Space as a Social Construct: Examining Spatial Dynamics in the Farmers' Protest Movement (2020-2021)

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Abstract

The present paper examines the concept of space as a dynamic field that facilitates interaction and movement. It challenges the notion of space as merely a passive backdrop against which reality unfolds. The study further explores the dynamism of space and its production as a result of the interplay of social, political, and historical processes through examining farmer's protest movement 2020-21. Rooted in the philosophical reflections of theorists like Henri Lefebvre and Michel Foucault, the paper lays emphasis on the social production of space as a continuous process shaped by social relations and power dynamics. Focusing on the farmers' protest movement 2020-21, the paper examines how spatiality can be employed to organize resistance, sustain the protest, and exert socio-political pressure on the government. It focuses on the various ways through which farmers' community strategically transformed ordinary space into functional spheres of voicing dissent and debate. The demonstrators established a new spatial reality that made it easier for daily activities to continue and for their political demands to be heard. To understand the strategic use of space in the farmers' protest movement, the paper analyzes how the production and continual re-appropriation of space within the protest sites played a crucial role in organizing resistance, influencing government reaction, and raising awareness among the masses. Therefore, this paper underlines the significance of spatiality in understanding and shaping socio-political movements.

Keywords: space, social production, farmers' protest movement 2020-21, social relations

Introduction:

"Humans as social beings are said to produce their own life, their own consciousness, their own world" (Lefebvre 68).

The world of critical thought, since the beginning of time, predominately accorded temporality and historicism precedence over spatiality and geography. The temporal master narrative, as described by Edward Soja (137) dominated the critical hermeneutics in a historical but not comparably geographical imagination. Space found little to no relevance in the sociological wirings of the past and the present. It was, as Foucault discoursed, treated as "the dead, the fixed, the undialectical, and the immobile. Time on the contrary was richness, fecundity, life, dialectic" (Soja 136). It was only in the late 19th and 20th centuries that witnessed the acknowledgment of space as a significant facet of human society. In the field of geography thinkers like Carl Ritter and Alexander von Humboldt formulated modern geographical analysis, underscoring the relationship between human societies and their environments. Meanwhile, in sociology, scholars like Emile Durkheim and Georg Simmel explored the diverse ways in which spatial models shaped human interaction, both socially and politically. In critical theory, theorists like Michel Foucault, Henri Lefebvre, and Edward Soja, in the latter half of the 20th century, made sincere attempts to "rebalance the prioritization of time over space" (Soja 136), in order to challenge the dominant temporal discourse. Although, there are significant attempts being made to explore spatiality in shaping social relations and in a way being shaped by the same, space and geography have still not displaced history at the heart of contemporary theory and criticism (137). Nevertheless, there are critical theories taking shape to witness diverse ways of seeing time and space together constitute social hermeneutics.

One such theory that has revolutionized the conception and reception of space is Lefebvre's concept of social space. This idea, situated in his 1974 book *La Production de l'espace*, understood space as a social construct, manipulated by social relations and further manipulating social realities. According to this theory, space is a product and a method of production rather than an object or a container. Therefore, it is impossible to describe social space as an object among other objects or as a product among other products; rather,

it is the entirety of things produced and includes the interactions between them in their simultaneity and coexistence. Lefebvre argued that "every society—and, therefore, every mode of production—produces a certain space, its own space" (31). Therefore, a locality, a community, a city or a state cannot be understood as a simple collection of people and things placed in space—they all have their own spatial practice, creating their own space.

This paper amplifies a similar sentiment of treating space as an interactive, active entity, which is not to be seen as a passive backdrop against which things are placed, rather a dynamic field actively produced and constructed through the interplay of social, political and ideological processes. Space, as the paper explores, being a socially constructed sphere has an indispensable role to play in creating and constructing human experience. In a way, the discussion doesn't end at the production of space for it is not a one-time event but an ongoing process that continually informs and is informed by human relations and power dynamics. The present study attempts to understand the use of space in creating socio-political impact within a social movement, specifically examining the dynamics of the farmers' protest. The discussion within the paper is aimed at understanding how spatiality is used as a means to organize resistance and affect the government as well as the masses. In order to understand the importance of space in the farmers' protest movement, it is imperative to first comprehend the movement in its entirety and the innate social relations that constitute the same.

The three farm laws, as stated by the government, "were introduced into the Lok Sabha with the intent to remove leakages, corruption, and middlemen in agricultural procurement and for the welfare of the millions of peasants of the country" (What Were The Three Farm Laws). The first was 'The Farmers' Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Bill, 2020. It promised farmers complete freedom to sell their produce anywhere to anyone. 'The Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement of Price Assurance and Farm Services Bill, 2020' was the second bill that aimed at helping the farmers with small and marginal landholdings, to minimise the risk of market unpredictability, and make modern technology more accessible to improve farming. The third bill was 'The Essential Commodities (Amendment) Bill 2020' that enabled to regulate and ease the private sector's trade and other operations concerns.

The 2020-21 farmers' movement, organized as a reaction against these farm laws, aimed to resist imperialist intervention in the production and distribution systems of the agrarian sector. The protest started with creating adequate awareness among farmer unions urging them to think reasonably about the outcomes of the laws on their produce, freedom of what to produce, the income generated from the produce and their property rights. According to Singh, "the fear of losing the minimum support price (MSP) and the freedom to cultivate crops also played an important role in the unions' mobilization of peasants against these laws"(10). For the first time in the twenty-first century, farmers mobilized in significant numbers to oppose the imperialist goal across India. The movement was no longer organized at a regional scale rather it spread across national as well as international boundaries, for this time the fight was against the global capital attacking through the local.

In August 2020, regional protests took place primarily in various regions of Punjab after the farm laws were made official. Unions from other states, as well as national and international pro-people groups and the Punjabi diaspora, joined the demonstration (Thandi, 223). With the passage of time, the movement gained momentum leading to its first significant campaign, "Rail roko" on 24 September 2020. In the aftermath of the campaign, train services to and from Punjab were affected. On the subsequent day of September 25th 2020, farm unions declared a nation-wide shutting down 'Bharat Bandh' to voice their dissent against these laws. It is interesting to understand the use of railways as the starting point of the movement. To understand the spatial significance attached to the railways as a site of protest, it is important to explore the concept of social space.

Social space, as Levefbre puts it, "is the outcome of a sequence and set of operations, and thus cannot be - reduced to the rank of a simple object" (73). Furthering his argument, he contests that unlike nature which creates unique creations, social relations produce space. The term 'production' further creates scope for re-production. Thus, social space is not a static social construct; rather it is continuously generated and reproduced through a variety of social, economic, cultural, and ideological processes. The forces of production (such as labor organization and technical inventions) and the relations of production (such as power dynamics and class structures) have an impact on its production and reproduction. In the light of these statements it is interesting to analyze the various sites of protests, specific to the movement in question.

The railways can be interpreted as critical arteries of economic activity, facilitating the movement of goods and people. It, inevitably, becomes crucial for trade and commercial endeavours. Lefevre's idea of representation of space when applied to railways can be understood in terms of looking at railways as a symbol of progression, connectivity, modernity and industrialization. However, when it becomes a site for protest, from representation of space it transforms into representational space where the symbolic meanings are challenged and reinterpreted by different social groups. In the present case, for example, farmers re-produced railways (space) not as conventional symbols of progress but as conduits of hegemonic capitalism, marginalization, urging for a re-distribution of power. Railways, becoming a representational space, were strategically re-appropriated through occupation of railway tracks, stations, or infrastructure to disrupt the networks of commerce. Therefore, the transformation of railways into a site of protest was marked by re-interpretation of the space as a site for political dissent and dialogue.

Moreover, the imposition of the farm laws was deceitful as their implementation was brought about in an authoritarian fashion, without democratic discussion and dialogue with state governments and the famers' community. This went against the nation's federal framework (Singh 161). To question the undemocratic process of implementing the farm laws, farmers strategically chose railways as a significant site for their protests. Since railways were

established by imperialist powers during India's colonial history, they have a long and tense historical relationship with colonization. Farmers, symbolically faced the heritage of colonial rule and denounced the government's present authoritarian tactics by focusing on railways. Originally built to further the objectives of the colonists, the railways became a powerful symbol of resistance. This emphasizes the farmers' larger fight against repressive government, as well as their defense of democratic rights and federal ideals. By targeting railways, farmers did not only protest the current authoritarian actions of the government but also symbolically confronted the legacy of imperial dominance. "This tactic was popularized by the actions of BKU (Ekta-Ugrahan) in Punjab, where they protested against large corporate entities such as Reliance petrol pumps, shopping centers, Adani silos, and toll plazas"(Paramjit Singh 11). Additionally, the intention behind occupation of toll booths as part of the protest, much like the railways, reveals the community's aspiration to voice against capitalist interventions. Toll booths are befitting representations of privatization and the commercialization of public space and infrastructure, underscoring the government's prioritization of capitalist profit over public welfare. Therefore, toll booths as protest sites underline the protestor's resistance to policies and laws that favour the private, corporate systems at the expense of the common people. This occupation serves as evidence of their dissatisfaction with the way capitalist practices are increasingly invading public resources and crucial services. Toll booths represent the conversion of public space into profit-making machines for private players by generating revenue from regular people for the use of infrastructure that was usually constructed with public funds. This echoes the farmers' broader concerns over the farm regulations, which they believed will also result in major firms abusing farmers and the agricultural industry. This act of resistance calls for a re-evaluation of how public resources are managed and demands greater accountability and fairness in policies that affect the livelihoods of ordinary citizens. The symbolic occupation of toll booths thus aligns with the farmers' fight against capitalist dominance and authoritarian governance. The protestors' goals in occupying these spaces were to not only disrupt the physical operations of toll collection but also to challenge the underlying economic policies and ideologies that prioritize privatization and corporatization.

Although, the "rail roko" campaign brought the protest in the sphere of visibility for the entire nation, it failed to garner support of their respective state governments. This led farmers to extend the struggle as they decided to pressurize the central government by conducting a peaceful march to Delhi. According to Singh, farmers peacefully blocked vital roads, railway links, and borders leading to Delhi, the capital city of India, as part of the protest tactic used by the union leadership. Delhi's economic circuits were substantially affected by this (11). In and around the areas of Delhi, the protestors sealed borders, including the Kundli Border, Dhansa border, Jharoda Kalan border, Tikri border, Singhu border, Kalindi Kunj border, Chilla border, Bahadurgarh border and Faridabad border, etc. On 25th November, the police received the protestors of the Dilli Chalo [transl. "let us go to Delhi"] campaign with water cannons, dug up roads and layers of barricades and sand barriers to disrupt their movement.

This furthers the argument of representational space, where protestors as well as police officials bring about physical alternations and re-appropriation of space to serve and curb the needs of the protestors respectively. Barricades, tents, banners, and other makeshift structures were erected on bordering regions of Delhi. Protestors consciously orchestrated their protest in historically significant regions of Delhi, particularly Jantar Mantar, the parliament and the Red Fort. The invocation of Lefebvre becomes significant here, for he understands the production of space as a process deeply entrenched in historical, temporal, cultural and political processes. The representation of space thus comes about with its long standing history, which is why a historically rich area can be a better choice for protest to challenge meta-narratives and dominant power dynamics. It is undeniable that space as a construct is deeply rooted in history and other socio-political contexts, which is why spaces with rich historical significance can serve as powerful sites for protests to probe into dominant power systems. Protesters strategically choose such areas to underscore their resistance against established authorities and to evoke the historical struggles for justice and equality that these spaces symbolize. The demonstrators wanted to use Jantar Mantar's symbolic significance to spread their message. The demonstration positioned in the center of political power in Delhi, guaranteed increased exposure and media attention. This calculated move emphasizes the demonstrators' intention to challenge the laws they believe to be unfair by going straight to the capital and interacting with the administration. Furthermore, this serves to remind the public and the authorities of the irrevocable ideals of democracy and the freedom to dissent by holding the demonstration at a historically significant location. By equating the current conflict with earlier movements that influenced the country's democratic ethos, it places the fight against tyranny in a larger historical framework.

However, the centre demanded the protestors to re-locate the site of their protest in Burari, which is relatively a less historically significant area, but the protestors were adamant to conduct the peaceful protest at Jantar Mantar in central Delhi. It is possible to interpret that the government's call to move the protest to Burari was an attempt to marginalize the demonstration and lessen its significance and visibility. The demonstrators wanted to claim their right to occupy prominent, iconic locations in order to guarantee that their voices are heard and that their demands be taken seriously by insisting on Jantar Mantar. This emphasis also serves to support the notion that public areas—particularly those with historical significance—belong to the people and need to be open to democratic dissenting expressions. The demonstrators insisted on having their nonviolent protest at Jantar Mantar because it has a long history of serving as a hub for social movements and public dissent, representing a tradition of action and resistance.

It is also intriguing to map out the reasons as to why border areas, road junctions or roundabouts emerged as the most suitable choices for protest locations. To substantiate the argument, it is imperative to invite Foucault and his concept of heterotopias. Defining heterotopias, Foucault comments that,

These are real places—places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society—which are something like counter-sites. All the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality.(3)

In the same vein, borders, roundabouts or road junctions can be understood as heterotopias or as counter sites which are outside of all places but their location can still be traced. A border can be seen as a liminal space that fails to encompass a sense of finality, or a fixed attribution unlike other places which are defined by historical fixities. It thus, becomes a heterotopia of deviation, as it deviates from the established norm of finality or fixed meaning. Moreover, "heterotopias always presuppose a system of opening and closing that both isolates them and makes them penetrable" (7). Nothing is both more incredibly permeable and wildly secluded than boundaries. Borders, as heterotopic spaces, embody this duality. In tangible terms, they demarcate and separate territories and population, creating a sense of closure and symbolising control and sovereignty. This closure is evident in the presence of border fences, walls, and checkpoints, which seek to control and restrict movement. Meanwhile, they are also permeable and porous to an extent that they facilitate flow of commerce, movement of goods, ideas and people. Conclusively, borders can be translated as heterotopic space, which is why they serve as excellent locations for protests.

Extending the argument, the occupation of border spaces carries significant symbolic implications. Border areas, inherently porous, are perceived as vulnerable points through which external forces can infiltrate local territories. Consequently, sealing borders can be understood as an effort to stop this permeability and curb possible incursions or invasions. When used in relation to protests, border blockades can be seen as an expression of opposition to the government's attempts to impose capitalist values on local communities. The community's determination to keep its agricultural brotherhood from being appropriated into a more capitalist framework is symbolized by this act of border sealing. The demonstrators demonstrate their resistance to limit influences that jeopardize the integrity and values of the agricultural community by physically blocking these access points.

Moreover, the sealing of borders by farmers can be correlated with the traditional warfare technique of fortification, as both represent efforts to create impassable obstacles to protect a community or territory from external threats. According to Denman,the language of fortification can be interpreted as an act of installing impassable obstacles through the use of cumbersome, seemingly inert materials of stone, earth, concrete, and metal. Within this image, fortification is an architecture of creating clear lines between inside and outside and immobilizing enemies.(2)

In the context of the farmers' movement, blocking borders can be understood as a type of fortification, where physical obstacles are used to draw distinct boundaries between the community and outside forces. This is similar to the mediaeval fortress, where tall walls were built to control attacks and preserve territorial integrity. Wendy Brown's philosophical investigation into fortification offers valuable insights that can be applied to understand this movement. Brown deliberates on the ritual of erecting walls as a way to establish impermeable borders and declare sovereignty. She also draws attention to the contradiction inherent in these barriers, which are meant to uphold sovereign authority, but often fall short of that goal and instead blur boundaries between various domains of authority. She states that, "the aspiration of sovereignty embodied in the concept of fortification is equally elusive: one irony of late modern walling is that a structure taken to mark and enforce an inside/outside distinction—a boundary between "us" and "them" and between friend and enemy— appears as precisely the opposite" (Brown 25). Walls not only fail to secure sovereign authority; their very presence erodes distinctions between public/private, military/police, and law/ exception.

Applying this theory to the farmers' movement, the act of sealing borders can be understood as a strategic attempt to reclaim sovereignty from the government. By blocking borders, the farmers managed to symbolically and physically challenge the government's authority to impose and implement laws without their consent. In an effort to keep their fraternity from being subsumed into a more capitalist structure, they build barriers to oppose the penetrative interests of the government and capitalist forces. The inconsistencies in the paradoxical desire of the government to practice control that Brown criticizes are further brought to light by the farmers' fortification attempts. The farmers' acts expose the weakness in the government's claim to be the ultimate authority, even though it may believe it to be such.

The farmers' movement can be understood as a protest against the inequalities that are supported by government laws that put the interests of capitalists ahead of the welfare of agricultural communities. The farmers' act of fortification involves more than simply erecting physical barriers; it also involves standing up to a system that disadvantages them and curbing their rights. Similar to how historic fortifications tried to safeguard lands from invasion, it represents a resistance to external influences and emphasizes the farmers' right to protect their community from exploitative tactics.

Furthermore, Thomas Nail's idea of "kinopolitics" offers a helpful framework for comprehending how farmer communities strategically employ physical barriers to restrict movement as a kind of political action. According to Nail, "even the most dramatic forms of physical obstruction entail a politics of mobility, or 'kinopolitics,' focused on the management of circulations" (Denman 2). The farmers participated in a politics of mobility, regulating the movement of products, people, and information to make their views known and put pressure on the government, by blocking important border regions, roads, and access points to cities. These thoughful physical hindrance techniques, such as erecting barricades and roadblocks, acted as active tools of control, directing the flow of people and commodities. The farmers' complaints were emphasized by this disturbance, which compelled the public and government to take notice of their requests. Through their actions, the farmers effectively managed circulations by disrupting the normal flow of traffic and supply chains, creating a tangible impact on daily life and the economy. This

demonstrated their critical role in the broader societal and economic system. By controlling these circulations, the farmers sought to bring attention to their issues and compel the government to engage with them. Additionally, their control over these movements highlighted broader issues of freedom and rights, challenging government policies and decisions that marginalized their community. By disrupting mobility, the farmers emphasized their struggle for fair treatment, consultation in policy-making, and protection against exploitative practices.

Singh, in the essay "Imperialism and Punjab's Peasantry: Then and Now", highlighted how "each protest site surrounding Delhi became its own type of township equipped with nearly all the basic necessities of life"(11). According to Lefebvre, space is not a passive backdrop but is actively produced through social practices and relationships. This was best demonstrated by the farmers' attempts to transform ordinary highways and empty lots into lively, functional places furnished with almost all the basic living essentials. Through their collaborative acts, protestors actively created these places rather than just occupying them. In order to guarantee that everyone had access to food, makeshift kitchens were put up, medical facilities were built to address health demands, and sanitation services were arranged to maintain hygiene. In addition, entertainment and educational opportunities were offered, which promoted a sense of solidarity and community. This dynamic production of space turned the protest sites into lived, social spaces where everyday life could continue despite the ongoing struggle. The creation of a new spatial reality by the demonstrators amplifies Lefebvre's idea that space is a social construct, repeatedly shaped and reshaped by human networks and interactions.

Conclusion:

Studying spatiality within the context of the farmers' protest movement offers significant insights into the complex associations between time, space, culture and power. One can comprehend the spatial aspects of social mobilization and resistance by examining the strategic use of spaces like border areas, historically significant regions, and railroads as protest locations.

This paper highlights the complex role that spatial dynamics play in sustaining protest movements by using theoretical frameworks like Michel Foucault's concept of heterotopias and Henri Lefebvre's idea of the creation of space. This investigation highlights how crucial it is to take spatial affectivity into account when studying social movements by illuminating the complex ways in which collective agency, identity, and struggle form and are shaped by geography.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper

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