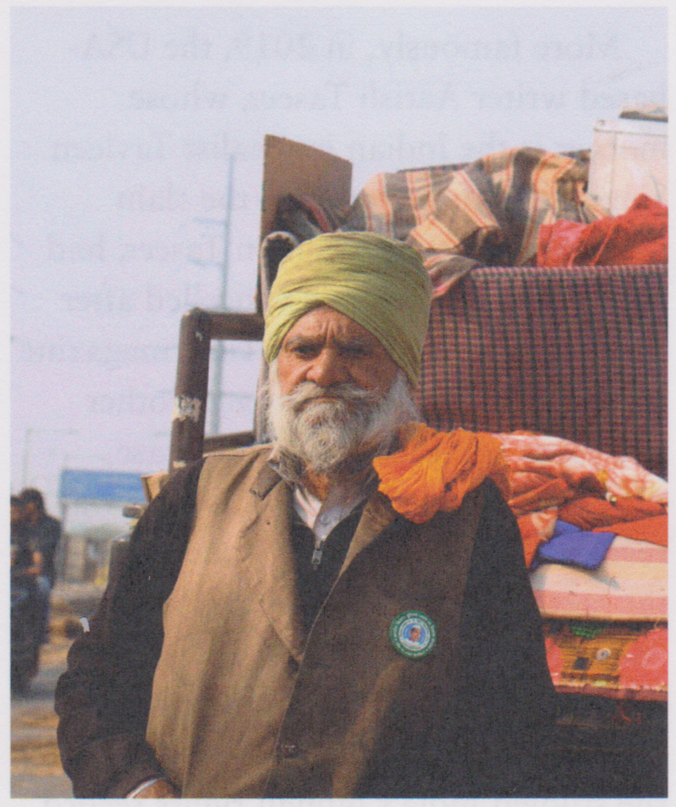
An agency for those denied agency

A press agency is giving a voice to Sikhs who are coming under attack globally, writes **AMY FALLON**



ABOVE: An image from India's farmers' protests, which Sikh PA covered

"IF IT WEREN'T for the Sikh Press Association, a lot of Sikh voices, especially ours, wouldn't be heard," Deepa Singh told Index, just months after he said he was treated like a terrorist in the UK.

His is one of those who has benefited from a press agency giving a voice to those who may not otherwise have one.

The founder of the charity Sikh Youth UK, who is also known as Kaldip Singh Lehal, was arrested at Gatwick Airport while returning to the UK last December. He said he was subjected to a humiliating detainment and "interrogation…like a terrorist" under the government's counter-terror law – and he told his story to the Sikh PA.

This agency provides multi-platform content – including editorial copy, news, images, infographics, video content and data – to journalists and newsrooms around the world. The idea emerged in 2012, during a massive explosion of online Sikh education, when one man had a vision. The late Bhai Jagraj Singh was an Oxford graduate and a former British Army officer who gave up a successful career in finance to found the Sikh PA in London.

A news agency for the world's fifth largest faith group, and run by a team of just two, is a big deal. It provided coverage of the 2020 and 2021 farmers' protests against laws passed by the Indian parliament. It also reported on the assassination of Sikh activist Hardeep Singh Nijjar in Canada in June 2023. Canada has accused India of carrying this out, an accusation it denies.

But "censorship and targeted interference remain barriers" to the agency's work, said Everything's 13, the Sikh educational charity under which Sikh PA operates. Its press officers have received threatening phone calls after covering certain issues, while online death threats are a frequent occurrence, Jasveer Singh, the press executive at Sikh PA, told Index.

Originally from the UK, he now works for the agency in British Columbia, Canada, which has a large Sikh population.

"There have also been character attacks which involve tarnishing the reputation of staff, legal threats and even efforts to have the association labelled an extremist organisation," he said.

He added that while some of those behind these attacks may be "Indian nationalist bots" and not real people, "if they're willing to threaten someone like me, then the people that are active who are bringing thousands together to be part of this movement…they want them killed".

A former staff member was prevented from entering India because of his journalism, he said.

Because the West "became apathetic to Indian interference, overlooking it for trade deals", borders do not keep the community safe, he said. Support for Khalistan (a separatist movement promoting the idea of a Sikh homeland) and criticism of India have increased, while India has stepped up its efforts to silence activists.

Meanwhile, Jasveer claims enclaves have appeared in the diaspora where violent criminal Indian nationalist gangs work.

"But Sikh faith is entwined with tales of courage and sacrifice," he said, adding that carrying out the work of Bhai Jagraj Singh, who died in 2017 aged just 38, is a "task of honour".

"We are the voice for the voiceless, a megaphone for the unheard of our community," he said. "That must continue regardless." ✖

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Amy Fallon is an Australian-Canadian journalist

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