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Responses of US-based Sikh Nonprofits to the Farmers' Movement

The farmers' movement has attracted the attention and support of Sikh diaspora communities. In this compilation, we illustrate some of the responses of four US-based Sikh nonprofits: the Jakara Movement, Sikh American Legal Defense and Education Fund (SALDEF), Sikh Coalition, and United Sikhs. All four are 501(c)(3) organizations under the US tax code. The material has been collected from the organizations' websites and their email communications. During this period, these organizations have continued to pursue their other objectives and activities, including general support to the Sikh community for protection of civil rights, guidance on health and safety during the pandemic, and various community-building, educational and outreach efforts. Each organization has its own distinctive character, though they also share many of the same goals and foundational values. They typically act independently, but will also come together or promote each other when the situation demands.

Jakara Movement

The Jakara Movement is headquartered in California, and that state's Sikh community, especially young people, is the main focus of its activities.

Mission and Vision

"The Jakara Movement is a grassroots community-building organization working to empower, educate, and organize Punjabi Sikhs, and other marginalized communities; to advance their health, education, and economic, social, and political power. We strive to create a Gurmat-inspired community, rooted in the struggle of our foremothers and forefathers, to develop powerful, informed, and organized youth leadership, locally-rooted residential power, and community capacity that will be a key partner in building a better future for all."

Activities

The Jakara Movement was the lead organizer of a "Kisaan [Farmer] Solidarity" car and truck rally which assembled in Oakland, California, and drove across the Bay Bridge to the Indian Consulate in San Francisco, then looping back to its starting point. The rally took place on December 5th, 2020, and gained significant media attention. Several California gurdwara management committees joined in the organizing, and their congregations participated in the rally.

In a December 1st email newsletter, part of a statement explaining the rationale for the rally was provided, framed as an open letter to the "diasporic Sangat," with a

link to the complete document on the web. That document was in Punjabi as well as English, and was signed by about fifteen diasporic organizations from a half-dozen countries. The letter began,

Watching the images of the Kisaan Morcha [Movement] over the past few days has sent a resounding message and reminder to Panthic naujawan [youth] around the world: political power and strength has always ultimately laid in the hands of the sangat. The only question has been when will we decide to break from our doubts and self-imposed restrictions to wield it?"

The statement includes framings in terms of Sikh beliefs and ideals, as well as a critique of many aspects of India's national government, oppressive state power more generally, and the influence of Western powers. Hence, it provides a complex moral and political rationale for the farmers' struggle and for international support of the movement.

After the rally, it was estimated (newsletter of December 14th) that 12,000 vehicles were involved, and that the caravan was 20 miles long. It was characterized as the largest protest by Sikh Punjabis in the US, and included participants from Arizona, Nevada and Washington as well as California. Once again emphasizing the Sikh community's identity, the newsletter stated,

Our collective ਸੰਗਤ (sangat/company/congregation) showed up in immense numbers to support the ਕਿਸਾਨ (kisaan/farmers) protesting in India. From the youngest of the Panth to our elders, the spirit of the Guru and the ਸੰਘਰਸ਼ (Sangharsh/struggle) is alive and well in the West.

Subsequent activities by Jakara included a community forum; a discussion of how to combat misinformation about the farmers' protests on social media – a campaign that has been sponsored by entities associated with India's ruling party; a virtual conversation with independent journalist Sandeep Singh, who has been reporting from the protest sites on Delhi's border; an event linking the farmer protests to Martin Luther King Day and human rights violations by India's government; a campaign to free activists like Nodeep Kaur, who had been arrested; and other ongoing efforts.

SALDEF

SALDEF is headquartered in Washington, DC, and while it has a national presence, many of its activities are focused on giving Sikhs visibility and influence in the nation's political capital, including events for members of Congress (especially Langar on the Hill), congressional internships for young Sikhs, and so on. It is the oldest of the four organizations.¹

Mission and Vision

“SALDEF is a national Sikh American media, policy, and education organization. Our mission is to empower Sikh Americans by building dialogue, deepening understanding, promoting civic and political participation, and upholding social justice and religious freedom for all Americans. We are grounded in our values of optimism (chardi kala), humility (nimrata) and service (seva), inspired by the community (sangat) for the benefit of all (sarbat da bhalla).

“We envision a United States where Sikh Americans are respected and recognized as a vibrant and integral part of the fabric of this nation and are appreciated for our shared values of service, social justice, and an unshakeable belief in freedom and equality for all.”

Activities

SALDEF's weekly newsletter collects and features stories from the media, and the farmers' movement began to appear in these weekly wrap-ups in late November. On December 12th, SALDEF collaborated with South Asian Americans Leading Together (SAALT) to host a webinar titled, “Punjabi Farmer Protests & Historic March to Delhi - A Global Perspective.” The description indicated its broad conceptual scope: “experts will discuss the current situation of the farmers in Punjab, the uprising against the recent central government policies and the significance of the farmers around the world. Experts will also discuss the implications of these policies from a social and economic perspective.”

At this time, media reports began to include responses by US politicians to the farmer protests, especially Congressman John Garamendi (D-CA-03), Co-Chair of the American Sikh Caucus. Stories about the farmer protests began to be prominent in the weekly media compilations. In January, SALDEF featured alumni from SALDEF's internship program speaking about their perspectives on the protests.

¹ Its original name was Sikh Mediawatch and Resource Taskforce (SMART).

On February 2nd, SALDEF issued a statement that began,

The Sikh American Legal Defense and Education Fund (SALDEF) is deeply concerned about the escalation of the use of force by the Indian government and attacks on free speech. We strongly condemn the increasing number of human rights violations, including the detention of journalists and other attacks on the press, as farmers from around India protest the passage of the farm laws.

This was followed on February 10th with a more detailed condemnation of human rights violations, which concluded, “We urge you to reach out to your members of Congress and let them know about the human rights violations happening in India right now.” This was supported by resources on the SALDEF website. Subsequent weekly newsletters and additional messages have continued to aggregate media reports on the protests, the Indian government’s responses, and statements of concern from various organizations around the globe.

Sikh Coalition

The Sikh Coalition is probably the largest organization of the four, in terms of budget. It is headquartered in New York, and was formed as a response to the 9/11 attacks, and concerns for the safety of Sikhs after that cataclysmic event.

Mission and Values

“Through the community, courtrooms, classrooms, and halls of Congress, we work to protect the constitutional right to practice your faith without fear. We strive to do this with integrity, selflessness, and the belief that our shared work holds a greater purpose.”

Activities

On December 7th, the Sikh Coalition reported its own efforts to sway US politicians, and urged others to do the same:

TAKE DIRECT CONGRESSIONAL ACTION NOW: Tell your lawmakers in the U.S. Congress to show solidarity with farmers and condemn the Indian government's response to the protest. Take 60 seconds and tell your members of Congress to take action now!

Last week, the Sikh Coalition sent letters to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, the House Foreign Affairs Committee, and the members of

the American Sikh Congressional Caucus in an effort to help raise awareness and request that they join the growing chorus condemning the Indian government's undemocratic response.

Later in December, these calls for action were renewed, and the Sikh Coalition reported on its own efforts, including succeeding in getting Senator Bob Menendez (D-NJ, and the Ranking Member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee) to write to India's ambassador to the US about the issue, as well as directly informing various segments of the US media.

In January, the organization used the example of the Seattle City Council which, urged by the area's Sikh community, had passed a resolution in support of the farmers' protest, to draft a model resolution that can be used to ask local, county, state, and federal government officials to stand with the farmers. Once the Biden administration was sworn in, the Sikh Coalition sent letters to the White House and the State Department, asking that it condemn the Indian government's violence against the protestors, hold the government and its leadership accountable, and monitor the Indian government's own, or government-sanctioned, retaliatory actions that have violated the civil rights of protestors, journalists and others.

The Sikh Coalition has continued to focus on influencing the US government and media. In February, it strongly criticized what it viewed as a weak statement from the US State Department about the Indian government's handling of the protests, and through the present, it continues to focus on media influence and advocacy.

United Sikhs

The US headquarters of United Sikhs are in New York, but it also has offices in nine other countries, including Canada and the United Kingdom. United Sikhs also regularly engages in relief activities for domestic and international disasters, such as hurricanes, floods and earthquakes.

Mission

“To transform, alleviate, educate and protect the lives of underprivileged, individuals and minority communities impacted by disasters, natural or man-made, suffering from hunger, illiteracy, diseases, or from violation of civil and human-rights into informed and vibrant members of society by fostering sustainable programs regardless of color, race, religion or creed. We at UNITED SIKHS believe that the development of enlightened and progressive societies can be made

possible by socially conscious groups of people who make a commitment to develop and direct human potential.”

Activities

United Sikhs’ international presence, including in India, and its experience in disaster relief, have distinguished its response to the farmers’ protests. They began reporting on the protests in their newsletters in late November, by which time they were already offering “Langar (meals, water), Medical Services (Urgent care, ambulatory support, medications) and PPE needs (Masks, sanitizers) ...” They also noted that “Volunteer teams of professionals and doctors are available from Punjab and Delhi throughout this march. Our legal teams are also ready to serve with any anticipated needs in the coming days.”

In early December, United Sikhs reported having set up medical camps and ambulance services at the protest sites on the borders of Delhi. They also provided water for drinking, bathing and washing clothes, as well as blankets and bedding. At the same time, the organization mobilized its international presence, with a large (virtual) international conference on December 10th, marking International Human Rights Day.

Communications from the organization also began to tell the stories of United Sikhs volunteers at the protest sites, including medical professionals and people experienced in feeding large numbers of people for relief missions. This included, for example, Parminder Singh, who went to Kerala to help there, so these efforts were not restricted to the Punjab-based protests.

United Sikhs also began to seek donations for families of farmers who had died during the protests, through a Fallen Farmers Fund. Their communications have featured individual stories of the affected families. At the end of January, a legal helpline and fund was launched for those who went missing after the January 26th tractor rally in New Delhi. This has involved partnering with legal professionals, farmers’ unions, and the Delhi Sikh Gurdwara Management Committee. Many individuals have been detained by the police, often under trumped-up charges, and legal representation for them has been vital. In a March statement, Harpreet Kaur, the United Sikhs Legal Director, India, said, “Safeguarding the welfare of the victims and their families, regardless of the time it takes to process the cases, is part of our Legal Aid project. We continue to receive requests for assistance on our Legal Aid helpline.”

As winter has turned to summer, United Sikhs has been providing fans, coolers and shade shelters. It has expanded its onsite efforts to eye care for the elderly, blood

donations, and trash clean up. These kinds of efforts have become increasingly important as the government has restricted protestors' access to services and conveniences at the protest camps on the borders of Delhi.

Websites

www.jakara.org

www.saldef.org

www.sikhcoalition.org

www.unitedsikhs.org