



Sikh Research Journal

Vol. 7 No. 1

This article is from *Sikh Research Journal*, the online peer-reviewed journal of Sikh and Punjabi Studies

Sikh Research Journal *Vol. 7 No. 1 Published: Spring 2022.

<http://sikhresearchjournal.org>

<http://sikhfoundation.org>

Final Reflections on the Farmers' Movement

Editorial Team

Special Issue on the Farmers' Movement in India

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

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

¹ Paramjit Singh and Ronki Ram (2022). “Making sense of agrarian distress and peasant struggles in Punjab.” *Sikh Formations*, Vol 17, no. 4

² *ibid*

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

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

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³ *ibid*