

3 Mediating Counter-narratives and Solidarity: The Case of *Trolley Times* in the Indian Farmers' Movement¹⁷

Introduction

The production of counter-narratives by protest movements is an important feature of their internal and external communication strategies. Self-mediation or 'being the media' is a regular response to mainstream media representation that often invisibilises or stigmatises social movements. The 2020–2021 Indian Farmers' Movement against three new agricultural laws offers interesting examples of how the protest was supported medially and the ways counter-narratives and solidarity were mediated. The movement's newsletter, *Trolley Times*, was one such initiative that aimed at countering mainstream media narratives, informing about the cause and building affective ties among protesters and supporters. It did so via a differentiated multilingual transmedia strategy including social media handles, video material, print publications and public performances.

An analysis of the content and imagery of the newsletter reveals several themes that shape the *Trolley Times*' narrative of the Farmers' Movement. In terms of content, the strong anti-capitalist critique directed at the new farm laws and the government in general dominates. On another discursive level, the movement is portrayed as a model for an ideal Indian society via its visions and practices, which include a strong sense of trans-regional and even trans-ideological solidarity and an emphasis on unity and secularism in opposition to the BJP government's divisive agenda. The ideal of secularism in this context must

¹⁷ I would like to thank my colleague Fathima Nisaruddin for drawing my attention to *Trolley Times* and my colleagues Nadja-Christina Schneider, Dhanya Fee Kirchhof and Julia Strutz for discussing, reading and commenting on draft versions of this article. The first version of this chapter was published for the RePLITO Digital Knowledge Archive. See Titzmann (2020).

be understood within the Indian framework, which refers to the equality of all religions and the right to practice one's faith rather than a strict separation of state and religion (Bhargava 2002). It is inextricably linked to the concept of unity as propagated in the popular nationalist slogan 'Unity in Diversity' from the first decades of independent India.

By analysing the mediation strategies of *Trolley Times* as well as its content and ideas, mechanisms of circulation, meaning-making and the creation of solidarity will be explored. In the following chapter, *Trolley Times* is not regarded as an isolated initiative but is understood as being embedded within complex dynamics and practices of political mobilisation, solidarity and media engagement.

The Farmers' Movement and Its Demands

The Farmers' Movement or Samyukt Kisan Morcha (Hindi: 'United Farmers' Front'), formed in November 2020, is the term for a coalition of over forty Indian farmers' unions. The movement originated in resistance to three new agricultural laws passed by the Indian government in September 2020. Protests arose immediately and continued with increasing intensity for over a year. In the course of this, there were repeated clashes with the forces of law and order, and after a year, the movement lamented several hundred deaths. The majority of protesting farmers hailed from the agriculture-intensive regions in North India: Punjab, Haryana and Uttar Pradesh. Protests also quickly emerged from farmers in other parts of the country, as did expressions of solidarity from all sectors of the population. While the overarching solidarity across religion, caste and gender has been emphasised by activists, the dominance of Jat farmers from Uttar Pradesh and Punjab cannot be ignored and is largely explained by the historical background of peasant movements in northern India (Lerche 2021). The participation and unification of numerous, very heterogeneous farm unions from all over India, including those of marginalised communities such as Muslims and Dalits, was still remarkable.

Following the 'Rail Roko' (Stop the Trains) campaign, which interrupted train services in Punjab, the unions organised the massive 'Dilli Chalo' campaign in November 2020, with an endless convoy of tractors and trolleys moving towards the national capital. The march on Delhi was accompanied by a nationwide general 24-hour strike by millions of people across India on 26 November 2020 in support of the farmers' cause, and thousands gathered at various border crossings on the way to Delhi. They turned into month-long blockades along the highways leading from Punjab and Haryana to the capital.



Figure 20. At the protest site in New Delhi. © Rupinder Singh on Unsplash

On 26 January 2021, India's Republic Day, tens of thousands of farmers held a farmers' parade and again drove a large convoy of tractors with trolleys to Delhi. Even though a partial victory was seized in January 2021 when the Supreme Court ordered a stay of the bills, the final withdrawal of the laws was only achieved on 19 November 2021. The ultimate success was celebrated extensively, even though the assumption lingers on that it was merely a tactical move by the government in view of the upcoming regional elections in Punjab and Uttar Pradesh in early 2022.¹⁸

Why were the farmers against the new laws? In her 'Graphic Story', Vidyun Sabhaney (2021) briefly reviewed the three key points that are critical to understand the urgency of the protest and the origin of the discourse emanating from the *Trolley Times* newsletter:

1. **Abolition of the Minimum Support Price:** The Minimum Support Price (MSP) is a recommended price for basic food items that is part of existing agricultural policies in much of India. This informal 'support price' is recommended by the government and is intended to provide farmers with a minimum profit for the crop while increasing food security in the country. Its abolition would leave farmers completely at the mercy of fluctuating market prices.

¹⁸ The Punjab elections were nevertheless won by the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) and the Indian National Congress (INC), with the AAP providing the new chief minister.

2. **No limit on crop hoarding:** The removal of the current restriction on crop hoarding would mean that prices could be driven up by those with purchasing power, i.e. large companies.
3. **Access of companies to agricultural land is facilitated:** Corporate companies can agree on contract farming and thus get access to the land through loopholes in case of debt, loss of control over cultivation decisions and possibly the land itself.

Against the backdrop of a decades-long ongoing agrarian crisis that has generated high debts for many farmers, severe diseases caused by pesticides and the sad notoriety of increasing numbers of farmer suicides across the country, all three points triggered instant fears of poverty, hunger, job loss, complete neoliberalisation and capitalisation of the agricultural sector.

In their protest against these propositions, farmers invoked metaphors that emphasised their elemental role in providing food for the entire nation. Many slogans used during the rallies characterised them as providers and nurturers: 'No Farmer, No Food', 'grain-givers', '*annadata*' (Hindi: 'provider of food'). In this way, they were able to secure broad support among the population across the country. (Fig. 20).

Protest Aesthetics and Mediation Strategies

Besides its very basic function of a medium for communication, the production of *Trolley Times* broadly falls under what existing research calls protest aesthetics: the performative and communicative expressions of a protest that constitute a movement through the performance of politics (McGarry et al. 2020, 15). Protest aesthetics comprise a material and performative culture with a high capacity to be replicated digitally and shared across social media networks, ideological terrain, state borders and linguistic frontiers. This includes slogans, art, symbols, slang, humour, graffiti, gestures, bodies, colour, clothes and other objects. These create an alternative space for people to engage with politics (McGarry et al., 19). Attempts to theorise protest aesthetics note that the production of protest artefacts, the circulation of symbols and discourse contribute towards the creation of a collective memory of the protest (Cammaerts 2012). Protestors film and photograph what they see and post it on social networking platforms, sometimes in real time, thereby producing an ever-expanding archive of images and self-representations of protest events (Cammaerts 2012, 125) (Fig. 21). With regard to the Farmers' Movement, this archive of protest aesthetics is composed of the stored contributions and images from various media channels, eyewitness accounts, photos and print materials that circulate. It is a rich resource for the following analysis.



Figure 21. At the protest in New Delhi. © Rupinder Singh on Unsplash

I further use Cammaerts' mediation opportunity structure to specifically analyse the mediation strategies at work in the context of *Trolley Times*. Cammaerts describes strategies of producing counter-narratives, of being the media (in the sense of 'indymedia') and of dissemination independently from mainstream media as 'self-mediation' (Cammaerts 2012, 125). Although one can legitimately question the 'self' in his conceptualisation,¹⁹ the strategy of mediating counter-narratives by the movement's activists is at the heart of what constitutes *Trolley Times*.

The *Trolley Times* Newsletter

Against the background of these theoretical considerations, *Trolley Times* offers a most interesting example in terms of both content and circulation. The newsletter, by volunteers from the Farmers' Movement, for the movement, combined

¹⁹ The question is where/what the 'self' is in the context of a movement that is formed around an issue and is not about identity. The Farmers' Movement has no clearly defined identity that could serve as a collective 'self'. It is rather similar to leftist and union movements that form around a cause. It is not an identitarian movement and even intentionally blanks out the socioreligious affiliations and backgrounds of its participants. I thank Nadja-Christina Schneider for pointing out this inconsistency.

journalistic counter-narratives in the style of ‘indymedia’ and artistic expression in support and reflection of the movement. It was published bilingually in Hindi and Punjabi, and the first three editions were translated by the editorial team into English, followed later by a published collection of select translated articles in English. *Trolley Times* put out 22 editions at irregular intervals within one year (Fig. 22). Its first edition was published on 18 December 2020; its last, on 9 December 2021. The newsletter’s publications ended with the perceived victory of the movement, with the Modi government taking back the laws on 19 November 2021.

The following observations are mainly based on an in-depth analysis of the first three editions’ English versions (eds 1–3) and on two interviews with *Trolley Times* co-editor Navkiran Natt.²⁰

Navkiran Natt is a dentist by profession and also has a degree in film studies, but since 2020, she has been what Rohit Kumar from *The Wire* has called an *andolanjeevi* (professional female activist) at the Farmers’ Movement. She comes from a family of activists, with both her parents being involved in the Punjab peasant movement for decades. Her mother, Jasbeer Kaur, was one of the leading activists in the protests against the three farm bills. At the Tikri protest site, Navkiran Natt ran a library, organised film screenings, gave speeches and founded *Trolley Times* with a group of young volunteers.

Mediation Strategies

In line with Cammaerts’ notion of ‘self-mediation’, *Trolley Times*’ major aim was to be a voice of the protestors and to publish counter-narratives to the government’s framing and mainstream media reporting, which were, with the exception of Punjabi media, perceived as biased and anti-farmer. The goal to provide real news amidst fake news resulted in a kind of ‘battle of narratives’ (Singh 2020, 1), with the ‘BJP troll army’ on one side and the activists’ accounts on the other. Images and testimonies of a peaceful, non-violent protest helped to justify the movement and symbolised an alternative to the violent, discriminatory ways of the government and police. This was carefully integrated into the self-representation of the movement: ‘The peaceful nature of the agitation has ensured that the narrative continues to remain in the favor of farmers’ (Singh 2020, 1).

²⁰ An edited version of the first interview with Navkiran Natt is available on YouTube. See Natt & Titzmann (2021).



Figure 23. Newspaper delivery by bicycle © Ravi Sharma on Unsplash

To spread the farmers' self-narrative, it was essential to ensure circulation. *Trolley Times*' first mode of distribution was a printed newsletter at the protest sites (Fig. 23). Starting with 1,000 copies, they eventually reached 7,000. According to Navkiran Natt, the target audience was rural elderly Indians who are not fluent in reading English media. This also explains the focus on publishing in Hindi and the regional language Punjabi, which is the mother tongue of many protesting farmers.

Navkiran Natt recalled a certain nostalgia attached to producing print media, as newspapers are the oldest mass medium. Furthermore, she mentioned the rural target audience as a decisive factor to not limit their initiative to an online platform. Particularly during the height of the protests, internet connectivity was weak and only partially accessible from the protest sites. Another intention was to create a sense of collectiveness through the shared reading and discussing of the newsletter. The volunteers distributed one copy per trolley to motivate groups of protestors to engage with each other and the writings in *Trolley Times*. Navkiran Natt described the particularities of the print medium as follows:

Mobile phone, tablets, iPad and all that, it made that experience [of reading] very individualistic. Which is in a way very lethal for organising the masses, because when you are experiencing things individually, you don't get that collective sense which you get while you are sitting together and discussing one particular agenda or one particular political issue. (Navkiran Natt, personal interview via Zoom, 08/07/2021)

Her assessment here is entirely consistent with the assumption that solidarity collectivises what would otherwise remain individual experiences and emotions and, in this way, becomes an essential motivation for joint action (Stewart and Schultze 2019, 100251). Thus, the collective reading of *Trolley Times* was meant to help forge these necessary solidarities to support the movement. Navkiran Natt also saw the joint creation of publications as central to political activism and explained how the editorial team was particularly keen on involving young people to facilitate a learning experience of basic forms of activism. In emphasising the important role of publications for a movement, she also drew a connection to historical movements such as the Ghadar Party, which revolved around a publication.²¹

Parallel to the classic print medium, the editors followed a cross-media strategy, with the maintenance of a website that included all editions as PDF downloads, social media channels (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram) with additional postings and a video production called 'Trolley Talkies' via YouTube. From the initial editors, circulation was taken into the hands of people who wanted to publish the newsletter and distribute it in their neighbourhoods. Navkiran Natt explained that they simply asked people to not change any content; otherwise, the newsletter could be re-published by anyone. She further emphasised the importance of social media in reaching a wider audience and a very engaged diaspora. *Trolley Times* had more than 80,000 followers collectively on its social media handles.²²

Social media speaks to what Papacharissi has called 'affective publics' (Papacharissi 2014): publics created through emotional and affective communication via images or texts that touch people's heart and soul. She argues that

²¹ The movement, which came to be known as the Ghadar Party, initially consisted of Indians from the North American diaspora who advocated for India's independence from the British colonial regime. It became an international political movement and spread to India and Indian diaspora communities around the world. Its main activities took place between 1913 and 1917, while the party was not formally dissolved until 1948. The movement took its popular name Ghadar (Urdu: 'rebellion') from the vernacular newspaper *Hindustan Ghadar*, launched in coordination with the Hindi Association of the Pacific Coast. See also Oberoi (2009).

²² Facebook: 13,000 followers; Twitter: 11,600 followers; Instagram: 58,500 followers (25/01/2022).



Figure 24. Shahmukhi translation of *Trolley Times* ed. 11. © Trolley Times

social media does not make revolutions, but it does give an emergent, storytelling public its own means to empathise with events, often by making participants part of the unfolding story. Technologies facilitates networks, but it is our stories that affectively connect us. That was exactly what *Trolley Times* did: by giving protesters the space to share their stories, thoughts and opinions, it fostered an affective community.

The role of language is significant in achieving this affective appeal. As already mentioned, the use of regional languages over English facilitated access to a wider audience. After the initial translations by the editors themselves, more people volunteered to translate *Trolley Times* into other Indian languages, i.e. Bengali, Malayalam and Marathi, but also into French and Spanish. Most of these volunteers were not known to the editorial team. During our first interview, Navkiran Natt mentioned interesting acts of solidarity in the form of distributing and translating the newsletter. For instance, volunteers in Pakistan translated it from the (original) Indian Gurmukhi script for Punjabi into the Shahmukhi script, in which Punjabi is written in Pakistan (Fig. 24). Navkiran explained this engagement with the many cultural, social and geographical similarities across the border and a shared issue of agrarian crisis.

Narratives of Solidarity

Creating avenues for self-mediation and counter-narratives is one way of establishing solidarity with the Farmers' Movement. Rakopoulos conceives of solidarity as a concept that bridges – 'that is, captures loosely and yet in tension – diverse modes of practices, forms of sociality and mechanisms of envisioning future prospects for people's lives. It links diverse networks of people and sometimes contradictory meanings' (Rakopoulos 2016, 142). Solidarity as a 'bridge-concept' thus describes a perceived unity that spans ideologies and social and regional categories. Similarly, McGarry et al. links the enactment or performance of solidarity to 'different voices being heard' (McGarry et al. 2020, 16).



Figure 25. Protesting women. © Rupinder Singh on Unsplash

In the discourse in and around *Trolley Times*, people often described the Farmers' Movement as bringing communities of different religions and occupations together (i.e. farmers and workers), as being trans-regional and trans-ideological is emphasised, as is the significant involvement of women (Fig. 25). *Trolley Times*' mission statement already hinted at the aforementioned concept of 'bridging':

We are aware that partisan publishing representation can create rifts in the movement. Our team works round the clock to choose write ups that **look beyond such differences** and commit to the progress of current movement that is exemplary because of the **unity of farmers, labourers and other sections**. [...] The organisations' leadership has worked resolutely to tread the ideological differences between themselves and bring this united movement to a point where its ultimate conclusion is victory. (*Trolley Times* 2020, my emphasis)

The narrative of solidarity across divisions was very present in many articles published in *Trolley Times*, e.g. 'The movement is an inspiration for India's future, where people from different ideologies and backgrounds can come together and work for the collective benefit of all' (Sharma 2020, 3). Other remarks were more specific about the divisions that the movement transcended, e.g. gender differences: 'It is an accomplishment of the farmers' protest that it has erased these historical differences. Women and men have chosen to unite against a common enemy' (Toor 2020, 1).

However, solidarity helps create networks but does not necessarily facilitate egalitarianism: it is a relation that is negotiated across power imbalances (Mohanty 2003). A strong narrative of solidarity and unity might even serve to make these power imbalances between social groups invisible. For instance, Lerche elaborates on the dominance of Jat farmers in past and contemporary agrarian movements and the difficulties in creating a political coalition with Dalit and Muslim farmers' unions and argues that 'the unity of the movement is forced upon the concerned social groups' (Lerche 2021, 1380). He cites several reasons why the struggle over agricultural laws was important for exploited and oppressed groups as well as for capitalist farmers. Most importantly, Lerche stresses the potential of challenging the current government's political oppression far beyond the agricultural sector. However, he does not foresee this broad-based unity lasting beyond the protests (Lerche 2021).

The dominant narrative from within the movement, of which *Trolley Times* is an important voice, emphasised a conceptualisation of solidarity that works in tandem with the notions of unity and secularism. Unity is often equated with

collectivity. The poem 'It's a Festival' by Surjit Patar, published in *Trolley Times* (Patar 2020, 4), featured two exemplary lines:

No, this is not a crowd, it is a sangat,²³ the collective of souls.

Leaving I behind, to go to Us and We

This discourse connects to the notion of secularism, which, in the Indian understanding, is not the strict separation of state and religion but the mutual tolerance and acceptance of all religions. The Farmers' Movement shared a recurring reference to India as a secular republic with other recent protest movements in India. The anti-CAA protest in Shaheen Bagh²⁴ (see [Chapter 2](#)) was spearheaded by Muslim women who challenged the dominant media representation of their religious community, but the protest on the ground was secular in nature. Symbols of the Indian republic, such as the national flag, or regular protest activities like public readings of the preamble of the Indian Constitution, document secularism, equality, socialism and sovereignty as core values and guidelines through which the Constitution gains its validity. 'Through their conversations, discussions, and debates, they [the women of Shaheen Bagh] were imagining a secular nation into being – a country where questioning the government, working together as citizens, and challenging discrimination and hatred through peaceful ways is the new normal' (Bhatia and Gajjala 2020, 6294).

Indian flags could be found at the Farmers' protests as well, and on the occasion of Republic Day (26 January) 2021, *Trolley Times* published its eighth edition, with the preamble of the Indian Constitution as its cover page ([Fig. 26](#)).

The discursive way secularism is referred to in the Farmers' Movement is similar to the anti-CAA movement and usually includes a reference to the idea of the 'oneness of humanity' in Sikhism, thereby connecting political and religious discourse.²⁵ Guru Nanak envisioned a fundamental, common truth under-

²³ *Sangat* is a Punjabi word used for community (of Sikhs).

²⁴ The Indian Parliament passed the new Citizenship Amendment Act 2019 (CAA) on 11 December 2019. It amends the 1955 Citizenship Act by providing a pathway to Indian citizenship for persecuted religious minorities from Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan who are Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, Parsis or Christians and who arrived in India before the end of December 2014. The law does not provide this option for Muslims from these Muslim-majority countries. Vociferous protests against the CAA developed across the country, of which the large protest in the Shaheen Bagh neighborhood of New Delhi received particular attention.

²⁵ For an extensive discussion of the idea of oneness in Punjabi devotional culture, see Kirchhof (2021) and Kirchhof (2022) in the RePLITO Digital Knowledge Archive.

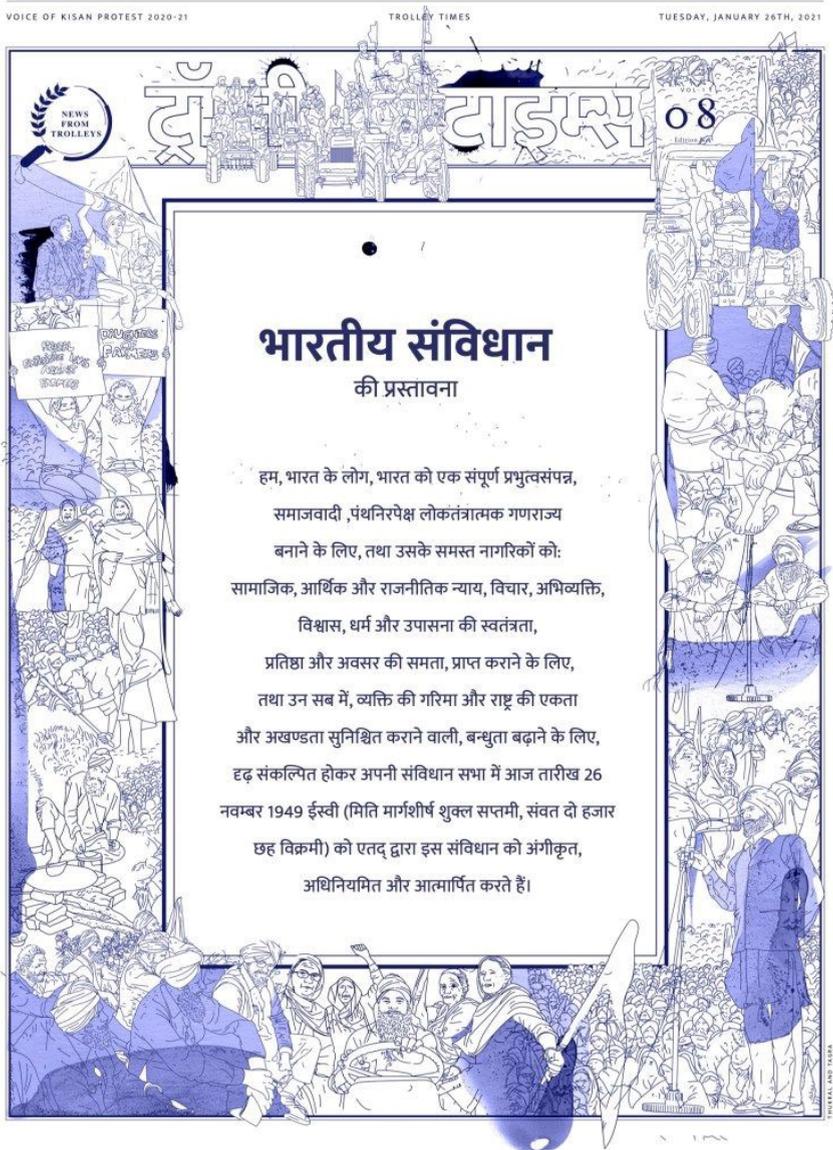


Figure 26. ‘The Preamble to the Indian Constitution’ (Hindi), *Trolley Times*, ed. 8, 26/01/2021. © Trolley Times

lying the faiths of diverse people, and, for him and his followers, the equality of humanity was to become the ethical paradigm (Singh 1992, 340).

Visions and Practices of an Ideal Society

Those who want Sarbat Da Bhalla (Wellbeing of all) are presenting an exemplary character to the world. (Mahesari 2020, 2)

Connecting to the idea of oneness, many comments indicated a strategic decision to demonstrate peacefulness, unity and non-violence in order to provide an ideal example of how humans can live together (Fig. 27). During interviews and in the *Trolley Times* stories, participants described the protest sites as exemplary spaces, almost utopian ‘ideal towns’ or ‘ideal societies’, in contrast to the decaying Indian democracy.



Figure 27. At the protest site. © Rupinder Singh on Unsplash

Navkiran Natt elaborated how she sees the protest sites at the Delhi borders as good examples of communal living:

These are small towns and they are having each and everything that one town should have. They are having their own libraries, and film screening centres and schools and everything. [...] These protest sites they are exemplary spaces in the sense how a community should live. That sense of collectiveness, the opportunities or the material things are available for everyone across caste, class, region, religion and race, everything, even gender. I want



Figure 28. Preparation of a communal meal at the protest site. © Rupinder Singh on Unsplash

the same sense to prevail globally as soon as possible and we will fight until then. (Navkiran Natt, personal interview via Zoom, 08/07/2021)

Her account informs us of practices of resource pooling, community kitchens and mutual aid. These are guiding principles of village culture, here invoked with the intention of forging solidarity. Thus, solidarity is at once specific to a certain situation but also has a sociocultural history of its own. Rakopoulos calls this the ‘re-contextualisation of village-hood’ (Rakopoulos 2016, 143) in times of crisis.

A vivid example was the revival of the Sikh tradition of *langar* that became a symbol for the Farmers’ Movement (Fig. 28).²⁶ It is clearly a tradition that belongs to a specific socio-religious repertoire of the subcontinent and has been practised for centuries. Cooking, eating and distributing food as a performance of bonding and solidarity became very typical for the Farmers’ Move-

²⁶ In Sikhism, a *langar* (Punjabi: ‘kitchen’) is the communal kitchen of a *gurdwara* that serves meals free of charge to all visitors – without distinction of religion, caste, gender, economic status or ethnicity.

ment. There exists, perhaps, even a kind of global repertoire of practices within protest movements, such as community kitchens, libraries, eating together and in public, etc. Many of these practices share a kind of ‘nostalgia for the rural’, imagining a quasi-rural or anti-urban form of community – even when they are not about peasants.²⁷

Historical Repertoires and Capitalism Critique

A form of political nostalgia characterised the movement even beyond its reference to the rural. By evoking images of ‘indigenous’ struggles towards a better future, contemporary protest movements produce a certain kind of nostalgia for India’s socialist past as well as for historical movements against oppression and exploitation, in contrast to the undemocratic and repressive reality under the current Hindu nationalist regime. Repeatedly-referred-to historical repertoires and figures during the farmers’ protest included Bhagat Singh, Mahatma Gandhi,²⁸ B.R. Ambedkar, the Ghadar movement, Sikh gurus and various historical Sikh warriors (Singh 2021) (Fig. 29).

The dominant narrative in *Trolley Times* juxtaposed the struggle of the aforementioned historical pioneers for a just and equal society with the current political scenario. A dominant feature was a strong critique of India’s neoliberal economic policies and capitalism in general. The criticism was directed in particular against the ‘sell-out’ of agriculture to large corporations. Two of India’s richest businessmen, Mukesh Ambani, head of Reliance Industries, and Gautam Adani, head of the Adani Group, became symbolic figures of exploitative capitalism in this struggle.

In sating the intentions of Ambanis and Adanis, this government has sold the education of this country so it can open Jio University.²⁹ It has sold the security of this country so Ambanis can make Rafale’s [sic!],³⁰ sold airports and ports so Adanis can make a profit. It has sold railway stations. Only our soil was left but they are preparing to sell it too. (Kumari 2020, 3)

²⁷ I thank Julia Strutz for her important comment on the global scope of community practices in the context of protest movements.

²⁸ Gandhi is less referred to in posters but more rhetorically in the adaption of the term *satyagraha* (‘non-violent struggle’).

²⁹ Jio University is a private university financed by Mukesh Ambani, to be built outside Mumbai.

³⁰ Rafale is a French fighter aircraft.



Figure 29. Images of revolutionary Sikh role models (from left to right): Udham Singh, Kartar Singh Sarabha (a leading member of the Ghadar Party), Bhagat Singh holding a Punjabi translation of the novel *Mother* by Maxim Gorki, and Baba Banda Singh Bahadur. © Rupinder Singh on Unsplash

One of several cartoons published in *Trolley Times* depicted Prime Minister Narendra Modi pushing Mukesh Ambani on a swing that is actually a gallows. In the background, farmers who died by suicide are seen hanging from trees. ‘Farmers Suicides’ is written on the tree trunk (Fig. 30).



Figure 30. Cartoon by Mir Suhail. *Trolley Times*, ed. 1, p. 3. © Trolley Times

The message is easy to understand and similar to many other texts published in the newsletter: Modi and his corporate ‘friend’ Ambani were amusing themselves by ignoring the plight of the farmers and even used the structure that kills them for their own benefit (the gallows became a swing). The protestors claimed that the Modi government favours business tycoons at the expense of ordinary citizens and that businessmen would benefit from the agricultural laws that farmers opposed. However, the cartoon also points to an imminent danger for the swinging Ambani: if he slips, the gallows will strangle him.

Conclusion

The initial insights into the vast array of materials within the Farmers’ Movement’s dispersed protest archive highlight the significance of generating alternative narratives as a crucial element of their internal and external communication tactics. Engaging in self-mediation or ‘becoming the media’ emerges as a common response to the tendency of mainstream media to either overlook or stigmatise social movements. *Trolley Times* offers a compelling illustration of



Figure 31. Protest in solidarity with the Indian Farmers' Movement in New York City. © Gayatri Malhotra on Unsplash

how protest is bolstered through media support, showcasing the mechanisms by which counter-narratives and solidarity are conveyed. Its objectives encompassed challenging mainstream media portrayals, educating about the movement's objectives and fostering emotional connections among protesters and sympathisers through a diverse multilingual media approach, which includes social media platforms, video content, printed publications and public performances (Fig. 31).

According to a follow-up interview with Navkiran Natt (personal interview via Zoom, 27/01/2022), the impact of *Trolley Times* was felt in the very positive response from the protesting farmers and especially by the positive feedback from the global readership of the newsletter, which was primarily composed of the Indian diaspora. The editorial team is convinced that their one-year-long initiative has aided in making the movement nationally and internationally more visible. Building on this successful strategy of activism, *Trolley Times* continues to exist in a slightly different format as a multimedia offering focused on issues and policies affecting agriculture. Its prime target group, according to Navkiran Natt, is young people in Punjab. *Trolley Times* will continue as indymedia and at the same time be an entry point for young people into activist publishing.

Within the one year that the farmers' protest lasted, the production of protest artefacts, the circulation of symbols and discourse have created a collective memory. It is the task of future research to investigate what happens to this collective memory: will it enter the national consciousness and become an integral part of a broader national narrative? By transferring knowledge, social movements become 'epistemic communities' (Lipschutz 2001) – but will this community survive after the immediate cause? Even though the movement achieved its primary goal with the withdrawal of the three agricultural laws, many issues related to the agrarian crisis and conflicts with the current government remain.

The fact that the Samyukt Kisan Morcha was formed on the basis of a coalition of farmers' unions needs to be reflected upon when we discuss the aesthetic and communicative practices of the movement and also the performance of secularism and anti-capitalist critique. Navkiran Natt situated the initiative of *Trolley Times* within a certain kind of nostalgia for 'old' activism and traditional print media that connects this recent movement to earlier socialist and unionist movements on the subcontinent, which were dedicated to anti-capitalism and notions of equality and secularism as well. There is much discussion about 'new' social movements in the digital age, but this successful protest movement seems to prove that 'old' social movements are by no means dead. One might even assume that such heterogeneous mass movements have even greater chances of success, since they are able to reconcile many concerns and give the impression of a true representation of the people.³¹ It is quite certain that the political mobilisation of farmers and many other social groups in India will last; and so will the need for further research.

³¹ I would like to thank Nadja-Christina Schneider in particular for adding this point to the conclusion of this chapter.

