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## **Sikh Spiritual-Political Dynamics in the Farmers' Movement**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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