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Farmer's Agitation in Punjab: A Foray into the Cultural and Collective Memory of Sikh Community

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Abstract:

The paper casts a glance at the farmer agitation that stirred North India and its significance for the Sikh community in the current cultural and political context. The paper takes recourse to the past of Sikh community, their repository of cultural memory and how cultural memory has been materialised in the form of books, pictures, sculptures, films that exude vital meanings from the perspective of a collective. In the process, the paper also raises vital questions about identity, both residual and emergent, in the Sikh community in the current landscape. The paper also looks at the history of protest music within the Punjabi Sikh community and cross examines that with the protest music from the Farmers' Protest. It also centres the cultural and creative responses generated during the protest as a symbol of dissent and hope.

Keywords: Farmers, Cultural Memory, Music, Art, Memory.

Jaspreet Singh's masterful and unmistakably gripping book *Helium* (2013), serves as a cultural archive, exploring the lacerating loss during Sikh genocide, while also highlighting the significance of memorializing historical loss. An intensely political narrative, it pursues an angry agenda of justice and retribution for the massacre of Sikhs in 1984, as yet an un-dead past.

The novel likens, both in its social urgency and the politics of exclusion to the larger problems faced by the Sikh community even in the contemporary times especially in the context of Farmer's protest. The farmer agitations that stirred North India in the last four years have once again reignited conversations about Sikh identity and their tumultuous past.

Situated at the core of this rumination about Sikh community is a renewed desire to investigate how spectral wounds, then and now, reveal dystopic violence, excluding Sikhs from social, cultural and even legal protection.

The farmer agitations that shook the powers to be, will be etched as another chapter of resilience and resistance in the current times. While there may have been a demonic attempt to silence and stereotype the entire community, the persistence of the farmers has been oddly reminiscent of Orwell's critique of totalitarianism as also his commitment to telling the truth, however unpalatable, and doing so with both artistry and humanity.

A connection between the attempted recolonization of India's economy through neoliberal reforms and the re-emergence of rhetoric around separatism during the farmers' protest took full steam. Despite the use of humanistic principles embedded in Sikh tradition during the protest to draw attention to issues around food and land insecurity, lack of education, and poverty; an intentional media generated phantasmagoria was generated around image of the farmers to discreetly deflect attention from real concerns.

In fact, far from the images of violence fanned in popular imagination, an incredible amount of artistic production occurred during the protest and innumerable numbers of Sikhs were involved in humanitarian relief during the protest. In an article '*Echoes of Protest: The Role of Art and Literature in the Farmers and Laborers Protest*,' Amrit Deol discusses how protestors combatted the government's attempts to censor the exchange of political content by following a long historical tradition of generating and distributing protest art in Punjab. Another activist Gurbeer Singh looks at the history of protest music within the Punjabi Sikh community and cross examines that with the protest music from the Farmers' Protest. Continuing with the theme of protest music, Kumool Abbi also centres the cultural and creative responses generated during the protest as a symbol of dissent and hope.

The Punjab peasantry and the Punjabi community in general have a rich legacy of resistance against the injustices of the statecraft. Throughout history, striving to be both Indian and Punjabi, or Indian and Sikh has required some specific forms of 'double consciousnesses. This is not to suggest that taking on either or both of these evolving identities necessarily exhausts the subjective resources of any particular individual or community. However, where 'nationalist, or ethnically absolutist discourses orchestrate political relationships so that these identities appear to be mutually exclusive, occupying the space between them or trying to

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demonstrate their continuity has been viewed as a provocative and even oppositional act of political insubordination.'(Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*)

Since 2020, farmers and labourers started thronging New Delhi, India. As the protests unfolded, protest art and literature became vital to the adaptability of the movement. Protesters generated unique art and literature that followed long historical traditions of protest in Punjab and created new mediums to distribute knowledge, art, and literature.

The last three years of continuing resistance spearheaded by a vast assemblage of the young and the educated, artists, musicians including the Diaspora call to mind the emblematic black song "Keep on Moving" which was notable for having been produced in England by the children of black settlers. Not unlike that, the sloganeering and songs that have defined a rather valiant struggle has also expressed the restlessness of spirit creating thereby a new topography of loyalty and identity in which the structures and presuppositions of a myopic nation state have redefined.

Sikh History, observes Mc Leod, is one of struggle, sacrifice and martyrdom from the martyrdom of

"Guru Arjan to the present day. He tends to link this aspect of the Sikh tradition with the heroic tradition of Punjab. The village bards who used to sing of courage and sacrifice began to praise the Sikh martyrs in the eighteenth century. Themes of heroism and martyrdom can be witnessed in the Central Sikh museum in the precincts of the Harmandir Sahib in Amritsar and Baba Baghel Singh Museum adjoining Bangla Sahib Gurdwara in New Delhi where paintings and weapons are displayed together. In popular posters too, heroism and martyrdom are as much emphasised as the doctrine of divine Name." (*Sikh Ideology, Polity and Social Order*, 126)

Following the snaking paths and the deterrents therein, the agitating farmers unravelled not just their determination but vicariously also of Sikh history and temper. It is in fact interesting that all this unfolded on the borders of Delhi, a city not entirely unfamiliar with Sikh sacrifices and their phoenix-like regeneration.

In fact the martyrdom of Sri Guru Tegh Bahadur, the ninth Sikh Guru, which has no parallel in human history also happened in Delhi. A supreme sacrifice made for protection of motherland, religious identity, human rights and people's welfare; it was a watershed moment

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not just in Sikh history but also in our collective pursuit to emerge as a determined and inclusive nation.

Rightly crowned with the sobriquet of 'Hind Di Chadar' he founded the town of *Chak Nanki* in Punjab, later enlarged by the tenth Guru Sri Guru Gobind Singh into the city of Anandpur Sahib. Looking back at the memory of sacrifice of Guru Tegh Bahadur and other Sikh Gurus is quite revelatory as they bolstered Indian society at a time when it was in the grip of caste-based atrocities, exclusion, discrimination and untouchability.

Sikhism always attempted to keep people aligned to the highest ideals of morality and integrity though the Sikh fraternity faces a collective accusation of jeopardising the same. The foundation of Sikhism on the other hand is seeped and embedded in innumerable episodes and events whereby they shielded Indians from both external threats and internal conflicts, even at times protecting Hinduism against Islam. The ninth Guru not only preserved and strengthened people's resolve to protect their religion but elevated Sikhism in the process. History holds witness to the way he helped Kashmiri Pandits, who were under life threatening pressure from Iftikar Khan, Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb's Governor for Kashmir, to convert to Islam or be killed or abandoned in the dense forest.

Excavating the cultural memory of Sikh religion is like unearthing a perpetual state of fearlessness and focus on human justice amidst critical situations emerging in Mughal India culminating in the ninth Guru's execution at Chandni Chowk in Delhi on 11 Nov1675 by the orders of Emperor Aurangzeb. Rectifying skewed perspectives being spewed and spiralled in the current day in which even the martyrdom of the ninth Guru is reduced to an accident of history while vilifying the community in general is both urgent and necessary.

This entire agitation which ultimately captured the fancy and imagination of global icons holds a unique signification not just for the farming community but also the Sikh community and its resilient character that has repeatedly fought the enormity of ideological and cultural invasions and yet salvaged and strengthened its traditions like never before. The protest caught the attention of linguistics, popular culture icons and several others as the farmers started making makeshift houses on the borders of New Delhi. Taking recourse to Sikh past and their cultural memory will in fact reveal a long history of similar struggles. In this case excavating the cultural memory of Sikh community is significant.

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Cultural memory is formed by symbolic heritage embodied in texts, rites, monuments, celebrations, objects, sacred scriptures and other media that serve as mnemonic triggers to initiate meanings associated with what has happened. Also, it brings back the time of the mythical origins, crystallizes collective experiences of the past and can last for millennia. Therefore it presupposes knowledge restricted to initiates

Maurice Halbwach (1950) in his book *The Collective Memory* studies memory as a social phenomenon which is created through social interaction and communication. Halbwach (1950, 14) writes that "even the most personal memories are conditioned by social interactions. Therefore, the identity of the individual depends upon this memory." (1950, 151). However, it is Jan Assman and Aleida Assmann who take off from here and attempt to see collective memory from the cultural perspective, in other words, collective memory as an institutionalised form by a collective. With this, they attempt to see how societies ensure the "survival of the type" (Assman and Czaplicka 1995, 125) and "consistency in human nature through generations" (1995, 126). Different societies devise ways to sustain memory through different generations. Their notion of cultural memory is a materialised and objectified memory in the form of books, pictures, sculptures, films etc. that exudes vital meanings from the perspective of a collective.

"Cultural Memory has its fixed point: its horizon does not change with the passing of time. These fixed points are fateful events of the past, whose memory is maintained through cultural formation (texts, rites and monuments) and institutional communication (recitation, practice and observance)" (1995, 129)

Sikhs have been in the process of a peculiar cultural formation and evolution. Sikh memory is a storehouse of all such knowledge in form of texts, rites, monuments, recitation, practice and observance etc., which have provided a sense of peculiarity and unity to Sikhs. Gurbhagat Singh and Deepinderjeet Randhawa (2009), in their seminal work, "*Sikh Memory: Its Distinction and Contribution to Humankind*" have studied different aspects of this memory. Finding the earliest evolution of Sikh memory in Guru Nanak, and further additions consecutively by the last nine Gurus, the scholars stress the idea that "*Bani* is responsible for the survival of the Sikhs as a distinct people with their own literature and thought despite numerous moments of annihilating threats in the short history of five hundred years" (2009, 40). Sikh institutionalized symbols like *Nishan Sahib* have also inspired the Sikh warriors to remain united and to fight for the freedom of thought, and to establish the *Khalsa Raj* in the

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18th century. Institutionalized collective memory of encounters between Guru Gobind Singh's army and the Mughal Army in Anandpur Sahib in 1704, sacrifices of His four sons has taught the collective to never bow down to intolerance and injustice. This is a particular example of preservation of Sikh memory as Sikhs recall, in thousands and lakhs honoring and enlivening the sacrifices of the Gurus by paying tribute every year.

Believing in *Ek Onkar* as Revealed Guru in *The Guru Granth Sahib* and locating trauma as *Vismadic* /wondrous God' *Hukam/* Will in the *Bani*, following *SikhRehatMaryada*- Sikh code of conduct, saying Sikh *Ardas/*Prayer(twice daily), Sikh religious calendar full of *gurpurabs* and martyrdom days of Gurus and other great Sikh warriors are some of objectified memories that Sikhs have embodied individually and collectively. While these memories embodied by Sikhs have kept them righteous , these memorials, institutions, codes of conduct have taught them to remain optimistic and whenever Sikhs as a collective have gone through "hegemonizing and even annihilating torture" (Singh and Randhawa 2009, 25). They write:

"The Sikh memory has been a continuous negotiation and re-negotiation while resisting coercive forces…. it is mediated by the equality of cultures/ faiths and remain ready to protect its identity against hegemony." (Singh and Randhawa 2009, 109)

Sikh *Ardas* first started by Guru Gobind Singh, is an example in Sikh memory formation that has further cemented the collective self image as people who always pray for *Sarbat Da Bhala*, wellbeing of all regardless of caste, creed and race; and yet know the responsibility to defend their faith and identity. Ritualistic remembrance of traumatic events that surround the sacrifices of Gurus and their family members has taught the collective Sikh community to be intrepid in the face of oppression and to raise voice against the injustice. Most of these memories belong to those times when Sikhs fought against their marginalization by the central forces in India and abroad in the 18th century and before.

Not only that the life of various Sikh Gurus characterized by travels and explorations is testimony to the fact, if one is required of the unrelenting quest for truth and justice in their lives. JS Grewal writes in his book *Sikh Ideology, Polity and Social Order*, "Guru Nanak's mission was interpreted by his followers as transcending all previous dispensations, including the Indic and the Islamic. There is enough justification for this interpretation in the works of Guru Nanak. Transcendence was built into Guru Nanak's discovery of the truth." (28)

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From the farmer protests have emerged abundant pictures of people reciting the *Bani* and singing hymns from Guru Granth Sahib during the protest. In keeping with old Sikh practices, protesters took part in *Nagar Kirtan* on the birth anniversary of Guru Gobind Singh. All such evocations of tradition and Sikh ritual demonstrate the role of institutionalised memory in the form of *Gurbani*, even in the embodied practice of *Vand Chakan*/ "Eating by Sharing" or community kitchens. Observing important Sikh days on all occasions at the protest sites played to keep farmers inspired and spiritually strong.

As days went by, the farmer's protest spiralled into an unusual protest, alternating between Bani recitals and new age music, bridging contemporaneity and antiquity, at the cleavage of India's capital, restrained in bronze strips on the border, subsuming gradually into a city that, with the potent agency of political power had forcefully drawn the far-off peripheries (both geographical, religious and linguistic) away from the centre. And with that historic movement of the farmers across Delhi borders, the centre of the political power became in the last four years inalienably mixed and suffused with the pulse of difference. In the essay *BabarBani* in JS Grewal' s book quoting *Janam Sakhis* he builds on the theme of political power in a manner uncannily reminiscent of the present situation. He writes, "Guru Nanak refers to the rulers who had lost all sense of duty in the pursuit of pleasure. They lived in palaces, lived in large *Harams*, owned stables or horses, commanded troops and amassed wealth at the cost of others. Whoever arrogates greatness to himself and indulges in pleasures is only a grain picking ant in the eyes of God." (38)

The continuous evocation of *Bani* played a significant role for farmers who went through deep anxieties in the initial four months. Establishment of a Gurudwara at Singhu Border protest site is another evidence of how the agitation remained devotionally inspired. The *Nishan Sahib* and community kitchens helped in keeping all unions united, and enabled to get them going on a daily basis. By practicing the tradition of 'selflessness' and 'sharing' promoted by their Gurus, the farmers gradually created a site brimming with hope, generosity of spirit , abundance of food and shelter, (including spiritual shelter in the form of a gurdwara) at the protest sites, encouraging people to come and contribute with their physical presence.

The ongoing rekindled the memory of Sikh figures from the earlier centuries alive when Sikhs as a collective had to face the hegemonic forces in the form of Mughals and Afghans. In fact camping, travelling and facing subsequent dislocation has been integral to Sikh

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history. "In November 1707, when Bahadur Shah started on his campaign in Rajasthan, Guru Gobind Singh accompanied the imperial army and remained near the camp for more than ten months. His continued presence with or near the camp could easily be interpreted by distant or superficial observers as his acceptance of service with Bahadur Shah."(Grewal JS, *Sikh Ideology, Polity and Social Order,* 104).

This further enlivens the memory of Guru Gobind Singh and His sons who had stood their ground by protecting their faith in 1704. A picture published in Indian Express dated 12 Jan., 2021 showed a museum on wheel displaying some glimpses of Sikh Past at Singhu Border (including sculptures showing younger sons of the Guru being walled alive). Such attempts of making Sikh memory alive are to spread awareness among the younger generation and others about Sikh people's bravery and actions in the past.

Pictures that emerged from *Kisan Ekta Morcha* show that Hari Singh Nalwa – a prominent Sikh figure from 18th century who had helped established Sikh Empire by protecting Punjab up to Khyber Pass – became another Sikh figure from the past from whom the farmers got inspiration. It shows a wall painted with the line which reads in English "we are from lineage of Nalwa, we are the protectors of our future generations" (Fig.4). All these pictures suggest that farmers, as any well intentioned movement would take shape tries to assert their identity through old Sikh past and memory.

Memory of these figures contemporized by the farmers suggests the role farmers realised they would have to assume in the bigger scheme of things in the critical situation risen before them in the light of the new farming Bills.

Jan Assmann writes, "Cultural memory is characterized by sharp distinction made between those who belong and those who do not, i.e. between what appertains to oneself and what is foreign" (1995, 130). Thrust into a crisis, memory helped them rekindle their old glorious terrain of who they are and how they needed to respond. With the memory of the collective past, Punjab farmers found a model to deal with their present situation, and in keeping their identity consistent with the past, chose to stand firmly on their ground against the three farming bills. These memories seem to have replenished their courage and strengthened their resolve to stand tall 'come what may', otherwise farmers would not have held placards reading "We will either win or we will die" written on it. Remembrance of Hari Singh Nalwa, and four sons of Guru Gobind Singh re-produced their self image as an indefatigable race who would never leave their ground when oppressive forces attacked them both physically

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and ideologically. It was this determination that was needed to keep the protest ablaze during the crucial months of late 2020 to early 2021.

Cultural memory of *Thanda Burj*– "Cold Tower", in Sikh society added another dimension to the spiritual support and unrelenting determination in the farmers. Every year, December month known as *Poh da Mahina* in Punjab is commemorated as month of both quiet mourning and an obligatory recall for Sikhs as the tenth Guru sacrificed the lives of his four sons and mother for his ideals. The Sabhas are organized in Fatehgarh Sahib in Punjab where Wazir Khan had kept his mother and his sons in cold tower as prisoners in 1704. Sikhs visit the place in vast multitudes to pay obeisance. A poster hanging from a tractor in the protest site read "those people can't be intimidated by the water cannons, who always remember the history of *Thanda Burj*" is emblematic of the same. By invoking this Sikh memory, the farmers infused themselves with more courage and valour.

It is quite evident from all these events that the farmers protest became a catalysing force for rejecting the especially crude and reductive notions about Sikh community. On the contrary, the Sikh farmers have rallied on with their adoptive, parental culture of sacrifice and vigilance, of humanity and transcendence. In fact through this long persisting agitation, one has become fascinated with how successive generations of Sikhs have understood this connection and how they have projected it in writings and speaking in pursuit of their rights.

The lives of Gurus defined by an equivocal focus on meditative felicity on one hand and heroic valour on the other have stood out in this protest. In his book JS Grewal writes "The seventh mahal, Guru Har Rai, practiced deep and long meditations so as to gather all power unto himself but without revealing the fact to others. He strengthened the Godly side. Guru Harkrishan reached Delhi to give up his life. He adopted the form of a boy to highlight the injustice of the Mughals." (*Sikh Ideology, Polity and Social Order*, 118).

In fact a supremely positive outcome has been the unprecedented redefinition of the relationship with the younger generation in Punjab. By invoking Sikh past they created an emotional compulsion and urgency for every Sikh and Punjabi to support the protest. It bears repetition that while the farm bills might have been proposed with a divisive intent, they have ironically forged a compound culture from disparate sources. Elements of political solidarity and cultural continuity transmitted from the past since 17th and 18th century has been reaccentuated in Punjab.

This new assertive mood is both contagious and inspiring and has done well to

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record its extraordinary popularity enacted in the ties of affiliation and affect which articulated the discontinuous histories of Punajbis/ Sikhs in the new world. All the same it has not been driven by political or moral brazenness but by conscientiousness and structure. A similar strain is visible in the following words of JS Grewal about Bhai Gurdas.

"The religious faith of the Khalsa is still more important than their politics. Gurdas himself does not pray for power, or seek patronage. He prays for the boon of the name, association with the *Sangat*, eradication of *Haumai*, acceptance of the *Hukam* and attainment of liberation. There is no earthly power now to stand in the way of this pursuit. Freedom of the conscience is ensured by political freedom. Gurdas sings of this liberation." (119)

Resultantly, the narrative of modern Indian politics has been effectively, continually crisscrossed by the movements of farmers and other Sikh people-not only as commodities or static facts imbued with imaginary ideas of fixity and radicalism but engaged in various struggles towards emancipation, autonomy, and identity -providing a means to re-examine the problems of a myopic nationality and historical memory.

While one dwells on the farmer agitations and the Sikh past, one must also address the question of violence that is used synonymously with Sikh community. The question is particularly perturbing because the farmer agitation was a peaceful protest. But one must dwell, following the onslaught of accusations on Sikh politics and its reliance on expressions of raw passion than on an intellectually driven engagement that is more restrained with a wider diplomatic input. Is it because by harping on raw passions ,Sikh doctrines that call for an egalitarian and open society can be crushed under the weight or domineering force of power and ego? As discussed this cultural subjectivity elsewhere, *(Akal Takht: Revisiting Miri in Political imagination pub: Naad Pargaas 2018)*, perhaps the answers to these questions can also be discovered from the studies of contradictions within popular folklore that often celebrates lasciviousness, violence, caste-pride along with the simplicity of a destitute farmer.

Arvind Pal S Mandair in his book titled *Violence and the Sikhs* interrogates conventional typologies of violence and non-violence in Sikhism by rethinking the dominant narrative of Sikhism as a deviation from the ostensibly original pacifist-religious intentions and practices of its founder Gurus. This element highlights competing logic of spirituality and violence drawn from primary sources of Sikh literature, thereby complicating our understanding of the relationship between spirituality and violence, connecting them to issues of sovereignty and the relationship between Sikhism and the State during the five centuries of its history. By

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cultivating a non-oppositional understanding of violence and spirituality, this element provides an innovative framework where both reconcile and co-exist and are invoked in alternating contexts. In doing so the book provides a novel perspective on familiar themes such as martyrdom, Martial Race theory, warfare and (post)colonial conflicts in the Sikh Diaspora.

Meanwhile it must be mentioned that Aleida Assman raises questions about the risks and benefits of the cultural memory derived from traumatic events: “Does this memory bring up an aggressive potential or does it result in greater respect and dialogue between neighbours?; Does it build a society that is more vengeful and more aware of its past?; Does it let the individual citizens more sensitive or insensitive to the violation of human rights or the condition of minorities?” (Cultural Memory: The Link between Past, Present, and Future**,** Richard Meckien published Jun 03, 2013)

It may well be concluded that cultural memory should not be understood as an unhealthy fixation to the past, but as a back-up, a kind of background necessary for society to build its future. But, according to her, this memory should be inspected critically, as any other. Therefore, she cautions, we must take care that the negative past, once transformed into memory, does not wake the revanchism: “memory can be dangerous and destructive if it digs up anger willing to revise history”.

However a lot of media engineered narratives have overlooked all such positives and have focused only on the profane, contaminated world of a very meagre popular culture among the Punjabi youth where they have been temporarily seduced by their conditions of unemployment and and unthinking consumption of inappropriate cultural objects like substance addictions, wastefulness and vanity. The media has in the process, conveniently overlooked how a vast majority of those involved in the agitation have broken silence in artistic and meaningful ways. For instance the spread and burgeoning of songs and the compounding musical expression has played a role in reproducing what may be called in postmodern terms a counterculture of modernity. The evolution of music throughout this agitation created alternate spaces of articulation, moving beyond an understanding of political processes currently seeing the Sikhs as the expression of an essential, unchanging identity. On the contrary the farmer’s movement has rightly located the Sikhs as an evolving constituted subjectivity that is emerging contingently from the endless play of cultural and religious signification that has attended upon the Sikh community.

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The vitality and dynamism of this musical culture has offered a means to get beyond the related oppositions between essentialists and pseudo-pluralists on the one hand and between totalising conceptions of tradition, modernity, and postmodernity on the other. It also provides a model of performance which can supplement and partially displace theoretical debates with real time concerns.

Remembrance of past treasons of Central political forces against Sikhs worked this time also to justify present distrust over Farming Bills. Whereas farmers saw themselves as protectors of the future, this perspective presented Delhi as a seat of political oppression and injustice. Lyrics of the song '*Pecha*' dedicated to farmers by Harf Cheema and Kanwar Grewal (2020) released on YouTube on 21st November 2020 explored Sikh past confrontations with Delhi rulers, creating subversions and ruptures in the hegemonic narratives by inscribing it with their own , often fettered reality.

During the Battle of Anandpur Sahib in 1704, Sikh troops observed one of their own, Bhai Kanhaiya tending to Mughal soldiers wounded in battle. The Sikhs reported what they saw to their leader, Guru Gobind Singh, who summoned this man to his court. Guru then asked Kanhaiya, "These Sikhs are saying that you go and feed water to the enemy and they recover". Kanhaiya replied, saying, "Yes, my Guru, what they say is true, however, there were no Mughals or Sikhs on the battlefield. All I saw were people."

It seems especially significant that the cultural expression which music allows us to map out does not seek to exclude problems of inequality or to make the achievement of justice an exclusively abstract matter. Their compositions offer, among other things, a continuous commentary on the systematic and pervasive relations of domination that supply its conditions of existence. Their aesthetics can never be separated into an autonomous realm where familiar political rules cannot be applied and where, as Salman Rushdie memorably puts it, "the little room of literature/ music" can continue to enjoy its special privileges as a heroic resource for the well-heeled adversaries of radical regimes.

While the obvious has already been stated by highlighting some of the positive outcomes of this agitation, it is the emergence of a parallel subculture that appeared and emerged in the last couple of years, has been the most significant legacy of this protest. At some level, helmed by circulation of dissenting newspapers, subversive songs and several other religious and spiritual symbols, it appears as if what began as an intuitive expression of some

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eventually developed into an alternative body of cultural and political expression with huge outcries of justice, retribution and transformation.

Having said that one very significant development that one witnessed in the last two years was both the organisation and engineering of this protest slogans, articles, songs in Punjabi language. Since very long, the Sikhs have witnessed discrimination towards Punjabi language since the pre-independence period.

They were not recruited into the British army in 1854 for political reasons Along with this, Hindustani officers, according to G.W. Leitner, were prejudiced against the Panjabi language and were also influencing the education policies, leading to the neglect of the language. Kiranpreet Kaur Bath writes in *Language ,Politics: Challenges to the Punjabi Language in India(Sikh Formations, 2024)*:

"These logistic and political reasons, consequently, impeded any possibility of promoting, either for education nor employment, of the language by the British and this led to the language being highly ghettoised. Therefore, when, in 1882, the Singh Sabha of Lahore petitioned Sir Charles Aitchison, the Governor of Panjab, to make the Gurmukhi script as a medium of instruction, at least for the Sikh community, the request was rejected on the pretext that the speakers would suffer unemployment and hence exclusion from positions of power and prestige. The linguistic and religious divisions between communities that emerged during the colonial period further limited the language only to the Sikh community."

It is therefore quite heartening to see that in an atmosphere gripped by colonial hegemonic dominance of English and the contouring of Hindi alongside that, Punjabi which has been always treated as a 'low vernacular' has been the face of this struggle**.** Creation of a robust infrastructure supporting the language, including its extensive digital presence on social media platforms, websites, and news channels, came to reflect the strong affinity of the Panjabi community with the language and its efforts towards the preservation and promotion of the language.

Parallels can also be drawn between the attempted repression of this movement on one hand and the observations made by Noam Chomsky about mass media on the other. Arguably the most important intellectual alive according to *The New York Times*, Noam Chomsky is a veteran linguist and public intellectual who have contributed to the field of media studies. Talking specifically about his 'Propaganda Model,' which he first presented with Edward. S Herman in their book *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass*

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Media (1988), the theory examines media control in the social, cultural and political sectors of society. In their book, Chomsky and Herman explain the effect of wealth and power on mass media interests and choices. They say, "[The model] *traces the routes by which money and power are able to filter out the news fit to print, marginalise dissent, and allow the government and dominant private interests to get their messages across to the public*." The first filter is about 'media ownership' which proposes that since media organisations (mostly) run with a profit motive, they tend to serve the consumers with biased news items. Selective promotion of interests and opinions that happened throughout the farmers protest fits well in the explanation of this filter. Advertising revenue is the second filter according to which stories that have a 'buying mood' in the economy find more space in the publications. What matters here is that these stories majorly rely upon the interests of the advertisers who see news more like a money-generating process than an information-driven service in journalism. That again seems to explain a selective churning and circulation of news throughout the agitation.

That said, it has already been established that the lineage of sacrifice and resistance is integral to Sikh faith. Over and above poetry – produced in response to various struggles in Punjab in close confluence with music has always offered protest, resilience and solidarity. It sutures together politics and the creative medium and to this end, its performative nature –has been the mainstay and face of several agitations.

Over the centuries, *Kavishers. Dhadhis and* other balladeers have been reciting long epic poems in public spaces illustrating frequently that the word and music are inseparable. Many ballads about war and strife that are sung and celebrated today emerged initially as significant works of Punjabi medieval poetry.

In a book titled *History of Punjabi Literature*, Sant Singh Sekhon and Kartar Singh Duggal note , " the folk song of Punjab tell the tales of battles and brave warriors, describe festivals and fairs...tell stories of the farmers, of the large hearted, and of the rains which are usually kind and of the crops which seldom let the peasant down."

Several writers, contemporary and in the past, have explored through poems, short stories, novels and genres such themes of resistance and peasant agitation. Just before Covid gripped the world, Punjabi poet Surjit Patar stated in his closing address in Amritsar Literature Festival in 2020, "Reciting poetry in a way that each word is understood and intended is an art in itself but the larger process is the creative ideology behind the poem." Therefore the

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recent evocation of the anthem of resistance 'Pagri Sambhal Jatta'- first sung in March 1907 once again registers the celebrated commemoration of the political and the aesthetic.

Many examples can be excavated from the rich architecture of Punjab's literature especially through the revolutionary decades of twentieth century. For example, Dulla Bhatti, a resistant hero of the land is celebrated during the festival of Lohri. Dulla who rebelled against the Mughal emperor Akbar symbolised the prominent social force which countered the hegemony of the Mughal state. As the current farmer's protest galvanised into a mass movement, farmers, artists and activists took recourse to medieval songs/ poems and artistic forms of resistance

In his song poem dedicated to the farmer's protest titled 'You Write Laws', the writer Harbans Malwa reminds one of the lineage of defiance. Such and many more folk based evocations have established and reinforced the binaries of the oppressed and the oppressor and signalled through each evocation that in the posterity – it will be the oppressed who will be sung, remembered and celebrated – not the rulers or the government.

It would be unfair, not to mention the song *Patshah* which brilliantly juxtaposes the farmer's agitation with, borrowing from Nijhawan's work the Dhadhi singers, 'mythohistorical events of the Sikh past that become conceptually related. The notion of sacrifice is paramount in *Patshah.* Borrowing from the natural and the spiritual world, the song positions the farmer 'like a steadfast mountain' and a 'commanding presence' whose 'faith and patience' make him a picture to behold. His 'face glowing with spiritual lights' gestures to his grounding in social justice which is a constitutive element of Sikh faith. Evoking the sacrifices of the ninth and the tenth Sikh Guru, the lyrics of the song *Patshah* braid together heroism and martyrdom, capturing thereby the essence of Sikhism in these protests.

A scrutiny of the creative responses- oral, visual and textual – produced during the current protests reveals that this vast corpus recorded in print, audio and digital text , image and video in addition to voicing emotions and providing critique through varying modes has emerged as the collective depository of people's history .

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