

Farmers' Protest: A Movement Against Fascist Regime in India

by

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ABSTRACT

India witnessed the world's biggest protest in 2020 by farmers against three farm laws passed by an authoritarian Hindu nationalist government. This protest got worldwide attention as it lasted more than a year. The farm laws aimed to deregulate India's agricultural markets by promoting contract farming to benefit the corporate sector. Instead of accepting their fate, farmers nationwide challenged the Modi government boldly. This project aims to analyze the long struggle of Indian farmers and their resistance and mass protest against state violence and how they forced fascist political leaders to repeal laws that were against the sustainability of a way of life rooted in land. In the bigger picture, this research focuses on analyzing repressive state policies against the agricultural class to destroy traditional markets of agriculture and give agrarian industry to private firms. The most remarkable aspect of this movement is that through it, the hopeless democratic structure of the country regained its essence. It restored the constitutional values of unity and association among Indians. My research project explains the details of this organized protest, which got global support and attention and established the role of such social movements in claiming fundamental rights. This research will rely on an interpretive research design that includes open-ended, in-depth interviews with the co-founder and co-editor, Navkiran Nath, of the newspaper Trolley Times, which emerged within this protest, and a translation from Punjabi and Hindi language to English and analysis of a newspaper, 'Trolley Times'.

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among the co-founding members of the Trolley Times, Navkiran's resilience and leadership inspired me.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

India has been witnessing a serious democratic decline since 2014 when the Modi-led Bhartiya Janta Party (BJP) came into power after reelection in 2019, BJP turned into a more illiberal and authoritarian ruling party by curtailing civil liberties, silencing dissent, targeting opposition leaders, scholars, minorities, reviving sedition laws and controlling media (Behl, 2022, p.1141). After coming into power for a second term in 2019, BJP emerged as the strongest political party with a weak opposition and tried to misuse this huge majority to meet its non-democratic agendas of suppressing minorities, controlling the press, benefitting big corporate houses and crushing every voice of dissent in the country. “The historically assumed preconditions for establishing a democratic polity are economic development, high rates of literacy, and ethnic and religious homogeneity with low levels of affiliations based on religion and high levels of loyalty to the nation and high levels of voluntary association, but sadly in India, none of these conditions were met (Behl, 2019, p.7)” as Indians are historically divided by caste and religions by the rulers. The BJP used these differences to divide the Indian people even more and this political party pushed the democratic structure of India towards an authoritarian rule (Behl, 2022, p.1142).

The BJP after winning the elections of 2019, passed multiple laws against the spirit of the constitution of India that targeted minorities like the Jammu and Kashmir Reorganization Act, Citizenship Amendment Act, National Register of Citizens (Behl, 2022, 1142), and three farm laws that mobilized farmers movement of 2020-21 and challenged the fascist government of India. This peaceful social movement by farmers demonstrated the power of democratic participation in challenging authoritarian

regimes. As a unique highly organized social movement based on the Gandhian principle of non-violence, farmers' agitation emerged as a hope for revival of democratic structure in India.

To evaluate the democratic structure of a nation, an analysis of social movements can play a pivotal role because, through these movements, an estimate can be made about relationships between citizens and governments, accountability, and transparency of the governments. In this project, I am focusing on the role of farmers' protests as a social movement in reviving democratic beliefs in India. Mahatma Gandhi explained that a true democracy cannot be worked by twenty men sitting at the Centre, it must be worked from below by the people of every village (Pantham, 1983, p.173), the farmers' movement emerged as a challenge to non-democratic structure promoted by BJP as farmers claimed their right to participate in making of laws affecting them.

In India, agriculture is one of the key contributors to the economy (Kotishwar, 2018, p.37), and it is the backbone of the nation because it generates employment and trade through exports and imports. For a long time, agricultural markets within India have been running in conventional mandi systems that are physical agriculture market yards (Shakeel et al.,2022, p.1). However, it is a bitter truth that the farmers of India were never in good condition as they always bore losses more than they earned from their produce. Due to anti-farming policies by multiple governments, farmers were filled with rage, demanding agriculture reforms.

With globalization, Indian economic policies changed, and in the late 1990s, news of agrarian crises and farmer suicides was everywhere in Indian media (Singh et al., 2020, p.13). Over 400,000 farmers and farmworkers have died by suicide in India since the 1990s, primarily due to indebtedness (Singh et al., 2021, p.2) and as per the

National Crimes Report Bureau of India, in 2022, approximately one farmer or one farm laborer died every hour (NCRB, 2022). These figures highlight the gravity of the agrarian crisis in India. Farmers' distress is as old as farming itself because it is the nature of agriculture that it cannot generate a continuous flow of income to farmers (Singh, 2022, p.35), and it can be due to climate changes but majorly due to improper policies of governments.

Instead of implementing agricultural reforms, the Modi-led BJP government introduced three farm laws in 2020. The three farm laws that were enacted hurriedly without a proper debate in the parliament and without consulting stakeholders were: the Farmers' Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Act, 2020; Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement on Price Assurance and Farm Services Act, 2020 and Essential Commodities (Amendment) Act, 2020 (Chakrabarty, 2022, p.3). The Farmers' Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Act, 2020 aimed at allowing sale and purchase outside the Agricultural Produce Market Committee (APMC) mandis (market yard), which would have enhanced the relative bargaining power of private procurers and farmers will be left with no choice but to sell their produce as per prices fixed by private companies. It proposed a new system where farmers were free to sell their crops to anyone and the abolition of the mandi system. In India, the agricultural market yards are called mandis, which are governed at the state level in almost all Indian states (Narula, 2022, p.116). According to the government, this new farm law would give more freedom to the farmer, more autonomy, and eliminate the intermediaries from agro-business (Chakrabarty, 2022, p. 4) but it would have deteriorated the conditions of farmers.

The Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement of Price Assurance and Farm Services Act, 2020, involved an amendment that would have allowed big corporations to set the contract farming in India (Kaur and Saratchand, 2023, understood a majority of small and marginal farmers would have likely not understand the conditions of contract farming that would lead to their exploitation and farmers would be incapable of fighting legal battles with big companies due to limited resources. The third farm law, the Essential Commodities (Amendment) Act, of 2020, allowed the stockpiling of food articles by private corporations as it removed hoarding limits except in extraordinary circumstances. As this law permitted private procurers to maintain large stock holdings of produce, it would result in higher food prices, clearly beneficial to sellers (Kaur and Saratchand, 2023, p.296) because they will sell hoarded produce at maximum prices as the government would have no control on prices. The Modi government loudly proclaimed that the mandi system deregulation would open agriculture to market competition (Chakrabarty, 2022, p.4). However, they had the sole aim of privatizing the agricultural industry and giving the entire power of controlling prices to big corporate houses. These laws were sufficient to force farmers of India to live at the mercy of private companies and an attempt by the BJP government to deepen agro-business capitalism in India (Moliner and Singh, 2024, p. 20).

A movement grew in response to these government laws and systemic changes in farming. The farmers of India realized the intentions of the government to privatize agriculture, so they mobilized towards Delhi to participate in a movement to get new farm laws repealed. As intersectional solidarity is the central force in contemporary social movements (Einwohner et al., 2021, p.705), the outpouring of solidarity from ordinary people of India mainly from Punjab, Haryana, Rajasthan, and Uttar Pradesh

as they came together by putting gender, class, regional, language, and caste differences aside was a unique factor of this movement which contributed to its success. There were four different protest camps in Tikri, Ghazipur, Shahjahanpur, and Singhu around the borders of the national capital of India, Delhi. Around 33 farmers' organizations participated in this movement, and more than 700 protestors died (Rajalakshmi, 2021). In addition to farmers, students, actors, singers, and old men and women participated in this protest. In a sector that is deeply patriarchal, where land ownership rates are overwhelmingly male-dominated while workforce participation rates are overwhelmingly women, the women farmers of India came out on the streets protesting the controversial farm laws that the ruling BJP hastily passed in September 2019 without following the proper procedure in Parliament that threatened to privatize farming and increase the exploitation of small farmers (Chakrabarty, 2022, p.1). Passing a bill without following the procedure provided by the constitution of India is an absolute disregard for the democratic values of India (Bagchi and Raghuvanshi, 2024, p.3) because it is a core feature of democracy. The BJP government passed farm laws without consultation with stakeholders and bypassed parliamentary procedures. So, this movement challenged the BJP's attack on the democratic structure of India.

This protest shook the authoritarian rule of the BJP because not only men, but women were also marking their presence and forced the ruling party to think seriously about this mass opposition by farmers. This agitation provided an "alternative vision of democracy by developing new and inclusive forms of solidarity and allegiance, demonstrating the possibility of more equitable forms of democracy (Behl, 2022, p.1142)". Farmers came together and formed a collective to resist the anti-farming policies of the government because they anticipated the intentions of the ruling party to

give benefits to private companies at the cost of the livelihoods of farmers. The most likely outcome of farm laws was the abolition of the conventional mandi system (market yards), which would subsequently lead to private companies controlling prices. Instead of adopting agricultural reforms, the BJP passed farm laws that opened agricultural markets to private companies (Behl, 2022, p.1142). One of the most appealing factors of this agitation was its long duration and effective organization that kept motivating protestors not to leave protest camps until laws were repealed. This thesis analyzes this movement as to how it challenged a government that is responsible for a democratic decline in India. I am also elaborating on the role of gender and caste in social movements aimed at democracy building. In a broader sense, this project explains the influence of social movements with strong intersectional solidarity in deepening democracy in nations facing a democratic decline.

Research Question

This project will map the farmers' protest to what it aspires to, what it is for, and what it enables. I will analyze the internal mechanisms and structure of this movement to understand how this movement forced the government of India to repeal farm laws. In a broader context, I will explain why social movements like the farmers' movement of 2020-21 are critical for liberal democracies. At first, I will focus on tracing the history of the agricultural crisis in India by analyzing existing literature on the same; secondly, I will focus on internal mechanisms of farmers' protest, gender dynamics, economic support systems, and caste dynamics within protest camps by examining the multiple interview sessions I conducted with my research participant.

Trolley Times' first headline, 'Unite, Fight, and Win,' immediately caught the attention of national and international audiences and media. In the internal communication of the movement and informing the diaspora about the farmers' movement, the Trolley Times played a crucial role. Therefore, in addition to interviews, the thesis explores the Trolley Times, a pivotal source of internal communication within protest camps. Specifically, I will discuss articles from this newspaper to evaluate the impact of this news medium on the people protesting and reading it worldwide.

I am interested in elaborating on how a caste-oriented Indian society managed to fight against a fascist regime while eating in the same utensils and drinking water from the same pots. It is common practice in rural India and even urban India, to some extent, to keep separate dishes for feeding food to low castes. To my surprise, through relational interviews with Navkiran Natt, I learned that such discrimination was not known in farmers' protests, and Indian women, especially rural women who occasionally step outside their homes without their men, chose to join the protest with full conviction. For the first time, when I saw a TV screen showing huge crowds of Indian women with their heads covered with Kesari veils raising slogans against draconian farm laws, I knew this was something new, something big, a modern revolution against the powers that are no longer concerned with the growth of our nation. Indian media is notorious for being 'Godi Media' (Media that sits in the lap of the ruling party); I will touch on the role of state-sponsored media in creating a false narrative in the nation against protesting farmers and how Trolley Times became a source of genuine flow of information from the protest that made it famous in the diaspora.

So, this thesis addresses the following research questions:

- How do social movements influence the democratic landscapes in countries facing serious democratic decline?
- What were the internal structures and mechanisms of the farmers' protest?
- What motivated the long duration and ultimate victory of this protest?
- How did Trolley Times help bridge gaps within the community when mainstream media spread misinformation and disinformation?
- What were gender and caste dynamics within protest sites, and how did this intersectional solidarity within protest reignite the democratic values among Indians?

Methodology

I use qualitative research methods and an interpretive research design for this study. To generate data, I analyze the internal structure of the farmers' movement of 2020-21 by examining the newspaper "Trolley Times," published in protest camps, and exploring the impact of this agitation beyond the protest camp settings. This newspaper successfully created a sense of collectivism in protest camps. As it was published in regional languages, Punjabi and Hindi (Behl, 2022, p.1143), it was more appealing to rural Indians. This thesis analyzes articles from this newspaper to evaluate this movement's internal structure and motivation and how farmers made this movement successful and nonviolent. I translated and transcribed around sixty articles from different editions of Trolley Times and analyzed around twenty articles written by seventeen authors and reflected those in this project.

I followed a relational interview (Fujii, 2018, p.19) method for conducting interviews. Dr. Natasha Behl contributed throughout to forming interview questions.

Then, I translated the interview questions from English to Punjabi. After translation, we interacted with the research participant in three interview sessions via Zoom. All sessions were conducted mainly in Punjabi, and in some parts, English was used. The first interview was on June 3, 2024; the second was on June 10th, 2024; and the third and final was conducted on June 21, 2024.

My research participant Navkiran Natt participated in the farmers' movement and was also a co-founder and co-editor of the newspaper Trolley Times. I, along with Dr. Natasha Behl, conducted open-ended interviews on Zoom, and these open-ended, semi-structured interview sessions relied on a relational interview approach focused more on meaning-making (Fujii, 2018, p.90). The method of relational interviews is most suitable for projects that focus on how people construct meanings that could be related to actual events and experiences (Fujii, 2018, p.9); I applied this method for interviews because it allowed me to interact with the participant to understand her first-hand experiences at the protest sites. Through the interview sessions, we dug deep into how life is for a protestor living in a protest camp for more than a year without any permanent access to restrooms, menstruation supplies, physical security, and sanitation needs.

During interview sessions, I tried to get an idea of how things occurred at a ground level with such limited resources in the farmers' movement. Initially, I planned to conduct interviews in the field. Instead, I conducted Zoom interviews because of ongoing elections in India and extreme political tensions. It was unsafe for anyone to discuss anything against the ruling BJP government, so we agreed to meet via Zoom to protect the research participant. Our interview sessions were more like dialogues

because I consciously chose to use a method of relational interviews where data emerges from interactions or dialogues rather than interrogation (Fujii, 2018, p.8).

Once the interviews were completed, I worked on transcription in Punjabi and then translated transcriptions into English. According to Lee Ann Fujii, researchers who do their transcriptions from audio files sometimes use this task to remind themselves what the interviews contain (2018, p.76); doing the process of interview transcriptions by myself helped me refresh my mind. I identified multiple themes and patterns within interviews while transcribing interviews. Navkiran Natt is my research participant and research scholar, and she was one of the three co-founders and one of five co-editors of the newspaper Trolley Times. She was the only woman in Trolley Times, and I chose her as my research participant because of my interest in understanding gender dynamics within protest and Trolley Times. Relying on a single research participant added depth to my research because she gave me rich contextual information about the movement that enriched my understanding of the mechanisms of farmers' movement. As she was quite active in the farmers' movement, her first-hand experience with state oppression, surveillance, and threats helped me understand what it was like to fight against a government.

“The practice of using multiple sources of evidence analogous to intertextuality is often termed ‘triangulation’ (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2012, p.88).” So, in my research, to enhance the credibility of my work, I included triangulation of multiple data sources like Trolley Times, interviews with research participant, and various published works on my research topic. I conducted a qualitative analysis of articles from the Trolley Times, relational interviews with Navkiran, and secondary sources like published research papers. Dr. Natasha Behl provided critical insights into my data

analysis throughout this process, her expertise helped me in interpreting data in more nuanced ways.

Positionality and Reflexivity

I belong to a Sikh family from Punjab, a north Indian state also known as India's breadbasket (Mahanta & Bhardwaj, 2022, p.112), with a home surrounded by farms where I witnessed crops grow yearly. I remember, in my childhood, whenever there would be pouring rain and thunderstorms, as kids, I, along with my siblings, used to get so joyful that we would pray out loud to God to make that rain last longer so we could skip school. We never had agricultural land, but my grandmother used to make us understand that for those who have their whole year's income under the open skies, it is a sad time; we should be praying for them. This provides insight into how many middle-class people unite with farmers in India. I interviewed my research participant, a woman from a family with an agricultural background who actively participated in farmers' agitation. She took me on a journey of experiences she had, and hurdles protestors faced, yet emerged victorious against a government that can kill every voice of dissent.

It is a common practice in Indian agricultural markets that farmers who grow fresh produce are forced to sell their produce at meager rates, and that produce is sold at ten to twenty times higher rates in the market by vendors. As it is not always true that the germ of an idea must come from a scholarly work, it may come from daily life experiences and prior history and the ethnicity of a researcher (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2012, p.25), I am trying to find answers to the questions which I used to have in my mind about the exploitation of farmers in India. Prior knowledge not only shapes

a research interest but also assists in conducting research (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2012, p.26), and in my case, knowing the protesting farmers' language made it quite easy for me to conduct interviews. In my research project, my awareness of the farmers' movement and relating to the same community helped me to identify my research participant and create a working bond between us because "sometimes such experiential or other background knowledge can become helpful to obtaining access to a community or to interviewing in a given language (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2012, p.26)."

During every harvesting season, farmers block highways for multiple days to put pressure on the government to get proper prices for their produce. In the cold winters of Punjab, I have seen thousands of sugarcane trolleys with farmers waiting in line on one side of the national highways to get unloaded by Sugar Mills and farmers sleeping on roads waiting for their turn. It was so heartbreaking to see human beings reduced to just a number waiting for days without any shelter to sleep at night. When the farm laws of 2020 were introduced, I saw many farmers around my locality leaving their homes to march towards Delhi. The younger generation and women also left their homes to participate in this movement and it made me realize that something was different this time. When the mobilization of farmers started, they were on every screen as the media reported this huge mobilization and social media was also full of clips of a huge number of farmers marching toward Delhi. When the government of India attacked peaceful protestors with water cannons and tear gas shells, it was so disheartening because we assumed that we lived in a democracy, and we had the right to peaceful protest. Old men with their turbans soaking with water and their bodies injured with tear gas shells moved many hearts. Those pictures are etched in my mind. This movement was growing in those times when we were scared to even post an anti-Modi comment on a

Facebook post because the Modi government was hunting and silencing every voice of dissent. They declared anyone speaking against them as anti-national. The exemplary courage of farmers deepened my interest in following this movement. The youngsters were dying in their twenties due to heart failure and old men and women died of heart attacks at protest camps, but the government was continuously denying the demand to repeal farm laws. I remember I used to wonder how a democratic government could become so numb to its citizens. How can they remain silent amid such chaos?

Being a lawyer, I always used to wonder if minorities, women, and the labor class of India were aware of their fundamental rights guaranteed by the constitution of India because I seldom witnessed a fight back from these sections of society. As a woman in the legal field, I felt there was gender-based discrimination in India's courts. Women are treated as outsiders, and most young women who enter court premises work under senior attorneys who are males; it becomes quite hard to build a trusting relationship with senior attorneys who are acting as mentors to juniors because of gender-based discrimination. It is difficult to build trust and solidarity in a hierarchical power structure divided by gender (Behl, 2020, p.780). More shockingly, female lawyers face such discrimination not only from co-workers; but also, from the general public who hesitate to reach out to a female lawyer in India. Although the constitution of India provides gender equality, Indian women face discrimination in every field. Natasha Behl rightly argues that India guarantees its women various rights but fails them in many ways (2019, p.36). From my own experience, I can say Indian women face multiple layers of gendered violence in civil society, at the workplace, and even before reaching the workplace while traveling in public buses. Gender discrimination and gender violence erode democratic values like justice and equality.

For me, it was a daily struggle to reach the workplace by public buses where poking male gaze and physical touch disturbs a woman to the core, and reaching the workplace and getting excluded from discussions by seniors as if women are outsiders in the legal profession, was even more heartbreaking. I was even asked my caste by the clerk of my senior attorney the day I conveyed to him that I was leaving legal practice. I was amused by the fact that the last thing they wanted to know about me before I left was my caste. “Despite constitutional guarantees of women’s formal equality, Indian women’s lived experiences reveal a more complicated picture, where experiences of citizenship are plagued with everyday discrimination, exclusion, and violence in the private and public spheres (Behl, 2019, p.2)” and I faced such discrimination almost everywhere. Only a few young female graduates were practicing in a district court in Punjab, where I used to practice. I was shattered to see the working conditions for women in Court complexes in India. There is no access to menstrual supplies within court complexes, and females have to struggle to find a separate restroom. In the district court where I was practicing, young females had to reach restrooms after crossing the awkward gaze of undertrials who used to be sitting near washrooms. Article 42 of the Constitution of India provides that the state must establish just and humane working conditions including a safe environment and worker wellbeing but, on the ground, being a working woman is a struggle in India.

I chose to join the Social Justice and Human Rights community, hoping to know such subtle human rights violations and complexities better. When I decided to write a thesis for this degree, Dr. Natasha Behl guided me in choosing the right section of Indian society to study- the farmers of India. I witnessed the farmers' movement of 2020 quite closely, and for me, it was the first time that such a huge number of Indian

farmers with their children and women came out on the streets asking for the repeal of draconian farm laws. A masterpiece by Melvin Rogers “The Darkened Light of Faith” made me understand the potential of democratic resistance in challenging nondemocratic power structures. The way African American activists remained hopeful in democracy amid extreme oppression and systemic racism, I feel farmers of India also remained hopeful amid brutal state oppression. There are striking similarities as how Americans treat blacks (Rogers, 2023) and how India treats its Dalits. This movement emerged as a hope for democracy in India because it boldly challenged the legitimacy of government actions and highlighted the relevance of public discourse and the right to protest. I aimed to evaluate the impact of this social movement on a regime that is undermining the democratic fabric of India.

As the participation of women was a unique factor of this movement, I was eager to know how women managed to live in the protest camps without any safety or security, without sanitation facilities when I struggled to get these basics in safe court premises. I decided to interview Navkiran Natt because she is a famous figure from the Farmers’ movement of 2020, and she was a young woman actively participating not only in the movement but was working in Trolley Times as well. She was one of the three co-founders of Trolley Times and her proximity to the movement and this newspaper provided me with enough information for my project. I aimed to analyze both the movement on ground levels and Trolley Times as well, Navkiran helped me to understand both aspects.

Origin of Trolley Times- A Newspaper in Protest Camps

The farmers participating in the movement came up with a novel solution to initiate the flow of information during the protest. They started publishing Trolley Times and circulated a local newspaper inside the protest camps. Trolley Times was also made available online and reached rural areas of Punjab, Haryana, and the diaspora. This overseas reach of Trolley Times made this agitation global, and the diaspora massively supported this movement. “As mainstream media became a propaganda outlet for the BJP, the Trolley Times challenged this coverage (Behl, 2022, p.1143).” This protest was one of a kind, and “it created an inclusive democracy that included protest camps and rural networks (Behl, 2022, p.1143).”

The fascist BJP government used every possible way to silence the voices of protestors, blocking their social media handles (Singh, 2021), shutting down the internet, controlling news channels (Behl, 2022, p.1143), and detaining protestors, scholars, journalists, opposition leaders (Singh, 2020) and students who supported these protests, but Trolley Times emerged as hope to protestors who needed information about what was going on around them. It also motivated people on protest sites to continue protesting state repression. Newspapers are the oldest source of information, and rural populations protesting at Delhi’s borders loved Trolley Times because they felt aware of the ongoing dialogue and statements of the government.

Trolley Times was published in 22 editions at irregular intervals for one year. Its first edition was published on December 18, 2020, its last on December 9, 2021, and the newspaper’s publications came to an end on November 19, 2021, after Narendra Modi repealed the farm laws (Titzmann, 2022). This newspaper became the voice of protestors when every other source of information was blocked by the government or controlled by the BJP. It emerged as a tool for community building within protest

camps as it instilled solidarity (Singh and Punia, 2020) among protestors. Providing a platform for farmers from different regions, backgrounds, and affiliations to connect and share their experiences builds a sense of unity and collective identity among the protestors, and this newspaper successfully engages with protesting farmers. It highlighted the diversity of the farmers' grievances and aspirations of the farmers' movement. Trolley Times is a novel initiative that aims to challenge mainstream media's false narratives against the movement and build a sense of collective among protestors and supporters (Titzmann,2022).

Trolley Times discussed the ongoing developments on the political front during protests and transcribed talks and interviews, announced plans and press conferences, and communicated decisions of the farmer unions on the evolving situation (Mahanta & Bhardwaj, 2022, p.114). This newspaper also published articles on the history of farmers' movements and global movements by farmers to claim their rights. To cater to the audience from different states of India, there were articles explaining the life and profiles of farmer leaders from different states so that protestors could get to know the lifelong struggles of farmer leaders. This way, Trolley Times connected the farmers' movement of 2020 with historical agricultural movements. Most importantly, this newspaper created a print archive of farmers' protests, which was otherwise impossible to preserve due to false propaganda by mainstream media.

Literature Review

In India, democracy has been under threat since the BJP came into power in 2014 and recent most important laws and political decisions like the imposition of a national lockdown with four hours' notice during COVID that caused nationwide mobilization

due to fear and anxiety of poor, demonetization, farm laws that were passed without parliamentary consultation are examples of this democratic erosion (Tudor, 2023). In a democratic nation, the citizens cannot be reduced to votes but the citizens actively participate in public affairs and decision-making (Bagchi and Raghuvanshi, 2024). The power of ordinary people to challenge the powerful has always been considerable and many evils like slavery ended by social movements (Markoff, 1996). In India, recent trends show how the government adopts policies and laws directly affecting citizens of India without any consultations and such policies face criticism and resistance. Social movements like the farmers' movement of 2020-21 can transform a nation by challenging ruling parties. Some authors elaborate on the relevance of the right to protest for social change. Marchart (2022) explains how the right to protest an expression of popular sovereignty is, a "self-awakening" instigated by an imperative call of duty not reducible to a set of liberal individual rights. Farmers realized that it was high time to protest farm laws. India's farmers' protest is a great example of the importance of the contemporary movements for social change (Narula, 2022). Some argue that the farmers' movement of 2020-21 provided an alternative vision to Indian democracy rooted in radical egalitarianism when democracy was moving rapidly towards an autocracy in India under BJP rule (Behl, 2022).

To suppress the farmers' agitation, the BJP government restrained civil liberties, shut down the internet, controlled the news in the media, and arrested political opponents, students, protestors, journalists, and intellectuals all in the name of restoring peace and order, and managing COVID-19 crisis along with the usual excuse of eliminating the 'anti-nationals' who pose a threat to India's security and unity

(Chakrabarti, 2022) but despite severe oppression, this protest continued until it became a success.

Generally, women in rural India are expected to play only conventional roles like cooking, cleaning, and caring for children. However, this agitation brought the women from Indian households and women of the Anti-CAA movement who were protesting the Citizenship Amendment Act that excluded Muslims from getting Indian citizenship who migrated to India before 2014 but granted citizenship to persons from other religions (Sharma & Singh, 2023, p.1). From all parts of India, women farmers came together on a common front, strengthening each other, offering solidarity, and bringing to the fore women's role in mass mobilizations (Chakrabarti, 2022). Around 60-70% of farmers in India are women, but as they are doing invisible labor, most are not considered farmers because their names rarely appear on land ownership documents (Narula, 2022).

After reviewing the existing literature on farmers' protests, I can say that there is a shortage of studies on this agitation, as some studies discuss the historical background of the agricultural crisis in India (Singh, 2022; Fadaee, 2022), some elaborate on the right to protest in general (Kottai, 2021; Narula, 2022), others talk about false propaganda of media houses against farmers (Anand & Sharma, 2022). Some illustrate the participation of women in this agitation (Chakrabarty, 2022). Existing research on this struggle of farmers hardly touches on the core mechanism that played a vital role in the success of this agitation, how this protest was internally organized, and how farmers across the nation from all religions and castes fought under a single front from the lens of the internal newsletter 'Trolley Times.' As this agitation came as a massive success against the notoriously oppressive government of India,

there is a need to inquire about the internal settings of this movement that reignited democratic spirit among Indians, and this research is trying to fill this gap by analyzing the internal organization of this movement by analyzing Trolley Times.

Most research analyzing farmers' agitation is conducted through qualitative research methods to understand the mechanisms of this protest. A vital element of the protest's survival became using art and literature in various forms to express the ideologies of those involved. Throughout the protest, the Modi administration made vigorous attempts to suppress the release of information about the ongoing demonstrations through the censorship of media, the arrests of numerous journalists, and internet blackouts at protest sites (Deol, 2022). The Punjabi songwriters and singers played a crucial role in preparing the ground for the farmers' protest march to Delhi before it took place. Writers and singers penned, sang, and released most of these videos in September and October 2020 to unite the farmers raising their voices against farm laws (Abbi, 2022). Throughout the protest, one common theme in art and literature produced by the movement was the deconstruction of time to connect various moments in Sikh history and experience to the contemporary (Deol, 2022). Artists drew connections between present struggles and historical incidents of Sikhism like Sikh Gurus sacrificing their lives to uphold their faith and protecting human rights. Trolley Times did this by connecting this movement across time by discussing historical incidents from Sikh history.

The farm bills were enacted during the COVID-19 lockdown, and the rural community accused the government of abusing the situation. At the same time, most of them were preoccupied with keeping a social distance and protecting themselves from the disease. Fear of COVID-19, labor scarcity in agriculture, the loss of standing crops

on the field, and threats to one's way of life all affected the rural community. The government created specific agricultural regulations amid all these worrying circumstances, using the crisis as a springboard for reform (Shakeel et al., 2021). Another study highlights some of the problems of Indian agriculture and the government's policy response and traces the trajectory of the farmers' agitation against the farm laws (Singh, 2022). Singh (2022) discusses that the question of reform in agriculture is paramount and proposes a road map for Agri-reforms like consulting stakeholders before adopting any agricultural reform, developing proper irrigation systems, encouraging crop diversification, and developing robust agricultural market systems.

The government of India tried to malign the protest with cheap tactics and Grewal (2022) elaborates on the connection between the recolonization of India's economy through neoliberal reforms and the re-emergence of rhetoric that tries to create a lethal phantasmagoria around the idea of Khalistan. Punjab lost many innocent lives between the 1980s and 1990s in the name of Khalistan through extra-judicial killings by the security forces of India and now the government is trying to create the same conflict within the farmers' movement. He elaborates on the aftermath of the protest, following the return of protestors to their home state after the repeal. During Punjab's recent elections, there has been an increase in communal violence between groups amongst the Hindu far-right, like the Shiv Sena and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh. There has been a rise in the expression of anti-Sikh sentiment, organization of anti-Khalistan protests, and arrests (or deaths) of people who played essential roles in the protest.

In March 2023, the BJP's central government worked with Punjab's state-level government, AAP, to shut down internet and phone access across Punjab for three days as they conducted a manhunt for Amritpal Singh, an advocate for Sikh separatism, with local police working with paramilitary soldiers to patrol streets and set up checkpoints (Yasir & Raj, 2023). To support the BJP's agenda, the opposition Party AAP worked with it to target Sikh separatists in Punjab. BJP supporters and BJP IT cell started targeting online trolling and harassing protestors. This suggests that the media campaign against farmers during the protest was successful. A threat was successfully made to circulate, and mass populist paranoia can be made to serve as a mechanism for state-inculcated violence and hate (Grewal, 2022). Multiple national and local media organizations, rather than allaying farmers' anxieties and educating them about the farm laws, tried to discredit farmers' movement by labeling them as "Khalistanis" and "Naxals," and instead raising the farmers' concerns, Indian mainstream media discredited the farmer's protest and this worked in favor of the ruling party and corporations (Anand & Sharma, 2021, p.131). To malign the image of the movement, mainstream media claimed that protesting farmers are 'Khalistani' which means it is supported by members of a separatist group 'Khalistan' struggling to create an independent Sikh state and 'Naxals' who are far-left radical communists in India.

Another unique study addresses the mental health issues of Indian farmers that are behind the increasing suicides of farmers (Kottai, 2021). Kottai's research highlights the intimate relationship between the neoliberal state and farmers' distress to which the mental health system shuts its ears and eyes, obscuring and downplaying socio-structural determinants of farmers' mental health. Agrarian distress varies across different states of India and in the state of Uttar Pradesh it is far worse than the other

parts of India. Mahanta and Bhardwaj (2022) draw attention to embedded structures of inequality that often pervade social movements and foreground the specific historical, communitarian, and democratic ethics that the farmers' protests rehearse in the present moment. They analyzed what motivated people to extend support and solidarity to a protest movement (Mahanta, Bhardwaj, 2022). This study argues that emotions constitute the culture of protests and social movements, yielding the many affective responses to unfolding events and the pleasures of protest that flow from its performative forms – rituals, songs, dances, speeches, etc. It correlates it with farmers' leader Rajesh Tikait crying, and the corresponding emotional response it triggered became a defining moment in reclaiming the eroding legitimacy of the farmers' protests.

The farmers of India never got their dues despite spending their whole youth in their fields under the sun. Although the Green Revolution brought sudden growth in the agricultural sector, in the long run, it had deadly consequences like suicides by farmers due to debts that were taken for buying pesticides. Using resources like technology and fertilizers is estimated to be inefficient because it causes more harm than benefit in the long run (Shiva, 2016, p. 8). Through the Green Revolution, the government sought to integrate the agrarian sector into a market economy, and just like new farm bills were trying to privatize agriculture. This crisis deepened in the COVID lockdown (Singh, 2020). Instead of implementing agricultural reforms, the BJP government came up with new farm laws, another blow to the agricultural sector. Farmers challenged these laws and fought a long battle. More than 700 farmers lost their lives during this movement (BBC, 2021), and ultimately, the government was forced to take back these bills that posed a serious threat to the livelihoods and lands of farmers.

Trolley Times explains women's participation as how old women in wheelchairs were within campsites for more than a year and how young women handled everything with exemplary patience and courage. This agitation is a glaring example of an organized protest at the grassroots level, and this research will delve deep into how ordinary farmers managed to protest for more than a year under the suppression of the fascist ruling party in India. Trolley Times emerged as evidence of farmers' agitation as mainstream media worked with the ruling party; only Trolley Times explained the real-time occurrence of this agitation, so this project will elaborate and analyze the core of this agitation through stories of protestors and supporters that were published in Trolley Times.

Overview of the Thesis

In this project, I elaborate on the core of the farmers' movement of 2020-21 in India by analyzing stories and articles published in Trolley Times and insights from ground level in protest camps through interviews with my research participant. I explain how far I cover a broad range of lived experiences of my research participant about life in a protest camp and connect those experiences with stories from Trolley Times.

Chapter 1 introduces farmers' agitation amid a democratic decline in India and an important argument of this project that the government of India intentionally passed farm laws that were against the farmers to benefit some corporate houses. It also elaborates on the main aspirations of this protest and why Trolley Times emerged as a newspaper within protest sites. Chapter 2 elaborates on the motivations that pushed farmers of India to join this movement through analysis of the Trolley Times and interviews with my research participant. This section identifies economic motivation

and perception of threat to livelihood and lands as the main factors that inspired farmers to join the farmers' movement.

Chapter 3 provides insights from the lived experiences of my research participant and stories from Trolley Times to elaborate on how a collective identity was forged within protest camps, given the internal structures and hierarchies of gender, caste, language, religion, and region. It also addresses how mainstream media tried to malign the protest image and how the conscious efforts of farmers, farmer unions, protestors, and the Trolley Times formed a collective identity. Chapter 4 elaborates on the Trolley Times for historically situating the farmers' movement. This movement has historical roots of struggle that contributed to a huge stir by present protests. There were multiple movements in Indian history where newspapers were focal points, and the Trolley Times emerged in the same context from protest camps. Multiple stories of protestors from Trolley Times connecting the present movement to history are also discussed in this chapter. Chapter 5 concludes that the farmers' agitation was a unique organized movement that pushed India's government to repeal farm laws without any conditions and reignited hope for democracy in India.

CHAPTER 2

LOGICS BEHIND FARMERS' MOVEMENT OF 2020-21

Social movements assert popular sovereignty (Tilly & Wood. 2019, p.15), similarly, the farmers' movement advocated for challenging existing power structures in India by claiming direct participation in the democracy. Since the Bhartiya Janta Party came into power in 2014, it has been using legal mechanisms like misuse of sedition laws to suppress dissent and extralegal tactics like promoting Hindu vigilantism to target minorities to undermine democracy in India (Behl, 2022, 1142). In a political environment of suppression, the farmers' movement emerged as a strong resistance against the BJP's tendencies to undermine democracy. India is a nation blessed with a great climate and huge agricultural land capable of producing food for its huge population. However, the persistent sufferings of farmers in India are rooted in poor policies. Around 112,000 people from the agricultural sector committed suicide in India in the last decade (Fleck, 2024). These figures highlight the agrarian crisis in India.

Before the independence of India, food grains were appropriated forcefully by the British from Indian farmers under a colonial system of rent collection (Shiva, 2016, p.1). The Green Revolution was claimed to increase the productivity of land, but it caused losses to farmers in the long run, and then neoliberal policies adversely affected farming as small farmers lost their lands. The farmers of India were never given agricultural policies by any government that could help their actual growth. This massive farmers' outrage connects with historical agricultural policies and environmental calamities. India's ongoing agrarian crisis is rooted in the neoliberal reforms of the early 1990s and the Green Revolution before that (Fadaee, 2022, p.32).

Neoliberal policies benefitted big landlords and ignored small and marginal farmers and before that the Green Revolution caused financial burdens in farming, harmed productivity of soils by introducing overuse of pesticides, and due to such pressures, many farmers committed suicides.

The farmers' protests of 2020, the largest and the longest ever witnessed after India's independence have once again highlighted the agrarian crisis and the plight of farmers in the country (Kottai, 2021, p.70). When the BJP introduced three farm bills to privatize agriculture, it shook the entire nation. On June 5th, 2020, the government of India came up with three ordinances (Moliner and Singh, 2024, p.20) that became laws after the president's nod and claimed them to be agricultural marketing reforms. The ordinances came in June when the coronavirus pandemic peaked, and India was in lockdown. Through a combined analysis of Trolley Times and interview data alongside a review of current literature on the farmers' movement, I identified two major driving forces that motivated farmers of India to participate in farmers' agitation: (1) economic motivations and (2) perception of threat. In the following sections, through stories from Trolley Times, my conversations with my research participant, and existing literature, I explain how economic motivations and perception of threats made Indians participate in the farmers' movement.

Economic Motivations

The most significant factors that pushed farmers to protest were economic motivations. Farm laws were enough to create a sense of economic danger in the minds of farmers as they clearly understood the intentions of the BJP government to control farming. BJP's agenda of creating 'one nation, one market' in India is a conspiracy to build a

unified national market that can be easily captured by powerful corporate houses such as Reliance Industries Limited and the Adani Group (Narula, 2022, p.114). Farmers know that once farming is privatized, traditional agriculture will be ruined, making farmers more vulnerable to exploitation by private corporations (Shakeel et al., 2021, p.5).” When there is no government involvement in fixing prices, private traders will intentionally fix low prices for farmers’ produce (Kaul, 2021), and farmers will be left with no choice but to sell their produce at low prices. The clear aim of new farm laws was to hand over farming to private corporations, so there was a fear of privatization of agriculture, leading to rising costs and inflation. One of these farm laws of 2020 eliminates the restrictions on hoardings of essential produce; that is to say, this law gives open permission to any private player to hoard produce and sell it at a desired price in the market (Shakeel et al. 2021, p.5). In the third edition of Trolley Times, Islam Hussein's article highlights a deep fear that these new farm laws would bring the nation to starvation (Hussein, 2020, p.4):

If our food grains were stored in the warehouses of private companies, if any food crisis were to happen now, how would we transport the food grains stored in private godowns to the hungry people who need them? Because then neither will the Food Corporation of India procure grains on behalf of the government nor will it have its stock. It will be the private corporations owning the stock, and the foodgrains released from Adani’s silos and warehouses will be sold at their asking price.

Hussein echoes the fears of a dark conspiracy of the BJP to turn farming into an agro-capitalist business as these laws were framed to abolish mandis- market yards (Shakeel et al.,2022, p.1) and free hoarding of essential commodities in a country like India where only private players can afford the infrastructure necessary to store grains or any produce. Instead of assisting farmers, the BJP focused on introducing pro-corporate agricultural bills (Narasimhaiah, 2021, p.517) to introduce industrialists like Adani and

Ambani to agriculture so that they could earn huge profits. Hussein speaks to farmers' larger concern that the Food Corporation of India would be annulled once these laws came into force and businesspeople like Ambani and Adani would control the food prices as the agriculture market would be handed over to them (Behl, 2022, p.1143).

In the eleventh edition of Trolley Times, Naval Kishor Kumar writes:

New farm laws provide that farmers can now market their produce themselves, but farmers are apprehensive that small farmers will be left helpless in this situation. There will be no one to care for them. The farmers are claiming that through these laws, the government is trying to turn farmers into mere laborers in the lands they own (2021, p.4).

Small and marginal farmers who owned small lands participated in farmers' agitation because they knew their agricultural standing would be crushed through farm bills. Although farm bills boast of giving farmers more freedom to sell their crops to anyone, small farmers will be crushed in this system and reduced to mere laborers on their farms.

He further claims:

These laws talk about freeing the production, storage, and sale of pulses, oilseeds, and grains from control except in extraordinary circumstances like war. Agricultural experts believe that this is a law that promotes hoarding. Farmers also believe that this is an attempt to give legal sanction to hoarding (2021, p.4).

Hoarding of any produce can create chaos in the market because it can lead to inflation. One of the new farm laws aimed to remove limitations from hoarding foods and grant private companies free will to hoard produce, which could create a scarcity in the market to sell it at desired rates ultimately. These laws were an attempt to favor big corporate houses at the cost of the livelihoods and nutrition of every Indian. What the farmer is saying is corroborated by academics; farm laws allowed big corporations to

stockpile unlimited essential food commodities without any intervention from the government (Narula, 2022, p.122). “The likely outcome of these laws would be the collapse of the public agricultural system, which would jeopardize small farmers’ livelihood and the nation’s food security” (Behl, 2022, p.1142). A nation where a public distribution system feeds a large population needs strict laws against hoarding food items. Still, the BJP was handing over control of the flow of essential food commodities to private firms.

Farmers would be reduced to laborers only. As the farm laws of 2020 provided a legal framework for contract farming where farmers will produce at pre-decided prices for private companies (Narula, 2022, p.120), so clearly no guarantee of Minimum Support Price to farmers feared economic losses at the hands of private companies. These fears stirred a nationwide protest of farmers, who fought for their livelihoods and lands. In the first edition of Trolley Times, an article by Geeta Kumari elaborates on the evil intentions of the BJP government to leave agriculture of the country at the mercy of private corporations so that the government can ditch its responsibility towards the farming community (2020, p.3). In this article, Geeta Kumari says:

The second bill says that farmers can enter into contracts with anyone for multiple years to come. But will the Adanis and Ambanis care whether a farmer whose harvest turns out bad, due to weather or due to irrigation has enough to survive till the next season or will they, like the British, only focus on getting their money’s worth? As for who has ever benefited from the Ambanis till today, you probably can’t even recollect a single name. What will happen to the farmer whose crop didn’t turn out right? In such a case, the government won’t have to do anything because it will have no responsibility, that is why this bill exists. Then maybe those who have a problem with our farmers eating pizza won’t utter a word when they drink poison instead. Because till now, in this country, 2,96,438 farmers have committed suicide, but we haven’t heard a word from this government.

Kumari elaborates on the BJP's plan to eliminate the responsibilities of setting a minimum support price for crops and privatizing agriculture. She asks about the future of those farmers whose produce might not turn out well and compares Adanis and Ambanis to the Britishers because they used to be concerned only with generating revenues from Indian farmers. Britishers created rural indebtedness in India because they used to extract exorbitant revenue from peasants living in extreme poverty (Venkateswarlu, 2021, p.51). New farm laws are feared to repeat the same crisis in farming, especially for small farmers. If a small or marginal farmer's produce fails the quality test, he will be left to his fate, so small and marginal farmers will face the most brutal consequences of farm bills (Narasimhaiah, 2021, p.516) because the government will take no responsibility in such cases.

Another article published in the first edition of Trolley Times on December 18, 2020, highlights the intention of the BJP government to enslave India's agriculture (Sharma, p.3). Sharma explains the aims of the farmers' movement as follows:

Farmers' struggle is directly against the Center's power. It is also against the idea of economic development of the country by letting the corporate and multinational companies loot the resources of India. The mood of the farmers sitting in the movement indicates that they are not going to return without winning this battle. They know that if they return without winning, then that small piece of land that they own will be looted by the corporate and India's food security will also be enslaved by them.

Sharma suggests that farmers' protest is a struggle against the central power in India that is selling the agriculture of India to corporate houses, which will ultimately lead to the loot of India and its farmers. There is a clear apprehension in the minds of farmers of enduring economic losses as they will lose their lands if they leave without winning. "During the first few years of reform, private corporations would likely purchase

agricultural goods at a price surpassing MSP, securing their monopoly power in the market. They could then set prices far lower than MSP, which would likely have devastating consequences for Indian farmers (Behl, 2022, p.1142).

People joined this movement for many reasons and on motivations for people joining the farmers' movement, Navkiran explains:

“People were motivated because they understood the broader political importance of this movement and started feeling that if farming were attacked, farmers would be affected, and everyone would be adversely affected by it. These laws will lead to inflation, and it will affect every household so people across the spectrum participated, and somewhere from that understanding, broader solidarity was formed.”

Not only those who are into farming will face repercussions of farm laws, but everyone will face adverse effects of farm bills in the long run. Many Indians felt a deep connection with the farmers' movement because there was a threat in the minds of people that this time, BJP was attacking the food plates of Indian citizens, as farm laws would lead to the hoarding of food items, leading to inflation. It will adversely affect everyone's quality of life. Those who own farmlands will likely lose their lands. People understood that now everyone will suffer.

Navkiran explained that it was a matter of food, a basic need for farmers of India and every other person who participated in the protest. While commenting on the intent of the BJP, she said, “After passing three farm laws, the BJP was portraying itself as a pro-development party, and for that, they are promoting free business, and they are here for development. However, many businessmen joined the farmers' protest in solidarity and were very much part of the capitalist system. It was because people realized that it was not about free business but monopolization.” Once private firms

create a monopoly in agriculture, they might offer better prices in the initial years, but then after acquiring the power of monopoly, they would set a price far below the actual MSP that farmers used to get (Behl, 2022, p.1142). Further, she recalled past policies of the BJP, “there were many faces of it like demonetization and GST policy. Still, these policies had no positive impact, but they destroyed small-scale businesses and small shopkeepers.”

When the BJP came up with demonetization, it promised that it was a policy to create a cashless economy and root out “black money” from the economy. Still, it was very chaotic for people because the government failed to print enough new currency notes in a country that works on over 90% cash-based transactions (K.S. & Subarata, 2018, p.486). So, the BJP had a history of failed economic policies, and people knew it. Navkiran further highlighted fear in people's minds that the BJP passed farm laws to privatize farms, as the BJP is working towards privatization in every field. She said:

“BJP was portraying that farm laws will end the role of middlemen, which will benefit farmers and farming as well. But people say it is not about free business but monopolization everywhere and in every field, such as farming and business. During COVID, these big business tycoons Ambani and Adani realized that every business could go to a loss, but people will never stop eating food, so it is important to tap into that part of the chain. This is why they wanted to enter the food or agriculture industry, which is the basic need of every human being. Ambani had already started buying silos in Punjab, so it was evident to the public that it was a fight against a joint conspiracy of central government and capitalists.”

As per a report published in the second edition of Trolley Times, Adani's group of industries already owns grain silos in Punjab and is expanding business in many fields of Punjab (Gill, 2020, p.2), and the public is aware of these facts. She adds:

“However, rural people were unaware of the meanings of words like corporates and capitalism; they knew that some rich people were running the government. The government was destroying the business of the public to give benefits to these corporate houses. Every participant in the protest had a clear idea of this.”

It was already in the public domain in India that the Modi government was giving every business to its close allies, the Ambanis and Adanis; Ambanis are involved in famous defense deals of buying Rafael jets, and Adanis are given exclusive contracts of operating government airports (Kazmin, 2019). Farmers had a clear picture of the financial losses they would face if farm laws were implemented, and to save themselves and upcoming generations from this ordeal, they joined this movement with high spirits.

Perception of Threat

“If I don’t go to the protest now, much that has been knitted will unravel, including my son’s dreams, your father’s earned land.”

This quote from a story published in the first edition of Trolley Times captures the deep perception of threat in people's minds created by new farm laws. People feared that they would lose everything to big corporate houses that had the sole aim of earning profits. As farm laws of 2020 provided for the abolition of the traditional mandi system for granting more freedom to farmers so that they can sell their produce to whoever they wish, farmers felt a threat because they were afraid that now they would not get the security and services they used to get within traditional mandi system (Narula, 2022, p.124). In addition, farmers clearly understood that farm laws would have adverse consequences in the long run because they knew they would not survive in the corporate-friendly agriculture markets. Eventually, they will also likely lose their livelihood and lands (Behl, 2022, p.1142).

Farmers also feared that the laws would abolish the facility of minimum price support for major crops, attack their livelihoods, and clear the way for a corporate takeover of India's agrarian economy (Narula,2022, p.89). The anger and intense response to the farm laws was because farmers were aware that possible implementation of these acts would deepen the crisis faced by small and marginal farmers in Punjab who are already struggling with debts that lead them to suicides (Abbi, 2022, p.31). Women farmers who worked as invisible laborers on farms also joined the protest because they were worried that farm laws would not only attack their livelihoods but might increase suicide numbers within their families because of the financial crisis, and some males could abandon their homes leaving their families behind (Chakrabarty, 2022, p.8).

It was evident from the provisions of farm laws that they were formed for the benefit of big business tycoons in India, like Adani groups, as they are close allies of the ruling party (Narasimhaiah, 2022, p.516). So, farmers were anxious because the elected government favored business tycoons over the citizens of India, who would be directly affected by this. There was an atmosphere of fear because protectors of the nation and its interests were working for industrialists. Also, fear and ambiguity lingered in farmers' minds about the corporate support and assurance as to what they will do if corporations fail to buy agricultural produce or reject it due to quality issues (Singh, 2022, p.40). Apart from this, the “farmers also fear that farm laws will exacerbate inequality and exploitation because they are already struggling with massive poverty and in a sector that has been divided by caste, gender and class differences (Chakrabarty, 2022, p.4)”.

A story published in the first edition of Trolley Times explains how fear of losing everything to corporations forced old women of Punjab to join protests in the chilling winters of Delhi (Kaur, 2020, p.2). Jaswinder Kaur elaborates on the spirit of an old lady (bibi) knitting a sweater and decides to join the farmers' movement. She writes:

Bibi dropped her sweater knitting and headed to the Gurudwara to sign up her name. Everyone warned her that she had asthma and what she would do if she got sick. It has been very cold. Bibi ignored everyone and got ready to go to the protest. Her daughter-in-law joked, "Bibi, your sweater will go unfinished. Who knows how many days will pass there." Bibi listened seriously and said, "If I don't go to the protest now, much that has been knitted will unravel, including my son's dreams, your father's earned land." Without speaking to anyone, Bibi left home and joined the women attending the protest."

This story highlights the explicit fear of losing life earnings that forced people to join the movement. This old woman is so fearful of unraveling the dreams of her family. The unfinished sweater can be looked at as an old lady's unfinished responsibilities toward her family. The way this old woman got ready to join the movement without giving a thought about the difficulties she might face at protest camps explains her understanding of the urgency of the current crisis. Her fear of losing everything looks so real that she says if she doesn't go to protest now, she will probably lose her son's dreams and their hard-earned lands. Everything that they had built for generations was at stake, and farmers knew this.

Another heart-touching story of an eighty-year-old woman named Gurmail was published in the first edition of Trolley Times. Sangeet Toor writes:

"Gurmail was around eighty years old, and as she packed a small bag, she smiled and said, "I am prepared to die for our land" (Toor, 2020, p.2).

And after a few days of the protest, she died of a heart attack while protesting. She sacrificed her life to protect farming. Just like her, more than 700 protestors died in the protest, some were killed in direct clashes with the government, some died of heart attacks in the cold winters, and some committed suicide at protest camps. Farmers were ready to die for their lands and prepared to protest until laws were repealed. Rural women of India came in solidarity, and their resilience contributed to the long struggle against farm laws.

A moving story from Trolley Times of a 108-year-old man from Punjab, who was not taken to the protest by his family due to his old age, beautifully illuminates the spirits of farmers. He traveled on his own to the protest site from his village. When he reached there, he was lost because it was quite hard to find his family of more than 200,000 protestors, but his determination to join the fight for the collective rights of farmers at such an old age was exemplary (Kaur, 2021, p.3). When asked why he joined the protest at such an old age, he replied jokingly that he was there for PM Modi's wedding. So, not only the youth of India but old men and women jumped into fighting against farm laws because they knew this was worth fighting for.

Farmers also felt threatened due to previous policies of the BJP government that targeted minorities (Kaul, 2023, p.22), left-leaning academics (Das, 2024, p.6), and small businesses in the country, so they felt that now the government is trying to attack the agriculture sector. Ambani buying silos in Punjab explained to farmers that they are fighting against the joint conspiracy of the government of India and capitalists. Protesting under open skies during a deadly pandemic is attributed to the magical unity and solidarity within the protest. It threatened the food, income, and land and it

threatened to unravel all the dreams and aspirations that had been knitted for generations that brought people together and made them fight till they won.

Discussion of Evidence from Interviews and Trolley Times

After reading stories from Trolley Times and analyzing interview data, I understood that for farmers, it was a question of life or death because their livelihoods and lands were at stake. Sadly, the ruling BJP tried to malign the image of protest and projected farmers' protest as it was against the people of India (Georgekutty and Varghese, 2024, p.211). Farmers were fighting for all. There was a deep-seated anxiety in the minds of farmers that they would lose their livelihoods, and this anxiety was there because the government never gave farmers of India their dues. Farmers of India still remember what British rule did to Indian farming for their gains, so they stood against farm laws to protect themselves from exploitation. While reading stories from Trolley Times, I realized that farmers were afraid of losing a traditional support system from the government as new laws were abolishing traditional agricultural markets. The conventional support system from the government includes financial assistance, crop insurance, subsidies, and mainly MSP (minimum support price). The likelihood of following new procedures to sell their produce, which, too, went to private houses, created a sense of threat in farmers' minds. Their fear was justified because it was public knowledge that capitalist Adani was buying storage facilities in Punjab. The fear that big corporations of Ambani and Adani will control prices in agriculture markets resonates with previous experiences of people where the BJP failed them. For example, when Navkiran recalls how policies like demonetization and GST had no positive impacts but crushed small-scale businesses, for general people, farm bills were

expected to do the same with the agriculture sector. The government of India attacked the interests of Indian citizens through various policies from time to time that maligned the democratic structure of India. Social movements can lead to the deepening of a democracy (della Porta, 2005) and the farmers' movement played a critical role in defending democracy in India.

The Trolley Times claims through multiple articles written by protestors that farm bills are a joint conspiracy of the central government and corporate houses and as everyone knows this fact, people came together to fight; stories of an eighty-year-old woman who died of a heart attack and a 108-year-old man who came alone to protest against the wishes of his family explain the resilience of people who are ready to go to any extent to mark their presence in the protest against the farm laws and ready to fight till their last breath to safeguard their future. Navkiran's insights on the connection between agricultural policy and inflation explain how these laws had an impact beyond the farming community.

An analysis of the Trolley Times demonstrates that small and marginal farmers of India had the highest stake in this protest because they would have no option to sell their crops. After all, big business tycoons would not entertain small landholders and there would be no support from the government in the form of any financial aid or MSP. So, such small farmers would be exploited the most. In such times when the BJP government was actively looking forward to turning any government-run institution into big business tycoons, it became evident to people that now the BJP was trying its hand at the agriculture sector, and farm laws were a strong step towards it. I find economic motivations like fear of losing lands, livelihoods, inflation, and perceptions of threats like fear of corporate control over agriculture and losing conventional systems

of support like MSP and subsidies mobilized farmers. In the next chapter, I will demonstrate how a collective identity was formed in the farmers' movement.

CHAPTER 3

CULTIVATING A COLLECTIVE IDENTITY IN THE FARMERS' MOVEMENT

In a country like India, where the meaning of citizenship is different for different sections of society because the mechanisms of exclusionary inclusion operate within all spheres of life causing an unequal experience of citizenship (Behl, 2019, p.23), the farmers of India faced the same exclusionary inclusion as they have been included in the political systems but excluded from participation in processes of decision making. Farmers were denied their right to democratic participation as farm laws were passed without consulting farmer unions. Against these arbitrary laws, the farmers' movement epitomized how a collective identity can be constructed despite hierarchies of gender, caste, language, religion, region, and complex internal structures of a movement. The Indian farmers' protest of 2020–2021, produced unexpected contrasts, alliances in farmers' unions, and intersectional solidarities against a common foe (Kalra, 2024, p.162). Although solidarity is the central axis of collective action, it is quite hard to achieve (Einwohner, 2021, p.704). The farmers' movement is an example of how marginal sections of society can fight systematic exclusion by forging a collective action. The agriculture sector makes up over half of India's total population (Sandhu, 2021), so over half of India's population was enraged by farm laws. The lack of consultation with a section of the population that constitutes half of India's workforce highlights a critical flaw in the democratic structure of modern India. For over a year, around 300,000 protestors gathered on the borders of Delhi at the Singhu, Tikri, and Ghazipur (Sandhu, 2021). It is interesting to analyze how so many people in addition to farmers like women, doctors, social activists, journalists, students, urban, and rural youth, and diaspora came forward in solidarity with farmers of India against farm laws.

The ruling party claimed farm laws as agricultural reforms, but the opposition political parties and farmers considered farm laws as ‘death warrants’ for the farmers (Anand & Sharma, 2021, p.130). So, farm laws posed a serious threat to India's farming community, leading to strong protests across India. People from different religions, castes, regions, and occupations joined this movement. The religious minorities in India enjoy equal status, yet they lack the political strength to challenge Hindu domination (Behl, 2019, p.38). However, in the farmers’ movement minorities and majority populations came together to fight back draconian farm laws. The government of India tried every possible policy to crush this movement like curbing civil liberties, shutting down the internet at protest sites, arresting political opponents, academics, and protesters, and spreading misinformation and disinformation on protests through mainstream media (Chakrabarti, 2022, p.3). Amid brutal state oppression, farmers stayed at Delhi borders for more than a year in a non-violent protest and fought for their lands.

The farmers’ movement of 2020 has witnessed some significant democratic values within the protest movement. When the BJP was dividing a secular nation based on religion and caste, the farmers’ movement brought people from every religion and caste together in a collective fight. Although most protestors were Sikhs but Hindus, Muslims, Christians, and Buddhists from different states joined the movement (Mander, 2021. As this movement received wide media coverage at national and international levels, it got huge support from civil society and women across India (Chakrabarty, 2022, p.5). This movement was a fight of every farmer and agricultural laborer from every caste, religion, and community who asserted their constitutional

right to protest to protect their livelihood, which was threatened by the new farm laws (Mohanty, 2021, p.7).

Mainstream media tried every bit to malign the image of protest by spreading misinformation about the aspirations of protesters. When more and more people started coming into solidarity with farmers, then state-sponsored media began spreading a false narrative against the protesters. Many big news houses claimed that farmers are brainwashed and misled while flashing headlines like ‘Khalistan in Protest’ (Priyadarshani, 2020). Khalistan is a separatist group of Sikhs seeking to establish a separate nation for Sikhs (Singh, 2016, p.192). Mainstream media tried to spread disinformation that the farmers’ movement was a movement of Punjab and that supporters of Khalistan were involved in it. In the incident of 26th January, when some protesters hoisted a Kesari flag- a Sikh flag at Red Fort, mainstream media used that opportunity to defame the whole protest. To some extent, the media successfully created a split among protesters by spreading false claims that farmers took down the Indian flag and replaced it with a Khalistan flag after January 26, farmers from Haryana started leaving protest sites as they felt cheated, but they came back to the movement within next day after an emotional address by farmer leader Rajesh Tikait that went viral. This incident of an emotional appeal from a farmer leader highlights the power of union leaders in motivating protesters. Navkiran explained the incident of January 26 as a turning point for the movement “Whatever happened on 26th of January at Red Fort, after that suddenly it looked as if the protest will be over. I remember from the 27th of January, as we were stationed at Tikri, and at Tikri many farmers from Haryana were stationed suddenly on the night of the 26th because the whole state-sponsored media started spreading a narrative that this protest was of only Khalistanis

and finally their real face is clear now. Even the public and Farmers of Haryana felt like Punjab's farmers cheated on them by hoisting Kesri flag. They felt like it was not fair to hoist the flag as they were not protesting for this, so they started going back on the night of 26th January." Navkiran recalled that "the police were waiting to arrest Rajesh Tikait, a farmer leader from Uttar Pradesh who was addressing farmers, everyone was looking at the protest, there was so much uncertainty in Singhu and Tikri, so many cameras were covering him live while addressing during an emotional conversation, he started crying on stage and his speech went viral on social media, it moved people especially from western UP and Haryana, typically Jaat belt. I guess Tikait himself comes from Jaat family and I don't know if Jaat pride or masculinity got hurt that day. People started coming back and by the morning of the 28th, there was a rush of people again." However, the BJP used the incident of January 26 to suppress the protest, arrested many youths and farmer union leaders, and pressed criminal charges against many journalists as well who were covering that incident (Human Rights Watch, 2021). The brutal suppression of a peaceful protest by the BJP unveiled their intention to crush the right of peaceful protest guaranteed by the constitution to Indian citizens.

Interestingly, the more the ruling party suppressed the protest, the more people joined the movement, and they endured brutal state oppression with unity while fighting for what they deserved. This struggle displayed that in the fight for justice, all conventional differences can be put aside, and collectivity can be formed. This movement owes its success to the collective identity forged in a setup with vast differences, and the conscious efforts of farmers, farmer unions, protestors, and the Trolley Times formed this collective identity. A sense of collective motivation inspired people to fight till farm laws were repealed, and this collective identity was formed by

multiple factors discussed in the following paragraphs, including motivation by farmers' unions, the non-violent nature of the movement, a common goal, and the unique internal structure of the movement.

Role of Farmers' Unions

The first and foremost factor that played a huge role in bringing people together in the farmers' movement was the various farmers' unions that came forward to lead people to a common goal of getting farm laws repealed. "These farmer unions, which have been largely secular and socialist, have helped forge new solidarities across religion, class, and caste, and these solidarities have deepened during the protests, with farmers and laborers living, eating, and organizing together (Behl, 2022, p.1144)." An article from the first edition of Trolley Times elaborates on how a movement initiated by a few farmers' organizations turned into a big people's protest (Udoke, 2020, p.1).

Dr. Udoke wrote:

After the central government passed the anti-farming bills, the protest started by the farm unions to get what is rightfully theirs has become an intractable, ubiquitous people's movement. Perhaps, in current times, the people's astuteness in determinedly remaining peaceful has overwhelmed the decision-makers of the central government, and generally, this is a good sign.

Udoke argues that the non-violent nature of the farmers' movement made this protest special, and the fact that there were no conflicts within the protest was a shock for the government of India. Before the farmers' movement, India witnessed another nonviolent movement at Shaheen Bagh, where Muslim women protested laws aiming at the systematic marginalization of Muslims in India and, in some cases, even stripping them of their Indian citizenship (Bhatia & Gajjala, 2020, p.2). A conscious choice to remain peaceful while protesting in modern times became a challenge for the central

government because they failed to find loopholes to attack peaceful gatherings. Interestingly, the peaceful nature of these movements made it popular globally and gained solidarity from the diaspora. While discussing the non-violent nature of the protest, Navkiran reflected on the democratic structure of decision-making by farmer unions to avoid any kind of conflict within the protest. She also shared that conflict was kept within the confines of the union meeting and then whatever was decided by the majority prevailed. So, the deliberate effort to decide every step by following democratic orders made the farmers' movement peaceful.

Role of Trolley Times

Trolley Times emerged as a tool that aimed to challenge false narratives against farmers and the movement in the mainstream media and bridged communication gaps between protestors and supporters of the movement, inside and outside protest camps (Titzmann, 2022, p.2). When mainstream media was busy defaming the protest, Trolley Times emerged as a medium of internal communication that kept protestors informed and motivated toward their goal of repealing new farm laws.

In the first edition of Trolley Times, the first article published with the title “We shall Fight, We shall Win” written by Sudarshan Natt, the author is warning his fellow protestors about the BJP’s intentions to malign the image of protest and looking out for an opportunity to attack the protest (Natt, 2020, p.1). He writes:

They are embedding instigating agents amongst the farmers or inciting conflict among farmers to find opportunities to justify an inhumane attack on them. My farmer brothers stay united and beware of any provocations. Coexist with the local people with love and cooperation. Beware of every mischief and trouble-making element, useless boast or goading ideas, or speeches and slogans that divide. Forget the Modi government; not even the tyrannical British government

could end our united, disciplined, peaceful protest. Even now, they are testing our peace, patience, and discipline. So, end provocations and attempts to divide with patience and vigilance and stay committed to the providential slogan - “We shall fight - We shall win.”

Natt explained the power of unity when state mechanisms were working against the protest. Farmers knew that the government was trying to create an opportunity by provoking the farmers to turn violent so that the government could retaliate brutally. He promoted living with coexistence to form broader solidarity. Coexistence was reflected within protest camps by running schools, providing food, and setting up libraries not only for the protesting farmers but poor who live in shanty towns on the outskirts of Delhi. Natt reminded protestors that they overcame colonial oppression before independence from the British. This example of historical resistance added more depth to the call for solidarity for joining the movement and protesting in a united and peaceful manner. Farmers opposed multiple British laws aimed at seizing their lands, revenue on land, and waters before independence (Kaur & Saratchand, 2023, p.300). So, the leaders of farmer unions and speakers in protest spoke about it openly to guide protestors to stay calm and patient. Many articles written by protestors were published in Trolley Times to give the right direction to youth and motivate them to stay united and nonviolent. Youths were asked to stay disciplined and patient in protest camps.

When I asked Navkiran if the idea of ‘nonviolence’ was deliberately incorporated within the protest, she replied:

“Yes, it was a conscious choice because when you are protesting and fighting against a government that celebrates killings and they have all the state equipment, but you are just protestors at the end of the day, so there can be no fight with the state at that level. So, at that point, nonviolence was the best policy; in a way, it was a political answer to the politics of BJP.”

Being a nonviolent movement, it became quite hard for the government to crush this movement, and she rightly points out that it would be foolish to challenge the BJP, which could use its power and state apparatus against the protestors to malign the image of the farmers' movement then to crush it ultimately. So, Trolley Times motivated its readers to stay strong and united through its content. However, Indian mainstream media openly spoke the language of the state and big corporations while creating a false narrative against the farmers' movement. (Anand & Sharma, 2021, p.130). The media tried in every possible way to create a false narrative about who was protesting. The unity and discipline within protest camps motivated all the supporters to remain alert about the conspiracies of the ruling party.

Common Aspirations

The common goal of farmers' agitation to repeal new farm laws motivated protestors to stay united despite significant differences in India, like religion, caste, gender, and class. As faith plays a pivotal role in a collective struggle (Rogers, 2023), religious symbolism and faith in each other made the farmers' movement nonviolent and long-lasting. The story of two farmers from Trolley Times is a strong example of how farmers decided to take back their lawsuits against each other and decided to only fight against new farm bills (Tanveer, 2020, p.2). Tanveer writes:

My neighboring village is Bappiana, District Mansa. Two farmers from there have gone to Delhi. To sit in. Their fields share a boundary. One of them has a chicken farm. They are rivals and are not on speaking terms. One of them has sued the other one. The one who sued says to the other - "here, brother, drink cha". He sits near him. After a while of silence, he says - "Brother, first, when I get back, I'm going to take back my lawsuit against you, my friend! Delhi has lost. Both have won the lawsuit."

This story highlighted how farmers put aside their rivalries and shifted their priorities to challenging bigger issues. Offering tea to other farmers and deciding to take back lawsuits explains the newfound understanding within protest to fight with unity and to ignore personal issues in such hard times. This kind of unity among farmers suing each other in the court of law highlights their understanding of the value of the present struggle where they are putting aside their issues to fight against the rulers of the country sitting in Delhi.

When I asked my research participant, Navkiran, about what motivated her to join and stay in protest for more than a year, she replied,

“As a student and citizen of this country, it was my fundamental responsibility to join the farmers’ movement.”

Her statement shows that people understood their responsibility to oppose oppressive state policies attacking their livelihoods and lands. When asked about mainstream media’s reporting on this movement, Navkiran elaborated on state-sponsored media as mainstream media in India and how mainstream media defamed the farmers’ movement. She expressed:

“The corporate-funded media was trying to enforce state narratives like propagating narratives about Khalistan or saying that old women joined protests for money.

Such derogatory remarks about old women created more outrage in the minds of people, especially women of India, and they became more determined to join the movement. The statement of the chief justice of India, where he asked women and aged protestors to leave the protest sites, started a debate on women’s role in farming because women work equally to men in farming. In the seventh edition of Trolley Times, an article

published with the title “Women Fighting Against Black Laws and Traditions” written by Surmeet Mavi and Sangeet Toor explained how a shallow remark by the top justice of India made women of India more determined to participate in the farmers’ movement. They wrote:

“On the one hand, the Samyukta Kisan Morcha decided to celebrate January 18, 2021, as Women Farmers' Day; on the other hand, Chief Justice of India Sharad Arvind Bobde remarked, "Why have women and the elderly been kept in the movement?" to be a thing. Such comments reflect the anti-women mindset of those in power and their supporters. The farmers' agitation of 2020-21 is a befitting reply to such thinking. The participation of a large number of women and their emergence in the role of farmer leaders scares the rulers.”

Such statements boosted the participation of women in the movement, and it was also a shock to hear such a stance from the chief judicial officer of India.

Navkiran explained that because there is a clear demarcation based on gender in South Asian societies, separate trolleys, tents, and restrooms for women made them more comfortable in protest. Many farmer unions actively motivated women from their villages to join protests. Navkiran explained that when the media started covering women protestors, more females joined the protest because there were no conflicts within camps, so they felt safe and secure. She explained:

Some trolleys were marked as some for women and some for men, and in those trolleys, a large number of women used to come, so it visibly made women more comfortable, especially those women who never stepped out of their homes.

So, such internal structures made women comfortable to join protests, and women leaders like Harinder Kaur Bindu, Jasbir Kaur Natt, and Paramjit Kaur Longowal inspired women to join this struggle. Protest sites became a platform to discuss gender equality because men and women had to live nearby (Chakrabarty, 2022, p.6), making

the farmers' movement gender inclusive. "These women leaders made fiery speeches against the Modi government's completely apathetic attitude towards women in protest (Chakrabarty, 2022, p.7)." So, women were actively engaged in activities within the protest, and their role was a lot more than mere cooking and cleaning. It was a good chance for Indian society to see women as equals.

An interview with Harinder Kaur Bindu, a state leader of a farmers' union Bhartiya Kisan Union Ugrahan conducted by Sangeet Toor (2020, p.1) was published in the third edition of Trolley Times. Bindu elaborated on her fight for the rights of the laborers and farmers for the last 30 years. She stated:

"Months before the farm bills were passed, the Ugrahan union had already begun organizing meetings and committees, especially for women in villages, blocks, and districts. The block committees went from village to village to set up new units and to conduct training sessions for families so that the men would take up domestic duties when the women were away to participate in meetings. The women were trained according to their interests and confidence. The women were assigned responsibilities on par with the men. The male union leaders were encouraged to include the women in their families to set an example for other union members to involve their families."

There were conscious efforts by unions to increase the participation of women in the movement even before the farm laws were passed explaining the anticipation of farming community of upcoming dangers. Such preparations contributed to the participation of women in the movement and normalized the presence of women on an equal front with men.

In our conversation about how solidarity was formed across caste and class differences between landowners and laborers, Navkiran expressed her observations:

I think it is because many saw this movement as a political movement in addition to a farmers' issues movement. People saw it as a blockade in front of the BJP, and due to this, everyone came into solidarity, including Dalits, farm

laborers, the landless class, small farmers, businessmen, and commission agents. So, everyone came to support this protest. People were motivated because they understood the broader political importance of this movement, and people started feeling that if farming was attacked, not only farmers would be affected, but everyone would be adversely affected by it. That will lead to inflation, and it will affect every household, so people across the spectrum participated, and somewhere from that understanding, broader solidarity was formed.

People understood the broader implications of farm laws; many feared losing their lands, some feared losing livelihoods and employment opportunities, and many feared the hike in the prices of food items. This collective sense of threat created solidarity among various sections of Indian society. “This solidarity has been evident in one of the movement’s slogans: ‘Long Live Farmer-Laborer Unity’ (Kisan-Mazdoor Ekta Zindabad) (Behl, 2022, p.1144).” It was in the air at protest camps that created a strong collective; even those who had nothing to do with farming joined the farmers' movement because everyone knew that these laws were a huge blow to the livelihoods of those growing food for all.

In the fourth edition of Trolley Times, an article titled ‘The Farmer is also a worker’ written by Jaspreet Kaur was published and she elaborated on laborers and farmers from Bihar. She writes:

Mehar Singh said, “I am a laborer and a farmer too. I come daily with my wife and my children to do service in the free kitchen.” Singh, from Bihar, continued: “What farmer brothers are saying, it is in the interest of everybody, nobody can understand this thing more than me. It is important that the people of the city should understand these bills and their consequences, otherwise, we will never be able to free ourselves from the fraud of this thief government. (Kaur, 2020, p.4)”

The laborers understood the aspirations of farmers and they knew that farmers were protesting to save the interests of everyone linked to agriculture, so they came in solidarity with farmers.

Navkiran explained that there were no separate Dalit spaces in the protest camps, but everyone lived together. However, she also clarified that although Dalits were living with all in camps, the farmers' protest was a dominant caste protest of 'Jats and Jaats' because most of the farmers in India are from these two castes. She added that because Dalits of India mainly work as laborers, their participation in the protest was symbolic, and Dalits' demands were never incorporated into this protest. Dalits' rights over natural resources are one of the most complex issues in India even today (Momen & Shahen, 2024, p.118), so their limited participation in the farmers' movement is understandable because 60% of Dalit households do not own agricultural land in India (Gokhale, 2019). However, people from all castes and religions cohabited peacefully in protest camps. They used to cook and eat together without any barriers and shared common living spaces, and through such collective ways of living in protest camps, they broke purity and pollution rules within protest camps. It was quite a unique phenomenon in a country where caste discrimination is a huge issue to date.

Internal Structures and Mechanisms of Movement that Created a Collective Identity

When Navkiran was asked about the internal structures and mechanisms of protest that were conscious efforts to make it more gender, religion, caste, and class inclusive and to promote a collective identity, she explained how deliberate efforts were made to ensure the participation and involvement of every section of society in the

protest, ensuring that they were being heard and taken care of in the protest camps. For some days, all the responsibilities of stage proceedings were given to Dalit landless laborers, and some days, women were taking care of everything. She stated:

“One day was celebrated for religious minorities, and on that day, people from Muslim Manch of Punjab and many other representatives of other minorities visited that day. Then, one day, small traders came there, and this way, different communities that were in solidarity with farmers’ protests were given space in protest camps. Ambedkar Day was celebrated there, and Dalit leaders were invited. To portray the prevalence of unity among protestors, all the sections of society were given their due space within the protest.”

So, tactics like celebrating Women’s Day, religious minorities day, and Ambedkar Day were conscious attempts to include all sections of society within the movement. She highlighted the democratic structure of the decision-making process within protest camps and deliberate efforts to give space to everyone in the protest. Ideas like running a people’s parliament and including everyone in its proceedings convey a message in the public domain that everyone has equal status within the protest.

Finally, cultural and religious practices also united people and motivated them to fight collectively. Within protest camps, the practice of ‘Langar’ from Sikhism, through communal kitchens, fed hundreds of thousands of people protesting, regardless of their religion, class, caste, or gender (Behl, 2022, p.1143).” As everyone was eating meals from the communal kitchens, grounded in the Sikh principle of serving humanity, helped to build solidarity among supporters (Narasimhaiah, 2021, p.519). The idea of providing mutual aid was highly prevalent in the movement as the everyday needs of every protest were being met through the community they built together. For example, villages from Punjab and Haryana were sending essential supplies to the protest camps, blankets were collected through social media drives, libraries were set up, doctors came

forward to treat people, and protestors themselves were patrolling to provide security to participants of the protest (Narula, 2022, p.145).

As protestors were eating together, reading Trolley Times to each other, discussing strategies, and facing state oppression collectively, all this created a collective identity within the protest. ‘It is a Festival’ a poem written by famous Punjabi author ‘Surjit Patar’ was published in the first edition of Trolley Times where he compared the protest to a festival (Patar, 2020, p.4), and he wrote a beautiful line referring crowds of protestors to a collective:

“No, this is not a crowd, it is a kind of Sangat, a collective of souls.”

He connects protest to the notion of secularism. He portrays the unity of protestors in the form of a ‘Sangat,’ which is a religious term in Sikhism that denotes fellowship, where everyone is equal irrespective of caste or religion because, in the Indian understanding of secularism, there is no separation of state and religion but tolerance and acceptance of all religions (Titzmann, 2022, p.12).

In the fifth edition of Trolley Times, an article titled ‘Our Unity’ by Gul Panag was published, and she beautifully elaborated on how farmers fight on a united front.

“Unity and patience are like grace and shield for us in the war of struggle. And we have shown everyone how strong our unity is. Then, whether it is the unity of our heroes of Haryana and Punjab, who are engaged in this fight shoulder to shoulder, or the unity of people of every state, religion, and caste, who have spent nights together in this cold, those who used to try to break our courage and unity have lost today because none of their tricks have been successful. The world has seen how we have the courage to conquer every front. The opportunity to participate in the struggle comes with great fortune. If we have this opportunity today, it is our biggest duty never to forget the lessons learned

from here and to create a new Punjab based on the lessons of unity and patience.” (Panag, 2021, p.3)

She highlighted the spirit of the protestors and reminded everyone that being a part of such struggles is of great significance in a lifetime, and patience and unity are two guiding principles to fight for victory. She further pointed out a possible future where unity and cooperation can create a new Punjab for a more inclusive society. This idea of a new Punjab symbolized that struggles are not merely for survival but for a better society and safe future.

In the third edition of Trolley Times an article published written by a protesting woman named Mamta Jakhad, she elaborates on what she witnessed in this movement:

As soon as I heard about the farmers’ protest movement, I wanted to be part of it. On reaching here with my two daughters and husband, I felt a surge of pride for the spirit displayed at the protest and the people’s anger towards Modi. One hardly ever gets to see the feelings that are evident here: the love, the brotherhood, of being part of a single big family. The socialist India that we have always dreamed about -- I can see it here.

The feeling of a collective fight against Modi brought people together under one front. India which was becoming more and more intolerant, it was a sigh of relief to witness such unity for any Indian dreaming of a socialist India.

The stories from Trolley Times and my interactions with Navkiran Natt explain that a collective fear of losing lands and livelihoods brought people together to fight against the government of India. However, it was not easy to maintain unity in a huge protest. The regional diversity of protestors made people understand that everyone feared new farm laws, and they decided to struggle collectively. While discussing regional disparities Navkiran explained that farmers were demanding MSP but in states like Uttar Pradesh where MSP was abolished in the 1990s and younger farmers knew

nothing about MSP, conscious efforts were made to make them understand these terms like addressing from stages and articles in Trolley Times explaining the same.

Navkiran explained that they decided to publish a bilingual newspaper to cater to the audience with regional diversity so that people could sit together and read it to each other. Initially, the Trolley Times was published in Punjabi and Hindi. Navkiran added that later, she learned that some editions of Trolley Times were published in other regional languages of India like Bengali, Marathi, Malayalam, and English. So, farmers from different regions read Trolley Times and understood the collective threat they were fighting against. And when mainstream media started spewing venom against the movement, and farmers were watching their fellow protestors dying in struggle, it instilled a spirit to fight to the death in protestors. Farmer organizations that were active for many decades brought farmers across India to fight against farm laws. Navkiran rightly stated that farmers' organizations were the backbone of this movement.

Trolley Times bridged gaps and created a sense of belongingness in protest through real stories of protestors. As Navkiran stated, the presence of Dalits was not the same as that of dominant castes, it points to the fact that India's social hierarchies don't entirely disappear in protests either, even if caste barriers around eating and living together are disrupted. However, Dalits participated in the protest, reminding me that the road to equality for Dalits in India is never-ending. She also described the participation of women as quite low compared to men because women of India are still engaged in invisible labor in agricultural farms. The presence of women was low to men but in comparison to past protests, it was huge. Many women whose spouses have died by suicide due to debts joined the movement, in addition to this, the inability of

female farmers to access subsidies, insurance, and loans has driven women to join the protest in large numbers and demand wider reforms (Nabourema, 2021). I realized that the presence of women and Dalits was a unique feature of this movement as their participation remarkably increased the visibility of this movement. Navkiran stated that one could not expect idealism in such a big movement because whatever was happening in the outside world, all of that was happening inside as well. So, the movement faced complex challenges around social stratification in Indian society but emerged as a challenge to the BJP that passed farm laws bypassing democratic procedure. What stood out to me is that when mainstream media was hunting for news to defame the movement, they failed to catch any sensational story that could say something about internal disturbance or discrimination in the protest. Something unique about the farmers' movement's internal structures and mechanisms was that it made people think as a large group and not for individual motives and this happened because serious efforts were made to increase intersectional solidarities within the movement by encouraging active participation of every section of society by farmer unions. In the next chapter, I will trace the struggles of farmers in India from the times when India was a British colony to the modern times of BJP rule.

CHAPTER 4

CONTINUITY OF STRUGGLES: HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF THE FARMERS' MOVEMENT

Social movements like the farmers' movement in India are not a product of modernity, many such social movements occurred throughout history. In the fifteenth century, the German Peasants Revolt emerged as a historical example of a social movement that emerged over decades of popular contention, eventually culminating in the mass mobilization of 1524 and 1525 (Ebbinghaus, 2024, p.1159). “Just as the months-long George Floyd uprising in 2020 built on Black Lives Matter protests since 2012, the German Peasants' Revolt emerged out of sustained movement mobilization (Ebbinghaus, 2024, p.1164).” It was similar in the case of the farmers' movement of 2020-21. While analyzing the farmers' movement and understanding that there was a sense of collective and a threat that mobilized a huge number of farmers, I realized that to understand the farmers' movement, it is crucial to analyze the roots of this struggle.

Although there was an immediate threat and economic motivations of farmers that led to this protest, this movement can be traced back to the colonial period and independent India when farmers of India were facing different challenges like British policies of exorbitant taxes that undermined the autonomy of farmers, financial challenges posed by Green Revolution and neoliberal policies that forced many farmers to sell their lands. The movement of 2020-21 is not the first time farmers in India have come to the streets to protest farm laws; there have been various such incidents in history when farmers challenged oppressors. Before the independence of India, the

British used to forcefully collect food grains from farmers as a method of revenue collection under the colonial system (Shiva, 2016, p.5). The British tried to seize the lands and waters of farmers (Kaur & Saratchand, 2023, p.300), and farmers protested it. Then, on multiple occasions, the farmers of colonized India protested excessive amounts of land and water revenues by the Britishers. Sadly, to date, farmers of democratic India are struggling to save their lands and livelihoods from the so-called democratic government.

After the independence of India in 1947, farmers' unions became active but remained divided due to religious, caste, and class barriers. Rich farmers from dominant castes used to lead and control farmers' unions and organizations. Then to tackle the scarcity of food grains, the Green Revolution introduced in India with expensive seeds and fertilizers to increase yields. However, the Green Revolution became a curse for small and marginal farmers of India as expensive technologies introduced by this revolution were too expensive for small farmers (Narula, 2022, p.102). In the 21st century, farmers led many protests due to alarming rates of suicides by farmers, increasing debts, and corporate takeover of agriculture. The historical struggles of farmers helped them to anticipate the consequences of new farm bills so, in 2020, a huge movement arose against the new farm laws aiming to privatize agriculture and threaten the livelihoods of farmers in India. This movement was an outburst of past anti-farming policies and the most recent example of the resilience of the agricultural community. Farmers' resistance is explained in the following paragraphs, from British rule to modern times against new farm bills.

British Rule and Farmers of India

The British replaced traditional agriculture with commercial agriculture between 1850-1947, and this period shattered the agrarian community of India (Venkateswarlu, 2021, p.43). Under British rule, in 1907, India witnessed a protest in Punjab named “Pagdi Sambhal Jatta” (Save Your Turban) against three laws introduced by the colonial government targeting the lands and waters of Punjab; it lasted for eleven months, and subsequently British withdrew these laws (Kaur & Saratchand, 2023, p.300). This movement had a complete absence of communal divide; Sikhs, Hindus, and Muslims joined it to protect their self-respect (Mukherjee, 2021, p.6). This protest is an example of the collective resistance of farmers under British rule, who protested for eleven months to protect their lands and waters. Not only men but women also participated in such struggles. Women like Sarojini Naidu and Kamala Nehru provided crucial leadership, walked alongside Mahatma Gandhi in the historic Salt March, and actively picketed salt works and shops, disrupting the British salt monopoly and symbolizing resistance (Gupta, 2016). Then, from 1931 to 1935, farmers in India led a movement for a reduction in land revenue and water tax against the British (Kaur & Saratchand, 2023, p.300). Farmers asked for immediate reductions of at least 50% in every type of tax and irrespective of political affiliations, everyone joined this movement (Mukherjee, 2021, p.13). In 1943, 3.5 million Indians starved to death in the Bengal famine, but the British continued to stockpile Indian grains to feed their troops during World War II at the cost of the lives of Indians (Shiva, 2016, p.5). Those growing food were starving in British India, and the British Empire was preserving food grains for their war needs.

Another notable movement, the Telangana Peoples’ Struggle or Telangana Peasants Struggle, was an anti-feudal and anti-caste movement against the Nizam of

Hyderabad, and later that of Independent India. This movement was led by numerous women leaders advocating for socio-political reforms like caste justice, labor protection, and women's freedom. The armed movement lasted from 1946-1951 and was one of the first major labor uprisings following India's Independence in 1947 (Mangat, 2020). Many Indian women struggled for labor rights, caste reforms, and gender equality.

Farming in Independent India

After India's independence from the British, farmers, like every other citizen of India, dreamt of a better India with better employment opportunities and equality. There were protests by small and marginal farmers against exploitation by middlemen, and the government of India ended the role of middlemen (Veerasha, 2016, p.143), which was the first land reform of independent India. It is important to change land ownership patterns for the equal growth of a nation (Veerasha, 2016. p.141), but in India, Dalits were seldom given ownership rights over lands by land reforms. This disparity in granting lands only to upper castes is the root cause of many issues within farming. Sadly, most post-independence land reforms favored big farmers with large lands, and landless Dalits were kept deprived (Kaushal, 2015, p.50). The socio-economic disparities increased in those times, and Dalit farmers had no voice. Only the upper caste or dominant caste people were chosen as Leaders to lead the farmer's organizations and landless farmers were given no importance. Landowning farmers, mainly from dominant castes used to oppress landless laborers who used to be mostly Dalits (Behl, 2022, p.1144). To date, Dalits work in fields of dominant castes as bonded laborers in India. There were huge rivalries between farmers' organizations because dominant caste organizations asserted themselves as superior to others, resulting in

organizational clashes (Singh, n.d.). Due to such clashes, farmer organizations could not become an attractive group of voters because farmer organizations used to represent only a small section of farmers, so they were ignored by the politicians as they were of no good to them (Singh, n.d.).

The most substantive documentation of women's role in Indian peasant struggles occurred after the launch of three major communist struggles, namely the Telangana Armed Struggle (1946–1951), the Tebhaga Movement (1945–1948) in Bengal, and the Warli struggle (1945–1952) in Maharashtra of Western India (Prasad, 2021, p.24). The Telangana and Warli struggles were against slavery, forced labor, and landlordism, the Tebhaga movement focused on the rights of sharecroppers and cultivators and women were active participators in these movements because these issues impacted many women agrarian workers, particularly from the poorest Adivasi and Dalit sections (Prasad, 2021, p.24).

Green Revolution

Further policies like the Green Revolution introduced modern mechanisms in agriculture, which benefited the landowning class, and the farmers' organizations led by wealthy farmers also appealed to small farmers to join the Green Revolution (Kannuri & Jadhav, 2021, p.558). This modern technology was way too expensive for small and marginal farmers, so they began to lose their lands to large farmers, and after some time, small farmers turned into landless laborers (Narula, 2022, p.102). Only wealthy and dominant caste farmers led farmers' organizations, so they were not concerned about small farmers' difficulties. In the long run, the Green Revolution only gave increased yields but at a quite high cost to the farming community of India.

Farmers were in extreme distress then, but there was no unity. Caste was a huge factor that caused fragmentation among farmers. A large-scale farmers' movement in the 1970s and 1980s demanded better employment opportunities. Still, it couldn't do much because of strained relationships between the farmers' organizations (Singh, n.d.). Back then, there was a lack of unity among farmer leaders in fighting under a common front for their demands. In those times, farmers' organizations failed to collaborate, and the major factors that came into play were caste, class, and different ideologies of different organizations (Singh, n.d.). Farmers protested in the 1980s but failed to integrate as a single front, and political powers were not afraid of fragmented protests. Although the green revolution was presented as a wonder that would lead to prosperity, it created new forms of economic and ecological issues (Shiva, 2015, p.20). A large number of small and marginal farmers faced a financial crisis as they could not afford expensive seeds and fertilizers introduced by the green revolution. It created chaos in the agriculture sector, and no one was ready to take responsibility for this huge failure (Shiva, 2015, p.23). Farmers bore its losses and are still struggling to gain stability.

Neoliberal Reforms

After that, in the 1990s, neoliberal reforms were introduced in India to push the economy, and it was a major economic shift from a socialist to a capitalist approach to growth. Still, in the agrarian sector, these reforms created a huge crisis. Although the neoliberal reforms boosted India's economic growth, this growth was unequal in different sectors as the government of India withdrew its support from key factors, including agriculture like reductions in granting subsidies on fertilizers, electricity, and irrigation (Narula, 2022, p.105). Without subsidies, many farmers failed to bear the expenses of cultivation. These reforms caused a huge decline in the average of

agricultural land in India and most of the small farmers were left with no land (Fadaee, 2022, p.36). It created huge income disparities in India, making the rich richer and the poor poorer. It was assumed that opening international trade would boost the agriculture sector due to surplus production in India. Still, it turned out to be a disaster for the agrarian sector of India, leading to an agricultural crisis (Shakeel et al., 2023, p.3). Neoliberal policies decreased public sector investments in agriculture, and after that, every government tried to introduce more and more corporate investment in agriculture (Jha, 2024, p.48). As the role of government decreased in agriculture, it harmed this sector because private companies intended only to earn profits. These novel policies caused alarming suicide rates in small farmers because they failed to compete with modern technologies and expensive seeds introduced by these new policies without the support of the government. It increased debts on farmers, and in this vicious circle, many farmers lost their lands to rich farmers.

It was a struggle for farmers to present their genuine demands to the ruling parties and fight for their rights because farmers' organizations were divided. Only after 2017 did farmers' unions start collaborating (Singh, n.d.), and this joint coalition contributed to the optimal organization of the farmers' movement in 2020. The lifelong hard work of farmer leaders under their unions helped mobilize protestors on such a large scale.

Historical Connections within Protest Camps

Navkiran explained, "Sometimes people start believing that this huge protest emerged suddenly for a recent issue, but when you are part of a political organization, then you know that such a level of protest does not appear overnight; it takes hard work

over many years.” Although the farmers’ movement of 2020-21 garnered unprecedented media attention, this resentment of farmers is decades old. This movement’s leaders made conscious efforts to build a connection with the history of the struggles of their ancestors against rulers. The struggles of farmers, freedom fighters, and sacrifices in Sikhism were also elaborated within protest camps to make youth aware of the historical fights against injustice.

While elaborating on publishing a newspaper, Navkiran said, “We can see trolley times as a unique initiative at the protest site, but it was not for the first time. If we look back into our history, every big historical movement had such initiatives as the publishing of a newspaper or magazine. Many movements, like the Ghadar movement, evolved and used newspapers as the central axis of this movement, and the Kirti movement is another example in this context. It was the same kind of attempt because we come from the same historical background.” Ghadar party was a group of South Asians, predominantly Punjabis, including farmers, laborers, students, and intellectuals with a goal of independent India from the British empire and attaining racial equality abroad. Still, the most interesting part of this party was a newspaper named Ghadar (revolt, rebellion) published in San Francisco. It circulated in many parts of Asia, South and North America, East Africa, and Western Europe (Upadhyay, 2014, p.1). The newspaper Ghadar was the center of the Ghadar movement as it spread ideologies of movement across the globe. The journal ‘Kirti’ published in 1926, was the first organized labor journal in northern South Asia, and it discussed the rights of labor and the working class with audiences from Punjab, the USA, and Russia (Deol, 2023, p.243). Trolley Times did the same for the farmers’ movement of 2020-21. Not only did the founders of Trolley Times take ideas from historical movements to publish a

newspaper to initiate communications within protest sites, but they also used this newspaper as a medium to educate protesters about the condition of the agrarian sector in the 20th century and the struggles of leaders of farmer unions and labor class amid acute crisis in the agriculture sector. Trolley Times may serve as a political resource for future movement building as well.

Navkiran elaborated on the importance of situating this movement in a historical context and explained, “We put forward the importance of history within protest sites. Generally, a newspaper aims to report and update on day-to-day events, but in Trolley Times, we were trying to trace what was happening a hundred years ago, two years ago, and fifty years ago.” It was an effort to ignite spirits to fight back against farm laws, just like Punjabis faced brutality with courage and always raised their voices against oppression. In the second edition of Trolley Times, an article was published titled ‘The Scars of Journeys’ written by Swarajbir:

Punjab was wounded many times on the various journeys it undertook during the last century too. Its feet are pricked from the exile of Ajit Singh (Bhagat Singh’s paternal uncle and one of the leaders of ‘Pagadi Sambhal Jatta’ movement), the hangings of Kartar Singh Sarabha, Harnam Chand (Nahma Fansiwala), and Rehman Ali. The incarceration of other Ghadrists blistered its feet. The bullets fired at innocent and peaceful protesters in Jallianwala Bagh are still lodged in its chest, and the bodies dropping dead and those writhing in pain are fresh in its memories. The contusions from the torture of Akali movement protesters at the hands of rulers are still blue. The memories of the gallows are imbibed in its consciousness where Bhagat Singh, Rajguru, Sukhdev, Udham Singh, and others are hanging, even now. The partition of ‘47 impaled its heart, and the lives lost during the uprising of the 70s doubled its agony. The burns of the 80s tormented its body, and the massacres of ‘84 in Delhi and other cities stabbed its back. The helplessness of parents losing their children to drugs and the woeful misery of families of farmers and laborers who took their own lives broke its spine. The battered body of Punjab appeals to the farmer leaders to stay united and to keep quelling the divisive agendas. Let’s remind ourselves what the wise poet Shamsudeen ‘Shams’ said, “Our differences ruined us, O friend, that’s why we’re in anguish today (2020, p.2).

This article powerfully summarizes the intense history of struggles of Punjab in the last century, like sacrificing their lives for freedom from colonial rule, losing lives during peaceful protests, killings during the partition of India, massacres of 1984 in Delhi when a large number of Sikhs were brutally murdered by state-sponsored violence, and now losing youngsters to drugs and farmers suicides due to debts. Punjab's collective memory as a region is the struggle for justice and to date, this struggle continues. This article appeals to the farmer leaders to stay united to fight against oppressors; only solidarity can help tackle present issues. This article connects every reader to a historical struggle and motivates him/her to stay in protest. It also blends historical struggles excellently with the modern call to action for change.

A story from the twenty-first edition of Trolley Times titled " Struggle for My Land" is a conversation between Ranjit Singh and Gurdeep Singh from protest sites:

Our family was the one who left Pakistan in Santali (1947)—having the entire landed property. From there, we stood up, and our families had not set foot. This is my main point of coming to the protest. If there is talk of taking away the land again, then the matter seems to be to the heart, all that is remembered. Once lost, you can't let anything like this happen again. They want us to not have anything left behind us and no future generations should exist. Now, neither we are cultivators nor doing any business for a living. The reason for that is that our families have not been able to be established yet (2021, p.2).

This conversation is deeply drenched with the impact on the lives of common people of atrocious policies of rulers. The partition of India in 1947 robbed people of their lives, homes, and lands. Those wounds are still unhealed, as many struggle to find a proper livelihood. This fear of losing everything again highlights the trauma of past wounds traveling over generations.

This trauma made people join the farmers' movement so that history could not repeat itself. Navkiran further stated, "I think many people were becoming a part of an

agitation for the first time, and we did the historical contextualization of movement. We cannot afford to see such movements in isolation. It is essential to understand the historical alienations of things.” No movement can arise suddenly without historical trauma and struggle; the farmers' movement was no different. It was a frustration against hundreds of years of oppression and ignorance of rulers.

In the third edition of *Trolley Times*, Rupri Kaur, a famous poet in Canada, elaborates on the farmers' movement. Her interest in expressing her feelings on this movement highlights the relationship between diaspora and protest sites. Kaur writes:

History shows Punjab has always taken on tyrants. Modi is no different. My people laugh at tyrants. Punjabis today say, “When Alexander the Great attempted to invade, Punjab sent him packing. What’s a Modi to an Alexander the Great?” For Sikhs, dissent against oppression is nothing new. We resisted the Mughals for 300 years. We birthed a global resistance against colonial British rule, including one that stretched from the fields of Northern California to the villages of Punjab, called the Ghadar Movement. My parents’ generation survived the 1984 Sikh genocide and the decade of state-sponsored violence and extrajudicial killings that followed. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi now joins the long historical list of tyrants Punjab has taken on (Kaur, p.2).

Kaur elaborates on the historical legacy of strong resistance of people from Punjab against every oppressor, like the Mughals and British, and Modi being a threat to minorities of India is joining this list. She further explains that dissent is integral to the heritage of Sikhs, and movements like Ghadar are examples of the global reach of this community in struggles for freedom against British rule. Then she explained the Sikh genocide of 1984 and the ten-year-long period of extrajudicial killings in Punjab by the government of India, and this explains Punjab’s distrust in the central government. The central government of India was never kind to Punjab. Kaur calls for unity in modern times while elaborating on the historical struggles of Punjab against its rulers. This time

not only Indians but global populations understood the lies of Narendra Modi (Singh, 2021). The huge support of the diaspora is an example of the same.

Many old people protesting farm bills shared their life experiences from history and their participation in farmers' struggles. In the third edition of Trolley Times, a story of an old woman was published. Amolak Singh writes:

In the ongoing struggle against the anti-farm laws, Surinder Kumari Kochhar shared her valuable experiences of struggles she had participated in throughout her life. She arrived with a women's group to join the movement on the borders of Delhi. She said, "The scenes I witnessed in 1943-44 are in front of us once again." This reflection underscores fears that if the new laws are not repealed, people will lose their livelihoods, land, forests, water, and the means to sustain life itself. They will drown in the ocean of poverty, pushed deeper to death. Surinder witnessed Ghadrites and labor leaders in 1944 visit the huts of the poor. The Delhi protests brought back memories of that past as she witnessed the farmers' leaders organize meetings, discussions, and rallies to mobilize support. She saw this as the making of history, the present woven together in the mesmerizing chain of history and the history of the future (Singh, 2020, p.2).

This story highlights the continuous struggle of farmers as Surinder Kumari links her past struggles to the present movement. Witnessing the same crisis in 2020 that she witnessed in 1943-44 demonstrates the urgency of the situation to protest with unity so that now farmers do not have to lose everything. Her idea of the present is woven together in a chain of history, symbolizing how the present movement is deeply intertwined with historical struggles, a lesson to be learned by every protestor. Her vision of the farmers' movement on the road to creating history comes from her participation in past struggles as she witnessed similar movements. This time, she is hopeful for a transformative victory for farmers due to the strong resistance and unity of farmers.

Another story from the fifth edition of Trolley Times of an eighty-eight-year-old man, Santa Singh, highlights the spirits of farmers. Raavi writes:

Since day one, many older people have been standing in the ongoing farmers' struggle at the Delhi borders. One of them is 88-year-old Santa Singh. This is not the first struggle of Santa Singh, who came from the village Phool. He has been a Bharatiya Kisan Union (Ekta) Dakaunda member for thirty-two years. Often, the protesting farmers can be seen narrating stories of the struggles of the past and joking. Santa Singh's family members are standing with him at the Tikri border (Raavi, 2021, p3).

An old man who has been a member of a farmers' union for thirty-two years explains the struggle of Indian farmers who are protesting at such old ages when they should be living in the comfort of their homes. Still, they are protesting in cold winters along with their families. So, the participation of old men and women who had experienced struggles in the past made youngsters understand the roots of the present movement. Multiple articles on historical figures who sacrificed their lives for the independence of India, like Bhagat Singh, Rajguru, and Sukhdev, inspired youth from protest camps to fight for their rights. Ideals of Sikhism were incorporated into protest camps. National media blamed protestors as 'Khalistanis' (supporters of the idea of a separate nation of Sikhs) but contrary to that, Sikhs chose to support the cause of fighting for the dispossessed (Behl, 2022, p.1143), and this fostered even more solidarity within different communities. All these stories of martyrs and ideals of religion came from history and transformed the protest.

While elaborating on the long duration of the protest, Navkiran stated, "I think the backbone of farmers' protest was the farmers' organizations that made this protest so long. These organizations were pretty old, and they had decades of experience; they already witnessed such protests in the past, and it also came out in some protests multiple times, but this time, the exemplary unity of farmers' organizations paved the way to success." However, farmers' unions were not always working jointly for the

betterment of the agricultural community; there were many rifts among them in the 20th century due to caste, class, and ideological differences (Raj Kamal Singh).

The crisis of suicide by many farmers around 2002 initiated a struggle. An alliance was formed in five farmers' unions namely Bhartiya Kisan Union (Ekta), All India Kisan Sabha, Jamhoori Kisan Sabha, Kirti Kisan Union, and Kisan Vikas Manch, to fight against this crisis. There were huge mobilizations of farmers to protest neoliberal policies in India (Kaur & Saratchand, 2023, p.303). Then, in 2005, a struggle that lasted for two years against the corporate takeover of lands in Punjab was initiated by BKU (Ugrahan) joined by multiple farmers' unions, and ultimately, farmers got deserving compensation (Kaur & Saratchand, 2023, p.303). These types of struggles from history tied the movement of 2020-21 to the historical examples of farmer struggles. The participation of women in multiple movements in history mobilized women of India. The victories in past movements by adopting mechanisms like mass mobilizations, nonviolence, and patience motivated farmers to fight until farm laws were repealed. The unity of farmers' organizations in 2020-21 transformed the entire protest. It inspired people from every part of India and the diaspora to join this struggle against Modi's draconian farm laws. After farm laws were passed in 2020, the All India Kisan Sangharsh Co-ordination Committee (AIKSCC) organized farmer meetings to evaluate the impact of the new farm laws, and within some time, all the 31 Punjab farmers' unions, including Khet Mazdoor Union (of Dalit farm laborers), joined to work with the AIKSCC for protesting new farm bills (Ram, 2023, p.20). Once this collaboration of 32 farmers' unions and later BKU(Ugrahan) joined, there was no looking back, and the mobilizations these organizations managed to create shook the ruling party.

India is largely an agricultural country where more than half of the population is engaged in the agrarian sector (Kannuri & Jadhav, 2021, p.558). Still, farmers in India are living without financial safety and security. However, farmers in India always fought for their rights. The farmers' movement taught me that history is full of lessons for every community, and in the case of farmers, it is even more important to look up to how their ancestors fought for their rights. After analyzing multiple articles from Trolley Times that demonstrate the movement's connection with history, I argue that farmers of India suffered in history due to the oppression by colonial rule as they exploited farmers for generating huge amounts of revenue (Kaur & Saratchand, 2023, p.300), discriminatory agricultural reforms by the government of independent India that favored upper caste landowners and ignored landless Dalits of India (Kaushal, 2015, p.50), bad impacts of the Green Revolution on small and marginal farmers as it turned them into landless laborers (Narula, 2022, p.102), neoliberal policies in agriculture, debts on farmers leading to suicides and now presently, the government's agenda of privatizing agriculture is the latest threat to farmers. Neoliberal policies deepened the divide between landowning rich farmers and landless poor farmers, mainly farm laborers, leading to mass poverty in the farming community (Lerche, 2014, p.388), and new farm laws seemed to attack everyone in the farming community.

I also argue that the farmers' movement is a result of systemic injustices of ruling parties against agricultural communities of India. I argue that in history Indian women fought for not only their livelihoods but also for their identity and dignity. The story of an old woman who shared that she is experiencing a similar fear she experienced in 1943-44 when India was a British colony, explains the gravity of the struggle of farmers that is still ongoing. The shared experiences from the life stories of

protestors pointed out that the Indian government never formed policies for the benefit of farmers but to benefit rich landowners and foreign companies in the past and now the private companies and the farm laws of 2020 are the latest in this plan. The most crucial element of the history of farmers' struggles is that they always stood tall against rulers without fearing the consequences but with a hope of victory.

I also argue that this movement brought back the memory of Indians that their women were real revolutionaries in history and presently they are even more empowered and vocal about their rights. Indian women portrayed successful leadership within the movement that challenged misogyny and patriarchal norms in Indian society. They reclaimed their identity as farmers when they were treated as invisible laborers in farming.

Farm laws of 2020 aimed to hand over agriculture in India to private companies. Modi forgot that he was targeting farmers, who consider their lands as their mothers in India. He ignored the history of struggling farmers who pushed Alexander the Great back from their land and challenged colonial policies against farming. The central government of India, led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, was adopting policies against Indian citizens like the British policies against Indians, like crushing dissent, detaining under sedition laws, and attacking agriculture for the sake of favoring private companies. Undoubtedly, BJP and Modi behaved like a colonial power during postcolonial times in India. The BJP underestimated the power of social movements with huge intersectional solidarity in shaking the roots of oppressors. It looked like the Farmers' movement awakened Indians, and the exemplary patience of protestors ultimately forced Modi to repeal farm laws. After a year of highly organized mass protests, in December 2021, Prime Minister Narendra Modi repealed farm laws aiming

to worsen India's agrarian sector, especially the conditions of farmers (Narula, 2022, p.92). It was a moment of pride for every Indian who felt connected with this movement. In a wider context, the farmers' movement forced Modi to take back laws that he was stubborn to implement, and as Navkiran explained, "it erased a myth within India that Modi is invincible." While elaborating on the election results of 2024 in India, Navkiran said, "If we analyze recent parliamentary election, BJP got no seat in Punjab, even in Haryana they lost multiple seats and UP was a shock for BJP. BJP lost many seats in Western UP like Jayant Chaudhary, he was part of the farmer's movement but betrayed the farmers and joined BJP. The mandate of Punjab clearly shows the impact of farmers' protests. In Rajasthan, as well many farmer leaders associated with CPM won like farmer leader Harra Ram who remained in farmers' protest for a long time and won his seat with a huge majority. Another comrade Raja Ram won in UP and these results indicate the impact of farmers' protest on parliamentary elections." Although the fight for justice and equity is still long to create an ideal democracy in India, but farmers' victory emerged as a hope for democracy in India because no one could imagine such unity in a protest before this movement.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

As Rogers points out that the institutional and legal structures of a democracy are of utmost importance but for their healthy functioning rightly oriented citizens are required who can ask themselves “who are we in the lives we lead and the actions we undertake concerning each other?” (Rogers, 2023, p.267). He rightly claims that a nation that cannot ask such questions, is already dead or approaching its end. The Farmers movement asked for a healthy democracy in India by challenging nondemocratic practices of ruling powers. It emerged as a hope in a nation facing severe democratic decline. It demonstrated the strength of unity and nonviolence in social movements, especially in India, where Modi’s regime suppresses every voice of dissent.

The world’s largest democracy is on the verge of collapsing due to the BJP’s misuse of power for selfish gains. Modi’s government’s arbitrary policies caused a huge turmoil among minorities, journalists, scholars, and the agricultural community. An already suffering community of farmers, who struggle to get appropriate prices for their produce, endure losses due to harsh weather conditions, are forced to take debts to manage their cultivation, and are tackled with the threat of privatization of agriculture with a highly organized protest. A protest driven by farmers' struggles since British rule emerged as a unique movement in India that garnered huge attention from people across India and the diaspora. Farmers compared Modi’s regime to British era because of oppression similar to British. This movement outlined a proper mechanism to fight against the government that ignores its citizens for personal gains, like electoral gains.

This struggle demonstrated the power of a social movement by a collective and organized section of the society facing exclusionary inclusion (Behl, 2019) in challenging the policies that were framed without consulting those who were directly involved. An analysis of democracies through social movements, like the farmers' movement, can expose underlying social and economic issues and reveal government responsiveness to such issues. As Mahatma Gandhi said, "real Swaraj (democracy) will come not by the acquisition of authority by a few but by the acquisition of the capacity by all to resist authority when it is abused" (Pantham, 1983, p.174). The farmers' movement emerged as a strong resistance against systemic abuse of authority by the BJP. So, it was a step towards attaining a real democracy.

Being an Indian citizen, I witnessed this protest around me. The pain of watching farmers face brutal state oppression without reacting to it was too much to even see on social media. I was moved by the raging crowds of youth and old turbaned men standing in front of water cannons in extremely cold weather, getting injured by tear gas shells. The astonishing resistance of farmers and the fervor of youth in protest of draconian farm laws forced the government of India to take back farm laws. It was understandable that something was fishy because farm laws were passed without following the due process of the Constitution of India amid the COVID pandemic when the entire nation was in lockdown. As these laws were abolishing traditional mandi systems (agriculture yards) and promoting contract farming, it was enough for the farmers to know that it was high time to take a firm stand against these laws.

The mainstream media tried to malign the image of protestors and aired a false narrative against this movement. Still, it failed to do so because protesting youth came up with the idea of setting up their flow of information about the protest through a

newspaper, 'Trolley Times.' This newspaper emerged as a genuine source of information for people within the protest and the diaspora. It encultured unity in the community within protest camps as protestors read this newspaper to each other and then discussed whatever was happening around them. It was a unique effort to build communities together during hardships. The way Trolley Times catered to every section of society by giving space in the newspaper was outstanding and enhanced the solidarity of farmers and laborers. Tracing the historical struggles of farmers through Trolley Times revitalized the spirit of protestors to fight against oppression. In modern times of social media, when people prefer reading news online, Trolley Times emerged as the central force of communication about the farmers' movement.

As farm laws posed a serious economic threat to farmers, the public also perceived a threat of inflation that would affect everyone, and this threat caused nationwide mobilization of farmers towards Delhi to protest. The patience of protestors wrote the destiny of farmers because the government failed to find a way to crush peaceful and nonviolent protesters. The participation of women from young to old made this movement even more interesting because now stakeholders were not only men but women as well, and the government hesitated to disperse the protestors. The internal structure of the movement, like creating safe spaces for women and policing by volunteers at night, also contributed to the peaceful structure of the movement. By actively engaging women in the movement and ensuring their safety, this movement not only challenged traditional gender roles in Indian society but also redefined the space for public protest. The inclusivity within this movement elaborates on the capability of social movements to bring transformations and foster a sense of collective.

The coalition of farmers' organizations and unions was the backbone of this movement because it created an inclusive space within protest for all, irrespective of the religious or caste background of the protestors. Through an analysis of interview responses with Navkiran, I find that the internal structure of the movement was democratic as the majority took all decisions, and all were living together, eating together, and fighting for the same cause; all these subtle things reignited democratic spirits in a section of Indians who were becoming extremely intolerant to each other's differences due to divisive politics of Modi on the name of religion and castes.

While conducting this research, I understood the deep impacts of government policies on the lives of populations for generations and how sometimes this generational oppression comes out in the formation of revolutionary movements. Through stories from Trolley Times, I understood that it was not only the BJP but in the past Congress party did nothing remarkable for farmers and before those colonial powers exploited the farming community. I realized that to understand the aspirations of the farmers' movement, I must talk to someone present in the protest. My research participant Navkiran narrated her experience and triple vulnerability as a woman, a protestor, and a co-founder and co-editor of Trolley Times newspaper. The government of India was hunting for people to put in jail for creating an environment of fear. Still, Navkiran was actively involved in the protest, performing every role assigned to her. I couldn't dive into this movement's deep layers of structure without my interactions with Navkiran. I appreciate her courage in discussing everything I asked about the movement.

I argue that the farmers' movement created a new kind of society within protest sites with vast intersectional solidarity (Einwohner et al., 2021), where a strong collective prevailed, everyone was treated equally, every voice was heard, women

actively participated, youth presented a unique bravery, and democratic values existed. In a country where Dalits are still getting killed for drinking water from the taps of upper castes, where Muslims are getting lynched to death for mere suspicion of beef eating, the unity and collectivity within the Farmers' Movement restored our belief in humanity. This movement was a collective victory of Indians against a regime that was claiming itself as invincible and was implementing policies to harass the common man for favoring capitalists. The biggest message of the farmers' movement is that India could be a democratic society again without any discrimination and with an exclusive right to protest injustice. I believe that the legacy of the farmers' movement will reverberate far beyond the repeal of farm laws, motivating future generations to continue their fight for a more inclusive democracy by following the Gandhian principle of nonviolence. It will be a reminder to future generations that in a fight for justice and equality, the potential factors can be incorporating unity, intersectional solidarity, equal participation of women, nonviolence, and leadership following democratic processes in social movements.

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