

Itineraries of Insurgency in Rural India

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Sara Abraham speaks to veteran Odia activist and author Ranjana Padhi

Ranjana Padhi has been active with various autonomous groups since the mid-eighties, including Saheli, Workers' Solidarity, and Kashipur Solidarity. She has also organized around issues of state repression; democratic rights and civil liberties; workers' rights; sexuality; slum demolitions; forcible evictions caused by corporate land acquisition; and communal violence.

She is also a writer and researcher. In 2012, she published [Those Who Did Not Die: Impact of the Agrarian Crisis on Women in Punjab](#), which told the stories of families and women relatives of those peasants who committed suicide in Punjab during the extended agrarian crisis. The fieldwork on which the book was based was extraordinarily novel for the depth of attention it gave to people's daily lives. Last year, she also published (with Nigamananda Sadangi) [Resisting Dispossession: The Odisha Story](#), a fine-textured account of various anti-dispossession movements in her native Odisha.

Sara Abraham spoke to Ranjana Padhi to get her reflections on her experiences from a decade ago to the current moment.

How would you connect peasant women's lives in Punjab with the farmers' movement we have just seen on the outskirts of Delhi? Is there a difference from the time you did fieldwork for your book?

Yes, much has changed, especially the scale of women's participation today. Almost all the 32 unions of Samyukta Kisan Morcha (SKM) mobilized women for the struggle to repeal the three farm laws. When Punjabi farmers' productive assets are under threat – or there is a threat by corporate capital – they act as a community. The peasantry is a community, it is not individual labourers or male farmers alone. Participation in these rallies has surely changed the chemistry and I have [written](#) about what I observed when I visited the protest site.

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But I also have mixed feelings about it. Issues like women's reproductive roles, son preference, domestic violence, household labour, dowry, and the sexual division of labour have yet to become rallying points. Maybe the time is now. Maybe the ground has been created for rural movements in Punjab to start challenging patriarchy within the family and the community.

During my field work and long stays in Punjab, I came across many elderly women who were members of the Punjab Istri Sabha. This organization was the women's wing of the Communist Party of India and was a huge mass organization spread across many districts. It was active even up to the years of the Khalistani militant insurgency, when they demanded compensation for women survivors whose families had been targeted by the militants. But the organization's grip on various issues — like the unfolding agrarian crisis, women's retreat back into the house after the Green Revolution, and women's suffering in the aftermath of a male member's suicide — was fragile. Patriarchy

entrenches itself at times of economic crisis or social breakdowns. Many of the women I spoke to were living these changed realities, which the Punjab Istri Sabha did not address. At that time, only the Bhartaiya Kisan Union (BKU) (Ekta Ugrahan) had begun working with young women to address issues of dowry, sex-determination tests and son preference, as well as drug addiction among the youth.

The situation has become grimmer now. The agrarian crisis has deepened, as has the plight of women. The cash economy is taking a toll on the lives of the landless and marginal peasants. Today, microfinance firms are proliferating. [Women are taking multiple loans](#), paying extremely high interest, and becoming vulnerable to loan recovery sharks. Most loans are for household expenses. There are almost 12.88 lakh women borrowers today. Women are also falling prey to gold loans by banks and, more often than not, are unable to pay. Banks and corporations are living off the poor, living off the poorest of women. It is a shame. It was 2005 when women's right to agricultural land was granted as an act but it came too late.

Suicides, including among indebted women, have also increased since I did my field research. There are around 16,000 suicides a year, of which around 7,000 are laborers. So, you can imagine what 7,000 agricultural labor families are suffering. We need to delve into empirical realities to know what's happening to families and households. And also ask: why should the burden of patriarchy make men give up? Why not fight the system along with its social and cultural ethos

Basically, we are also seeing the transition of agricultural society into a cash economy. And it is the landless who bear the brunt of this transition. Companies and micro credit programs target women as borrowers simply because they run the house. It is also happening in the villages of Odisha, where I'm from, and among the fisherfolk in Chilika areas. They are trapped in debt and work hard to pay off interest all the time. Seeing all these changes from the standpoint of women and the landless gives a complete picture as nothing else can.

A positive change that has come in recent years is women survivors in the Malwa region of south Punjab drawing attention to agrarian distress. In May 2019, an anaganwadi [rural childcare centre] worker, Veerpal Kaur, contested Punjab's Lok Sabha elections from the Bhatinda constituency. She won more than 4000 votes simply by campaigning for the rights of women affected by farmer suicides in their families. There are also campaigns to stop the harassment of loan companies and waive off loans, especially by the Punjab Kisan Union and BKU (Ekta Krantikari).

How did the leadership of the farmers' movement address the experience of women?

As you know, the peasant leadership was demanding the repeal of the three farm laws, passed by the Modi government to aid corporate houses. The mobilization of huge numbers naturally also led to discussions about other issues people, including women, faced in daily life. Some women union leaders like Harvinder Singh Bindu and Paramjeet Kaur spoke about land rights for women, recognition of women's labour, and so on, from the stages at the farmers' encampments. But at the same time, I had misgivings when leaders emphasized that fighting the *Essential Commodities Act* amendment is important for women because they have to buy rations to run the kitchen. Food is grown, processed, stored, rationed and also cooked. Let us not reinforce the sexual division of labour and entrench stereotypes of women. Yes, she's cooking, but everybody's eating the same food. The burden of the *Essential Commodities Act* amendment is on the entire society and not just women.

Can you now tell us a little about your earlier activist work in Delhi and how it led you to rural Punjab?

I was a student activist in Delhi in the early eighties and naturally got drawn to the autonomous

women's movement there, which was uncovering so much about the patriarchal social reality, with its institutions, customs and traditional practices. Women were on the roads in huge numbers calling out rape, wife battering and discrimination in every area of life. The critique of patriarchy left an indelible impression on this generation. The events of the times we live in shape who we become. The clearest choice for me then was the autonomous feminist collective [Saheli](#), even though I was also influenced by the democratic rights and civil liberties movement. I was also beginning to see the hand of the authoritarian state through the 1984 Sikh genocide in Delhi and the Nellie Valley massacre in Assam. What I found appealing about Saheli was its basic understanding that women's struggles have to connect with struggles of all other oppressed groups and is not an end in itself. I was knee-high in the women's movement as I internalized these basic political tenets. It informed our political practice, both as a collective and as individuals. Our strength lay in collective work and forming alliances.

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And what was unique about Delhi was the long-lasting issue-based coalitions and alliances made by small groups and mass organizations. I worked for more than 20 years in Saheli. In 1996, it became part of the Delhi Janwadi Adhikar Manch (DJAM), which was a coalition of around 30 to 40 left trade unions, students' groups, democratic rights groups and other progressive organizations. DJAM was formed immediately after the Supreme Court order of July 8, 1996, which ruled that polluting industries be relocated out of Delhi. This meant workers were simply thrown on the borders of Delhi. Some of the images still etched in my mind is the massive exodus of workers, who thronged the bus terminals and railway stations. It was like a scene from partition. Some workers died of shock and heart attack also. No mainstream media channel covered this. So that was a very grim reality. There were also massive slum demolition drives ordered by the courts. DJAM campaigned through hundreds and thousands of leaflets and street meetings in public places, *bastis* and industrial areas. We questioned who Delhi belonged to and whether workers were responsible for pollution, as the court order seemed to imply. My exposure to industrial areas and slum settlements in Delhi came through these campaigns. I also saw the shattering of working-class lives and households, lives that were paying the heaviest price for the economic restructuring of the city.

Women were especially hard hit as they tried to hold the family together, often resorting to wage labour at exploitative rates. Increasing indebtedness also trapped hundreds of families. On March 8, 1998, DJAM mobilized women to speak to the press. Our findings based on a survey was presented as a report, titled [*Things Fall Apart: Voices of Women Affected by Factory Closures and Slum Demolitions*](#).

At the time, we were also constantly getting news of farmers' suicides, especially in the Vidarbha region. My involvement with working class households in Delhi filled me with restlessness and a desire to inquire more. We only got to read about farmer suicides but not how the family runs, what happens to the loan, what happens to the children, and so forth. A critique of the Green Revolution was already in my mind – however unclear then. But peasant suicides in Punjab filled me with searching doubts about peasant households, their survival and coping mechanisms. Going to Punjab was easy. The peasant unions frequently came to Delhi for protests. They were very happy to collaborate.

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In rural Punjab, I spoke to women about domestic violence, their food intake, access to loans, youth addiction, children's school fees, and what their bodies have also borne. I was interested in how the

household was running because the radical and parliamentary left, despite both having very large women's wings, did not raise the question of the family. I found the burden of patriarchy was also borne by male farmers, who struggled to meet what was expected of them as the main breadwinner. But of course, women faced the brunt of patriarchy. Whatever protection a marriage is supposed to give them so thin and very fragile. And even after their husband's death, the same women would still be performing the duties of the daughter-in-law, caring for the father-in-law, and all that. Who questions these institutions that have become *fait accompli* for women?

In the mid 2000s, I formally left Saheli after more than twenty years in the organization. I realized it was becoming disempowering for me to continue in an urban-based women's collective. I was loyally playing the role of attending meetings and reporting to the collective. But I was feeling lost under the weight of the unfolding neoliberal reforms. I was scared of becoming a feminist expert or, worse, smug and cynical. I felt I had to go back to listen to women and how they are impacted. To answer your question, all these events and exposure led me to rural Punjab.

You are now based in the eastern state of Odisha. What was the reaction there to the farmers' movement?

The SKM's struggle to repeal the farm acts have been like an adrenaline shot for peasant unions here. Suddenly the question of agriculture and farmers is in the mainstream. MSP [Minimum Support Price] is a common issue across India, but it works differently in each place. In Odisha, the struggle of the peasantry is around issues of sharecropping. Even if Odisha does not have the litany of woes of states like Punjab, the commercialization of agriculture here is resulting in higher cost inputs and less output. In Western Odisha, we have also seen farmer suicides, especially among sharecroppers. Also, peasant unions from Odisha went and stayed in Singhu and Tikri [sites of the farmers' encampment]. But the financial condition of most farmers' unions here is abysmally bad, so many can't afford to travel and stay in Delhi. Nevertheless, many here have been inspired by the SKM. There is now even a unit of the SKM called Odisha-SKM. The group is organizing and supporting betel cultivators in Dinkia Chaaridesh against corporate land grabbing.

In your recent book, *Resisting Dispossession: the Odisha Story*, you document many dispossession struggles in Odisha over the years. Many of these struggles pit farmers against corporate land-grabbers. Would you see these struggles as part of the agrarian crisis?

The connections are so clear. Corporate capital is preying on agriculture, pushing in destructive industries, targeting labour laws and wiping out subsistence economies. The nature of capitalism is changing fast. The operations of extractive capitalism are targeting mineral-rich states. The people they are displacing and dispossessing for land and minerals are engaged in subsistence production. For instance, Tata brought a steel plant to Odisha. People in that area grow and sell kewda flowers that go to Uttar Pradesh and to the Gulf. They have been doing this for generations, but now they have been displaced. Similarly, people resisting the POSCO [Korean steel multinational] and Jindal Steel Works in Odisha make a living from betel cultivation and fishing.

These small producers are the ones today standing up against big corporations. It's ordinary subsistence producers, forest dwellers and fisherfolk up against a militarized state-corporate apparatus. The huge resources of the Indian state that goes into curbing left wing extremism is directed at these subsistence producers and forest dwellers, as we have seen in Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh as well. These people are making history through victories big and small, by daring to take on the state-capital nexus. These are life and death struggles for industrial workers, peasantry, forest dwellers and fisherfolk.

In our book, we focus on, for instance, the struggle to keep POSCO out of Odisha. The villagers applied to the district administration, state administration, and the NGT [National Green Tribunal] for relief. They challenged the forest laws when it was discovered that almost 3000 acres of the 4,000 acres were forest land. They got gram sabha [village council] resolutions passed. The violence by the state was massive and relentless. When we could go to the village, it was like an orthopedic ward – so many fractures, ruptures, torn ligaments. That struggle stalled the work and kept POSCO waiting for many years, which certainly depleted its coffers. The way the anti-POSCO struggle carried on for years made history.

I am not so sure about Jindal Steel's entry and the possibility of success. They're moving very fast with the aid of a militarized state apparatus. Ruthless capitalist advance brings with it repression, aggression and the destruction of a fragile coastline and ecosystem. I have documented how people are fighting Jindal Steel [once more](#) today.

We have seen that the Punjabi diaspora knows how to connect with the Punjabi farmers' movement. They are involved at various levels of support and solidarity. What can the diaspora population do in relation to struggles like those in Odisha. Are there coalitions being built across the world on its issues?

If there are people in the diaspora who would connect here, that would really help. But we need to move beyond timebound issue-based campaigns, and instead create a community of people that question where the planet is headed.

This is very important. The global neoliberal economy and right-wing ascendancy is making our struggles more challenging. There is a deepening of caste, class, and misogyny. We need a closer understanding of capitalism and how it works on the ground for minorities, for Dalits, for women, for workers, for the LGBT community.

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We also need to contest the consent generated for the prevailing development paradigm by international agencies, NGOs, corporatized academia, and so forth. So, we need to sharpen the ideological questions and reject the prevailing development model. If that comes from the diaspora, that could be really good.

But for global coalitions to be built, we need to affirm the agency of rural actors in the global South. We need to recognize that women's labour is a life-giving activity; farmers are the food producers and Adivasis have protected the mountains, forests and the commons. All this is not understood enough by the Left. Ultimately though, it is not necessary to sharpen intellectual work first. That will happen as we engage in political praxis.

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P.S.

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