

## **The Pen, the Keyboard, and Resistance: Role of Social Media in the Farmers' Protest**

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The passing of 3 farm bills by the Indian Parliament in September 2020 launched the 2020-2021 Indian farmers' protest, which gained global prominence as Sikhs in the diaspora engaged with the movement through social media. Sikhs in the diaspora mobilized and organized rallies across the globe to stand in solidarity with the farmers and laborers in India - many of whom do not typically engage with Punjab matters. The level of engagement with the farmers' protest amongst diasporic Sikhs is far greater than what it was during the 2015 *Sarbat Khalsa* or the post-1984 Sikh struggle for independence. The strength of the movement comes from the role media has played, which is uncommon to the Sikh community with historical movements such as the *Ghadr* Movement and post-1984 Sikh struggle establishing community-oriented newspapers. With technological advances allowing greater potential for communicating and mobilizing support, this paper will analyze different historical forms of communication, along with the impact of community-led media.

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### **Introduction**

With the passing of 3 farm bills by the Indian Parliament in September 2020, farmers and laborers from Punjab began protesting locally. After some time, leaders began the *Dilli Chalo* (Let's go to Delhi) movement, where tens of thousands of farmers and laborers from Punjab and Haryana marched towards the capital and were joined by protestors from several different states. The government made every attempt to halt the march before it reached Delhi by installing barricades and using water cannons against the protestors. Not only did the protestors persevere, they were able to gain international attention and support. Due to the rise of social media, videos and photos of Navdeep Singh climbing onto a police water cannon, shutting it off, and then jumping onto a tractor became viral (Singh, 2020). While police-protestor confrontations continued, protestors have utilized media to combat the pro-government narrative (coined as *Godi Media*) and reclaim their own narrative. The farmers' protest gained global prominence through their use of media from ground up reporting. Using primary sources, interviews, and historical methods, the purpose of this paper is to 1) analyze the role media has played in historical movements such as the *Ghadr* Movement and the post-1984 Sikh struggle for political freedom; 2) compare and contrast the earlier forms of historical media with how farmers and laborers have reclaimed their own narrative through social media and volunteer newspapers reporting from the

ground; and 3) explore how social media has helped the farmers' protest gain global attention and reconnected diasporic Sikh youth to Punjab issues.

First, this paper will analyze different historical forms of communicating with the community such as the Ghadr and the World Sikh News. It is crucial to, first, understand the social and historical context of the Ghadr Movement and its newspaper, also titled Ghadr. The Ghadr was the first newspaper started by Sikhs in the diaspora with the purpose of freeing South Asia from British rule and has been a source of inspiration for those protestors in Delhi and Sikhs in the diaspora. The World Sikh News, which was established following the 1984 attack on Amritsar, served as a key source for Sikhs who had begun to distrust the Indian government and its media. Second, we will look at all forms of media utilized by protestors to actively resist the Godi Media and reclaim their narrative. The Indian government, through its metanarrative has attempted to paint the protest and protestors in a negative light –see Figure 1 below - but because of the power of social media, protestors have been able to share stories from the ground which highlight the hypocrisy and bias of the Godi Media.

**Figure 1: Godi Media at Work**



Source: Mir, Suhail (2020)

Furthermore, social media grants those unable to be physically present on the ground in Delhi to connect with protestors and provide moral and financial support while witnessing from afar how the masses in Delhi - not the Union leaders, but the lay people/common folks - are participating in the revolution. Finally, this paper will examine how new forms of media, made possible by advances in new technologies, has enabled quicker and wider reach resulting in the emergence of a global protest. Sikhs in the diaspora mobilized and organized rallies across the globe to stand in solidarity with the farmers and laborers in India, which provides protestors in India moral support knowing

that those in the diaspora are with them. A thorough analysis of these key historical moments will demonstrate how media has influenced the farmers' protest and even helped sustain the movement for nearly a year.

### **Revolution and Media: Past Historical Movements and the Role of Media**

‘There is that great proverb — that until the lions have their own historians, the history of the hunt will always glorify the hunter.’

[Brooks, 1994]

The above African proverb has been used to describe dominant groups' ability to gain power and control through the production of historical narratives and storytelling. For centuries, the legacy of historical writing has been one that promoted European and Western superiority and perpetrated an inferior status amongst non-Whites. This same strategy has been used by governments to not only marginalize specific communities, but also to silence or smear any who attempt to revolt or protest against the government. This section will analyze the social and political context behind the creation of historical community-led newspapers which provided a counter-narrative to combat government-backed media and misinformation during the British Raj in the 1910s and India in the 1980s and 1990s.

#### **The Ghadr Newspaper**

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, British colonialism was at its peak ruling over countries across the globe including South Asia. While some became complacent with, and even appreciated, British rule for different reasons, a group of South Asians - led by a majority of Sikhs - in the United States established the *Ghadr Lehar* in 1913 to free South Asia from British rule.<sup>1</sup> Acknowledging and understanding the importance of educating fellow diasporic South Asians about the necessity of freeing South Asia from British rule, the first newspaper was released later that year on November 1, 1913. Titled ‘Our Name, Our Work’, the first issue explained that the Ghadr's name and purpose were one and the same – mutiny or revolution. In an attempt to rally their readership to revolt against British rule in South Asia, early issues spoke about several different revolutions, such as Pancho Villa and the Mexican Revolution, Irish revolutionaries fighting for Independence, and the Boer revolt in South Africa. Through their newspaper, the Ghadr Party sparked a transcontinental movement as the Ghadr engaged with South Asians from the Americas to East Asia; however, the Ghadr leaders and editors in California were awaiting their opportunity to travel back to British India and actively start a mutiny. Within a week of Austria declaring war on Serbia, following the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, the Ghadr newspaper sent out the following announcement in its August 4<sup>th</sup>, 1914 issue:

The Trumpet of War  
Commencement of the Great War

Oh warriors! The opportunity that you have been searching for years has come, that is, the Trumpet of War has sounded; the war has started; you lie sleeping here. Do you know what is happening in the world? Listen and understand and get ready quick. Don't delay a moment. The whole world gazes on your face, that the Indians are sleeping like opium eaters. You cannot regain opportunities lost. Do now what you have to do and later do not cry over spilt milk. Haven't you found out yet what has happened? War has started between Germany and England. Now is the chance for India's freedom... All Britain's land and naval forces will be occupied in fighting against Germany. Therefore, all the white troops in India will have to leave. This is the right time for you to start a war of freedom. You can very soon expel the British from India. Oh brethren, take your freedom now. If not you will remain slaves for long... So, beloved, raise your hands and start the mutiny openly. Take arms from the troops of the native states, and wherever you see the British kill them. If you do your work quickly and intelligently, there is the hope that Germany will help you. Get help from Nepal and Afghanistan. Start the war quick. Don't delay... Again such an opportunity has arrived. So make haste.<sup>2</sup>

The anti-colonial movement, as mentioned in the August 4<sup>th</sup> issue of the *Ghadr*, was not simply symbolic. The goal was clear: to expel the British. The commencement of World War I served as the impetus for the next issue - August 11<sup>th</sup>, 1914 - of the *Ghadr* which read:

Wanted

Fearless, courageous soldiers for spreading mutiny in India.

Salary, death.

Reward, Martyrdom and Freedom;

Place, the field of India.

At present two things are wanted for progress. What are these? Papers and Arms – the paper *Ghadr* and guns.

With a global audience, the newspaper became so powerful and influential that when called upon, eight thousand Punjabis, largely Sikhs, in the diaspora returned to British India to fight for freedom (Josh, 1978: 208). Meanwhile, the newspaper called for others to be strategically placed in different countries to form alliances and attack the British on multiple fronts. For example, with trade routes open amongst British colonies, Indians had been able to easily settle in Southeast and East Asia. Two members of the *Ghadr* Party, Santokh Singh and Bhagwan Singh, were sent specifically to Southeast Asia to gather support for the transnational anti-colonial movement (Puri, 1983: 104). Though written mainly in Punjabi and Urdu to reach out to Indians in British India, seditious literature was also adapted to local languages, such as

Gurkhali, Chinese, and Pushtu for traders and regiments in Southeast Asia (Puri, 1983: 110). Understanding the damage that the Ghadr was capable of, the British government banned any seditious literature. Regardless, the Ghadr served as the driving force behind Overseas Indians' attempt to break free from the bonds of colonialism (Ramnath, 2011).

### **World Sikh News – Combatting India's Dominant Narrative in a Post-1984 World**

The editorial in the first issue of the World Sikh News on December 28, 1984, stated:

Day after day the government sponsored media kept spinning the most fanciful yarns, voluminous enough to form a heavy horror encyclopedia, to project us as ruthless renegades. Curiously we allowed our detractors to portray us in whatever fashion they deemed profitable for their ominous designs. Only after the sanctity of the Golden Temple was outrageously violated, Akal Takht destroyed and innocent Sikhs in thousands brutally butchered with none in the world coming forward to condemn or censure the perpetrators of the most heinous crimes, that we are beginning to wake up to the necessity of having our own voice - the voice that will cancel the curse cast around us and assert the truth. Launching of the weekly World Sikh News is a solid step in that direction.

[World Sikh News, Editorial, 1984]

Following the 1984 attack on Amritsar and the murder of thousands of innocent Sikhs, a meeting was held in Stockton (California, U.S.A.) to discuss what could be done to help those in India. Some individuals decided it was crucial to have Sikh media and Stockton was the ideal location to establish a Sikh newspaper considering the history of the Stockton Gurdwara and its links to the Ghadr (Grewal, 2020). With the Stockton and Fresno Sikh communities providing the initial funding, the first issue of the World Sikh News was published in December 1984, which shared a message from then Major-General J.S. Bhullar and Secretary General of the World Sikh Organization:

The Sikh Nation has been feeling the need for a Sikh Newspaper since long, due to animosity of the Govt. of India, the venture could not be successful. To quote the Words of Great Sikh martyr Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, in India, the press is the hand-maiden of the Govt., which will never tolerate a free press critical of the Govt. and its policies or personalities. By starting 'World Sikh News'... you have fulfilled one of the long cherished aspirations of the Sikh Nation.

The readership consisted of Sikhs in the United States, Canada, and England as they greatly appreciated a newspaper that spoke to them. The President of

the World Sikh News, Dr. Gurinder Singh Grewal, shares that the newspaper was 'mailed every week to US Congressmen and Senators, Canadian Parliament members and other government officials, and British elected representatives' (Grewal, 2020). The World Sikh News team attempted to expand their readership to India through a newspaper agency in New Delhi; however, the agency refused to provide any service. A Kashmiri refugee who settled in California shared that, from his experience in India, the World Sikh News 'was the only correct one and all the other Indian papers were printing government lies' (Grewal, 2020). While mainstream media from India and abroad refused to acknowledge the genocide or the disappearances in Punjab, the World Sikh News served as a trustworthy news source for Sikhs in the diaspora - one which provided on the ground reporting about the horrors in India such as 'Disappearances in Punjab' 1990, and 'Genocide has been legalized' 1990.

The impact and influence of World Sikh News caught the attention of the Indian government as they began to threaten several businesses that associated themselves with the newspaper, which resulted in businesses withdrawing their public support for the newspaper (Grewal, 2020). The government's interference in Sikh affairs and with World Sikh News, expanded beyond threats as they were able to infiltrate the community in an attempt to implode it from within. For example, the co-author of *Soft Target* and journalist Zuhair Kashmeri shares that the State Bank of India gave a \$2 million loan to a Sikh Canadian businessman, who in return served as an agent of the Indian government to infiltrate and tarnish the image of the Sikh community in Canada. The government used these tactics to divide Sikhs among themselves and 'brand them terrorists in the eyes of the world' (World Sikh News, 1990). Despite efforts by the government to threaten, infiltrate and taint the image of the Sikh community, the community-led World Sikh News ran successfully for twelve years, from 1984 to 1996, fulfilling the void that the community was searching for. The end of the newspaper came when the leaders found hope and relief with the election of 'the civilian government' in Punjab (Grewal, 2020). While the community-led newspapers were relatively short-lived, the historical memories of the Ghadr and the World Sikh News had a lasting impact.

### **Farmers' Protest 2020-2021 and the Rise of Social Media**

As protestors arrived at the capitol and set up temporary housing, the Indian government and media largely ignored or misrepresented the movement. While this served to be a more difficult task during the British rule in the 1910s and India in the 1980s through 1990s, despite the efforts of the *Ghadr* and World Sikh News, the evolution of media from the 20<sup>th</sup> century to the present day has made it easier to combat the dominant narrative.<sup>3</sup> Technological advances allow for a more intimate connection between the protestors in India and those in the diaspora by enabling quicker communication and live

reporting from the ground, which often contradicts the narrative from government-sponsored media sources, in Delhi, to be shared with those in the diaspora. The power of social media has helped the diasporic community engage with the farmers' protest in ways that were not possible during the British rule and India following the 1984 attack. This section will examine the different ways in which social media has been utilized in the movement as (1) a virtual battlefield; (2) a tool to mobilize the masses; (3) a fundraising tool and (4) an educational tool to build awareness.

On November 27, 2020, VICE India shared that police officers at the Haryana-Delhi border used tear gas shells, water cannons, and baton attacks on protestors while also digging up roads, putting up iron barricades, cement barriers, piles of sandbags and even trucks with deflated tires to prevent protestors from entering the capitol (VICE India, 2020). While government-sponsored media downplayed the situation, reports from the ground spread quickly through social media. Members of the elite class in India even rallied to the government's side to help suppress the protest. Social media became a virtual battlefield for the movement when Indian actress Kangana Ranaut shared a tweet claiming that Mohinder Kaur, an elderly woman, was paid 100 rupees to join the protest (The Quint, 2020).<sup>4</sup> Punjabi singer and actor Diljit Dosanjh came to the aid of Kaur as Dosanjh and Ranaut engaged in a war of words on Twitter. Dosanjh's criticized Ranaut and spoke of the strength of Punjabi mothers, declaring that they are like God to Punjabis (Dosanjh, 2020). In an age when celebrities are revered more than politicians, their voice has the ability to influence the masses. People across the globe began paying attention to and following the celebrity war of words on Twitter realizing what was happening in India. The Dosanjh and Ranaut battle reached the diaspora as Punjabis rallied behind Dosanjh and Kaur claiming him to be 'one of the most important leaders of our people' (Humble the Poet, 2020).

While some utilized social media as a virtual battlefield for the movement, others used it as a tool to mobilize the masses and organize rallies in support of the farmers and laborers in India. On November 28, 2020, the *Jakara* Movement, a Punjabi Sikh grassroots community-building organization based in California, made the following ask on their social media platforms:

CA Sikhs - is there a desire to build together 1000 car caravan starting from LA (stopping in Bakersfield, Fresno, Livingston, Ceres, and Manteca) & another group starting from Live Oak/Yuba City (stopping in Sac and Stockton) ending at SF consulate solidarity with kisaan morcha?  
[Jakara Movement, 2020]

Through the advances in communication, Jakara was able to quickly connect with other diasporic Sikh youth and organizations who were also planning to host a rally. Jointly, Sikh organizations across Northern California organized a solidarity protest on December 5, 2020 from Oakland, California to the Indian Consulate in San Francisco. A week after Jakara's post, advancements

in communication exceeded their expectations as an estimated 10,000 Sikh Americans from Yuba City to Los Angeles rallied to San Francisco in cars, motorcycles, buses, and tractors (Sarah, 2020). The rally 'clogged' the San Francisco-Oakland Bay Bridge for over three hours as non-Indian drivers stuck in traffic saw signs reading 'No Farmers No Food,' 'Take Back the Black Laws,' 'We are Farmers,' and shared posts on social media expressing support (Stimson, 2020). Similar solidarity rallies were hosted by diasporic Sikhs in cities across the globe. A website created to help organize and mobilize protests, *A Sovereign World*, shows that protests were held in over 30 cities in the United States, Canada, Scotland, Austria, Australia, the United Kingdom, and Germany (World Sikh News, 2021).

As Sikhs in the diaspora mobilized, they also used social media as a tool to gather funds to support the farmers' protest. Those in the diaspora were able to witness the work being done on the ground by organizations like Khalsa Aid and wanted to financially support the movement. As those in the diaspora asked themselves what they could do to help, posts of organizations and projects to support began being shared on social media (CHNGE, 2021). Some directly donated to organizations - such as a single donation of roughly \$50,000 to Khalsa Aid from a Canadian Sikh, Raja Dhaliwal - while others bought items from small businesses where partial or full proceeds were going to support the movement (Bhasin, 2020). As social media is able to quickly share information, the financial support reaches organizations just as quick allowing for a rapid response to items needed at the protest site. For example, during the winter, financial support from the diaspora helped fund heaters, blankets, and tents. Social media has proven to be a resourceful tool to help gather funds for the movement time and time again.

Finally, social media was used as an educational tool to help combat the dominant narrative and raise awareness about the farmers' protest. Similar to governments and movements in the past, the Indian government and its media agencies made every attempt to suppress the farmers' protest. Realizing that the movement was being censored in the media, a group of individuals launched *Trolley Times* on December 18, 2020 with the words 'We will unite, we will fight, we will win!' across the front page. With historical memories from the *Ghadr* and the World Sikh News, *Trolley Times* mimicked the ideology of the historical community-led newspapers as its goal was 'to clarify the real news in the midst of fake news' ('What is Trolley Times?', 2020). However, they had one advantage over the previous ones: social media. While *Trolley Times* is extremely valuable for its roughly 5,000 print copies that are distributed at the Delhi border, its real power comes from its 11,500+ followers on Twitter, 13,400+ followers on Facebook, and 55,800+ followers on Instagram (Philip, 2021; *Trolley Times*, 2021). As opposed to their physical readership, social media allows them to reach thousands of readers in an instant to educate those in the diaspora about activities on the ground. Activists in India and the diaspora have utilized social media as an educational tool to



discuss the histories, people, and injustices related to the movement through artwork, poetry, infographics, and panel discussions.

The farmers' protest gained more popularity when Rihanna, a popular singer and humanitarian, shared a CNN article about the protest on her Twitter with the caption: 'why aren't we talking about this?! #FarmersProtest (Rihanna, 2021). Her post received over 300,000 retweets and nearly a million likes, but more importantly, it raised great awareness about the farmers' protest amongst non-Indians as her post sparked a chain of posts from prominent personalities expressing support including organizations (Amnesty International and UN Human Rights), mainstream media channels (*NY Times* and the *Daily Show*), activists (Greta Thunberg and Meena Harris), politicians (U.S. Congresswoman Rashida Tlaib and Congressman Eric Swalwell, British Member of Parliament Claudia Webbe, and Attorney General of Minnesota Keith Ellison), athletes (former-NBA star Baron Davis, NBA-star Kyle Kuzma, and NFL-star Sammy Watkins), and other celebrities (Magan, 2021). Wide receiver for the Pittsburgh Steelers, JuJu Smith-Schuster, even donated \$10,000 'to bring medical assistance to Indian farmers protesting agricultural laws' (Berger, 2021). The farmers' protest brought together millions from across India, and the globe, but the elite class in India continues to work with the government and its forces to limit the impact of the historic movement. While the sheer length of the movement has proven to be detrimental as the vocal support in the diaspora has declined drastically, the movement made its mark as it garnered international support not only from Sikhs in the diaspora but also prominent personalities and presumably, their followers. What makes this more significant is that most individuals who engage with the protest through social media are diasporic Sikh youth who were not born in Punjab - with some never having been to Punjab either.

## **Conclusion**

Shawn Kelley, Professor of Religion, notes that due to the fact that Europeans were 'enslaving Africans, slaughtering natives, conquering Orientals, and demonizing the Jews,' Hegel, along with other intellectuals, were able to create a narrative in which Africans were dehumanized and Natives, Jews and Orientals were seen as inferior to Europeans (Kelly, 2002: 6). With these power dynamics in place, it allowed society to create a discourse where the 'othering' of certain groups was deemed perfectly acceptable. Over the course of several centuries, the discourse that commenced was only strengthened. These models are in the background and the foundation of systems of domination and exploitation - whether that be the British or Indian government. Historically, dominant narratives have not adequately discussed or represented marginalized communities - from the British rule in the 1910s to the Indian government in 2020. For centuries, counter-histories or reconstructed histories were impossible as these communities had no voice, but community-led newspapers and the rise of social media has allowed for these narratives to come to fruition. Media has the ability to shift the

momentum in any movement as it can either tarnish the image of movements and protestors to a point of no return or bring people together to unite against a common cause. These community-led newspapers and posts on social media serve as a source of inspiration for the protestors in Delhi and those in the diaspora.

While there is no telling when or what the conclusion of this movement will be, it is definitive that media has played a crucial role in and advanced technology has allowed for quicker and wider reach with greater potential for communicating information and mobilizing support. With marginalized groups not being able to establish institutions as effortlessly as the dominant group, community-led newspapers and social media allows authors and readers to delve into the narratives that may not have been institutionalized. Historically, media has been utilized by the dominant class as a weapon of oppression, but now groups are using it as a source to fight for their own narrative and fight against oppression. Social media has marked the beginning of a new era of cooperation and movement-building. Its power was displayed throughout the farmers' protest as farmers and laborers have been able to control their own narrative - actively resisting against Godi media and ensuring that the narrative is not misconstrued.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> *Ghadr* is an Urdu word that derives from Arabic which means 'mutiny' or 'revolution.' *Lehar* is a Punjabi word that translates to 'wave' or 'movement.'

<sup>2</sup> Originally written and distributed in Punjabi and Urdu but translated to English during the Hindu-German Conspiracy trials in San Francisco during 1917-1918.

<sup>3</sup> While social media has given marginalized communities a platform, we must also acknowledge that the Indian government continues to make every effort to censor communities. The government worked with social media platforms to block access to the internet and silence individuals.

<sup>4</sup> Her exact age is not known, but sources put her between 73-80 years old.

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