

# **India: Beaten, not broken: Meet Shiv Kumar and Nodeep Kaur, young labour activists inspired by Bhagat Singh**

Wednesday 17 March 2021, by [LALWANI Vijayta](#) (Date first published: 16 March 2021).

**Born to Dalit farm labourers, they grew up to be industrial workers. Even police torture hasn't dented their resolve to fight for workers' rights.**

In 2016, Shiv Kumar was asked what he wanted to become when he attended a career counselling session at the Industry Training Institute, Haryana, where he was learning how to make and use precision tools.

"I told them I wanted to become a baaghi," said Kumar. A rebel.

The answer sparked laughter among the university students who were interviewing him. But Kumar was serious.

"I have lived a life of struggle since the beginning," explained the 25-year old labour activist. "The exploitation is happening in the fields, in companies, and in the village because we are Dalit. There is exploitation everywhere so there is an expectation to fight."

From the training institute in Sonipat, Kumar went on to work in a factory in the industrial town of Kundli, where he founded the Mazdoor Adhikar Sangathan or Workers' Rights Association in 2018.

The sangathan mobilised factory workers in the area to demand fair, timely wages and better working conditions - activism that went unnoticed until Kumar's path intersected with the largest farmers' protest in India in three decades.

Since November, lakhs of farmers from Punjab, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand have stormed the borders of the national capital on their tractors and trolleys to protest against the Narendra Modi government's three contentious farm laws that were passed by the Parliament in September last year. Farmers fear that these laws would leave them at the mercy of private corporations and further undermine their livelihoods.

In January, barely a few hundred metres from the Delhi border village of Singhu where protesting farmers have set up camp, Kumar and his colleague Nodeep Kaur staged a demonstration outside a factory that had not paid its workers their dues. The police swooped down to arrest them in three cases, charging them with extortion, theft and attempt to murder.

While in police custody, the families of the young activists alleged they were subject to brutal physical assault as well as casteist abuse. Kumar, who has a visual disability in his right eye, sustained multiple fractures, broken toe nails and other injuries on his hands and head, according to the [medical examination report](#) submitted to the Punjab and Haryana High Court on February 23.

Kaur was granted bail on February 26. She walked out of jail that night and addressed a press conference the very next day at Singhu, asking for the release of Kumar.

On March 4, a judge gave bail to Kumar. As they waited for him to emerge from the Sonipat District jail, his friends and family thought it was best to take him to the hospital to treat his injuries. But as soon as Kumar walked out with a limp, recalled Ankit Kumar of the Chatra Ekta Manch, he started chanting slogans like 'Inquilab Zindabad' and 'Kisan Mazdoor Ekta Zindabad'.

"I do not know where he gets so much courage from," marvelled Ankit Kumar.

### **Surviving torture**

Shiv Kumar and Nodeep Kaur, both 25 years old, are children of landless Dalit agricultural labourers who grew up to be industrial workers. The young activists have come to be celebrated as symbols of [farmer-worker solidarity](#) that underpins the current movement, particularly in Punjab, where large farmers and landless farm-workers, despite their history of antagonism, stand united in their demand that the government repeal the three "black laws".

On Thursday, the two activists sat under a tent in Singhu, relaxed and smiling, betraying no signs of the physical and mental hardship they had been through, other than the occasional adjustment that Kumar made of his right leg that had been fractured in police custody.

They said they had been spontaneously drawn to the farmers' protest, because they understood the farm laws would affect the entire working-class.

On January 12, the Mazdoor Adhikar Sangathan had staged a protest outside a factory that had not paid its workers their wages. A scuffle broke out at the protest after which Kaur was arrested on the same day and taken to Karnal police station, she said. After her arrest, the police tortured her and sexually assaulted her, she alleged.

"Someone was kicking me, someone was pulling my hair," she said. "They beat me in a deserted area and in Sonipat [police station] and they just threw me in jail. I could not walk and they gave me thin blankets in the winter."

The Haryana police have not responded to the allegations.

Kumar said he was picked up by police officials four days after Kaur's arrest, even though [the police claim](#) they arrested him on January 23.

He said he was using the mobile toilet at the Singhu protest site around 3 pm on January 16 when some men covered his face with a cloth. He shouted but the men held a gun to his waist and threatened him to stay quiet. They made him walk 600 metres away from the protest site and into the industrial area, he claimed, where they made him sit in a car. Kumar did not know who they were until they took him to the Sonipat police station where they stripped him naked and assaulted him, he alleged.

"They beat me as if I was an animal," he said, alleging Haryana police unleashed gruesome methods of torture on him at least three times a day.

"They split my legs wide and kept kicking my groins," he said. "They were putting their weight on it and pressing it. I was laughing at what they were doing. But I got angry when they got a big metal rod and pressed it on my body. The rod was at least 10 kgs and two men weighing at least 100 kgs were on me."

Kumar alleged the police officials hit him on the head with their shoes, hit his nails with sticks and put his legs in boiling water.

A medical examination in Sonipat district jail confirmed Kumar's injuries. The doctors also said that Kumar showed symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder.

"They did not let me sleep for three days to mentally torture me," he said. Nor did the police let him meet his lawyer or contact his family for weeks.

He was shown pictures of three strangers and was asked to identify them, he recalled. Kumar did not know them. The police also asked him how his association was funded. "We would get Rs 10 from each worker to print pamphlets," he explained. "We just have two rooms where workers come to meet us. The rent is Rs 5,500."

Kumar said the solidarity evolving between farmers and workers seemed to threaten the police. The violence against him also had casteist overtones, he said.

"Chamar hai tu, leader na ban. Jo tera kaam hai, woh kar." You are a Chamar. Do not try to be a leader. Do what you are meant to do, the police officials allegedly told him.

"They would spit on my face," he said. "Everyone talks about democracy but I did not see that in the jail."

Kumar is angry about what happened to him and Kaur. But his anger was not directed at the police. "My anger is more towards the corrupt system and the gap between the rich and poor," he said. "The police are just a part of the system."

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— Shiv Kumar (@ShivKumar\_mas) [March 5, 2021](#)

## Shared resilience

Kumar and Kaur both share a childhood of struggle.

Kaur grew up in Muktsar Sahib in Punjab where her parents remain an active part of the [Punjab Khet Mazdoor Union](#), a collective for farmers and workers in the district. She regularly accompanied her mother to demonstrations against atrocities against Dalit women within the district.

In 2019, she moved to Delhi and contacted Kumar in October last year after she left her job at a call centre in Azadpur, North Delhi.

She joined the Mazdoor Adhikar Sangathan shortly after and began working for a factory that made tempered glass in Kundli, but left the job once the farmers' protests began to mobilise workers coming to Singhu.

"We were warned that working in labour rights was like walking on the edge of a sword," said Kaur. "We can be killed anytime. Our life is not very long."

The association also used the momentum of the farmers' protests to raise awareness about the Modi government's changes to the labour laws in 2020. The Centre replaced 44 existing labour laws with four labour codes which workers fear will water down labour rights, social security and other protections for those in the informal sector.

While quarantining in the Karnal district jail in January, she organised the inmates to hold a hunger strike as jail authorities had stopped phone calls to families, she said.

"If we do not struggle then we will die," said Kaur. "We have seen since our childhood that we do not get anything without protesting. I have learnt all this from my mother and my sister Rajveer."

Immediately Release Shiv Kumar and Nodeep kaur! Shame on Haryana Police! [#ReleaseShivKumar#ReleaseNodeepKaur](#)  
[#SpeakUpForShiv#SpeakUpForNodeep](#) [pic.twitter.com/9XaW9bfqBg](https://pic.twitter.com/9XaW9bfqBg)

— Rajveer Kaur (@Rajveer88724) [February 17, 2021](#)

Shiv Kumar grew up in Devru village in Sonipat, Haryana. His father worked as an agricultural labourer. His mother was diagnosed with a mental disability 23 years ago. Kumar has two elder sisters and two younger siblings. As the middle child, he had started working to support his family while he was in school.

In 2014, he read the seminal essay *Why I Am an Atheist* written in 1931 by the young revolutionary leader Bhagat Singh. The essay resonated with Kumar.

"I did not have much faith in god at the time. There was not much to believe," said Kumar. "My mother has been ill for 23 years. If there is a god, then why has he not cured her? If there is a god then why is there so much discrimination? Why is one poor while the other rich? Some are eating to their fullest but others are sleeping hungry."

His first brush with activism took place in 2015 after he was arrested by Sonipat police for protesting along with others outside a private school that had denied admission to children from low-income families in violation of the Right to Education Act. Kumar was in his final year of school at the time. His family did not support his activism.

"My family wanted me to study and get a good job but I acted differently from what they thought," he said, adding that his family is fully supportive of his work now.

After studying at the Industrial Training Centre from 2016 to 2017 where he learnt the use of dies and moulds, he moved to Kundli in search of work. His first job in a factory earned him Rs 8,000. He subsequently moved on to other industrial jobs but was exploited as a worker, he said.

Workers like him are paid less than the minimum wage, he pointed out. Accidents at the workplace do not entitle employees to a fair compensation, and being late to work meant getting paid only half the wages. "I got to see all this and I felt that there is a need for a union," he said. In three years, the Mazdoor Adhikar Sangathan has grown into a 300-worker strong union.

## **A life of resistance**

Another young activist who was arrested for her advocacy of the farmers' cause is a 22-year old climate campaigner from Bengaluru, [Disha Ravi](#). She was arrested from her home in Bengaluru by

Delhi Police in a case pertaining to a Google document tweeted out by Swedish activist Greta Thunberg. The police alleged the “toolkit” had been allegedly drafted alongside Sikh separatist groups.

Ravi’s case received wide attention. Her arrest made headlines immediately. After she was granted bail on February 23, she stayed away from the limelight until she released a [statement](#) on Saturday.

“This is the difference in class,” said Kaur. “The upper-class people feel that if they speak again then they will be targeted. But we will be attacked even if we remain quiet.”

Both Kaur and Kumar, who celebrated their birthdays in jail in February, have been flooded with interview requests since they were granted bail.

Kaur is aware that much of the media attention on her was sparked by a tweet from Meena Harris, the niece of US Vice President Kamala Harris. Kumar said the only reason their arrests made news was because they had taken place in the backdrop of the ongoing farmers’ protests.

“During the lockdown, when the workers did not get their rations and were hungry, the media did not cover it,” said Kumar, who staged road blockades in Kundli during the lockdown demanding rations for migrant workers. “When they were being thrown out of their rooms, if someone’s finger or hand got cut, the media did not cover it.”

Since the alleged torture, Kumar said he was unable to get proper sleep and Kaur added that she needed rest. But they could not afford to do so – they are currently unemployed and need to find work to sustain the daily expenses of their activism. “Not even one per cent of the work has been done,” she said.

Speaking about the causes that she would like to take up in the future, she said: “Children are being made to work and I have seen that women do not get equal wages as men.”

Both Kaur and Kumar said they were prepared for the consequences activism could have on their lives, and said they would continue to support the farmers’ protests till the laws were repealed.

“I have to fight this fight,” said Kumar. “No compromise with my life and no backing out. I have to move forward.”

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**Vijayta Lalwani**

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