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Faith, Trauma, and Transnational Connections in India's Farmer Protests

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It has been months since Indian farmers have been protesting against three new agricultural laws instituted by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led government. Contrary to government claims about the laws boosting efficiency in the farming sector, farmers say that they risk losing their lands and livelihood in the face of deregulation, deepening corporate control, and the triumph of free-market forces.² Sikh farmers, mostly from Punjab, have been at the helm of the movement.

While Sikh farmers on the ground in India are doing the work of mobilization and resistance, transnational Sikhs across the globe are providing a significant scaffolding for the movement. The Sikh diaspora's centripetal orientation towards Punjab and quest for ways to forge transnational connections becomes exaggerated and visible during certain critical moments such as what we're witnessing today. For Sikhs across the world, the ongoing government repression³ conjures memories of a painful past,⁴ especially the state-sponsored massacre of 1984.

While diasporic Sikhs are often careful to point out that the movement is not only about religion or Punjab, in extending their solidarity they inevitably evoke spiritual, emotional, and material ties with the *sangat* or community, as well as their identities as farmers' lineal and collateral kin.⁵ Transnational Sikhs are drawing upon these lineages with farming, faith, and Punjab to provide moral and material aid to struggling farmers in India.

¹ <https://berkleycenter.georgetown.edu/responses/faith-trauma-and-transnational-connections-in-india-s-farmer-protests>

² <https://www.anticapitalistresistance.org/post/behind-the-indian-farmers-struggle>

³ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-55899754>

⁴ <https://scroll.in/article/985313/red-fort-how-punjabi-protestors-are-tapping-into-history-to-mobilise-against-farm-laws>

⁵ <https://scroll.in/global/981209/children-of-kisaans-the-global-punjabi-diaspora-speaks-up-for-the-farmers-protesting-in-india>

They are keenly following the developments, extending impassioned support to the farmers on the ground by offering free food, essential supplies, medical aid, amenities, and even foot massage machines;⁶ organizing their own protest marches⁷ and teach-ins;⁸ wielding social media as a tool⁹ to generate awareness and express their outrage at the Narendra Modi-led BJP government; issuing strong condemnations of human rights violations;¹⁰ signing petitions;¹¹ and composing songs and poetry of protest,¹² as well as other creative expressions. In the process, they are creating, evoking, and reinforcing fictive and real kinship with Sikh farmers. All of this is tinged with a feeling of *déjà vu*: The oppression and atrocities, the portrayal of farmers as “Khalistani,” or separatist and “anti-national,”¹³ is all too familiar. Behind today’s strong and sustained transnational organizing lies a longer story of violence and suppression, but also contention and struggle. For Sikhs in the diaspora, the past is reflected in this present struggle and an understanding of the present is deflected through past trauma.

Immigrant Sikhs, like many other immigrant communities, create and maintain transnational circuits, simultaneously straddling the worlds of “home” and “host” and forging economic, sociocultural, and political connections. One of the earliest and most vivid illustrations of transnational linkages dates back to the early 1900s when anticolonial leaders began drawing connections between the discrimination that Indians were facing in North America with their colonial status in India, leading to the formation of the Ghadar (mutiny or revolution) Party (Sohi 2014). The party consisted of mostly Sikhs, but also non-Sikh Punjabi migrants from various backgrounds, who came together to bring about violent revolutionary change in India and carve a niche for themselves in their new diasporic locations.

Though the Ghadar movement fell short of achieving their revolutionary goal, it was an early manifestation of a strong, inclusive transnational mobilization supporting India. The movement shows that when it came to political organizing,

⁶ <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/nia-examines-khalsa-aid-functionary-in-case-against-sikhs-for-justice/article33594744.ece>

⁷ <https://scroll.in/global/981209/children-of-kisaans-the-global-punjabi-diaspora-speaks-up-for-the-farmers-protesting-in-india>

⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j2EKPYktBc>

⁹ <https://twitter.com/hashtag/farmersprotest?lang=en>

¹⁰ <https://saldef.org/saldef-condemns-human-rights-violations-at-kisaan-protests/>

¹¹ <https://www.sikhcoalition.org/get-involved/take-action-tell-congress-condemn-indian-government-response-farmersprotest/>

¹² <https://twitter.com/mallikakaur/status/1335325646990364672>

¹³ <https://caravanmagazine.in/politics/republic-day-khalistan-conspiracy-government-playing-dangerous-game-punjab-disaster>

identity as “Indian” rather than Sikh, Hindu, or Muslim was most important. However, these solidarities shifted significantly in a watershed moment in Sikh and Indian history: the violence of 1984. Hitherto muted tensions between Sikhs and Hindus became manifest and solidified in 1984 not just in India but also transnationally.

In June 1984, following political tensions, and under the pretext of “apprehending a handful of militants,” the Indian army under state leadership invaded the “theopolitical center”¹⁴ of Sikhs, the Golden Temple in Punjab. Thousands of pilgrims were killed. Given that this sacred complex lies at the “center of [the Sikh] moral and religious world” it has acquired an anthropomorphized quality. Thus, the attack was mourned for the death of people, but also for the “desecration” and “hurt” inflicted on the Golden Temple as embodying the *sangat* (Chopra 2011).

Following closely on the heels of this attack, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was assassinated by her Sikh bodyguards on October 31, 1984. The assassination precipitated the organized, state-backed massacre of Sikhs in India’s capital city, New Delhi, and other parts of North India.

The initial wave of killing lasted from the evening of October 31 through November 4, with more than 3,000 Sikhs murdered. The events of 1984 initiated at least a decade of extrajudicial killings, disappearances, atrocities, and torture in Punjab sanctioned by the state. “1984” became shorthand, symbolizing the violence of June and October to November but also tensions between the Sikh community and state, when the state assumed a “Hindu” identity, drawing a simplistic association between the majority-Hindu community as the “rightful proprietors” (Hansen 1999) of India.

Transnational Sikhs’ robust involvement that we see today is best understood within this longer genealogy of persecution and resistance. Even though the events of 1984 unfolded in India, the outrage, anger, and sadness resonated with Sikhs globally. In the immediate aftermath of the events, Sikhs in the diaspora were visibly moved to action, with many protests and demonstrations against the Indian state (Kurien 2018). Sikhs perceived the attacks of 1984 as an assault on the Sikh collective body, echoing a foundational principle in Sikhism that the guru or teacher is present in the “corporate body of the community” (Oberoi 1987). Sikhs in the diaspora extend this principle to construct a transnational, “imagined community” (Anderson 1983). So even though diasporic Sikhs were

¹⁴ <https://sikhbookclub.com/2017/08/21/the-golden-temple-its-theo-political-status-by-sirdar-kapur-singh>

physically distant from the violence of 1984, they were injured by the loss of a community which “serves as the repository for binding traditions” (Erikson 1991).

In 1984, for first-generation and second-generation Sikhs who started learning about the events at home and in community settings like gurdwaras, the violence led them to reclaim their religious-cultural identity that they had been gradually renouncing as they assimilated into immigrant contexts. One of the most powerful illustrations of this was in the Sikh performance of embodied identity (expressed through articles of faith, especially *kes* or hair covered by the *pagh* or turban). At the epicenter of the violence in India, many Sikh men were being forced to cut their hair and make themselves less conspicuous. But in a remarkable display of transnational connection and solidarity, it was diasporic Sikhs who answered back to the conflation between bodies of individual Sikhs and the collective Sikh body as “terrorists” in India, by performing community in and through corporeality.

While doing research on intergenerational transmission of trauma among diasporic Sikhs (Devgan 2015), my first-generation interlocutors shared how the violence of 1984 provided them with a lens to start comprehending their parents’ experiences of the 1947 Partition. Today, for second-generation Sikhs—those born in the diaspora or who migrated at a young age—the farmers’ movement is shaping their generational consciousness and becoming the idiom through which to start making sense of historical injustices. They are joining the dots between past genocidal violence and present threats of genocide.

Twitter has been especially abuzz with such activity. A young Sikh woman living in the Bay Area recently tweeted: “Our grandparents saw 1947. Our parents saw 1984. We are seeing 2021.”¹⁵

Another New-York based Sikh woman—a lawyer, activist, and writer—posted a thread on Twitter, connecting Hindu nationalism under the BJP government to anti-Sikh violence related to the farmers’ protest.¹⁶

Successive generations of the Sikh community remember a difficult past, but only through imagination and projection (Hirsch 2012). Yet there are occasions when ghosts of violent pasts that always linger in the background, a shadowy absence-presence, make themselves visible and known. The farmer protests of 2021 are one such moment. In the midst of pro-BJP misinformation in the Indian media

¹⁵ <https://twitter.com/punnettsq/status/1355231800948256769>

¹⁶ <https://twitter.com/sikhfeminist/status/1358062274892677124>

and the vile and frightening campaign to purge India of minority groups, especially Muslims, there are now also calls to recreate the genocidal violence of 1984, both on the ground¹⁷ and on social media.¹⁸ For transnational Sikhs, the temporal divide between 1984 and 2021, and the physical distance between India and their diasporic locations, is getting compressed—trauma that is not finite and finished, but chronic and persistent, is manifesting itself all over again.

A significant dimension of transnational Sikhs' solidarity with the farmers' protests has to do with being haunted by an oppressive past that is considered finite and/or denied. Yet, as sociologist Avery Gordon explains: “[h]aunting” creates the need to transform, change, or a “something-to-be-done” (Gordon 2008). As diasporic Sikhs galvanize support for farmers, they are driven by their haunted past, not so much as an albatross, but as a means to reclaim and reshape the present and future. Protesting farmers in India have been going strong against all odds, worthy contenders to the tyranny of Modi's Hindu nationalist and neoliberal regime. If we prod just beneath the surface of this remarkable movement, we will also see how faith, trauma, and transnational connections nurture, replenish, and reinvigorate the roots of a struggle that will likely have enduring effects not only in the realms of economics¹⁹ and politics²⁰ but also internal differentiation within communities, especially reevaluating gender and caste oppression.²¹

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¹⁷ <https://scroll.in/article/985363/in-delhi-public-support-for-protesting-farmers-is-giving-way-to-anti-sikh-prejudice>

¹⁸ <https://www.thequint.com/cyber/twitter-500-accounts-suspended-violent-calls-repeat-of-1984-red-fort-sikh-farmers>

¹⁹ <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/farm-protests-in-india-are-writing-the-green-revolutions-obituary/>

²⁰ <https://jacobinmag.com/2021/02/farmer-protest-india-narendra-modi>

²¹ <https://caravanmagazine.in/agriculture/left-punjab-haryana-caste-gender-solidarities-farmers-protest>

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