

Prospects of Leaderless Disobedience: *A Case Study of the 2020-2021 Punjabi Kisan Protests*

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Abstract

This paper explores the 2020-2021 Punjabi Kisan or farmers protests as a case study in leaderless civil disobedience and interrogates how the movement overcame the skepticism about the ability of a leaderless movement to survive and succeed as posed by sociologist Zeyneb Tufecki. By pulling back the curtain on the histories of the Civil Rights Movement, the paper shows how charismatic leaders of protest movements are not the persuasive factor and posits an analysis of the Punjabi farmer's non-violent tactics that supports this conclusion. This paper concludes that this case study suggests successful leaderless disobedience relies on a politics of coalition.

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How can one possibly affect change through non-violent protest today without a modern-day Gandhi or Martin Luther King Jr. (MLK) as a leader? Asking this question, however reifies the limited liberal narratives of non-violent protest that exaggerate the role of individual leaders.¹ By glossing over the importance of organizational infrastructure² or concealing the processes of global political cross-fertilization that inspired many prominent leaders³ individual people become worshipped as heroes. This limits our conception of how ordinary people working together can create change. This essay argues that modern non-violent protest movements can be successful without an identifiable individual leader by focusing on a ‘politics of coalition’ where multiple factions, organizations or groups collectively advance a political goal. The case study of the 2020-2021 Punjabi kisan (farmers) protest march, 13-month-long occupation and diasporic disobedience is a vehicle through which one can understand how an unlikely group of peasant farmers in India attracted worldwide attention and succeeded in their goals without a definitive leader.

To this end, the essay will first unpack Erin Pineda’s analysis of how the narrative of extraordinary individual leaders misrepresents history, particularly in the case of MLK and the Civil Rights Movement in the United States. The enlarged history of the Civil Rights Movement shows how even the conventional example of a successful protest movement did not solely rely on the existence of a charismatic individual for its success. Second, the essay will engage with Barbara Deming’s work to demonstrate how the success of the Punjabi kisan protests can revitalize our faith in the power of non-violent strategies to create positive societal outcomes. Lastly, the essay will respond to Zeynep Tufekci’s skepticism about the ability of a leaderless movement to survive and succeed. In the case of the Punjabi kisan protests, the essay concludes that the support of an international ethnoreligious diaspora was essential for taking this movement beyond Tufekci’s observations.

Background on the Punjabi Kisan Protests

The 2020-2021 Punjabi kisan protests were a bloc of modern non-vio-

1 Erin R. Pineda, “Introduction: Civil Disobedience and the Civil Rights Movement,” in *Seeing Like an Activist*, by Erin R. Pineda, 1st ed. (Oxford University Press New York, 2021), 1-C0.P35, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780197526422.003.0001>.

2 Zeynep Tufekci, “Leading the Leaderless,” in *Twitter and Tear Gas: The Power and Fragility of Networked Protest* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017).

3 Erin R. Pineda, “An Entire World in Motion,” in *Seeing Like an Activist*, by Erin R. Pineda, 1st ed. (Oxford University Press New York, 2021), 53–90, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780197526422.003.0003>.

lent agitations by peasants in India “fighting for the restoration and protection of their land.”⁴ The disobedience was a response to three farm acts or bills imposed by the Indian central government and Hindu-nationalist Prime Minister (PM) Narendra Modi designed to decrease government protection of the agriculture industry and open markets to international corporate firms. These acts also limited the negotiating power of small individual farmers, who were often working on less than two acres of land, making them vulnerable to exploitation by foreign corporations and potentially paving the way for their eviction.⁵ While the three farm acts threatened the livelihoods of many Indian farmers, the Indian agrarian crisis had been in motion for decades. Over 300,000 Indian farmers took their lives because of farm-related distress between 2000 and 2016—16,600 of whom were from Punjab alone.⁶

The first farmer’s march, including over 25,000 tractors was held on July 27, 2020, and less than a month later, all 31 farmers unions in the state of Punjab “joined hands to work in co-ordination... giving [the protest] a critical thrust” by building the All India Kisan Sangharsh (struggle) Co-ordination Committee.⁷ In November 2020, the movement launched the call to Dilli Chalo (march to Delhi) under the banner of Samyukt Kisan Morcha (United Farmers Front, SKM) in the hopes of eliciting a response to their demands from the central Indian government.⁸ The convoy of hundreds of thousands of tractors and trolleys from farmers across Punjab and Haryana faced serious state repression in the form of “tear-gas shells, water cannons, digging of trenches, concrete barricades, police baton charges and preventative arrests.”⁹ At the New Delhi border protestors set up three camps where they would remain for a period of 13 months until the farm acts were repealed on November 29, 2021. At each camp, protestors came together creating communities that included free accessible kitchens (langar), health clinics, biweekly newspapers, libraries, performance stages showcasing music, poetry and dance and tractor repair stations.¹⁰

4 Ronki Ram, “Agrarian Resistance in Punjab,” in *Agrarian Reform and Farmer Resistance in Punjab Mobilisation and Resistance*, ed. Shinder S. Thandi (S.I.: ROUTLEDGE, 2022), 34.

5 Ram, 18–19; Navsharan Singh, “It’s Apathy Which Killed Them: Remembering Punjabi’s Kisans,” *Beyond the Pandemic: (Sustainable Development Policy Institute, 2022)*, 138, JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.library.uvic.ca/stable/resrep46221.17>.

6 Singh, “It’s Apathy Which Killed Them: Remembering Punjabi’s Kisans,” 141.

7 Ram, “Agrarian Resistance in Punjab,” 20.

8 Ram, 21; Singh, “It’s Apathy Which Killed Them: Remembering Punjabi’s Kisans,” 139.

9 Shinder S. Thandi, “Mera Pind, Mera Sabyachar, Mera Virsa,” in *AGRARIAN REFORM AND FARMER RESISTANCE IN PUNJAB Mobilisation And (S.I.: ROUTLEDGE, 2022)*, 227.

10 Ram, “Agrarian Resistance in Punjab,” 21–22; Singh, “It’s Apathy Which Killed Them: Remembering Punjabi’s Kisans,” 140.

The Myth of a Leader

There can be no doubt that the impact of MLK in inspiring the victories of the 1960's Civil Rights Movement for social change in the United States is deeply significant. However, historians have broadened the temporal, geographical and ideological boundaries of Black activism which has, as Pineda notes, "revealed the ideological skew of the prevailing narrative...[including] its depiction of a well-known cast of characters."¹¹ This skew towards the exceptionalism of MLK dangerously limits how civil disobedience action is theorized, curbing the potential for ordinary citizens to see themselves as able to affect change. First, it conceals the scale and the relentless repetition of behind-the-scenes logistical work done by a host of volunteers and local organizations during the Civil Rights Movement.¹² Additionally, it conceals "an entire geography of political claim-making"¹³ that occurred across colonial Asia and Africa where activists engaged in nonviolent protest to achieve their aims.

Pineda argues that consistently limited reference to the writings and speeches of MLK obscures his subject position as enmeshed in "an ongoing, contested discourse"¹⁴ and that the 'long' Civil Rights Movement actually began as an imaginative enterprise with abolitionists, which was carried through the 1930s with radical Black activism and was moulded by the transit of decolonial activism and scholarships. This discourse relies on the work and ideas of hundreds of unacknowledged scholars, activist groups, communities, and networks. Nevertheless, understandings of non-violent protest are analytically bounded by a constructed remembrance of the 'short' 1960s Civil Rights Movement that idolizes MLK and presents him as the single determinant of success.¹⁵ When our history "misrecognizes the work of activism as the repetition of given repertoires, rather than an imaginative enterprise"¹⁶ the types of people, goals, and conditions deemed necessary to launch a successful protest in the modern context are severely limited. Waiting around for a modern Martin Luther King Jr. does a disservice to the work of ordinary people who built a politics of coalition through transnational and intersectional groups, relationships, organizations, and networks long before the 1960s and who continue to do so today.

¹¹ "Introduction," 13.

¹² Tufekci, "Leading the Leaderless," 66–67.

¹³ Pineda, "An Entire World in Motion," 55.

¹⁴ "Introduction," 15.

¹⁵ Pineda, "An Entire World in Motion"; Pineda, "Introduction."

¹⁶ Pineda, "Introduction," 21.

In particular, and in the absence of a single authority figure, a politics of coalition recently grounded one of the most recent successful non-violent protest movements. Throughout the agitational activities of the kisan protests, there was not one individual who could be definitively identified as a leader pivotal to the success of the movement. Instead, the defining feature of the overall protest was its universalism, “comprising people across caste, class, creed, gender, region and professional breakup”¹⁷ including everyone from mothers with newborns, to elderly babas and bibis. Unions, women’s groups, landless labourers, and border communities around New Delhi organized and networked together to build a leaderless, egalitarian, and imaginative politics of coalition. This “heterogeneity of experience”¹⁸ carried the movement forward by providing needed practical and strategic tools to sustain successful occupation in the face of violence, negotiate through conflicting interests, and bridge across identities.

The Power of Non-Violence

While Barbara Deming, an advocate of nonviolent social change who came to prominence in the 1960s, certainly did not have the Punjabi kisan in mind while arguing for the potential of non-violent protest, their actions embody key thrusts of her argument that non-violent protest can be effective. First, the farmers’ bold direct action exemplified “the equilibrium between self-assertion and respect for others”¹⁹ through building relationships of solidarity. The goals of the farmers were initially only directed at the repeal of the three acts, asserting themselves and their wants, but the successful outcome of pursuing a creative non-violent agitation was dependent on a politics of coalition that was far-reaching and deeply generative. By “open[ing] pathways for building new class alliances”²⁰ and respecting the role of landless labourers, women, and the Dalits (untouchables) in the agricultural sector and beyond, the protest built “visible, raw and deeply moving”²¹ emotional and relational solidarities. This support for the farmers was repaid by allowing those groups—landless labourers, women, and the Dalit class—to have a platform, develop a voice and gain bargaining power.²² Instead of refusing to work with other groups and elevating self-assertion of the farmers’ individual goals, the protestors practiced egal-

17 Ram, “Agrarian Resistance in Punjab,” 21.

18 Singh, “It’s Apathy Which Killed Them: Remembering Punjabi’s Kisans,” 142.

19 Barbara Deming, “On Revolution and Equilibrium,” in *Revolution and Equilibrium* (New York: Grossman, 1971), 221.

20 Singh, “It’s Apathy Which Killed Them: Remembering Punjabi’s Kisans,” 148.

21 Ram, “Agrarian Resistance in Punjab,” 33.

22 Singh, “It’s Apathy Which Killed Them: Remembering Punjabi’s Kisans,” 143–44.

itarian respect for all members of Indian society—even some civil servants were welcomed in the camps.²³ They effectively facilitated Deming’s equilibrium. Crucially, these connections were not built with passivity. Instead, it was the boldness of the demands of all those engaged in protest, “acting out their determination to change the state of things”²⁴ which allowed for solidarity to be developed over time between coalitions of groups across Indian society. These generative outcomes of the kisan protest were undeniably due to the leaderless structure that relied on consistent maintenance of a politics of coalition by tending to relationships.

Second, the non-violent politics of coalition advanced by the kisan effectively exerted pressure, power, and force on the Indian government. As Deming argues, power is more than just appealing to the conscience of one’s adversary.²⁵ PM Modi repeatedly violated protestors’ human rights, leading to 700 deaths, and attempted to defame them through ethnically charged name-calling.²⁶ Yet, the extent of the kisan’s persuasion of PM Modi’s moral conscience was to force him to “pretend to have [one].”²⁷ Conversely, the unity of the farmers across state and class boundaries gave them distinctly political “leverage for change”²⁸ by turning public sentiment against PM Modi in advance of five state elections, including one in the Punjab, in early 2022.²⁹ In particular, the agricultural industry in India spans many of the northern states encompassing around 263 million workers, who had already witnessed their industry become vital to the maintenance of the Indian state during the COVID-19 pandemic.³⁰ Thus, the political pressure placed on PM Modi through an “assertive [and] constructive”³¹ politics of non-violent non-cooperative coalition building was vital to the success of the kisan mounting an unbeatable challenge to the Indian government.

The Weakness of Leaderlessness

23 Ram, “Agrarian Resistance in Punjab,” 22.

24 Deming, “On Revolution and Equilibrium,” 217.

25 “On Revolution and Equilibrium.”

26 Ram, “Agrarian Resistance in Punjab,” 25; Singh, “It’s Apathy Which Killed Them: Remembering Punjabi’s Kisans,” 235.

27 Deming, “On Revolution and Equilibrium,” 204

28 Ibid, 205.

29 Jaspreet Kaur Bal and Harman Singh Kandola, “Foreign Interference, Repeal of Farmer’s Bills, BC Floods,” #AskCanadianSikhs the Podcast, n.d., loc. 19:00-19:35, <https://anchor.fm/askcanadiansikhs/episodes/23---Foreign-Interference--Repeal-of-Farmers-Bills--BC-Floods-e1bcog8>.

30 Bal and Kandola, “Foreign Interference, Repeal of Farmer’s Bills, BC Floods”; Singh, “It’s Apathy Which Killed Them: Remembering Punjabi’s Kisans,” 138.

31 Deming, “On Revolution and Equilibrium,” 205.

There is still unfinished business in agrarian India; the absence of minimum support prices (MSP), depletion of water, indebtedness, and land fragmentation all remain unaddressed and keep farmers vulnerable. A question remains about whether more could have been accomplished if there was a central figure to lead the kisan protests? In other words, while leaderless movements can be successful, are they as effective? The galvanization of the kisan protest by social media demonstrates the role of the Internet in facilitating modern protest, particularly non-violent anti-authoritarian leaderless movements.³² Social media also allowed the voices and actions of the kisan to reach international audiences, which was crucial given the Indian media's pro-government bias and the need for funding, supplies, and political support from foreign governments which was primarily coordinated through the Sikh diaspora.³³

However, if there is no face for social media users to connect with during protests, how can leaderless ones “signal an organizing capacity powerful enough to threaten those in authority?”³⁴ This is a weakness of leaderless protests, as a politics of coalition risks the inability to challenge existing authority because there is no alternative person for people to gravitate towards. Even if we call the SKM union representatives ‘protest leaders’—in reality they were mere negotiators—40 people cannot be a leadership figure for the international public to coalesce around.³⁵ Moreover, many international audiences did not know about the existence of the SKM; and newspaper articles from prominent publications simply referred to the movement as the farmers’ protests.³⁶ If this were the case, how was this protest able to overcome this weakness inherent to leaderlessness, sustain itself and succeed so effectively in inspiring global coverage and support?

The critical way that the kisan protest was able to subvert this chal-

32 Tufekci, “Leading the Leaderless.”

33 Thandi, “Mera Pind, Mera Sabyachar, Mera Virsa.”

34 Tufekci, “Leading the Leaderless,” 71.

35 Ram, “Agrarian Resistance in Punjab.”

36 “Farm Laws: India Farmers End Protest after Government Accepts Demands,” BBC News, December 9, 2021, sec. India, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-59566157>; Yasmin Gandham, “Local Community Members React to Controversial Agriculture Laws Being Repealed in India,” Global News, November 19, 2021, <https://globalnews.ca/news/8389012/local-community-members-react-to-controversial-agriculture-laws-being-repealed-in-india/>; Mujib Mashal, Emily Schmall, and Russell Goldman, “What Prompted the Farm Protests in India?” The New York Times, January 27, 2021, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/27/world/asia/india-farmer-protest.html>; Jessie Yeung, “India’s Farmer Protests: Why New Farm Laws Have Sparked Outrage | CNN,” CNN, March 26, 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/2021/02/10/asia/india-farmers-protest-explainer-intl-hnk-scli/index.html>.

lence of leaderless protests using social media was by drawing on the strong ethnoreligious Sikh diaspora. As Tufekci writes, protests can represent “locations of self-expression and communities of belonging.”³⁷ The Sikh diaspora is widespread but remains a strong community that is deeply connected to political activities in India. For example, families continue to own land in India or have relatives engaged in farming; Sikh individuals continue to work in agriculture industries in the counties they have migrated to; and Sikh individuals have a substantive presence in Western political and legislative systems.³⁸ Newer generations of Sikh youth “emerged as the most assertive and articulate activists” using social media to enact change and gain support from their networks, which allowed them to “consolidate[e] their Sikh identity [while] also cement[ing] both inter-generational and intra-generational solidarity.”³⁹ Through their extensive engagement in domestic civic political and labour organizations, the diaspora exerted unique pressure by lobbying politicians to publicly declare their support for the kisan protests, including Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau.⁴⁰ More than 100 civil agriculture and labour organizations across Canada, the United States and the United Kingdom also expressed solidarity with the protestors and prominent Sikh communities in those countries held their own disruptive tractor marches.⁴¹ The actions of the diaspora were essential in helping the leaderless kisan movement counter what Tufekci terms “tactical freeze.”⁴² From a completely external place, social media allowed the diaspora to “nudge the movement toward new tactics”⁴³ without sacrificing its antiauthoritarian horizontal coalition politics or its ability to negotiate.

Relying on a pre-existing diaspora is not a viable pathway for all leaderless protest movements as it is highly dependent on the overall unity of the diaspora, specific people, goals, and contexts of the disobedient activities in question. However, the types of activities that the Sikh diaspora engaged in present tactical options for any international political audience cultivated through social media to mobilize. As a result, leaderless protest movements that are built on a politics of coalition and sustained through online engagement may not have to sacrifice their horizontal antiauthoritarian structure in service of tactics. A compromise can be found between

37 “Movement Cultures,” in *Twitter and Tear Gas: The Power and Fragility of Networked Protest* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), 88.

38 Thandi, “Mera Pind, Mera Sabyachar, Mera Virsa,” 232–33.

39 Thandi, 239–230.

40 Thandi, 230.

41 Ram, “Agrarian Resistance in Punjab,” 7; Thandi, “Mera Pind, Mera Sabyachar, Mera Virsa,” 228–31.

42 “Leading the Leaderless,” 77.

43 Tufekci, 78.

“the power and the fragility”⁴⁴ of such movements.

Conclusion

This essay has explored the 2020-2021 Punjabi kisan protests as a modern case study of successful non-violent agitation built on a leaderless politics of coalition. The ideas of Erin Pineda and Barbara Deming frame the story of the farmers activism as one that asks us to appreciate the power and work of sustained collective organization, imagination, and universalism that lead to a politics of coalition. These processes were critical to the farmers’ ability to exert forceable political pressure on the Indian government and achieve success through non-violent direct action. Although Zeyneb Tufekci identified significant challenges faced by modern leaderless movements that use the Internet to gain support, the Punjabi kisan movement was able to subvert such tactical challenges through extensive diasporic support. In tackling other pressing sociopolitical challenges that characterize the modern world, learning from the Punjabi kisans will be crucial in revitalizing our imaginations about the prospects for leaderless disobedience.

⁴⁴ Tufekci, 82.

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