

Agrarian Resistance in Punjab: Contextualising Farmer Protests at the Gates of Delhi in a Historical Perspective

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Agrarian crises, farmer unrest, and state repression, are perennial to Punjab. Ever since the annexation of Punjab in 1849, people of this borderland state have constantly struggled against one or other legal injunction passed by their governments at different intervals. From 1907 until the recently enacted three farm laws, an unfortunate truism is that government injections were never meant primarily, if at all, for the benefit of farmers. While on the one hand, farmers are eulogised as *amdata* of the nation, who toil to produce grain, on the other, they are forced to fight their own state and even central governments for their legitimate rights. The central concern of this paper is to historically contextualise the current farmers' struggle, premised on the understanding that the on-going farmers' protest has striking parallels with, and possibly even provide a mirror image of, various earlier agrarian agitations fought by their forefathers against attempts to erode their rights and livelihoods. The paper concludes with a critical reflection on larger agrarian crisis which has been largely unaddressed over the last several decades, but which underpins to a great extent the determination of the farming community - as expressed in the current agitation - not to yield further ground to what are considered the imperious dictates of a central government. However, for fear of overly elongating this tract, only a brief though broad assessment of these roots has been offered here.

Introduction: Beginning of the Grievance

The periphery of Delhi - capital city of India - has earned a unique distinction of being the site of longest ever witnessed farmers' peaceful protest in the history of peasant movements in the world. The protest began in East Punjab (Indian Punjab, hereafter Punjab) on June 6, 2020 against three ordinances (temporary laws) - dealing with agricultural produce, sale, hoarding, marketing and contract farming - promulgated by the Central Government of India on June 5, 2020 (*National Herald*, 2020). The first ordinance, the Farmers' Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Ordinance 2020, provided freedom to sell and buy farm produce in the county - within Agricultural Produce Market Committees (APMC) markets or outside them. The central government claims that this ordinance will liberate farmers by giving them the freedom to sell their produce anywhere. The second, the Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement on Price Assurance and Farm Services Ordinance 2020, dealt with contract farming under which farmers will produce crops as per contracts with corporate investors for a mutually agreed remuneration. The third ordinance, the

Essential Commodities (Amendment) Ordinance 2020, regulated the list of essential items whose prices are to be standardised by the government.

In a nutshell these farm ordinances (now laws), the central government claims, aim to provide barrier-free trade for farmers' produce outside the long prevailing notified marketing system, and empower them to enter into farming agreements with the private sector prior to production of their agri-produce. The federal government has asserted ad nauseam that these laws will transform Indian agriculture, attract private investment, revolutionise the lives of the farmers in India, and that farmers will have more options to sell their produce, and on better prices. This message has been reiterated during all the meetings convened by it with various agitating farmer organizations. As far as Minimum Support Price (MSP) is concerned, the central government reiterated that: 'MSP was, MSP is, and MSP will continue in the future'. It assured farmers that there is no move on its part at all to scrap the MSP, and there is absolutely no reference to it in the new laws. It has further asserted that these laws will help the farmers to get connected to big traders and exporters, bringing profit to agriculture. (Jha, 2020).

However, as far as farmers are concerned, they have totally different opinion about the farm laws. A general impression prevails among them that the three farm laws will dismantle the MSP system and the AMPC. It is also widely believed that farmers' legal ownership rights on their agriculture land will eventually be passed into the hands of the big corporate houses. Deep concern is also shown that in the absence of AMPC, the big corporate houses will acquire monopoly over agriculture markets, fix the price of their produce arbitrarily, and force them to sell their crops at much lower prices than what they would have been getting under the prevailing MSP system. Their common fear is that within the purview of these laws they would not be able to negotiate effectively with powerful corporate houses who, with the help of big corporate law firms, would bind them to unfavourable contracts with hidden liability clauses that would be beyond the comprehension of many of them, especially the poor and illiterate farmers (Mustafa, 2020). It is further believed that these newly enacted farm laws will dismantle the traditional *arthiyas* system.¹

The agitating farmers, supported by agricultural labourers, and people from various other directly or indirectly agriculture related professions, are of unanimous opinion that farm laws will deprive them of their agriculture land and the well-established and long tested regulated agriculture market set-up. Thus, they want their complete rollback; and a legal guarantee for the MSP. Randeep Surjewala, chief spokesperson of the Indian National Congress, while expressing solidarity with the agitating farmers said that his party will fight the Modi government 'tooth and nail' on this issue. He further said:

These three draconian ordinances are a death knell for agriculture in India. They will subjugate the farmer at the altar of a handful of crony capitalists, making them labourers to toil on their own land rather than getting a remunerative price for their crop under the system of minimum support price (Jha, 2020).

A further apprehension is that once these laws are implemented, the states would not be allowed to levy market fee/cess outside APMC domains. At present, the market fee, rural development fee, and commission of *arhatiyas* (commission agents) are 3 percent, 3 percent, and 2.5 percent; and 2 percent, 2 percent, and 2.5 percent respectively in Punjab and Haryana, the epicenters of farmers' protest. There is an apprehension that after the implementation of the farm legislation, Punjab and Haryana would lose an estimated Rs 3,500 crore and Rs 1,600 crore each year respectively (Mustafa, 2020).

II

Central Government Legislation and Response of Farmers

However, despite farmers' continuous opposition and protests against the farm ordinances, in the states of Punjab and Haryana, the central government introduced them as Bills in the Lok Sabha, lower house of the Parliament of India, on September 14, 2020, and passed them on September 15 and 18, 2020. Subsequently, on September 20 and 22, the same were passed in Rajya Sabha, the upper house of the Parliament of India. And finally on 27 September 2020, the three controversial farm ordinances turned Bills became Acts - the Farmers' Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Act 2020 (FPTC Act), the Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement on Price Assurance and Farm Services Act 2020 or the Agreement on Price Assurance and Farm Services (APAFS), and the Essential Commodities (Amendment) Act 2020 - after obtaining assent from the President of India. During the entire period of more than three months - from the promulgation of the ordinances to their becoming Acts/laws - hardly a day passed in Punjab and Haryana without protest by farmers who were agitating for their complete rollback. The three controversial agriculture reforms laws (the first two are new, and the third one is a modified version of the Essential Commodities Act 1951), and their vigorous opposition by varied farmer unions has been quietly considered as a long drawn fight between the people - left alone to fend for themselves since 1991 - and the neo-liberal market economy, supported by international financial institutions like the International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Trade Organization (WTO) and World Bank (The Times of India, 2020; Sharma, 2021; Sharma, 2021a). The international financial institutions, as per the Washington Consensus (Naim, 1999), force states to withdraw all kinds of subsidies from the agriculture sector and let it to be governed within the market logic of demand and supply. Though the three contentious farm laws were passed in 2020, 'the discussion on policy reforms and structural changes in agriculture started around the year 2000. It began with suggestions for changes in market regulation and removal of various restrictions provided under the APMC Act' (Chand, 2020: 6). Since 2020, all the successive central governments made multiple attempts to persuade states to introduce reform in the agriculture sector. However, in finding the state governments were not taking interest in the proposed agricultural reforms, perhaps due to apprehension of farmers' protest, and given

the federal angle of the case involved, the current NDA central government took the plunge on June 5, 2020.

On the very next day, June 6, 2020, farmers of Punjab launched an agitation against the three farm ordinances with burning of effigies of the NDA in hundreds of villages in the state. Given Covid-19 restrictions, they protested on their rooftops daily for an hour, from June 14 to 30, 2020. Initially, the rooftop protests began in a few villages but soon they spread to over 500 villages in Punjab (Jagga, 2020). Rooftop protests were followed by handing over memoranda at the offices of sub-divisional magistrates (SDMs) for forwarding to the Prime Minister's Office (PMO). Within a period of one and a half month, 11 major state farmer unions came together to protest against the farm ordinances. On July 20, 2020, they burnt effigies of the erstwhile SAD-BJP alliance in several villages. On July 27, 2020, these 11 farmer unions collectively organised a massive tractor rally (over 25,000 tractors hit the roads on this particular day) and submitted memorandums to their MPs. One of the tractors was driven by a 17-year-old girl, Baldeep Kaur. She led the march in Bathinda and drove her tractor to submit a memorandum to the former Union Minister Harsimrat Kaur Badal. This massive tractor march became the standard practice of farmers' protest henceforth (Jagga, 2020).

Soon after the July tractor march, farmers of Haryana followed suit, and started organising meetings in protest against the farm ordinances. It was also during this time that the All India Kisan Sangrash Co-ordination Committee (AIKSCC) became active and organised a number of kisan meetings regarding the impact of the farm ordinances on life of the farmers and their subsequent transformation into farm Acts. By the mid-August 2020, all the 31 Punjab farmer unions, including Khet Mazdoor (Dalit farm labourers) unions, had joined hands to work in co-ordination with the AIKSCC to streamline the protest, giving it a critical thrust and focus. This was followed by *nakabandi* (guarding) of villages against the entry of SAD and BJP leaders, 'jail bhara andolan' (fill the prisons), and sending of memoranda to the Prime Minister's office (Jagga, 2020).

An inflection point came after the three contentious farm ordinances were introduced as Bills in Parliament on September 14, 2020: Farmers of Punjab and Haryana held *dharnas* (sit-ins), blocked roads, began 'pakka morcha'² outside the residence of Parkash Singh Badal, former Chief Minister of Punjab. On September 23, all 31 Punjab farmer unions announced their joint 'rail roko' (stop the railway trains) agitation from October 1, 2020. They also announced their programme of organising *dharnas* outside malls, toll plazas, petrol stations of identified corporate houses, as well as outside the residences of BJP leaders. Once these Bills became Acts on September 27, 2020, the farmers of Punjab upped the ante, by blocking railway tracks throughout the length and breadth of their borderland state for about two months. Darshan Pal, former medical doctor, and working group member of AIKSCC, told Raakhi Jagga that:

We started protests in a phased manner but when we were not heard, we had to come out on roads, block tracks and even roads. People need to know that when governments are deaf, we have to follow these methods, as they did not listen to us, did not talk

to us, despite our protests and passed the Bills in Parliament. Many people on social media now ask why we block tracks, roads. So this is our answer to them (Jagga, 2020).

It was during the intervening period of the passing of the central farm ordinances and their enactment as Acts/laws, that a strident opposition was gradually built up in Punjab against them by galvanising varied Kisan organisations in the state. The farmers of Punjab established a common platform at Shambhu, on the Punjab-Haryana border, and this location almost immediately became the epicentre of the movement. Deep Sidhu, a small-time film actor, who among others, was accused of derailment of the Kisan *parade* (march) on the Republic day of India on January 26, 2021, was able to bring himself into the spotlight of the farmers' protest at Shambhu morcha. Since November 26, 2020, the farmers shifted their protest to the periphery of Delhi in response to *Dilli Chalo* (Let's march to Delhi) call given by the All Indian Kisan Sangharsh (struggle) Co-ordination Committee (The Economic Times, 2020). However, before the call to *Dilli Chalo* was formally put into action on November 25, 2020, efforts were made to find an amicable solution of the protracted crisis. But the meetings between the Union Agriculture Minister, Narinder Singh Tomar, and representatives from over 32 farmer unions to solve the imbroglio remained inconclusive.

The march was held under the banner of Sanyukt Kisan Morcha (SKM) - United Farmers Front. The Rashtriya Kisan Mahasangathan (apex farmers organisation), various factions of Bharatya Kisan Union (BKU) - BKU (Ekta-Urgahan), BKU (Rejewal), BKU (Dakaunda), BKU (Chaduni) - Jan Kisan Andolan, All India Kisan Mazdoor Sabha, Krantikari Kisan Union among others participated in the call to *Dilli Chalo* (The Economic Times, 2020). Despite some initial opposition mounted by the Haryana Government to preclude the march from reaching its destination, the agitating farmers from Punjab and Haryana were able to reach the borders of Delhi (Singhu, Tikri, Ghazipur), and since then (November 26, 2020) they have been camping there with support from various quarters from their respective home states as well as Sikh diaspora (National Herald, 2020) ever since. Especially worthy of mention is the tremendous and continuing support by the surrounding populace, expressed by way of organised daily deliveries of much-needed material items – mainly various food items, milk, etc, in spite of the logistical hurdles to their daily lives thrown up by this agitation.

III

Non-Partisan Peaceful Protests

What distinguishes this longest farmers' protest is its thoroughly peaceful nature – though with a blip, motivated by political machinations, surrounding the 26th of January – and the all-inclusive character of its huge gatherings comprising people across caste, class, creed, gender, region and professional breakup. It has attracted worldwide coverage through its continual addressing of huge

gatherings from its historic 'Kisan stage' established at the Singhu border of Delhi, and has assumed an international character being a non-partisan platform. Meticulously arranged, assiduously managed, and adroitly guarded by the farmers themselves, this unique Kisan platform (Kisan stage) has attained the lustrous status of global virtual Kisan podium. Leaders of political parties have been strictly debarred from sharing the stage or addressing farmers. Kulwant Singh Sandhu, general secretary, Jamhuri (Demoractic) Kisan Sabha, Punjab, told *The Print*:

It was decided that no leader of any political party will be allowed to speak from our stages. Politicians are looking at 2022 (assembly elections) but we are looking at our livelihood. We don't need their support, rather they want to join our protest. But we have strictly banned that (Sethi, 2020).

The mainstream national media is also not being allowed to cover the protest site for its alleged partisan slant (Suresh, 2020). It is often referred as 'godhi (lap dog) media' by the protesting farmers. The protesting farmers have launched their own separate biweekly paper, *Trolley Times*, both in Punjabi and Hindi, to cover their peaceful protest in an undistorted manner (Ramani, 2020).

Another worldwide talked about aspect of the protesting site of the farmers at Delhi borders is *langar* (community kitchen). The langar is prepared jointly by the participating farmers - men and women - and managed out of the provisions collected by the farmers from within their community sources as well as those donated by sympathetic philanthropic diasporas. The langar is open not only to farmers, but to all irrespective of caste, colour and creed. Yet another interesting aspect of this unique farmers' agitation is heavy participation by women, young as well as old. Their participation is not only confined to community kitchen and looking after makeshift staying arrangements at the Delhi borders, they can equally be seen actively participating in various other organisational and managerial activities of the farm unions (Bhattacharya, 2021). A visit to this thoroughly non-violent, non-discriminatory, and non-political site of farmers' protest with copious participation of women is often considered as no less than a pilgrimage (Sura, 2020). Many participating women joined the agitation along with their newly-born children in tow, as well as older people, including grand-parents.

The protest at Delhi borders (Singhu, Tikri and Ghazipur), initially led by the farmers of Punjab and Haryana also gained the support from over 40 farmer organizations of the country under SKM. With the passage of time, farmers from Western Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh also joined the protests. Apart from the farmers, *arthiyas* (Bhardwaj, 2020; Chaba and Damodaran, 2020), labour unions (Deol, 2021; Kaur, 2021; Toor, 2021); women (Bhowmick, 2021; Kaur, 2021; Kakhra, 2021; Gayatri, 2021; Toor, 2021); students (Iftikhar, 2020); teachers, doctors and engineers (Butani, 14, 2020); writers (Khanna, 2020); singers (Pandey, 2020), retired soldiers (Singh, 2020); government servants; and various other sections of civil society have been showing solidarity with the farmers in their struggle for the complete annulment

of the three agriculture laws in question since its beginning on November 26, 2020 (Kumar, 2020). Kirti (Workers) Kisan Forum (former IAS, IPS, Army & Civil Service Officers) of Punjab and Haryana have been supporting the farmers' agitation by organising seminars on the three agriculture laws (Kaur, 2021). However, among all the social segments of the agitation, women have assumed a special importance by remaining an integral part of the protests against all odds. They even celebrated International Women's Day at the Delhi borders by gathering in thousands (Kaushal and Kissu, 2021). *The Times* magazine dedicated its cover title to the women agitating against these laws (Bhowmick, 2021).

Though not less than 500 farmers had lost their lives so far, and 11 rounds of talks were convened between the Government of India and representatives of the agitating farmers, there is no solution in sight as both the sides are adamant regarding their respective positions – farmers want total repeal of the three laws and a legal guarantee of the MSP, whereas the Central Government of India continues to repeat its belief in their long-term benefits, and of late also beginning to ask farmers to negotiate amendments in the laws (Sabarwal, 2021; *The Tribune*, 2021). To end the deadlock in the face of serious health hazards posed by the winter cold and the Corona pandemic, the Supreme Court of India stayed the implementation of the three controversial farm laws on January 11 till further orders and formed a committee of experts comprising representatives of the central government and the protesting farmers' unions (BusinessToday.in, 2021). It also suggested that the agitating farmers should return home to their livelihoods (Rajagopal, 2021). The highest court also appreciated the peaceful conduct of the protests and stated that it did not want to stifle their democratic rights (Rajagopal, 2021).

In a similar vein, on January 20, 2021, the central government also proposed to suspend implementation of the three controversial farm laws for 18 months and set up a joint committee to discuss the laws in detail as well as to find an amicable solution in the interest of the farmers (BusinessToday.in, 2021). In the words of Joginder Singh Ugrahan, president BKU (Ugrahan), 'The government proposed to suspend the farm laws for one and a half years. We rejected the proposal but since it has come from the government, we will meet tomorrow and deliberate over it' (*The Times of India*, 2021). It was said that the central government also proposed to submit an affidavit in the Supreme Court for suspending the farm laws for a mutually-agreed period and set up a committee (*The Times of India*, 2021). After consultation among them, the farmers did not accept the Supreme Court suggestion to go back to their homes until their demands to annul the three farm laws and legal guarantee for MSP were met. They also rejected the central government's proposal to put in abeyance the three contentious farm laws for 18 months, and reiterated that nothing short of complete rollback of the farm laws is acceptable to them.

Peaceful agitation by farmers and their steadfast determination to get the farm laws rescinded, continues to attract wide supports in favour of their protest from within the country as well as from different quarters of the world. Pop superstar Rihanna of the US (*National Herald*, 2021), environmental activist

Greta Thunberg from Sweden (Aiyar, 2021) and the US Vice President's niece Meena Harris extended support to protesting farmers (Misra, 2021). Whereas, in contrast, Gita Gopinath, the Chief Economist, International Monetary Fund (IMF), and Gerry Rice, Director of Communications at IMF underlined the benefits of the agricultural laws for the farmers (India's Business Standard, 2021; and Outlook Web Bureau, 2021). Noam Chomsky, a globally reputed social scientist, philosopher and linguist, in a conversation with an Indian scientist-turned-filmmaker, Bedabrata Pain, had all praise for the ongoing farmers' protest at Delhi borders. When asked for a message to the agitating peasants of India, Chomsky said:

Because they are doing the right thing with the courage and integrity for the benefit of their own families, for the farmers of India, the people of India and for the entire world who needs this model of struggle to carry out the same kinds of actions in their own circumstances which share a lot with the circumstances of the farmers of India and they should be proud of what they are doing and I think this movement is a beacon of light for the world in dark times (Pain, 2021).

To keep their spirit high and to underline their demands for complete rollback of the three agriculture laws and a legal guarantee of MSP, the protesting farmers have chosen to celebrate their struggle at different intervals. On the completion of 100 days of their agitation, on 6 March 2021, thousands of farmers demonstrated wearing black turbans and armbands by peacefully blocking the Kundli-Manesar-Palwal (KMP) and Eastern Peripheral expressways - the two speedways that form a ring around Delhi. Women dressed in black colours - some of them wearing black *dupattas* (long head scarves) - with black flags in their hands - also participated in the blockade (HTC & Agencies, 2021). During the blockade, the farmers raised slogans against the BJP-led government for not accepting their demands. Manjeet Kaur, a woman protester who arrived with a score of women at the protest site of KMP expressway, stated:

The government wanted to know what was black in three agri bills (sic). Today, we have worn black dresses to show that everything in the laws is black. We will not return home till laws are taken back (Times of India, 2021).

The blockade continued for five hours (11am-4pm) and remained peaceful throughout. Vehicles carrying children and women, ambulances and cranes were not halted. Water, tea and food were served to those who remained stranded (Times of India, 2021).

Since the beginning of the protest on November 26, 2020, except for the unfortunate incident of putting up Nishan Sahib and farmer flag on the dome and empty flag post at Red Fort on Republic Day, 26 January 2021 (Kamal, 2021), there has not been even a single incident of violence and sabotage at the site of the agitation. After the temporary setback caused by the unfortunate incident of clashes and confrontation at Red Fort on January 26, 2021, the timely

intervention by Rakesh Tikait, Uttar Pradesh BKU leader, restored the momentum of the peaceful agitation. His tearful emotional appeal restored, even redoubled, enthusiasm among the farmers (Chaba, 2021; *India Today*, 2021). Commenting on the chaos and violence on Republic Day and the emotive pull of the tears of UP farm leader, Rakesh Tikait, Punjab farmer leader Balbir Singh Rajewal, who heads the BKU (Rajewal), said:

After the Red Fort incident, the agitation suffered. It (agitation) was hit for a day-and-a half, but pickd up after that. Now farmers are again rushing to Delhi borders. We are thankful to Tikait sahib and we will invite him to Punjab and honour him (Chaba, 2021).

The Red Fort incident on the R-Day was a conspiracy, argued Rajewal, to scuttle the farmers' peaceful struggle. Rajewal told the *Indian Express* that 'he was aware who was behind it'. He continued:

We understand that this was done by Centre, BJP, and RSS. They are trying to provoke us that the agitation fizzles out. But I appeal again to the farmers that we do not have to react. We have learnt a lot from the event that unfolded on Republic Day. We have matures. The farmers also realise this that we were more effective when we were peaceful We will not indulge in any violence. We are alert to prevent any violence (Chaba, 2021).

Tarsem Peter, president, Punjab Pendu Mazdoor (Village Dalit Workers) Union (PMU), was also of the same opinion:

After the R-Day incident there was a lot of fear among the people that now they will not only lose this battle, but also their image. That fear, he added, has withered away *after the emotive appeal of Tikait* (Chaba, 2021, *emphasis added*).

Though the farmers were called names throughout the course of the protests, the intensity of such filthy epithets swelled at once after the Republic Day incident. The protesting farmers were termed as Khalistanis, urban Naxals and even Maoists by those who supported the farm laws. It was also often heard that those protesting at Delhi borders are not real Kisans. The farmers on protest at Delhi borders are also accused of spreading the Coronavirus. Reacting to such accusation, Joginder Singh Ugrahan, President of farm organisation BKU (Ekta Ugrahan) said:

It does not matter much as to how people describe our protest, but the most important is the determination of the farmers who won't settle for anything less than repeal of the laws. For this, we may have to spend many more number of months at borders, away from our homes. We have amply showcased that even though we are away from the homes, yet the crops have been

well taken care of and we have even faced the coronavirus pandemic staying in the open (Kamal, 2021).

Arguing on the same lines Balbir Singh Rajewal and Darshan Pal - both of the SKM - opined:

Governments, be it central or Haryana, had always been trying to defame farmers in any way possible. After the central government, now Haryana is calling us super spreaders of Covid but anybody can come and see the record at protest sites as there is no history of protesters getting impacted of Covid. It is only a ploy to defame us and deflect attention from the real issue of scrapping farm laws (Kamal, 2021).

After celebrating the completion of 100 days of their agitation, the farmers remembered June 5 and 6 (tabling of farm ordinances before the Union Cabinet, and the first farmers' protest being held against the ordinances respectively) by burning the copies of the farm laws at 250 places in Punjab and also outside the residences of BJP leaders. The protest to mark completion of one year of the introduction of controversial farm laws was organised under the banner of SKM. June 5 was also observed as Sampoorana Kranti Diwas (Total Revolution Day). Relating the eventful account of one year of farmers' struggle to repeal the contentious farm laws, Sukhdev Singh Kokrikalan, general secretary of the BKU (Ugrahan) said:

Out of 250 places, BKU (Ugrahan) organised protests at 49 places. These included 6 protests outside DC offices in various districts, 26 outside SDM offices and 16 outside BJP leaders' houses. Our cadre organised protests in 12 districts of Punjab. Everywhere, we burnt copies of farm laws. It was on June 5 amid lockdown when ordinances were tabled for the first time. I remember that from June 4 to June 30 last year all our members used to stand on rooftops daily for an hour along with hand written protest charts as there was curfew in Punjab and we were not allowed to assemble. However, slowly we started village-level protests, later tractor march in July, jail bhara andolan in August. It was followed by village-level five days protest banning entry of SAD-BJP leaders in villages in August. We also organised pakka morchas at Badal and Patiala in September for 5 days, later 'rail roko' in September and finally indefinite dharnas, protests at various sites from October 1. It has been a year and we have not felt tired even for a day (Jagga, 2021).

Speaking on the event of the Sampoorana Kranti Diwas, Jagmohan Singh Patiala, general secretary of the BKU (Dakaunda), lamented on the insensitivity of the central government. He said that the government is not bothering 'that we are protesting against their decisions for the past one year. We started our first protest on June 6, 2020 and it is still continuing' (Jagga, June 6, 2021).

Another occasion that farmers chose for highlighting their protest against the controversial three farm laws, was to mark the completion of seven months period of their protests at the Delhi borders on June 26, 2021, by holding protest marches towards the Raj Bhawans (Governor Houses) of Punjab and Haryana. A month before, on the completion of six months - on May 26, 2021 - of their protests at Delhi borders, farmers also observed 'black day' by putting up black flags and burning the effigies of government leaders at Singhu, Tikri and Ghazipur borders - the central sites of farmers protests. About the June 26 event, the SKM apprised the stakeholders, a day before i.e. June 25, 2021, through a curtain-raiser on its social media platforms (Kamal, 2021). This event also marked 46 years of imposition of emergency by the Indira Gandhi government in 1975. While comparing the current crisis with that of 1975, Balbir Singh Rajewal, president of the BKU (Rajewal) said:

The situation is similar to 1975 now as the present regime has put an undeclared emergency in place when right to expression is in danger and the dissenting voices are termed as anti-national. The Narendra Modi government is not ready to listen to the pains of the farmers who are sitting at the borders for seven months and the government is branding them as separatists, anti-nationals and urban naxals. Despite all this, farmers will not sit back till their demands of repeal of three laws, enacting law on MSP are not met (Kamal, 2021).

As per the plan, the farmers from Haryana and Punjab gathered in large numbers at Gurdwara Nada Sahib in Panchkula and Amb Sahib in Mohali respectively. In a repeat of November 26, 2020, scenes of farmers braving water cannons and pushing aside barricades with their mighty tractors amidst police lathi charge, were witnessed when they broke open the Mohali-Chandigarh border on June 26, 2021. However, what distinguished June 26 march from that of November 26 was the restraint observed by the protesting farmers in avoiding direct confrontation with the police. Police too, this time, adopted some restraint. To avoid any unruly scenes, farmers from Haryana handed over their memorandum at the Haryana-Chandigarh border (Kamal, 2021). To ensure a peaceful march towards the Raj Bhawans in Chandigarh, the protesting farmers maintained discipline in dissent, restricted the participation by the youngsters, and raised slogans of 'Save Agriculture, Save Democracy' (Jagga, 2021). During his interaction with the *Indian Express*, the general secretary of BKU (Dakaunda), Jagmohan Singh said:

We never wanted things to go out of hand in excitement. After January 26, we have been very cautious about maintaining discipline while protesting. Every farmer union leader had been assigned certain duties. It was a mix of our young, middle-aged, and elderly farmers who marched towards Chandigarh on Saturday morning (Jagga, 2021).

Reiterating their stand on the legitimacy of the farmer protests against the farm laws, Rajewal, the senior-most (77) kisan leader and president of BKU (Rajewal) briefed the *Times of India*:

It is a matter of survival for farmers. These laws are against the interests of farmers, who fear losing their land and whatever MSP they are getting on a few crops (mainly wheat, paddy). We are here to get the laws repealed and make the government bring an act for legal guarantee of MSP on all crops to all farmers. We are not going back before that despite knowing fully well that we may have to face a lot of onslaught (Kamal, 2021).

Endorsing the views of Rajewal, Joginder Singh Ugrahan (75), the president of BKU (Ekta Ugrahan) and the second senior-most Kisan leader said:

The BJP is still not tired of testing our patience. After all its tricks failed, it is now resorting to defamation. We will face this as well but will not go away. These laws are against the economy, social life, the soul and spirit of farmers (Kamal, 2021).

Almost six months have passed since the last round of talks were held between the representatives of the central governments and farmer leaders on January 22, 2021; and for more than a year, farmers have been shuttling between their agriculture fields/homes and the sites of protests against the three farm laws. Bone chilling cold and scorching heat failed to dampen their enthusiasm at the seamlessly barricaded borders of Delhi. If for the central government, it is a question of prestige, then for farmers of their *hoNd* – existence. That is what sustains their zeal and endurance. ‘For the hegemonic agrarian ruling class in Punjab, land is not merely an economic asset, Kumar argued cogently, but has social and cultural value’ (Kumar, 2021).

The central government, nevertheless, profess to an utter conviction of the long-term benefits of the laws. Hence the present impasse and the difficulty of fathoming what will eventuate in the current circumstances. However, there is a general consensus that the deadlock may turn more complicated in view of reports in the national media that farmer organisations are planning to gherao Parliament during the upcoming monsoon session to reinforce pressure on the central government to withdraw the three controversial farm laws. Buta Singh Burjgill, president, BKU (Dakaunda), told the Indian Express:

On July 17, we will go to houses of leaders belonging to opposition parties and give them a warning letter. It will be our request to either break their silence in the house or leave their seat. Five days later, a large group of people will leave Singhu, reach the Parliament, and tell the Opposition to disrupt proceedings inside. We will sit outside. We will keep repeating it; this is our plan to protest (Express New Service, 2021).

Revealing the action plan of farmers protest at the upcoming monsoon session of Parliament, the SKM issues a statement that:

five members per organisation and at least 200 protestors per day
will protest every day outside the Parliament during the session
– between July 19 and August 13 (Express New Service, 2021).

The SKM had assured that the protest would remain peaceful, and to forestall any untoward incidents such as those instigated by saboteurs on Republic Day a few months earlier, the farmer unions had issued identification badges to those joining the protest outside Parliament. Despite the unfortunate incidents on January 26, 2021, when farmers were denied entry to central city areas, the very fact of the farmers obtaining permission from the Delhi police on July 22, 2021 to hold a 'Kisan Sansad' at Jantar Mantar in parallel to the official Sansad (Parliament) session, strongly indicated the surging space of farmers' opposition to the three Central farm laws. Commenting on the third day of farmers' protest near Parliament, Rakesh Tikait, the spokesperson of BKU, exhorted the farmers 'to save the soul and freedom of India' (HT Correspondent, 2021). Joginder Singh Ugrahan, President BKU (Ekta-Ugrahan), speaking on the importance of Kisan Sansad, claimed:

Staying eight months against a formidable opposition was not easy, after January 26 especially, when the protests had reached its weakest point, but the BJP defeat in three states, including West Bengal, gave us a boost and now Kisan Sansad is preparing us to hurt the BJP in Uttar Pradesh elections (Kamal, 2021).

Endorsing Joginder Singh Ugrahan's view-point, Balbir Singh Rajewal, President BKU (Rajewal) said: 'The BJP understands only the voice of votes. We got the saffron in Bengal and now we'll get them in UP and Uttarakhand' (Kamal, 2021).

The SKM's resolve to remain peaceful was further vindicated on August 28, 2021 when the Haryana Police baton-charged farmers who blocked a highway in Karnal in a protest against a BJP meeting, attended by Chief Minister Manohar Lal Khattar (Malik, 2021). At least 10 people reportedly got injured during the baton charge and 'one of them died from a heart attack a day later.' What further aggravated the crisis was a video of an IAS officer of the Haryana administration, ordering policemen to 'smash the heads of farmers' (BBC News, 2021). The video showed him saying:

We will not let this line be breached at any cost. Just pick up your *lathi* (baton) and hit them hard... It's very clear, there is no need for any instruction, just thrash them hard. If I see a single protester here, I want to see his head smashed, crack their heads (Ghazali, Mohammed (reported) & Swathi Bhasin (edited), 2021; emphasis added).

The standoff between the Haryana administration and protesting farmers continued for more than a week. Though the Haryana government transferred

the officer out of Karnal on September 2, 2021, farmers pressed for the suspension of the officer who ordered the baton-charge. This agitation was suspended after the State government agreed to institute a judicial probe into the August 28 incident by a retired judge of the high court, and to 'give jobs to two family members of the deceased farmer Satish Kajal under sanctioned posts at DC rate in Karnal,' (The Economic Times, 2021). However, the suspension of that agitation did not put an end to the farmers' strategy of protest outside the venue of BJP meetings until the three laws in question were not fully withdrawn. Within a period of one month of the Karnal highway incident, farmers underlined that their collective resolve remained undiminished, by crossing barricades put up by the Haryana police at Indri in Karnal to prevent them from reaching the venue of another BJP meeting where BJP MLA Ram Kumar Kashyap and other leaders were expected to reach (The Tribune, 2021). The August 28 brutal incident reminded of heavy police repression under the British rule unleashed during the *Anti-Bandobast* (Land Settlement) agitation of Amritsar of 1938 against the steep rise of land revenue and *Abiana*/canal water charges (discussed below).

Lakhimpur Kheri violence of October 3, 2021 was another case of mind-numbing violence which involved the Uttar Pradesh government and farmers protesting against the three central agricultural laws which reminded of the peaceful muzaras morcha against the Kathorlia jagirdars of tehsil Pathankot, district Gurdaspur (discussed below). It witnessed nine people dead at village Tikunia that falls on the connecting road to Banbirpur occupied by protesting farmers who had gathered to protest the visit of Uttar Pradesh Deputy Chief Minister, Keshav Prasad Maurya, to the native village Banbirpur of Union Minister of State for Home Ajay Misra Teni, the MP from Lakhimpur Kheri. The occasion was a prize distribution function organised by the Union Minister of State at a school in Tikunia to be presided over by the Deputy Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh. On the same day, the latter was also scheduled to inaugurate development projects in Lakhimpur Kheri.

The genesis of the Lakhimpur Kheri standoff can be traced to some alleged remarks made by Union minister of State Ajay Misra during his visit to Lakhimpur Kheri on September 25 at a gathering of farmers in his Lok Sabha constituency. He allegedly warned a group of farmers over their 'unruly' behaviour showing him black flags during the event. This had provoked the protesting farmers to protest at the forthcoming October 3 visit of Union minister of State and Deputy CM of Uttar Pradesh at Tikunia-Banbirpur road in Lakhimpur Kheri. It was during the protest at this site that a vehicle ploughed through the peaceful gathering of protesting farmers with murderous intent, leaving four of them (Nakshatra Singh, Daljeet Singh, Lavepreet Singh and Gurvendra Singh) dead. The other four of nine found dead were reportedly of BJP cadre. They were travelling in a cavalcade vehicle and were allegedly dragged out and lynched by the protesters. The ninth death was reported of a journalist identified as Ratan Kashyap, who was present on the site covering the incident of violence for a TV news channel (India Today, 2021).

Reiterating the peaceful nature of the farmers' protest, SKM condemned the barbaric killing of a farm labourer, named Lakhbir Singh, on October 15, 2021 by a group of Nihangs at the Singhu border and disassociated itself from them (Shaurya, 2021).

There is a widely-shared impression that all the above mentioned incidents of violence were the handiwork of invisible anti-farmer forces which continuously hatch deep-rooted conspiracies to discredit and thereby sabotage the peaceful kisan protest movement from within. However the leadership of SKM has displayed exemplary finesse in thwarting all such Machiavellian machinations thus far and successfully maintaining the agitation's momentum.

All said and done, farmers protest, has been able to carve a niche not only at the national, but also global level and has developed close rapport with almost every section of the society. This gives rise to some searching questions about this movement: Where from does it draw the strength to persist with a struggle, which is now in its second year? What motivates farmers to obstruct railways, roads, and spend endless days and nights in the open fields at Delhi borders? How is it able to commandeer such unswerving grassroots support for its protests? These questions probe the very spirit of this long-drawn agitation and in the following section an attempt has been made to answer them by contextualising the farmers protest in the rich heritage of peasant struggles in both pre-partition and post-independence Indian Punjab.

IV

Contextualising Farmers' Protests

(1) Pre-Independence and Pre-Partition Agrarian Movements

Pre-partition Punjab witnessed many peasant struggles, which bequeathed a rich legacy for latter generations of farmers. With agriculture being the mainstay of majority of its populace, and given the unregulated and oppressive system of local moneylending accompanied by heavy land revenues and water taxes, peasant struggles became a routine occurrence during pre-partition Punjab (for details see: Darling, 1977 [1925]; Barrier, 1966: Chps 1-3; Barrier, 1967). After the annexation of Punjab in 1849, British government put its entire land in the state under meticulously devised legal control (Barrier, 1967: 355-358). Another major project undertaken by the British Raj was the canalisation of large tracts of barren land, leading to the advent of irrigation and sudden prosperity among the otherwise pauperised peasant communities of the state (Barrier, 1967: 455-357). This canal-based system of arid land irrigation had not only propelled the high-yielding varieties of crops, but also gave rise to residential colonies of farmers around the newly-dug canals (Barrier, 1967: 356-58). Many farmers also joined the British army, which brought rich opportunities for Sikh soldiers to visit Europe and North America, but also forced them to face their ignoble social status as subjects of the British Empire (Chandan, 2014; Rahi, 2018; Waraich, 1967; Waraich, 1991). This had led to social and political awakening among the inhabitants of the newly established canal colonies in Western Punjab

- many of them ex-soldiers in the British army - that eventually played a catalytic role in the emergence of peasant movements in the state against agriculture Acts, which offended their *izzat* (honour, prestige, self-respect).

However, preceding salutary contributions by the peasantry during the massive British Canal projects, there were much earlier inflexion points such as introduction of the Persian water wheel in this region in the 16th century, and establishment of a Sikh Kingdom by Maharaja Ranjit Singh in 1799. The peasants of Punjab fought for freedom and their land, first under the command of Five *Pyare* and twenty-five Singhs sent by Guru Gobind Singh - along with Baba Banda Bahadur (Alam, 1982: 95-107) - to help establish just rule in Punjab, and later launch guerrilla warfare through various Sikh *Misls* (confederacies). During this long period of chequered history, the valorous peasantry of Punjab was engaged primarily in fighting for the restoration and protection of their land. It was also the peasants who bore the brunt of brutal persecution at the hands of both alien forces, and of the partition of the vast province of Punjab when circumstances conspired against them and they had had to forsake their well-groomed canal irrigated agriculture fields in West Punjab, now in Pakistan.

In addition, the sterling contribution made by the farmers of Punjab in the organisation and functioning of the historic *Ghadar* movement, 1913-1948 (Puri, 1983; Sainsara, 1969), Gurdwara Reform Movement, 1920-25 (Singh, 1978), *Babbar Akali* Movement, 1921-25 (Waraich and Kangniwal, 2015, Babbar 2006), *Guru ka Bagh Morcha*, 1922, and *Jaito Da Morcha*, 1924-25 (Walia, 1972: 26-27 & 52) add further lustre to the rich heritage of farmers' relentless struggle for the safeguard of their land rights, and restoration of their civic and religious liberties (Singh, 1978; Fox, 1985). *Guru ka Bagh* and *Jaito Morchas* are well-known for their exemplary non-violent struggle. The genesis of the current agitation, which has galvanised farmers across India, can be traced to these pre-independence agrarian agitations in Punjab.

Farmers' Struggle of 1907

The *Pagri Sambhal Jatta* movement of 1907 is the pioneer peasant movement of Punjab, which provides clues to understanding what sustains the vigour of the ongoing farmers' protests at the borders of Delhi. This movement was launched primarily to force the British administration withdraw the Punjab Land Colonisation Act 1906 (introduced in the Punjab Legislative Council on October 25, 1906, and passed in February 1907), which aimed at depriving landowners of their land. This was not the only agriculture law passed by the Punjab Legislative Assembly since the establishment of the Canal Colonies by the British government in the late nineteenth century after the annexation of the Punjab in 1849. A good number of agriculture-related Acts - the Land Alienation Act of 1900, the Punjab Limitation Act 1904, the Transfer of Property Act 1904, the Punjab Pre-Emption Act of 1905, the Court of Wards Act of 1905, and the Punjab Land Alienation Act Amendment Bill 1906 - had already been passed by the provincial government without facing any resistance from the land-

owners. Instead, all these Acts were presented by the British government as what N. Gerald Barrier called ‘paternal protection of the cultivating land-owners’ (Barrier, 1967: 354).

However, what prompted the landowners to rise against the Punjab Land Colonisation Act 1906 was its various stringent clauses that ‘forbade transfer of property by will’, introduced ‘strict primogeniture as interpreted by the Canal Officer’; imposed fresh conditions like planting of trees as well as prior permission for their cutting, sanitary rules and higher occupancy fee; legalised fines and debarred the courts from ‘interfering with executive orders’ (Barrier, 1967: 359-360). The Act also included a clause stating that ‘if a new settler died without gaining occupancy rights (generally before five years), the land lapsed to the government’ (Barrier, 1967: 359). However, even though before the enactment of this Act, landowners in the Chenab canal colony were subjected to various hardships by the local administration in the form of corruption and arbitrary fines, they did not raise the banner of revolt against the British government laws, which the latter considered benevolent. But as soon as their land was targeted, landowners turned hostile. The increase in the *abiana* (water rate) under the Doab Bari Act of 1907 further aggravated the crisis that forced them to unite first under the ‘yeoman grantees’ of the Bar Zamindar Association and then under the revolutionary leadership of Ajit Singh, uncle of Shaheed Bhagat Singh, who with the support of the Bharat Mata Sabha, an underground organisation, fought the Punjab Land Colonisation Act 1906 tooth and nail (Barrier, 1967; Mahajan, 1981, Mukherjee, 2004: 26-29). The threat of losing land was articulated as a threat to the very existence of the landowners, and this sentiment was captured in the movement’s slogan: *Pagdi Sambhal Jatta* (take care of thy turban [honour] O, Jat). Eventually, the movement itself came to be known by this very slogan (Sidhu, 2020).

The often repeated epitaph of ‘the question of *hoNd* (existence of farmer) in the ongoing farmers’ protests reminds us of the above-mentioned slogan of 1907 movement. The current farmers struggle against the three farm laws, like that of the 1907 peasant movement, is being fought to safeguard the *hoNd* (existence) of farmers. Both of these historic farmers’ movements (1907 and the present one) were launched after thoroughly debating each and every clause (Barrier, 1967: 364-68; Pal, 2009-2010: 453-55). Another striking parallel between the Punjab Land Colonisation Act 1906 and the current three farms laws, is that both were rushed through the legislative process sans a proper discussions (Barrier, 1967: 361 & 366). Finally, the Punjab Land Colonisation Act 1906 was withdrawn after the Secretary of State vetoed it on May 26, 1907.

Nili Bar Morcha

Nili Bar da Morcha of 1938 - *Banney Uttey Adho-addh* - ‘50-50 share of the harvested crop’ fame - in West Punjab was another historic farmer movement that provides us significant background to contextualise the ongoing farmers’ protest. The Nili Bar da Morcha began with the strike by 50,000 *Muzara* (tenant peasants/share-croppers) under the leadership of the Punjab Kisan Sabha formed

on March 23, 1937 led by Baba Jawala Singh - its founder president (Kangniwal, November 22, 2020a). Other prominent leaders of this peasant struggle were Ram Singh Ghalamala, Prof. Jalwant Singh, Baba Jalwant Singh Garewal, Takaia Ram, Wadhava Ram, Sharifdeen, Kherdeen Khanowalia, Hazari Ram, Vaid Sant Singh and Gian Singh. Joginder Singh Bhambar, Ajit Singh Manakpuri, Ataullah Jahania and Ghandarv Sen also joined the Nili Bar morcha (Bilga, 1989: 237-38). This muzara kisan morcha was launched against the Unionist Government of the Punjab Province for its anti kisan policies. Sunder Singh Majithia, the Finance Minister, was entrusted with initiating a dialogue with the Muzaras in Multan. He in turn deputed M.L. Darling, Financial Commissioner of Punjab,³ who on May 1937, went to the Ganji Bar, which had a huge gathering of 20,000 Muzaras, and met their representatives led by Baba Jawala Singh and accepted in entirety their 22 demands - prominent among them were: muzaras' right to get their share of crops at the rate of half-half in the field itself, end of *begār* (forced labour), provision for animal fodder, reduction in land revenue, canal water tax and loans etc, to forgo revenue upto Rs 5, and resolution of disputes by village panchayat (Bilga, 1989: 237). The Nili Bar morcha was the beginning of the Kirti Party's movement against feudalism in the state. The movement was spearheaded by the Punjab Kisan Sabha, founded on March 23, 1937. Baba Jawala Singh and B.P.L. Bedi (father of film star Kabir Bedi) were its founder President and General Secretary respectively. Bedi and his wife Freda Bedi (Whitehead, March 30, 2019) stood with the farmers in their struggle against the dictatorial British regime. These powerful precedents, i.e. the 1907 kisan morcha and the non-violent agitation by the Muzaras of Nili Bar, have demonstrated the tenacity and political prowess of organised kisan movements against legislation which they view to be an existential threat, hence there is a strong sense of *déjà vu* and historical connection pervading the current farmers' agitation.

Amritsar Morcha

Anti-*Bandobast* (Land Settlement) agitation of Amritsar of 1938 was another historic peasant struggle against the proposed unjust increase of Rs 4 lakh in land revenue that began July 20, 1938 and came to a successful end on August 9, 1938 after the removal of the Clause 144 (prohibiting public gatherings) and the decision to initiate the process of land settlement was withdrawn (Bilga, 1989: 250-51; Chayn, 1990:173; Kangniwal, November 22, 2020b). This peaceful agitation of farmers led by Punjab Kisan Sabha, supported by Akali leaders (Udham Singh Nagoke, Darshan Singh Pheruman among others) and 'other leaders such as Baba Sohan Singh Bhakna, Harnam Singh Kasel, Sohan Singh Josh, Kartar Singh Gill, Gehal Singh Chhajalwadi, Mohinder Singh, Fauja Singh Bhullar, Dalip Singh Johal, Santa Singh Ghandivind, Jaswant Singh Kairon (brother of Partap Singh Kairon) and Bibi Raghbir Kaur, as well as a crowd of at least 5000-6000 peasants and several thousand other sympathizers' remained non-violent despite heavy repression unleashed by the police on the participating farmers under the instructions of Muhammad Shafi, the city

Magistrate of Amritsar (for details see: Bilga, 1989: 249-51; Mukherjee, 2004: 154-165). Another dimension of that morcha, which helps us to better understand the unity between the labour unions and farmers in the current farmers' protest against the three farming laws, is that many labour unions also joined hand with the Amritsar Morcha in support of its demands for withdrawing the increased rate of land revenue including privately digged wells as well as *shamlat* (common land) and barren land. Further, Jayaprakash Narayan, Saifuddin Kitchlew, Swami Sahajrand and N.G. Ranga, and pan-Indian Kisan leaders (Bilga, 1989: 250; Mukherjee, 2004: 159-60) also spoke in the favour of the Anti-Bandobast agitation of Amritsar, which had elevated its relevance to the national level.

Muzara Struggle of Gurdaspur

The muzaras of tehsil Pathankot, district Gurdaspur, bore the brunt of many of the worst brutalities. These were perpetrated by the jagirdars of Kathrol, known as 'Kathorlia jagirdars', who owned 35 to 40 villages in the tehsil between them. These muzaras lead wretched lives - after every harvest, the Kathrolia jagirdars routinely usurped a lion's share of the crop using various flimsy pretexts (Bilga, 1989: 245-246). Consequently, the muzaras were left with very little, and compelled to sell even their meagre dairy products for routine household needs, to the great detriment of their families' health, surviving as they did on food of very low nutritional value - dry chapattis, some pickle, chutney, and onions. The dearth of competent and affordable health facilities meant that many muzaras died of malaria and other otherwise treatable diseases, often falling victim to quacks (Bilga, 1989: 245-246).

The victory of the Nili Bar Morcha had ignited a ray of hope among the muzaras of Pathankot tehsil. Under the leadership of Baba Ishar Singh, a founder of the Kirti Party in Gurdaspur district, numerous volunteers joined and began organising the muzaras in Pathankot tehsil. Prominent among these was Vishnu Dutt Sharma,⁴ a student in Banga Town near Phagwara, and native of Khatkar Kalan, who had begun living with Baba Kharak Singh, at Anup Shahr of Nangal. Baba Kharak Singh was a veteran muzara to whose house Kirti activists enjoyed an open invitation. Chanan Singh Tughalwala, Giani Hari Singh, Chanan Singh Chhota, Shiv Kumar Sharda, Thakur Das Kathrol, Mani Ram Gobindsar, and Bibi Shankuntala, all led the Gurdaspur muzara agitation against the oppression of the Kathorlia landlords (Bilga, 1989: 245-46; Chayn, 1990: 173). Their main demand, like that of the Nili Bar Morcha, was a very reasonable one - give half of the harvested crop for its tiller.

Despite the Kathorlia jagirdars ratcheting up their oppression through henchmen, the agitation went from strength to strength with the opening of a new revolutionary center called Shiv Kumar Sharda's Paniar Ashram (wherein Mai Tabbo of Paniar Ashram used to collect provisions from fellow villagers for the common kitchen to serve the Kirti party activists), and the entry of poet Lahori Ram Pardesi and Inder Singh Murari, who, before their shifting to Kangra district, had organised conventions of muzaras against the jagirdars

(Bilga, 1989: 247). Ram Singh Dutt was a prominent agitation leader who deserves special mention. He had been interned in his village Viram Dutta after returning from Moscow, but the entire functioning of the muzara movement - including all activities of the Kirti Party - took place under the banner of the Congress Party, and operated from within the village of Viram Dutta under his tactful leadership. During the period of his village confinement, a huge mazdoor-kisan-muzara conference had been organised in Viram Dutta, and so high was the popularity of Dutt that all participants prior to reaching the conference venue, met him at his residence. He had been legally debarred from undertaking any public activity or making political statements (Bilga, 1989: 247). A similar level of commitment and zeal are visible at the borders of Delhi where support has been pouring in from different sections of society from both within the country and abroad, and many Vishnu Dutt Sharmas have been camping alongside protesting farmers of Punjab, Haryana, and Uttar Pradesh in solidarity with their cause.

Charhik Morcha

Charhik Morcha of 1938, the Korotana conference struggle of 1941, *Harsa Chhina Mogha* (canal water outlet) morchas of 1946, and *Tanda Urmar Muzara Lehar* of 1947 were some other equally historic Kisan struggles organised under the leadership of Punjab Kisan Sabha in the pre-partition Punjab, which provide further context to properly place the ongoing farmers' protest in its proper, and lustrous, lineage. The Charhik morcha was launched by the *Kirti Kisan Party* on July 29, 1938 against the autocratic rule of the *Kalsia Riyasat* under the leadership of Baba Rurh Singh Chuharhchak, Vice-president of the Punjab Kisan Sabha and unopposed elected member of the Punjab Legislative Assembly in 1937 (Bilga, 1989: 260; Walia, 1972: 141). There was a popular saying that if Baba Jawala Singh was the commander of the muzara movement in West Punjab, Rurh Singh was that of East Punjab (Bilga, 1989: 260). Ujagar Singh Bilga, Gulzar Singh Kandekadh, Gurmukh Singh Ambalwi, and Baba Karam Singh Bilga were among others prominent leaders of this morcha (Bilga, 1989: 262). Farmers of villages Charhik, Burj Duna, Manuke, Berr Raoke, Chupkiti/Sandhuan Wala, Budh Singh Wala and Raoke were reeling under heavy unjustified taxes levied by the rulers of the Riyasat. Since these villages were situated far away from the Riyasat headquarter, they were deprived of basic civic amenities despite the heavy taxes collected. Within three months of its intensive peaceful struggle, the morcha led to thousands of farmers being arrested, such that jails were unable to accommodate more arrested farmers. The participation of women was equally emphatic, for instance Bibi Raghbir Kaur, a Kirti Party member of the Punjab Assembly, who took out a demonstration of 100 women in favour of agitating farmers. Ultimately, the morcha was an overwhelming success, ending with the acceptance of all its demands by the rulers of the Kalsia Riyasat on January 14, 1939 (Kangniwal, December 13, 2020).

Korotana Struggle

The pre-partition Korotana conference struggle was another illustrious milestone in the history of Punjab Kisan agitations. It took place at a time (during the World War II) when the British government had banned all progressive and radical kisan organisations, and many of their leaders were incarcerated in the Deoli Camp jail in Rajasthan and other prisons in the state. It was during such repressive circumstances that the Kirti Kisan Party decided to hold the fourth Delegate *ijlas* (session) of the Punjab Kisan Sabha at village Kotorana, fourteen kms from the town of Moga in the Malwa region of Punjab - a vast left-leaning Kisan belt from where even now a large number of farmers are currently protesting against the three central farm laws (Kangniwal, 2020). The preparation for the *ijlas* had already been made after selecting delegates through village-level elections of Kisan committees and holding *ijlas* of the Tehsil and District Kisan committees (Kangniwal, 2020). To thwart the *ijlas*, the government had made preparations including the stationing of heavy contingents of horse-mounted policemen at different intervals along the route to the destination decided upon for holding the *ijlas*. A rumour was also spread in the surrounding villages through the public announcement system that no one should reach Kotorana because of the possibility of firing taking place over there (Kangniwal, 2020).

Nevertheless farmers, paying scant heed to police warnings and arrests pre-*ijlas*, rushed to village Kotorana in thousands with red flags and raising slogans. During their march to the site of *ijlas* a total number of nine presidents - Mangal Singh, Baba Dhara Singh, Teja Singh Chuharchak, Lal Singh Kanwar, Muhammad Hayat, Gazhi Badrudeen, and Wadhava Ram - of the Kisan organisations, one after another, were arrested by the police (Kangniwal, 2020). It is apt to note at this juncture that in a striking similarity, the protesting farmers from Punjab and Haryana - like the Kisans of Kotorana struggle - had also reached the borders of Delhi on November 25, 2020 after overcoming various hurdles thrown in their way by the Haryana government. Against all odds, an estimated 40-50 thousands farmers were able to reach the site of the *ijlas*, where Gehal Singh Chhajalwaddi, assisted by Jagjit Singh Lyallpuri in the capacity of secretary, officiated. Like the current agitation at the gate of Delhi, hundreds of women, under the leadership of Sushila Chayn of the Kirti Party, participated in the *ijlas* at Kotorana that continued uninterrupted for three days (September 20-22, 1941). About 40 thousand kisan were present every day during the three days' *ijlas*. Meticulous *langar* arrangements were made throughout the programme, and on the last day of the congregation a Kisan workers' drama group of Ludhiana entertained the large gathering through real-life-based skits of kisans and the iniquitous treatment meted out to them at the hands of patwaris, nambardars, and moneylenders (Kangniwal, 2020). This protest was another grand success, and added another feather to the Kisan political movement's cap.

Lahore Morcha

Coming in on the heels of the Amritsar success story, the Lahore Morcha of 1938-39 presents a piece of significant historical background against which the current farmers' protests can be contrasted in order to understand the enthusiasm and persistence with which its participants, including women, the elderly, and children, have been braving the odds across highways on the borders of Delhi. The Lahore Morcha was launched against the enhancement of land revenue in the recent resettlement of Lahore district. A total of around 5,000 volunteers were jailed during this six-month agitation - primarily comprising *jathas* of volunteers marching to the Lahore Assembly (Bilga, 1989: 266). The first demonstration was organised on March 23, 1939 by the District Kisan Committee of Lahore under the leadership of Yog Raj and Tehal Singh Bhangali (Chayn, 1990: 178). The organisers of this inaugural demonstration were not permitted a meeting with the Premier of Punjab, and were compelled to violate Section 144. By the end of the first week, 374 had courted arrest (Bilga, 1989: 264-65; Mukherjee, 2004:189-190).

The large number of arrests did not shatter the spirit of the morcha. Though the District Kisan Committee of Lahore launched the morcha without the permission of the Punjab Kisan Committee (PKC), the latter came to its rescue by soliciting volunteers from neighbouring districts. This kept the morcha going at a time when farmers were busy during the wheat harvesting season. Despite April being harvesting season, 700 volunteers had been arrested by the middle of the month. It was at this time that the PKC took over the morcha, and appointed a sub-committee consisting of Baba Rurh Singh, Master Gajjan Singh and Ram Kishan for the purpose. Thus, between April 17 and May 3, the morcha got a new lease of life. During this period more women⁵ than men courted arrest. Momentum continued to build, with volunteers from a large number of districts joining the morcha. Even volunteers who had only recently returned home after spending a nine-month period in prison, threw themselves back into the fray by re-enrolling (Mukherjee, 2004:189-192).

When the government tightened its grip after the middle of June 1939 by pre-emptively arresting both leaders of the morcha as well as volunteer members of *jathas* in their respective home districts in order to prevent them from reaching Lahore at all, the PKC adapted by devising a strategy of sending of *jathas* of only five members. The morcha was given a substantial thrust by support extended by the All-India Kisan Sabha (Rasul, 1974), the Labour Federation of Amritsar, trade unions in Jalandhar, members of both the Congress and Akali Dal, and students of Lahore. The current farmers' protest at Delhi borders has also been supported by a large number of students, with some of them even running mobile libraries at the protest sites. Gurinder Singh, an Oxford University alumnus, told *NewsClick*:

We are here since day one. We felt that youth here, apart from participating in *seva* activities, have very little to do. So, we created this open space for them to get involved in creative activities. We named this library-cum-cultural centre as Sanjhi

Sath, which means shared *chaupal* (place for meeting) (Anwar, 2020).

Emboldened and empowered by such a broad spectrum of support, the morcha not only survived rampant police repression let loose in the home districts of the *Jathas* in August, but thrived. Finally, after a continuous agitation of six months, the morcha was unilaterally withdrawn by the PKS in the last week of September 1939. Though few of its demands had been accepted by the government of Sir Sikandar Hayat Khan, Premier of Punjab, the morcha had generated a political awakening among the peasantry, publicity for its cause, greatly boosted its membership numbers, and lastly benefited from the gravitation of several district-level congressmen to the Communist movement (Chayn, 1990: 178; Mukherjee, 2004: 194-196).

Harsa Chhina ‘Mogha’ Morcha

Harsa Chhina ‘Mogha’⁶ morchas⁷ of 1946 (henceforth Harsa Chhina morcha) are yet another celebrated struggle by the Punjab farmers in the pre-partition period, which was launched on July 20 1946 against the Provincial government’s notorious ‘remodelling scheme’ of reducing the size of the 100 outlets which released water from the Upper Bari Doab Canal of Lahore that irrigated the agriculture land of a large number of villages falling under the Ajnala tehsil, in the Majitha sub-division of district Amritsar. The size of forty out of the total number of canal outlets was reduced to a level that would allow only *a quarter* of the given water to pass into the fields. Deeply upset by the inexplicable government action, farmers of the surrounding fifteen villages of Harsa Chhina approached the concerned ministers through the legislator of their constituency, but failed to enlist a positive response from the government. The aggrieved farmers then submitted a memorandum to the government through Kisan Sabha of district Amritsar, for withdrawal of the ‘remodelling scheme’ and restoration to the original size of the canal outlets. It was also mentioned in the resolution that if nothing positive is heard from the government, within a span of fifteen days, the affected farmers will dismantle the newly installed smaller size outlets (Kangniwal, Unpublished paper[a]).

After receiving no response from the coalition government of Congress and Akalis, formed after the 1946 provincial elections, 10 thousand farmers got organised under the leadership of Achhar Singh Chhina, President of Punjab Kisan Sabha, on July 20, 1946, as per the prior communication to the government. On the same day, 25 volunteers, led by Achhar Singh Chhina, held a march from Gurdwara Babe di Kulli to dismantle the outlets. This was followed by similar volunteer groups from different villages under the common forum of ‘Harsa Chhina Mogha Morcha for War Council’. The morcha rapidly acquired momentum, which forced the government to stop arresting protesting farmers, whereupon the morcha leaders began organising *dharnas* (sit-ins) by the *Jathās* (volunteer groups) in front of the office of the canal department. Many women also participated in the morcha. Bibi Raghbir Kaur (former

Legislator), Mohinder Kaur Bedi, Bibi Kirtan Ghudae kee Wali, Parsinoo Kasel among others led a large women-only procession shouting *murdabad* (down with or death to) and *Nehri morcha jit ke rahange* (we will not relent unless the Nehri morcha is secured) towards the office of the canal department and entered its premises after breaking through the human-ring formed by the police. The police arrested the protesting women and sent them to Brostal Jail in Lahore. During the morcha, a total number of 1800 farmers were arrested, and though the morcha was suspended following the eruption of the communal clashes on the eve of partition of Punjab, it left an indelible print of determination and endurance of farmers to fight for their land rights - qualities which are reflected in the ongoing farmers' protest (Kangniwal, unpublished paper[a]).

Tanda Urmar Morcha

The *Tanda Urmar Muzara Morcha*⁸ is, perhaps, the last Kisan morcha for the restoration of land rights of farmers before the partition of Punjab. This morcha was launched by the Hindu, Sikh, and Muslim muzaras and shopkeepers against the oppressive verdicts of a Pathan *jagirdar*, Shahbaz Khan, who owned the entire 2400 acres of agricultural land, upon which the shopkeepers, artisans, muzaras, and labourers all paid fixed rents. Muzaras were not allowed to dig wells on the land, and neither did they have any rights on trees standing on their rented land. If anyone sold a house or shop, 20 percent of the received price was payable to Shahbaz Khan. The muzaras were also expected to give gifts to the jagirdar on varied occasions in their families. In 1946, the jagirdar brought village grave-yards and cremation grounds under his control, and simultaneously enhanced the rent of the shanties, houses, and shops. This spurred the affected muzaras and shopkeepers to form common committees under the leadership of Abdul Kadar Khan, a reputed resident of the town, who then led the first *jatha* of muzaras to harvest the crop of the jagirdar. Events then quickly escalated, with the police arresting and imprisoning all jatha members for a period of one year, leading to Ibrahim, a well-known local personality, being nominated to coordinate a morcha and an action committee being formed under the leadership of Abdul Kadar Khan (Kangniwal, unpublished paper[b]).

In January 1947, the Action Committee convened meetings, organised conferences and took out processions to build public opinion against the oppression perpetrated by the goons of the jagirdar, who were looting the houses of muzaras, insulting their women, and beating them mercilessly without any provocation. Munshi Ahmed Din, Tikka Ram Sukhan, Ashraf, Chaudhary Devi Lal of Haryana, Ramanand Mishra, national leader of the Socialist Party from Bihar, and Pandit Mohan Lal Dutt addressed the conferences organised by the morcha. On hearing the wide publicity of this morcha, Mahatma Gandhi deputed Sushila Nayyar to Tanda Urmar. The latter appreciated the non-violent conduct of the satyagrahis of the morcha despite the repressive actions of the jagirdar (Kangniwal, Unpublished paper[b]).

The Action Committee prepared a programme to cut trees from the land of the jagirdar and harvest crops sown on the graveyard land forcefully occupied

by him. On February 17, 1947, the entire Jatha of 50 satyagrahis deputed for this cause under the command of Abdul Kadar Khan, head of the Action Committee, was arrested and imprisoned in Hoshiarpur jail for one year - though a few were sent to other jails for scarcity of space. Mubarak Sagar, communist leader, was also arrested and jailed, and Hukam Chand Gulshan, Kisan leader, was jailed without any judicial inquiry (Kangniwal, Unpublished paper[b]). Baldev Mitter Bijli and Mubarak Sagar were also imprisoned (Bilga, 1989: 248). The morcha received strong support from various other districts, and a total number of 1300 volunteers, of all religions, were arrested and imprisoned for one year. More than 300 women also participated in the *satyagraha*, seven of whom were arrested and jailed. Among the arrested satyagrahis were twenty-seven Muslims and four Hindus. Of the total arrested thirty-one were teenagers.

This morcha came to an abrupt end on June 30, 1947 due to the sudden eruption of communal riots on the eve of independence of India and Pakistan respectively, and the ensuing partition of Punjab. All arrested volunteers were released on November 27, 1947, with Muslims taken to Delhi under high security cover, then sent to Pakistan. Subsequent to partition and the jagirdar leaving for Pakistan, the remaining village inhabitants were relieved of the draconian jagirdari system, and eventually the muzaras were declared owners of the land they were tilling as tenants of the jagirdar, under the Constitutional provisions of independent India (Kangniwal, Unpublished paper[b]).

V

Contextualising Farmers' Protests

(2) Post-Independence Agrarian Movements

PEPSU Muzara Movement

Other than the above-discussed pre-partition Kisan morchas, the post-independence Indian Punjab similarly witnessed farmers' struggle for the safeguarding of their land rights. Patiala and East Punjab States Union (PEPSU) Muzara movement (henceforth Pepsu Muzara Movement, PMM) of 1948-51 was the most prominent. The other equally important struggles were: *Khush-hasiyati* Tax morcha (anti-betterment levy agitation) of 1959, and the *Mehatpur Beyt muzara* agitation. The PMM, in fact, was the continuation of the muzaras' protracted struggle against the *biswedars* (big landlords/absentee landlords) since the formation of the *biswedari* system in the 1870s, by the Maharaja of Patiala - an erstwhile princely state, capital of PEPSU and district headquarters of Punjab for the North-Western region of India. The biswedars, mostly the relatives and close confidantes of the Maharaja, established their ownership rights on vast tracts of lands, but those (hereditary proprietary peasants) who had actually developed these lands with generations of hard labour of their families were reduced to ignoble status of muzaras.⁹ A *Hidayat* (princely fiat) issued in 1872 forced muzaras to pay half of their crop to biswedars as *batai* (the share of a crop going to biswedars under the share-cropping system). However,

in actual practice, many of the muzaras were left with only a ¼ of their hard produced crops (an instance of rack-renting) courtesy of the *kankut* system, under which state functionaries assessed the yield of each crop before its actual harvest and often fixed an exaggerated amount to be handed over to the biswedars (Mukherjee, 2004: 246-247). The biswedari system got further intensified during 1902-04 after the Permanent Land Bandobast (Arshi, March 19, 2021), and the First Regular Settlement of Patiala (A.D. 1908-1909) reinforced it formally (Mukherjee, 2004: 246; Mukherjee, 1979: 216-83).

However, the muzaras did not sit idly by. They approached courts and also the Viceroy at Shimla to reclaim their grabbed lands but to no avail (Arshi, March 19, 2021; Singh, May 16, 2021). The failure in getting relief from the courts by the ancestors of the currently protesting farmers might have impelled them not to be impleaded in the ongoing case in the Supreme Court. Rajewal, President BKU (Rajewal) told The Economic Times:

We have been included in this matter against our wishes. We have told our lawyers to tell the court that we do not want to be impleaded in the case ... We are prepared to go to jail. The Supreme Court should not discuss the law points going ahead as the matter then be delayed for long (Sharma, 2021).

Finding no relief from the courts, muzaras began vehemently opposing biswedars and their henchmen from taking away their hard produced crops. This led to bloody fights between the erstwhile proprietors, now turned muzaras, and the biswedars supported by their musclemen. The muzara struggle got impetus with the formation of the Punjab *Riyasti Praja Mandal* (henceforth Praja Mandal) on July 17, 1928 at Mansa in Patiala state. Though the Praja Mandal was mainly a movement of the Sikh peasantry that evolved out of the long drawn Gurdwara Reform Movement (1921-25),¹⁰ the varied ideological affiliations (Akalis, Socialists, Communists and Congress) of its multi-religious membership gave it a secular platform.¹¹ It instilled new spirit in the muzara movement through its Akali-Praja Mandal Dewans (religio-political congregations)¹² as well as extension of its political campaigns to the smaller states of East Punjab, especially the state of Nabha, Jind and Malerkotla, for the protection of rights and liberties of the people, the setting up of representative institutions, and the amelioration of the hardships of the Muzaras. In 1933, the Mandal started an Urdu Weekly *Ryasti Duniya* (Lahore) edited by Talib Hussain of Malerkotla and a Punjabi journal *Desh Dardi* (Amritsar) edited by Sardara Singh Yuthup of Nabha Riyasat, to provide extensive coverage of its varied activities (Bilga, 1989: 240; Walia, 1972: 82-83). History repeats itself: the ongoing farmers' struggle for the withdrawal of three agriculture laws is being spearheaded by more than 32 Punjab farmers unions, and over forty Indian farmers unions, coalesced into *Samyukt Kisan Morcha*, having divergent political affiliations.

Another significant development that further strengthened the muzara movement was the formation of the Communist-led kisan committees, which were also working 'under the influence and direction of Praja Mandal leaders

...’ (Mukherjee, 2004: 252). In a nut shell, the Praja Mandal leaders, Akalis and the leaders of the Communist-led Kisan Sabhas stood with the muzaras in their tirade against the biswedars, ‘who had no legitimate right to the land which had been theirs (proprietor turned Muzaras) for generations ...’ (Mukherjee, 2004: 247). Supported by the Praja Mandal movement, Akalis and Communists, and awakened by the new political consciousness ignited by the bloody happenings at Jallianwala Bagh (1919) at Amritsar, Nankana massacre (1921) at Nankana Sahib Gurdwara, now in Pakistan, Jaito da morcha (1924) and Morcha Guru ka Bagh; muzaras formed their own ‘Muzara Committee’ in 1929 and ‘Muzara War Council’ in 1938-39. In 1945, a new twenty-one member Muzara War Council was also formed and this ‘unleashed the most militant movement in the East Punjab States’ (Walia, 1972: 95-97 & 163). The muzaras stopped paying *batai* to biswedars, leading to pitched battles between them at many villages - prominent among them were Rajomajra¹³, Bhadaur, and Qila Hakimian - culminating in a minimum of three dozen killing of muzaras including some women and children (Mukherjee, 2004: 249-266; Arshi, 2021).

Though Praja Mandal movement (kisan movement of self-cultivating peasants) and PMM (occupancy tenants’ movement) were considered complimentary,¹⁴ one major factor that differentiated them was their level of commitment to achieve their respective goals. For the former, the basic demands were reduction of land revenues and water rates, right to *shamlat* (village common land), amendment of Nazool land laws (laws which regulate inheritance in case there are no direct descendants), relief from indebtedness, abolition of *begār* (forced labour), right of *shikar*/hunting etc (Mukherjee, 2004:244). In the case of the latter, the muzaras’ movement aimed at retrieval of hereditary proprietary land rights divested by arbitrary and iniquitous edicts of the Maharaja of Patiala Riyasat and gifted to the biswedars. For the muzaras the movement was a fight to the finish, whereas for the self-cultivating peasants of the Praja Mandal, the fight was a game of political expediency since their land ownership rights remained intact. There is another strong parallel. The current farmers’ struggle seems to be a perfect repeat story: in the 1980s, the farmers’ movements were precisely, to quote Kumar, for:

the enhancement of support prices, institutionalised credit system, regular supply of inputs on subsidised rates, etc. Those protests used to threaten to stop the supply of foodgrain to *cities* of other states. Whereas now the crisis is privatisation of agricultural operations and of food grain not finding a market. This protest is for survival (Kumar, 2021, *emphasis added*).

Farmers are steadfast in their determination, as can be gauged from their statements reported in the media, to return their home only after getting the three controversial farm laws rescinded.

The question of reclaiming hereditary land rights - the question of survival - kept the muzaras’ momentum alive despite the brutal repression unleashed by the aristocracy of the Patiala Riyasat. The movement also suffered several setbacks such as the passing away of Sewa Singh Thikriwala, the legendary

kisan leader and founder President of the Punjab Riyasat Praja Mandal, the arrest of Harnam Singh of Dharamgarh, Master Tara Singh's pact with Maharaja Bhupinder Singh, the steep fall in crop prices because of the Great Depression, and the arrest of the Punjab Socialist and Communist leaders during World War II for their opposition to the war effort. The movement got a fillip after the ban on left-wing parties was withdrawn and once again, Communist leaders started building up support in favour of the muzara movement. Dharam Singh Fakkar led the Patiala State Kisan Committee, and Ishar Singh Tamkot led the Patiala State Kisan Muzara Committee, along with Harnam Singh Dharamgarh's efforts after his release from Jail. He attempted to reactivate his contacts among sympathetic Akalis circles and this helped significantly in reviving the dampened spirit of the struggling muzaras (Mukherjee, 2004: 277-295). Emboldened by this groundswell support, especially that given by Harnam Singh Dharamgarh, Jagir Singh Joga, Achhar Singh Chhina, Ishar Singh Tamkot and Ajmer Singh Tamkot, the muzaras of villages Gurbukhshpura, Dasondhasinghwal, Gobindgarh, Dhandoli Khurd in Sunam District and Bakshiwal confronted the biswedars by their refusal to pay the *batai* share (Mukherjee, 2004: 287-291). The muzara movement of Patiala State compelled the Maharaja to make a Royal Proclamation on March 11, 1947 to the effect of guaranteeing proprietorship rights to tenants, though, only on a portion of the land (Mukherjee, 2004: 292). The tenants did not accept the proclamation - a sign of their growing strength - and remained steadfast in their resolve to realise the return of their hereditary land.

Lal Communist Party and the PEPSU Muzara Movement

The muzara movement touched new heights with the entry of the Lal Communist Party Hind Union (henceforth Lal Party) in its struggle against the biswedari system in the PEPSU region of the Punjab state. Led by Teja Singh Swatantar,¹⁵ the Lal Party, a militant breakaway group of erstwhile Ghadrites and 'Kirit' Communists of Punjab, who differed with the official line of the Communist Party of India (CPI) on the question of partition as well as support to the peasant movement, was founded on January 5, 1948, in Nakodar in Jalandhar District (Mukherjee, 2004:297). In its founding conference (January 5-8, 1948) at Nakodar, the Lal Party elected a central committee and a Punjab State Committee. The former consisted of Teja Singh Swatantar (General Secretary), Bhag Singh PhD, Ram Singh Dutt, Bujha Singh, Wadhawa Ram, Chhajju Mal Vaid and Gurcharan Singh Sehnsra. The latter, composed of Chayn Singh Chayn (Secretary), Vishnu Dutt Sharma, Harbans Singh Karnana, Giani Santa Singh, Ajmer Singh Bharu, Dharam Singh Fakkar, Paras Ram Kangra, Lal Singh Kanwar (poet) and Chanan Singh Tugalwal. The party published its own fortnightly newspaper, *Lal Jhanda* (Red Flag) in Punjabi, Hindi and English edited by Teja Singh Swatantar. The current farmers' agitation also founded its four-page bi-weekly newspaper *Trolley Times* in Punjabi and Hindi to provide a truer picture of the struggle.

The Lal Party appeared on the scene at a time when the muzaras and biswedars were locked in full confrontation, which for the former was a crucial, and almost existential struggle. This was also the time when the Communist-dominated Muzara War Council (formed in 1945), the Communists, and muzara-sympathetic Praja Mandal were all passing resolutions calling for total abolishment of the oppressive biswedari system. In the face of increasing strength of the muzaras and the support they received from the Communists and the Congress-backed Praja Mandal, the biswedars began organising armed gangs to defend their illegally occupied lands, and to forcefully take *batai* from their muzaras. These new developments further radicalised the muzara movement which soon found itself enmeshed in pitched battles, involving armed resistance, over issues of non-payment of *batai* and forcefully resuming control over their land occupied by the biswedars.

It was at such a crucial juncture, against the backdrop discussed above, that Teja Singh Swatantar began the process of organising small bands of armed men after founding the Lal Party in 1948. The sole aim of the 'armed force wing' of the Lal Party was not to wage a war against the state, but to save the muzaras from armed assaults of the biswedars unleashed by their well-organised armed gangs (Mukherjee, 2004: 297-299). Subsequently, muzaras of more than 200 villages were able to reclaim their occupied land and divided the same among themselves under the supervision of Baba Harnam Singh Dharmgarh of the Lal Party (Arshi, 2021). Refusal of payment of *batai* became a routine matter. After the inauguration of the union of Patiala, Nabha, Jind, Kalsia, Faridkot, Kapurthala, and Malerkotla (the East Punjab States), which came to be known as Pepsu, on July 15, 1948, the muzara-biswedard confrontation, especially given the increasing influence of the Lal Party among the muzaras, spread to all regions of these princely states. Chanan Singh Dhoot, Chaudhary Wasao Dhaliwal, Master Hari Singh Dhoot, Baba Karam Singh Dhoot and Baba Harnam Singh Kala Sanghian were among the prominent muzara leaders in Kapurthala Riyasat. Chanan Singh Dhoot, Chaudhary Wasao and Master Hari Singh were also elected to the Punjab Assembly (Bilga, 1989: 241).

The confrontation reached a climax in village Kishangarh of tehsil (sub-division) Mansa in Patiala on March 16 and 18, 1949. On March 16, a Sub-inspector of the police was killed in the clash. After a gap of one day, the police, reinforced by a contingent of the army with tanks and armoured cars, surrounded Kishangarh. In the exchange of fire at the village, six people were killed, a dozen seriously injured and 'twenty six Red Guards along with their leader, Dharam Singh Fakkar were taken into police custody and tried for various offences like murder, rioting etcetera' (Walia, 1972: 193-94). A battery of lawyers, who were also well-known leaders of Praja Mandal, defended the detainees pro bono and ultimately all the accused were acquitted (Arshi, 2021).

It is worth mentioning here that muzaras' political awakening and their stellar commitment to the cause of getting their illegally occupied hereditary land back was so intensive that even the military action failed to deter them. According to Walia 'The tenancy movement continued till various land reform measures were enacted by the Pepsu Assembly after the 1952 General Elections'

(Walia, 1972: 194). In fact, the concrete process of land reform measures began taking shape after the formation of a 'purely Congress ministry in 1952 ...' (Mukherjee, 2004: 302). Under this Congress ministry, continues Mukherjee:

An Agrarian Reforms Enquiry Committee was set up to make recommendations regarding suitable legislation to solve the tenants' problems and the process of agrarian reforms set in motion. Till such time as the legislation could be enacted, the PEPSU Tenancy (Temporary Provision) Act was promulgated in January 1952 which protected tenants against eviction (Mukherjee, 2004: 302).

In the fast succession of changes at the helm of the governing structure between July 1948 and May 1951, Pepsu witnessed four interim ministries (Walia, 1972: 194). Even following the first General Elections in 1952, the situation remained essentially unaltered. The United Front Ministry formed on April 21, 1952 under the leadership of G.S. Rarewala, failed to survive even for a year. However, before its dissolution and the imposition of presidential rule in March 1953, the Rarewala government was able to introduce much expected agrarian legislation in the Assembly (Mukherjee, 2004: 302; Walia, 1972: 197). Since agrarian reforms were already in process, an amicable solution of the muzaras' lingering agitation was chiselled during the ensuing presidential rule. The president issued the PEPSU Occupancy Tenants (Vesting of Proprietary Rights) Act, which authorised the muzaras (occupancy tenants) to 'become owners of their land by paying compensation amounting to 12 times the land revenues. This amount, given the war-time and post-war inflation and the fact that land revenue continued to be assessed at the pre-war rates, was not too burdensome (Mukherjee, 2004: 303). The PEPSU Tenancy and Agricultural Lands Act, together with the PEPSU Abolition of *Ala Malkiyat* Act were also issued by the president, and brought the muzara agitation to its successful conclusion with the restoration of their hereditary proprietary land rights (Mann, 1983: 326-27). After the successful completion of the PMM, the Lal Party reunited with its parent organisation, the Communist Party of India, and a few years later Pepsu was mostly merged into East Punjab state on November 1, 1956 following the States Reorganisation Act.

The PMM was thus one of the most successful agrarian agitations in this region, and the only able to get land reforms introduced without much bloodshed. The movement retrieved over 16 lakh acres of land from the illegal control of the biswedars, returning it to their original and hereditary owners, thus elevating them to the higher category of proprietary farmers (Arshi, March 19, 2021). At village Kishangarh - the epicentre of muzaras' protests, where four farmers (Ram Singh, Kunda Singh, Kapura Singh and an unidentified person) were killed in a bloody clash between state armed forces and villagers supported by the Red Guards of the Lal Party in March 1949 - an annual commemorative function is held in memory of the martyrs of the PMM on March 19. A memorial gate dedicated to the contribution of the village to the movement has also been constructed at the entrance of Kishangarh. Drawing inspirations from the Pepsu

muzara movement, the protesting farmers at Delhi borders organised this year's annual function on March 19, 2021, at Tikri border as well as at other protest sites. Paying tribute to the martyrs of Kishangarh at the Delhi borders, Darshan Pal, president of Krantikari Kisan Union and also a member of SKM, felicitated family members of the martyrs and highlighted the contribution of the movement in securing the rights of muzaras (Jagga, 2021). There are striking similarities between the current farmers' movement and the PMM. They both forged unity between farmer and agricultural worker unions, generated a social and political awakening among farmers and farm workers, blurred caste and gender fault lines, and aimed at strengthening the country's democratic system.

Anti-Betterment Levy Agitation

After the PMM,¹⁶ post-independence Punjab witnessed another mass peasant peaceful agitation - Anti-Betterment Levy agitation - against a 'major aspect of Government policy' (Surjeet, 1986: 8). This struggle was led by the CPI's front organisation *Punjab Kisan Sabha* which had mastered the art of non-violent struggles in pre-independence period. Though the Anti-Betterment Levy agitation, locally known as *Khush-hasiyati* Tax morcha, was formally launched on January 21, 1959, it actually began in 1952 when, before the completion of Bhakra canal system, the Punjab Government 'armed itself with a legislation to impose betterment levy, with the aim of meeting all the expenditure on canal system through this tax' (Surjeet, 1986: 4). Like the Punjab Land Colonisation Act 1907, this legislation's *raison d'être* was the collection of substantial funds via the taxation of farmers on account of 'fifty percent of the increase in price of land due to the Bhakra canal system.' (Surjeet, 1986: 4). A major criticism of this legislation was that the Punjab government wanted to collect tax to the tune of Rs. 123 crore to meet the canal's construction expenditure, ie much before its completion, from farmers whose 30 lakh acres of land - out of the total commanded areas of 49 lakh acres of land under the Bhakra canal project - would be actually irrigated.

The Punjab Kisan Sabha opposed the tax by arguing that the construction costs of the Bhakra canal system 'could be met through the normal course of taxation like the water tax and surcharge which were in operation at that time' (Surjeet, May 1986: 4). It was calculated that the Punjab government could receive more than four crores of rupees in the form of water tax and surcharge from 30 lakh acres of actual land slated to benefit after the completion of the Bhakra canal project and that 'would be sufficient to meet the cost of the irrigation part of the components of the project ...' (Surjeet, 1986: 5). It was also argued that the Bhakra project was not a profit but a productive venture, and the levy would adversely impact the already highly indebted and heavily tax-burdened peasantry of Punjab and pushing the financially weakest into distress sales of farmland and subsequent penury. Nonetheless, the adamant Punjab government began serving assessment notices by the end of 1957 and beginning of 1958, to peasants falling within the canal catchment areas spread over nine

districts (Surjeet, 1986: 4-8). This, no doubt, instigated the peasantry of the state to rise up en masse to fight for their land rights.

More than 11,000 affected peasants approached the courts against the draconian assessment notices, and expressed their angst through organising conventions, conferences, signature campaigns, mass representations, memoranda to both the State and Central government, and massive demonstrations involving more than one lakh peasants. In retrospect, the ongoing protest against the three 2020 central farm laws, are a mirror image of what actually transpired during the Anti-Betterment Levy struggle of Punjab. Like the various farm unions of the currently protesting farmers at Delhi borders, the Punjab Kisan Sabha engaged the then Punjab government to discuss very thoroughly each and every clause of the Levy Act and meticulously argued its case while focusing on their serious repercussions for the already debt and tax burdened Punjab peasantry. But the Punjab government did not pay any heed to peasant concerns and 'promulgated an ordinance on January 4, 1959, to realise betterment levy as advance payment' (Surjeet, 1986: 6).

Thus the Punjab Kisan Sabha - after unsuccessfully campaigning for more than one and half years - was left with no option but to take to the streets in a direct, but peaceful, confrontation with the obstinate Congress government of Partap Singh Kairon. The Sabha formed various Action Committees at different levels and started enlisting volunteers. To establish proper co-ordination among its various Action Committees, the Sabha also constituted a state-level Action Committee consisting of Jagjit Singh Lyallpuri, Harkrishan Singh Surjeet, Dalip Singh Tapiala, Baba Gurmukh Singh, Mohan Singh Jandiala, Master Hari Singh, Gurcharan Singh Randhawa, Satwant Singh - nephew of Master Tara Singh, who later became secretary of the Punjab unit of the CPI (M) - and Avtar Singh Malhotra to work incognito. Ultimately the Partap Singh Kairon Government, having failed to silence the democratic voice of the struggling peasants, was forced to retreat. Sohan Singh Josh, Baba Bhagat Singh Bilga, Harnam Singh Chamak, Hardit Singh Bhattal, Bhag Singh Canadian, Desh Raj Chadha, V.D. Chopra, Partap Singh Dhanola, were among other prominent leaders of the Punjab Kisan Sabha who waged a vehement struggle against the unjustified levy. Within less than a period of one month after the promulgation of the ordinance, more than 10,000 volunteers were enrolled to struggle for its retraction (Surjeet, 1986: 6; Sidhu, 2020).

Despite deploying the modus operandi of mass democratic mobilisation, the state regime initially refused to relent, and deployed all repressive and brutal measures at its disposal - firing, tear-gas, lathi charge, third degree torture of non-violent volunteers, and forcibly taking away property items of the peasant houses in the name of executing attachment orders. Within a period of two months (from January 21, 1959 to March 22, 1959) of the struggle:

nineteen thousand volunteers offered Satyagraha by obstructing the work of district courts, ten thousand went to jails, three thousand volunteers got badly beaten by police lathis, hundred were tortured in police stations. Eight became martyrs facing the police bullets, including three women (*Mai Chand Kaur and*

Mai Bachan Kaur of Aitiana village of Ludhiana district and one woman from Narur village of district Kapurthala); one died in police custody, due to torture; and two more laid down their lives in prison. Apart from the firing at these places, the police and the security forces organised a seige on many villages with machine guns directed against the villages, in order to restrict the movement of the people in strong centres (Surjeet, 1986:2-3; emphasis added. Also see: Sidhu, 2020).

Ultimately the Kairon Government, having failed to silence the democratic voice of the struggling peasants, was forced to retreat.

Summing up, this struggle brought together volunteers from across divides of caste, class (poor, middling, rich landowners, and landless agricultural labourers), gender, age (inter-generational), religion, political party affiliation (with both Congressites, Akalis, and Communists) and both the urban and rural. It generated both a solid cohesive social consciousness based on the syncretic heritage of medieval Punjabi culture, whilst simultaneously dealing a severe blow to Partition-induced communal consciousness. As stated by Surjeet 'Never before in the post-independence period, had Punjab witnessed such a resounding and massive unity of the popular forces' (Surjeet, 1986: 2). Various *jathas* of volunteers visited canal catchment areas, priming peasants for a long struggle, and were received with warmth at every village. Akin to the upsurge of cultural awakening along the borders of Delhi, the boys and girls enthralled gatherings of protestors with newly-composed revolutionary songs decrying the unjust ley tax. Not only peasants and labourers, but hundreds of *numberdars* (revenue collectors), *panchas* (members of village *panchayat* (governing body) and *sarpanchas* (head of *panchayats*) also joined the struggle (Surjeet, 1986: 2).

Mehatpur Byet Muzara Movement

Mehatpur *Byet*¹⁷ Muzara movement¹⁸ was another post-independence resounding peasant success which provides valuable historical background for contextualising the current farmers' protests at the seamlessly barricaded borders of Delhi. It is not only the currently protesting farmers who are accused of being Khalistanis and supported by 'Urban Naxals' - such labels were also frequently hurled at peasants of the Mehatpur *Byet* Muzara Movement. They were allegedly accused of being supported by Naxalites and consequently subjected to brutal oppression but nevertheless ultimately emerged victorious due to their innate strengths. These strengths arose from the gross injustice inherent in the status of being a muzara¹⁹ which created a steely determination in the affected, and due to the non-violent nature of their agitation against which the administration's choices of counter actions were limited.

The story of the Mehatpur *Byet* Muzara Movement began in 1961 with the then Punjab government's decision to set up a potato seed-farm on 10,000 acres of land spread 65 miles along the Satluj river belt in the Doaba region of Punjab. This land had been already sold by the Central government to the Punjab

government at a nominal rate of Rs 5 per acre (Chandan 1979: 188). A portion of this land was with the Forest Department, and the rest, on the North of Satluj, was declared uncultivable and was locally called *Jhall* (Sidhu, 2021). It was on this uncultivable *Jhall* on the Doaba side of the river that 1,682 families, mainly of the Rai-Sikh tribe, had settled on approximately 27,000 acres of land following their displacement from Ferozepur district in 1957, after re-demarcation of the Indo-Pak border. Earlier, in 1947, they had already been displaced from West Pakistan due to Partition.

Some of these displaced families had settled on the Malwa side of the river by establishing small villages of thatched huts and had begun cultivation on occupied land in the river bed in the early sixties (Chandan, 1979: 188). These occupants of the land in the river bed came to be known as *abadkars* (settlers) - which was certainly an elevation over their earlier lower social status of so-called refugees (returnees of West Punjab). The Mehatpur *Byet* Muzara struggle was waged by the *abadkars* of Sanghowal (Jalandhar), Matewara and Hedon (Ludhiana) villages of the *abadkars*, whereas the Hedon *abadkar* agitation (1972-76) was fought under the leadership of Punjab Kisan Sabha against one Banta Singh, who had occupied 450 acres of evacuee land (Chandan, 1979: 188). In the latter struggle, the *abadkars* were able to establish their hold on Banta Singh's occupied evacuee land, and christened the reclaimed land and 'the small colony of thatched huts as Swatantra Nagar, named after the Teja Singh Swatanter, a Communist leader of Punjab' (Chandan, 1979, 188-189). The Matewara and Hedon *abadkar* agitations (1972-76) were fought under the leadership of Comrade Puran Singh Narangwal of Punjab Kisan Sabha against one Banta Singh, who had occupied 450 acres of evacuee land (Chandan, 1979: 188). In Hedon, the *abadkars* were able to establish their hold on Banta Singh's occupied evacuee land, and christened the reclaimed land and 'the small colony of thatched huts as Swatantra Nagar, named after the Teja Singh Swatanter, a communist leader of Punjab' (Chandan, 1979, 188-189). The *abadkars* of Matewara were also restored to their allotted land. Both the Matewara and Hedon agitation were won without the use of violence.²⁰

However, the main struggle of the *abadkars*, for which the Mehatpur *Byet* Muzara Movement has been known, was fought on the issue of setting up of a seed-farm, with technical assistance from erstwhile Soviet Union, at village Sanghowal in the vicinity of Mehatpur, another well-known village in the Nakodar tehsil of Jalandhar district. Though in official records the seed-farm was called 'Sanghowal Seed Farm', local people knew it by the name 'Russi[an] seed-farm' (Sidhu, 2021). To complete this ambitious project, the Punjab government brought in twelve giant Russian tractors to flatten the uneven river-bed land along with its wild bushes and trees. In this process, on October 23, 1968, these tractors razed the huts of the *abadkars*, destroyed their standing crops, and dismantled their tube-wells. To make matters worse for *abadkars*, the majority of surrounding landowners - who had been promised high quality seeds at a low price - supported the government on this issue to the extent of fighting the *abadkars* with goons (Sidhu, 2021).

Caught in the teeth of adversity, the *abadkars* of Sanghowal organised under the leadership of the CPI(M)-controlled Punjab Kisan Sabha by constituting a 27-member Abadkar Action Committee (ACC) with a CPI(M) activist, Kulwant Singh²¹ belonging to a nearby village Mandiala, elected its secretary. Arjun Anjan, Dona Singh, Arjun Gaunswal, Kartar Singh Raipur were also members of the ACC, among others. Advocate Harbhajan Singh, Dhanpat Rai Nahar, Hakikat Rai, Surjit Singh Guru, and Santokh Singh were among other prominent members of this morcha (Sidhu, 2021). The ACC approached the court, deputations of *abadkars* met state officials and clashes frequently occurred between the police and agitating *abadkars* who threw themselves, along with their women, children and even elderly family members, before government tractors which were destroying their crops. Demonstrations were also organised against the overly repressive measures taken by the Punjab police (Chandan, 1979, 188; Sidhu, 2021).

In mid-1969, the *abadkars*, armed with conventional weapons and even hoes, took out a massive demonstration at Nakodar and presented a charter of demands to the Sub-Division Magistrate (SDM). Emboldened by the tremendous grassroots support given, the *abadkars* of Sangowal occupied a 150-acre farm owned by Gujjar Singh of village Khaira Fauja Singh Mushtarka, illegally and distributed it among landless Dalit families of Tara Singh and Bhagat Singh from the Ajnala side, thus forcing him to flee to his native town of Khanna (Chandan, 1979, 188; Sidhu, 2021). The *abadkars* were allegedly accused of aligning with the Naxalite movement, which had successfully established cells in rural Punjab, but this was pure fiction concocted by the state in order to let loose police brutality on the protesting *abadkars* and force them to withdraw their agitation. According to Chandan:

In June 1970, the Punjab police carried out the biggest-ever combing operation in its history from Ropar to Malsian to terrorise the *abadkar*. Every hut was searched and people were beaten up indiscriminately (Chandan 1979: 189).

However, police action failed to dampen the spirit of the agitating *abadkars*. ‘In the same month’, to quote Chandan further, ‘a joint *abadkar*-Muzara convention at Ferozepur of the kisan wings of both the CPI and CPI(M) put forward the major demand of giving ownership rights to the *abadkars*’ (Chandan, 1979: 189). Finally, in August 1970, at the Sanghowal kisan conference, the then Akali Finance Minister, Balwant Singh, as per his promise during the 1969 assembly elections, announced that every *abadkar* family, whether it had *girdawri* (land records) or not, would be given 4-5 acres²² of land with proprietary rights (Chandan, 1979, 188; Sidhu, June 26, 2021). Thus, the *abadkar*, with the support of ACC and their peaceful struggle, were able to retain their land in the Mehatpur Byet area against all odds.

Chandigarh Morcha

With the formation of the Punjab Khetibari Zimindara Union (KZU) in 1972,²³ and later its transformation into the Punjab unit of BKU in 1980,²⁴ a major shift occurred in the nature and politics of the farmers' movement in Punjab. Till the mid-1970s, all farmer struggles were waged under the active leadership of the Communists, primarily the CPI but with significant backing and participation of Ghadri Babas.²⁵ But with the founding of the KZU (later the BKU), the centre of gravity of Punjab farmers' union politics shifted to affluent farmer leaders with no Communist backgrounds, who successfully entrenched themselves in panchayats, block samities, and co-operative institutions, and even a cursory glance at the various issues taken up by the Punjab BKU, reveals that it has represented primarily the wishes of this particular sub-demographic (Gill and Singhal, 1984: 1729).

The BKU leadership has been, since its inception, monopolised by rich farmers, but even small and marginal farmers joined it - though it was agnostic, or at best lukewarm to their interests - for the reason of clan kinship. As Gill and Singhal have argued 'With the resources of the rich farmers, particularly tractor-trollies and participation of the poor peasants, the union is able to demonstrate its strength at various levels' (Gill and Singhal 1984: 1729). The current unity between the farmers and agricultural labourers witnessed at Delhi borders, with the sharing of common facilities, particularly the trollies modified into mobile rooms, is reminiscent of the 1984 Chandigarh agitation.

The first major kisan agitation launched by BKU started on January 20, 1983 with the non-payment of electricity bills. After a year-long mobilisation, the union planned *dharnas* in front of Punjab State Electricity Board (PSEB) offices, and had announced a *gherao* of the Punjab Governor at Chandigarh in January 1984. In parallel to the union's preparation for a massive farmers' agitation on the burning issue of electricity bills, the CPI and CPI(M) led Kisan Sabhas, along with the Kisan wing of the Akali Dal, were leading a peasant struggle in the Malwa cotton belt for compensation for the previous season's damaged cotton crop. Thus the BKU and Communist-led Kisan Sabhas were concurrently involved in two different, but equally important, farming issues. After the successful conclusion of the Kisan Sabhas' agitation for the damaged cotton crop's compensation and their subsequent entry into the agitation for non-payment of electricity bills led by the BKU, the latter began a *gherao* of the Punjab Raj Bhavan (Governor's residence) on March 12, 1984 (Gill and Singhal, 1984: 1729-30).

Comparing the Chandigarh morcha of 1984 with the ongoing farmers' protest at the borders of Delhi today, one can identify several similarities that are helpful in contextualising the genesis and the operation of the agitation for the withdrawal of the three 2020 agriculture laws. A large number of peasants - between 30,000 and 40,000 - responding to the call of the union to *gherao* the Governor's residence in Chandigarh, the capital of both Punjab and Haryana, had camped on the adjacent lush green lawns of the golf-course for a week (Thukral, 1984; cf Gill and Singhal, 1984: 1730; and Shiva, 1991: 183). Farmers

camped with their own provisions, set up *langar* (community kitchen), built thatched huts on areas adjacent to the Raj Bhawan, which came to be known as 'Kisan Nagar', and farmers of nearby villages of both Patiala and Ropar districts regularly supplied milk and vegetables (Gill and Singhal, 1984: 1730). Also akin to the current farmers' protest at Delhi, farmers from Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra²⁶ participated in batches in the Chandigarh morcha,²⁷ which continued till March 18, 1984 when it was successfully concluded after an agreement between the union and the representatives of the Punjab government (Gill and Singhal, 1984: 1729-30).

The gherao remained peaceful during its entire one week duration. Though during the beginning of the arrival of farmers, the residents of nearby sectors were wary, but were won over by the thoroughly peaceful conduct of the gherao. Gobind Thukral, who covered the protest for *India Today*, reported:

The wife of a senior civil servant, who had kept her children indoors the first two days of the blockade, said: 'With Punjab's violence as backdrop, one expected that they would set the city on fire. But one could envy their informal manners and friendly nature. We shall certainly miss them' (Thukral, 1984).

Similarly, scores of local residents, organisations and establishments at the borders of Delhi volunteered their services to the protesting farmers in various ways - opening their homes, allowing access to their washrooms, providing local water supply sources, and arranging 'langar seva' (Sunny, 2020). In yet another parallel between these two farmer agitations, which are separated by more than 37 years, is that no political party was/is allowed to participate and neither are they allowed to enter farmers' villages.

Farmer unions' hostility to participation by political parties at the protests at the Delhi borders and elsewhere, and their entry to villages, has primarily to do with the non-party political character of the majority of the BKU organisations. During its Chandigarh morcha for the gherao of Raj Bhawan, BKU declined not only the help offered by many Congress (I) and Akali Dal leaders, and also that by Devi Lal, a major Jat leader and Janata Party leader from Haryana (Gill and Singhal, 1984: 1730). However, the Punjab Kisan Sabhas, in total contrast to the various Punjab units of the BKU, were overtly political in their orientation since they were effectively the kisan front organisations of the CPI and CPI (M), thus causing the BKU to view these Kisan Sabhas as stalking horses for these communist movements (Gill and Singhal, 1984: 1729). This difference between the BKU and the Kisan Sabhas was further accentuated by a stark difference between their respective membership support bases, with the BKU largely supported by affluent farmers and the latter supported predominantly by the poor peasantry and landless agricultural labourers (Gill and Singhal, 1984: 1732).

To their great credit, the collective leadership of the ongoing farmers' protests has been able to build an impressively cohesive unity between farmers of all economic strata and landless agricultural labourers, creating a formidable coalition of forces. Responding to a question about ideological differences among the various farmers' unions participating in current protest at Delhi

borders, Joginder Singh Ugrahan, President BKU (EU) said, ‘... despite ideological difference, we were able to come together with a common minimum program’ (Singh, 2021).²⁸

VI Critical Reflections

Until now, we have delved deep into the sequence of events related to the on-going farmers’ protest from its beginning on June 6, 2020 to the present, and its contextualisation in the rich heritage of farmers’ struggles for the restoration of their land rights during pre-partition Punjab, as well as in independent India. In this section, an attempt is made to unravel varied interpretations about the rise of this farmers’ protest. Some have interpreted them as a continuation of the proud tradition of peasant revolts, as mentioned above, bearing aloft the banner of justice and opposition to semi-feudalism, dictatorship and authoritarianism disguised in many ways. The arguments for passing the laws put forward by the central government have received support in the writings of some well-known agro-economists as well as public scholars like Ashok Gulati, Gurcharan Das, Swaminathan S Anklesaria Aiyar and Arvind Panagariya among others. However, anti-laws arguments are also - and rather more boisterously - being supported by a larger number of economists and public scholars - Arun Kumar, Sucha Singh Gill, RS Ghuman, Pramod Kumar, Surinder Jodhka, Sukhpal Singh, Gian Singh, D. Narasimha Reddy, Kamal Narayan Kabra, R. Ramakumar, Vikas Rawal, Devinder Sharma and P Sainath among others - who question the very paradigm within which these laws are framed and finally enacted.

The central government, as is generally argued, insists that given the plethora of production of wheat and rice, the APMC and MSP-based system of sale and purchase has become unviable for these two main MSP-based crops of Punjab and Haryana. It is further argued that the central government finds it difficult to create more storage facilities for the wheat/rice rotation cropping system of north-western India, and neither does it believe that the country needs any more wheat and rice. It has asked farmers to shift to production of pulses and cultivation of seeds for making edible oils. Yet another argument raised in support of new agriculture laws, is the depletion of groundwater since rice is a water-guzzling crop (Shiva, 1991: Chap 4; Ghuman and Sharma, 2016: 1-20).

This strongly implies that the said laws were enacted not keeping in view, as often claimed, the welfare of farmers but as a countermeasure to the lack of storage capacity by the government as well as to arrest the water depletion process in states of Punjab and Haryana. In other words, the abolition or the weakening of APMC and MSP in the long run, will end the system of assured fixed prices of wheat and rice crops, and thus eventually force the farmers to stop the sole rotational cultivation of them. There also lies another fear - namely that since the central government is washing its hands off of the wheat and rice procurement process, then concomitantly, the current supply of wheat and rice to the poorest sections of the nation under the Public Distribution System (PDS)

will also gradually cease to exist as per liberal market logic. In short, the three recently enacted laws by the central government are strongly suspected to be more in response to the above-mentioned three factors: Water depletion, lack of storage facilities, and pressure to let loose liberal market forces. Seen from this perspective, the farmers' interests seems to have had no consideration in their enactment.

It is highly relevant to point out that farmers were coaxed by the federal government to grow wheat and rice in preference to the large variety of crops being grown in the pre-Green Revolution phase in Punjab. This was done in order to extricate the nation from the then 'ship-to-mouth' reality which kept India vulnerable to the demands of grain exporting nations, especially the USA. After the end of World War II, the US had retained a vast munitions production industrial base, which was suddenly turned bereft of a market. However, the production capacities of many US munitions companies had a duality of use and could also make pesticides and fertilisers, e.g. the company IG Farben's explosives facility could be, and was, re-purposed for making nitrogen fertilisers. Native crops were inimical to chemicals (fertilisers and pesticides), therefore US companies, especially DuPont, had made efforts to genetically engineer crops to suit their chemicals in order to create a captive market out of thin air. These dwarf varieties - misleadingly called 'high-yielding' varieties in a marketing masterstroke - not only needed chemicals for similar crop production to indigenous varieties, but also ten times the amount of water to do so.

In 1965 India suffered from a drought, and to build buffer stocks, had solicited the US for grain. However the latter had insisted on the use of its dwarf varieties (i.e. the Green Revolution) as a pre-condition, which failed to find favours with the then Indian Prime Minister, Lal Bahadur Shastri (Shiva, 1991: 32). Some leading economists, as well as agricultural scientists, also questioned the American agricultural strategy on economic grounds and potential risk of disease and displacement of small farmers. The only group that supported the strategy was of young agricultural scientists 'trained over the past decade in the American paradigm of agriculture' (Shiva, 1991: 31). Subsequent to Shastri's death, the Green Revolution pushed for by US corporate interests, took hold in India, especially in the Punjab (Shiva, 1991: 30-32). The World Bank made loans to India conditional on implementation of the Green Revolution in all its aspects, including building of dams, canals, etc. In turn, the Indian Government made loans to farmers conditional on proof of usage of chemicals. The upshot of the Green Revolution in Punjab, was a calamitous depletion of the water table, widespread indebtedness, and health issues emanating from the entry of agricultural chemicals into the food supply chain, especially drinking water (Ghuman, 1983: 213-38). Increased crop yields and hence production were attributed by many to increased irrigation, and not the foreign crop varieties as boasted by US corporates - though even this increase in irrigation had a downside, as discussed later in this paper.

In India as a whole, this has led to literally hundreds of thousands of farmer suicides - a pandemic which still remains largely unaddressed by the Indian

government. The 1984 political crisis in Punjab was birthed largely by the disastrous consequences of the Green Revolution as well as the inherent inequitable pricing mechanism for crops which hugely disadvantaged farmers, reducing most to little more than serfs on their own land, working for a pittance as per the heavily tilted pricing system. This unrest bifurcated into a militant movement on one hand, and a Kisan agitation on the other. Farmer unions in Punjab had planned a blockade of trains and grain to Delhi in June 1984 to protest their oppressive circumstances, but since the vast majority were Sikhs, it was relatively easy for the central government to deflect this by conflating their legitimate demands with those of the militant groups (Shiva, 1991: 183-193). The same sleight of hand has been repeatedly deployed in Machiavellian attempts to defame and discredit the on-going farmers' protests on the borders of Delhi.

However the underlying injustices remained, and by 1991 it is estimated that 30 per cent of the \$90bn national debt of India, which brought it to the brink of bankruptcy forcing it to approach the IMF and subsequently implement structural reforms, was attributable to financial inputs which were requisites of the (continuing) Green Revolution. Despite all of this, the rapacity of corporates and the gross imbalance in the 'inputs-to-output price realisation' ratio for farmers - designed and presided over by both the State and central government - both went largely unnoticed and uncommented upon. With the passage of time, the rotation crop system of wheat and rice became the mainstay of both the Punjab and Haryana agrarian economies. It was only after the threat of food scarcity subsided, the lowering level of groundwater in Punjab and Haryana, or the disastrous impact of pesticides and insecticides on the health of the soil and its crop products, began to elicit concerns by the central government. Moreover, overproduction of wheat and rice did not occur overnight - efforts should have been made much earlier to manage and work out the required average national annual requirement of food grains and total area to be brought under wheat-rice cultivation. There was a dearth of regulatory mechanisms for diversification and optimal use of areas under cultivation, for instance for crops like pulses and seeds for edible oils. Farmers in Punjab and Haryana have in the past proven to be very forthcoming in adapting to new agriculture skills. If they could convert their farms into a 'national food bowl', then the same energies could have been channelised towards the production of pulses and other crops as per the food requirements of the country. But that was not done for reasons best known to national agriculture policy makers.

The two key issues - fallout of the Green Revolution, and disadvantageous crop pricing mechanism - nonetheless remain hugely relevant to the present plight of farmers across India, and the current farmer protest though focused on the three much vilified farmer laws, has also acted as a channel for the expression of a deep angst given birth by these two factors. It can therefore be surmised that, observed in a broader context, though farmer laws are the immediate trigger for today's protests, the deeper underlying vectors need to be urgently addressed in order to fully deliver justice to this key sector of the economy. Such an approach would involve a complete paradigm shift and affect

approximately two-thirds of the population, changing the trajectory of the entire country. Unfortunately such a vision seems beyond the grasp of the present dispensation - intent as it is on following the (failing) neoliberalism model of the West, without a thought to its own specific national characteristics. This is perhaps the greatest irony for a government, which proclaims 'Swadeshi' as a foundational concept in its ideology.

In the light of the above discussion, it will be both an injustice and sheer opportunism to force farmers to abandon the wheat rice rotation crop system in the guise of freedom to sell their produce anywhere in the country wherever they deem fit. What must not be forgotten is that the liberal market logic is based on profit. Profit follows the logic of accumulation of wealth at one end of society and proliferation of poverty at the other, all while outsourcing environmental degradation to local communities as well as to the globe as a whole. Since the farmers did not themselves choose the rotation crop system, they should not be so crassly abandoned now to fend for themselves at this crucial moment when they are enmeshed in a negative economic spiral directly attributable to the cultivation of these two cash crops.

Through the enactment and implementation of alternative or more suitable agriculture-related laws, the government needs to take responsibility in facilitating and generally smoothening the gargantuan reorientation envisaged, from what has over time become a generational cropping pattern, to a much more diversified agrarian economy. This reorientation scenario would otherwise be completely alien to today's generation of farmers, especially the great majority, who are firmly locked into the wheat-rice crop rotation pattern. Further, during the transitional period, farmers' minimum living standard needs to be vouchsafed in the foreseeable event of their shift to new crops and cropping patterns. Such a scheme should, other than imparting training and market knowledge, also provide adequate assurance of financial help to tide over the anticipated farmer losses due to the abandonment of the wheat/rice crop cycle.

Moreover, the current crisis was the outcome of a one-sided decision taken by the central government in enacting the three laws - key stakeholders were not taken into confidence, other than some eyewash meetings for favourable publicity. This gross neglect is not without precedent insofar as farmers are concerned - neither were they taken into confidence during the launch of the green revolution project in the late 1960s. Had the farmers been aware of the likely depletion of groundwater, and the mindless use of pesticides and insecticides detrimental to the health of the soil, livestock, and humans, they would have certainly sought a more viable alternative for overcoming the challenge of ensuring national food security.

Now, especially given farmers are keenly aware about the likely negative fallouts of the current legislation and are correspondingly thoroughly opposed to its implementation in whatever form, it would be in the larger interest of the country to withdraw this legislation first and then to confer with all stakeholders in order to craft a comprehensive and sustainable solution to the issues of overproduction of wheat and rice, storage crisis, depletion of groundwater, and deteriorating health of the soil. The government also needs to map out workable

mechanisms for viable agricultural markets for desired future produce, all in alignment with the long-term ecological sustainability of such trajectories.

A legitimate centrality for, and paramount importance of, the *hyit* (interest) of the *kisans* and their associated landless agricultural labourers must not be viewed as onerous, but be recognised, respected, and upheld, in this entire process. Unfortunately this is something which has been conspicuously absent in the government's current approach, an approach which is widely perceived to be both unduly corporate-friendly and highly authoritarian. What is more worrisome at this stage is that even if the much-hyped three farm laws are rescinded, the larger questions of the wider agricultural crisis, comprising of land fragmentation, depletion of underground water, indebtedness, crop diversification, and creeping pauperisation of farmers, are all in danger of remaining both unaddressed and vulnerable to the predations of Big Business operating in an environment of crony capitalism.

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Notes

¹ 'The *arhtiyas* (commission agents) and farmers enjoy a friendship and bonding that goes back decades. On an average, at least 50-100 farmers are attached with each *arhtiya*, who takes care of farmers' financial loans and ensures timely procurement and adequate prices for their crop. Farmers believe the new laws will end their relationship with these agents and corporates will not be as sympathetic towards them in times of need' (Bhatia, 2021).

² Agitation, campaign, continuous protests/struggle for some time.

³ M.L. Darling is also known for his various seminal books on the Punjab peasantry, the most widely cited among them being *The Punjab Peasant in Prosperity and Debt* (Darling, 1977).

⁴ Vishnu Dutt Sharma (1921-1993) later became the Punjab secretary of the Lal Communist Party of Hind Union. He migrated to the UK in 1957 and became an activist of the Indian Workers Association. He was elected to the National Executive Committee of the Communist Party of Great Britain in 1971. For details see:

http://banmarchive.org.uk/collections/mt/pdf/12_79_18.pdf (accessed on July 28, 2021).

⁵ Bibi Tej Kaur, Mrs Tehal Singh and Mrs Yog Raj were among the 107 women who offered themselves for arrest in the morcha between April 17 and May 3, 1939 (Mukherjee, 2004: 192).

⁶ Canal outlets for releasing water for irrigation of agricultural land.

⁷ I have based my account of the Harsa Chinna 'Mogha' Morcha on the following: Charanji Lal Kangniwal, 'Harsa Chhina Mogha Morcha,' Unpublished paper[a]. Incidentally, Margaret Bourke-White, an American photographer, happened to be in Punjab during 1946-47 and she took many pictures of the Morcha which are now available in the LIFE Photo Collection.

⁸ I have based my account of the Tanda Urmar Muzara Morcha on the following: Charanji Lal Kangniwal, 'Tanda Urmar Muzara Lehar,' Unpublished paper[b].

⁹ Hereditary proprietary peasants turned occupancy tenants.

¹⁰ Sewa Singh Thikriwala (Living Martyr), its founder President, and Bhagwan Singh Longowalia, its first General Secretary, were prominent Akali leaders who remained in the forefront of the movement for reform of Sikh shrines (Walia, 1972: 47-55).

¹¹ Sewa Singh Thikriwala, Bhagwan Singh Longowalia, Jagir Singh Joga, Dharam Singh Fakkar, Jagir Singh Phaguwalia, Harnam Singh Chamak, Harnam Singh Dharmgarh, Harchand Singh Jeji (Panth Dardi - a well-wisher of the Panth), Shamsher Singh Nagri, Wazir Singh Daftriwala, Sadhu Singh Daler, Pritam Singh Gujran, Ajmer Singh Tamkot, Ishar Singh Tamkot Giani Sardara Singh Yuthap, Master Hari Singh, Giani Bachan Singh, Ujagar Singh Bhaura, Santa Singh Chakarian, Ujagar Singh Kirti, Narain Singh Bhadaur, Chand Singh Bhadaur and Hardit Singh Bhattal were prominent leaders of the Praja Mandal movement that provided solid base to the muzara movement. Saiffudin Kichlu, Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah, P.N. Kaul, Talib Hussain, Sant Ram Vakil, and Labhu Ram were among the earlier Hindu and Muslim members of the Praja Mandal that underlined its secular character and wider reach beyond the PEPSU region.

¹² The term *dewan* refers to a religious congregation held in gurdwaras. It was also used for designating Akali Movement meetings, which had a religious-cum-political character. The Praja Mandalist adopted this term for christening their political meetings in order to dodge the stringent clauses of the Royal Hidayat of 1932 (Mukherjee, 2004: 250-251). Popularly known as Hidayat 88 for it being signed on 5th Poh 1988 Bikrami calender, it was promulgated in Patiala through a special *Firman-i-Shahi* (the Royal Decree) on January 14, 1932 (Walia, 1972: 115).

¹³ A village near Dhuri, was owned by Gurnam Singh, father-in-law of Bhupinder Singh of Patiala state (Walia, 1972: 96).

¹⁴ Since both the movements - Muzara and Praja Mandal - were having their main support base among the Sikh peasantry, many of their leaders were common (Mukherjee, 2004: 245). Another interesting aspect of both the movements was that though their leadership had multiple political and religious affiliations, all of them were agreed on the question of reclaiming from the *Biswedars* the grabbed land of proprietary peasants turned occupancy tenants.

¹⁵ Teja Singh Swatantar (1901-1973), the legendary revolutionary, had led the tenants' movement in the PEPSU. A close associate of the Ghadarites, he cut his political teeth in the Gurdwara Reform movement. He formed his own Jatha named 'Swatantar Jatha' (lit. Free Band) to liberate Gurdwaras from the control of corrupt Mahants patronised by the British administration. In 1921, his Jatha liberated Gurdawara Teja Weela, in village Teja of Gurdaspur district, from the control of its deceitful Mahants, and subsequently liberated many more Gurdwaras and he also supported the Babbar Akali movement. His leading role in the eviction of the Mahants from Gurdawara Teja Weela, earned him his first name 'Teja' from the very name of the Gurdwara and his last name 'Swatantar' originated from the first name of the title of his Jatha - 'Swatantar Jatha'. His original name was Sumund Singh. In 1922, he became the youngest and most educated executive member of the Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee. His leading role in organising agitation against the bloody episode of Jallianwala, Bagh forced him to quit Khalsa College, Amritsar. He later completed his graduation in Arts from the University of Panjab (now Punjab), Lahore during his confinement in Campbelpore jail. In early 1923, he went to Kabul as a Sikh missionary and whilst there he came in contact with Ghadarites who persuaded him to acquire military training. On his return from Kabul, he was arrested and taken to Peshawar, from where he escaped at the first available opportunity. He returned to Kabul in 1923 along with Uddham Singh Kasel, Gurmukh Singh, Rattan Singh, and Santokh Singh, then moved to Turkey in 1925, as Azad Beg, from where he acquired Turkish citizenship, graduated in military studies, and eventually received a commission in the army. Five years later, he moved to Berlin and travelled across Europe, where he was believed to have met Ajit Singh of the Pagri Sambhal O' Jatta fame, who allegedly told him that 'Desh (country) cannot be liberated, just by liberating Gurdwaras' - something which was said to have influenced him deeply, convincing him of the necessity of revolution. He eventually reached North America, where he was also believed to have met Lala Lajpat Rai and Maharaja Mahendra Partap Singh. In January 1932, he left North America and visited Panama, Mexico, Cuba, Chile, Argentina, Uruguay, and Brazil in succession. In Panama, he organised a protest, mainly by Punjabi Sikh immigrants, on March 23, 1931, the day Bhagat Singh was hanged. From Panama he went to Argentina, where he met Bhagat Singh Bilga. He then reached Brazil and met Ajit Singh, after which both of them went to Europe, travelling to Portugal, Spain, France, Turkey, Berlin in Germany and finally reaching Moscow in Russia. In Moscow, Teja Singh, joined KUTV - the Communist University of the Toilers of the East. He returned to India via Kenya in December 1934 and reached Punjab in 1935, soon becoming a prominent leader of the Punjab Kirti group and mobilising resistance

against British Rule. He was arrested, along with other Communist leaders, on January 16, 1936, and his popularity at that time can be gauged from the fact that while in jail, he was elected unopposed to the Punjab Legislative Assembly in May 1937. He was secretary of the Punjab Communist Party from 1944 to 1947, and remained a prominent leader of the Kisan Sabha. In 1948, during the armed struggle of the Lal Communist Party, warrants totalling one lakh rupees (a hundred thousand rupees) were issued for his arrest, forcing him to go underground. These warrants were withdrawn on January 5, 1963, after a delegation of Gadharite led by Baba Sohan Singh Bhakna met the then Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru in early 1963. Subsequently, Partap Singh Kairon, as Chief Minister of Punjab, withdrew the warrants and Teja Singh resurfaced after sixteen years of an incognito existence. He became member of Punjab Legislative Council from 1964 to 1969, and in 1971 was elected a Member of Parliament from the Sangrur Lok Sabha constituency on a CPI ticket. He then became president of the All India Kisan Sabha in 1968 and remained in this capacity until he took his last breath on April 12, 1973, dying from a heart attack in the Central Hall of Parliament. Indira Gandhi, the then Prime Minister of India, announced his passing and paid tribute to him in the house.

¹⁶ I have based my account of the Anti-Betterment Levy agitation on the following: Surjeet, 1986.

¹⁷ Land along the river bank.

¹⁸ I have based my account of the Mehatpur *Byet* Muzara movement on the following: Chandan, 1979; Sidhu, 2021. Apart from these two field-based studies, despite my best efforts, no other written material could be traced.

¹⁹ For a detailed account on the low social status of muzaras see Mukherjee, 2004, pp. 247-48.

²⁰ Based on author's conversation with Comrade Puran Singh Narangwal, Chandigarh, August 14, 2021.

²¹ Sukhdev Sidhu's article (June 26, 2021) is also based on information provided by Kulwant Singh Mandiala. He left UK and returned to his native village Mandiala with the desire to bring revolution. He joined the CPI (M) and started working within its front kisan organisation, Kisan Sabha, and played a leading role in the Mehatpur *Byet* morcha. He returned to UK later and now lives in the US.

²² The maximum 5 acre limit was kept, keeping in view the exigency of electoral politics of the communist parties. It was alleged that those muzaras who occupied land between 20 to 100 acres, during the Pepsu Muzara Movement, later did not even vote for the CPI in the elections (Chandan, 1979, 188; Sidhu, 2021).

²³ Among the eight founding members of the NZU, Baba Mohinder Singh Thind was one of the secretaries of the erstwhile Unionist Party of pre-partition Punjab, and Partap Singh Kadia was an Akali MLA (Gill and Singhal, 1984: 1729).

²⁴ Bhupinder Singh Mann, Ajmer Singh Lakhwal were among the earlier Presidents and General Secretaries of the Punjab unit of BKU. Balbir Singh Rajewal, current President of BKU (Rajewal) was the Secretary of the All India BKU (Gill and Singhal, 1984: 1729).

²⁵ All Ghadrites were popularly known as Babas, experienced revolutionaries, who sacrificed their comfortable lives for the establishment of an egalitarian socio-political order.

²⁶ The Maharashtra batch was led by Sharad Joshi of Shetkari Sangathan (Gill and Singhal, 1984: 1729).

²⁷ This morcha got support from the kisan wing of Akali Dal, activists of Kirti Kisan Union (KKU) and sympathisers of Kisan Sabhas (Gill and Singhal, 1984: 1729).

²⁸ Why the farmers' unions are against political parties' participation in the ongoing protests at the Delhi borders and entry of their members in villages has to do primarily with the non-party political character of the majority of the BKU organisations. Yet another factor that separate the BKU and the Kisan Sabha was the difference between the strength of the peasantry and the landless agricultural labourers (Gill and Singhal, 1984: 1732). But as far as the on-going farmers' protests are concerned, its mature leadership has been able to build a cohesive unity between the farmers and the landless agricultural labourers.

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