

## ***Mera Pind, Mera Sabhyachar, Mera Virsa:*** **Understanding Sikh Diaspora Support for the** **Punjab Kisan Morcha**

**Shinder S. Thandi**

*University of California, Santa Barbara*

Whilst the Sikh diaspora has a long history of involvement in homeland politics, the overwhelming support shown by them to the current farmers' protest movement is unprecedented in many ways. Firstly the emotional support has come from almost all sections of the Sikh diaspora and is multi-generational, including support from those who have never been to or have no knowledge of Punjab. Secondly, the Sikh diaspora has contributed generously, both financially and materially and in terms of form, size and variety never seen before. Thirdly, Sikh diaspora mobilised their local communities to show support for the farmers through tractor and car rallies and demonstrations, including at Indian Consulates to counter the government narrative. Fourthly and finally, Sikh diaspora lobbied successfully their respective governments and Parliaments, to raise awareness of farmer grievances, causing diplomatic tensions between these governments and India and leading India to respond pro-actively against supporters. This paper is an attempt to analyse the nature and forms of Sikh diaspora support, motives behind their support and their expectations of both homeland and hostland governments. The paper also argues that the current diaspora support for farmers and mobilisation for global support represents a watershed moment in Sikh diaspora experience and signals the political maturing of the Sikh diaspora community.

### **Introduction: Formation of the Sikh Diaspora**

Over a century and a half of Sikh overseas migration has led to the scattering of Sikhs all over the globe, with the total number in the Sikh diaspora now estimated at around 2 million, out of total Sikh population of around 25 million. Well over 80% of the Sikh diaspora is now concentrated in two major regions – Europe, with majority still in the UK, and North America, with Canada having the largest share.<sup>1</sup> This formation occurred during a number of migration waves, each wave having its own specific conditions and features causing Sikhs to venture overseas. Sikh overseas migration starts in earnest in the 1860s after re-appraisal of Sikhs by the British due to their role in the Indian Mutiny of 1857, but gathers pace over the next half a century. Thus, by the outbreak of World War 1, Sikh communities were well established in various overseas locations in southeast and east Asia, Australia, New Zealand, Fiji, East Africa, UK and on the Pacific coast of North America, especially around the porous borders between USA and Canada (Mangat, 1969; Ballantyne, 2006; Shamsul and Kaur, 2011; La Brack, 2008). The spread and settlement of these pioneer overseas communities reflected the changing socio-economic conditions in Punjab:

British army recruitment with Sikhs treated as one of the favoured ‘martial races’; new information on employment opportunities abroad as policemen or security guards to protect the expanding British empire, and the deteriorating economic conditions or opportunities at home ‘pushing’ Sikhs to go overseas to seek their fortunes (Tan, 2005; Streets, 2010; Thandi, 2017). The first two factors largely explain the movements to southeast and east Asia and last to other regions mentioned above.<sup>2</sup>

By the 1920s, a series of anti-immigrant policies, especially in North America, Australia and New Zealand severely limited the further expansion of Sikh migration. However, as favourable conditions re-emerged in the post-World War 2 period, initially in war-damaged UK, we see the beginnings of the golden period of Sikh migration. The mass movements of the 1950s and 1960s to UK and from the mid-1960s to USA and Canada, to the Gulf States in the 1980s and the more recent movements since the 1990s to newer locations such as Greece, Italy and Spain in southern Europe and Norway and Sweden in northern Europe, largely have rural roots, mainly in villages of central *Doaba* districts (Jacobsen and Myrvold (2012); Thandi, 2017). This in a way reversed the earlier trend during the British colonial period when migration flows from the *Malwa* and *Majha* sub-regions were quite common. However, with many of the earlier pioneer migrants from *Malwa* and *Majha* loosening or in many cases, totally breaking ties with their homeland localities, especially those in countries such as Malaysia and Singapore and Fiji, the newer post-war *doaba* migrants were in a position to sustain strong economic, cultural and political ties with their villages, consequently helping this sub-region to become economically more developed relative to others.

Nowadays most *doaba* villages can be considered transnational villages, with pioneer migrants or their children and grandchildren settled in all parts of the diaspora. However, with growing awareness of the relative success of overseas *doaba* Sikhs, overseas migration from the *Malwa* and *Majha* districts also increased over time. In fact, new employment opportunities in the post-1980s decades opened up horizons for different categories of Punjabi migrants, especially for those who had been previously under-represented, whether in terms of religion, caste or sub-region, making the whole of Punjab part of the inter-connected and globalised world. I emphasize the sub-regional dimensions of Sikh migration for at least two important and inter-related reasons. Firstly, as the most developed and globalised sub-region, arguably as result of extensive overseas migration, the *doaba* sub-region does not suffer, to the same extent, from agrarian distress when compared with the *Malwa* sub-region. Secondly, the predominantly *doaba* Sikh diaspora communities had become familiar with the plight of *Malwa* farmers - incidence of debt, suicides, cancer etc – and had already developed a narrative which blamed these ills squarely on the Indian state and so it was not surprising when the farmer protests started, they gave them their overwhelming backing.

### Sikh Diaspora's Homeland Orientation

Unlike the expectations of assimilationist theorists in migrant receiving countries, the vast majority of overseas Sikhs have continued to maintain links with their homeland, whether only symbolically (that is, seeing Punjab as their sacred homeland) and/or materially. Thus many continue to maintain familial, economic, financial, philanthropic, cultural and political connections with Punjab albeit at different levels depending on the relative time period of overseas settlement (Thandi, 2014b). In the age of globalisation, expansion in flight routes and availability of cheaper air travel and advances in and diffusion of telecommunication technologies which allow instant and almost free global connectivity via the internet and social media, not only have homeland linkages strengthened and become multi-layered, they have also expanded to include intra-diaspora networks, creating dense transnational practices among the global Sikhs (Thandi, 2014b). This was an important aspect of concerted diaspora lobbying during the current farmers' agitation.

Acknowledging the growing role of diaspora communities as non-state actors in the global economy, the extensive literature that now exists emphasises two potential diaspora roles: one as *positive* where diasporas have the potential to economically and socially develop their homelands through various forms of financial assistance – remittances, both financial and social, foreign direct investment, philanthropic funding for modernising villages and funding education, health and civic infrastructure, among others (Thandi, 2000)<sup>3</sup> – and the other as *negative* where diasporas have the potential to finance insurgency or separatism, create communal tensions or wreck peace accords.<sup>4</sup> There are many examples of both types of roles played by diasporas and each has its own specific context. Generally speaking, we can say that a conflict-generated diaspora (which forms out of individuals 'pushed out' of their homeland as refugees or asylum seekers due to state repression) compared to a diaspora formed through voluntary or free migration, will be more problematic for the homeland state.<sup>5</sup> This however, may appear a rather simplistic differentiation because this implies that diasporas are a homogenous group and may have all migrated during the same time period or under similar conditions when clearly that is often not the case except in extreme humanitarian crisis cases. Often diasporas form over a period of time, during different waves and in different contexts and comprise of different categories of migrants – unskilled and skilled, rural and urban, young and old, male and female and dependent or bread-winner – making diasporas a very heterogeneous group. We discussed that heterogeneity in the context of formation of Sikh diaspora above. Having said that, and given diasporas retain an emotional attachment to their homeland, albeit to different degrees, they can be mobilized by their hostland based organisations in the pursuit of activities which can be considered positive or negative or both. Thus active diasporas can use 'identity politics' in a variety of ways to exert an impact or leverage over their homelands, often to the annoyance of homeland governments. According to Benedict Anderson, one of the pioneers of the concept of Long Distance Nationalism, a diasporan:

‘While technically a citizen of the state in which he comfortably lives, but to which he may feel little attachment, he finds it tempting to play identity politics by participating (via propaganda, money, weapons, any way but voting in the conflicts of his imagined *Heimat* (homeland)...this citizen-less participation is inevitably non-responsible – our hero will not have to answer for, or pay the price of, the long-distance politics he undertakes’ (Anderson, 1991, p.13).

One can question Anderson’s ending words in the quote above, written before the acceleration of globalisation, especially as they relate to diaspora support for farmers. Since then, many scholars have explored diaspora’s multi-layered motives for involving themselves in identity politics, especially if they nurse a grievance against their homeland government. More importantly, their involvement is not always risk-free as the global reach of the nation-state has also stretched and deepened and many do have to bear some of the negative consequences which may arise from their involvement.

Sikh Diaspora’s involvement in homeland politics has a long history going back to the early part of the twentieth century. We can take two examples to illustrate this: (1) the *Ghadar* movement had its origins in California over a century ago and which had the objective of freeing India of British colonial rule<sup>6</sup> and (2) diaspora’s support for the Khalistan (Sikh Nationalist) movement in Punjab in the 1980s to establish a Sikh Homeland where Sikh sovereignty would be paramount.<sup>7</sup> Of course both the Ghadar and the Khalistan movements failed, for several but qualitatively different reasons, and there are strong memories with the latter movement still having a significant voice among small sections of the Sikh diaspora.

The Ghadar movement’s hope of bringing down British rule in India was doomed to fail given the enormity of the task, total manpower available, botched preparations due to poor co-ordination and serious miscalculations by the leaders. Some describe the movement as a utopian pipe-dream led by misguided individuals who were fooled into thinking that a revolutionary path was even possible. However, having said that, the Ghadar rebellion scared the British, making them take it seriously and to respond by a series of repressive measures in India.<sup>8</sup>

Despite the emotional outrage and anger expressed by the Sikh community for attack on the Golden Temple by the army ordered by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, this did not translate into mass support for the overseas Khalistan movement. Almost 14 years of violence and killings coming from militant organisations and police and para-military forces in Punjab, had turned most of the Sikhs against the Khalistani organisations as the community yearned for peace and communal harmony in Punjab. In the diaspora too, support was only forthcoming from a small section of the Sikh population and militant activities had, in fact, polarised opinion in the community leading to high tensions and even violence.<sup>9</sup> Further, the anti-Sikh violence in Delhi and in some other cities following the assassination of Indira Gandhi by her Sikh bodyguards in

November 1984, again created outrage at the gruesome killing of thousands of innocents, it did not translate into support for Khalistan, rather only generated even greater anger against Indian governments for their failure at not delivering justice to the victims and their families.

### **Diaspora's Growing Influence on Hostland Politics**

In the discussion above we have shown how diasporas continue to play an important role in their homelands and how their linkages have become more dense and multi-layered. We should also note that these linkages are no longer just uni-directional ie from diaspora to homeland as previously thought but are actually multi-directional and circular, that is, from the homeland to different nodes of the diaspora and vice versa. These have evolved and strengthened over the years for the same globalisation processes - cheaper global air travel and diffusion of new technologies to the developing world. The emergence of these dense transnational practices mean that daily news and events in the homeland are transmitted instantly to diaspora locations. This news is also transmitted to diaspora communities through the well-established Sikh/Punjabi owned media, be it newspapers, radio stations, television channels or online platforms. The role of this media is also an important factor in understanding diaspora's support for the ongoing farmer agitation in India.

There is, however, another important dimension to diasporas which still remains under-researched but is highly important in the context of this paper. Over the decades, diasporas have begun to play a unique role by building and strengthening links with their host or adopted countries. After all, they have been living in these countries for several decades and assimilationist and integrationist forces will have had an impact on political and social attitudes over the generations. A good measure of these forces are diaspora's increasing participation in the domestic politics of their adopted countries. This political participation happens in multifaceted ways but two major forms are noteworthy: firstly, participating in elections at different levels of government and secondly, lobbying hostland governments to protect and promote community interests, usually through establishing advocacy organisations which also engage in national and global networking.<sup>10</sup> Regarding the former, we, of course, have some outstanding examples from early history involving overseas Sikhs: Sophia Duleep Singh's activism during the suffragette movement in the 1910s in the UK, Makhan Singh's role in establishing and leading the trade union movement in Kenya in the 1940s and Dalip Singh Saund, the first Sikh US Congressman from California during 1957-1963, who showed his concern for California farmers and hostile US immigration policies. As the period of Sikh settlement increased, so did electoral participation in domestic politics, although the extent of involvement was always contingent on local political conditions and opportunity structures. If we look across different Sikh diaspora nodes today we will see that the degree of Sikh participation in electoral politics, especially at the highest levels, is most advanced in Canada, then perhaps in UK and USA. In these countries, Sikhs and other Punjabis are involved in domestic politics at

different levels of government - city council, municipal, state or provincial and federal. This is not to deny that in older settlement countries like Singapore, Malaysia and New Zealand, individual Sikhs did not participate in domestic politics, they did, but their overall number remained limited. An important point I am making here is that by entrenching themselves in corridors of political and social power in their adopted countries, allows them some leverage over policies adopted. It also provides them an opportunity to mobilize political support for a specific cause, such as farmers' protests. We will come back to these important multifaceted aspects of diaspora's role later in the paper.

### **Diaspora Mobilisation for '*Kaley Kanoon*' (Black Laws)**

As news of farmer protests against the three farm Ordinances, later becoming Acts, began to percolate to different diaspora locations, there was an immediate response in terms of asking questions about what they could do to show support to their kinsmen back home. These questions were being asked constantly in workplaces, *gurdwaras*, community centres and in the Sikh/Punjabi media. Right from the beginning there was little focus on actual details contained in the pending legislation, but a unanimous consensus that this was yet another example of Indian government's conspiracy to harm Sikhs and Punjab. The community was already aware of the adverse conditions - those of farmer indebtedness, farmer suicides and cancer train - being experienced by Punjab farmers over the decades. These communities had also participated in annual marches and rallies to commemorate anniversaries of Operation Bluestar and absence of justice against perpetrators of Anti-Sikh pogroms in Delhi in November 1984. The Khalistani organisations, who often organised these rallies, in fact, had gone a step further to develop their own anti-India narrative which was often repeated/rehearsed by their leaders at these rallies. According to this narrative the ills inflicted on Punjab, such as farmer suicides, drug addiction and environmental destruction, were all part of Indian government's deliberate policy to destroy Sikhs and the dream of Khalistan.<sup>11</sup> So the introduction of these new laws fitted well into the existing narrative of many Sikhs about injustice in India.

Diaspora support for the farmer agitation gained wider support and attitudes became even more entrenched after call by farmers' organisations to take their protest to Delhi. As we learned, serious attempts were made by the Haryana BJP government, working in close alliance with the government in Delhi, to stop the peaceful march through acts of brutal repression. Tear-gas shells, water cannons, digging of trenches, concrete barricades, police baton charges and preventative arrests were used on farmers at Shambhu and a few other places to stop them moving forward on National Highway 1, the old Grand Trunk Road, towards Delhi. The brutal attack on peaceful protestors enraged the Sikh diaspora and later the global community, as images of Indian police firing water cannons were constantly played and replayed by major global news media outlets such as BBC, CNN, Bloomberg and Al Jazeera. All attempts to stop the farmers moving

towards Delhi failed and as protestors approached Delhi, negotiations between the farmers' organisations and government law enforcement agencies resolved that farmers could camp peacefully at Singhu and Tikri and later Ghazipur, on the borders of Delhi. The '*Dilli Chalo*' movement and the state repression that followed was a critical turning point which mobilized the Sikh diaspora to support farmers, defend human rights and the right to peaceful protest. The farmers' protest was now becoming globalised through processes discussed below.

Diaspora support for farmers was mobilized and demonstrated in different ways. Almost all gurdwaras in major countries of Sikh settlement made immediate appeals for funds to offer financial support to farmers and enable them to continue their struggle. Media reports and author's personal conversations with many members of the *sangat* and committee members at different gurdwaras in the UK and USA indicated that anything from US\$30,000 to US\$100,000 was raised by such appeals by each gurdwara over a period of several weeks, especially after the farmers began to consolidate their communal living in camps at Singhu, Tikri and Ghazipur. This occurred despite the fact that most countries had lockdown rules which either closed or limited the gathering of sangats in gurdwaras. The audio-visual Punjabi media, especially television channels and radio stations were engaged in almost blanket coverage of discussions about farmer protests as some had either embedded their own journalists in the camps or employed other journalists to send daily updates directly from the camp sites. The media also made daily funding appeals and often reported on how the collected funds were being utilised to ensure transparency. In California, USA and Canada, several business and truck company owners made direct appeals to their employees or truck drivers to donate money towards the farmers' cause and some individuals are reported to have donated as much as \$5,000 each. A number of NGOs stepped up to the challenge by both raising funds and sending material items for the camps - blankets, mattresses, medicines, portable toilets, diesel, books, bottled water and food parcels - to provide warmth to farmers, help to sustain the movement and in raising their morale. Much of this financial and material assistance came via intermediaries based in India.<sup>12</sup> Khalsa Aid, a British NGO that has been operating around the world as well as in India for over 20 years, providing humanitarian aid in emergency situations, made extra efforts to serve the perceived needs of the farmers.<sup>13</sup> In addition to the above collective forms of support, several wealthy individuals or groups, with past history of philanthropic work or new to it, took it upon themselves to offer *seva* in different and creative ways - to fund *langars*, provide nutritional food such as almonds, heaters, ventilators or volunteer their medical services etc.<sup>14</sup>

Instant images of gratification shown on social media of this diasporan *seva* only acted to boost funding efforts to support farmers at these camps, especially as it was both a very chilly winter and ongoing public health crisis due to the Covid-19 pandemic. There can be no doubt that many diasporans would have returned to Punjab to show support and participate in the movement had there not been a pandemic and almost universal restrictions on international travel.

They had done so before, for instance, enthusiastically supporting the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) during the 2014 Lok Sabha and 2017 Punjab Assembly elections. At that time, many diasporan Sikhs had pinned their hopes on AAP as it was promising corruption-free Punjab, which many of them were desperately seeking given their negative experiences of Indian bureaucracy. Diaspora support came in the form of both finance and manpower with AAP claiming 2,500 diasporans returning in 2017 in response to its '*Chalo Punjab*' campaign.<sup>15</sup> Their support appeared particularly significant for the Party in 2014 as it managed to capture 4 of the 13 parliamentary seats in the Lok Sabha at its first attempt. However, the expected diaspora influence seemed to vanish in 2017 as AAP's internal and organisational problems erupted openly with AAP only able to capture 20 Assembly seats across Punjab and more significantly only 2 in the doaba region where most diasporan Sikhs hail from.

In addition to financial support – which could then be transformed into material support for the camps – diaspora communities also mimicked the tractor rallies of farmers. News reports indicate around 50 cities spread across the globe, especially in areas of high Sikh settlement, saw Sikhs hold tractor or car rallies in support of farmers. One of the largest of these was the Tractor Rally spearheaded by young people of the Jakara Movement in the Bay Area of California, home to one of the largest concentration of Sikhs. It was reported that 10,000 vehicles drove across the Bay Bridge from Oakland to the Indian Consulate in San Francisco, taking two hours rather than the normal commute of 20 minutes.<sup>16</sup> This also happens to be the region where the Ghadar Party was founded and undertook many activities, including publishing their own newspaper *Ghadar* – see article by Tejpal Bainiwal in this issue of the Journal. Canadian Sikhs also held a car rally in Brampton to end at the Indian Consulate and a kisan rally from Calgary to Edmonton to coincide with the one organised by the *Samyukt Kisan Morcha* (SKM) in Delhi on India's Republic Day, January 26, 2021.<sup>17</sup>

The use of social media – WhatsApp, Instagram, Facebook, YouTube – by Sikhs in raising awareness of the farmer movement, discussing issues behind the protests, providing updates etc. can't be over-estimated. Many advocacy groups such as the Sikh Coalition, United Sikhs, Sikh American Legal Defense and Education Fund, Turbans 4 Australia, National Sikh Youth Association (UK) and others had gained considerable experience in online networking, campaigning and fundraising, especially because of the tremendous rise in hate crimes against the Sikhs following the Twin Towers bombings on 9/11 and in raising awareness about the Sikhs and leading legal struggles for recognition of Sikh religious symbols such as the turban, *kirpan* and *kara* in schools and workplaces. So when the farmer protests began, their online infrastructure was already in place to start their campaigns on raising awareness and lobbying policymakers. Social media was used extensively by the younger generations, especially university and college students and they emerged as the most assertive and articulate activists in spreading the message and countering the official Indian government narratives at rallies and on online platforms. Many



of these students also held their own meetings to raise awareness on campuses and engaged in creating art, music and merchandise such as T-shirts and posters, to raise donations. Naindeep Singh, Executive Director of the Jakara Movement emphasised the unique role being played by young people who, he argued, had lived their lives as 'cultural brokers' and were well positioned 'to provide fresh perspectives and bring in new groups'. Manpreet Kaur, Communications Director for Jakara went further and expressed the anguish faced by diaspora Sikh youth in the following moving way:

'We are sitting so far away from what's happening on the grounds, but feel every emotion as though we are there - we cry with those crying, we smile with those dancing and singing folk songs, we laugh with those creating witty jokes and songs. We're sitting on the edge of our seats, inspired and in awe.,'<sup>18</sup>

For the first time since Operation Bluestar, this new generation of diaspora-born children also began engaging with their parents, discussing reasons behind the farm protests, learning about their own family heritage and history of their ancestral homeland. If Operation Bluestar served as a lesson in Indian politics for them, the farmer agitation was now a lesson in agricultural economics and Indian federalism. This constructive engagement had the effect of consolidating their identity and cementing inter-generational solidarity.

A unique aspect of diaspora support, not witnessed before to the same extent or in the same way, was diaspora engagement with representatives of domestic political, civic and labour organisations. This engagement was helped immensely by the fact that these organisations had experience of working with members of the Sikh community on various other political or labour campaigns. Sikhs, representing their own local community organisations, approached their local or municipal councils, to lobby in support of farmers. Many wrote to their elected representatives either at the city, state or federal level to raise awareness of farmers' issues, violation of human rights of peaceful protestors, curtailment of access to the Internet, not allowing press freedom and more generally about police repression and abuses of democracy in India. These lobbying efforts yielded good results at all levels. The Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau came out in support of farmers and criticised Indian government's handling of the peaceful farmer protest which created a diplomatic row,<sup>19</sup> many US Congressman – Reps and Senators – also condemned India for its repression of peaceful protests and undemocratic practices in January 2021. At about the same time, around 78 Indian-American organisations and gurdwaras in the US sent a joint letter to US President Biden requesting him to convey a strong message to the Modi government on human rights violations of peaceful protestors. These organisations also expressed concern over how some handles on social media were mischievously proposing a repeat of the 1984 pogroms against Sikhs which, they argued, would only raise tensions among Indian Americans.<sup>20</sup>

In the UK, more than 100 Members of Parliament and Lords, signed a letter written by UK MP Tanmanjeet Singh Dhese to the Prime Minister Boris Johnson, asking him to declare his support for the protesting farmers and raise

the matter with the Indian government on his forthcoming visit there.<sup>21</sup> Finally, an e-petition campaign to ‘urge the Indian Government to ensure safety of protestors and press freedom’ was signed by over 100,000 British citizens, crossing the threshold necessary to guarantee a parliamentary debate. The debate took place on 8 March, 2021, lasted one and half hours and covered many aspects of the farmer agitation. Many MPs urged the UK government to call out India’s human rights abuses and for limiting press freedom. The Government Minister, whilst conceding that human right violations and limits on press freedom were not acceptable, said the government was unable do anything about the farm legislation as this was an internal matter for India.<sup>22</sup> Needless to say, the debate upset the Indian government and its response was swift as we will discuss later in this paper. The above examples are, of course, serious global rebukes of the Indian government coming from the highest level of politics and were challenging the Indian government narrative that had been promoted after the Republic Day events in India.<sup>23</sup>

In terms of support from citizen organisations, including those representing the Indian diaspora, there was also an overwhelming positive response to show solidarity. For instance, in February 2021, the Global Indian Progressive Alliance, representing some 20 Indian diaspora organisations from across the world, issued a statement in support of protesting farmers, for repealing the farm laws and urging the Indian government to recognise the right to peaceful protest. Pointing to the haste and undemocratic nature of Farm Laws, the Alliance stated:

‘As progressive Indians, we are again disturbed to see the ramming through of laws without any attempt at consensus building. There has been no discussion with other political parties, citizen groups, affected stakeholders or academics in developing bills and passing them through Parliament, suppressing even the parliamentary debate process’.<sup>24</sup>

In the USA, eighty-seven farmer organisations and allied agroecology, farm and food justice groups delivered a solidarity statement in support of the unified, peaceful and dignified farmer struggle, to the leader of Samyukta Kisan Morcha (SKM) which was managing the protests on behalf of 40 plus Indian farmers’ unions. Showing astute awareness of the issues at stake, Sophia Murphy, Executive Director of the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy was reported as saying:

‘Liberalising markets without taking into account farmers’ political voice and protecting against concentrated buyer power makes a mockery of what markets should stand for; we denounce the three farm bills, the lack of consultation with farmers and their organisations, and stand in solidarity with the brave stance India’s farmers are taking.’

In a similar vein and with their own members' experiences in mind, Jim Goodman, President of the National Family Farm Coalition was reported as saying:

‘We are honoured to join the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy, Rural Coalition, Grassroots Global Justice, and 83 additional organisations standing in solidarity with the farmers and farm workers in India who have been protesting for 85 days to protect their minimum price guarantees. We have been forced to accept low farm prices and we support their demands for economic parity - fair prices and living wages - to defend their livelihoods, their food sovereignty and the future of their republic.’<sup>25</sup>

A report in *The Tribune* by Bhasin in March 2021 stated that more than 100 labour, community and civil society organisations in Canada and other countries issued a joint statement in solidarity with farmers of India.<sup>26</sup> The above are only some examples to demonstrate that Sikh advocacy groups across North America, Europe and Australasia were working hard to raise awareness of farmer grievances, urging civic, labour and diaspora organisations to write letters of support to elected representatives and help with fund raising. Mobilizing and lobbying at this level is unprecedented in Sikh diaspora experiences.

### **Diaspora Motives for Farmer Support: Livelihoods over Profits**

There are numerous motives behind the diverse, widespread, enthusiastic and emotional involvement of the Sikh diaspora in the farmer agitation and we will only identify and discuss the major ones in this paper. An important motive is related to the strong sense of empathy with Punjab farmers given that a large component of the Sikh diaspora come from farming families, usually Jats, with many still owning agricultural land back in Punjab.<sup>27</sup> This land is usually operated by their family members, other relatives or co-villagers or those from neighbouring villages and usually under some contractual agreement. Their landholding, however meagre, is considered part of family history, identity, social and political status, a memory of previous lifestyle and livelihood and also an asset which can be endowed to future generations. Any perceived threat to this mental equilibrium will not be tolerated. Over time, many Sikh migrants had worked hard to accumulate savings and some used them to purchase more land in their village or nearby to add to their meagre inherited share, seeing this purchase both as a financial investment and as means of earning steady income. Thus, many diasporan Sikhs still own substantial acreage of farmland and receive substantial amounts of annual income (*hala*) from those cultivating it. This income comes in handy for holiday spending during their visits home but many also be used in philanthropic ways to help in modernising their villages or in providing village level or nearby education and health services. Yes, it is true that some families, especially those who migrated several generations ago, began to sell their land as they knew their children were unlikely to return or

care much about their family land, but a significant majority still continue to hold on to their land, however small and unviable. In any case, a sharp drop in agricultural land prices over the past five years halted the sale process with many biding their time and hoping for a rebound. Just as important as owning land, most diasporan Sikhs have families, relatives and friends back home whose livelihoods are highly dependent on income earned through farming operations. If their livelihoods are perceived to be in danger, it should not surprise us if diaspora Sikhs would want to offer every support to eliminate that risk. Government statistics show that only a small proportion of Punjabi farmers are large landowners and if anything the vast majority are small and marginal farmers with landholdings of less than 2 hectares and their numbers are increasing whilst the average size of their landholding is decreasing (Sood, 2016). In fact, due to agrarian distress, many farming families are highly dependent on financial remittances received from their overseas family members, helping them to avert falling into debt and to eke out a decent level of living. The extent of landlessness in Punjab has been rising and farm laws have only acted to instill new fears in the minds of many marginal farmers that they may also be pushed to the edge of landlessness and poverty, especially given that alternative employment opportunities are almost non-existent for them (Singh et al, 2009). Many such farmers are involved in the agitation and diaspora Sikhs express strong empathy towards them.

There are two further factors worth noting in understanding diaspora motives for support. Firstly, all political parties of Punjab have their chapters in most countries of Sikh diaspora settlement. As leaders of all of these parties, except the BJP, came out against the new farm laws, they also wanted to publicly demonstrate their opposition in diaspora locations and instructed their members to join the rallies and engage in fundraising. Secondly, it is worth remembering that there is continuity in some occupations in the diaspora and farming remains an important source of livelihood for many Sikhs – banana cultivation in Woolgoolga, Australia, dairy farming in the Waikato region of New Zealand, berry farming in Abbotsford, Canada and fruit, nut and vegetable farming in USA, particularly in California's Central Valley. So we would expect these farming communities to show empathy and solidarity and offer support given they are aware of the challenges which face farming and farmers in their own environments.

To reiterate an old saying, often used in derogatory ways towards Punjabi farmers by Indian urban middle classes, that 'there is only one culture in Punjab, it is agriculture', has taken on a new meaning during this agitation in a very creative and positive way. In fact, farming practices are so deeply embedded into the culture, psyche, ethos, values and essence of a Sikh farmer, this clearly manifested itself in public display and affirmation of community's rich cultural heritage, both in terms of religious values and rituals and folk music. Baba Nanak was, after all, a farmer for the many years whilst founding a new community at Kartarpur.<sup>28</sup> The camps, and cultural performances occurring there, demonstrated to the outside world the depth and richness of this agrarian

and folk culture, with many folk singers. *dhadi jathas*, poets, musicians, dancers, actors and *gatka* experts, volunteering to entertain there. Thus, farming and culture are shown to be intertwined and inseparable in the Sikh tradition. Through these cultural performances, the overwhelming sentiment evoked, both in India and in the diaspora, was that a farmer's village (*pind*), culture (*sabhyachar*) and heritage (*virsa*) were under attack by a ruthless government that had been captured by 'exploitative' Indian and global agro-business corporates.

### **Indian Government Reactions to Sikh Diaspora support for Farmers**

The Indian government has always kept a close watch on activities of its diaspora communities through its diplomatic missions and consulates, more so on Sikhs given the support and encouragement given by some sections of the Sikh diaspora to the Khalistan movement in the 1980s. It would be an understatement to say that many Sikhs since 1984 have felt deeply alienated from the Indian state, irrespective of the political party in power. The army attack on the Golden Temple during Operation Bluestar, lack of justice for victims and their families after the anti-Sikh pogroms in Delhi and in some other cities, dubious 'black lists' of alleged diaspora-based 'terrorists' and unlawful detentions, have made the Sikh community cynical of intentions of the Indian government, creating a major trust deficit. When the Indian government's negative perceptions about overseas Sikhs went into over-drive at the start of the farmer agitation, with government Ministers and the pro-Modi Indian media linking the protests to Khalistani elements, many Sikhs saw this as an excuse to label them for demeaning the farmer movement.<sup>29</sup> But as we discussed earlier, diaspora support for farmers came from diverse sections of the Sikh community - young and old, rich and poor, progressives and conservatives, those with farmer and non-farmer backgrounds - as well as from those who were pro-Khalistan and those historically and vocally opposed to the Khalistan movement. So, at the community level at least, labelling the very diverse diaspora based supporters of the farmer agitation as anti-nationals or Khalistanis, did not work and if anything intensified anger against the government and to greater efforts at galvanizing support. The government response was to instruct its missions abroad to monitor rallies supporting farmers with the objective of intelligence gathering and keeping records on anti-farm law protesters. Some of the intelligence gathered is already being utilised by the Indian government as indicated in recent news reports on refusal of entry at Delhi airport to philanthropist Dhaliwal and revoking of OCI cards and long-term visas to many diasporans.<sup>30</sup>

India prides itself in being the largest (parliamentary) democracy which gives voting freedom to all but this is only one and a limited aspect of human freedom. Other measures such as the Human Freedom Index are more comprehensive and inclusive and India scored 6.43 out of 10 in this index in 2020, placing it at 111 out of 162 countries.<sup>31</sup> Viewed from this perspective and with India constantly repeating its claim on the global stage as being the largest

democracy, arguably the most serious damage to its carefully cultivated global image was done by diaspora lobbying. The large number of statements and letters in support of farmers from governments, government agencies and civic organisations exposed India's global image. The Indian government hated being tarnished by accusations of human rights violations, blocking of internet at camp sites, curtailment of press freedom by jailing or intimidating journalists who questioned government policies and using the National Investigation Agency to intimidate farmer leaders and organisations funding them.

Two examples are worthy of note which demonstrate India's immediate reaction to foreign government comments. Firstly, on 4 December 2020, India's Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) called in Canadian diplomats for a rebuke after Prime Minister Justin Trudeau voiced concern about human rights violations of peacefully protesting farmers during a Facebook Live session. The Ministry called his comments 'unwarranted' and amounted to 'unacceptable interference' in India's internal affairs which risked damaging bi-lateral ties between the two nations.<sup>32</sup> The pro-Modi Indian media went further and questioned Trudeau's motives, as well as his personal and his Sikh Defence Minister's alleged links to the Khalistan movement and accused both of them of pandering to Sikh voters in Canada. This diplomatic spat was just another example of the troubled relations between India, Canada and the Sikh community since Operation Bluestar.<sup>33</sup> The second example relates to Indian Government's reaction after the British parliamentary debate on farmer agitation on March 8, 2021 mentioned above. Showing great anger at comments made by some MPs during the debate, India's Foreign Secretary Harsh Vardhan Shringla summoned Alex Ellis, the British High Commissioner based in Delhi the next day and is reported to have told him that the debate represented a 'gross interference in the politics of another democratic country' and many MPs were deliberately misrepresenting events in India to engage in vote-bank politics.<sup>34</sup> Hitting back at the debate, the Indian High Commissioner in London also released a similar statement on Twitter:

We deeply regret that rather than a balanced debate, false assertions - without substantiation or facts - were made, casting aspersions on the largest functioning democracy in the world and its institutions. [...] When aspersions are cast on India by anyone, irrespective of their claims of friendship and love for India or domestic political compulsions, there is a need to set the record straight.<sup>35</sup>

Needless to say this is the usual response from the Indian government whenever its policies, especially on human rights and press freedom are criticised. But in this case, criticism of India was coming from different quarters of the world and was challenging the Indian narrative of necessity of farm reforms to enrich farmers, their acceptance by most farmers except a minority, role of vested foreign interests and its image as a tolerant democracy. But it was becoming clear to many, sustained hostility of the government towards farmers and their

supporters, whether at home or abroad, its intimidatory tactics through 'political' abuse of the National Investigation Agency to serve notices to many individuals, curbs on press freedom and jailing of journalists reporting on farmer protests and internet blackouts at camp sites was tarnishing the 'carefully cultivated image of Modi as a world statesman.'<sup>36</sup> It is worth remembering that Modi, when Chief Minister of Gujarat, was refused a visa to enter USA in 2005 till he became the Prime Minister for his alleged tacit support for Hindu extremists in the Gujarat carnage in 2002 which left 2,000 people dead.

Sikh diaspora's support for farmers also created tensions between Sikhs and with some sections of the Indian diaspora at the community level at several locations. In a way this was not surprising given the past history of troubled Sikh-Hindu relations, especially in Canada, associated with the Khalistan movement and bombing of Air India's 'Kanishka' flight which killed 329 people and the subsequent botched trial. The Khalistan movement had also created tensions among Sikhs themselves which till persist in different forms.<sup>37</sup> However, this time, a new element, pro-Modi Hindutva groups, unhappy at the criticisms levelled at Modi, their personality cult-like hero, entered the scene by holding '*Tiranga Yatra*' or rallies in support of farm laws and India's 'Hindu nationalist' government. Some of these rallies, especially in Brampton in Canada, and Sydney in Australia ended up in threats of intimidation, violence and vandalism and also developed a religious dimension.<sup>38</sup> In Canada a 'war of words' in different Indian languages played out with the Punjabi media mostly supporting the farmers and media in other Indian languages supporting the Modi government. In Ontario, when the *Hindu Forum Canada* sponsored billboards on major highways thanking the Prime Minister Modi for sending Covid-19 vaccines (but not Germany or USA which also sent them) and at a time when Indians at home were struggling to get them and thousands of farmers were protesting, was seen as provocation and raised tensions.<sup>39</sup> A widely reported case was that of a Haryana youth, Vishal Jood, labelled a 'Tirangi Warrior', who was found guilty and sentenced to jail for attacking Sikhs in a series of incidents in Sydney, despite petitions by Haryana's Chief Minister Khatter to the Indian foreign ministry to intervene.<sup>40</sup> I use the above examples not to give the impression that actual Sikh-Hindu violence was widespread, because it wasn't, but only to draw attention to the fact that tensions were running high in some places and community leaders and the police had to appeal for calm and not to spread hatred.<sup>41</sup> This, however, was not the case with the very venomous and visceral 'war' over the social media which has not abated.<sup>42</sup>

### Some Conclusions

Sikhs have emerged as a classic example of a truly transnational community, with global mobility and a growing global visibility. Historical experiences demonstrate that Sikhs developed an acute sense of mobility, a sort of rootlessness, which compels them to move in light of the changing socio-economic environment (Thandi, 2017). So, after their initial settlement in a foreign country, many move again to another country some time later, and then

to another. In fact, Sikhs have experienced thrice or multiple migrations over the past century and a half. Many Sikhs, for instance, who first ventured abroad to Malaysia, Fiji, Singapore or the UK, then migrated to Australia, New Zealand, Canada or USA, and many have resettled again within these locations. This sense of 'nomadism' or 'rootlessness' actually became more acute in the contemporary age of globalisation where new digital technologies enabled Sikhs to keep in touch and exchange information on a 24/7 basis, wherever they may be settled.

So although Sikhs started migrating overseas a long time ago and may have settled and resettled in different locations, many have still not lost contact with their ancestral homeland. Homeland orientation has only strengthened and a long period of settlement abroad has also resulted in growing Sikh diaspora outreach in both their hostlands and at a global level. All three of these features - homeland orientation, hostland orientation and global orientation - are important in understanding the extent, depth and scope of diaspora support for the farmer agitation going on in India.

To elaborate further on the less discussed second feature, firstly, given the long period of settlement, Sikhs increasingly began participating in domestic politics, representing their local populations at different levels of government and holding important positions from City Mayors to Ministers in federal or central governments. Canada is an excellent example of the latter as many Sikhs have been elected to the Canadian Parliament and there have been more Sikhs in the Trudeau Cabinet since 2016 than in India.<sup>43</sup> This not only raised the profile of the Sikh community but also given them some leverage to influence decisions and policy making. Secondly, the long period of settlement increased upward social mobility of the community, allowing it to create strong institutions and advocacy networks which accommodate their religious, political, social and cultural needs. The establishment of these advocacy organisations and associated networks means that Sikhs have become relatively experienced and successful in engaging in a dialogue among themselves and with other communities to defend their core religious values, ethnic identity and community interests in their adopted homes. We have shown in this paper how these advocacy networks were mobilised to show solidarity and offer all forms of support to Punjabi farmers protesting against the ill-conceived farm laws passed by the Modi administration. This activism was also important in internationalising the farmers' issues which put the Indian government on the back-foot under world's gaze.

There can be no doubt that Sikh diaspora mobilisation in support of farmers has been unprecedented. It has been the most widespread, diverse and unifying mobilization which included mass participation by women and diaspora born younger generations and needs to be contrasted from the diaspora mobilization for the Khalistan movement which only ended up polarizing and dividing overseas Sikh communities, tarnishing their image which took some time to rectify. An important question to end on is what will happen to this mobilization and support if the farmer protest remains unresolved and drags on into the New



Year or even longer. Will diaspora support continue and be sustained at the same level or will supporters lose interest? Will the movement remain peaceful and continue to show unity among farmer organisations, in the face of renewed provocation and diversionary tactics of the government? Will the forthcoming Punjab Assembly elections in early 2022 prove to be a distraction, maybe tempting the farmers to enter the electoral process which farmer organisations have been able to resist so far? At the moment, government and farmers' positions are deeply entrenched between 'never withdraw' and 'must withdraw', despite a ruling by the Supreme Court to find a middle ground by suspending the new laws for 18 months and offers by the government to make amendments to the laws and suspend them for 2 years. This will, indeed, be a great test of political determination on both sides but which party will be prepared to concede first?

[NB: This article was completed and submitted before the announcement by Prime Minister Modi on 19<sup>th</sup> November 2021, to revoke the farm laws]

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> It is always difficult to find accurate data on the total Sikh population. If we go by the latest Indian census data, there are around 16 million Sikhs in Punjab, another 5 million outside Punjab, scattered in various States and Union Territories, adding to 21 million and with further 2 million estimated to be living overseas, makes a total of 23 million. However given potential accounting errors, the Indian census figures for Sikhs can be safely raised by 10 percent, and figures in India would then be 17.6 million in Punjab plus 5.28 million in the rest of India, making a total of 23 million. The remainder, around 2 million reside outside India as part of the Sikh diaspora, making the total global Sikh population to be 25 million.

<sup>2</sup> For a detailed discussion of the push and pull factors that explain Sikh overseas migration see my article (Thandi, 2017) in the *Brill Encyclopedia of Sikhism*.

<sup>3</sup> Both Merz et al (2007) and Brinkerhoff (2008) have several case studies to show contexts in which diaspora's can have a positive role.

<sup>4</sup> See several case studies in Smith & Share (2007) and a survey of existing literature in Koinova (2018).

<sup>5</sup> There are plenty of examples of such conflict-generated diasporas becoming more active in supporting self-determination or separatism in their homelands. In the case of Sikhs, there is some evidence to suggest that Sikhs who managed to settle abroad as asylum seekers in the 1980s/1990s, sometimes referred to as political migrants, were more active in the Khalistan movement. See Mahmood (1996) and Tatla (1999).

<sup>6</sup> The Ghadar movement still continues to attract academic interest from diaspora based scholars. For some recent publications see Malini Sood (2001), Maia Ramnath (2011) and Seema Sohi (2014). Also see several articles in the

special issue of the *Journal of Sikh and Punjab Studies* on the Ghadar Movement edited by Sukhdev. S. Sohal in 2019 and accessible at:

[http://www.giss.org/jsps\\_vol\\_26.html](http://www.giss.org/jsps_vol_26.html)

<sup>7</sup> 2 There is now extensive literature on the Khalistan movement but both Deol (2003) and Shani (2011) provide interesting perspectives. However, in terms of detailed discussion on diaspora mobilization for Khalistan, Tatla's 1999 book on *The Sikh Diaspora: Search for Statehood*, remains unchallenged.

<sup>8</sup> For an interesting discussion on British responses to Ghadar, see Condos (2017), pp 198-215.

<sup>9</sup> Tatla (1999) has an excellent discussion on rising tensions, based on his close reading of Punjabi vernacular sources, both within the Sikh community and Sikh relations with other Indian communities.

<sup>10</sup> Currently there is no satisfactory conceptual framework to measure the level or extent of influence exerted by Sikh diaspora lobbies in hostland politics by Sikh and Punjab Studies scholars, so clearly more research is needed. For interesting case studies of lobbying in the USA by other diasporas and their influence, or lack thereof, on US foreign policy see DeWind and Segura (2014).

<sup>11</sup> The author has attended many such rallies in London's Hyde Park and Trafalgar Square and vividly remembers the 2019 rally which marked the 35<sup>th</sup> anniversary of 1984 and heard many such speeches.

<sup>12</sup> For instance, a 20 year resident of California, Satwinder Singh Bagga and his friends collected Rs 10 lakh to undertake *seva* of mineral water for marching farmers. See 'NRI from California spends lakhs on mineral water for protesting farmers', *The Tribune*, January 25, 2021.

<sup>13</sup> Khalsa Aid was founded by Ravinder (Ravi) Singh, in 1999 after apparently being shocked at seeing the plight of refugees in Kosovo. Singh aligned the organisation's values under the Sikh ideology of '*sarbat da bhalla*' (welfare of all mankind). Two Sikhs, representing Brampton in Canada, Tim Uppal (Member of Parliament) and Prabmeet Singh Sarkaria (Member of Provincial Parliament) and Mayor of Brampton Patrick Brown, nominated Khalsa Aid for the Nobel Peace Prize for their humanitarian work.

<sup>14</sup> There are too many donations by wealthy individuals or families to list here but three examples are noteworthy. First, Raja Dhaliwal of Canada, through his World Financial Group donated Canadian \$50,000 towards *langer seva*. They donated this money via Khalsa Aid that was already operating in the camps. For details see report by Sukhmeet Bhasin 'More support, aid pouring in from NRIs for protesting farmers at Delhi', *The Tribune*, November 29, 2020. Second, California based philanthropist farmers, Tut Brothers, with rural roots in Jalandhar, donated 30 quintals of almonds to farmers camping on the Delhi borders. These were sent through their relatives. See news report 'NRIs send 30 quintal almonds for protesters' in *The Tribune*, 4<sup>th</sup> Dec, 2020. The four Tut brothers had earlier donated around Rs55 million in 2004 to install an imported water filtration plant to keep water clean in the *Sarovar* which surrounds the Golden Temple. Third, Dubai based businessman and Chair of *Sarbat Da Bhalla Charitable Trust*, Dr SP Singh Oberoi, vowed to help farmers with whatever

they deemed as necessary: team of 18 specialist doctors, essential medicines, 5 ambulances, 20 tons of dry food, fodder for horses, reflectors on tractor-trolleys to prevent accidents, 3,000 blankets, 3,000 jackets, 12,000 sleepers. See *The Tribune* report 'Farm Stir: Anger pours on to streets', December 5.

<sup>15</sup> See *Financial Express Online*, 'Around 2,500 NRIs return to Punjab to back AAP in Assembly elections', January 13, 2017.

<sup>16</sup> The Jakara Movement is a grass roots level youth movement led by past or current university and college students. They have been active over the past decade in raising awareness and advocating action on race hate crimes and human rights violations in Punjab. For a report on the Bay Area rally see Vandana Menon (2020) 'Children of kisaans': The global Punjabi diaspora speaks up for the farmers protesting in India' *Scroll*, December 14, 2020.

<sup>17</sup> See report by Sukhmeet Bhasin 'NRIs to hold car rallies in Canada to support farmers' tractor march on Jan 26'. *The Tribune*, January 25, 2021.

<sup>18</sup> Quoted in Vandana Menon (2020).

<sup>19</sup> See Sadanand Dhuma 'India Throws a Trudeau Tantrum', *Wall Street Journal*, Dec. 10, 2020.

<sup>20</sup> See the news report 'Global Indian Diaspora sends roses to Indian missions as mark of love to farmers', *The Tribune*, Feb 14, 2021.

<sup>21</sup> See 'If protesting farmers are abused, it will make movement stronger: British MP Dhesi', *The Tribune*, January 30, 2021.

<sup>22</sup> Hansard's full text of the debate can be accessed at [Press Freedom and Safety of Protesters: India - Hansard - UK Parliament](#)

<sup>23</sup> The Indian government released a statement through the MEA in February 2021 in response to growing international criticism of Indian government's dealings with farmer protests. The statement defended India's position and claimed 'it is unfortunate to see vested interest groups trying to enforce their agenda on these protests, and derail them. This was egregiously witnessed on January 26, India's Republic Day' and stated 'some of these vested interest groups have also tried to mobilise international support against India'. To read the full statement see Government of India Ministry of External Affairs, 'Press Statement on recent comments by foreign individuals and entities on the farmers' protests', 3, February 2021.

<sup>24</sup> See *Press Trust of India* report 'Global Indian diaspora seeks repeal of farm laws', February 1, 2021.

<sup>25</sup> Both statements are taken from a *Tribune* news report 'US farmer groups deliver solidarity statement to Indian farmers', *The Tribune*, 20<sup>th</sup> Feb, 2021.

<sup>26</sup> See Sukhmeet Bhasin's report 'Canadian civil groups out in support of Indian farmers', *The Tribune*, Mar 03, 2021.

<sup>27</sup> No generalization is implied here as the author is well aware of many relatively smaller Sikh groups from non-farming backgrounds among the Sikh diaspora. Although no data or research exists on these groups, the vast majority have shown sympathy and support, maybe for different reasons, including religious affinity.

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<sup>28</sup> For an excellent discussion of Nanak's life at Kartarpur see latter part of Gurinder Singh Mann's opening chapter 'Bābā Nānak and the Founding of the Sikh Panth' in Jacobsen, Mann, Myrvold and Nesbitt (2017).

<sup>29</sup> There are many examples of statements from Government Ministers and other BJP spokesmen that try to link farmer agitation with the Khalistani movement. One example deserve a special mention. During the Supreme Court hearing on farmer agitation and their forthcoming protests on Republic Day, the Attorney General (AG) K K Venugopal confirmed to the Chief Justice that 'Khalistanis have infiltrated into the protests'. This was confirmed after a senior advocate P S Narasimha, representing the Consortium of Indian Farmers Association which supported the farm laws, stated that groups like 'Sikhs for Justice' are involved in the protests against the laws. The AG said he would file an affidavit and IB reports the next day. It appears no such affidavit or IB reports were filed as there is no information in the public domain on their filing. See *Times of India* report 'Khalistan supporters have infiltrated farmer's protest: Attorney general to SC', January 12, 2021.

<sup>30</sup> For example, see report by Aman Sood, 'NRI Darshan Singh Dhaliwal refused entry for 'backing' farmers' protest', *The Tribune*, October 24, 2021 and another report a few days later 'OCI cards, visas of farm protest backers revoked', *The Tribune*, October 27, 2021.

<sup>31</sup> The Human Freedom Index was developed jointly by the Cato Institute, Fraser Institute and the Liberales Institut of the Frederick Naumann Foundation for Freedom. According to the *World population Review* website

'The Human Freedom Index places each country on a scale of 0 to 10, where a score of 10 represents the most freedom, for personal freedom and economic freedom. Each country's human freedom index is an average of the two.

*Personal freedom* is the freedom of an individual to have freedom of opinion and expression, freedom to come and go, equality before the courts, and security of private property. *Economic freedom* consists of personal choice, freedom to compete in markets, protection of person and property, voluntary exchange, and allowing people to prosper without intervention from the government or economic authority' (italics added).

Further details and full report can be accessed at

<https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/freedom-index-by-country>

<sup>32</sup> See report in the *New York Times* 'Indian Farmers' Protests Spread, in Challenge to Modi', 4 December 2020.

<sup>33</sup> Sikh community's anger against India and Canada was clearly visible when a Canadian think tank known for its conservative leanings, Macdonald-Laurier Institute (MLI), released a controversial report written by a senior journalist Terry Milweski, which argued that Khalistan was basically a Pakistan project created to harm India. The report appeared to make a number of unsubstantiated

allegation against *Sikhs for Justice*, a pro-Khalistan advocacy group which was also behind a global Khalistan Referendum 2020 campaign but also cast doubts on Sikh advocacy in general. In the forward written by Ujjal Dosanjh (former British Columbia Premier and well known for his anti-Khalistan stance) and Shuvaloy Majumdar (Munk Senior Fellow for Foreign Policy at the Macdonald-Laurier Institute, and former Director of Policy to Canadian Foreign Ministers) both appeared to warn Canadians about Sikh human rights advocacy groups engaged in providing a 'steady and predictable drumbeat of victimization, persecution and genocide commemoration, presented as steps to assist a community in need of healing' (p. 5). This appeared to jive with the Indian government narrative on Canadian Sikhs and unsurprisingly, the Indian Government and Indian media lapped it up implying 'we told you so'. Sikh Community leaders and 50 plus academics asked the Macdonald-Laurier Institute to withdraw the report but it is still available on its web-site.

The *Sikhs for Justice* took out a defamation lawsuit against both Terry Milewski and MLI, seeking millions in damages. Recently a court ruling by a Canadian Judge means that the defamation case will now go to full trial unless both parties reach a settlement. See the report by Murtaza Ali Shah 'Sikh group scores first win in defamation case involving allegations of Pakistan's backing', *Geo News*, November 6, 2021, Accessed <https://www.geo.tv/latest/380712-sikh-group-in-canada-scores-first-win-in-defamation-case-over-allegations-of-pakistans-backing>

The MLI report can be accessed at:

[20200820\\_Khalistan\\_Air\\_India\\_Milewski\\_PAPER\\_FWeb.pdf](https://www.mli.ca/20200820_Khalistan_Air_India_Milewski_PAPER_FWeb.pdf)  
([macdonaldlaurier.ca](http://macdonaldlaurier.ca))

<sup>34</sup> See 'India protests farmer protest debate in UK house, summons high commissioner', *The Times of India*, 10 March 2021.

<sup>35</sup> See as above.

<sup>36</sup> See Tavleen Singh 'Mishandling of farmers' agitation has damaged PM Modi's carefully cultivated image as a world statesman', *Indian Express*, February 7, 2021.

<sup>37</sup> One interesting example of continuing tensions was the cancellation of talks on the farmer agitation at the University of British Columbia and Simon Fraser University in Vancouver, Canada in April 2021. Hartosh Bal, political editor of *Caravan*, a respected and progressive news magazine based in Delhi in India, who has been highly critical of Indian government's human rights record and its use of repressive measures against protesting farmers, was invited by the Punjabi Studies program at UBC to give an online talk about the ongoing farmers' struggle in India. He was also invited to a similar online talk at Simon Fraser University. A group of Sikh activists objected to the talk as he was nephew and alleged to be supporter of the late K. P. S. Gill, Police Chief in Punjab at the height of the Khalistan movement. As Police Chief, Gill was held responsible for killings and disappearances of hundreds of Sikh youth in the 1980s and early 1990s. As a result of activists' pressure, both talks were cancelled. For more details, see reports by Gurpreet Singh 'UBC pressured by Sikh activists to cancel daring journalist's appearance on panel' and 'Canada's laughing-stock

universities cave in twice to community gatekeepers by cancelling Indian journalist's talk' in *The Georgian Straight*, April 1 and April 25, 2021.

<sup>38</sup> See the following *Tribune* reports on Canada and Australia 'Indian diaspora holds Tiranga rally in Brampton for stronger ties with Canada' *The Tribune*, 1 March, 2021 and 'Australia threatens deportations after attacks on Sikhs' *The Tribune* 4 March, 2021.

<sup>39</sup> For further details, see report by Rishi Nagar 'Farmers' revolt is dividing the Indian diaspora in Canada', *Calgary Herald*, April 24, 2021.

<sup>40</sup> See report by Sandeep Dikshit 'Tribune Attack on Sikhs in Sydney: Haryana youth Vishal Jood pleads guilty', *The Tribune*, 2 September, 2021.

<sup>41</sup> With rising tensions between Sikh and Hindu communities, especially among the youth, attempts were made to jointly condemn them although not all agreed to sign a public statement. See report by Kathleen Calderwood, 'Tensions boil over in Sydney's Indian community as farmers' protests in Delhi continue', *ABC Western Sydney* 15 March, 2021.

<sup>42</sup> The exchanges became particularly vitriolic after a number of well-known global celebrities such as Rihanna, Greta Thunberg, Trevor Noah, Meena Harris (lawyer and US Vice President Kamala Harris's niece) and a number of hollywood actors such as Susan Sarandon and John Cusack among others, tweeted their support for farmers. Punjabi celebrities such as singer-actor Daljit Dosanjh, musicians Jay Sean (Kamaljit Singh Jhooti) and Dr Zeus (Baljit Singh Padam) and Indo-Canadian You-Tube host Lilly Singh, also tweeted support for farmers, troubling the Modi government and its celebrity supporters such as Bollywood actor Kangana Ranaut.

<sup>43</sup> The first Trudeau government in 2016 had four Sikh MPs in the Cabinet, although after the recent election, this has gone down to 2, Harjit Singh Sajjan and Kamal Khera. Harjit Singh Sajjan, Defence Minister since 2015 was transferred in the Cabinet reshuffle to become Minister for International Development and Minister Responsible for the Pacific Economic Development Agency of Canada. His position was given to Anita Anand, an Indian-Canadian with Punjabi roots. Kamal Khera, Sikh MP from Brampton West and one of the youngest females elected to Parliament, became the Minister for Seniors. Also interestingly, Sikh-Canadian Jagmeet Singh, leader of the New Democratic Party (NDP), again emerged as the 'kingmaker' after Trudeau's Liberal Party failed to win a clear majority in Parliament.

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