

## **Enhancing Visibility, Extending Solidarity: Women's Participation in the 2020-21 Farmer Protests**

**Swaroop Lahiri**

*Doctoral Student, University of California, Santa Barbara*

The 2020 Indian farm bills have been the subject of much debate and have engendered farmer protests in multiple parts of the country, notably in Singhu and Tikri on the Delhi border. A striking aspect of the protests is the strong and multifaceted involvement of women cutting across age, class and caste divides, and on a scale which is historically unprecedented. This paper focuses on the participation of chiefly Punjabi and Haryanvi women at the Singhu and Tikri sites but also in their home states and explores their varied motivations and modes of participation. The paper also contemplates on whether their participation experience has the potential to transform gender relations both at home and in the public sphere, especially since the majority of the women protesters hail from deeply patriarchal states.

In September 2020, three controversial farm bills were hastily passed in the Indian Parliament: the Farmers' Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Bill, the Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement on Price Assurance and Farm Services Bill and the Essential Commodities (Amendment) Bill. These farm acts, colloquially referred to as the 'black laws', have stirred up much controversy and uproar because of their intent to liberalize the agricultural sector at the expense of some farmers' incomes and autonomy. Small and marginal farmers who are often debt-ridden and have very little bargaining power vis-à-vis powerful agro businesses are expected to be the worst hit (Economic and Political Weekly, 2020).

The bills have sparked widespread protests throughout the nation. By November 26, 2020, the protests gained momentum as farmers from Punjab, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan stormed towards the national capital, Delhi, and made their base on its borders. The two most prominent border protest sites are Tikri and Singhu located on the Delhi-Haryana border. Singhu and Tikri are vibrant bustling spaces that highlight continuity between dissent and everyday life. *Langars* (a Sikh hallmark of free community meals served by the community kitchen), including pizza *langars*, massage centers, tattoo parlors, makeshift gym and libraries are sights that greet visitors (Tagore, 2021). In sync with the Sikh ethos of *sewa* (selfless service), amenities such as medicine shops, a dental camp and laundry facilities have also been set up (Sinha, 2020). Poems by Punjabi revolutionary poets Lal Singh Dil and Sant Ram Udasi are recited by young children with fervor. Posters, slogans and speeches make ample reference to Sikh religious vocabulary and the Sikh people's longstanding

contributions to the Army, their role as the nation's *annadata* (food provider) and their inherent revolutionary spirit.

While the ongoing protest received global solidarity and extensive media coverage due to its sheer scale and organizational prowess, the overwhelming presence and active participation of predominantly Punjabi and Haryanvi women made it all the more remarkable. This paper focuses on women's participation in the farmer protests through a brief historical examination of women's involvement in protests and by exploring the impetus for participation as well as the nature of participation in the current protests and its implication for gender relations.

### **Historical Background on Women's Involvement in Protests in India**

Women in India have a long history of association with social protests, dating back to the colonial era and the freedom struggle. The modes of participation, the degrees of participation and the rationale behind participation have varied depending on the cause, class identity and external environment. Two relevant peasant movements that included active and overt participation by women were the *Tebhaga* Movement of 1946-47 and the Naxalite Movement of 1967-71 (Singha Roy, 1992). The *Tebhaga* Movement, supported by the Bengal Kisan Sabha, was initiated by sharecroppers, agricultural laborers and poor peasants against the *Jotedars* and *Zamindars* (rich peasants and landowners) and demanded the sharecroppers' right to retain two thirds of the agricultural produce. While women from the protesting households cooked for the activists, sheltered them and secretly delivered messages, they also openly retaliated against the landowners including the women of the landowning households by defiantly carrying paddy claimed by landlords to their own houses (Singha Roy, 1992: 56). They even converted their domestic tools such as broomsticks and traditional vegetable cutters to weapons when shielding the protesters against the wrath of the police (Singha Roy, 1992: 58). The Naxalite Movement, often seen as an extension of the *Tebhaga* Movement, featured a similar variety of participation tactics from women, such as grabbing crop produce, meal preparation, sheltering injured protesters and serving as communication agents. It is important to note that while women took part in these movements, they were driven by their class identity rather than their gender identity. The participating women were from the agricultural labor class and resisted not only the police and the male landowners and rich peasants but also women belonging to the landowning households who were seen to be complicit in the exploitation of the laborer class.

Apart from socio-economic status, the characteristics of the political field affect the issues and struggles that women choose to support. Ray meticulously unravels the complexities of women's movements in India by comparing the movements in Bombay and Calcutta (Ray, 2000). The main puzzle that she investigates is why different issues were taken up by women of both cities when they shared a similar social and political history, especially during the colonial

period. Women in Calcutta rallied behind the causes of unemployment, wage discrimination, literacy, electricity and water (practical concerns) whereas women in Bombay were more aligned to the Western feminist movement and took up gendered or 'feminist' issues (strategic concerns) such as sexual harassment, patriarchy and violence against women (Ray, 2000: 5, 24). The reason behind this divergence is the nature of the political field: Calcutta had a hegemonic political field with the communist party Communist Party of India (M) dictating women's issues whereas Bombay had a fragmented political field where independent women's organizations were setting the agenda (Ray, 2000: 42). Leftist political parties and their associated women's wings prefer to focus on class based issues such as poverty and unemployment. Gender issues are taken up occasionally but only when they do not overshadow the broader agenda. On the other hand, independent organizations can afford to pursue explicitly feminist issues since they are not accountable to political parties.

Environmental protests often garner staunch female support as women are generally regarded as the custodians of familial well-being. Examples include the 1973 *Chipko* Movement, the 1980 Anti-Nuclear Power Plant Protests, 1984 protests against Union Carbide after the Bhopal blast and the 1985 Narmada Dam protests (Bhowmick, 2020). While eco-feminist scholars have argued that women have an innate relationship with nature, it is in fact the gendered division of labor, and in particular, women's reliance on the natural environment to collect firewood and fodder that also make them recognize the pressing stakes of the issue at hand (Agarwal, 1992, 147-148).

Several features of previous women's protest movements help us to understand women's key role in the 2020-21 farmer protests: the farm laws threaten to disrupt household well-being, there has been substantial mobilization by local political parties as well as women's organizations in generating awareness and participation methods have ranged from food preparation, taking care of the household in the absence of men to peaceful sit-ins at the protest sites, speeches and sloganeering. At the same time, past protests were usually localized. In the present case, women, including a significant proportion of elderly women, have had a prolonged presence at the national capital's protest sites, located at a considerable distance from home and devoid of the accustomed privacy. The participation of elderly women mirrors the 2019-20 Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) demonstrations, where grandmothers who had previously never ventured out of their homes, assembled at Shaheen Bagh in Delhi, braving the harsh winter for a peaceful sit-in that championed equality and justice for the future generations.

### **Women's Mobilization in the 2020-21 Farmer Protests**

The women who have gathered at the Singhu and Tikri protest sites are mainly from Punjab and Haryana. They are a diverse lot and cut across class, caste and age divides. They range from Jat women of large landholding families to Dalit agricultural laborers. Much of the credit for such robust female participation in the protests can be attributed to the efforts of farmers' unions such as the Bharti

Kisan Union Ekta Ugrahan (BKU- Ekta Ugrahan) in organizing extensive on-ground mobilization and awareness campaigns and in trying to establish inter-caste solidarity (Sinha, 2020). The following images (Time Magazine's front cover and an illustration published in the *Trolley Times* – a newspaper launched by the farmers to represent their voices) exemplify this diversity of women protesters.





Source: Top: *Time Magazine* March 2021 Edition; Below: *Trolley Times* Volume 1, Edition No. 2 December 22, 2020

The fact that *Time Magazine* chose to feature Indian women protesters on its front cover vouches for the powerful leadership that women demonstrated in the protests. The front cover has women of all ages, including grandmothers and a young girl. Some choose to cover their heads with the *chunni* (traditional long scarf) which is a marker of Sikh religion and Haryanvi culture aimed to protect the modesty of the woman (the practice of *purdah*). Yet, they still defy the broader connotations of *purdah* such as the gendered partitioning of space and behavior through their prolonged presence at a public protest site. The images of the woman carrying her baby and the young girl convey that women's social roles are no longer limited to their traditional gendered duties of caregivers. Rather, they translate into a more capacious notion of a dissident community with a common political goal. The young girl's presence and solidarity imply that the event is also a political lesson in progress with future generations at stake. On the other hand, the *Trolley Times* illustration depicts three elderly women who refuse to adhere to the ablest and ageist presumptions about participation in political struggles. A featured story in the first edition of *Trolley Times* mentions an elderly woman who abandons her coveted sweater knitting project and signs up for the protest despite poor health conditions. Her reasoning is simple: 'If I don't go to the protest now, much that has been knitted will unravel, including my son's dreams, your father's earned land.' (Kaur, 2020).

### **Women's Motivations for Participation**

The social imaginary of a farmer in India is a male figure as captured by the popular term *kisan bhai* (farmer brother). Showing up to the protests in solidarity with the farming community meant asserting their independent identity as farmers and gaining recognition as farmers for many women (Kaushal and Kissu, 2021; Kaur and Sekhon, 2021). Women in agriculture have been historically disadvantaged compared to their male counterparts. A long list of factors are to be blamed (Agarwal, 1994: 298). Socio-cultural norms such as the prevalence of *purdah* restrict their mobility and make it more likely for agricultural extension officers to target male household heads for technology diffusion and training. The use of the plough by women is a social taboo and so they need to rely on hired workers or male members of the family for ploughing their fields but their ability to command labor is limited. Women also typically have lower access to financial, informational and institutional resources due to lower ownership of assets such as land and cash, lower literacy rates including digital literacy and less awareness.

The new farm laws will sharpen the existing gender inequities in agriculture and more adversely impact women (MAKAAM, 2020). Since women farmers suffer from low mobility and generally sell small quantities of inferior produce, they mainly tend to sell their produce to local private traders who, over the course of time, become familiar and trusted figures. These traders often double up as informal credit lenders and provide support for other agricultural needs. The new laws will trigger the entry of bigger, alien players and will severely undermine women's existing networks of market access. Most women farmers simply do not have the bargaining power, the requisite negotiation skills or the literacy levels to deal with powerful businesses and risk being completely sidelined in a corporatized agricultural sector.

In addition, India's current wave of feminization is occurring under distress circumstances (Pattnaik et al., 2018). Women's involvement in agriculture is negatively associated with the average size of landholdings and is positively associated with poverty and total farm area under food grains. In other words, poor women with smaller landholdings who mostly cultivate food grains are stuck in the agricultural sector. These women are also increasingly confronted with a hostile agricultural landscape characterized by water scarcity, fragmented plot sizes, mechanization and the difficulty of accessing labor. Hailed as the cradle of the Green Revolution, the euphoria has long died down in Punjab. The state is now bogged down by a severe agrarian crisis as a result of rapidly depleting groundwater resources, rising costs of production notably lease land rentals, and mounting indebtedness. Farmers and agricultural laborers are caught in a spiraling debt trap due to high capital and technology investments necessitated by the Green Revolution and dwindling farm incomes (Singh et al., 2017). The surge in suicide rates, especially in the *Malwa* region, highlights the dire situation.

Women who have lost husbands and other male members of the family to suicides suddenly find themselves in the role of primary breadwinners. Women who have access to land and were previously excluded from working in the

fields due to family customs now grapple with the unfamiliar tasks of cultivation and agricultural decision-making in a collapsing agricultural landscape. For the landless women, there exist very few opportunities for paid labor in Punjab since the cultivation of the two dominant crops wheat and rice is heavily mechanized (Singh, 2021). If suicide was driven by the inability to repay debts, women frequently inherit the deceased member's debt in addition to fending for their families. An assessment of landholding status of families post suicide in the Malwa region shows that landholding size reduces irrespective of the category of the farmer (marginal, small, semi-medium, medium, large) and sometimes even leads to instances of landlessness (Padhi, 2012: 22-24). It is hardly surprising then that a large number of widows from the suicide afflicted Malwa region turned up at the protests notably on December 16, 2020 as the farm bills are expected to worsen the factors that compel suicide. The pandemic served as a tipping point because the lockdowns drastically cut down the income avenues for many debt-ridden women and participation in the protests provided them with an outlet to vent their frustrations and anger (Toor, 2020; Gayatri, 2021).

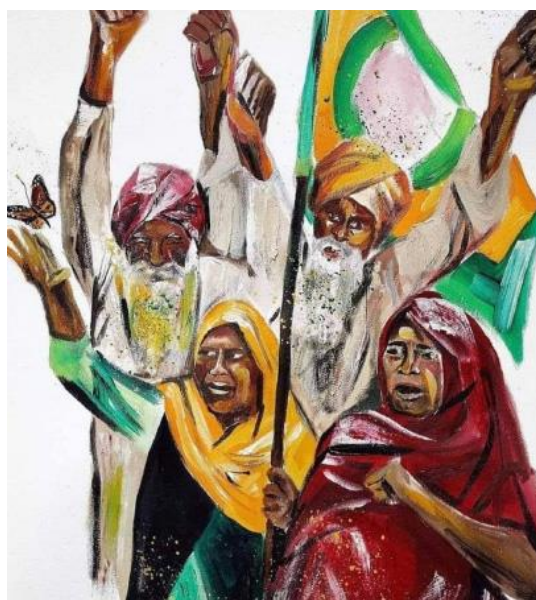
Not all women protesting are farmers themselves but belong to farming households. There is a common perception that the farm acts would snatch land away from landowners and reduce them to bonded laborers in their own fields. In fact, in 1907, there was an eerily similar movement to the present farmer protests called the *Pagri Sambhal Jatta* movement spearheaded by celebrated revolutionary Bhagat Singh's uncle Ajit Singh. It was launched against three British laws related to agriculture which threatened the autonomy and land ownership rights of Punjabi farmers. The farm acts were Doab Bari Act, Punjab Land Colonisation Act and the Punjab Land Alienation Act (Brar, 2020). For the traditional landowning Jat-Sikhs, land is not only a source of sustenance but a cultural asset. Land, irrespective of size, is sacred and intrinsically tied to the honor and ancestry of the family. Elderly women insist that the protests are essential to protect the interests of the future generations by ensuring that their land remains in the family (Shergill, 2020). Several women are also concerned that the laws would have a direct adverse impact on their households' kitchens as well as on other indicators of gender equality (Salam, 2020; Gupta, 2021; Talwar, 2021). Women's assets such as gold and utensils are the first to be auctioned off in times of crisis and repaying of debts. Due to the prevalence of patriarchal customs, declining farm incomes would more strongly affect the nutritional intake and educational opportunities of women as they typically have very low levels of intra-household bargaining power.

### **Modes of Participation and Representation**

Media reports documenting the farmer protests are sprinkled with phrases like 'women of steel', 'women helm the stir', 'women take reign' and 'women take the lead' and laud the grit, determination and leadership skills of women. Women themselves describe the movement as revolutionary and confidently state that they are prepared for sacrifices as they hail from the land of Bhagat Singh with ancestral ties to the freedom struggle and an inherited revolutionary

trait (Singh, 2021; Bhatnagar, 2021). Women participants who died during the protests are referred to as ‘martyrs’ as the fight against the farm laws is viewed as a noble cause.

Apart from the sit-in at the Delhi protest sites, women have been instrumental in sustaining multiple protests in their home states, at locations such as toll plazas and shopping malls. In some instances, women have taken over agricultural tasks to enable men to leave for the protest sites or have adopted a rotational strategy that permits them to balance their domestic responsibilities with their presence at the Delhi border protests. They have also ensured a steady supply of rations and other essential items to the sites. At the Delhi border protest sites, women juggled a range of activities such as cooking *langar*, singing revolutionary songs, performing skits, delivering speeches and managing the events on the stage. Their leadership streak was particularly evident on Women Farmers’ Day (January 18) and International Women’s Day (March 8) when all events were entirely organized and led by all-women crews (Bhatnagar, 2021; Kaushal and Kissu, 2021). A new publication, *Karti Dharti*, was launched by a group of women to provide a platform for diverse voices, notably women’s voices, related to the farmer protests. The prevalent motto was to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with men (commonly referred to as brothers) and fight as equal partners and stakeholders. The following illustration from *Trolley Times* with women in the foreground raising the farmer union BKU-Ekta Ugrahan flag captures this sentiment.



Source: *Trolley Times* Volume 1 Edition No. 2 December 22, 2020



Women's performances amalgamated their identities as farmers and as family members of men who have suffered as a result of a failing agricultural sector. They employed both radical forms of participation such as burning effigies of the advocates of a neoliberalized agricultural sector - IMF-World Bank, corporate honchos Adani and Ambani and the Prime Minister Narendra Modi - and tractor rallies as well as performative gendered practices of mourning. The female driven tractors on Republic Day signaled an attempt to shatter male monopoly on agricultural technology and claim recognition and visibility as women farmers in their own right. Simultaneously, women lamented the loss of their sons and husbands who had committed suicide due to acute indebtedness by holding their portraits high (Iftikhar, 2020). The photographic presences of those who have died forged a site of revolutionary remembrance and brought an affective charge to the crisis. In the context of the farmer protests, the most interesting form of performance by women is the *Pitt-Siapa* (Kopal, 2021). *Pitt-Siapa* is a Punjabi mourning ritual performed only by women which entails weeping, beating up their chests and foreheads and singing songs bemoaning the death. However, in this case, women used the ritual to curse and wish for the death of Narendra Modi with the phrase '*Modi mar jaa tu*' (Modi go die). This act in itself can be classified as bold defiance since women were weaponizing their traditional emotional labor responsibilities to assign a death verdict to the most powerful man in the country. This transgression not only undermined the authority of the Prime Minister but also emphasized the agency of the politically marginalized women bound by the dictates of patriarchy.

### **The Implications of Women's Participation in the 2020-21 Farmer Protests for Gender Relations**

One of the most striking aspect of women taking part in the farmer protests is that the vast majority of them come from the states of Punjab and Haryana, the heartland of the patriarchal belt in India. According to Caldwell (1978), the patriarchal belt is characterized by undervaluation of women's work, subordination of women through restrictive behavior codes and the intertwining of family honor with female virtue, high fertility rates and a preference for male children. A penchant for male children supported by female foeticide and female infanticide practices is indicated by the dismal child sex ratio in both states: 846 females for 1000 males in the 0-6 age group in Punjab and 834 in Haryana as compared to the national figure of 919 (Census of India, 2011). Caldwell (1978) states that despite their blatant exploitation, women in the patriarchal belt rarely fight back overtly because they have been socialized since a very early age to embrace traditional gender roles defined by religious teachings.

Kandiyoti (1988) builds on Caldwell's notion of the belt of patriarchy and coins the term 'classic patriarchy'. In areas of classic patriarchy, women seldom display overt acts of resistance and often figure out ways to accommodate their interests within the system through participation in 'patriarchal bargains' taking into account their constraints. The nature of the 'patriarchal bargain' is defined

by class, caste and ethnicity. In societies where classic patriarchy is prevalent, early marriages of women and control and subordination of women are common. Women's labor and progeny are fully appropriated and women's contribution to production is rendered invisible. Under classic patriarchy, women of higher caste and class are more likely to follow *purdah* or female seclusion that serves as a marker of status. As coping mechanisms, women in these regions use interpersonal strategies that maximize their security through emotional manipulation of their sons and husbands. There is a premium on age and older women grease the wheels of the patriarchal system by abetting the infliction of gender injustices they themselves faced on their daughters-in-law. When classic patriarchy is threatened by new market forces, the introduction of capital or economic impoverishment, women resist transition and seek to claim their part of the 'patriarchal bargain' - protection in exchange for subordination and propriety. This is because the alternative range of options for women to enhance their security is limited.

Punjab and Haryana embody many traits of classic patriarchy with their profligate dowry practices and appropriation of women's labor including reproductive labor. Women are conditioned to believe that their domestic contribution is not valuable and are barred from exploring wage employment due to caste barriers. Jat-Sikh women complain that they are restricted from seeking wage employment even in the face of economic duress since their caste privilege renders paid employment a social taboo (Padhi, 2012: 45-46). In Haryana, agrarian needs had led to bride prices but this practice did not translate into an elevated status of women. Instead, bride prices were paid for physically strong women who could fulfill the family's agricultural labor needs - widow remarriage was also encouraged for the same purpose (Chowdhry, 1994: 60, 120). On the other hand, in Punjab, many widows were forced to remarry close family relatives so that any property rights they had inherited as a result of widowhood would remain in the family (Kaur, 2011).

Women's feisty participation in the farmer protests hence appears in stark contrast to the socio-cultural fabric of Punjab and Haryana. The protest sites have witnessed fluid gender roles with men and women equally sharing kitchen duties. Men who had previously never cooked are now serving food to women and respecting and recognizing women's labor (Natt, 2020). They see this as nothing short of a revolution. The tractor rally by women was enthusiastically supported by men despite the tractor's traditional masculine connotation. Activists have taken advantage of such a large female gathering to spread awareness about women's rights and motivate them to stand up for themselves. For some women, protesting has truly been a transformative experience (Gayatri, 2021; Bhowmick, 2021). This is especially true for women who had spent most of their lives within the confines of home and had rarely interacted with the outside world. There is a growing optimism that the protests have stirred women's consciousness and improved self-perception and are a stepping stone for gender equality movements that have so far occurred unevenly in the country, including in Punjab. The participants are expected to return as

enlightened women free from the shackles of gender stereotypes with the resolve to challenge the state and regressive patriarchal customs back home.

However, there is skepticism about whether participation in the protests can dramatically alter gender relations, especially within the household since the social conditioning of women is deeply entrenched. There is an age factor involved too: older women are more likely to want to revert to the status quo after the protests are over (Gayatri, 2021). This desire can be explained by the classic patriarchy discussion mentioned earlier. Older women with limited options for independent economic survival rely heavily on the patriarchal bargain especially since they have already fulfilled their end of the bargain (subordination and propriety) in their initial years. For them, the sole goal of the protests is to repeal the farm acts. Furthermore, the same protest sites that ensured gendered labor sensitization and the weakening of rigid gender roles also became spaces of female objectification and multiple sexual harassment incidents, including an alleged gang rape (The Tribune, 2021).

### **Conclusion**

The ongoing farmer protests raging at the Singhu and Tikri borders of Delhi are characterized by historically unprecedented levels of participation from primarily Punjabi and Haryanvi women belonging to various socio-economic classes, castes, age groups and professions. Refusing to be mere spectators, women turned into active participants, leaders, security guards and organizers in Singhu and Tikri, and simultaneously cultivated smaller protests in their home states. There were numerous reasons behind such a powerful involvement: some women wanted to be recognized as independent farmers who were equally, if not, more adversely affected by the farm laws due to inherent gender inequality in agriculture. Other women were opposing the laws because they would shrink many farmers' household incomes and impact household welfare, especially women's nutritional intake and educational opportunities. Most of the remarkably resilient elderly women feared that the farm acts would endanger familial land ownership: a marker of family honor. The modes of participation ranged from cooking, delivering speeches and slogans to performative acts that mourned deceased family members and challenged authority and patriarchy.

The protest sites were transformed into flourishing spaces of increased gender equality where cooking duties were evenly distributed, women's traditional labor was valued and women participants were treated as equal partners. Several women, especially younger women, claimed that the protests were an eye-opener in terms of how they should perceive themselves and boosted their morale and self-respect. However, it is uncertain whether participation in the protests would translate into improved gender relations and create dents in the patriarchal society. The introduction of the farm laws is essentially seen as an economic issue and it is usually relatively easier to garner women's support for economic causes. In any case, involvement of women in previous peasant movements in Punjab, albeit on a much smaller scale, did not result in much change in gender relations. On the other hand, mobilizing women

on gender issues is a tedious task, especially in deeply patriarchal settings such as Punjab and Haryana. Historically, men have solicited and appreciated women's solidarity and support for social issues but it remains to be seen whether female participation in the current farmer protests succeeds in becoming a launch pad for gender equality movements in Punjab or for the country at large.

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