



Battle for a Collective Belonging:
Field Insights from Protestors, Union Activists in The Farmers Protest Movement
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Abstract:

This paper is a culmination of fieldwork that was undertaken during the *Kisan Andolan* (farmers' protest) in India. It captures the voices of union leaders and activists through field and online interviews. Reporting these voices, the reasons behind the success of the movement are analysed. It is found that the non-violent method of protesting, inclusion of different strata of the society, the cooperative nature of different farmer unions and their roles, and an intensive communication network led to an outcome farmers sought after. This paper also looks into the tradition of the *Satyagraha* method of protesting and how the *Kisan Andolan* revived its relevance in the modern Indian political context.

Keywords: Farmer's Protest, Agrarian Crisis, Movements in India, Non-Violence, Social Identities, Communication Strategies

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Introduction:

India has witnessed many farm protests throughout its history. Beginning from peasant movements to the farmers' protests in the 1970s against the pricing issues and the alleged neglect of rural matters, many of these demonstrations have gone on to become massive movements that have altered the country's political landscape. M. V. Nadkarni (1987, 1-2), economist and former professor at the Institute For Social and Economic Change, said that this is mainly because these movements of dissent have adapted to fight for larger goals, gain broader perspectives and try to change the social order. One such movement, which began as small agitations in Punjab and grew to become a pivotal point in India's contemporary history, is the recent protest by the farmers from Punjab, Haryana, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh.

The three laws passed by the Indian Government - the Farmers' Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Act; The Farmers' (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement of Price Assurance and Farm Services Act; and The Essential Commodities (Amendment) Act - deeply angered the farmers. They believed their safety and well-being were jeopardised. The farmers saw it as a direct attack on the ownership and relationship with their land. Their distress that led to small protests in the villages of Punjab culminated in an agitation never seen before in India since the Independence movement.

On November 26, 2020, the farmers staged an intervention, demanding the government take back the draconian laws that would lead to the monopolisation of the market and the privatisation of the agricultural industry. Amidst the pain and suffering at the sites, including violent repression from the State forces and the harsh weather conditions, the farmers and people alike found the motivation to sustain themselves until their demands were met. After protesting relentlessly for longer than a year, the Modi government announced its intention to repeal the three farm laws.

This paper attempts to bring out the voices and the first-hand accounts of farmers and farm union leaders, both from the protest sites and by conducting interviews through video conferencing. A specific questionnaire was prepared to capture the reasons, the vision for the protest, the methods employed, and their reflections throughout their time at the protest site.

This questionnaire was designed after field visits to four sites of protest - Ghazipur near Uttar Pradesh, Tikri, a census town in West Delhi, Pakora Chowk, an area on the Delhi-Rohtak highway and Singhu, a village close to the Delhi-Haryana border. The interviews observed that the Satyagraha methods of protest led to the participation of diverse people from different strata of the society, making the protests a success. The role of the farm unions and the effective communication strategy employed within and outside the ambit of farm protests added to its success.

Methods of Protesting:

The protest was non-violent, except for certain skirmishes. This is in line with the Satyagraha methods of protest, which formed the basis of the Indian freedom struggle led by Mohandas Karamchand 'Mahatma' Gandhi. The word 'Satyagraha' (truth-force, or soul force) was coined by

Gandhi (as quoted in Carter, 2009) as a way to resist injustice and stick to the truth, at the same time avoiding violence, physically and psychologically, to ‘convert’ the opponent.

Many scholars have researched and analysed the benefits of these methods of protest, particularly the likes of Gene Sharp. Gene Sharp (as quoted in Hardiman, 2018) wrote that one of the most compelling arguments of Satyagraha is the principle by Gandhi that means determine the ends. Nonviolence encourages dialogue and negotiation and does not alienate potential allies. Richard Barlett Gregg ([1934], 2018) analysed the psychological impact of non-violent resistance in his essay ‘Moral Jiu-Jitsu’, where he pointed out that when violence is met with non-violent resistance in front of the public, the assailant loses calm and becomes conscious of their image, and their actions seem to be excessive and undignified. Therefore, the assailant loses prestige and public support.

The protestors seemed to have understood the concept, the methodologies, and the benefits of the Satyagraha methods of protest. The protests began through mass mobilisation, an essential aspect of Satyagraha. The methods of protest used in *Satyagraha*, such as *dharnas*, were a form of self-suffering that was free from feelings of hatred for the opponent. They were helpful when the two parties knew each other personally and enjoyed mutual respect, and thus, self-suffering in itself legitimised the protests (Hardiman, 2018). The mobilisation of farmers from the villages of Punjab to the borders of Delhi saw the same pattern.

Sukhdev Singh Kokrikalan (personal communication, December 3, 2021), the general secretary of the Bhartiya Kisan Union Ekta (Ugrahan), explained that one of the methods of protest in the villages of Punjab was to make the members of the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) know their discontent. According to Professor Ashutosh Kumar (as quoted in Sharma, 2021), the SAD is the only political party that claims to safeguard the interest of the Sikhs both in India and abroad and was an ally of the BJP in the Lok Sabha.

Narang (2014) points out that SAD’s contribution to Punjabi polity, such as demanding a *Punjabi Suba* (A linguistic state along with the Punjabi language) and their Anantpur Sahib Resolution of 1973 attracted the Sikh community and farmers had made them a major regional political force. They had been in power since 1966 for almost every alternative period either alone or as coalitions, have massive support from the Sikh-landed Jat peasants, and share relationships with major Sikh institutions such as the Shiromani Gurudwara Prabandhak Committee (SGPC).

Kokrikalan (personal communication, December 3, 2021) noted that pressure on the SAD increased when different villages that came under the protesting *Jathe Bandhiyans*, amounting to 600, decided to place a curfew on villages that were headed by the SAD. Pradhans of villages belonging to the SAD were blocked from reaching their homes. The curfew made villagers aware of these farm laws and their harms. The SAD eventually cut ties with the BJP, and Harsimrat Kaur Badal, who was the Union Minister of Food Processing Industries at that time, resigned from her position (PTI, 2021).

Gandhi maintained a stance that honour is the only thing worth preserving, but it should be achieved not through violent retaliation but rather using non-violent means, including holding to the ‘Truth’. Therefore, the question of honour permeated beyond the realm of family, local

community, or caste into a defence of the honour of the people as a whole against the state. This meant that it was better to accept death rather than retaliate with force (Hardiman, 2018).

In a similar fashion, the protestors realized that they should stick to their truth, which in this case, was the cause to save the farmers and their livelihoods from the draconian farm laws. Many farmers who were interviewed decided to protest even if it meant that they would die at the site. Ompal Singh Malik said that “*Hum tera mahine mei tera din bhi ghar nahi laute*” (in the 13 months of protesting, we did not return home even for 13 days) (Chindaliya et al., forthcoming). They remained silent even when they were pressured by the State to end the protest using brute force.

Tejveer Singh (personal communication, January 18, 2022) noted that when the Tikri rally happened on December 10, 2020, that was the first time they *lathi-charged* the protestors. The protestors in return did not act violently, nor did they hit back, burn down shops, or cause any other disruptions. Moreover, as many as 750 protestors sacrificed their lives. Ompal Singh Malik said that the leaders eventually had to tell the protesters, “*jahan rokte hai wahin beth jao*” (sit wherever they stop us). They insisted that “*shanti kayam rakhna hai*” (maintain peace) in speaking up against the government. The two principles, “*shanti and anushasan*” (peace and discipline), guided the movement (Chindaliya et al., forthcoming).

While it was not intended, they were also able to put economic pressure on the Central Government. Manoj (personal communication, December 9, 2021), a local shopkeeper who ran a souvenir store at the Singhu border, commented that sitting at the border had created economic losses for the Government as it was not able to run toll booths. At the same time, it created losses in terms of tax revenue from the commercial establishments alongside the highway, such as automobile showrooms and petrol bunks that were shut down and occupied by the farmers as night shelters.

Symbolism was used to make bold statements against the government and privatisation. For instance, according to anonymous sources (personal communication, December 9, 2021), it was agreed that Jio, the mobile and internet services offered by Reliance Industries Limited (RIL) would be collectively boycotted, as they have interests to commercialise and privatise agriculture and other essential services in Punjab and Haryana. This was similar to the boycott of foreign goods and the burning of British-made clothes by the protestors involved in the Indian Independence struggle, a predominant episode being at the Elphinstone Mill complex in erstwhile Bombay on November 17, 1921 (Koppikar, 2017).

Sharp (as quoted in Hardiman, 2018) noted that it was theorised that violent forms of insurrection have been exclusionary. As, in theory, it involved mainly the able-bodied and males needing arms and training. Therefore, the elderly, women, and children only had marginal roles. On the other hand, this Satyagraha included people from different strata of society. These diverse voices were central to the narrative during the farmer's protests. Women, children, and senior citizens were involved in the protests, and as a matter of safety, it was pertinent for them to not be violent. Harpreet Singh, a volunteer at the Pakora Chowk site, informed that many miscreants tried to harass women, especially at night, and also tried to destroy property on the site. Thus, it was important to stay calm and not act violently so as to not hurt the protestors themselves.

Different Social Identities:

The protest was a collaborative effort to ensure that the demands of people from different social backgrounds were met. Be it gender, caste, class, or religion, the intersectional identities of the protestors, helped ensure that no voice was secluded from the discourse.

Role of Women-

Women have been active participants in protests and acts of resistance throughout history. In this regard, protestors at the *Kisan Andolan* reminisced that throughout Sikh history, whenever there was a fight or a battle, women played an important role. In the present times, women have spearheaded protests against predatory institutions, such as microfinance institutions, but with limited mobility and agency. However, with the farmers' protest, women were given a stage to have a voice and talk about their own plights as well as the given farm laws (Chindaliya et al., forthcoming).

The popular narrative often alienates women from their contribution to the agricultural industry. Tejveer Singh (as quoted in Chindaliya et al., forthcoming) explained, "if not for my mother, my father would not have been able to wake up every morning and work in the farms. My own mother reared cattle to pay for my schooling and college. She also participated in the protests and reiterated in her speech that she is a daughter of a farmer, a wife of a farmer, and a mother of a farmer.". This sentiment was reflected everywhere, and thus, women participated in the protests wholeheartedly. Ompal Singh Malik (as quoted in Chindaliya et al., forthcoming) commented that women had a far bigger role than men throughout the 13 months of protesting. Some women were at the border, and some stayed back home to take care of the household and the produce in the farms. Even women who were early into their pregnancy participated at the protest sites with utmost conviction. "*Humari behen betiyon ne itna sahyog diya aur sarkar hila di* (our sisters and daughters were a tremendous support and shook the government)" Ompal Singh Malik (as quoted in Chindaliya et al., forthcoming) said.

Tejveer Singh (as quoted in Chindaliya et al., forthcoming) explained that women participating in agriculture is not just a way of life and livelihood but also their culture. Women's participation in agriculture is important in Punjab (and places alike) as they take into account the profits and the earnings, and they decide how to spend it, including how to donate some of the earnings to temples and Gurudwaras. This was something neither the Government nor the policymakers understood.

Since women were active participants, their specific needs were well thought out and met without any hassle at the protest site. The spatial arrangements were done in a way that ensured the security of women. For instance, Jasbir Kaur Natt (as quoted in Chindaliya et al., forthcoming) noted that there were two types of camps that were set up- one was a family camp, and the other was exclusively for women, like dorms. The latter was mostly built by unions and NGOs such as The Khalsa Aid and Pind California. In another instance, Abishek Singh (as quoted in Chindaliya et al., forthcoming) said that the medical camps that were set up by AICCTU paid special attention to the needs of women who left homes to partake in the protest. Stocking of sanitary pads for easy access was a key component in their arrangement. They also had a steady supply of medicines such as Meftal-Spas to deal with menstrual cramps.

Despite these rigorous measures, there were a few untoward incidents that had happened to women, which the unions tried their best to resolve with the help of the police. Natt (as quoted in Chindaliya et al., forthcoming) mentioned an incident where a woman from Bengal wanted to go to the protest with a few male members of the Kisan Social Army but was sexually harassed by them on her way there. After reaching the site, it was found that she was COVID positive. Before her father could reach her, she met her demise. Her father filed a case, and the union leaders at the border were supportive and cooperative throughout the draining process. The abusers were reprimanded and imprisoned.

Natt (as quoted in Chindaliya et al., forthcoming) also stated that there was a new sense of understanding of each other's work and role in society. She narrated that men who did not know how to cook had to not only learn how to cook, but also chop vegetables and wash utensils at the site. Similarly, women had to not only work in the fields, but also now had to supervise the farms and the produce. This reversal of gender roles helped each other appreciate their roles. However, she also mentioned that gender reversal of roles did not mean that they were close to achieving gender equality. Learning to do chores, however, was the need of the hour and men only learnt those skills to survive.

Caste/Tribe-

Ompal Singh Malik (as quoted in Chindaliya et al., forthcoming) said that there was participation from people from all caste backgrounds. "*Koi chua-chut nahi tha*" (there was no caste-based segregation). He also noted that in the field, it was impossible to tell who belonged to which caste. Even if they knew the caste of an individual, it did not matter, they would all sit together to have meals, share the tents and equally participate in the cultural events. The ration that they received, often came from Valmiki samaj and Harijan samaj- no *jaati* or *biradari* was left behind.

Even langar, which Natt (as quoted in Chindaliya et al., forthcoming) said is an integral part of Sikhism, actually began as a way to eradicate the caste system, where everyone could work together and perform *sewa*. According to Natt, it is imperative to note that it was not the Gurudwaras, but the good samaritans who organized the *langars*. At the Tikri border, food and water were available for all, irrespective of the individual's identity and background. However, she did mention that she was not aware of the arrangements at the other sites.

Tejveer Singh (as quoted in Chindaliya et al., forthcoming) said that members from the Gujjar community sat with the protestors, helped set up the camps, and propagate their demands and struggles on social media platforms. There were Adivasi groups and tribal leaders from Madhya Pradesh, such as the Meena Samaj (of the Meena tribe), who supported the cause. Unfortunately, the lack of funds kept them from being physically present at the sites. The farmer unions were also unable to support them as they had running costs within the protests and couldn't divert the funds towards their participation and stay. Moreover, rail tickets were not being issued easily due to the ongoing COVID-19 crisis.

He also said that this movement was also transformative for protestors from certain caste backgrounds. For instance, protestors from Haryana and the Hindu Jats, who are infamous for

using violent tactics for protesting, learnt that they can support the movement and achieve their goals without resorting to violence. They were strategically allocated the duty of handling social media to help spread information about the movement, and to recognize the power of satyagraha tactics of protesting.

Religion-

While the protest was not an undertaking of a specific religion, the movement was fought along the lines of the Sikh beliefs. Many of these protestors took inspiration from the battles fought by the Sikh gurus and warriors as a way of protesting against the government. Natt (personal communication, January 19, 2022) noted that the Kisan Andolan found its roots in the two pillars of Sikh philosophy, that is, *Sewa* (service) and *kirtan* (honest work and perseverance).

All that being said, a sentiment that resounded over the course of the interviews was that the protest was not a Sikh Andolan. Ompal Singh Malik (as quoted in Chindaliya et al., forthcoming) said, “*ye sabka andolan tha, 36 biradri ka tha*” (it was everyone’s protest, all 36 communities). Despite the media’s attempts to alter the discourse and cite it as a “Khalistani Movement”, there was nothing far from truth. People from all religious backgrounds came in solidarity to fight against the “anti-farmer laws”. Not just that, but the farmers also had the support of labour unions from different states such as Maharashtra and Kerala, Tejveer Singh (personal communication, January 18, 2022) explained. Abishek Singh commented that they all believed that the fight was for a bigger cause, against the rapid corporatisation of India and the autocratic government (as quoted in Chindaliya et al., forthcoming).

Class-

The protests also witnessed the active participation of *dehatis* (landless farm labourers). They considered it as a site where they could assume their agency and exercise their voice regarding the repercussions of the three laws on their livelihood. A. Singh (as quoted in Chindaliya et al., forthcoming) explained that this was because there is a symbiotic relationship that exists between the landed and the landless farmers. T. Singh (as quoted in Chindaliya et al., forthcoming) gave an example: landless labourers rear cattle and sell milk and milk products as a side income. For them, the fodder comes from what farmers cultivate on their lands. Purchasing fodder from other agencies is not viable due to its high cost. Therefore, the farm laws and the protests were of utmost importance for the *dehatis* too.

Natt (personal communication, January 19, 2022) noted that at the offset, there were some *dehatis* who were under the impression that the government was going to reclaim lands and redistribute them. This thought provided them with momentary relief. However, after several conversations with the farmer unions, they realized that the laws would not only make everything expensive but might also permanently cease their lands. This realization led the *dehatis* to stand in solidarity with the landed farmers.

T. Singh (as quoted in Chindaliya et al., forthcoming) said that at the protest sites, the *dehatis* helped the farmers in procuring milk from about 200-300 villages around Haryana, anointing 5-8 quintals of milk every day. In return, the farmers helped those who were walking back to their

villages in Uttar Pradesh and Haryana by giving them a stock of rice, *atta* and *dal* that had been saved (Chindaliya et al., forthcoming). In this sense, the *dehatis* and the farmers came together to form a flourishing, co-existing ecosystem.

Role of Unions:

One of the reasons behind the success of the farmer protests was the involvement of the farmer unions that managed and sustained the magnanimity of the protest. These farmer unions have been existing since the times of the Indian Independence Movement, and have been actively involved in discussing farmers' issues. As the protests progressed through the year, farmer unions had various responsibilities, such as "*chanda ikhata karna aur sambhalna*" (collecting and managing monetary donations) and "*manch sanchalan*" (setting the stage and managing the speeches and performances). They were seen as the face of the protests in front of various forms of media.

There were many farm unions involved in the protests, both regional and national. There were also unions that represented different classes of people, such as the Dehati Mazdoor Sabha, representing the Dehatis or the landless labourers, and the All India Central Council Of Trade Unions (AICCTU), representing labour unions across the country. There were many unions and their different factions as well. The Bhartiya Kisan Union was one of the few that were present with its own cliques, such as the Bhartiya Kisan Union (Rajewal), Bhartiya Kisan Union Ekta (Ugrahan), Bhartiya Kisan Union (Dakunda) among others. Malik (as quoted in Chindaliya et al., forthcoming) quoted that however, when the ordinances were first passed in the Parliament, there were meetings conducted by different *sangathans*, where it was decided that not one single *sangathan* can make the Government repeal those ordinances. Therefore, it was important to stay united and fight against the state.

According to Abhishek Singh (personal communication, January 22, 2022), the involvement of non-farmer unions was attributed to the fact that agriculture is such an interconnected network, that even if one point within the system fails, others follow suit. This is evident from the fact that the farm laws and the land owned by the landowners were so important for the *dehatis* who rear animals for extra income, as the grass and fodder for the animals come from these agricultural lands after cultivation.

T. Singh (personal communication, January 18, 2022) noted that volunteers at the sites were guided by committees that consisted of 10-11 people. The people on the committee were leaders from various unions, retired members of different departments of the Government such as the Electricity and Health department, and NGOs such as the Red Cross, who knew how to protest and negotiate with the government peacefully. Malik (as quoted in Chindaliya et al., forthcoming) explained that the committee also maintained a register with the names of different people who had been assigned different duties at the sites. Their task was to manage the operations of the protest, collect and tabulate the funding they received, and plan expenses for transportation, medical facilities etc. This committee served as the contact point and resource management spot at the protests.

While historically different unions and *jathe bandiyans* had different demands, this protest had a sense of shared interest. Despite these differences, in Ompal Malik's (as quoted in Chindaliya et al., forthcoming) experience, the unions never faced issues such as having contradictory opinions

and disagreements in the protest strategy. All the decisions were taken democratically, with a common consensus. They took time to discuss and deliberate until they could reach a conclusive decision if they had any differences. There was no case of people leaving or wanting to leave from the 40 farmers' organizations that were at the forefront of planning and managing the protest. It was decided that the protest will be regulated by the committee and everyone would have to abide by their orders.

While historically different farmer unions have focused on different aspects of agricultural life, all the unions were against the concept of privatisation. They believed that privatisation will only make the prices of essential goods expensive. A speaker anonymous to the authors spoke on the stage at the Pakora Chowk protest site and commented that privatization “made water expensive, education expensive and now will make rice and wheat expensive.” More so, they recognised that privatisation and commercialisation of agriculture were detrimental to their livelihoods. It was understood that farmers may lose their rights over their land, and eventually not get their own dues for the labour that they put in.

According to Tejveer Singh (as quoted in Chindaliya et al., forthcoming), the main role of these unions was to mobilise people by explaining the problems of privatisation and the importance of *mandis* in a simple manner. He (personal communication, January 18, 2022) noted that the union leaders were able to explain these using analogies driven from the story of Jio, the telecommunications behemoth of RIL, and how they were able to eliminate other competitors such as Idea and Bharat Sanchar Nigam Limited (BSNL) by using sly marketing tactics and using the telecommunications laws to their favour. Other concepts such as the ills of contract farming and agriculture as a state subject were explained to the common people in a similar manner. He (as quoted in Chindaliya et al., forthcoming) also noted that people understood it because of their own experiences of facing economic hardships during the pandemic. People also drew motivation from the experiences of farmers from Uttar Pradesh who had to sell their produce in markets in the nearby state of Haryana, in cities such as Karnal and Sonipat (Chindaliya et al., forthcoming).

One of the most important aspects of the protests handled by the unions were money and finances. According to an anonymous source (personal communication, December 9, 2022) in the protest site at the Singhu border, activities such as running langar and managing the stage would cost Rs. 20 lakhs every week. Thus, the duty of raising money and managing donations fell on the unions' shoulders. The union leaders collected money from each household in their respective villages by explaining to them the reason behind raising money. For instance, Tejveer Singh (as quoted in Chindaliya et al., forthcoming) informed that their committee collected Rs. 2,100 from each village when they wanted money to organize the tractor rallies. Additionally, he stated that they collected Rs. 500 from each village for the “Black Day” programme on August 15. There were instances where members from the union asked for donations from protestors who attended the speeches on those days. It didn't matter how much they were willing to pay- it could be either Rs. 5, or Rs. 10.

Natt (as quoted in Chindaliya et al., forthcoming) noted that many donations came from international stakeholders as well, such as Non-Resident Indians (NRIs) who have extended families living in India. For example, unions at the Tikri border received Rs. 69 lakhs and those at the Singhu border received about Rs. 7 crores as funds from foreign donors. In many instances, these foreign donors donated through ration. The unions were able to portray the urgency of the

situation and garner support from people across borders. The overseas community not only provided monetary aid but also mobilized groups fighting for the cause, ultimately transcending physical spaces. They planned and organized rallies in countries like the UK, Australia, and Canada so much so that the voices of the protests were heard 24/7 around the world. The effect of these actions had global implications as well, as dignitaries such as Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and American Vice President Kamala Harris spoke about it, thus encouraging conversations at the international level. Malik (as quoted in Chindaliya et al., forthcoming) said that some overseas citizens of India even travelled back to not only partake in the protests but also witness the grandeur of the situation- something that has not been seen since India's independence.

Effective Communication Strategies

Throughout the course of the interviews, it was realized that there were two main components to the communication strategy used by the unions: one was an internal strategy to communicate and coordinate with different unions and the members, and the other was an external strategy to disseminate information to the masses through social media and news channels.

Internal Strategy-

Tejveer Singh (as quoted in Chindaliya et al., forthcoming) noted that when the movement began, nothing was pre-planned. After the ordinances were passed, and the President had signed the farm laws, a *Chakka Jam* and *Bharat Bandh* were called on November 5, 2020, and November 15, 2020, respectively. These events were decided at a meeting on October 17, 2020 (Chindaliya et al., forthcoming). Thereafter, Tejveer Singh (personal communication, January 18, 2022) informed, there was a meeting between a small committee that consisted of farmer union leaders such as Balbir Singh Rajewal, Yogendra Yadav, Rajeev Sethi, BM Singh and Gurnam Singh Chaduni.

Both T. Singh and Malik (as quoted in Chindaliya et al., forthcoming) said that many meetings were conducted by different farm unions and the 32 *Jathe Bandhiyans* in places such as Chandigarh. Whatsapp Groups helped unions and protestors to stay connected and communicate information quickly and effectively. To organize meetings, unions used phone calls. After which, within a span of 2 hours, the 40 members committee (of *jathe bandhiyans*) would come together to make decisions and further mobilize ideas. The unions and *jathe bandhiyans* made sure that there were meetings conducted within at least 10 villages every day that would help communicate with the farmers.

External Strategy-

Natt (as quoted in Chindaliya et al., forthcoming) said that the unions did not have to specifically strategize anything to mobilize people and make more people join the protests. Gossip in public places such as hospitals, parks and public transport helped create awareness. Even langars formed a point of gossip amongst protestors and the common people alike. Swaranjeet Kaur (personal communication, November 23, 2021), an interviewee on the field, mentioned that langars also served labourers and workers who were returning home from working at factories near the Tikri border. Conversations at these langars made the workers aware of the protests and their motives, ultimately convincing some to join.

Natt (as quoted in Chindaliya et al., forthcoming) said that apart from arranging the donations and rations from the protestors, focused on mobilizing people. The sound systems of the Gurudwaras in villages were used, and people in the villages used to listen to Gurudwaras and their calls carefully. After listening to the calls, many came forward and participated in the protests by bringing their tractors.

After the videos of the barricades being broken went viral and the protest gained momentum, social media became an extensive repository of information and a major facilitator of discourse development. The involvement of social media was important to reach sectors other than agriculture and maintain transparency about the happenings at the protest sites. For instance, Tejveer Singh (personal communication, January 18, 2022) said that Twitter handles such as the Kisan Ekta Morcha helped the 10-11 people committee at each site to keep up to date with the various events and spread it across people easily. In addition to that, social media sites helped send updates to people around the world. Harpreet Singh (personal communication, December 3, 2021), during an interview, commented that social media platforms became so relevant to the protests that even the older section of the protestors became accustomed to them and learnt how to operate and access them.

There were social media handles that were managed by the unions. For example, according to Ompal Singh Malik (personal communication, January 19, 2022), Dharmendra Malik, one of the spokespeople of BKU, was allocated the duty of running the social media profiles of BKU on platforms such as Twitter. Tejveer Singh (personal communication, January 18, 2022) said that politicians such as Chandrashekar Azad Ravan, founder of Bhim Army and National President of Azad Samaj Party spread the word about different activities of the protests such as the *Bharat Bandh* through his social media handles. Even the labour unions, such as AICCTU, that assisted the farmers at the protest sites used their social media handles to post updates from the borders and catalogue their involvement in the farmer's protest. They were also able to use social media to defend themselves when they were questioned about their motives, methods and certain untoward incidents. Tejveer Singh (personal communication, January 28, 2022) mentioned that when the lynching of Lakhbir Singh happened, it was particularly highlighted that he was a Dalit to paint a casteist angle to the protests. Using the help of social media spaces of activists such as Jignesh Mewani, they were able to defend themselves. In addition to that, Abishek Singh (personal communication, January 22, 2022) told that members of the labour unions also participated in the cultural events that were organised at the sites. They were often invited to give speeches to the crowds at the podiums.

T. Singh and Natt (as quoted in Chindaliya et al., forthcoming) noted that the Punjabi mainstream media, such as the newspaper company The Tribune, Punjabi YouTube channels, social media accounts and influencers articulated and amplified the voices of the protestors. The newspapers published articles and opinion pieces by farm leaders that spread the motives of the protests and the ills of the farm laws. The social media accounts used different modes of audio-visual means of communication, such as memes, art, documentaries, music and dance videos. Live sessions streamed the speeches of the farm union leaders. Artists were helpful, especially film actors, singers and songwriters, both from Punjab and Haryana. They came to the border, performed and

boosted the morale of the people protesting, especially the youth. Some songs such as “*Modi Ji Thari Tob Kade Hum Delhi Aage*” became popular.

The publicity helped the protestors to get the support of the local people who lived around the protest site and had businesses there. Meet Maan (personal communication, November 23, 2021), a volunteer with the Jamindara Socialist Organization which had *langar* running at the Tikri protest site, told us how they broke into a commercial establishment owned by a local person to escape the harsh winter cold, and the owner forgave their activities after understanding their intent from watching the news and videos from social media. The owner went on to give that building to the protestors which they used as a storehouse to store grains and other raw ingredients needed for the *langars*. Swaranjeet Kaur (personal communication, November 23, 2021), also mentioned that many local businessmen served them tea and snacks that they made at their homes before opening their shops for business.

However, not everyone painted a positive image of the *Kisan Andolan*. The Godi media², according to Malik (as quoted in Chindaliya et al., forthcoming), attempted to malign the movement and the identity of the protestors by calling them terrorists and Khalisthanis (Chindaliya et al., forthcoming). While initially there was positive representation from the mainstream media, the incident that happened on January 26 at Red Fort³ altered the narrative. Drawing from his experience, Tejveer Singh (as quoted in Chindaliya et al., forthcoming) pointed out that most on-ground journalists know the truth. It is the editors who get to have the final say and depict the movement and the protestors in a bad light. Even though some media channels were attempting to demonise the farmers and attack the ethos of the protest, Malik (as quoted in Chindaliya et al., forthcoming) noted that they were still important because they were creating and maintaining the dialogue and giving them more strength to keep fighting relentlessly.

Conclusion:

This paper serves as the medium to amplify the voice of the primary stakeholders of this protest - farmers and farm union leaders. In their words, it was the government that prolonged the protests. Dhyan Singh Rajput (personal communication, December 4, 2021), an interviewee at the Ghazipur protest site, said that the government neither considered the farmers as the primary stakeholders and did not ask for their opinion, nor did they try to listen to demands of the farmers who were protesting, making them brave harsh conditions and not focus on their lands and cultivating it. The farmers did not want the protests to happen, but in the end, they went back to their homes in Punjab with a sense of accomplishment and fulfilment that they fought for their kith and kin.

For some, it was a learning experience where they saw a change in themselves. Natt (as quoted in Chindaliya et al., forthcoming) explained that she was a short-tempered person in general, and she learnt how to control her anger and be patient. She also mentioned that they now had a new

² ‘Godi Media’ or ‘Lapdog Media’, is a term popularized by Hindi news anchor Ravish Kumar. It is used in Hindi-speaking states to denote news media companies that work as an extension of the ruling party (Source: <https://thewire.in/media/backstory-farmers-protest-journalistic-callousness-media>)

³ On January 26, 2020, a group of farmers digressed from the tractor rally in Delhi and entered the premises of the Red Fort. They hoisted the Sikh holy flag, the ‘Nishaan Sahib’ in the place where the National Flag used to fly. One farmer died and 80 policemen were injured. (Source: <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-55793731>)

understanding about those who had been imprisoned for speaking out against the government, such as Umar Khalid⁴ and Sudha Bharadwaj⁵, as the farmers felt that anything could happen and they should be ready to face it, including death.

Despite the uncertainty, they were able to sustain for more than a year and make the government listen to them. By staying with the truth, making almost everyone a stakeholder, trusting the farm unions which contemplated their actions and reacted accordingly, and effectively making people understand their cause, the farmers achieved something extraordinary - one of the largest contemporary Satyagraha movement.

⁴ Umar Khalid is a former student of the Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. He was arrested under the draconian Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, 1967 for allegedly conspiring the Delhi Riots of 2020 and delivering hateful speech against the Narendra Modi government during the visit of former American president Donald Trump in 2020 (Source: <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/umar-khalid-/story-lj2XPxkP50PNZ10oHIIACI.html>)

⁵ Lawyer-activist Sudha Baradwaj was arrested in 2018 after allegedly delivering an inflammatory speech in December 2017, which the police allege that incited violence the next day in Bhima Koregaon. She was in jail for three years, and released on bail in 2021 (Source: <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/sudha-bharadwaj-released-from-jail-in-elgar-parishad-bhima-koregaon-case-2643670>)

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