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## **Farmers' Movement in Punjab: Consciousness and Politics**

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### **Abstract**

The paper argues that the leaders in the ongoing farmers' movement in India are playing a decisive role in raising consciousness among farmers and agricultural labourers, including influencing them to assert their rights in the political scenario at the level of state as well as the centre. The rising consciousness and fear of land<sup>1</sup> seizure are prompting the farmers' collective fight against privatization in the agricultural sector and anti-farmers policies of the central government. Although a pre-existing consciousness has played a vital role in initiating the movement, the movement itself has heightened much consciousness among farmers and farm workers. Their raised consciousness and mobilization for the movement has also forced agriculture related issues on the agendas of various political parties at all levels of politics. Thus, the paper discusses the various ways in which the farmers' organizations have raised farmers and farm labourers' consciousness that has motivated them to participate in formal politics which has far-reaching consequences for Indian democracy. Because the movement is ongoing, the analysis, thus far, is preliminary and consequently, exploratory in nature.

### **Introduction**

In Punjab, the recent farmers' movement is a result of awareness in farmers of the potential harm of the three new farm laws passed by the Government of India. It is a consciousness that has been long nurtured in the historical context of agricultural movements in Punjab. Several socio-economic and political factors have played a significant role in the rising consciousness of farmers. Due to their heightened

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<sup>1</sup>The farmers speculate that in the initial years corporate houses will provide better price of crops. Meanwhile, the government *mandis* or Agricultural Produce Marketing Committees (APMCs) will break down and then corporate houses will purchase their produce on throw away prices. However, in the context of contract farming, private firms will not provide the suitable prices of produce in case of bumper crops. The contract farming law does not allow the farmers to approach the civil courts in case of conflict or controversy. In these circumstances, the farmers will face the loss who are already in trap of vicious circle of debt. Ultimately, they have no other option to sell their land in order to repay the debt.

consciousness, farmers, particularly the educated leaders of different farmers' organizations have grasped the hidden threats of the new farm laws. Thus, it has played a critical role in mobilizing and organizing farmers and farm labourers against the laws.

However, a comprehensive discussion of farmers' consciousness requires grasp of the socioeconomic conditions of farmers and labourers, significance of land in farmers' consciousness as well in Punjabi society. Punjab is an agrarian state where agriculture is not merely a major source of livelihood, but also a way of life. Agricultural land and way of life are proudly offered as a legacy to future generations. It is, therefore, a socioeconomic identity of certain castes and communities in the state. The occupancy of land in Punjabi, particularly in Sikh society, has become the parameter in determining social status of individuals and caste/s (Singh, 2020a: 25; see also Singh, 1986: 297-298) as well as a path to obtaining political power. Various studies (Marenco 1976, Judge 2002, Puri 2003, Ram 2007, Baixas and Simon 2008, Singh 2016) have shown Jat Sikhs, as landowners, occupy a high social status. Although scheduled castes constitute the largest segment of the population of the state, they remain at the lowest end of the social strata because they are landless (Ram, 2007: 4070; see also Singh, 2019: 291). Furthermore, green revolution added to the value of land in the society. Although agricultural progress benefited rural society across caste and class categories (Bhalla and Chadha, 1983), it mostly benefited the landowning castes in the state. It shows that power and status in Punjabi consciousness are determined by land ownership.

Sociological analysis of the movement shows that farmers are also protesting to maintain their dominant social position in the state. In Punjabi society, as afore noted, power revolves around the axis of land. Even, social status in Sikh society is determined by the size of land holding (Puri, 2003: 297-298). During the missal and Maharaja Ranjit Singh's period, Jat Sikhs were major recipients of *jagirs* (a type of feudal land grant). Therefore, they captured the dominant position in the society (Singh, 2020: 25). The colonial government decided to follow the principal of not altering the existing social and economic order. It passed the Land Alienation Act of 1901. The Act permitted purchase of agricultural land by only those belonging to defined agricultural castes i.e. Jats, Kambojs, Sainis, Arians, Gujjars (Mukherji, 1998: 1045). These extraordinary privileges to the Jats contributed further to their caste consolidation, dominance and arrogance of privilege. In the post-independence period and after the green revolution, the land holding castes controlled the political institutions which allowed them to dominate the social space

of Punjab. Jat Sikhs, who owned the most of land, were considered socially superior than those who did not own as much land and non-agricultural castes. Thus, the ownership of land had become the criterion of Jat dominance. Therefore, farmers often assert that land is necessary for the existence of their coming generations because it is associated with their livelihood as well as asocial status. Thus, it has become a critical question for Jat Sikhs and other agricultural castes of the state to save the source of livelihood and to maintain their social status too. As a result, both consciousness and fear of losing land had become key factors in mobilization of the farmers against the central government in order to repeal the laws.

Regardless, agriculture based economic prosperity was not going to be everlasting. In the middle of 1980s, the agrarian crisis that surfaced in Punjab was attributable to stagnation in production, rising costs, indebtedness, crops failure (especially cotton) etc. (Singh et. al., 2016: xvi). Furthermore, in the 1990s, neoliberal policies resulted in the decline of public investment in agriculture sector, freezing the minimum support price (henceforth MSP), rising cost of inputs, and high cost of borrowing formally or informally. Such agricultural policies of the central government and the Punjab government deepened the agrarian distress. As a result, agrarian distress that included the heavy burden of debt carried by farmers' and agricultural labourers alike led them to commit suicide (ibid: 6). Thus, for a long period, small farmers and agricultural labourers in the state (particularly in the Malwa region) have been distressed. They were already contemplating resistance to these unjust and exploitative policies of the government. The latest set of farm laws<sup>2</sup> added fuel to the fire. It ignited the ongoing agitation by farmers in Punjab (and Haryana) initially and gradually evolved into a pan-Indian movement. The movement has received support from different sections of the society i.e. singers, artists, sports persons, traders, shopkeepers, women, employees, advocates, ex-servicemen etc. Participation from women, among all of those groups, is noteworthy. In this movement, women are playing leading roles. It is often forgotten that women too can own land and they do perform labour in the fields (Natt, 2021: 133). In this backdrop, the paper is an endeavor to reflect on the strategies employed by various farmer organizations to nurture this consciousness and facilitate understanding of the gravity of the laws in the lives of farmers and farm labourers.

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<sup>2</sup> The three laws are: 1) Farmers' Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Act, 2020; 2) Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement of Price Assurance, Farm Services Act, 2020; and 3) Essential Commodities (Amendment) Act, 2020.

The paper is divided into three parts. First part focuses on the genesis of consciousness and its assertion by the farmers in Punjab. Second part discusses the shift of farmer unions from non-electoral politics of pressure group to active participation in electoral politics. Third part deals with conclusion and implementations. The paper is primarily based on data collected in the months of August and September of 2021 in the villages in Sri Muktsar Sahib and Ferozepur districts. The instruments involved detailed interviews with farmers and ethnographic observations. According to the Oxford dictionary, the word consciousness can have at least three meanings; first, the state of being able to use the sense and mental power to understand what is happening; secondly, the state of being aware of something; thirdly, the ideas and opinions of a person or group.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, D. M. Rosenthal analyses the term consciousness in three senses, firstly, condition of people awake and responsive to sensory inspiration. Secondly, consciousness is an individual being conscious of something. Thirdly, consciousness is perceptions and thoughts of individuals (Rosenthal, 2009: 157). In the present context, consciousness is used for farmers' state of being aware of and their perceptions of the new farm laws.

### **Genesis of Consciousness and Assertion of Farmers in Punjab**

Punjab is recognized as the land of protests (Ram, 2014:164). Several socio-religious, political, and civil protest movements started from this land. These movements did not merely criticize the prevailing oppressive socio-religious rituals, traditions and public policies, but also ignited consciousness of the people. Farmers movements as civil and political protest began as early as the colonial period. During this period, farmers of Punjab had successfully organized several movements (Mukherji, 1998: 1044-45) which also had a strong link with the farmers movements at the national level. The canal colonies agitation of farmers was mobilized by Sardar Ajit Singh, an uncle of Shaheed Bhagat Singh, in 1907. Again, in 1924 and 1930s farmer organizations mobilized the farmers on the issue of land and water revenue (Singh and Gill, 1984: 1728; Ali, 1989: 14-19). These movements had raised consciousness of farmers and labourers about their pitiful conditions during colonial rule (Singh, 2020a: 5-8). Though, in the post-Independence period, the Naxalite movement and the Communist Party of India

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<sup>3</sup> Access from

[https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/american\\_english/consciousness](https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/american_english/consciousness), accessed on 05/10/2021.

(henceforth CPI) raised consciousness among farmers and labourers, but they failed to lift them up from below. Through the decades, the farmers continued to be distressed and devolved into despair. But, the new farm laws, while posing a challenge to the plight of farmers and farm labourers, interestingly has sparked a consciousness, at least leading to the current movement that has been going on for close to a year now. Of course, as discussed afore, the farmers and workers were primed for such heightened consciousness. One could say that it was lying dormant. Nevertheless, the hard work of grassroots organizers has catapulted this consciousness to another level.

A close look shows that the leaders of different farmers' organizations<sup>4</sup> had been organizing well before the start of the current movement. They went to various villages in Punjab, worked to raise their awareness and subsequently, succeeded in organizing them.<sup>5</sup> They informed the farmers, labourers and the people about the repercussion of new farming laws and anti-farmer policies of the government. They urged the farmers and labourers to collectively fight against injustice to save their own land, which is the primary source of their livelihood. They used references from Sikh history and *bani* of the Gurus to motivate the farmers and labourers in order to fight against the unfair political system and the draconian laws. Prior to the protest, they appealed to the farmers and labourers to organize at the village level. The leaders asserted the importance of organizing as key for the unity of farmers and labourers. It was necessary, the leaders said, for groups previously divided on account of political party affiliations, castes, class, and region. Such efforts to organize by the leaders where they were brought to the same platform was a huge sign of success. A pamphlet of Bharti Kisan Union Ekta Ugraha (henceforth BKU Ugraha) underlines the importance of farmers organization, where the slogan read, viz. "*Jathebandi bina gujara nahi, sangarsh bina koi chara nhi*" (No survival without organization, no option without agitation).<sup>6</sup> The significance of organizing and agitating for survival of the farmers and agricultural labourers was well established by the union leaders. In an interview, Sudarshan Sullah (a farmer)

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<sup>4</sup> Beside of leaders of farmer Unions, the Punjabi singers, writers and actors also played a critical role in raising awareness and mobilizing the farmers and labourers against the new farming laws of Union government. They went at each spot of agitation and urged the farmers through their songs to start the protest until or unless the government repeals the laws. A few singers went to also Haryana to mobilize the farmers.

<sup>5</sup> Interview with Sudarshan Sullah, a block level leader of BKU Ekta-Ugraha, at Toll Plaza on SH20 national highway, Mahmujoyia on 29/08/2021.

<sup>6</sup> Pamphlet was published by State Committee, Bharti Kisan Union Ekta-Ugraha, publisher Sukdev Singh Kokri Kalan.

reported that consciousness had risen among the common farmers. Earlier, only the leaders of farmers organizations were aware. And, they often argued that one day corporations would seize the land. Now, that prediction seems true and people are cautiously listening to them. At present, farmers as well as common people have become much more conscious than before. Even the ordinary farmers have started to question to the political leadership.<sup>7</sup> Their rising consciousness could also be mapped from hoisting flags of the *kissan* unions' on their houses' rooftops, cars, motorcycles and cycles. They pasted stickers also on cars, motorcycles, and tractors which inscribed the slogans viz. 'No Farmer No Food', 'Jai Jawan Jai Kissan', 'Farmers: We Feed the World', etc. Along with the flags and stickers, so many songs and poems were recorded, written and popularized through social media platforms by Punjabi singers and writers in order to foster consciousness and mobilize farmers against the three farm laws.

Furthermore, an interesting development is the consolidation of a consciousness of unity that seems to have bridged certain social cleavages (i.e. regional, religious, class and caste) that normally divide farmers and labourers. Its finest example is the evolution of a consciousness that united the farmers of Punjab and Haryana overriding their regional identities. Now, they appear to identify as farmers first and then as Punjabis or Haryanvis. Hence, one sees unifying forces of the movement that has transformed into a force to reckon with. And the unity has manifested in many ways – from donations of food, to sharing of lands. Now, they use the inclusive umbrella category *kirti lok* (working people) to refer to themselves.

During the whole course of time, farmers' leaders utilized the space of gurdwaras in the villages to address farmers, labourers and ordinary people. They argued that the politicians-corporation nexus is responsible for the misfortune of farmers and labourers. Since 1990s, the political leadership has slowly and steadily created pathways for corporations into the agricultural sector. New farm laws by BJP government are an extension of that long term plan. They merely wish to expedite that process of efficient exploitation of farmers<sup>8</sup> by corporations (like the ones owned by Mukesh Ambani and Gautam Adani) by taking control of their land. The laws will make the farmers slaves of corporations.<sup>9</sup> They circulated copies of the

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<sup>7</sup> Interview with Sudarshan Sullah.

<sup>8</sup> Accessed from <https://qz.com/india/1942448/indias-protesting-farmers-think-new-laws-benefit-ambani-adani/>, accessed on 12/08/2021.

<sup>9</sup> Interview with Nirmal Singh at village Khirkianwala of Sri Muktsar Sahib on 29/08/2021.

laws among the farmers. Consciousness has risen further among them by studying the laws.<sup>10</sup> Thus, the raised consciousness among farmers also raises fear in their minds that the corporations will seize their land (Singh, 2020b: 14). As a result, consciousness and fear among the farmers persuaded them to initiate the movement on a large scale

Narinder Singh, a farmer leader, narrated that when the country had acute shortage of food grains, then the government encouraged the farmers to use high yield seeds in order to accomplish the requisite food demand of the country. The government ensured the farmers for public investment in the agriculture sector viz. credit on low interest rate, subsidies on inputs such as seeds, pesticides, water pump etc., and MSP on crops. Therefore, to meet the demand of food grains, farmers of Punjab used the high yield seeds or genetically modified seeds, urea, pesticides, and high quantity of ground water. As a result, ground water level is depleting in the state and the land is becoming barren. Now, the government is also withdrawing from agricultural sector and leaving them at the mercy of corporations.<sup>11</sup> Surely, in the initial years of green revolution, agriculture was profitable. It helped farmers prosper and did the same for the sectors associated with agriculture. Later on, stagnation in the production, low price of food grains, and rising input costs made agriculture a poor source of livelihood. Consequently, farmers and agricultural labourers incurred massive debts (Gill, 2005: 219). A recent study shows that about 83.33 percent of the marginal farm households and 80.07 percent of agricultural labour households are in debt in rural Punjab (Kaur et. al, 2018: 146). However, the debt for agricultural labourers is four times higher than their annual income.<sup>12</sup> This high indebtedness is pushing both farmers and labourers to commit suicide (Singh, 2014: 27).

### **Shift from Non-electoral Politics to Electoral Politics**

Farmers rising consciousness has persuaded them to question the central as well as the state governments whom they hold responsible for their misfortune and distress.

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Narinder Singh (allies Joga Singh), block president of Guruharsahai of Bharti Kisan Union Ektadkoda, argued that this whole process of making conscious to the farmers, agricultural labourers and ordinary people. Interview with Narinder Singh at Toll Plaza on SH 20 national highway of Mahmujoya on 29/08/2021.

<sup>12</sup> Accessed from <https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/punjab/debt-on-farm-labourers-four-times-their-annual-income-claims-study-164742>, accessed on 28/08/2021.

This questioning has moved into the space of formal politics. The leaders of SKM issued a 'Voters' Whip' to the Members of Parliament (henceforth MPs) of the opposition political parties to be present in parliament and halt all other business transactions until the central government accepts the demands of farmers on the floor of the house. They also accused the opposition parties for their failure to effectively confront and expose the central government's apathy towards the demands and suffering of the farmers.<sup>13</sup> In this way, SKM pressurized the opposition parties to surround the government from both inside and outside the parliament. But thus far the farmers' organizations have remained unsuccessful in convincing the government to accept their demands. Therefore, the failure of pressure politics coerced the farmer organizations to shift towards active participation in electoral politics as the strategy going forward. They maneuvered to pressurize BJP through *vote ki chot* (blow of vote). Under the banner of SKM, farmers' leaders opposed BJP in the West Bengal assembly election. As a result, TMC succeeded in defeating BJP in the election. Even in order to build pressure on the central government, SKM's leaders have also planned to oppose BJP in Punjab, Uttar Pradesh, and Uttarakhand in forthcoming assembly elections to be held in 2022. The Muzaffarnagar *Kisan Mahapanchayat* was the beginning of this course where SKM leaders explicitly challenged the central government to either accept their demands or be ready to face dire consequences in future assembly elections in various states. They also argued that if BJP polarizes the people, then they will work to unite them. Thus, on the one hand, it reveals that raised consciousness has provided them an understanding about the politics of polarization. On the other hand, it reflects the growing need to address the several issues faced by farmers through legislative process.

More specifically, the farmers' movement has shown much political influence in the state of Punjab. In the initial phase, in order to save their political existence, Shiromani Akali Dal (Badal) (henceforth SAD(B) left the cabinet ministry in BJP's government and broke its alliance with BJP due to political sway of farmers. The movement has raised awareness and mobilized the farmers to ask questions of political leadership of different parties about promises they had already made. Largely, farmers are questioning political leaders of mainstream political parties of the state i.e. SAD, Congress and Aam Aadmi Party (henceforth AAP). They believed that these political parties have remained unsuccessful in resolving the problems experienced by farmers and labourers whenever they have been in power.

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<sup>13</sup>Accessed from <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/farmers-front-issues-whip-to-mps/article35370520.ece>, accessed on 12/08/2021.

However, leaders of thirty-two farmers' organizations of Punjab have declared that they will not allow BJP's leaders to organize conferences, meetings or rallies in the state. Moreover, farmers in several villages have put up banners saying that stray animals and political leaders are not allowed to enter the villages. It shows that the rising consciousness among farmers is also challenging traditional modes of politics. Subsequent to violence between farmers and police at Moga, thirty-two farmers' organizations demanded the presence of all political parties, except BJP, to send their representatives to answer their questions on 10th September, 2021 in Chandigarh. At the meeting, leaders of farmers directed the parties to cease their political rallies before the formal announcement of election by the Election Commission in order to avoid clashes between farmers and supporters of various parties. All political parties consented to this demand of farmers' leadership. Later on, the SAD (B) raised their voice against this decision that it would provide a space to Congress party to hold political conventions in the form of governmental programs. Although SAD (B) has raised objections, it has not dared to become an obstacle. It shows that farmers movement has generated a space in state politics where no political party can manage to win the forthcoming assembly election without the support of farmers. The farmers are also setting the agenda of different political parties such that it is centered on agricultural development and welfare of farmers and labourers. The movement has also convinced the state government to form its policies related to farmers and labourers. Thus, it shows that the rising consciousness among farmers is deepening democracy and changing traditional modes of politics in the state.

### **Conclusion and Implementation**

The paper establishes that leaders of different farmers' organizations have played a critical role in raising consciousness among the farmers and agricultural labourers in the state. The rising level of consciousness organized the farmers and labourers at the village level and mobilized them to start the agitation against the Congress-led Punjab government as well as the BJP-Akali's alliance government at the Centre. The movement has augmented the level of consciousness as well as strengthened fraternity among farmers and farm labourers. Such consciousness and fraternity will hopefully help negotiate and minimize social cleavages (like caste, class, religion and region) among farmers and labourers in India's rural society. In their rising consciousness, thrives democratic values that has mobilized civil society in the state. It is a good sign for Indian democracy.

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