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ΠΣΑ

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# The Pi Sigma Alpha Undergraduate Journal of Politics

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# Editor's Preface to the Spring Edition

Here at Elon University, we are extremely grateful to host *The Pi Sigma Alpha Undergraduate Journal of Politics*. We are proud to present the Spring 2022 issue and congratulate all authors published in this issue for their high achievement.

This publication seeks to highlight the intellectual curiosity that leads to innovative scholarship in all subfields of political science, scholarship that addresses timely questions, is carefully crafted, and utilizes diverse methodologies. We are committed to intellectual integrity, a fair and objective review process, and a high standard of scholarship as we showcase the work of undergraduate scholars, some of whom pursue questions that have been traditionally ignored in scholarship but that drive our discipline forward.

Following the lead of the American Political Science Review (APSR) Editorial Board, we are excited to publish research in the areas of “American politics, comparative politics, international relations, political theory, public law and policy, racial and ethnic politics, the politics of gender and sexuality and qualitative and quantitative research methods.” This publication also values the relationships formed through student-faculty collaboration and aims to build a culture of scholarship that expands beyond the college campus. We hope to encourage and empower students to seek out knowledge and pursue their potential, contributing to scholarship in a variety of disciplines.

This year, we thank our advisors Dr. Baris Kesgin and Dr. Aaron Sparks for their support, without which the issue would not have been possible. We would also like to thank the entirety of the Political Science and Policy Studies Department at Elon University, especially Dr. Laura Roselle; our Faculty Advisory Board; and all the students who shared their exceptional work with us this semester.

We are excited to present the Spring 2022 edition of the *Journal*. Thank you for your continued support and readership of our publication; we hope you enjoy the edition.

Sincerely,

*The Editorial Board at Elon University*

# Submission of Manuscripts

The *Journal* accepts manuscripts from undergraduates of any class and major. Members of Pi Sigma Alpha are especially encouraged to submit their work. We strive to publish papers of the highest quality in all areas of political science.

Generally, selected manuscripts have been well-written works with a fully developed thesis and strong argumentation stemming from original analysis. Authors may be asked to revise their work before being accepted for publication.

Submission deadlines are September 15th for the Fall edition and February 15th for the Spring edition. Manuscripts are accepted on a rolling basis; therefore, early submissions are strongly encouraged.

Students may submit their work through Elon University's submission portal, found here: <https://www.elon.edu/u/academics/arts-and-sciences/political-science/psa-journal/>

Alternatively, students may email [psajournalelon@gmail.com](mailto:psajournalelon@gmail.com) with an attached Word document of the manuscript. In the body of the email, students are asked to include their name and university, the title of the manuscript, and the closest subfield of political science to which their manuscript pertains (American politics, comparative politics, international relations, political theory, or policy studies). Due to the time committed to the manuscript review process, we ask students to submit only one manuscript per submission cycle.

Submitted manuscripts must include a short abstract (approximately 150 words) and citations/references that follow the *APSA Style Manual for Political Science*. Please do not exceed the maximum page length of 35 double-spaced pages, which includes references, tables, figures, and appendices.

The *Journal* is a student-run enterprise with editors and an Editorial Board that are undergraduate students and Pi Sigma Alpha members at Elon University. The Editorial Board relies heavily on the help of our Faculty Advisory Board, which consists of political science faculty from across the nation, including members of the Pi Sigma Alpha Executive Council.

Please direct any questions about submissions or the Journal's upcoming editions to the editors at Elon University: [psajournalelon@gmail.com](mailto:psajournalelon@gmail.com).

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# “What Would Gandhi Do?” Gandhian Influence on the Indian Farmers’ Protests 2020-21

Nina Dang, St. Olaf College

*Indian farmers protested for over a year against a set of laws instituted in September 2020 that they expected would destroy their livelihoods and leave agriculture workers—42.6% of the Indian workforce—economically ruined due to big corporate takeover. The protests threatened the long-held power of Narendra Modi’s central government, gained worldwide recognition as the largest protests in history, and were ultimately successful in causing the repeal of the new laws. The success and gravity of the movement and its explicit references to the methods of civil disobedience pioneered by Mahatma Gandhi have inspired comparisons to India’s 20th century movement against colonial British rule. Were the Farmer’s Protests truly a “Gandhian” movement? Little scholarly work has attempted to answer this question. In this paper, I argue that while some of the methods employed in the Farmers’ Protests seem to draw directly from Gandhi’s repertoire, their deviation from the quintessential Gandhian ethos of moral development and quest for spiritual truth prevent their classification as “Gandhian.” I analyze 17 news articles on the protests published by domestic and international outlets, from September 17th, 2020, to November 29th, 2021, and compare them to those that characterize the “Gandhian Approach,” as defined in civil disobedience literature. This research has particular significance for understanding the endurance and applicability of Gandhi’s almost century-old methods of resistance in contemporary Indian politics, and underlines the unique qualities of Gandhi’s anti-colonial movement.*

## INTRODUCTION

**M**ahatma Gandhi’s unconventional and successful methods of colonial resistance against the British occupation of India in the early 20th century, such as hunger strikes, have served as inspiration for civil resisters across regions and time periods (Cortright 1997; Danielson 2003; Salstrom 2014). The Indian Farmers’ Protests of 2020-21 are a contemporary example of successful Indian civil disobedience that seem to embody a Gandhian approach. Indeed, protesting farmers themselves have explicitly cited Gandhi as their guiding force: in an example, one sitting protester in New Delhi had a written message duct-taped across his mouth that translates to, “*Walking in the footsteps of Gandhi, I am on a hunger strike*” (Saaliq 2021). Additionally, movement organizers held protest marches that they referred to as *satyagraha*, which is a term that was coined by Gandhi to describe his unique form of nonviolent protest. Due to these references, and perhaps the common geographic location of the two movements, journalists and commentators globally and within India began to draw connections between them. However, there have been few attempts to systematically study the Farmers’ Protests on the basis of their alignment with the “Gandhian Approach” to civil disobedience

(Suhrawardy 2022; Tripathi 2022). In this paper, I attempt to address this gap by analyzing news coverage of the farmers’ protests beginning from their commencement in September 2020 until their cessation in November 2021, in search of evidence of the methods of civil disobedience they employed, the organization of their coalition and public statements made by their spokespeople, and ultimately assessing the level of alignment with the Gandhian Approach as defined by scholarly categorizations.

Based on the analysis, while some of the methods employed in the Farmers’ Protests seem to draw directly from Gandhi’s repertoire, their deviation from the quintessential Gandhian ethos of moral development and quest for spiritual truth prevent their justified classification as “Gandhian.” This research points to the endurance and applicability of select elements of Gandhian methods of civil disobedience, while at the same time highlighting qualities that were particular to Gandhi’s 20th century anti-colonial movement. While the Farmers’ Protests may not be considered “Gandhian” from a theoretical standpoint, their symbolic use of Gandhi and *satyagraha* suggests an alternative lens through which one might evaluate the endurance of Gandhian influence in contemporary civil disobedience movements.

## BACKGROUND ON THE FARMERS' PROTESTS 2020-2021

In September 2020, the Indian central government led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi instituted a set of three new agriculture laws, which removed existing laws that protected the agricultural sector from corporate takeover (Bensadoun 2020). While the Modi government upheld that the new laws would grant farmers the freedom to set their own prices and hence benefit them in the long run, most affected farmers themselves contended that the measures would leave them vulnerable to corporate exploitation and destroy their livelihoods. The Samyukta Kisan Morcha (umbrella body for multiple farmers unions) conducted civil disobedience efforts soon after the laws were introduced and ceased on November 19, 2021, when the central government officially announced the repeal of the laws in response to the farmers' demands. In its course, it grew into the largest protest in history with over 250 million people participating in the general strike organized on 26th November, 2020 (Kim 2021). Some media outlets have called the protests a major threat to Prime Minister Modi's government (Saaliq 2021). In over a year, the protests against the new agricultural laws have taken on many forms and have employed several methods of civil disobedience, from protest marches to rail blockades to storming historic monuments. The Farmers' Protests were largely nonviolent, with some notable exceptions that will be discussed in the analysis.

### The "Gandhian Approach" to Civil Disobedience

Gandhi's 20th century movement to rid India of the British raj is one of the most extensively studied instances of civil disobedience in modern history, likely due to its trailblazing success. Gandhi's unique methods and the tenets of his version of nonviolent resistance comprise what many scholars of the topic refer to as the "Gandhian Approach," and what Gandhi himself referred to as "*satyagraha*." Scholarly analyses of Gandhi's tactics and Gandhi's own political writings provide a framework for understanding the foundational elements that make up the Gandhian Approach. Given the breadth of literature on this subject, there exists some variety in the scholarly emphasis given to different elements of Gandhi's *satyagraha*. In order to arrive at a standard characterization for use in the analysis, I first ascertain the elements described by scholars of Gandhian resistance to be basic "pillars" of *satyagraha*. I then detail how each of these pillars played a central role in Gandhi's 20th century anti-colonial movement. This discussion provides criteria of "Gandhianism" against which the relevant components of the Farmers' Protests will be judged.

### Scholarly Characterizations of Gandhian "Pillars"

Analyses of *satyagraha* tend to emphasize the salience of both practical and moral elements. Judith Brown notes about Gandhi's approach to civil disobedience that ideologies such as *ahimsa* (non-violence) and *satyagraha* (nonviolent resistance grounded in truth, that treats ends and means as

the same) characterize the moral dimension of the Gandhian movement, while the practical components include exploiting the opponents' vulnerabilities: grassroots mobilization and actions that garner widespread attention (Roberts 2009). Similarly, Ramin Jahanbegloo describes Gandhi's *satyagraha* and its global adaptations in terms of a commitment to bringing both parties to realize greater reciprocity and interdependence, rather than the elimination of the opponent altogether (Jahanbegloo 2016). Nonviolence on an individual and social level is an implied part of the practice of *satyagraha*. Jahanbegloo emphasizes the practical importance of the universal appeal of Gandhi's *satyagraha*, which bridged religious and social divisions for the purpose of achieving a common goal: destabilizing British control. Gandhi's personal *satyagraha* involved self-suffering and service to mankind, but the most fundamental element of his conception of *satyagraha*, for Jahanbegloo, is the struggle against all forms of injustice, regardless of who the victims are. Relatedly, in her analysis of the protestant adoption of Gandhian *satyagraha* in interwar America, Leilah Danielson describes *satyagraha*, as understood by select American pacifists in the 1930s, as a perfect marriage between nonviolence and effectiveness (Danielson 2003). The movement appealed to these pacifists as a viable method of action because it was at the same time morally defensible and effective. Danielson's conception brings together the individual elements of Gandhian politics described by other scholars, such as those mentioned above, by defining Gandhi's *satyagraha* as a strategy of "nonviolent coercion" (Danielson 2003, 372). The "coercive" element initially made it difficult for *satyagraha* to gain widespread acceptance in the pacifist community, which had previously believed that education, moral persuasion, and conversion to Christianity were the only appropriate tactics for creating social change. Gandhi's *satyagraha* was thus distinct from pacifism in that the practical dimension (relating to effectiveness) was at least as integral as the moral dimension. Considering these scholarly categorizations of the Gandhian Approach together, the commonly emphasized elements can be categorized into four "pillars": nonviolence (*ahimsa*), moral/spiritual development, strategic planning and coercion, and the unification of social groups. This basic theoretical framework provides a means for examining Gandhi's approach to resistance and creating specific "criteria" for the comparative analysis of the Farmers' Protests.

### Gandhi's Conception and Practice of *Satyagraha*

#### *Pillar 1: Nonviolence (ahimsa)*

Essential to Gandhi's conception of *satyagraha* is the belief that means and ends are inextricably intertwined. Since the aim of the movement was freedom from evil and the pursuit of moral truth, it could not deploy methods that were immoral or evil. Although Gandhi avoided expressing



religious affiliation in his politics, he is far better characterized as a pluralist than a secularist (Grier 2014). He believed that the moral truth at the heart of all organized religions was a belief in *ahimsa*, or nonviolence towards others, and wanted this to serve as a unifying force. Gandhi explains that *ahimsa* and *satyagraha* are necessarily interdependent: “When I look for Ahimsa, Truth says, ‘Find it through me.’ When I look for Truth, Ahimsa says ‘Find it through me.’” (Sheshagiri 1978, 64). This relationship is central to the Gandhian Approach; it is the reason that the movement took the shape that it did. In the absence of violence as an option, the quintessential “Gandhian” methods of resistance, such as fasts and Salt Marches, were born. It was these creative tactics of nonviolent resistance that were replicated by other freedom fighters across the world, such as Martin Luther King Jr, Nelson Mandela, Lech Walesa and Vaclav Havel (Jahanbegloo 2016). Gandhi’s belief in the pursuit of non-violence is succinctly summarized in one of his most famous quotes, “An eye for eye leaves the whole world blind.”

While Gandhi touted *ahimsa* as a moral imperative, his political pragmatism complicated his view of violence. He personally upheld nonviolence as a *satyagrahi* but was aware of the “peripheral” violence that occurs in movements of that scale. He tried to implement campaigns that entailed a low chance of violent outbreak, but he did not let the remote potential for violence deter a campaign. He was, after all, a political realist (Mantena 2012). In order for any resistance movement or tactic to be considered Gandhian, it needs to include a clear renunciation of physical violence by key spokespeople; however, the protest does not need to be completely devoid of any kind of physical violence, as the Indian anti-colonial movement was not (Roberts 2009, 52).

### *Pillar 2: Strategic Planning and Coercion*

Although *satyagraha* is centered around nonviolence, it should not be construed as mere pacifism. A defining element of Gandhi’s freedom movement, and arguably a key to its success, is its incorporation of pragmatic tactics that sometimes entailed coercion. Gandhi was a strategic thinker as much, if not more, than he was a spiritual leader. He once defined himself as “an essentially practical man dealing with practical political questions,” (Veeravalli 2014, 14). The collective effectiveness of Gandhi’s various resistance tactics can be attributed to the fact that Gandhi launched them based on a continued analysis of the vulnerabilities of the British imperial regime. For Gandhi, “*satyagraha* was a science and he was an experimental scientist, trying out different strategies of resistance and using particular symbolic issues in different contexts,” (Roberts 2009, 53). This pragmatic approach materialized in many of the influential campaigns of his *satyagraha*, such as the Swadeshi campaign which urged the boycott of British goods, the Non-Cooperation Movement, and the Salt March of 1930. The Swadeshi movement served to threaten the economic power Britain gained from exporting

goods in the Indian market, the Non-Cooperation Movement sought to induce self-governance by the withdrawal of Indian support in the imperial regime, and the Salt March unified masses of Indian people over their common resentment of the salt tax and occurred in plain sight of the international press. Anti-imperialism was not yet a strong theme in British national political discourse, so the British public was not a key target audience for Gandhi. Instead, he made a concerted effort to broadcast and spread his word in the anti-imperialist United States, who was also Britain’s main Western ally (Roberts 2009). Hence, in order for a movement to be rightly considered Gandhian, it should involve strategic analysis of the opponent’s vulnerabilities and the use of coercive tactics that probe these.

### *Pillar 3: Moral/Spiritual Development*

While its implementation is in large part pragmatic, *satyagraha* was a moral philosophy for Gandhi. This manifests as not only the renunciation of violent tactics, but as a holistic personal commitment to self-sacrifice, courageousness, service to others, riddance of evil, and reciprocal benefit. For Gandhi, these values were the path to realizing moral truth, which was the ultimate goal of the movement (Mehta 2010). He modeled these values himself as a *satyagrahi*, renouncing material living and devoting his life to the service of humanity through his politics. The ideal political system—and the one he strived to help India realize—was an ‘enlightened democracy,’ which would facilitate the expression of these values on a societal level. He believed that in order for a state to have moral authority, it could not be based on violence: “Democracy and nonviolence can ill go together...it is a blasphemy to say that non-violence can only be practiced by individuals and never by nations which are composed of individuals,” (Gandhi 1960).

The commitment to moral development is also salient in Gandhi’s dealings with his opponents, the British imperialists. Rather than treating them as enemies, Gandhi believed that the liberating effects of *satyagraha* should extend to them as well. *Satyagraha* was a means by which to achieve a “heightened reciprocity or moral interdependence” that allowed both parties to emancipate from truth-denying beliefs and actions (Jahanbegloo 2016, 193). He engaged in extensive negotiation and arbitration with British officials in order to live out that mission. This universal approach to morality explains Gandhi’s commitment to non-violence even towards a violent opponent. In a Gandhian movement, the opponent is not an enemy but a fellow stakeholder in the institution of moral society, and political action stems from the need to live out moral truths. As such, the goal of the movement is the betterment of humanity rather than the elimination of the opponent. In a Gandhian movement, the public expression of and commitment to these moral goals is an integral component.

#### *Pillar 4: Unification of Social Groups*

By highlighting what he believed to be the common foundation of all religious traditions (*ahimsa*), Gandhi framed *satyagraha* as an extension of all spiritual thought, “What may appear as truth to one person will often appear as untruth to another person. But that need not worry the seeker. What appears to be different truths are like apparently different leaves of the same tree,” (Gandhi 2005, 47). The Gandhian independence movement was almost unprecedented in its level of widespread support, which spanned ethnic and religious groups. Gandhi appealed to the Indian peoples’ closely held spiritual beliefs without alienating any single tradition. He believed that every religion needed epistemic humility because of the diversity of belief systems among the Indian populace. He believed that a secular state was necessary in order to allow multiple characterizations of the same essential truth to peacefully coexist and guide their respective followers toward moral living.

Gandhi selected symbols of protest that he thought would have widespread appeal. The Salt Satyagraha, or Salt March, of 1930 is a good example of such a selection. Salt was a necessity for almost all Indians, and most resented the British monopoly on salt and the subsequent high tax rate. He used this equalizing factor as leverage to amass more support for the resistance movement and encourage peripheral action, which was ultimately effective. The march began with around 80 people and grew to a force of over 50,000 of varying religious traditions, and encouraged further protest, such as illegal salt trade (Weber 2002).

In order for a movement to be Gandhian, it needs to have an ethos and effect of social unification. A Gandhian protest will act as a bridge between social groups that may not have historically converged. Using the “pillar” framework described in this section, the Farmers’ Protests will be systematically evaluated on their fulfillment of the criteria for Gandhianism.

## RESEARCH DESIGN

In collecting data on the methods, organization, and ethos of the Indian Farmers’ Protest for my analysis, I retrieved news coverage of the protests from both Indian and international sources, using the Access World News Research Collection database. I used the keywords “farmer\* protest\*” and the date range 09/24/2020 - 11/19/2021, which mark the respective beginning and end of the protest movement. I performed two rounds of searches, filtering once for articles only published by Indian sources, and once for articles published by North American sources (with the additional keyword “India”). In each search, I analyzed every 5th article that emerged, analyzing a total of 17 articles (12 from Indian sources and 5 from North American sources). I chose to vary the source location in order to obtain both detailed and “big picture” coverage, which I expected that national and international sources would respectively provide.

In analyzing the articles, I looked for mentions of specific strategies of disobedience (e.g. road blockades, hunger strikes) and rationales for their use, direct quotations about the reasons for protest (e.g. “the greater good,” pragmatic considerations), direct quotations about inspirations, principles or symbols that shape their protest (e.g. benevolence, service, opposing injustice, figureheads) and indicators of their attitude towards the opposition (e.g. cooperative, adversarial). This information provides the raw data for my pillar-by-pillar analysis of the movement.

News articles are appropriate primary sources for this research for a few reasons. For one, scholarship on newspaper data in the study of collective action shows that large protests, especially ones that disrupt public life, are more likely to be covered (Earl et al 2004). Since the Farmers’ Protests were country-wide and included events like road blockades, they are likely to have had broad coverage. Since violence is also more likely to be covered, I can be confident that instances of protests turning violent will be addressed in the news, which is important for my analysis of the “non-violence” pillar. A potential weakness of relying on news articles is that they are unlikely to illuminate the internal philosophical motivations of the organizers, which might limit the understanding of the moral character of the movement and its approach to the opposition. However, a key feature of Gandhi’s moral dimension is not only the personal, but the public projections of these motivations. Since journalists value statements from key persons when covering an event, evidence of the movement’s moral character will emerge through quotations and references to public statements. My reliance on news coverage poses a potential limitation given the increasing censorship of news media in India; it is likely that some facts and perspectives were omitted from my analysis as a result. However, the available coverage provides a sufficient basis for an overall analysis of the movement.

Contemporary India is an interesting case for the study of Gandhian legacies because of the Gandhian influence presumably woven into the general consciousness. This research might suggest whether contextual factors, such as regime type, that have changed since Gandhi’s time have an effect on the applicability of the original version of *satyagraha*. Additionally, findings from this research may be generalizable to collective action movements in other states experiencing democratic erosion, as India’s score on the EIU democracy index took a fall in 2020 (Biswas 2021).

## ANALYSIS

### *Pillar 1: Nonviolence (ahimsa)*

News coverage of the protests repeatedly pointed out that they mostly engaged nonviolent tactics. Their methods of protest included mass blockades of major roads and railroads (“Rail Roko Highlights” 2021), shadowing members of Modi’s

government (Schmall, 2021), and camping out for months at city borders (“India protest: Farmers breach Delhi’s Red Fort in huge tractor rally” 2021). Some protests did result in the injury or death of farmers and members of the opposition alike. In one example, a nonviolent demonstration turned into a violent clash in Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh, in October 2021. Four protesting farmers were killed after a car belonging to Junior Home Minister Ajay Mishra ran them over (“A farmer protest in India turns deadly, leaving 9 dead and a town on edge” 2021).

Other protesters reportedly beat and killed some of the occupants and the driver of the car, all of whom were members of the ruling BJP party. The protestors allege that the son of Junior Home Minister Ajay Mishra was also in the car, but Mishra denies this. A journalist was also later found dead at the site, but no further information about his death has been published. Speaking about this event, national spokesperson for the Farmers’ protests Rakesh Tikait called the protesters’ violence only a “reaction to the action” (Bhardwaj 2021). Protesters subsequently drew media attention to the violence they faced in the incident by posting images and stories about their deceased loved ones on social media (Schmall, Kumar, and Mashal 2021). In addition, the storming of the historic Red Fort in Delhi in January 2021 was described as one of the only other instances of violence associated with the yearlong peaceful protest (“Red Fort violence: Delhi police detain 200 after farmer protests” 2021). What was intended to be a peaceful breach of the Fort on foot and by tractor developed into a violent outbreak when some protestors diverged from the agreed routes, wielding swords against the police and breaking barricades. The event left one protester dead and 200-300 police officers injured. After the incident, the Samyukta Kisan Morcha (SKM), the umbrella group of protesting farmers, claimed in a statement released later that they “condemn and regret the undesirable and unacceptable events and dissociate ourselves from those indulging in such acts” (“Red Fort violence: Delhi police detain 200 after farmer protests” 2021).

Although the protests were nonviolent for the most part, these instances of violence and their treatment by movement leaders warrants attention in the present discussion. The SKM made clear in their statement regarding the Red Fort protest that they condemn the violence that transpired. This, and the nonviolent nature of the vast majority of the other campaigns, suggests that the ethos of *ahimsa* influences the movement in a significant way. However, Rakesh Tikait’s comment that the killing of the car occupants in the Lucknow clash was a justified “reaction” suggests an obvious diversion from Gandhian philosophy. Although Gandhi wasn’t blind to the potential for violent outburst, integral to his conception of *ahimsa* was the belief that violence could never justify violence.

### *Pillar 2: Strategic Planning and Coercion*

An analysis of the reported methods of the Farmers’ Protests suggests that they consistently engaged tactics that

were strategically planned and coercive. Although the Modi government has a stronghold of support throughout the nation and has increasingly cracked down on dissent, the farmers identified vulnerabilities and used tactics that would probe these. A key example of this planning manifested in the protesters’ decision to stage demonstrations in Uttar Pradesh prior to an important election in the state—a state that also happens to be considered the bellwether for the national vote. Poll results for the election that was to happen early in 2022 showed that the BJP’s lead in Uttar Pradesh had actually weakened, and analysts have speculated that the Farmers’ Protests were instrumental in causing this (Schmall, Singh, and Yasir 2021). This comes after the BJP had months earlier suffered an electoral loss in West Bengal, which it had considered winnable, most likely due to the Modi government’s poor response to the second wave of COVID-19 and a struggling economy. Due to the increased unpopularity of the BJP government after years of landslide victories, Modi and his party were left vulnerable to a well-organized protest, which commentators have claimed is what ultimately prompted their concession to the farmers, well in time for the 2022 election in Uttar Pradesh.

In addition to the location and timing of their protests, their campaigns themselves involved the strategic use of symbolism and framing. For example, in October 2021, the farmers embarked upon an 18-day march from Champaran to Varanasi in a reenactment of Gandhi’s Champaran Satyagraha march of 1917, in which he led farmers in protest against the British imperial government’s exploitation of Indian Farmers (Jafri 2021). The Champaran March of 1917 was Gandhi’s first Satyagraha movement in India and is hence considered an important historical event in Indian independence. The farmers likened their treatment under Modi to British colonial exploitation, and hence chose to align their movement with Gandhian *satyagraha*. When asked about the decision, foot march leader Akshay Kumar stated:

*Gandhiji came to Motihari when he got to know that Indian farmers were being exploited by the British government. The Britishers also gave a free hand to a British company to misappropriate the farmers’ hard-earned money. This is what is happening under the current regime to give benefits to big corporate companies. Therefore, we chose Chandrabhiya to begin our protest. (Jafri 2021)*

In addition to the March in Champaran, there were other examples of the farmers aligning with Gandhian ethos in the framing of their movement. Social activist Medhna Patkar, who played an active role in the protests, gave a speech on the 73rd anniversary of Gandhi’s death in which she stated that the farmers have chosen to embody *satyagraha* and nonviolence out of a keen awareness that using violence would only result in their annihilation by the opponent. She stated, “The protesters are not foolish that if they pick up stones, they (security forces) will bring out the guns,” (“Adopting

Satyagraha, farmers' protest should go on: Patkar" 2021). Their largely nonviolent ethos seems to at least in part arise from the legacy of awareness that masses of people peacefully protesting can be effective in dealing with a powerful enemy. In their nods to Gandhi, the protesters are strategically drawing upon one of the few instances in recent Indian history when its people came together behind a common cause. Like Gandhi did, the protesters sought not only domestic but also international media attention, which allowed them to organize the biggest protest in history, with over 250 million participants. In garnering widespread support, farmers made sure to highlight the violence of the opposition and the exploitation of the ordinary but integral Indian farmer (Schmall, Kumar, and Mashal 2021).

In choosing to focus demonstrations in Uttar Pradesh, frame their movement in terms of Gandhian *satyagraha*, disrupt public daily life transportation blockades, draw widespread attention to the violence and injustice they faced, the farmers displayed strategic planning and coercive strategies reminiscent of Gandhi.

### *Pillar 3: Moral/Spiritual Development*

Coverage of the statements of key spokespeople for the movement about their goals did not reveal a significant focus on the moral development of either party. While the protesters highlighted the injustice and exploitation that they were being subjected to, their arguments and goals were framed in pragmatic terms. For example, one of the slogans protesting farmers most often used was "No Farmer, No Food." Additionally, official statements by spokespeople addressing their opponent do not seem to reflect an ethos of reciprocal benefit or mutual betterment. For instance, national spokesperson for the movement Rakesh Tikait was once quoted saying, "Everyone should join us. The next target will be media houses, if you want to be saved then join us, else you'll also suffer" (ANI 2021). Rather than framing reform as a gateway to the universal betterment, Tikait uses threat in order to garner support for their cause.

The lack of a rhetoric of moral development or the emphasis on Gandhian values such as reciprocity marks a stark deviation from *satyagraha* as practiced by Gandhi. For Gandhi, political actions of *satyagraha* were means by which to achieve *satyagraha* on a spiritual dimension for all people. Perhaps due to the lack of a salient leader or *satyagrahi* who models and speaks to the values of the movement, the protests do not seem to embody any specific moral or spiritual goals.

### *Pillar 4: Unification of Social Groups*

That the Farmers' Protests were able to garner over 250 million domestic participants and attention from international media and figures (such as Greta Thunberg and American pop star Rihanna) is a testament to their concerted effort to create a widespread movement with universal appeal. Left-leaning unions, religious organizations and caste-based social

groups called *khaps* are some examples of the variety of social and political groups that were on the frontlines of sit-ins and marches (Moudgil 2021). In speaking on the need for mass organization, protest leader Akshay Kumar stated, "The purpose of this march is to identify issues of peasants of every district. We seek to understand the plight of farmers and organise them under one banner," (Jafri 2021). This logic also prompted the creation of the Samyukta Kisan Morcha (SKM) in November 2020, the umbrella body of farmers unions protesting the new laws. In addressing negative perceptions about the extent of religious inclusivity within the protests, Rajinder Singh Deepsinghwal, vice-president of one of the farmers unions, stated, "This is a farmers' movement and some people have been trying to make it a religious movement," (Anshuman 2021).

While the majority of protesters were North Indian Sikh farmers, movement leaders positioned the movement to represent the interests of all Indian farmers. They highlighted commonality by focusing on what they all stood to gain or lose depending on the development of the movement. In this way, the Farmers' Protests reflected the same effort that did the Indian independence movement to unify highly divided social groups before a common cause.

## **CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION**

A pillar-by-pillar analysis of the alignment of the Indian Farmers' Protests with the Gandhian Approach reveals that there are significant parallels between the two movements. Beyond their alignment with the pillars of non-violence, strategic planning and coercion, and the unification of social groups, the Farmers' Protests made deliberate nods to the Gandhian independence movement, such as by replicating Satyagraha Marches, commemorating the anniversary of Gandhi's death, and emphasizing the relevance of his resistance movement to their cause. However, the lack of evidence of a moral/spiritual dimension in their ethos prevents a justified classification of the movement as "Gandhian." The analysis seems to suggest that their references to Gandhi and Gandhian symbolism were strategic means to meet their practical goals, rather than an attempt to embody *satyagraha* in the original sense. It is possible that the contextual changes in India since the time of Gandhi have made it more difficult to find and use a common framework of morality. Without the existence of a shared "opponent," such as the colonial British government, there may not have been broad enough agreement about moral "good" and "bad." It seems that in the place of a shared understanding of morality, movement leaders used a shared appreciation of Gandhi and his legacy in Indian politics as a unifying force for mobilization.

This research points to the endurance and applicability of the more pragmatic elements of Gandhian methods of civil disobedience, while also highlighting the moral and spiritual quality that was particular to Gandhi's anti-colonial movement.



While the Farmers’ Protests may not be considered “Gandhian” from a theoretical standpoint, their symbolic use of Gandhi and *satyagraha* suggests an alternative lens through which one might evaluate the endurance of Gandhian influence in contemporary civil disobedience movements. ■

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