



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>

***Mainu Rang De Basanti Chunniya*¹:**

Women in the Farmers' Movement

Navsharan Singh

Independent Researcher and Writer

Thousands of yellow and green dupattas were the omnipresent symbol of the women's stirring presence at the borders in Delhi where farmers had set up camps all through 2021. Led by the farmers' unions, with the Punjab unions at the forefront, a convoy of tractor trolleys and trucks – thousands of them, extending for several miles – made its way into the capital city of Delhi on November 26, 2020. The farmers were seeking repeal of the three farm laws which the government had passed undemocratically. Women were part of this convoy. They came waving their union flags and braving the police barricades, water cannons and tear gas attacks.

Prevented by police barricades from entering Delhi, the farmers decided to camp right where they were stopped. Soon they set up mini townships at four different entry points to the capital, naming them after the well-known heroes of independence and land reform movements against the British rule. They put up signage of villages they came from and built little homes in the trolleys. Within days they opened libraries and reading rooms, several health clinics, installed laundromats, hot water heaters, mini workshops for repair of tractors, phone battery charging stalls, and a large number of community kitchens. Fresh vegetables and tankers of milk came from the farmers of neighboring state of Haryana every day. There was plenty of food for everyone at the community kitchens. "We are here to stay, we will leave only when the government repeals these draconian laws," they said.

These were women and men from small and marginal farming households overwhelmingly. In India roughly 85 percent of the farm holdings are small and marginal. It amounts to less than 2 hectares of land, with 70 percent less than 1 hectare and average landholding being only 0.5 hectares per household.² "We will

¹ Color my head scarf yellow.

² Figures as per the agriculture census of 2015-16 cited in <http://www.ruralagrarianstudies.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/State-of-Rural-and-Agrarian-India-Report-2020.pdf>

fight over and over again and generation upon generation, but we will not let our land go,” they said. The government introduced three farm bills in the Parliament in 2020 - the Farmers’ Produce Trade And Commerce (Promotion And Facilitation) Bill, the Farmers’ (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement on Price Assurance and Farm Services Bill and the Essential Commodities (Amendment) Bill. Together, these bills proposed relaxed restrictions on purchase and sale of farm produce, on stocking under the Essential Commodities Act of 1955 and outlined a framework on contract farming.³ The farmers feared that the laws will make smallholder farming unsustainable and force small and marginal farmers to give up their land and become casual or contract laborers in the cities. They were determined to fight this out and women were part of this fight. “How can we stay back when our land and livelihoods are threatened by the three laws,” they would often say.

The farmers stayed for 13 months in the camps they had set up before the farm laws were repealed on November 29, 2021. It was then that the farm unions decided to adjourn the protest and return to their villages.⁴

Women at the morchas

The leadership of the farm movement is predominantly elder male, with decades of experience of mobilizing farmers on local demands. There are over 32 farm unions in Punjab alone and they were all at the protest sites. A few of these Unions have women’s wing which are led by women, but by and large women are not in leadership positions in those unions.

However, women quickly acquired a very significant position in the protest movement. They worked quietly at the backend - collecting food and funds, talking to the press, and mobilizing support among the families in the villages and townships near the campsites at Delhi borders. In the buildup to the farmers’ march to Delhi

³ The Bills were introduced on September 14, and were passed in Lok Sabha on September 17, and in Rajya Sabha on September 20, received the President’s assent on September 24 and notified in the Gazette on September 27, 2020. In a matter of less than two weeks, completely suspending any democratic process and consultation, the Farm Bills were allowed to effect a fundamental transformation in the existing regulatory framework in agriculture in favour of big business.

⁴ Only days before the protest completed one year at the borders of Delhi, on 19th November, the Prime Minister of India declared repeal of the three laws.

led by the unions in Punjab, women's role in mobilizing support through the use of folk form *Jago* (wake up) - going around in the village late at night, singing and giving the message of the protest - was exemplary. As the movement became protracted, women's roles and responsibilities kept on expanding. They were given the responsibility to manage the stage and deliver speeches. During harvest seasons when the men had to return to the villages to harvest and take the crop to the *mandis*, women took over the protest sites. In these times, there were more women at the borders with added responsibilities of keeping the *morchas* alive.

While for many women from Haryana and Western Uttar Pradesh, it was their first time in a protest, it was not the case with women from Punjab who were present in very large numbers at the *morchas*. Farmer and agriculture labor women have a long history of mobilization which goes back to at least three decades. They have been part of farmers' protests demanding compensation for farmers' who died by suicide failing to cope with mounting farm debts and for crop failure due to faulty seeds provided through government outlets. They have been at the forefront against forcible land acquisition and in struggles for Dalit rights over village commons led by left farm and agriculture labour unions. Women have been a part of the farmers' unions, and the left unions especially, have been influential in bringing women into the public domain.⁵

⁵ Rural women's mobilization is deeply connected with many aspects of Punjab's left legacy and a very vibrant progressive rural cultural movement in the state which can be traced back to the late 1960s. There is rich music, poetry and also theater in rural areas. There are scores of rural theater troupes in Punjab, and we saw them regularly at the borders performing where the farmers were protesting. Many of these rural theater troupes are part of an umbrella organization - *Punjab Lok Sabhyachar Manch*, a people's cultural platform committed to building a just society through progressive cultural movement. These troupes do political theater. Women are both part of the audience and the lead performers. Another very interesting tradition in Punjab is the all-night cultural programmes in the villages, a tradition which began during the years of militancy in the 1980s when Punjab remained under night curfew - from 9 pm to 5 am - for years. A progressive left cultural tradition emerged in rural Punjab in this period. People would collect at a central point in the village before 9 pm and watch cultural programmes all night under the open sky. This tradition continued in the villages even after militancy ebbed. Women were mobilized for these cultural programmes as a conscious strategy and women see themselves as part of the movements.

Women were making history with their sweat and labor

At the four camps on Delhi borders, the unions set up protest stages. These platforms featured speeches by union leaders but also cultural performances including music, drama, poetry and folk singing, most of the day and into the evenings. These performances highlighted various themes – the agrarian crisis, rural indebtedness, apathy of the government officials, conditions of public schools and hospitals and women’s oppression. Women and men gathered every day to hear the farm leaders, cultural activists and learn about the happenings in the country. The protest stage and the camp settlements turned into schools for women where they learnt about their own oppression, but also about the others whose rights were being taken away. The reference to labour codes, the increasing hold of agri-corporates on the rural economy, falling incomes and increasing costs of farming, joblessness and the struggle of *dalit* labour rights activists, like Nodeep Kaur and Shiv Kumar,⁶ were common themes of discussion.

On 18th January, 2021, Sanyukt Kisan Morcha (SKM) dedicated one full day to celebrate women farmers' contribution to the movement. This was the first women farmer's day. Many more were to follow in the next few months. Women speakers took the stage and talked about three farm laws and its impact on women. Farmer women were also joined by many other working-class women on this day. There were para teachers, childcare workers, informal employment workers, nurses, *anganwadi* workers and also women from farm suicide victim families. It was on these stages that women started talking not only about farm crisis but also about patriarchy and discrimination, not so much using these concepts, but examples from their everyday lives - why are the families not happy when a daughter is born or why do we prefer sons over daughters or why do we have domestic violence in our families were some of the questions raised by the women.

On 8 March 2021, the unions celebrated International Women’s Day at the *morchas*. Thousands of women workers and farmers gathered to mark women’s struggles for emancipation. With over fifty thousand farmer and farm labor women

⁶ Nodeep Kaur and Shiv Kumar, young dalit labour activists were mobilising contractual industrial workers employed in the small factories in the vicinity of farmers’ camps in support of the farm movement. This attracted the ire of factory owners and they were arrested, brutally tortured, and slapped with serious charges, including murder. Nodeep Kaur also faced custodial sexual violence. For more details <https://www.article-14.com/post/why-govt-ditched-due-process-for-nodeep-kaur-shiv-kumar> and <https://www.article-14.com/post/dalit-labour-leader-shiv-kumar-tortured-in-custody-govt-doctors>

present, it was perhaps the biggest women's day gathering on planet earth on that day. The song of *basanti* dupattas was in the air *color my chuniya basanti*⁷ - a modified version of *mera rang de basanti chola* (color my cloak yellow) – the well-known Ram Prasad Bismil song associated with Bhagat Singh, Rajguru and Sukhdev as they walked to the gallows – reverberated in the air. The new version was about women coming out of the confines of home to claim that women's place was in the struggles. Women leaders and activists spoke about the exemplary role of women in the ongoing farm struggle and the corporate attack on their livelihood, of their exploitation in the big corporate farms where women laborers were not even paid the statutory minimum wage, they challenged the official policy of facilitating market subjugation of farming communities and their forced relocation to cities as perennial casual labor.

From the podium women talked about the forgotten role of women in previous farm movements – from Tebhaga⁸ to Telangana⁹ to Anti Betterment Levy struggles¹⁰ of the 1950s and 60s. They said that women always fought with men for the rights of the tillers but they were asked to go back home to cook *chapatis* after the movements were over. The failure of the leadership of earlier movements to pay attention to what the women were saying to help transform gender social relations was on women's watch. They threw back the challenge at the present leadership to recognise that the ongoing farm struggle would only be half as strong and half as vibrant if women had not joined the movement.

In July 2021, the SKM held a *Kisan Parliament* in the heart of Delhi as the Indian parliament met for the Monsoon Session for two weeks. Two full days of the farmers' parliament were dedicated to women farmers' issues when women ran the mock proceedings of the House. These two days saw a massive mobilization of women from different states of India – from Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and Telangana in the South to the western state of Maharashtra and the central and northern states of Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh and Haryana. The women farmers held spirited sessions foregrounding women's demands. It was

⁷ The modified song written by poet Sarbjot Singh can be heard here

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vL2bHbjcvek>

⁸ For a quick reference about the movement, please see <https://thewire.in/history/bengal-tebhaga-movement-sharecroppers>

⁹ For a brief summary <https://feminisminindia.com/2020/08/12/women-armed-revolution-telangana-peoples-struggle/>

¹⁰ For a brief introduction see: https://peoplesdemocracy.in/2020/0823_pd/anti-betterment-levy-struggle-punjab

evident in the farmers' protest that women who were not even recognized as farmers in policy and society created a space in the movement for articulating a gender perspective. Women's formidable presence was also successful in breaking the convention that politics is a male arena of activity. The layer of masculinity attributed to the farmers movement dissolved with women's presence as women became visible everywhere.

New issues from a new location

The farmers' protest began with the demand for repeal of the three farm laws. But soon women brought new issues to the farm movement and from a new location. Agrarian crisis in its plurality is writ large on the body politic of rural India – landlessness, falling incomes, rising costs of farming, mounting farm debts, ecological crisis manifesting in the degradation of environment, health, water, lack of employment in farm sector, especially for women, and increasing hold of the corporate giants on the lives of farmers. This is part of the everyday experience of rural farming communities.

The crisis also erupted in the form of suicides of farmers and agricultural labour who were unable to repay the farm loans. In January 2021, just a month after the farmers' *morcha* began at the borders, women farmers and labourers from the families of farm suicides in Punjab joined the protest at the Tikri border's Bibi Gulab Kaur stage. As they came, they brought with them the pictures of their dead relatives. Some even held two pictures. From the stage where they had assembled, when they held the grainy pictures high, it was like a wave of corpses rising. It was evident that while the entire farming families come under crisis with suicides, the suicides affect women profoundly. The women narrated how they are left to pick up the threads which men suddenly drop – to carry on the responsibilities of farming, repay the loans, demand compensation from the state and prevent forcible evictions from their land. Some of the women from farm suicide families have been organizing under the farmers unions and also under *Kisan Mazdoor Khudkushi Peerat Parivar Committee* (KMKPPC) – Committee of Farmers and Labourers Suicide Victim Families which was formed in 2017 and has been actively campaigning for compensation and rehabilitation of families of suicide victims.¹¹ But they continue to face state apathy. The farm labour suicide families

¹¹ KMKPPC was founded by Kiranjit Kaur, a young university student whose father had committed suicide. She went from village to village, collecting data on women whose husbands,

suffer even more as there is no state compensation for the suicide of the landless. These women brought their daily struggle for survival to the *morchas* and demanded that they be heard. State apathy towards them was called out by the unions.

Since the Green Revolution took off in Punjab, rural women have been written out of policy. They have experienced complete neglect and total stagnation in their employment and wages, unable to get employment in farm operations even for jobs which men have vacated as they migrate to the cities. The farm work which men and women do is very different. There is a strict gender divide in tasks. In Green Revolution areas with mechanized farming, agricultural wage labor is scarce in all seasons, and women's work is even more scarce. In Punjab for instance, women are almost entirely out of operations associated with the wheat crop; they find rice planting at times for a few days. It is only in cotton picking, which is not yet mechanized, that they find some paid work. The vegetable and citrus growing belt generates additional days of wage work, but the entire work put together does not exceed 150 days in a year.¹² This includes labor under the government's National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme.

The nature of the work in rural areas has also changed, especially for women. Overwhelmingly, it is contract work, piece rate, which is given to men who engage their wives and children in these operations. Rates are per hectare of rice planted, quintal of cotton picked, hectare of hay baled, and so on. The daily wage rates on vegetable and fruit farms, where women are concentrated, are almost one-third lower than the stipulated minimum wage. When men migrate to nearby cities and towns, both as skilled laborers and as unskilled workers on construction sites and other odd jobs, women stay behind to look after the children and desperately seek opportunities for wage work. If agricultural work is scarce, non-farm work is even more so. The women are landless and asset-less, representing the most marginalized section of agricultural wage workers.

sons, fathers or fathers-in-law committed suicide. The Committee terms farmer suicides as institutional murders and seeks state accountability for every suicide.

¹² These estimates are based on author's field surveys in many parts of Punjab for an ICSSR project 2019, unpublished.

Women's presence expanded farm movement's claims on the state

Women came to the *morcha* bringing with them their varied experiences of being farmers without land, having lost husbands, fathers, or sons to deaths by suicides, of their fights against sexual violence and the impunity it enjoyed, of their struggles for more work and better wage. With women's rousing participation in the movement, the farm movement's claims on the state expanded. The experience of women of the agrarian crisis is far more intense and their past sustained work and activism validated their experience and their present-day demands. With women's presence, the movement was no longer about state protection through MSP, but they added the demand of gender justice, land to the landless, guaranteed minimum wages for farm jobs, equal wage for farm operations and much more.

The farm movement which captured the public imagination and brought crucial issues of democratic social change to the forefront of the country's attention was shouldered by women who sat determinedly at the camps and fought the state's war of attrition with their calm confidence. Women's stirring presence gave us reason to hope that the leading role played by women in the farm protest will spill over to cultural fronts bringing to the fore gender equality in and outside of the home.