

SOLIDARITY & STRUGGLE FOR SURVIVAL

BY ASHEEF IQUBBAL & SANA ALAM

a photo story

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Solidarity And Struggle For Survival: A Photo Story

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introduction

DIGITAL EMPOWERMENT FOUNDATION has been actively documenting digitally as well as pictorially humanitarian crisis or historical events unfolded in the country for a long time. As a part of DEF's ongoing project of covering current farm agitation against the newly enacted farm laws, we visited three protest sites at the peripheries of the national capital — Ghazipur, Singhu, and Tikri borders — starting from 30 December 2020 to 06 January 2021. While visiting the protest sites, contrary to popular narrative, we witnessed extraordinary solidarity and struggle for survival. We tried to capture instances of their struggle which are being fought on multiple fronts. This photo story is an attempt to tell the unheard stories of their struggles.

“Farmers often argued against the three farm bills from the vantage point of Bihar, wherein 2006 the Bihar government abolished the Agricultural Produce Market Committees (APMC), passing a similar law claiming to increase farmers' income. The National Council for Applied Economic Research in its study noted increased volatility in grain prices in Bihar. After the abolition of the mandi system in 2006, Bihar experienced fractured growth in agriculture, as monthly income of the farm household is one of the lowest in the country -- less than INR 5000 a month, noted National Sample Survey Office.

“The Minimum Support Price (MSP) for wheat in 1970 was 76 rupees a quintal. The salary of school teachers in 1970 was 90 rupees a month. We did an analysis in 2015, the price of wheat is 1400 rupees a quintal, which means it has increased 19 times in 45 years. And the salary of school teachers in the same period has gone up by 280 times... We have deliberately kept the prices low. That's a reality.”

DEVINDRA SHARMA
agricultural economist

“If you understand the protest, deep down it is a collective resentment against the systems that have never changed. If you look at Punjab today, farmers are protesting, students are protesting, unemployed youth are protesting, anganwadi workers are protesting, nursing staff are protesting, arthiyas are protesting. These three farm laws have been a trigger. Revolutions in India have started from Punjab. So, I will not be surprised that in future, the Centre sitting in Delhi will be more careful in making up laws.”

AMAAN BALI

Author and Entrepreneur

“Three years ago, we learned that the average national daily dedicates 0.67 percent of its front page to news of rural origin where 69 percent of the population lives... That 0.67 percent figure is a huge exaggeration. It is a five-year average with an election year in between. If you take out the election year, coverage is between 0.18 and 0.24 percent.”

P SAINATH,
PARI Network

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THE ONGOING FARM agitation seems to be fighting on multiple fronts such the newly enacted three farm laws, against the misrepresentation of the protest and the protestors and logistically which is critical to keep the protest going. The National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government headed by the Prime Minister of India, Narendra Modi passed three new farm laws — the Farmers' Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Act, (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement of Price Assurance and Farm Services Act, and The Essential Commodities (Amendment) Act — and enacted after receiving assent from the President of India, Ramnath Kovind on 27 September 2020¹. On farm laws, detailed reports can be read at <https://ruralindiaonline.org/en/articles/and-you-thought-its-only-about-farmers/> and at <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/farmers-big-concern-and-what-govt-could-negotiate-7073291/>

The Government is pushing the laws as a 'historic' reform but, farmers believe that if the big corporations are allowed unregulated space in the agricultural market that could make the Agricultural Produce Market Committee (APMC) defunct, gradually eroding the Minimum Support Price (MSP), a guaranteed minimum price by the government to sell agricultural produces². As the protests continue to swell in lakhs, farmers are determined to protest in and around National Capital of India — New Delhi³. After multiple rounds between farmers and the government, discussions hit a stalemate with the government's unwillingness to accept farmer's demand of the repeal of what they term to be the 'black laws'.

As soon as the bills were tabled in the Parliament on 20 September 2020, Singhu which is the last village in Delhi while entering Haryana, protests erupted in different parts of the country — largely in North-Indian states of Haryana and Punjab — but their struggles were largely ignored by the national media. After protesting for months in their states, thousands of farmers were marching towards the National Capital on 27 November to oppose the laws, police used tear gas and water cannons against and ripped up highways to stop tractors and protestors moving forward⁴. Since then, on National Highway No. 01, Singhu become the epicenter of the farm agitation, protestors occupying several miles of the highway⁵. Digital Empowerment Foundation visited three protest sites — Singhu, Tikri, and Ghazipur — and tried to capture different aspects of the protest.



Everyone including men, women, children can be seen cooking foods at their make-shift community kitchens





Farmers have managed to install washing machines at Singhu Border to wash clothes of protesting farmers.

Keep the Stove of Protests Aflame

In an attempt to highlight the farmers' struggle, well-meaning accounts on social media and news platforms have romanticised the struggles. If one were to step back from romanticism, they would sense the protesters' palpable anxiety and their struggle for survival and their livelihoods. The protesting farmers were struggling for clean drinking water and proper sanitation. Sleeping in the biting cold, away from the comfort of their homes, posing serious health issues, especially for the elderly. The situation only worsened after heavy rainfall: tents and blankets were soaked, roads were muddied, and the farmers tried to clear waterlogging at Singhu border. 248 protestors have died during the struggle against farm laws reported Indian Express on 22 February 2021⁶.



Civil societies have also come forward to take care of farmers' health. They have set-up free medical camps at the protest sites.

Langars are playing a critical role in sustaining these protests by providing free food for everyone including protesting farmers. Almost all the langars are run by community fundings.





‘Udta Nahi Padhta Punjab High on Education Not Drugs’

Moving along at the protest sites, along with makeshift kitchens, trolleys, washing machines, medical camps, libraries and reading halls have become common sights. Farmers were reading a range of books and literature from Ambedkar to Bhagat Singh, and from Ravish Kumar to Pranjoy Guha Thakurata. Revolutionary poets such as Pash, Faiz were also grabbing attention of the farmers. One of them told us that the media and popular cinema has stereotyped Punjab and Haryana as non-serious people and drug addicts but have a legacy of intellect and revolution. Whenever, any crisis threatened the country, we were there at the front — intellectually, physically and financially. No revolution can sustain without ideas and intellect as Bhagat Singh said: “The sword of revolution is sharpened on the whetting stone of ideas.”



Kisan padh raha hai, Kisan badh raha hai—
Farmers are reading and marching ahead’ a
stand out message of the protesting farmers
for someone who thinks farmers are illiterate
or misguided.

Shaheed Bhagat Singh library at Tikri
Border where a range of literature can be
found on movements, farmers, and poetry.





An elderly farmer reading a book at Ghazipur Border.

Shaheed Bhagat Singh Library at Tikri border where the headquarter of a bi-weekly community-based newspaper — Trolley Times — is situated.





Bookshelf of Shaheed Bhagat Singh Library, where children, men, women were reading books, magazines, and newspapers.

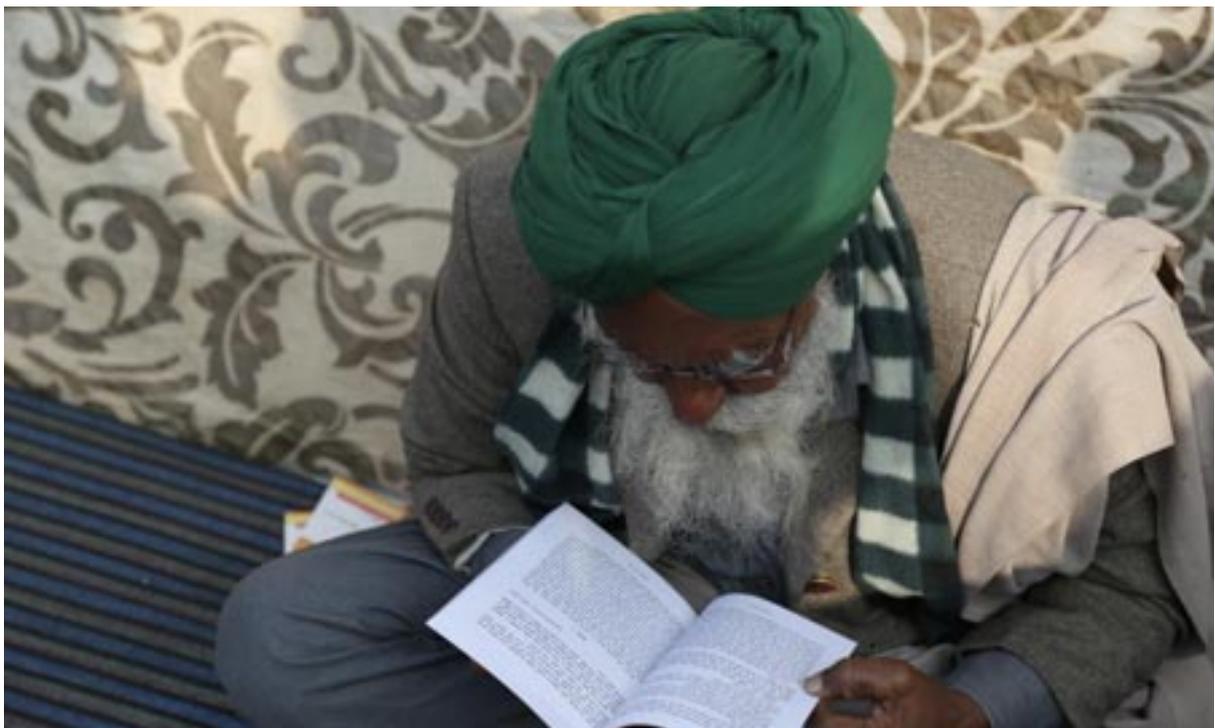
Posters of revolutionary poets, freedom fighters at Tikri Border





A farmer reading a regional newspaper at Singhu Border. National newspapers were hugely unpopular among these protestors as they believe they have been biased towards the ruling establishment.

Books were quite popular at these protest sites.





Women leading in sloganeering against three farm laws at Singhu Border. They were standing in the open trolleys.





Women of Tikri border soaking in the warm sun of a chilly winter in the National Capital.

Women At the Forefront

In recent times, marginalised sections of the society such as Muslims, Dalits, Tribals and Women have been at the forefront of resisting the majoritarian march of the Narendra Modi-led government. Protests against the Citizenship Amendment Act saw the largest mobilisation of women on a non-gender issue, and it is evident during the on-going farm agitation as well. Across all three protest sites that were visited, women were not only passively present but also actively participating in the protest activities. They were raising slogans, addressing protestors, organising marches and speaking to the media about the concerns related to the newly enacted farm laws. One of the women told us: “We are here to protect our lands. We will not go back until the laws are repealed.”



Balweer Kaur along with her family member has come all the way from Amritsar to participate in the protest at Singhu Border. Balweer told us: “We will not go back until the three farm laws are repealed. We are here to protect our land.”

Farmers marching at Singhu Border. They were raising slogans against the crony capitalism, central government and the three farm laws.





A woman farmer leader addressing the protestors at Singhu Border.

Across three protest sites that we visited, there was unprecedented solidarity among protestors.





In the placard, farmers can be seen pulling down Narendra Modi's statue while raising slogans of their victories.





‘Indian National Media on Sale’ read a banner at Singhu Border. The banner reflects the anger of the protesting farmers against the mainstream national media which have often propagated pro-government narratives.

Protesting Against Popular Narrative

As soon as farmers hit the borders of the National Capital, they received national media attention but only to be tagged as anti-social elements and Khalistani — a term used for Sikh separatist movement. Khalistani, a narrative that has been exemplified by the national media to delegitimize the protest implying that separatist groups of Punjab are orchestrating the farmers’ protest to fulfill their agenda of a separate homeland — Khalistan⁷. Along with Khalistani, they were portrayed as ill informed and political agents⁸. Farmers across these protest sites tried to debunk popular narrative through placards and raising slogans against mainstream media.



‘No Farmer, No Food’ — A protest against corporatisation of agriculture.

‘Lashkar-E-Media’ read a placard at the Singhu Border. Such placards are a reflection of Indian media that have been implicit in propagating hate. The constant propagation of hate/misinformation/demonisation of dissents have created an inflammable social atmosphere in the country.





A request to the Godi Media — A term used for news channels who have become a lapdog of ruling establishments — ‘We Are Farmers, Stop Showing Us As Terrorists’.

The palpable anger against mainstream media of the country can be encapsulated through such placards — ‘We Are Farmers, Not Terrorists’.



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