, the artist has painted the Red Fort – a reminder of the farmers' tractor parade on Republic Day, January 26, 2021 in New Delhi.

Figure 11

Kisan Shaheed Samarak, Kulpreet Singh, 2021, Metal sheets and mixed media

Source: https://www.newsclick.in/kisan-shaheed-smarak-memorial-those-who-died-nationwide-farmers-protest

Figure 11 depicts a homage to the farmers who sacrificed their lives while protesting on the borders of Delhi. It is the work of Kulpreet Singh, an artist from Patiala, Punjab. Singh's installation is made using metal sheets. The artist cut the metal efficiently and painted it black. In the installation, the images of grain along with farmers tilling the soil are shown. Also shown are bull and flame-shaped metal pieces. The depiction of the sun and the moon on the metal sheet represents the hard work that farmers perform day and night. The installation also contains the *Satyagraha Kalash* or earthen baked terracotta pots.[8] Besides these, a larger pot is also placed in the middle of the flames to symbolize the farmers' struggle as they resist the forces of nature, such as storms, heavy rains and floods, and fire in growing their crops and feeding the nation.

[8] https://www.newsclick.in/kisan-shaheed-smarak-memorial-those-who-died-nationwide-farmers-protest

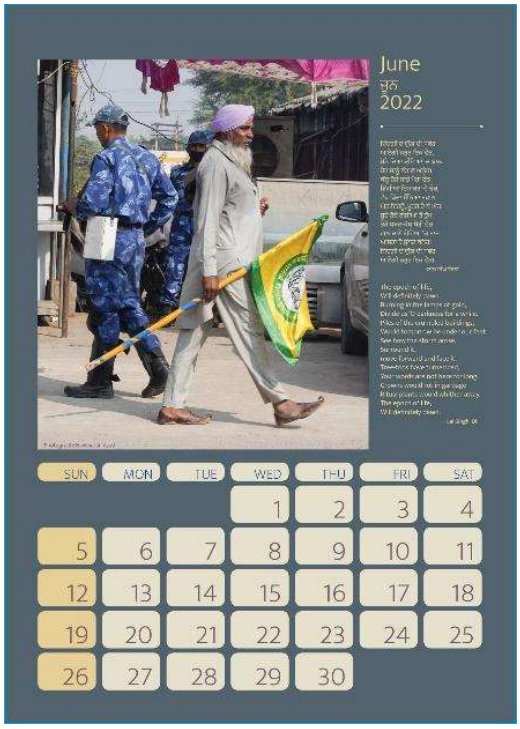

Figure 12

Photograph by Preetinder Singh Bajwa

Figure 12a

Photograph by Navchetan Azad

Source: Calendar Images shared by artist Preetinder Singh Bajwa

In addition to the paintings and sculptures, artists showed their support with various other kinds of art. Posters, murals, graffiti and photographs are examples of a few other ways in which artists extended support to the farmers movement. The internet, including various social media platforms were flooded with photographs from the farmers' protest showing their courageous struggle. Figures 12 and 12a are images from a calendar that was released on December 11, 2021, the day the agitation was "suspended" after the historic victory. This calendar contains a compilation of photographs highlighting the struggles of those living at the protest sites: the old and young, men and women. The text on the calendar reads: "This calendar is a humble contribution to the sacrifices (now over 700 people have been martyred) of those sitting at the borders. These photographs are provided by Randeep Maddoke, Navchetan Azad, Daljit Ami and Preetinder Bajwa. This calendar is the brainchild of Kanwal Dhaliwal, designed by Preetinder Singh Bajwa with support from Virinder Kalra. It celebrates the victory and commemorates the one-year

anniversary of the farmer's protest on Delhi's borders." The calendar also contains motivational quotes by Kabir, Surjit Patar, Sukhwinder Amrit, Bhagat Singh, Kuldeep Kaur, Lal Singh 'Dil', Pash, Baba Najmi, Ranjit Verma, Sant Ram Udasi and Vari Rai.

Conclusion

This essay depicting the various artistic forms of support of the farmers movement is anything but exhaustive. It contains only a few examples of the many different artworks that emerged during and after the protest. Artists from India and across the world used many creative art forms to narrate the story of the farmers' struggle, both as a way to support the movement as well as to circulate their message to the wider world.

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ਤੂੰ ਕੀ ਜਾਣੇ ਜ਼ਾਲਮਾਂ ਵੇ

Jaswinder Singh

ਤੂੰ ਕੀ ਜਾਣੇ ਜ਼ਾਲਮਾਂ ਵੇ ਇਨਾਂ ਪੰਜਾਬੀਆਂਕਿਸਾਨਾਂ, ਮਜ਼ਦੂਰਾਂ,, ਕੰਮੀਆਂ, ਪੰਜਾਬੀਆਂ ਦੇ ਜ਼ੋਰ

ਇਤਿਹਾਸ ਵੇਖ ਲੈ ਕਈ ਰੱਖੇ ਮੁਰੇ-ਮੁਰੇ (ਅੱਗੇ-ਅੱਗੇ) ਤੋਰ

੧.

ਹਾਲੇ ਸ਼ਾਂਤੀ ਨਾਲ ਮੰਗਦੇ ਨੇ
ਹੱਕ ਖੋਹਣੇ ਵੀ ਆਉਂਦੇ ਨੇ
ਹਿੱਕਾਂ ਉੱਤੇ ਪਿੱਪਲ ਵੀ ਲਾਉਣੇ ਆਉਂਦੇ ਨੇ
ਹਾਲੇ ਦੁਨੀਆਂ ਵਿੱਚ ਲਾਏ ਅਸਾਂ ਪਿਆਰਾਂ ਵਾਲੇ ਬੂਟੇ
ਜਦੋ ਬੀਜੀਆਂ ਬੰਦੂਖਾਂ ਫਿਰ ਬਦਲੇ ਨੇ ਦੌਰ
ਤੂੰ ਕੀ ਜਾਣੇ ਜ਼ਾਲਮਾਂ ਵੇ ਇਨਾਂ ਕੰਮੀਆਂ ਦੇ ਜ਼ੋਰ

੨.

ਸਾਡੇ ਖੂਨ ਵਿੱਚ ਗੁਰਾਂ ਨੇ ਕਿਰਤ ਹੈ ਪਾਈ
ਤਾਹੀਂਓ ਦੋ ਟਾਇਮ ਰੱਜ ਸਾਰੀ ਖਾਂਦੀ ਏ ਲੁਕਾਈ
ਜੇ ਅੰਨਦਾਤਾ ਨਾ ਰਿਹਾ ਕੌਣ ਅੰਨ ਫਿਰ ਊਗਾਉ
ਖੂਨ ਮੁੜਕੇ ਦਾ ਪਾਣੀ ਕੌਣ ਫਸਲਾਂ ਨੂੰ ਪਾਊ
ਤੇਰੇ ਇੱਕੋ ਬੂੰਦ ਮੁੜਕੇ ਨਾਲ ਉੱਡ ਜਾਣੇ ਭੌਰ
ਤੂੰ ਕੀ ਜਾਣੇ ਜ਼ਾਲਮਾਂ ਵੇ ਇਨਾਂ ਕਿਸਾਨਾਂ, ਮਜ਼ਦੂਰਾਂ,ਕੰਮੀਆਂ ਦੇ ਜ਼ੋਰ

੩

ਕਾਲੀ ਤੇਰੀ ਸੋਚ ਵਾਲੇ ਕਾਲੇ ਤੇਰੇ ਅਪਣੇ ਕਨੂੰਨ ਨੇ
ਖੁਰਾਖੋਜ ਨੂੰ ਮਿਟਾਉਣ ਵਾਲੇ ਤੇਰੇ ਆਪਣੇ ਜੁਨੂੰਨ ਨੇ
ਜੇ ਉੱਚੀ ਕੁਰਸੀ ਮਿਲੀ ਕਿਤੇ ਰੱਬ ਤਾਂ ਨਹੀ ਹੋਇਆ
ਕੋਈ ਡੂੰਮਣਾ ਨਹੀਂ ਐਸਾ ਜੋ ਨਾ ਪੰਜਾਬੀਆਂ ਨੇ ਚੋਇਆ
ਤੇਰੇ ਇੱਕੋ ਡੰਗ ਮੱਖੀ ਦੇ ਨਾਲ ਮਚ ਜਾਣੇ ਸ਼ੋਰ
ਤੂੰ ਕੀ ਜਾਣੇ ਜ਼ਾਲਮਾ ਵੇ ਇਨਾ ਕਿਸਾਨਾਂ ਦੇ ਜ਼ੋਰ

੪

ਬੱਚਿਆਂ ਤੋਂ ਬਜ਼ੁਰਗਾਂ ਤੱਕ ਦਿਲੀ ਵਿੱਚ ਡੇਰੇ ਨੇ
ਲੰਡਨ 'ਚ ਜਾ ਕੇ ਵੀ ਕਈ ਪੰਜਾਬੀਆਂ ਨੇ ਘੇਰੇ ਨੇ
ਜਿਹੜਾ ਤਾਨਾਸ਼ਾਹ ਬਣੇ ਉਹ ਬਹੁਤਾ ਚਿਰ ਨਹੀਂਉ ਟਿਕਦਾ
ਝੂੱਠ ਦਾ ਸਮਾਨ ਬਹੁਤਾ ਚਿਰ ਨਹੀਂਉ ਵਿਕਦਾ
ਸੱਚੀ ਪਵਾਉਣੀ ਤੇਰੀ ਪੈਲ ਰਾਜੇ ਜਿੱਦਾ ਪਾਉਂਦਾ ਮੋਰ
ਤੂੰ ਕੀ ਜਾਣੇ ਜ਼ਾਲਮਾਂ ਵੇ ਇਨਾਂ ਕਿਸਾਨਾਂ, ਮਜ਼ਦੂਰਾਂ, ਕੰਮੀਆਂ ਦੇ ਜ਼ੋਰ
ਇਤਿਹਾਸ ਵੇਖ ਲੈ ਕਈ ਰੱਖੇ ਮੁਰੇ-ਮੁਰੇ (ਅੱਗੇ-ਅੱਗੇ) ਤੋਰ

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What do you know O tyrant

Translation by Vineet Mehta

What do you know O tyrant the power of the farmers, Working class, Punjabis
How many have been overthrown, learn from the past.

(1)

Till now they demand with peace
Know how to snatch rights with ease
Know how to plant banyan on their chests
Till now have grown lovable nests
Revolution flowed around whenever guns were planted.
What do you know O tyrant the power of the Farmers

(2)

Gurus have implanted work culture in our blood
That's why the world eats to its stomach fill
If the food-giver goes away, how will the crops grow?
Who will water the crops by the sweat of one's brow?
A single droplet of sweat, you cannot shed
What do you know O tyrant the power of the Working class

(3)

Nourished on your negative thinking, are your black laws

Disastrous are your passionate flaws

If seated on a high throne, don't consider yourself as divine

No sphere is there beyond the Punjabis might

A single bite of bee will cause of yours great commotion

What do you know O tyrant the power of the Laborers

(4)

Young and the old have surrounded Delhi durbar

Many have lodged protests as London far

Tyrants don't last long,

False narratives don't sell

We'll make you dance with the peacock's bells

What do you know O tyrant the power of the farmers, Working class, Punjabis

How many have been overthrown, learn from the past.

Translated by Dr. Vineet Mehta, Associate Professor, Department of English, Doaba College, Jalandhar, Punjab.

Book Reviews

The Last Queen

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni,

Harper Collins, 2021,

372pp, $22.55 (hard cover) ISBN-13: 978-9390351954;

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's latest novel *The Last Queen* (2021) depicts the turbulent life of Maharani Jind Kaur (c.1817-1863), Queen Regent of the Sikh Empire (1843-1846). Narrated chronologically, it offers a fictional representation of Rani Jindan's childhood, her courtship and marriage to Maharaja Ranjit Singh (1780-1839), the brief and mercurial reigns of his successors, the wresting of Punjab from the hands of Rani Jindan and then her son, Maharaja Dalip Singh, and her subsequent exile in Nepal and later, Britain. The historical claims of this book and the intervention it makes, according to its author, are made apparent in the epigraph, which consists of a quotation by Chinua Achebe (1930-2013). This quotation speaks about the importance of writing history from the perspective of the lion and not the hunter. A clever play on one of the titles of Ranjit Singh, the Lion of Punjab, the epigraph also gestures towards Rani Jindan's own life, which bequeaths to both history and art a potent example of a relentlessly resistant subjectivity determined to thwart the colonial British power.

Like other novels by Divakaruni, *The Last Queen* offers memorable characters, such as, of course, Rani Jindan and Ranjit Singh, but also the loyal retainers Mangla and Avtar, the kind and friendly Rani Guddan, the wily Wazir Dhian Singh, as well as the devoted and fatherly statesman, Fakir Azizuddin. Little is known of Rani Jindan's life before the birth of her son, allowing the author considerable creative freedom to construct a poetic narrative of her falling in love with the gallant and charismatic Maharaja, who casts his powerful shade over this text. He is portrayed through Jindan's eyes in distinctly hagiographical, larger-than-life tones, which is convincing given her position as his youthful admirer and beloved. Ranjit Singh is also depicted as a man who likes women, daring even the displeasure of the Khalsa when he decides to marry a Muslim courtesan. And yet, the king who united the Sikh clans and rules over a multi-religious court and empire is portrayed as humbly aware of his own mortality, preferring to sit on a chair for he believed the throne

was meant only for the Guru Granth Sahib. Deploying the resources of both history and fiction, such characterization of Rani Jindan and Ranjit Singh makes for convincing and compelling storytelling.

At the same time, the author is at pains to explain or justify tricky or ambiguous aspects of history. Thus, Ranjit Singh finds himself explaining his past actions to a young Jindan, describing how he conquered Lahore "with almost no bloodshed" (54) and exonerating himself for his imprisonment of his mother-in-law and first ally, Sada Kaur. Writing historical fiction always entails interpretation, but the temptation to offer retrospective (over)explanations through the voice of key stakeholders can make historical figures seem simply unconvincing. Readers are sensitive to the enchantment of storytelling, which is why authors take such pains to conceal the craft that goes into creating the story. However, in the case of this book, the craft that was involved in its creation is made apparent through over-explanation.

Similarly, there are aspects of Jindan's fictional character that fail to persuade, such as the sophisticated political analysis this small-town girl with limited education and opportunities brings to conversations with an experienced statesman like Ranjit Singh. But her subsequent development and growth from girl to woman to matriarch is excellently arced. In the absence of historical information, what a text such as this offers is a fictional but plausible reconstruction of how Jindan would have negotiated new experiences in an unfamiliar context. How polygamy pitches women against each other in a contest for one man's attention and resources is a case in point. This is depicted vividly in the hostility between the memorable Mai Nakkain, Ranjit Singh's chief wife, and Rani Jindan, which ends only with the former's death. And yet, the text resists a reductive binary that celebrates one woman at the expense of another. Mai Nakkain retains her dignity in this portrayal, even as we sympathise with Jindan, the favourite and youngest wife, far less powerful and wealthy, who is often at her dominant co-wife's mercy.

History has shown that the competitive environment of polygamous marriages did not preclude camaraderie between women. In this vein, Divakaruni's imagination demonstrates the gamut of relationships that women would have had, from friendships between forgotten wives and new wives to those between mothers of reigning kings and mothers of insignificant princes (who posed no threat). Additionally, this is portrayed as part of a larger solidarity, across communities, regions, and realms. A particularly powerful moment in the text is the fictional confrontation between Rani Jindan – now separated from her son and living in exile – and the King and Prime Minister of Nepal, from whom she demands to know why

safe haven is being denied to Begum Hazrat Mahal of Awadh and her son after the Sepoy Rebellion of 1857. While there is no evidence of any such encounter, Divakaruni's choice to insert it in this text demonstrates the specific poignancy of this historical moment when the question of autonomy and succession in many states and kingdoms was endangered and many were, in fact, annexed or otherwise appropriated by the British. In this context, the aptness of one exiled queen and mother standing up for the moral right of another queen and mother who has also been driven out of her realm is not lost on the reader.

Divakaruni vividly depicts the constant turbulence and turmoil of Rani Jindan's life. Readers find themselves experiencing her tireless struggle with the persuasiveness and immediacy that are peculiar to first-person narration. Jindan's sense of agency is shown to be remarkable as she unceasingly makes schemes and plans to be restored to Punjab and her son. The author's imagination of her life in exile offers rich insights into what these corrosive and wearying years would have been like for her. The indignities of being dragged away, searched and confined, the mortification of being deprived of even her dwindling allowance, and her repeated attempts to undermine the British, only to be thwarted by them, evoke the reader's sympathy for Jindan. Furthermore, Divakaruni depicts how the colonial power uses patriarchal smokescreens to invalidate the political agency of a charismatic female ruler and her own text represents an act of disruption and resistance to this influential narrative about Rani Jindan in contemporary British historiography and colonial rhetoric.

A particularly instructive aspect of the text is the author's creative imagining of the voyage Rani Jindan undertakes to Britain with a heavy heart, so that she may live out the rest of her days with her son. Although other contemporary accounts of Britain by Indian royals do exist, these are often narratives faithful to the British Crown that are quite unlike the account Divakaruni spins for Rani Jindan. In this fictional narrative, Rani Jindan remains refreshingly unimpressed with the Victorian court as well as British homes, streets and society. As she shrewdly observes, the staged image of the vigorous and virile coloniser is not mirrored in the tired face of his oppressed working-class compatriot "back home." Furthermore, one of the most moving moments with respect to her exile in Britain consists of the painting of the memorable portrait by George Richmond. Rani Jindan – still beautiful and determined – was painted in 1863, the year of her passing. It is this painting that graces the cover of the book.

The author's astute understanding of narrative tension, irony and timing (both dramatic and comic) are evident in this text, making the reader turn page after page

without experiencing a lag anywhere. However, the very swiftness of narrative pace also poses a problem, especially in the chapters devoted to Ranjit Singh's successors and the duration of Rani Jindan's regency. A dizzying succession of events is rapidly narrated and dealt with – which may be a historically accurate representation of the alarming speed with which Ranjit Singh's successors and courtiers dismantled his empire before a waiting British foe – but makes for decidedly taxing storytelling. This narrative pace prevents the reader from fully appreciating the magnitude of momentous events and adjusting to fast-changing realities in Rani Jindan's world. As a result, the magnitude of the assassination of Wazir Jawahar Singh, which leads Jindan – his sister – to wreak vengeance upon the Khalsa Army by sending it to its death at the hands of a formidable British foe, is somewhat lost. However, the text occasionally offers brief moments of profound insight, such as when Jindan thoughtfully contemplates the nature of her actions and predicament. These leave the reader craving for more such moments of relief and reflection in these hectic chapters.

Divakaruni's language often presents problems. Words in Indian languages thrown casually into otherwise English sentences remain forced and awkward. These words, such as "kudi" and "sohni," inserted to evoke some sort of authentic and exotic Punjabi flavour fall flat, much to the discomfort of the subcontinental reader. Similarly, simplistic translations and equivalents persist of complex cultural phenomena to cater to western Anglophone audiences. Despite this manifest issue, there are also moments in *The Last Queen* when Divakaruni's language is particularly felicitous, offering jewelled, poetic phrases to depict the cultural capital of imperial Punjab and vivid as well as economical expressions to describe the elaborate political culture of the day. Material detail, which constitutes one of the many delights of historical fiction, is also rendered successfully in this well-researched novel. The courts, forts, gurdwaras, zenanas, bazaars and other indoor and outdoor spaces of Ranjit Singh's time as well as those of his successors are evoked. This allows the reader to envisage how sites now empty, dilapidated, or destroyed would have been peopled in their heyday.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Last Queen* furnishes a meaningful and important fictional contribution to the history and cultural memory of the Sikh Empire. It supplies meaningful glimpses into the trajectory of the early British Raj and situates the annexation of Punjab in the larger context of British ascendancy in India as the nineteenth century wore on. With its nuanced depiction of courtly women's lives, work, relationships and realities, it marks a significant fictional intervention in women's histories. Additionally, it offers a lesson in writing about South Asian

regions with complicated and intertwined histories without resorting to reductive ethnic or communal binaries, while also being true to a proud Sikh tradition. This novel is recommended for lay readers and scholars interested in the Sikh Empire and the colonial presence in nineteenth century India. Its problems are largely those of craft: a broader narrative arc would have eased the compression of events in the middle of the text and a sensitivity towards how fiction operates would have corrected the urge to over-explain and justify historical figures and events.

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