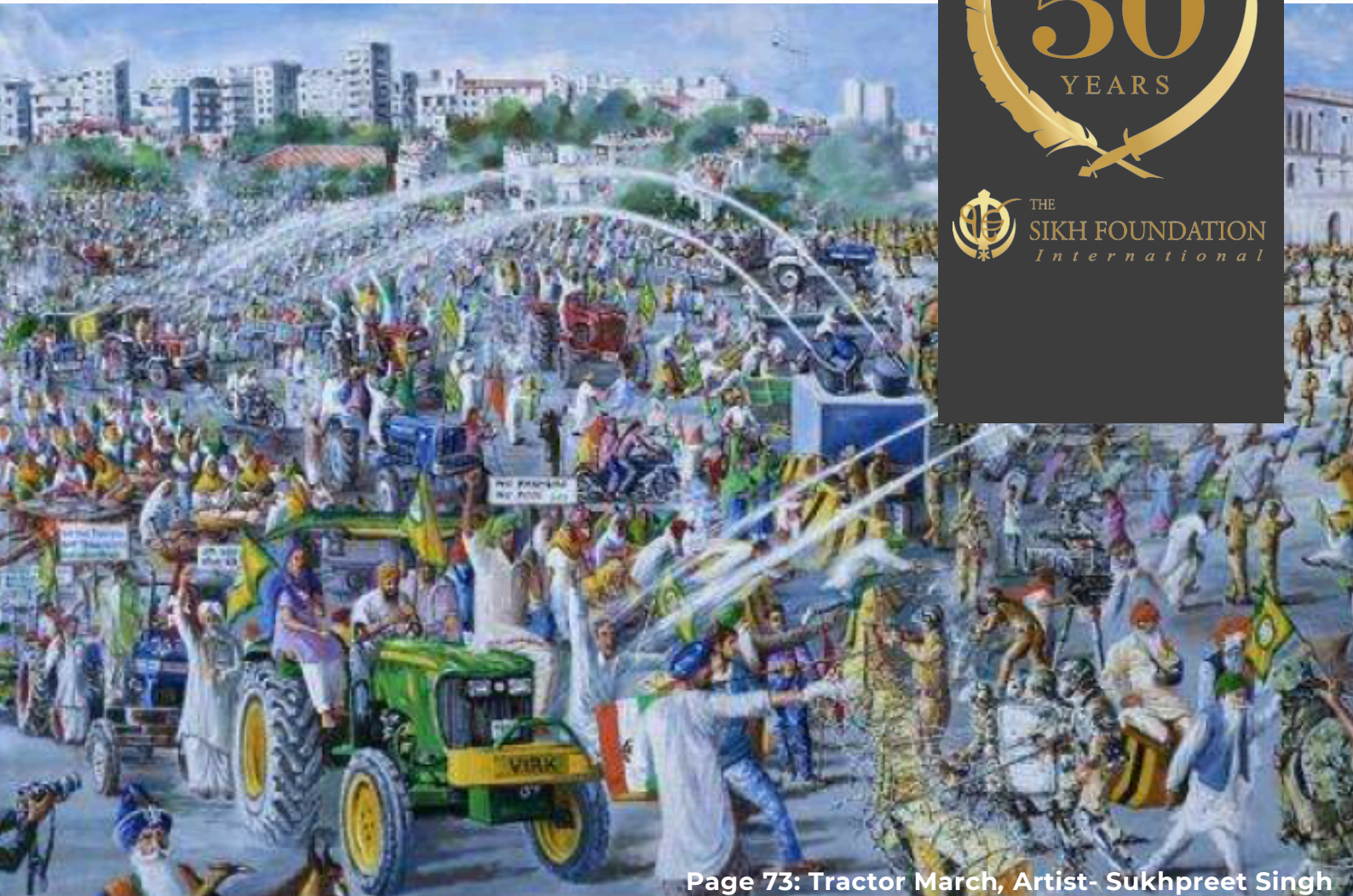


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Page 73: Tractor March, Artist- Sukhpreet Singh

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## **On the Farmers' Movement**

**Editorial Team**

*Special Section on Farmers Movement in India*

On November 19, the day of Guru Nanak's birth anniversary, Prime Minister of India Narendra Modi announced that the three agricultural laws that sparked a sustained resistance to them by both farmers and farm laborers will be repealed. Thus, today, as the editorial team prepares its second issue of *Sikh Research Journal* on the farmers movement, the struggle by both farmers and farm laborers seems to have been successful. It is a success that is borne of sustained resistance strategies that the farmers and farm laborers adopted, and their sheer grit and determination in the face of state oppression and police brutality. These are efforts that the government attempted to block, but consistently failed in the face of the farmers and farm laborers resilience in attitude, strategies, and political acumen.

Notably, movement participants and supporters, while welcoming the decision to repeal the agricultural laws, remain skeptical until the Prime Minister's words translate into action. In the words of Joginder Singh Ugrahan, President of Bharatiya Kisan Union Ekta (Ugrahan), it is important to remain vigilant of the government because the struggle is far from over.<sup>1</sup> *Samyukt Kisan Morcha*, an umbrella organization of various farmers' unions have made clear that the agitation will continue until the laws are formally repealed in the Parliament.<sup>2</sup> Movement leaders await the Indian government's response to various other farmers unions' demands, including legal guarantee of minimum support price (MSP) and resolution of specific contentious legal battles in favor of the farmers.<sup>3</sup> Displeasure has also been expressed at the method in which the decision to repeal the laws was communicated to the agitating farmers – through the medium of televised speech

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.newsclick.in/why-embers-peasant-struggle-burning-victory?fbclid=IwAR2F1PRmfvhjPuim40wbcNGdfmEbJwJrmMPBUj7AM9NRpycdoGCV4wXvyI4>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/samyukt-kisan-morcha-to-go-ahead-with-march-to-parliament/article37596438.ece>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/samyukt-kisan-morcha-to-go-ahead-with-march-to-parliament/article37596438.ece>

and without any face-to-face discussion with the farmers unions, a move which has been dubbed as undemocratic.<sup>4</sup>

Our goal in the second special issue on the farmers movement is to enlighten the reader about more aspects of the movement. The issue contains a range of contributions from academic analyses and photographic documentation of the movement to poetic and artistic expressions. The submissions by Bikrum Gill, Surinder Singh, Shoma Choudhury Lahiri, and Pritam Singh are academic accounts explaining various dimensions of the movement. Sonia Dhami and Diditi Mitra's essays provide a visual documentation of the movement. The issue ends with the poetry of Gursahiba Gill and Kewal Singh Ratra, inspired by the farmers movement. Do note that most of the manuscripts were prepared before Prime Minister Narendra Modi's announcement that the laws will be repealed. Thus, not all contributions reflect that change in government policies. We hope to address this change in government intentions and other kinds of development in our future issues.

The farmers' and farm laborers struggle is far from over, but this latest victory is still cause for celebration. It reaffirms the power of grassroots mobilization and protest and provides a much-needed boost for India's battered democracy.<sup>5</sup> Yet, the victory has come at a huge cost. More than 700 protestors lost their lives in the course of the year-long agitation. We offer our current issue in the spirit of celebration as much as commemoration.

Lastly, please note a correction to one of our contributors to the previous issue. Navkiran Kaur Natt is inaccurate. The name should have appeared as Navkiran Natt.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/samyukt-kisan-morcha-to-go-ahead-with-march-to-parliament/article37596438.ece>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/11/18/world/asia/india-farmers-modi.html?searchResultPosition=4>

**The Editors**

*Shruti Devgan*

*Shoma Choudhury Lahiri*

*Diditi Mitra*

*Nirmal Singh*

*Dona Suri*

*Elizabeth Weigler*

## **The 2020 Indian Farm Laws in an emergent Global Financial-AgriTech Accumulation Regime**

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### **Abstract**

Much of the popular analysis of the 2020 farmers protests in India identifies an “authoritarian” BJP government as the primary antagonistic force threatening the livelihoods of farmers in major grain producing states such as Punjab. This paper is motivated by concern that such a “methodologically nationalist” and “presentist” account risks obscuring more than it reveals regarding what is at stake in the contestations over the 2020 farm laws. It addresses these limitations by asking instead how the contestation over the farm laws renews the confrontation over the appropriation of the surplus value of the “agrarian South” that was set in motion by the rise of the neoliberal form of global capital accumulation in the late twentieth century. Locating the contemporary moment within the long history and broader geography of neoliberal capitalist imperialism brings to light the accumulation imperatives of global financial-agribusiness capital as key motive forces underpinning the farm laws. Attention is thus drawn in this paper to how the deepening of the privatization, liberalization, and financialization of agriculture in the Global South remains a key strategy for addressing global capital’s structural crises of over-production and over-accumulation. The paper argues that the intensification of neoliberal agrarian restructuring in India via the 2020 farm laws has opened further space for both a familiar mode of global agribusiness accumulation that aims to capture the surplus value of the real agricultural economy and for an emergent agritech mode of accumulation that is centered more on harvesting data in order to generate profits through financial speculation in the derivative agricultural economy. The paper concludes by emphasizing that the farmers movement is correct in contesting the farm laws, as the deepening of Indian agriculture’s integration into global capitalism threatens to render farmers into a category of permanently surplus labor.



## Introduction

In summer 2020, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government promulgated a set of farm laws<sup>6</sup> designed to facilitate and encourage increased private sector investment in Indian agriculture, particularly in the “downstream” domains of marketing, transport, and storage (Narayanan, 2020; GOI, 2020). The promulgation, and eventual passing, of these laws generated intense opposition from agrarian movements, beginning regionally in the major grain producing state of Punjab (Sinha, 2020), and eventually taking on a broader national and ultimately global scale of contestation (La Via Campesina, 2021; PAN, 2021; Basu 2021). The opposition grew both out of the exclusionary “form” through which the laws were promulgated and passed - the BJP government used the cover of the Covid shutdown to exclude input from farmers movements and affected states (Narayanan, 2020) - and the “content” of the laws themselves, which farmers movements feared would effectively enable large corporate agribusiness interests to monopolize control over agricultural trade (Sehgal, 2020). The fear, in particular, was that the laws would undermine the public marketing - or “mandi” – system that had hitherto offered farmers assured prices from government agencies and thus protected them from having to make distress sales at low prices to private grain-trading intermediaries<sup>7</sup>.

Much of the popular coverage, analysis, and discussion of the farm laws and protests has been grounded on an assumption that the source of the intractability of the contestation is an increasingly emboldened and authoritarian BJP government (Sinha, 2021; Daniyal, 2021; Kaur, 2021; Mashal and Yasir, 2021). The temporal “presentism” and spatial “localism” of this assumption - that the contestation is entirely endogenous to India and bound to a present moment of state-corporate authoritarianism - risks concealing more than it reveals regarding the actors and stakes involved in the contestations over the farm laws. There has been emphasis, in some of the more historically astute analyses, on locating a deeper “agrarian

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<sup>6</sup> This refers in particular to three laws: *Farmers’ Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Act*; *Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement on Price Assurance and Farm Services Act*; *Essential Commodities Act*. For a detailed discussion on the specific terms of the laws and their potential consequences see Narayanan, 2020.

<sup>7</sup> This concern was mainly associated with the first of the three laws – the *Farmers’ Produce Trade and Commerce Act* – which reduces the authority of the Mandi board to regulate agricultural market transactions and opens a broader unregulated “trade area” that includes electronic trading platforms. Concerns have also been expressed that the *Essential Commodities Act*, in removing stockholding limits, clears the way for larger traders to hoard supplies and potentially drive down prices paid to farmers and drive up prices charged to consumers.

crisis” in longer histories of colonialism and the post-colonial agricultural industrialization of the green revolution (Gill, 2020). What has remained largely under-examined, however, is how the contestation over the farm laws renews the confrontation over the appropriation of the surplus value of the “agrarian South” that was set in motion by the rise of the neoliberal form of global capital accumulation in the late twentieth century (McMichael, 2013). Locating the contemporary moment within the long history and broader geography of neoliberal capitalist imperialism brings to light the accumulation imperatives of global financial-agribusiness capital as key motive forces underpinning the farm laws. Attention is thus drawn in this paper to how the deepening of the privatization, liberalization, and financialization of agriculture in the Global South remains a key strategy for addressing global capital’s structural crises of over-production and over-accumulation. The paper argues that the intensification of neoliberal agrarian restructuring in India via the 2020 farm laws has opened further space for both a familiar mode of global agribusiness accumulation that aims to capture the surplus value of the real agricultural economy and for an emergent agri-tech mode of accumulation that is centered more on harvesting data in order to generate profits through financial speculation in the derivative agricultural economy.

### **The Neoliberal Agricultural Regime**

Neoliberalism emerged as a strategy for overcoming the constraints that were imposed upon capital accumulation by a postwar/postcolonial international order consisting of Keynesian welfare states in the Global North and national developmental states in the Global South (Harvey, 2005; De Angelis, 2001). The expansive presence of public sector provisioning of key social goods, the state enforced defence of labor rights, and the subsidies and protections offered to agricultural and industrial sectors in the Global South combined to place substantial limits on both capital’s general rate of profit and its capacity for profitably redeploying the surplus appropriated from labor over the course of production. These constraints would lead ultimately, by the 1970s, to crises of overaccumulation of capital and overproduction of agricultural and industrial output (Harvey, 2005; McMichael, 2004).

The capitalist class in the Global North responded to these crises by aggressively pushing for the deregulation of economic activity, privatization of public services, and the liberalization of trade and investment policies. Combined, such neoliberal measures would expand the range of economic activity through which capital could

profitably redeploy its over-accumulated surplus. While the assault on labor and public sector involvement in the economy increased the general rate of profit in the real economy, the deregulation of financial markets enabled capital to redeploy its surplus in derivative financial markets that offered rapid and high rates of return without the risks that accompanied longer term capital investment in the real productive economy<sup>8</sup> (Patnaik, 2020).

Global South states would, from the outset, come to disproportionately bear the costs of this emergent neoliberal mode of global capital accumulation. Financialization, for example, was significantly advanced through the recycling of overaccumulated “petrodollars,” in the form of loans, from US banks to Global South states (Gowan, 1997). The US treasury’s shift to high interest rates in the late 1970s made these loans increasingly profitable for US lending institutions while entrapping states across the Global South in a severe debt crisis. The major international financial institutions - the IMF and World Bank - made further loans conditional upon indebted states enacting “structural adjustment policies” such as privatization, liberalization, and deregulation.

Neoliberal structural adjustment policies would come to be applied with particular force upon the agricultural sectors of Global South states (Moyo and Patnaik, 2011; Patnaik, 2003; Ghosh, 2005). The dominant agribusiness firms of the Global North had been experiencing, since the 1970s, a crisis of overproduction of key grain commodities such as wheat, rice, and corn (McMichael, 2004). The link between these accumulation imperatives and the imposition of US led neoliberal reforms on Global South states is evident in the prominent role assumed by Cargill, the largest US grain trader, in the GATT negotiations that would ultimately lead to the formation of the World Trade Organization (WTO). Cargill representatives lobbied aggressively in favor of a ‘free’ global market for agriculture, arguing that developing countries should abandon goals of food self-sufficiency and allow instead for global market forces to determine what they should grow domestically and what they should provision via imports from more “productive” agricultural producers in the Global North (McMichael, 1997). The WTO Agreement on Agriculture would facilitate such “free” global market competition by requiring developing states to remove their so-called “trade distorting” farmer support programs. By dismantling farmer support programs - such as protective tariffs, input subsidies, public credit, and state marketing boards - the IFIs were exposing

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<sup>8</sup> Real economy refers to the production and distribution of goods and services, and is commonly contrasted with the ‘virtual’ economy of finance, which is centered upon the exchange of assets and claims (e.g. shares, futures contracts) derived from the real economy.

the agricultural sectors of Global South states to unequal global market competition with heavily subsidized agribusiness producers from the Global North. Structural adjustment thus enabled overproducing Global North agribusiness to dump their surplus on Global South states, which had deleterious consequences for the productive capacity and livelihoods of peasants across the Global South<sup>9</sup>.

### **India's Long Agrarian Crisis**

Negotiating an IMF bailout package and ascension into the WTO in the early 1990s, key policy makers in the Indian state embraced the neoliberal structural adjustment program and began enacting neoliberal reforms in the field of agriculture, including the reduction of input subsidies, the scaling back of rural public infrastructural investment, and the rolling back of public credit provisioning for the rural sector (Reddy and Sharma, 2010). Global North states applied further pressure through WTO negotiations and World Bank memorandums for India to dramatically scale back, and even eliminate, the minimum support prices (MSP) the state had provided in order to stabilize the livelihoods of farmers (Patnaik, 2003; RUPE, 2021). While the Indian state resisted at the time the outright dismantlement of the MSP system for foodgrains, due to pressure applied from below by farmers in the major grain producing states, it did take significant steps to scale back the level of support offered for particular crops, as is seen most clearly in the case of edible oilseeds (Vyas and Kaushik, 2020). The reforms that were adopted more wholesale, such as the reduction in input subsidies for fertilizers and pesticides and the rolling back of rural public credit, would increase the costs borne by farmers and thus generate a severe debt crisis that would come to be a principal determinant of the tragic epidemic of farmer suicides that would most evidently mark the neoliberal agrarian crisis in India in the 1990s and 2000s (Reddy and Sharma, 2010; Patnaik, 2003). While the reduction of input subsidies and exposure to global market competition increased levels of indebtedness, the collapse of public credit offered through regional rural banks forced indebted farmers to turn to either informal moneylenders or private sector banks that would charge high rates of interest and

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<sup>9</sup> On the broader impact of neoliberal agrarian restructuring on Global South states, see Moyo and Yeros (2005), *Reclaiming the Land: The Resurgence of Rural Movements in Asia, Africa, and Latin America*.

entrap borrowers in seemingly inescapable cycles of debt-interest payments<sup>10</sup> (Swaminathan and Ramachandran, 2005; Reddy and Sharma, 2006).

The first BJP government (1999-2004) moved to deepen the neoliberal agrarian reforms begun under the previous Congress government, which had the effect of further intensifying the agrarian crisis (RUPE, 2021). Increasing opposition to the neoliberal consensus from agrarian sectors played a significant role in the defeat of the BJP government in the 2004 elections, and forced upon the incoming UPA government a mandate to reverse the neoliberal program and renew support for agricultural livelihoods (Sanyal, 2007; Chatterjee, 2008). This led to the introduction of a series of laws - MGNREGA, Food Security Act, Land Acquisition Act, and the Forest Rights Protection Act - that guaranteed access to rural employment and food more broadly, and defended the land rights of farmers against corporate interests. While these laws, in combination with limited restoration of public investment in the agricultural sector, were observed to have gone some way towards ameliorating the neoliberal agrarian crisis (Lerche, 2013), they were experienced as constraints on accumulation by both global and national agribusiness corporations (Ahuja, 2014; Kripke, 2015; Sally and Watts, 2016).

### **Neoliberal Restoration: The Financialization of Agriculture and the Rise of Agri-tech**

As India and other “rising” Global South states, such as Brazil under the leadership of the Workers Party, enacted ameliorative measures to support livelihoods that had been undermined by neoliberal reforms, a growing convergence between financial and agribusiness capital was being forged as a means of escaping the ongoing structural crises of overaccumulation and overproduction. In order to sustain a sufficient rate of profit, multinational agribusiness firms such as Cargill were normally compelled, due to the low margins associated with international grain trading, to monopolize both high volumes of the global grain trade and, even more crucially, access to information of “on the ground” agricultural conditions (Clapp et al, 2012; Salerno, 2017). Control over information in key commodity producing and consuming regions has been critical for agribusiness firms to be able to move first, in relation to their competitors, and maximize where and when they could buy

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<sup>10</sup> For further discussion and evidence regarding the contraction of public credit for agriculture under the first wave of neoliberal reform see the following sources: Reddy and Sharma, 2006; Reddy and Sharma 2010; Patnaik, 2003; Patnaik 2007. On the undermining of the regional rural banks in particular, see Ramachandran and Swaminathan, 2005.

low and sell high. In light of the ongoing overproduction crisis that continued to squeeze grain trade margins, agribusiness firms were particularly motivated to utilize the growing global deregulation of financial speculation in agricultural commodities, from the 2000s onwards, to pursue higher, and more rapidly realized, rates of profit through trade in agricultural derivatives (Bursch and Lawrence, 2009; Clapp, 2014; Salerno, 2017). The links between finance and agriculture were simultaneously being deepened from the opposite direction, as finance capital itself sought refuge from the 2008 financial crisis by rapidly exiting conventional financial markets and rushing into agricultural commodity and land markets that were identified as more secure forms of investment (Bursch and Lawrence, 2009). Combined, these two movements - the financialization of agriculture and the agriculturalization of finance<sup>11</sup> - converged to generate momentum towards an emergent financial-agribusiness mode of accumulation (Ansuew et al, 2017).

This financial-agribusiness model of accumulation would consolidate further with the renewal of AI technologies from the mid 2000s onwards. Advances in data processing hardware along with the development of machine learning algorithms resulted in quantum leaps in social-technological capacity for data collection, processing, and deployment in service of more intelligent technologies. The broader political economy implications of the rise of AI have come to be predominantly associated with the emergence of the “platform capitalism” of the Big Tech firms of Facebook, Google, and Amazon (Dyer-Witherford et al, 2019). The motive force of platform capitalism is increasingly the harvesting of data from, rather than the sale of products to, consumers interacting on tech platforms.

It has been relatively less observed, however, the extent to which such platform capitalism has converged with the emerging “financial-agribusiness” mode of accumulation described above. Cargill, the world’s largest agribusiness corporation, had already brought into existence what it termed the “Cargill Platform” in the mid 1980s as a means through which the information collected from the vast array of Cargill subsidiaries and contractors across the world could

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<sup>11</sup> The financialization of agriculture refers to the increasing prominence of a secondary agricultural economy centered upon pursuing profits through trade in agricultural derivatives rather than through trade in real agricultural goods. For example, this would involve the speculative purchase and sale of futures contracts for wheat rather than the real purchase of wheat itself. The growth of this phenomenon, along with the broader interest of financial institutions to invest in agricultural commodity production, has led agribusiness firms to internally develop their own finance divisions. The agriculturalization of finance is a term coined by Henry and Prince (2018) to capture how finance itself was not only transforming agriculture but was itself being transformed by the growing presence of agricultural commodities in the financial economy.

be processed in order to facilitate the realization of higher margins in grain trading (Salerno, 2017). With the turn to financialization in the 2000s, the Platform enabled Cargill to position itself as an attractive fund manager for larger institutional investors seeking both the stable rate of return on investments in the real agricultural economy and the high rapid return available through speculating in agricultural derivatives markets (Clapp et al, 2012; Salerno, 2017). The Platform's capacity to access data from across the world left Cargill strongly positioned to anticipate, and possibly manipulate, commodity price swings and thus be able to determine with greater surety when to sell short or hold long in the derivatives market. The development of agritech data analytics over the past decade, through precision farm technologies and smart apps for the sale and purchase of agricultural products from farm to fork, has made it possible for agribusiness firms to build out larger platforms for accessing and processing increasing quantities of data drawn from commodity producers and consumers across the world (Clapp and Ruder, 2020). The accelerated shift from a focus on harvesting commodities to harvesting data enhances the capacity of agribusiness firms to generate quick profits through financial speculation.

### **The Farm Laws and the Global Financial-Agritech Accumulation Regime**

With the return to power of the BJP in 2014, the movement of global and national agribusiness to take over India's grain trade would once again be renewed. Cargill, for example, enthusiastically embraced the new Modi government for creating a more favorable "business climate" and claimed to have a higher interest, as a result, in investing larger sums of capital in Indian agriculture (Sally and Watts, 2016). At the time, Cargill had established itself primarily in food processing in India, and particularly in the edible oil market (Goyal, 2018). It had also emerged as the second largest grain trader in India, after the federal government, and was making clear its interests in expanding its market share in grain procurement. Specifically, Cargill has claimed that if the state marketing boards, or the APMC, were to be dismantled, then it would be possible to make Indian grains more competitive on the global market and that an increase in export levels would only serve to benefit Indian farmers (Dutt, 2020).

Initially, the Modi led BJP government, perhaps constrained by electoral calculations during its first term, resisted dismantling the MSP system. Confronting a renewed crisis of overproduction of wheat in the 2010s, due to increased yields across all major grain producing regions (Nunn, 2018), US

agribusiness would continue to press both the Obama and Trump administrations to pressure India and China in particular, via WTO adjudication, to end their supposedly “trade distorting” minimum support prices (Dhar, 2018). The dismantling of the MSP system would enable the Indian grain trade to be captured by private agribusiness interests that could then either hold grain stocks in order to drive up prices and increase profitability or compel grain farmers to convert to growing export oriented cash crops. This would, then, open greater space for US agribusiness to relieve the “overproduction” crisis by dumping wheat stocks on the Indian market. The shift from the public mandi system to private procurement via smart apps would, furthermore, provision large agribusiness firms such as Cargill with access to data on local soil quality, weather patterns, political conflicts, etc, that could enhance its capacity to generate profits for institutions investors by predicting price swings in derivatives markets<sup>12</sup>.

After having secured re-election, and under the cover of the Covid lockdown, the BJP government finally, with the passage of the 2020 farm laws, took decisive action against the MSP system and towards the privatization of Indian agricultural commodities trade more generally. In light of the discussion thus far, it becomes necessary to ask to what extent the farm laws are more concerned with the speculative profit-seeking and market capturing interests of corporate agribusiness rather than with, as the state claims, small farmers. Why is it not possible for both agribusiness capital and small farmers to benefit from the dismantling of the mandi board? Here, it seems that Cargill’s own logic justifying the farm bills demonstrates why this is not possible - you cannot both claim that you are going to make Indian grains more competitive - read cheaper - on the global market and claim that Indian farmers will experience a dramatic increase in the price level they are receiving for their grain harvests. Furthermore, the experience of Global South states that were forced to dismantle their state marketing boards in the 1980s suggests that the outcome will be one in which grain trading companies like Cargill will corner the grain stocks and the anticipated “free market” being promoted loudly by the BJP will quickly assume a monopoly character in which the buyer will have much more leverage in setting the price than the seller<sup>13</sup> (Moseley and Carney, 2010;

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<sup>12</sup> For further discussion on the link between agritech, data collection, and financial speculation see Clapp and Rudd, 2020 and Salerno, 2017.

<sup>13</sup> In a specific discussion on the impact of World Bank and IMF imposed Structural Adjustment Programs on state marketing boards in Gambia, Cote D’Ivoire, and Mali, Moseley and Carney (2006) demonstrate how the forced dismantling of state marketing boards enabled transnational agribusiness firms to monopolize the purchase and sale of grains. For small and medium farmers



McMichael, 2005). The export orientation that Cargill is promoting here recalls, in troubling ways, the colonial system of agriculture that starved to death tens of millions of people during the colonial era. As Utsa Patnaik's (2002) work has shown, export oriented agriculture in developing countries is often associated with rising rates of hunger.

In addition to Cargill, there are domestic capitalist forces at play as well. Most prominent amongst these is Reliance Inc, and specifically its increasing interests of diversifying into the agritech sector through its JioKrishi app that explicitly aims to take over India's food system from farm to fork. The digital agricultural market that Reliance is hoping to build and dominate depends, however, upon the dismantling first of the existing mandi board system. Reliance is promising increased efficiency and safety in the era of Covid - that customers can simply order their food through the app and have it delivered directly to their homes, and farmers can find the highest bidder for their harvests through the app (Bhalla, 2020). The Reliance JioKrishi initiative received significant momentum earlier in 2020 when Facebook made a large investment that provided it a ten percent ownership stake in Jio, which provides Facebook with an opening through which to introduce its whatsapp payment into India (Ghosh and Wagner, 2020). Previously, Facebook had struggled getting regulatory approval for the whatsapp payment in India, but soon after making the investment, and shortly after the farm bills were passed, the whatsapp payment received regulatory authorization.

Viewed more critically, this emergent agritech mode of accumulation, whether pursued by Reliance-Facebook or Cargill, will be built upon extracting value via data from farmers. Farmers will provide data through their use of the app, and will be forced to adjust their behaviour according to the data analytics returned to them by agribusiness firms holding a data monopoly. Ultimately, this will produce an entirely unequal market space through which farmers will be forced to sell their actual harvest to firms with total monopoly on information they have analyzed from the data points they have accessed from individual farmers. The old "national development" system was at least one that allowed farmers to negotiate with the state on a more collective footing and based on access to public knowledge via state agricultural extension agents.

The persistence of the protests waged by farmers against the farm laws represents a revitalization of the countervailing social power necessary to contest and check

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of these countries, the consequence was a reduction in the output price they received, which generated livelihood crises and more broadly impacted national food self-sufficiency.

the power of agribusiness capital in appropriating agrarian surplus value. The strength and determination demonstrated by the farmers' movements makes clear that they do not buy the claims of Cargill and Reliance that they will organize a more efficient, productive farm to fork system that will benefit both farmers and consumers. Rather, the farmers rightly anticipate a future in which large grain traders, or "smart apps", corner the markets and set the low prices at which they will be forced to sell their grains. In a context in which the ecological contradictions of the green revolution - such as lowering water table levels, depleting soil fertility, resistant weeds and pests - are constantly increasing input costs for farmers, in the form of fertilizer and pesticide use, a decrease in the output price can only but intensify the debt crisis for farmers (Reddy and Sharma, 2010; Patel, 2013). This may in fact lead to a mass "exit from agriculture" that is meant to be the end point of development (Li, 2009). However, by now, nearly thirty years after India began liberalizing and privatizing its agricultural sector, it is clear that there are not post-agricultural jobs that displaced cultivators can turn towards. India has, in fact, experienced sustained jobless growth - even with its high GDP growth rates there has been minimal increase in employment in the industrial and service sectors (Kannan and Raveendran, 2009). The future that may await displaced farmers may be that of what Mike Davis (2005) foresaw in his text "The Planet of the Slums" where he predicted that neoliberal agricultural policies that were expelling tens of millions from agriculture would lead to a growth in urban slums inhabited by the permanently unemployed/underemployed. In this sense, the struggle of Indian farmers is not theirs alone - this is a fight for survival that is confronting small farmers and peasants across the Global South. They are, as such, right to oppose these bills with the ferocity with which they have done so.

While preserving the existing MSP system in its current form will not resolve the entrenched agrarian crisis in India, dismantling the system can only further intensify the crisis. There are promising signs that the form of the protests in Delhi have instigated a political imaginary that is reaching beyond the MSP issue. The inspiring scenes of the institution of langar at the protests - this is a central tenet of Sikhi that centers communal preparation, service, and consumption of food as an embodied transcendence of unjust relations of caste. The centrality of langar at the protests point towards a world in which food is grown, prepared, and served in common, in community, for the purposes not of profit but rather of sustaining community and earth in service of a higher power. The insistence on maintaining kisan-mazdoor ekta, or unity, may, one can hope, center the need to complete the land reform project that the green revolution interrupted so that landless labourers, who disproportionately are Dalits, can finally secure access to land in Punjab, and

the prominence of women farmers at the protests would hopefully instigate further reforms recognizing and compensating the invisible and unpaid agricultural labor performed by women in Punjab.

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## **Mending the Social?**

### **Reflections on the Farmer's Agitation in Contemporary India**

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#### **Abstract**

This essay is a reflection of some of the distinctive aspects of the ongoing farmer's movement in India that has passed its one-year mark. Situating the movement in the agrarian context of the region, I show the multi-pronged nature of the movement and the diverse tools that it has deployed for protesting against the controversial farm laws, which if it had been implemented would have further aggravated rural distress in the region. In this essay, I claim that the movement is also unique in the alliances that it has forged in the course of articulating its resistance, which though not firmed up as yet, has the potential to strengthen India's democracy.

#### **Introduction**

Drawing on a social movement perspective, this article dwells on the distinctive aspects of the ongoing farmer's agitation in India, which has now lasted for nearly a year. Farmer agitations in rural India are not new, in fact at different historical conjunctures, peasants and farmers have risen up in protest against prevailing exploitation and marginalization and thus, reflecting their 'revolutionary potential'<sup>14</sup> (Shah, 2001). In the recent years too, we have witnessed a recurrent manifestation of discontent among farmers through their campaigns and long marches to the capital city. They have sought intervention as the importance of agriculture gradually declined in the national imagination (Jodhka 2018, Gupta 2005).

In this essay, I make an attempt to situate and understand the ongoing farmers movement in the Punjab-Haryana-Western Uttar Pradesh region since June-July

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<sup>14</sup> The debate pertaining to whether Indian farmers had revolutionary potential or not is quite old. (See Ghanshyam Shah (2001) for a full account.

2020 onwards in Punjab, after the ordinances<sup>15</sup> were published and more intensely since November 2020 when farmers started gathering at the Singhu and Tikri borders of Delhi. Is it a mobilisation like the ones we have seen before by the farmers' or does it signal a deeper crisis in the agrarian society in India? What is distinctive about the nature of this mobilisation? What possibilities do social movements like these, offer for our democracy?

Through analysis of newspaper accounts, blogs, speeches, interviews and academic articles, this piece argues that a) the ongoing farmer's movement is distinctive in the range of questions that it has raised; it reflects a crisis within rural society that has intensified due to a deepening of globalization; the movement unfolded several interwoven narratives and contexts and needs to be understood in the larger context of dispossession brought on by neoliberal policies; b) a distinctive aspect of this struggle has been the forging of intersectional alliances, between erstwhile antagonistic groups, across caste, class, gender and religion; though not yet settled, these alliances create a sense of hope in alternative possibilities that might evolve and strengthen Indian democracy; c) the movement is also distinctive in its use of nonviolence as a strategy of protest despite violence and non-recognition by the state in the course of their long struggle; the alliances and relationships that have been forged during this period have the potential of mending a society that is fractured along multiple lines.

### **Multi-pronged character**

The farmers' mobilization, which began since June 2020, have been hailed as 'the largest farmer's protest in the world' (Lerche, 2021). These protests may have started against farm laws and the demand for making Minimum Support Price (MSP) into law, but it has raised a range of issues that affect the farmers today. The issues range from struggles around the viability of agriculture to questions of food security, from the fears of land dispossession and a consequent loss of farmers' identity, to the long term demand for land reforms, equality and social justice as the spectre of corporatisation of agriculture looms large (Sandhu 2021, Sinha 2020). There were initial attempts at several rounds of dialogue between the

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<sup>15</sup> The farm ordinances led to 3 bills being passed in September 2020 which "aimed at transformation of agriculture and raising farmer's income.". These were the Essential Commodities (Amendment) Bill, 2020; the Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement of Price Assurance and Farm Services Bill, 2020; and the Farmers' Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Bill, 2020 which were passed in September 2020.

representatives of farmer unions and the government, but the lack of progress towards finding a solution led to a decision by the farmers to continue their agitation by staging sit-ins at different borders of Delhi, since they were not allowed to enter the city.

Their agitation gradually expanded to providing a critique of the government and its stance, as they travelled to other states like West Bengal to mobilise support for their cause. Sections of the movement have even upheld the right to dissent by protesting against the UAPA laws which have imprisoned social activists and intellectuals and the reading down of Article 370 (Singh, 2021) by the government. Expanding the scope of their protest can be seen as an attempt to challenge the legitimacy of the government itself and work towards a change of regimes. This attempt to connect with the other ongoing social movements and lend their support and express solidarity is a unique aspect of the farmers' movement, as it upholds and recognises people's voices in a democracy.

While the peasant movements in the colonial period highlighted the excesses of colonial rule as well as degradation of their lives as a result of an exploitative feudal social structure, it was through the many *satyagrahas* during the colonial period that the larger nationalist concerns of the peasants became manifest. Similarly, farmer's movements during the 1980s were distinct as they were led by the owner cultivators (and not peasants). They demanded subsidies in electricity, irrigation facilities, seeds and also articulated the divide between 'Bharat versus India' (Jodhka, 2018). These agrarian protests also saw the growing importance of farmers' organisations like the Bharatiya Kisan Union and Shetkari Sangathana which kept away from party politics and thus consolidated their leverage as a pressure group. Being multi pronged in nature, these mobilisations also 'tried to influence the national policies on prices and taxation structure as well as the approaches to basic planning and development' (Gupta 2002 :195). The ongoing agitation needs to be seen in relation to other such protests which have occurred during the decade of the 1990s, after the new economic policies were introduced. The new economic policies brought in several changes in agriculture which included trade liberalisation, fall of subsidies and other protections enjoyed by agriculture which has adversely affected productivity, the increasing volatility of agricultural markets which has had an impact on cropping patterns and so on. The current movement has evolved into a larger one attempting to address various cracks in the structure of Indian society.

However, a concern that still remains neglected are the implications of farming in an ecologically degraded region, with depleting groundwater levels. This could be

salvaged if there is diversification in cropping patterns. Though the farmers' mobilisations of 2018 had raised the concerns of climate change, the issue seems to have been bypassed the agitating farmers as well as the state (Kumar et al, 2020). A historical understanding of movements thus provides a glimpse of the changing rural life over the years. A singular narrative of protest demanding the revocation of farm laws and the reinstatement of the minimum support price (MSP) is not helpful to comprehend either the complexity or the variety of issues that affect the farmers in India today or the significance of the farmers' movements for Indian society.

Nevertheless, these multi layered narratives of protest are valuable in themselves as they reflect the existing context of rural distress and concerns of regional political economy. Apart from the rich scholarly works (Kumar 2018, 2021; Jodhka 2012) which have documented the changing dynamics of social relations in a predominantly agrarian society, these protests reveal how the major faultlines of caste, class, gender and religion that have shaped agrarian relations in the region are being negotiated and bridged in interesting ways through the intermediation of the farmers' organisations, in the context of these protests.

### **Of intersectional alliances**

The contemporary farmers movement has created space for erstwhile antagonistic groups to come closer to each other in a society which is deeply patriarchal and feudal in character. In order to understand the nature of agrarian social relations in the region, a few words on the nature of Indian rural life is necessary. Rural society in India is a differentiated universe constituted of a range of interests in land. Though the pattern of landownership is uneven in the villages and broadly corresponds to the caste hierarchy, the land based arrangements vary regionally. For example, while in the Gangetic plains land is cultivated primarily by tenants, sharecroppers and small farmers, land is owned and cultivated largely by Jat landowners with the assistance of agricultural labourers who belong to the lower castes in Haryana, Punjab and Western Uttar Pradesh. Traditionally, though the big, small and marginal farmers share similar caste backgrounds, the relationship between the landowners and agricultural workers, who are largely drawn from the Dalit and lower artisan castes among the Muslims, is dependent and antagonistic in nature.

Uttar Pradesh has seen farmer's movements in the 1980s. The farmers were brought together by Mahendra Singh Tikait under the Bharatiya Kisan Union (BKU). In BKU's parlance, a cultivator had to be a landowner in order to be recognised as a

farmer, and by this definition agricultural labourers were excluded. Tikait included Muslim farmers and forged strong ties with them (Gupta, 2001). The unity between the farmers suffered in the absence of a strong leader especially after Tikait passed away. Further, the decline of the *jajmani* system which held groups together however unequally, the rise of nonfarm occupations which led to the migration of the youth eroded the 'agrarian sociality' (Kumar, 2018) allowing for gradual inroads of right-wing divisive politics in the region. The slow communalisation of politics resulted in the Muzaffarnagar riots in 2013. It showed that a wedge had been driven between Hindu and Muslim farmers.

In the course of this agitation, the farmers' unions forged several strategic and structural alliances between different groups of people in the region. Though in the initial months, the mobilisation was seen largely as an agitation that was spearheaded by and restricted to Jat Sikhs, who were powerful and owned large areas of land in Punjab and Haryana, there was a realisation in the subsequent months in this prolonged fight that they would need the support of small and marginal farmers as well as agricultural workers. This was reiterated in the speeches made at the numerous *mahapanchayats* held by the farmer leaders. The construction of collective identity is very important for a movement's mobilization. Undertaken through a process of negotiation, and collective participation, the revival of the identities of the farmer and the labourer (Kumar, 2021) was a very important step towards forging new solidarities, moving away from caste and religious identities that divided the region. The farmer leaders, especially the sons of Mahendra Singh Tikait, made a conscious overture to connect with Mohammed Jaula,<sup>16</sup> who had worked closely with Tikait in building the BKU. This was an attempt to secure the support of Muslim farmers of the region.

Being anxious of their future, the Dalit labourers joined the protests under the banner of Zameen Prapti Sangharsh Committee (ZPSC) and Punjab Khet Mazdoor Union (PKMU). The corporate control over land would mean a loss of livelihoods, wages and even access to food (Singh, 2021). The unions felt specifically that 'the introduction of contract farming was anti-farmer and anti-labour' (Singh, 2021). 'Though their fight against the Jats was feasible within the existing structure, how would they fight the corporatisation of agriculture' (Sandhu, 2021). The dilution

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<sup>16</sup> Mohammed Jaula had moved away and formed his own organisation, when Rakesh and Naresh Tikait, sons of Mahendra Singh Tikait grew closer to the BJP. It is said that they even participated in the riots in 2013, where many Muslims lives were lost.

of the Essential Commodities Act<sup>17</sup> as a part of the farm laws would affect the food security of the nation at large and the lower castes and classes in particular. Through a process of repeated and vigorous campaigning across the villages, Dalit organisations like PKMU<sup>18</sup> emphasised that the farm laws would adversely impact even the poor farm labourers and not just the upper caste landowners (Singh, 2021).

The farm laws were expected to have a gendered impact especially on small and marginal farmers and labourers, a large proportion of whom are women. Traditionally made invisible by caste and patriarchy, these women farmers played a significant role by participating in the movement in both direct and indirect manner. They strengthened the protests. As members of farm unions, they devoted themselves to educating people in the villages about the laws, they made their presence felt at Singhu and Tikri borders along with men and even on their own, sent rations to Tikri to sustain the farmers who were staying there for months together (Rao and Talwar 2021, Talwar, 2021). In this manner, the women prioritised and sustained the protests during this period.

The ‘*arhthiyas*,’ another category of people, who are regarded as exploitative ‘middlemen’ and whose fate would become uncertain if the farm laws were implemented, occupy an ambivalent position in the rural economy. Closely connected to the *mandi*, these *arhthiyas* help the farmers in manifold ways<sup>19</sup>. Many *arhthiyas* today are Jat Sikhs and are substantial farmers too. Even though they have conflicting interests, they are considered to be ‘the lifelines of the farmers in the region’ (Gupta, 2021). A sense of class solidarity was forged as *arhthiyas* joined these protests demanding the repeal of farm laws.

Though intersectionality has emerged as a widely used concept in the social sciences, its presence in social movements has not been analysed substantially. The farmers mobilisation in attempting to bridge the gap between caste, class, gender and religious identities in the region, not only foregrounded multiple axes of privilege and discrimination, it also showed how intersectional interests can work to strengthen social movements. These structural alliances, though fragile and still

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<sup>17</sup> The Essential Commodities (Amendment) Act 2020 would remove cereals, pulses, oilseeds, edible oils, onions and potatoes from the list of essential commodities. It would also reduce the limit on stocks and storage of these commodities

<sup>18</sup> The PKMU ran campaigns named Chetna and Jagriti (Consciousness and Wakefulness) in phases across villages.

<sup>19</sup> *Arhthiyas* help in weighing, grading and sorting of grain, they function as fertiliser and pesticide agents, as money lenders. they advance loans and help farmers transport their produce to the *mandi* and ensure that it is sold. They are people who provide general knowledge about the system.

evolving, raise hopes and make these movements distinctive especially in a region which has seen riots and polarisation as well as economic distress brought on due to the agrarian crisis. Thus following Silke Roth, we can say that ‘intersectionality matters for all social movements - both as an analytic and political strategy’ (2021:1).

### **A non-violent inclusive civil resistance**

The farmers movement has been distinctive in its strategic use of ‘principled non-violence, i.e. the moral and ethical refusal to use violence’ (Nepstad 2011 : xii) to achieve its purpose. Despite attempts by the political representatives of the ruling party at the Centre, its supporters and a section of the media, to vilify and delegitimise the farmers mobilisation by labelling them as ‘pro-Khalistan’, ‘anti national’ ‘Naxalites,’ as ‘those supported by Pakistan and China’ (Khanna, 2021), the movement carried on its passive resistance in a peaceful, disciplined and democratic manner.

This was enabled due to the efforts of the farmers’ unions. A prolonged process of conscientization undertaken at the local level by these organisations clarified for the average farmer different aspects of the laws, what was at stake and how it would affect them personally. The initial months of protests in Punjab was a period marked by debates and arguments - a process through which the farmers sharpened their position against the bills and crystallised their demands. A widespread sentiment that was created was that the corporates would dispossess the farmers of their land. Therefore, ‘repeal or nothing’ emerged as a core demand, along with a set of subsidiary demands on the extension of Minimum Support Price (MSP) to other crops as they prepared for a long battle ahead. The creation of their own parallel ‘communication ecosystem’ (Ranjan, 2021) consisting of newspapers, information centres, and IT cell, enabled them to challenge the dominant political narrative manufactured by the state and remain connected to the actual reality on the ground. The farmer leaders also played a very important role in channelising the emotions (concerns, fears and anger) of the farmers into a strong awareness that they have to keep their protests peaceful in order to succeed. Acts of violence and anger were eschewed along with the added realisation that ‘they were being watched by the nation’ (Sircar, 2020).

Though political leaders across the spectrum extended their support for the farm laws, a deliberate strategy of the farmer’s organisations was to keep political leaders out of the main stage of the protest. The intention was to keep the reigns of the

movement firmly in the hands of the Samyukta Kisan Morcha- a platform which had brought together nearly 400 small and large organisations of farmers. This was similar to an earlier mobilisation against the Citizenship Amendment Act 2019, which saw a prolonged sit-in by Muslim women at Shaheen Bagh in Delhi and at different sites across the country. At the protest sites, entire villages and ‘*kunbas*’<sup>20</sup> were set up by the farmers, including community kitchens and libraries, where reading of revolutionary poetry from figures such as Pash and Sant Ram Udasi lifted their spirit, folk singers performing *ragnis* created an ethos replete with cultural symbolism. (Siwach 2021, Prashad, 2021)

What marred this communitarian ethos was the loss of farmers lives during the protests.<sup>21</sup> The experience of pain and loss did not provoke retaliation. In fact, it strengthened their resolve to fight and the adherence to a common cause created a sense of community, belongingness and self-restraint.

In this manner, on an everyday basis, the farmer’s movement used social and political power without resorting to violence or the threat of violence. It demonstrated the political effectiveness of non-violence as a form of struggle and also how civil resistance can be equally disruptive, being located outside the institutional methods of political change (Nepstad, 2011). While peasant movements like Tebhaga, Telangana and Naxalbari involved violence and invited violent state reprisal in turn, non-violent civil resistance as the farmers’ agitation has shown, has a moral power which can strike at the root of established regimes.

## Conclusion

The significance of the farmers movements lies in the fact that it allowed us to revisit the faultlines that have intensified in the local agrarian society, more specifically in the Punjab-Haryana-West UP region, due to a deepening of the processes of globalisation and its attendant consequences on a large section of people. As a social movement, the farmers’ mobilisation has led to a lot of churning within the local society, the ramifications of which were felt far beyond. In giving rise to new solidarities, enacting new forms of participation and raising significant questions, the agitation showed us how democratic values can be upheld and

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<sup>20</sup> A group of extended family members

<sup>21</sup> About 600 odd farmers lost their lives either due to adverse weather, or the conditions prevalent at the site of the protests, and more recently due to a wilful attack on a peaceful jatha at Lakhimpur Kheri.



strengthened on an everyday basis. The mobilisation has not ended. Although the farmers movement has been successful in ensuring that the laws are withdrawn, it still remains to be seen how farmer unions fulfil their commitments to their participants and bring about a gradual change in deeply entrenched agrarian relations.

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## Farm laws, Indian capitalism and Hindutva

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As part of Hindutva's politico-economic perspective on India, with a specific focus on the agrarian economy, the current Bharatiya Janata Party government (henceforth the BJP), which represents Hindutva ideology, brought in three Ordinances on June 5, 2020, in the name of reforming agricultural marketing and improving farmer welfare. All three were given hurried Parliamentary and Presidential approval, without stakeholder consultation or proper parliamentary scrutiny, before becoming law in September 2020 (Singh, T et al 2021).<sup>22</sup> These Ordinances were the following: the *Farmers' (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement on Price Assurance and Farm Services Ordinance, 2020*; the *Farmers' Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Ordinance, 2020*; and the *Essential Commodities (Amendment) Ordinance, 2020*.<sup>23</sup>

On the face of it, these farm laws may appear to be measures aimed solely at agricultural marketing reform. However, to view them only as marketing reform measures would be deceptive and illusory. Penetrating behind those illusions may reveal to us the reality of deeper connections between these laws and the historically specific conjuncture of Indian capitalism, and the link between that conjuncture of Indian capitalism and the Hindutva ideological perspective on India.

At first glance, there does not seem to be a direct relationship between the farm laws and Hindutva. The relationship works through several mediations. We look at these mediations below in arriving at the concrete relationship between the farm laws and Hindutva. In an attempt to tease out these mediations, we approach this subject in the following order: first, we consider at the changing facets of Indian capitalism from 1947 onwards; second, we study how nationalism and centralisation occupy key pivotal positions in these changing facets; and third, we

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<sup>22</sup> The materials from two earlier articles (P. Singh 2020a, 2020b) and T. Singh *et al* (2021) have been so extensively used in this article that the relevant passages have not always been cited here except in those cases where a specific point refers to the earlier articles. I strongly recommend that the reader consult T. Singh *et al* (2021) for an in-depth examination of many aspects of the political economy of the laws, policies and protests that have a bearing on this article, which focuses mainly on the interconnections between the farm laws, the Indian mode of capital accumulation and the Hindutva vision on India.

<sup>23</sup> Since the three Ordinances after being introduced as Bills in Parliament became Acts or laws after the Parliament approval and the Presidential assent, the words Ordinances/Bills/Acts or laws are used interchangeably in the paper.

investigate how nationalism and centralisation are critically placed in relation to the Hindutva vision of India, and how the agrarian strategy behind these laws is linked with the latest Hindutva view of Indian capitalism and its link with the Hindutva transformation of India.

Given the vast scope of the subject being covered, this article forms an introduction to the subject, and can be considered as a proposal for a project involving various aspects that would need detailed empirical exploration and substantiation and, indeed, theoretical elaboration.

### **Indian capitalism and nationalism**

The history of Indian capitalism in the post-1947 era can be divided into three main phases according to significant developments: the Nehruvian state capitalist model of development from the First Five Year Plan till roughly 1991; the neo-liberal model of capitalism with some specific Indian variations especially relating to poverty reduction and social security under the Manmohan Singh-led policy regime from 1991 until 2014; and lastly the Hindutva variation on the neo-liberal model of development from 2014 onwards. In the Hindutva model, there has been competition between the *swadeshi* model promulgated by some pro-RSS ideologues and the Modi-led global India model. In that internal competition the Modi model has clearly triumphed. Despite these variations between the three phases and those between the two strands of the Hindutva model, what all phases and strands have in common is the embedding of nationalism.

This nationalism was expressed through the circulation of slogans such as, among others, the historic-sounding 'nation in the making', the ideological 'idea of India' and the reverent 'mother India'. Common to all such formulations was the imagining of India as one family or entity or identity. This oneness was both territorial and ideological. The anti-colonialism of India's movement for Independence from British rule, expressed through the concept of *swarajiya* (self-rule) for Indians, empowered the ideology of Indian nationalism in the mass consciousness. The imagination of the self-awakened India aiming to achieve *swarajiya* (self-rule) had special resonance with the majority Hindu population because of the prospect of ending many centuries of rule by non-Hindus and consequently of Hindus regaining power. The ideological and emotional legacy of this anti-colonial self-rule nationalism was a powerful emotional current, and an ideological worldview linked to the concept of India as one unified and proud nation. Whether it was the inward-looking import-substituting model of the

Nehruvian era, the outwardly oriented export-promotion model of the Manmohan Singh era, or indeed the global India model under Modi, nationalism remained the central ideological force in policy-making and in economic strategies as well in related policy initiatives such as those related to foreign policy or defence policy.

### **Indian nationalism (Congress and Hindutva versions) and centralisation**

The project of creating India as one unified nation out of existing multiple identities as multiple nations/nationalities, regions, linguistic communities, religions and castes was pivotal to the movement for national independence from British rule which was hegemonized by the Indian National Congress under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru (Chandra et al 2017). In building this unified India in which all diverse identities are either annihilated or muted or transformed in conformity with that unitarian vision, centralisation was seen, especially by Nehru who became its chief proponent, as a key politico-ideological, institutional and economic strategy (Singh 2008, Anderson 2013, Singh 2014). It was partly the Congress's unitarian vision that led them not to accede to the Muslim League's demand for regional devolution of powers as outlined in the Cabinet Mission proposals. It was the rejection both of the Muslim League's demand and of the Cabinet Mission proposals by the Congress led by Nehru which eventually led to the partition of India (Jalal 1985, Singh 2008). Nehru and his colleagues believed that accepting the vision of federal devolution proposed by Jinnah would negate the Congress's strategic vision of welding a strong unified Indian nationhood together out of multiple identities. Contrary to official proclamations by the Congress Party and its post-1947 governments in India about the tragedy of the partition, Nehru and his colleagues were hugely relieved with the creation of Pakistan because they could then get on, unhindered, unchecked and unquestioned, with the project of centralised governance in India (for documentation, see Singh 2008, especially chapter 3 'Federalism, Nationalism and India's Development Strategy: An historical overview and analytical framework'). Nehru was a non-practising Hindu or, at best an atheist, but his almost romantic notion of India's historically unified identity meant that he equated the Hindu religion with the nation. In his much-celebrated book *The Discovery of India*, Nehru writes: 'Hinduism became the symbol of nationalism. It was indeed a national religion, with all those deep instincts, racial and cultural, which form the basis everywhere of nationalism today' (cited by Anderson 2013: 54). Nehru's Hindu bias was not religious *per se* but was closely entwined with his desire to build a strong united India with a highly centralised power structure.

Nehru was also a strong believer in centralised planning as a strategy for the capitalist industrialisation of India (Bettelheim, 1968; Chakravarty, 1989; Desai, 1959, 1984, 1975, 2004). This belief led him to argue for centralisation. Furthermore, central planning in the Nehruvian strategy was not merely an economic project; it was also seen as a political project to unify the nation by reducing inter-regional disparities through the regulation and allocation of centrally-controlled public sector investment in different regions (Singh, 2008). The Nehruvian project was ostensibly 'secular' in character but because Hindu majoritarianism was structural (due to the overwhelming Hindu majority among India's population), it had the consequence of entrenching Hindu majoritarian bias in Indian institutions (Singh, 2015; Rehman, 2016; Mohapatra, 2017; Deshpande & Palshikar 2019). Nehruvian centralisation wedded to a strong sense of Indian nationalism that was believed to be necessary to build one unified Indian identity was a crucial force in the creation of the requisite ideological, cultural and institutional space for the emergence of a Hindu version of strong Indian nationalism.

Despite the continuity of the centralist approach taken by the Nehruvian Congress towards Indian nationalism and Hindutva nationalism, the crucial difference between Congress-inspired nationalism and BJP-RSS-inspired nationalism is that the latter is explicit in its ideological commitment to build 'Hindu' India. This ideological adherence to a unified Hindu India leads the BJP to take a much more aggressive approach towards centralisation than the Congress. Its promulgation of the concept 'One India, One Agriculture Market' in defence of its farming policies articulated through the farm acts, its aggressive promotion of Hindi over regional languages (far more than the Congress ever did during its reign), its decision to scrap Jammu and Kashmir's constitutional status and statehood, and its New Education Policy are some of the key indicators of the BJP's aggressive agenda of centralisation. More recently, the central BJP government has extended the powers of the Border Security Force (BSF) beyond the previous 15 kilometres from the international border to 50 kilometres (Jagat, 2021). This measure, as much as the farm laws, is a link in the chain of aggressive centralisation pursued by the current BJP regime.

The BJP sees the emergence of regional nationalist identities in states with religious Hindu majority but a significant history of opposition to the Hindu/Hindi identity, such as the Tamil and Bengali identities to name just two, as obstacles to the emergence of a transregional Indian Hindu identity. Conversely, the more articulate proponents of regional identities such as the anti-caste Tamil thinker and politician



Periyar E. V. Ramasamy viewed regions as spaces of ‘counter-hegemonic force’ against Brahmanical Hinduism (Dhanda, 2021). Just as the BJP views regional identities with suspicion – as a subversion of its agenda to create an overarching Hindu identity – the regions suspect the BJP of working towards the annihilation of regional identities (Singh 2020d).

The farmers’ movement has been a critical catalyst in drawing attention to the anti-federal and anti-regional implications of the farm laws and Hindutva centralism. The full implications of the farmers’ movement against centralisation and the Hindutva Indian nationalism aligned with that centralisation are likely to emerge more clearly in the near future in the form of greater resurgence of regional nationalist identities and political formations.

### **The Hindutva vision behind the farm laws**

The three pieces of legislation introduced hurriedly by the Modi regime during the Covid health crisis must be seen against the backdrop of the ongoing massive consolidation of select industrial groups known to be especially close to the prime minister. This intervention in agriculture by the Modi government constitutes a watershed moment in demonstrating the government’s twin aims, first, to increase the participation of domestic agrobusinesses in the field of farm production, and second, to enhance central government control of agriculture in India. Agriculture has always primarily been a ‘state’ subject but is coming increasingly under the purview of the central government (Singh 2020c, 2020e, 2021a, 2021b, 2021c, 2021d, and forthcoming). The essential objective behind the three Acts taken together is to encourage private investment by agrobusiness corporations, both domestic and foreign, in the production, processing, storage, transportation, and marketing of agricultural products. The centralised control and regulation of the economy and its increased privatisation is at the core of the BJP’s intention to promote the Hindutva agenda aligned with global capitalist economy. In the internal organisational and ideological struggle between the tendency towards inward nationalism (*swadeshi*) and the tendency towards outward-oriented global capitalism within the BJP/RSS, the Modi tendency, with its roots in Gujarati business conglomerates and representing global capitalism has decisively won. The victory of the Modi school of thought has been facilitated by the structural transformation of India’s capitalist economy; the neo-liberal integration of Indian capitalism with global capitalism is signified dramatically by the 1991 neo-liberal economic reforms brought in by the then Congress government.

The tension between the states – the locations of different regional identities – and the Centre over the farm acts has been one of the defining features in the recent political and economic scene in India. The sharp polarisation between regional identities and the BJP's unitarian Hindutva agenda was most dramatically demonstrated during the recent West Bengal State Assembly Elections in May of 2021. In the last few years, West Bengal has seen a strong emergence of the regionally-based All India Trinamool Congress party (popularly known as the TMC) led by Mamata Banerjee, the current chief minister of Bengal. In the recent assembly elections, Banerjee was able to defeat the BJP convincingly by articulating the aspirations for a Bengali regional identity in opposition to the Hindu identity that was vociferously projected by the BJP during the campaign. The farmers' organisations had actively campaigned against the BJP in this election, and the active role played by Punjab-based organisations during the campaign against the BJP seems to have played a decisive role in shaping the election results in constituencies with substantial numbers of Sikh voters.

### **Conclusion**

Nationalism has been central to the shaping of Indian capitalism in the post-1947 period, with its roots in the shaping of the Indian nationalist vision during the struggle for independence from British rule. The ways in which nationalism has embedded itself in different strategies of Indian capitalist governance have mutated over time but the embeddedness has not changed. Centralised control and regulation of the economy and politics has been viewed by all nationalist strategies as critical to making India into one unified nation. The marriage of centralisation and nationalism in the creation of Indian capitalism has been the material foundation for the rise of majoritarian Hindu nationalism. The three farm laws enacted in 2020 were aimed at extending the centralisation of agriculture. The organisational and ideological ascendancy of the Modi faction within the BJP/RSS gave further impetus to articulating Indian nationalism by projecting India as a great power in the new global capitalist economy. The neo-liberal turn of the Indian economy and the closer integration of the Indian capitalist economy with global capitalism unleashed the international capital accumulation strategies of Indian conglomerates, which saw Modi's agenda as fitting perfectly well with their interests. The farm laws, alongside those accumulation strategies, were aimed to encourage domestic agro-business corporations in alliance with global corporations to take centrally-managed control of the production, marketing, transportation, storage and processing of agricultural commodities. This gigantic project of the

centralisation of agriculture under the control of agro-business corporations faced stiff resistance from farmers, non-BJP state governments and regional national identities in India.

**Post-script:** The massive and unprecedented farmers' protest against the BJP's farming strategy represented by the three farm laws lasted for more than a year and eventually forced the government on November 19, 2021, to announce that the laws would be repealed in the session of the Indian parliament starting on November 29. The victory of the farmers' movement is a serious setback to the so far unchallenged rise of Hindutva both in India and in the Indian diaspora. The assertion of regional identities in the face of the aggressive centralisation of Hindutva also contributed to the farmers' victory, and these two forces – regional parties and farmers – joined hands in many places but most crucially in the West Bengal assembly elections.

Some of the non-BJP state governments too sensed the risk to their rule stemming from the BJP's aggressive centralising agenda, and extended support to the farmers' movement as a way of confronting that agenda. The coming assembly elections in Uttar Pradesh in 2022 could be the next crucial battle between Hindutva's centralising agenda and its opponents. In the long term, if the centralisation of economic, political, cultural and ideological powers is not reversed, majoritarian Hindu nationalism will remain in control whether in power or in opposition. That is a challenge for anti-Hindutva forces that goes beyond the contestation over farm laws.

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## **Farmers' Movement in Punjab: Consciousness and Politics**

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### **Abstract**

The paper argues that the leaders in the ongoing farmers' movement in India are playing a decisive role in raising consciousness among farmers and agricultural labourers, including influencing them to assert their rights in the political scenario at the level of state as well as the centre. The rising consciousness and fear of land<sup>24</sup> seizure are prompting the farmers' collective fight against privatization in the agricultural sector and anti-farmers policies of the central government. Although a pre-existing consciousness has played a vital role in initiating the movement, the movement itself has heightened much consciousness among farmers and farm workers. Their raised consciousness and mobilization for the movement has also forced agriculture related issues on the agendas of various political parties at all levels of politics. Thus, the paper discusses the various ways in which the farmers' organizations have raised farmers and farm labourers' consciousness that has motivated them to participate in formal politics which has far-reaching consequences for Indian democracy. Because the movement is ongoing, the analysis, thus far, is preliminary and consequently, exploratory in nature.

### **Introduction**

In Punjab, the recent farmers' movement is a result of awareness in farmers of the potential harm of the three new farm laws passed by the Government of India. It is a consciousness that has been long nurtured in the historical context of agricultural movements in Punjab. Several socio-economic and political factors have played a significant role in the rising consciousness of farmers. Due to their heightened

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<sup>24</sup>The farmers speculate that in the initial years corporate houses will provide better price of crops. Meanwhile, the government *mandis* or Agricultural Produce Marketing Committees (APMCs) will break down and then corporate houses will purchase their produce on throw away prices. However, in the context of contract farming, private firms will not provide the suitable prices of produce in case of bumper crops. The contract farming law does not allow the farmers to approach the civil courts in case of conflict or controversy. In these circumstances, the farmers will face the loss who are already in trap of vicious circle of debt. Ultimately, they have no other option to sell their land in order to repay the debt.

consciousness, farmers, particularly the educated leaders of different farmers' organizations have grasped the hidden threats of the new farm laws. Thus, it has played a critical role in mobilizing and organizing farmers and farm labourers against the laws.

However, a comprehensive discussion of farmers' consciousness requires grasp of the socioeconomic conditions of farmers and labourers, significance of land in farmers' consciousness as well in Punjabi society. Punjab is an agrarian state where agriculture is not merely a major source of livelihood, but also a way of life. Agricultural land and way of life are proudly offered as a legacy to future generations. It is, therefore, a socioeconomic identity of certain castes and communities in the state. The occupancy of land in Punjabi, particularly in Sikh society, has become the parameter in determining social status of individuals and caste/s (Singh, 2020a: 25; see also Singh, 1986: 297-298) as well as a path to obtaining political power. Various studies (Marenco 1976, Judge 2002, Puri 2003, Ram 2007, Baixas and Simon 2008, Singh 2016) have shown Jat Sikhs, as landowners, occupy a high social status. Although scheduled castes constitute the largest segment of the population of the state, they remain at the lowest end of the social strata because they are landless (Ram, 2007: 4070; see also Singh, 2019: 291). Furthermore, green revolution added to the value of land in the society. Although agricultural progress benefited rural society across caste and class categories (Bhalla and Chadha, 1983), it mostly benefited the landowning castes in the state. It shows that power and status in Punjabi consciousness are determined by land ownership.

Sociological analysis of the movement shows that farmers are also protesting to maintain their dominant social position in the state. In Punjabi society, as afore noted, power revolves around the axis of land. Even, social status in Sikh society is determined by the size of land holding (Puri, 2003: 297-298). During the misal and Maharaja Ranjit Singh's period, Jat Sikhs were major recipients of *jagirs* (a type of feudal land grant). Therefore, they captured the dominant position in the society (Singh, 2020: 25). The colonial government decided to follow the principal of not altering the existing social and economic order. It passed the Land Alienation Act of 1901. The Act permitted purchase of agricultural land by only those belonging to defined agricultural castes i.e. Jats, Kambojs, Sainis, Arians, Gujjars (Mukherji, 1998: 1045). These extraordinary privileges to the Jats contributed further to their caste consolidation, dominance and arrogance of privilege. In the post-independence period and after the green revolution, the land holding castes controlled the political institutions which allowed them to dominate the social space



of Punjab. Jat Sikhs, who owned the most of land, were considered socially superior than those who did not own as much land and non-agricultural castes. Thus, the ownership of land had become the criterion of Jat dominance. Therefore, farmers often assert that land is necessary for the existence of their coming generations because it is associated with their livelihood as well as asocial status. Thus, it has become a critical question for Jat Sikhs and other agricultural castes of the state to save the source of livelihood and to maintain their social status too. As a result, both consciousness and fear of losing land had become key factors in mobilization of the farmers against the central government in order to repeal the laws.

Regardless, agriculture based economic prosperity was not going to be everlasting. In the middle of 1980s, the agrarian crisis that surfaced in Punjab was attributable to stagnation in production, rising costs, indebtedness, crops failure (especially cotton) etc. (Singh et. al., 2016: xvi). Furthermore, in the 1990s, neoliberal policies resulted in the decline of public investment in agriculture sector, freezing the minimum support price (henceforth MSP), rising cost of inputs, and high cost of borrowing formally or informally. Such agricultural policies of the central government and the Punjab government deepened the agrarian distress. As a result, agrarian distress that included the heavy burden of debt carried by farmers' and agricultural labourers alike led them to commit suicide (ibid: 6). Thus, for a long period, small farmers and agricultural labourers in the state (particularly in the Malwa region) have been distressed. They were already contemplating resistance to these unjust and exploitative policies of the government. The latest set of farm laws<sup>25</sup> added fuel to the fire. It ignited the ongoing agitation by farmers in Punjab (and Haryana) initially and gradually evolved into a pan-Indian movement. The movement has received support from different sections of the society i.e. singers, artists, sports persons, traders, shopkeepers, women, employees, advocates, ex-servicemen etc. Participation from women, among all of those groups, is noteworthy. In this movement, women are playing leading roles. It is often forgotten that women too can own land and they do perform labour in the fields (Natt, 2021: 133). In this backdrop, the paper is an endeavor to reflect on the strategies employed by various farmer organizations to nurture this consciousness and facilitate understanding of the gravity of the laws in the lives of farmers and farm labourers.

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<sup>25</sup> The three laws are: 1) Farmers' Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Act, 2020; 2) Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement of Price Assurance, Farm Services Act, 2020; and 3) Essential Commodities (Amendment) Act, 2020.

The paper is divided into three parts. First part focuses on the genesis of consciousness and its assertion by the farmers in Punjab. Second part discusses the shift of farmer unions from non-electoral politics of pressure group to active participation in electoral politics. Third part deals with conclusion and implementations. The paper is primarily based on data collected in the months of August and September of 2021 in the villages in Sri Muktsar Sahib and Ferozpur districts. The instruments involved detailed interviews with farmers and ethnographic observations. According to the Oxford dictionary, the word consciousness can have at least three meanings; first, the state of being able to use the sense and mental power to understand what is happening; secondly, the state of being aware of something; thirdly, the ideas and opinions of a person or group.<sup>26</sup> Similarly, D. M. Rosenthal analyses the term consciousness in three senses, firstly, condition of people awake and responsive to sensory inspiration. Secondly, consciousness is an individual being conscious of something. Thirdly, consciousness is perceptions and thoughts of individuals (Rosenthal, 2009: 157). In the present context, consciousness is used for farmers' state of being aware of and their perceptions of the new farm laws.

### **Genesis of Consciousness and Assertion of Farmers in Punjab**

Punjab is recognized as the land of protests (Ram, 2014:164). Several socio-religious, political, and civil protest movements started from this land. These movements did not merely criticize the prevailing oppressive socio-religious rituals, traditions and public policies, but also ignited consciousness of the people. Farmers movements as civil and political protest began as early as the colonial period. During this period, farmers of Punjab had successfully organized several movements (Mukherji, 1998: 1044-45) which also had a strong link with the farmers movements at the national level. The canal colonies agitation of farmers was mobilized by Sardar Ajit Singh, an uncle of Shaheed Bhagat Singh, in 1907. Again, in 1924 and 1930s farmer organizations mobilized the farmers on the issue of land and water revenue (Singh and Gill, 1984: 1728; Ali, 1989: 14-19). These movements had raised consciousness of farmers and labourers about their pitiful conditions during colonial rule (Singh, 2020a: 5-8). Though, in the post-Independence period, the Naxalite movement and the Communist Party of India

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<sup>26</sup> Access from

[https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/american\\_english/consciousness](https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/american_english/consciousness), accessed on 05/10/2021.

(henceforth CPI) raised consciousness among farmers and labourers, but they failed to lift them up from below. Through the decades, the farmers continued to be distressed and devolved into despair. But, the new farm laws, while posing a challenge to the plight of farmers and farm labourers, interestingly has sparked a consciousness, at least leading to the current movement that has been going on for close to a year now. Of course, as discussed afore, the farmers and workers were primed for such heightened consciousness. One could say that it was lying dormant. Nevertheless, the hard work of grassroots organizers has catapulted this consciousness to another level.

A close look shows that the leaders of different farmers' organizations<sup>27</sup> had been organizing well before the start of the current movement. They went to various villages in Punjab, worked to raise their awareness and subsequently, succeeded in organizing them.<sup>28</sup> They informed the farmers, labourers and the people about the repercussion of new farming laws and anti-farmer policies of the government. They urged the farmers and labourers to collectively fight against injustice to save their own land, which is the primary source of their livelihood. They used references from Sikh history and *bani* of the Gurus to motivate the farmers and labourers in order to fight against the unfair political system and the draconian laws. Prior to the protest, they appealed to the farmers and labourers to organize at the village level. The leaders asserted the importance of organizing as key for the unity of farmers and labourers. It was necessary, the leaders said, for groups previously divided on account of political party affiliations, castes, class, and region. Such efforts to organize by the leaders where they were brought to the same platform was a huge sign of success. A pamphlet of Bharti Kisan Union Ekta Ugraha (henceforth BKU Ugraha) underlines the importance of farmers organization, where the slogan read, viz. "*Jathebandi bina gujara nahi, sangarsh bina koi chara nhi*" (No survival without organization, no option without agitation).<sup>29</sup> The significance of organizing and agitating for survival of the farmers and agricultural labourers was well established by the union leaders. In an interview, Sudarshan Sullah (a farmer)

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<sup>27</sup> Beside of leaders of farmer Unions, the Punjabi singers, writers and actors also played a critical role in raising awareness and mobilizing the farmers and labourers against the new farming laws of Union government. They went at each spot of agitation and urged the farmers through their songs to start the protest until or unless the government repeals the laws. A few singers went to also Haryana to mobilize the farmers.

<sup>28</sup> Interview with Sudarshan Sullah, a block level leader of BKU Ekta-Ugraha, at Toll Plaza on SH20 national highway, Mahmujoyia on 29/08/2021.

<sup>29</sup> Pamphlet was published by State Committee, Bharti Kisan Union Ekta-Ugraha, publisher Sukdev Singh Kokri Kalan.

reported that consciousness had risen among the common farmers. Earlier, only the leaders of farmers organizations were aware. And, they often argued that one day corporations would seize the land. Now, that prediction seems true and people are cautiously listening to them. At present, farmers as well as common people have become much more conscious than before. Even the ordinary farmers have started to question to the political leadership.<sup>30</sup> Their rising consciousness could also be mapped from hoisting flags of the *kissan* unions' on their houses' rooftops, cars, motorcycles and cycles. They pasted stickers also on cars, motorcycles, and tractors which inscribed the slogans viz. 'No Farmer No Food', 'Jai Jawan Jai Kissan', 'Farmers: We Feed the World', etc. Along with the flags and stickers, so many songs and poems were recorded, written and popularized through social media platforms by Punjabi singers and writers in order to foster consciousness and mobilize farmers against the three farm laws.

Furthermore, an interesting development is the consolidation of a consciousness of unity that seems to have bridged certain social cleavages (i.e. regional, religious, class and caste) that normally divide farmers and labourers. Its finest example is the evolution of a consciousness that united the farmers of Punjab and Haryana overriding their regional identities. Now, they appear to identify as farmers first and then as Punjabis or Haryanvis. Hence, one sees unifying forces of the movement that has transformed into a force to reckon with. And the unity has manifested in many ways – from donations of food, to sharing of lands. Now, they use the inclusive umbrella category *kirti lok* (working people) to refer to themselves.

During the whole course of time, farmers' leaders utilized the space of gurdwaras in the villages to address farmers, labourers and ordinary people. They argued that the politicians-corporation nexus is responsible for the misfortune of farmers and labourers. Since 1990s, the political leadership has slowly and steadily created pathways for corporations into the agricultural sector. New farm laws by BJP government are an extension of that long term plan. They merely wish to expedite that process of efficient exploitation of farmers<sup>31</sup> by corporations (like the ones owned by Mukesh Ambani and Gautam Adani) by taking control of their land. The laws will make the farmers slaves of corporations.<sup>32</sup> They circulated copies of the

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<sup>30</sup> Interview with Sudarshan Sullah.

<sup>31</sup> Accessed from <https://qz.com/india/1942448/indias-protesting-farmers-think-new-laws-benefit-ambani-adani/>, accessed on 12/08/2021.

<sup>32</sup> Interview with Nirmal Singh at village Khirkianwala of Sri Muktsar Sahib on 29/08/2021.

laws among the farmers. Consciousness has risen further among them by studying the laws.<sup>33</sup> Thus, the raised consciousness among farmers also raises fear in their minds that the corporations will seize their land (Singh, 2020b: 14). As a result, consciousness and fear among the farmers persuaded them to initiate the movement on a large scale

Narinder Singh, a farmer leader, narrated that when the country had acute shortage of food grains, then the government encouraged the farmers to use high yield seeds in order to accomplish the requisite food demand of the country. The government ensured the farmers for public investment in the agriculture sector viz. credit on low interest rate, subsidies on inputs such as seeds, pesticides, water pump etc., and MSP on crops. Therefore, to meet the demand of food grains, farmers of Punjab used the high yield seeds or genetically modified seeds, urea, pesticides, and high quantity of ground water. As a result, ground water level is depleting in the state and the land is becoming barren. Now, the government is also withdrawing from agricultural sector and leaving them at the mercy of corporations.<sup>34</sup> Surely, in the initial years of green revolution, agriculture was profitable. It helped farmers prosper and did the same for the sectors associated with agriculture. Later on, stagnation in the production, low price of food grains, and rising input costs made agriculture a poor source of livelihood. Consequently, farmers and agricultural labourers incurred massive debts (Gill, 2005: 219). A recent study shows that about 83.33 percent of the marginal farm households and 80.07 percent of agricultural labour households are in debt in rural Punjab (Kaur et. al, 2018: 146). However, the debt for agricultural labourers is four times higher than their annual income.<sup>35</sup> This high indebtedness is pushing both farmers and labourers to commit suicide (Singh, 2014: 27).

### **Shift from Non-electoral Politics to Electoral Politics**

Farmers rising consciousness has persuaded them to question the central as well as the state governments whom they hold responsible for their misfortune and distress.

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Narinder Singh (allies Joga Singh), block president of Guruharsahai of Bharti Kisan Union Ektadkoda, argued that this whole process of making conscious to the farmers, agricultural labourers and ordinary people. Interview with Narinder Singh at Toll Plaza on SH 20 national highway of Mahmujoya on 29/08/2021.

<sup>35</sup> Accessed from <https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/punjab/debt-on-farm-labourers-four-times-their-annual-inco-me-claims-study-164742>, accessed on 28/08/2021.

This questioning has moved into the space of formal politics. The leaders of SKM issued a 'Voters' Whip' to the Members of Parliament (henceforth MPs) of the opposition political parties to be present in parliament and halt all other business transactions until the central government accepts the demands of farmers on the floor of the house. They also accused the opposition parties for their failure to effectively confront and expose the central government's apathy towards the demands and suffering of the farmers.<sup>36</sup> In this way, SKM pressurized the opposition parties to surround the government from both inside and outside the parliament. But thus far the farmers' organizations have remained unsuccessful in convincing the government to accept their demands. Therefore, the failure of pressure politics coerced the farmer organizations to shift towards active participation in electoral politics as the strategy going forward. They maneuvered to pressurize BJP through *vote ki chot* (blow of vote). Under the banner of SKM, farmers' leaders opposed BJP in the West Bengal assembly election. As a result, TMC succeeded in defeating BJP in the election. Even in order to build pressure on the central government, SKM's leaders have also planned to oppose BJP in Punjab, Uttar Pradesh, and Uttarakhand in forthcoming assembly elections to be held in 2022. The Muzaffarnagar *Kisan Mahapanchayat* was the beginning of this course where SKM leaders explicitly challenged the central government to either accept their demands or be ready to face dire consequences in future assembly elections in various states. They also argued that if BJP polarizes the people, then they will work to unite them. Thus, on the one hand, it reveals that raised consciousness has provided them an understanding about the politics of polarization. On the other hand, it reflects the growing need to address the several issues faced by farmers through legislative process.

More specifically, the farmers' movement has shown much political influence in the state of Punjab. In the initial phase, in order to save their political existence, Shiromani Akali Dal (Badal) (henceforth SAD(B) left the cabinet ministry in BJP's government and broke its alliance with BJP due to political sway of farmers. The movement has raised awareness and mobilized the farmers to ask questions of political leadership of different parties about promises they had already made. Largely, farmers are questioning political leaders of mainstream political parties of the state i.e. SAD, Congress and Aam Aadmi Party (henceforth AAP). They believed that these political parties have remained unsuccessful in resolving the problems experienced by farmers and labourers whenever they have been in power.

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<sup>36</sup>Accessed from <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/farmers-front-issues-whip-to-mps/article35370520.ece>, accessed on 12/08/2021.

However, leaders of thirty-two farmers' organizations of Punjab have declared that they will not allow BJP's leaders to organize conferences, meetings or rallies in the state. Moreover, farmers in several villages have put up banners saying that stray animals and political leaders are not allowed to enter the villages. It shows that the rising consciousness among farmers is also challenging traditional modes of politics. Subsequent to violence between farmers and police at Moga, thirty-two farmers' organizations demanded the presence of all political parties, except BJP, to send their representatives to answer their questions on 10th September, 2021 in Chandigarh. At the meeting, leaders of farmers directed the parties to cease their political rallies before the formal announcement of election by the Election Commission in order to avoid clashes between farmers and supporters of various parties. All political parties consented to this demand of farmers' leadership. Later on, the SAD (B) raised their voice against this decision that it would provide a space to Congress party to hold political conventions in the form of governmental programs. Although SAD (B) has raised objections, it has not dared to become an obstacle. It shows that farmers movement has generated a space in state politics where no political party can manage to win the forthcoming assembly election without the support of farmers. The farmers are also setting the agenda of different political parties such that it is centered on agricultural development and welfare of farmers and labourers. The movement has also convinced the state government to form its policies related to farmers and labourers. Thus, it shows that the rising consciousness among farmers is deepening democracy and changing traditional modes of politics in the state.

### **Conclusion and Implementation**

The paper establishes that leaders of different farmers' organizations have played a critical role in raising consciousness among the farmers and agricultural labourers in the state. The rising level of consciousness organized the farmers and labourers at the village level and mobilized them to start the agitation against the Congress-led Punjab government as well as the BJP-Akali's alliance government at the Centre. The movement has augmented the level of consciousness as well as strengthened fraternity among farmers and farm labourers. Such consciousness and fraternity will hopefully help negotiate and minimize social cleavages (like caste, class, religion and region) among farmers and labourers in India's rural society. In their rising consciousness, thrives democratic values that has mobilized civil society in the state. It is a good sign for Indian democracy.

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

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

Dr. Kang is the former *sarpanch*, or elected village head, of Khassan which is in the Jalandhar district of Punjab, India. He is also a lifelong resident of Khassan. Although his children decided to immigrate to North America, he did not. But, he does indeed visit them. In fact, I met Dr. Kang in New Jersey on one of his visits to America. But, those are trips he makes to meet friends and family, not with the desire to live permanently in the United States. Under Dr. Kang’s leadership, Khassan has won a few awards, including Rashtriya Gaurav Gram Sabha Puraskaar for water conservation for the year 2014-2015. This Award was conferred by the Union Minister of Panchayati Raj at Jamshedpur.<sup>37</sup> He is also trained as a medical specialist. Given Dr. Kang’s personal association with Khassan and Punjab, his professional experience as *sarpanch* and the fact that he owns land made him an ideal interviewee for my current project.

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

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<sup>37</sup> <https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/archive/jalandhar/khassan-village-gets-national-award-for-water-conservation-230875>

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

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

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

**Photo 1 – Polishing shoes**

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



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

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



**Photo 3 – Meeting at main stage**

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



**Photo 4 – Man in chains**

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





### Photo 5 – Library

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



**Photo 6 – Elder men sleeping in trolleys**

Much has been said about farmers camping out for months at protest sites in extreme conditions - torrential rain, bitter cold or the oppressive heat of the summer months.<sup>38</sup> In this photograph, elder farmers seek refuge from the brutal cold by sleeping in trolleys wrapped in woolen blankets on a thick bed of hay.



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<sup>38</sup> One example - <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/farmers-continue-protest-at-delhi-border-areas-amid-cold-weather/articleshow/79772147.cms>

**Photo 7 – Children at library**

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



### Photo 8 – Protestor carrying sign

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

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

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

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

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

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



**Photo 9 – Men having breakfast**

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



### Photo 10 – Shaheed Sandeep Singh Dhaliwal

In September 2019, Sandeep Singh Dhaliwal, a sheriff's deputy in Harris County in Houston, Texas, was fatally shot in the back of his head during a routine traffic stop. According to an article in *The Guardian*,<sup>39</sup> Dhaliwal became prominent after becoming the first officer to maintain his articles of faith while on duty. The Sikh community, as suggested by the poster, sees Dhaliwal as a martyr, or *Shaheed*. At the protest site, Dhaliwal, whose family originated from the district of Kapurthala, was honored in this manner.



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

<sup>39</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2019/sep/28/texas-police-turban-beard-killed-sikh>. Also see <https://www.click2houston.com/news/local/2019/12/18/man-accused-of-killing-harris-county-deputy-dhaliwal-indicted-on-capital-murder/>

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

**Photo 11 – Mr. and Mrs. Kang with protestors**

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



**Art of the Protest:  
A Selection of Paintings, Sculpture, Photographs, Graphics and  
Songs inspired by the *Kisan Mazdoor Andolan***

**Sonia Dhami**

*ArtandTolerance.com and Trustee, Sikh Foundation*

India's farmers and farm workers have been protesting against the three new Farm Laws<sup>40</sup> since they were passed through an ordinance by the Indian parliament in September 2020 amidst the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown. They continue to sit in protest at the borders of Delhi even today.

Art, along with dominant modes of resistance, has been an important avenue of protest in the *Kisan Mazdoor Andolan*. The photographs of the Tikri border protest camps posted on social media by Himanshu Dua, were the first to catch my attention. Thereafter, I started to take note of the many paintings, sculptures, graphic art, photographs, films and scores of songs and poems, inspired by the protests. Just as this protest is an ongoing campaign, so is the art, which continues to be created. While some of these works are created to inspire and motivate the protesters, others are important ways to document and memorialize the protest itself. They also enable us to understand the deeper human sentiments and emotions fueling the *Kisan Mazdoor Andolan* (farmer and farm labor resistance). In this essay, I have put together a selection of artwork, which resonated with me. These selected works cover a range of artistic expression directly inspired by the protests.

**RUPINDER SINGH AULAKH (b. 1972)**

India celebrated its 72<sup>nd</sup> Republic Day with a traditional military style parade in Delhi, the nation's capital. On that day, the farmers and farm workers organized their own parade as another way to protest the Farm Laws.<sup>41</sup> Thereafter, the authorities attempted to confine the protestors in their camps by putting up barricades and metal spikes that were nailed into the roads. The police also attacked some of the protestors in the camps and injuring many.

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<sup>40</sup> <https://egazette.nic.in/WriteReadData/2020/222040.pdf>

<sup>41</sup> <https://www.cnn.com/2021/01/26/asia/india-republic-day-farmers-protests-intl-hnk/index.html>





Figure 1a.



Figure 1b.

**Untitled, Rupinder Singh Aulakh, 2021, mixed media.**

Source: Courtesy of the artist

Such draconian visuals were widely shared by media outlets and social media accounts and reached audiences all over the world including Rupinder Singh Aulakh who is an engineer by profession from Seattle in Oregon, US. On one of his walks, he came across a random stone and a discarded piece of wood with nails protruding from it. These objects reminded him of the barricades of the protest camps in India<sup>42</sup> and led him to conceive the above shown artwork. Painting the nails in a bold red color, he wrote the words “Farmers Protest Delhi” on a yellow base on one side of the block (Figure 1a) and “*Kisan Morcha 2020-2021*” on the other (Figure 1b). The nails became a powerful representation of the spikes driven into the roads in Delhi and the red color symbolized the spilled blood of the farmers. Aulakh also painted the stone green – the color of the crops and also the flag of the farm unions - and placed it next to the wood. Together, the composition evolved into a powerful reminder of the response of the authorities to the protests.

<sup>42</sup> As recounted by Rupinder S. Aulakh

**GURPREET SINGH (b. 1976)**

Gurpreet Singh is an artist-activist from Bhatinda in Punjab, India and is actively engaged with the protests. On Valentine's Day in 2021, he dedicated his painting (Figure 2) titled "Her Voice" to all "mothers who are sitting at the borders of Delhi."<sup>43</sup> On the canvas is an elder woman, whom I see as someone who could be anybody's *Biji* (mother). Her face is weathered and her outstretched arm is devoid of any bangles except for a *kara*, representative of her Sikh faith. Her head is covered with a bright yellow *dupatta* (scarf) that is reminiscent of the color that thousands of women protestors wore when they gathered in the camps this year on International Women's Day.<sup>44</sup>



**Figure 2: "Her Voice"**

**Gurpreet Singh Bhatinda, 2021, oil on canvas, 36"x 24".**

Source: Surinder Kaur Dhami Family Collection

Furthermore, she appears to be reaching out of the frame painted onto the canvas. As a woman myself, I relate to this visual as being symbolically representative of women today reaching beyond the confines of the domestic space. More

<sup>43</sup> Artists post on [Facebook](#)

<sup>44</sup> <https://www.nbcnews.com/video/women-take-over-indian-farmers-protest-to-mark-international-women-s-day-102401605654>

importantly, I see her as representing all the brave and courageous women who are protesting the new farm laws.

And last, but not the least, the woman's *dupatta* is shown merging into the yellow mustard fields which, I believe, makes for a striking visual element in the painting. It also establishes the links between the women farmers and their farmland.

The artist has also included his self-portrait where he is shown standing amidst the fields holding the banner of the *Bharti Kisan Union Ekta Ugrahan*, proudly announcing his own association with the land as well as the organization.<sup>45</sup>

Gurpreet has created more than fifty artworks inspired by the protests.

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<sup>45</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/bkuektaugrahan>

**DEBANJAN ROY (b. 1975)**



**Figure 3**

**Untitled, Debanjan Roy, 2021, mixed media.**

Source: [sabrangindia.in](http://sabrangindia.in)

Sir Chhotu Ram, was a colonial era *Jat* leader who championed the cause of the farmers and helped pass laws to stop their exploitation by unscrupulous moneylenders that led to the passing of the Punjab Land Revenue (Amendment) Act in 1929 and subsequent social reform legislation.<sup>46</sup> In this sculpture (Figure 3), he is shown carrying the lifeless body of Sant Ram Singh, who until recently, was the head of the Nanaksar Gurudwara at Karnal in Haryana, India. Sant Ram Singh shot himself at the Singhu border in December 2020 leaving a suicide note

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<sup>46</sup> <https://internationaljournalofresearch.com/2016/11/14/peasantry-society-and-ch-chhotu-ram-a-historical-study/>

expressing his distress at the plight of farmers.<sup>47</sup> I find it interesting that both the characters selected by the artist share the name “Ram,” though it could be just a coincidence.

Roy is well known internationally for his pop-art style sculptures of Gandhi, highlighting consumerism in today’s culture.<sup>48</sup> Perhaps the artist here also intended to highlight the protesting farmer’s commitment to non-violence by including visual reminders to the popular images of Gandhi during the Satyagraha movement wearing a *dhoti* (garment) and striding ahead with a staff in hand. Here the staff is replaced by an oversized plow, which I believe, is a direct visual reference to the farmer. Roy, through this sculpture, urges us to recall and reflect on the history of farm movements in India – one from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and the one that is contemporary.

#### SUKHPREET SINGH (b. 1969)



**Figure 4: Tractor March**

**Sukhpreet Singh, 2021, acrylic on canvas, 43”x 84.”**

Source: Khanuja Family Collection

<sup>47</sup> <https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/haryana/unable-to-bear-farmers-plight-65-year-old-sant-commits-suicide-at-singhu-border-185185>

<sup>48</sup> <https://www.seattleartmuseum.org/Documents/pop-departures-educator-resource-guide.pdf>

Sukhpreet Singh from Ludhiana in Punjab, India painted a large 6 feet long canvas (Figure 4) showing the Tractor March held on the 26<sup>th</sup> January 2021. The painting was commissioned by Dr. P.S Khanuja, a leading US Sikh art collector and benefactor of the Sikh gallery at the Phoenix Art Museum at Phoenix in Arizona, US.<sup>49</sup>

Of the two hundred or so individual figures in the painting, a large number are farmers holding banners of multiple farm unions and placards with slogans like “No farmers no food” and marching on foot or riding on their tractors. One placard reads, “We are farmers not terrorists” which directly aims to dispel the false narrative of farmers as “anti-national.” The visible tricolor in the melee also reinforces this message. Also, seen prominently in the painting are the police armed with batons and guns as well as journalists and camerapersons recording the events.

Amongst multiple scenes included in the painting are incidents of police brutality, many of which are primarily based on visuals broadcast on media platforms.<sup>50</sup> These include scenes of protestors, young and old, being beaten by the police with *lathis* (batons) and struck with water canons. A sharp contrast to these images are the farmers who are shown serving *langar* (free kitchen) to the policemen.

In the painting, the artist has also thoughtfully highlighted the important role of women in this protest, through scenes showing them marching holding banners, sitting in protest, riding tractors and motorcycles as well as preparing meals.

This masterpiece painting is set against the backdrop of Delhi cityscape, which helps us visualize the location of the events depicted in the painting. Between the high-rise buildings and the distinct colonial era architecture of Connaught Place, we see the gleaming golden dome of Gurudwara Bangla Sahib, perhaps inspiring the viewers to keep the faith.

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<sup>49</sup> <https://www.ironwoodcrc.com/doctors/parvinderjit-khanuja-md-facp/>

<sup>50</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-55156219>

## HIMANSHU DUA (b. 1994) and NISHA K. SETHI



Figure 5: Himanshu Dua, 2021, photograph

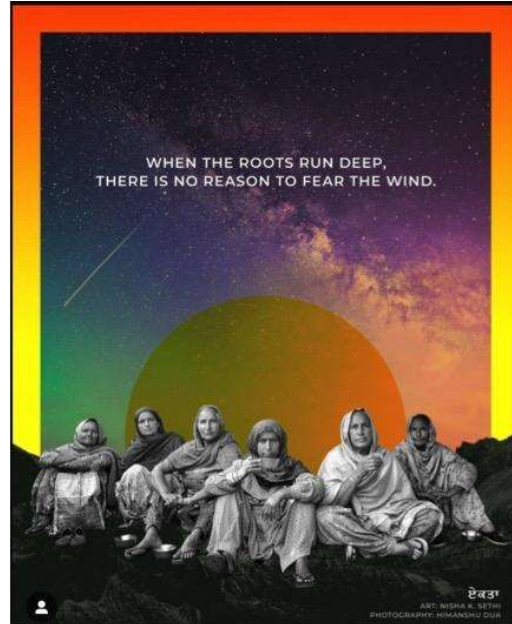


Figure 6: Nisha K. Sethi, photograph by Himanshu Dua.

Source: Surinder Kaur Dhama Family Collection 2021.

Source: [@nisha.k.sethi](https://www.instagram.com/nisha.k.sethi)

Himanshu Dua,<sup>51</sup> a young photographer from Bhadurgarh in Haryana, India shot a series of photographs showing the daily activities at the Tikri border camp. Some of his eye-catching photographs bring out the spirited leadership and participation of women in the protest.

In Dua's photographs, we see women who have left the relative security and comfort of their homes to be at the protest, including staying at the camps. To me, these photographs reflect a broader social change towards the empowerment of women as evidenced by the notable presence of women at the protest sites, fighting alongside men as equal stakeholders in this resistance movement.

The photograph (Figure 5) of an elder woman with a determined and stoic expression on her face, sitting alongside her tractor trolley, reminds me of a quote from a news feature commemorating International Women's Day published in *Time Magazine's* March 2021 issue. With much gusto, Gurmer Kaur who is in her mid

<sup>511</sup> <https://www.instagram.com/roundearthsquarepictures/?hl=enand>

70's, said "I am an illiterate woman, I cannot talk well but I can sit tight – and I will sit here till the next elections if these laws are not called off."<sup>52</sup>

Dua collaborated with artist and designer Nisha Kaur Sethi <sup>53</sup>of Oakland in California, US. Sethi digitally designed posters with images from Dua's photographs enhancing them with powerful quotes both in English and Gurmukhi. The artists made the posters available on Instagram for free download. Dua and Sethi issued a statement asserting the importance of widely sharing their work. They said, "This artist collaboration serves as a bridge between India and the global diaspora to help build solidarity and continue spreading awareness about what's happening. The photographs were taken on the ground at Tikri border in India and the collage art was created in Oakland, California. This series of work is being offered as a social justice tool and as a resource for the people. Please share with your communities and continue educating, speaking out, and showing up to your local action."<sup>54</sup>

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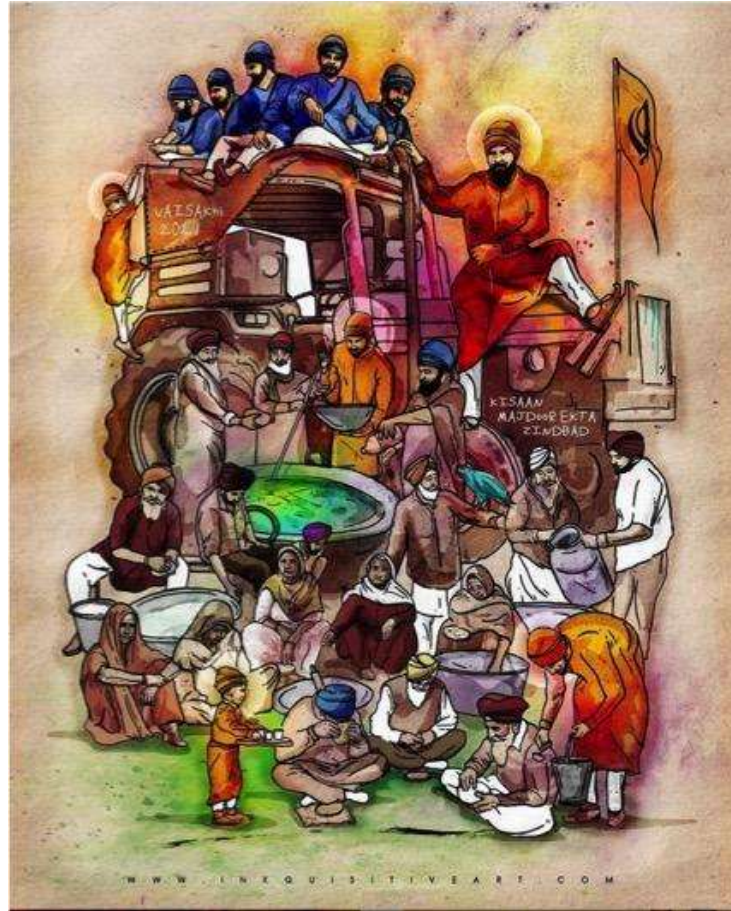
<sup>52</sup> Time magazine March 4, 2021 pg. 87 <https://time.com/5942125/women-india-farmers-protests/>

<sup>53</sup> <https://www.nishaksethi.com/>

<sup>54</sup> [https://www.instagram.com/p/CJ\\_wsbCA6W\\_/?utm\\_source=ig\\_web\\_copy\\_link](https://www.instagram.com/p/CJ_wsbCA6W_/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link)



**AMANDEEP SINGH – aka INKQUISITIVE**



**Figure 7: Vaisakhi 2021**

**Amandeep Singh, 2021, digital.**

Source: @inkquisitive

Amandeep Singh, widely popular on Instagram as “Inkquisitive,” is from the United Kingdom. His artwork style is distinctly multihued in bright and bold colors. Typically, Singh’s works are responses to various contemporary social and political events.

This year, since they were still at their makeshift camps protesting the farm laws, many farmers were unable to celebrate *Vaisakhi* (harvest festival) with their

families. Singh released a special art piece to honor the farmers urging them to continue to stay in *Chardi Kala* (rising spirit). The artwork (Figure 7) includes a larger-than-life figure of Guru Gobind Singh, alongside a *Nishan Sahib* (banner of the *Khalsa*) sitting atop the hood of a mechanical harvester. The Guru's *baaz* (hawk) is perched on a farmer's arm. On top of the same harvester are the *panj piyare* (five beloved of the Guru) dressed in blue robes. Their presence together with the Guru is to assure the farmers that their fight has their blessings and that they are not alone in their struggle.

The piece also includes the Guru's four sons who, history shows, embraced martyrdom to uphold their values. Their presence in the midst of the camp, working alongside and helping the farmers, is a proclamation of their support in this fight. The Guru and his sons appear distinct in their bright orange robes.

The farmers themselves are engaged in preparing, serving and partaking *langar* (free kitchen). The *degh* (cauldron) is being stirred. And one sees floating up to the surface of the food are the words '*Ek Onkar*,' the primal Sikh tenet. It means "God is one."

Accompanying the artwork posted on his Instagram account, the artist shares the following verses <sup>55</sup> referencing the qualities which the *Panj Pyare* personify through their respective names given to them by Guru Gobind Singh.

*"May the beautiful events of Vaisakhi 1699 remind you of the compassion of 'Daya'. To remain strong and determined through the righteousness of 'Dharam'. May any cold nights and lack of food/water continue to be a reminder of courage showcased by 'Himmat' when the Guru asked for a head. Commitment to be standing for 100+ days is a true reflection of 'Mokham' and as a community, we are all leaders and value that through 'Sahib'..."*

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<sup>55</sup> <https://www.instagram.com/inkquisitive/>

LALON (b. 1980)

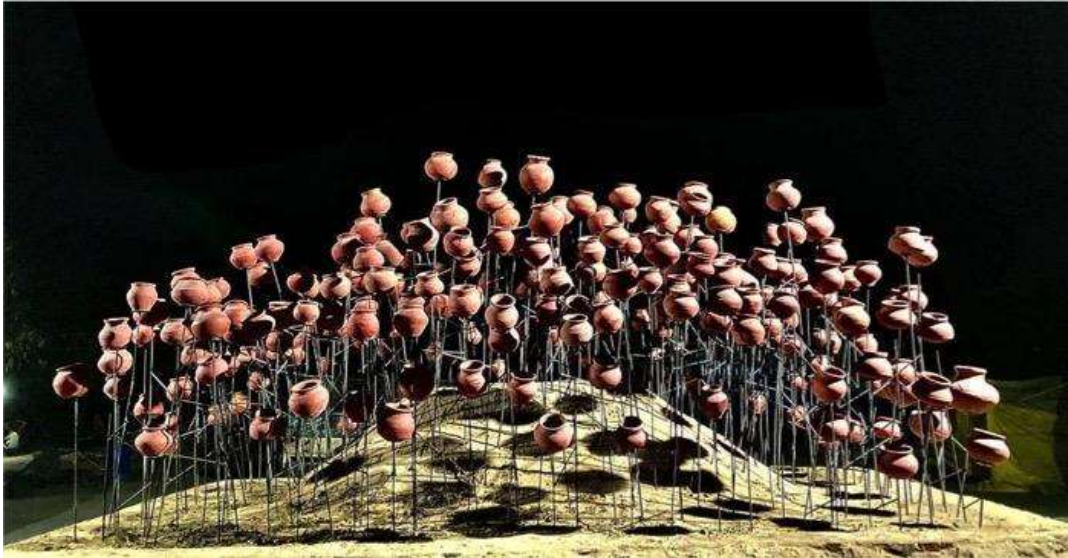


Figure 8: *Saheed Samarak* at Shahjahanpur, National Highway 48

Lalon, 2021, mixed media

Source: [indianculturalforum.in](http://indianculturalforum.in)

In April 2021, farmers launched the “*mitti satyagraha*” to honor the martyred farmers. They brought in *matkas* (earthen pots) filled with the soil from villages from different regions of India.

Just as this *satyagraha*<sup>56</sup> was concluding, Lalon, a Ph.D. student at the National Institute of Design Ahmedabad India, drove to Shahjahanpur on the Rajasthan-Delhi interstate border, to offer his contribution to the *Kisan Mazdoor Andolan*. On April 14, he finished this powerful installation, which he built on the road divider on National Highway 48.

The installation (Figure 8) comprises of pots arranged in the form of a flowerbed. There are in total 370 pots in honor of each farmer who died during the protest (count until April 14, 2021). The artists choice of using earthen pots reflects the fundamental association of the farmers with the soil they till. Having the pots upright with the opening facing the sky reminds me of the uncertainty surrounding the farmers’ livelihood. Their crops are forever dependent on the vagaries of nature.

<sup>56</sup> <https://simple.wikipedia.org/wiki/Satyagraha>

I believe the iron rods holding up the pots signify the steely resolve and strong commitment of the protestors. In keeping with the concept of a flowerbed, the base is not covered with concrete, rather it allows for grass to grow.

Lalon appreciates the support he got from the farmers to help him finish the memorial in time. In an interview to a news outlet, he poignantly recalls “The best moment for me was when I walked up to the top of the structure for finishing touches and one of the farmers who was helping out stopped me and asked me to take off my shoes and said to me - *yaha kisi ki samadhi hai* [this is a memorial].”<sup>57</sup>

### SARBJOT SINGH BEHL (b. 1965)

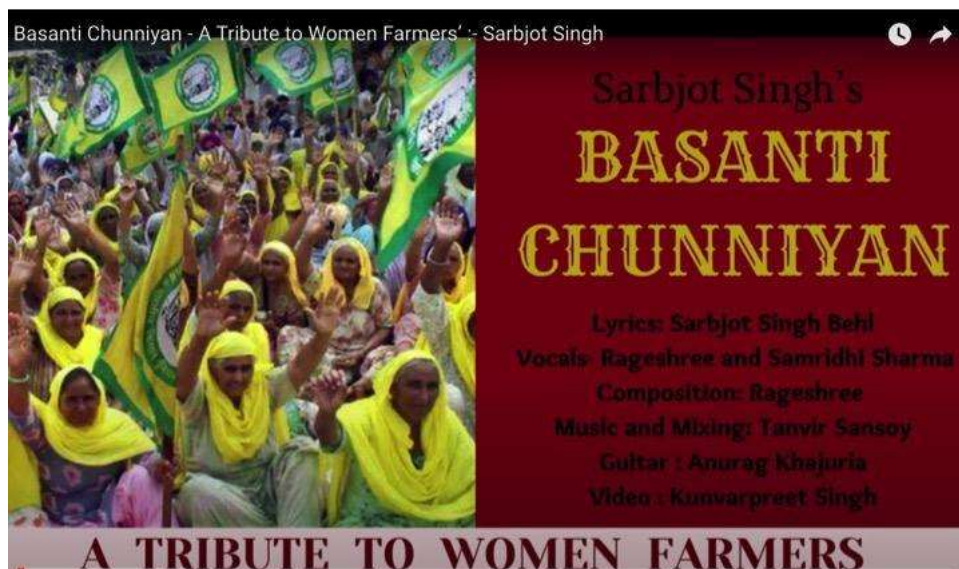


Figure 9: Basanti Chunnian

Sarbjot Singh Behl, 2021, video clip.

Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F14AIZtMnI>

The *Kisan Mazdoor Andolan* has also inspired hundreds of songs and poems. “*Basanti Chunnia*” (yellow scarfs) written by Sarbjot Singh Behl, a resident of Amritsar, is melodiously sung by the youthful student duo of Rageshri and

<sup>57</sup> <https://www.newsclick.in/Kisan-Shaheed-Smarak-Artists-Contributed-Farmers-Movement>

Samridhi Sharma. The song highlights the changing narratives around the roles of women in both the *Kisan Mazdoor Andolan* as well as their domestic spaces.

In the North Indian tradition, the color yellow is associated with revolutionaries. Behl's song (Figure 9) is inspired by the popular 1927 song by Ram Prashad Bismil "Mera Rang de Basanti Chola." The song is about the enthusiasm and commitment of the revolutionaries during India's struggle for freedom from colonial rule. While Bismil's song implicitly associates revolutionary zeal with mainly men, Behl's composition celebrates the young women who proclaim their right to wear this color in parity with the men. They aspire to stride shoulder to shoulder with men both in happy and challenging times. The song was released on the eve of International Women's Day, which was marked, by thousands of women<sup>58</sup> joining the *morchas* (protests) from Punjab, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan.

### Conclusion

A structurally simple sculptural composition by Rupinder Aulakh, a figurative sculpture by Debanjay Roy, a painting on canvas of a woman by Gurpreet Singh, a densely populated canvas of Sukhpreet Singh, photography by Himanshu Dua, the digital creativity of Nisha K. Sethi, the digital art of Amandeep Singh, a large on-site installation by Lalon, and the inspiring lyrics of Sarbjot Singh Behl sung by the melodious Rageshri and Samridhi Sharma – these memorable artworks by artists from different regions of India, stand in solidarity with India's farmers and *Kisan Mazdoor Andolan*.

Art helps us to document, memorialize and express the struggle of the farmers and farm workers from across India. Some of these paintings are already in private art collections in the US. It is important that we continue to engage with these powerful works whether it is through display of these artworks in museums and galleries, sharing of their images on social media and webinars, or highlighting them in academic journals and other publications. These dynamic works educate the world about this historic struggle of the *kisans* (farmers) and *mazdoors* (laborers) of India. These thought provoking works will continue to inspire us to stand up and fight for our rights, even long after these protestors have all gone home in *Chardi Kala*.

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<sup>58</sup> <https://www.independent.co.uk/asia/india/farmers-protest-india-international-womens-day-b1813930.html>

## **Six Hundred Farmers Have Died**

**Gursahiba Gill**

You celebrated freedom, an illusion of Independence  
A liberation from the shackles of your colonizers  
You thumped your proud inflated chests to the beats of a patriotic song  
Slight goosebumps, moist eyes and maybe a candle for those who extinguished  
their life for the future of your generation's freedom.

*Was your independence served to you on a platter?*

Delicately wrapped and covered by a cloche lest the stench of reality pierced your  
delusion?

These days the color of saffron outweighs the green.  
Freedom is no longer an illusion. It has been diagnosed with late-stage psychosis.

*Zaffron* grown in Kashmir carries a stronger fragrance, it absorbs a frequently  
spotted 'red' from the soil.

Barbed wires protect the broken bones of freedom.

In Punjab, you'll find a torn *phulkari* shroud concealing the remains of dried  
organs, bloodied turbans, lost eyes and muffled screams of mothers.

Faded green ceases to protect the fabric of our emancipation.

*They say 600 farmers have died. "Six hundred. That's all?", says the minister.*

Countless freedom fighters died, what's 600 compared to that number.

*We have no record of the farmers that have died, claims the center.*

Countless freedom fighters died unknown, what's a mere 600 compared to their  
number.

They say six hundred farmers have died but it has hardly been nine months of  
their struggle.

You still celebrate freedom, a hallucination of Independence

The gifted shackles rest lazily on your ankles

You thump your proud inflated chests to the melody of its weightless bells

Pricking goosebumps, raging eyes and definitely a hate speech to arouse those willing to extinguish this generation's life.

*Was your independence served to you on a manifesto?*

Delicately wrapped and covered by a cloche lest the stench of reality pierced your delusion?

*Gursahiba Gill* is a writer, poet, theatre artist and a postgraduate in Psychology aspiring to further her career by becoming a clinical psychologist. She is based in Punjab, India. Currently, she is studying Persian at Panjab University and working as a Counsellor and Psychologist volunteer with Himachal Queer Collective.

## ਸਾਡੀ ਤਾਂ ਸਬਰਨੀਤੀ.....

**Kewal Singh Ratra**

ਇੱਕ ਪਾਸੇ ਭਗਵਾ ਤੇ ਸਾਂਹਵੇਂ ਹਰਾ ਰੰਗ ਆ  
ਸਾਡੇ ਵਲੋਂ ਗੱਲ-ਬਾਤ ਤੇਰੇ ਵਲੋਂ ਸੰਗ ਆ  
ਬੁਰੇ ਬੈਠੇ ਅੰਨਦਾਤੇ ਰਹੇ ਕੁੱਝ ਮੰਗ ਆ,.....

ਸਾਡੇ ਵਲੋਂ ਮੁਲਾਕਾਤ, ਰਾਜੇ ਭਾਣੇ ਜੰਗ ਆ,.....  
ਸਾਡੀ ਤਾਂ ਸਬਰਨੀਤੀ, ਉਹਦੀ ਹੀ ਦਬੰਗ ਆ।

ਇੱਕ ਪਾਸੇ ਮਹਾਂਮਾਰੀ, ਫਿਰਦੀ ਕਰੋਨਾ ਆ,  
ਦੂਜੇ ਪਾਸੇ ਬਾਪੂ ਬੇਬੇ, ਵੇਖ ਆਉਂਦਾ ਰੋਣਾ ਆ,  
ਠੰਡ ਬਰਸਾਤਾਂ ਵਿੱਚ ਭਿੱਜਿਆ ਵਿਛਾਉਣਾ ਆ.....  
ਅਸਾਂ ਕਿਹੜਾ ਕੀਤਾ, ਤੇਰੇ ਮਾਪਿਆਂ ਨੂੰ ਤੰਗ ਆ  
ਸਾਡੇ ਵਲੋਂ ਮੁਲਾਕਾਤ....ਰਾਜੇ ਭਾਣੇ ਜੰਗ ਆ  
ਸਾਡੀ ਤਾਂ ਸਿਦਕਨੀਤੀ .....ਤੇਰੀ ਹੀ ਦਬੰਗ ਆ।

ਚੁੱਪ ਚਾਪ ਖੇਤੀ ਦੇ ਕਾਨੂੰਨ ਬਣਵਾ ਲਏ,  
ਭਾਗੋਆਂ ਦੇ ਕਹਿਣ ਉੱਤੇ, ਫਾਇਦੇ ਗਿਣਵਾ ਲਏ,  
ਬਣਕੇ ਸ਼ਿਕਾਰੀ ਤੂੰ, ਕਿਸਾਨ ਵੀ ਫਸਾ ਲਏ.....  
ਦੇਸ਼ ਬੰਦ ਕਰਕੇ, ਤੂੰ ਕੀਤੇ ਮੂੰਹ ਵੀ ਬੰਦ ਆ,  
ਸਾਡੇ ਵਲੋਂ ਮੁਲਾਕਾਤ .....ਰਾਜੇ ਭਾਣੇ ਜੰਗ ਆ  
ਸਾਡੀ ਤਾਂ ਸਬਰਨੀਤੀ.....

ਮੰਨਿਆ ਕਿ ਗੁਜਰਾਤੀ, ਪੈਸੇ ਦੇ ਵਪਾਰੀ ਨੇ  
ਬੈਂਕਾਂ ਲੁੱਟ ਬਹੁਤੇ ਹੀ ਤਾਂ, ਮਾਰ ਗਏ ਉਡਾਰੀ ਨੇ  
ਬਾਰਡਰਾਂ ਤੋਂ ਡਰ, ਬਹੁਤੇ ਸਿਰੇ ਦੇ ਮਕਾਰੀ ਨੇ.....,  
ਉਹਨਾਂ ਤਾਂ ਸ਼ਹੀਦਾਂ ਦਾ ਨਹੀਂ, ਗਾਇਆ ਪ੍ਰਸੰਗ ਆ,  
ਸਾਡੇ ਵਲੋਂ ਮੁਲਾਕਾਤ, ਰਾਜੇ ਭਾਣੇ.....  
ਸਾਡੀ ਤਾਂ ਸਬਰ ਨੀਤੀ.....



ਦੇਸ਼ ਨੂੰ ਹਮੇਸ਼ਾਂ ,ਸਰਕਾਰ ਹੀ ਚਲਾਉਂਦੀ ਹੈ  
 ਪਰ ਤੇਰੀ ਚਾਬੀ ,ਲਾਭੀ ਜੁੰਡਲੀ ਘੁੰਮਾਉਂਦੀ ਹੈ  
 ਵਿਕੀ ਸਰਕਾਰ ,ਅੰਤ ਆਪਣਾ ਕਰਾਉਂਦੀ ਹੈ,.....  
 ਇਹਨਾਂ ਨੇ ਹੀ ਇੱਕ ਦਿਨ ,ਘੁੱਟ ਦੇਣ ਸੰਘ ਆ  
 ਸਾਡੇ ਵਲੋਂ ਮੁਲਾਕਾਤ, ਰਾਜੇ ਭਾਣੇ ਜੰਗ ਆ  
 ਸਾਡੀ ਤਾਂ ਸਬਰ ਨੀਤੀ .....

ਕਿਰਤੀ ਕਿਸਾਨ ,ਮਜ਼ਦੂਰ ਤੇਰੇ ਦੇਸ਼ ਦੇ,  
 ਇਹ ਨਹੀਂ ਅੱਤਵਾਦੀ ਵੱਖਵਾਦੀ ਪ੍ਰਦੇਸ਼ ਦੇ,  
 ਬਿਨਾ ਹਥਿਆਰ, ਨਾਲੇ ਸਾਦੇ ਜਿਹੇ ਭੇਸ ਦੇ.....  
 ਥੋਡਾ ਮੀਡੀਆ ਹੀ ਰਿਹੈ, “ਰੱਤੜੇ” ਨੂੰ ਭੰਡ ਆ  
 ਸਾਡੇ ਵਲੋਂ ਮੁਲਾਕਾਤ, ਰਾਜੇ ਵਲੋਂ ਜੰਗ ਆ।  
 ਸਾਡੀ ਤਾਂ ਸਬਰਨੀਤੀ, ਤੇਰੀ ਹੀ ਦਬੰਗ ਆ।  
 ਸਾਡੀ ਤਾਂ ਸਿਦਕਨੀਤੀ ਤੇਰੀ ਹੀ...  
 ਸਾਡੀ ਤਾਂ ਸ਼ਰੀਫਨੀਤੀ , ਤੇਰੀ ਹੀ...

## Words of Patience

### Translation by Kewal Singh Ratra

We, the tillers of land,  
 with green headwears, we stand.  
 You, the ruler of nation, wearing orange color posing thy saintly look.  
 We sit at doorsteps of thy palace,  
 Wish to convey our sufferings to you,  
 It's Our Appeal, not war as you presume.

Upset is the Whole world due to Corona,  
 On the Delhi Borders,our old parents sit on wet ground under rain and shivering  
 nights.  
 None have we troubled.  
 You listen to us, O ruler of land.

You passed anti farming laws silently  
on the instance of the rich lords.  
In captivity, now feel the farmers like prey.  
Under lockdown, though want to sew our lips.

Your favourite lobby are tradesmen.  
They cheated the Banks and flew away to other safer lands.  
Not honest, they are not patriots. But You did nothing to catch them.

Aware you are that king rules  
The masses and their Welfare be your moto. Mind it! These thieves will bring  
your downfall.

Workers and peasants we are  
Of this nation,  
Neither terrorists nor separatists from far off land,  
Simple we are, without a dagger.  
But your media projects us war lovers,  
Whereas we are peace lovers,  
O ruler, do listen to our words of patience ....

*Kewal Singh Ratra*, a native of Kapurthala district in Punjab, is a retired state insurance officer. This poem by Ratra was published in the book "Jagdi Zameer" to which the poet holds copyright. *Sikh Research Journal* has published the poem with Kewal Singh Ratra's permission.

## Book Reviews

### *Narrating South Asian Partition: Oral History, Literature, Cinema*

Anindya Raychaudhuri,

Oxford University Press, 2019,

240pp, \$82 (hard cover) ISBN 978-0190249748; eISBN 978-0190249762;

DOI:10.1093/oso/9780190249748.001.0001

Anindya Raychaudhuri's book *Narrating South Asian Partition: Oral History, Literature, Cinema, OUP (2019)* examines the Partition of 1947 through oral history and cultural representations by integrating those narratives into the present. The author brings to the fore the relationship between private forms of testimony and public forms of cultural representation by elegantly intertwining oral history emerging from Partition memories with those from novels, short stories, memoirs and cinema. Raychaudhuri's data consist of 165 interviews which he conducted over three and half years across India, Pakistan and the UK covering Partition stories of both Punjab and Bengal. By so doing, Raychaudhuri records the voices of all communities affected by the Partition which would otherwise have been segregated accounts creating, and as he notes, "*an artificial and anachronistic divide between the two halves of partition*" (p. 4). As one who has grown up hearing stories of the Partition from the perspective of a Hindu (and implicitly upper caste) victimhood, I found this book especially enriching for its seamless integration of narratives and cultural representations of communities (Hindus and Muslims) and nations that were presumably hostile to each other. The narration by Raychaudhuri, thus, invites the reader to share in the sense of loss, grief, relief, in the stories of struggle and resilience of all affected by the Partition regardless of their identities.

The book has seven main chapters. Each chapter is organised around a specific theme. The first three are organised around the theme of loss: of home, of families, of childhood innocence. In the first chapter, the reader learns about nostalgia for the lost space of home; the second chapter deals with what came to characterise the Partition and its trauma: families separated and the rare instances of families being reunited in the new homeland, the abduction of women and their marriages into the family of their abductors and the resultant relationships that go against the "hegemonic notions of belonging." He locates through narratives and literature, such as that of Amrita Pritam's novels, the patriarchal violence the new nation states unleashed on women, and thereby questioning the statist narratives of abducted women and their "recovery." The third chapter focuses on adults who

look back at the Partition, reflect on their own roles in it, and the appropriation of their childhood experiences and actions by other adults, such as family members as well as writers, like Bapsi Sidhwa and Saadat Hasan Manto. Violence, like loss, has many meanings and the fourth chapter takes up this question of the Partition violence and its many meanings. Chapters Five and Six look at the question of violence and of safe passage through trains and riverways. The train and river spaces were the lines to a safe refuge from the old space that had to be abandoned, they were the lifelines, the links between two nations, the spaces where violence played out and they were also the markers of the Partition: they represented borders. In Chapter Seven, the focus is on broad methodological questions in studying the Partition and its “productive” nature, particularly in terms of refashioning selves and the possibilities the Partition opened up for new imaginations and new forms of existence.

Raychaudhuri begins the book with a personal recollection that is familiar to many refugee families: the legacy of loss and grief and the “ultimate instability of home” has in fact shaped the author’s identity. The lost home is remembered almost always as “the site of blissful perfection and material affluence” and is placed in stark contrast with the new home. The new home is marked by material deprivation, problems of basic sanitation and disease. The lost space is also represented as one of warmth, of coexistence. Here, the emphasis is on attachment and the depth of loss. But as the author underscores, this deep positive emotional attachment with the home that is now in enemy country undermines the national narratives of the Partition, nationhood and belonging in both India and Pakistan. The ultimate instability of the home that Raychadhuri claims had a persistent effect on his identity. It is also something I have witnessed on the maternal side of my family. I have seen first-hand the ways in which this “ultimate instability of home” and the fears it gave rise to converted an avowed leftist-refugee with a background of anti-communal activities into a warrior of Hindutva. And again, in the context of Gujarat 2002 my *mashi* (mother’s sister) sceptical of Muslim ‘designs’ recollected the violence of *desh-bhag* (or division of nation) as a plan hatched by an established Muslim family in their village in Bikrampur, Dhaka. The objective was to abduct her. She also explains and ultimately how that conspiracy was foiled: it was planned and facilitated by their Muslim milk-seller and Muslim boatmen. The leftist-refugee converted to right-wing ideology in his twilight years was my *mesho*, the husband of this aunt and thus, my uncle. The instability of home and its remembering can have different impact on refugee lives and the legacies of the Partition today.

Overall, the book is not intended to be representative of collective patterns of remembering the Partition. Raychaudhuri also makes it clear that he is not interested in finding the historical accuracy of the narratives, but in understanding the legacies of the Partition. He underscores that memory works in multifaceted ways and the narratives both reinforce and undermine the notion of a centralised nationalist narrative. In writing these narratives the author places the narrator as agent. Going beyond limited binaries in understanding agency and victimhood, Raychaudhuri complicates existing scholarship on the Partition. He views the narrator as agent in terms of “*the ways in which people exert narrative control over their memories and refuse to be defined by them*” (p.10). This field of agency is a contested domain where “*competing structures of agency battle for primacy*” (p.11). Almost immediately the author warns us against romanticising narrators as necessarily radical and counterhegemonic. The narratives are layered and messy. It is precisely these characteristics that allows for contradictory stories and opposing extremes to be juxtaposed. Consequently, it demonstrates a narrator’s ability to exert agency over his/her narrative, and, therefore, by extension, over himself/herself. It is noteworthy that the narrator’s agency runs centrally through all the chapters of the book that helps in contesting the falsehoods in nationalist and statist myths around the Partition. It has bearings on the contemporary legacies of the events of 1947 and after.

There is only one aspect that struck me through its absence: caste. Except for a couple of references to caste in three chapters, caste had a peculiar absence. In Chapter Two, through the narrative of Jaswant, Raychaudhuri underscores the necessity of a more nuanced understanding of displacement involving the individual, the family and national borders. There he mentions that Jaswant traced the genealogy of his caste backward to Sri Lanka and his own individual journey forward to that of a Welsh Sikh. We do not get to learn anymore about caste and what significance this backward and forward tracing may have for his narrative of the Partition and his own identity formation. In Chapter Three, he refers to the film *Ramchand Pakistani* where he mentioned that Ramchand was from a low-caste family. In chapter Six, he raises caste with reference to narrations around village structure and taboos of touch when he examines why water symbolizes communal harmony. Yet, that the Partition was also one about and around caste (a good amount of research had established this aspect particularly for Bengal) did not find any noteworthy reflection in Raychaudhuri’s book. Women, men, children, adults, Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus all voices have been given representation. But caste remains a (in)visible omission in the book.

The critique of Raychaudhuri's "Narrating South Asian Partition," however, does not undermine its value of the scholarship. The book is a significant contribution because it not only shows the ways in which the Partition works in the present, reinforcing and contesting dominant national and statist narratives, but the book humanises all those who have been affected by the Partition and allows the reader to empathise with them.

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