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## **Artistic Response to the Farmers' Protest 2020-21**

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### **Abstract**

Artists are an inseparable part of society. They tend to express emotions through different genres of art, such as painting, sculpture, art installation, cartooning and digital art to name a few. I witnessed this kind of artistic expression during the recently concluded farmers protest in India. Artists played an important role in documenting and narrating the movement as it unfolded from the very first day of the movement until the farmers returned back to their homes in November-December of 2021. The artists were not just from India but from various places around the world. Through their art, the artists showed their support for the farmers. This essay aims to bring to the reader some of those ways in which the artists supported the farmers.

### **Introduction**

Artists and their art are an integral part of society.<sup>1</sup> They are inspired by social movements to create art as well as play a seminal role in affecting positive social change. Artists represent social issues creatively through various genres like paintings, sculptures, and art installations. They do so even when the issues and their representation cause discomfort among people. In this way, artists express their solidarity with the people. Artists' engagement with the farmers protest is an excellent example of this expression of solidarity.

The farmers protest in India came under national spotlight on 26th November 2020 when farmers, mostly from Punjab and Haryana, marched towards the national capital Delhi in thousands. They demanded a repeal of the newly legislated farm

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<sup>1</sup> Okoronkwo, Joy & Chukwu-Okoronkwo, Samuel. (2013). Art, Society and Culture: Inseparable Tripartite Phenomena.

laws<sup>2</sup> under a “*Dilli Chalo*” (March towards Delhi) campaign. Farmers were apprehensive about the laws because they would lead to abolition of the Minimum Support Price (MSP) guaranteed by the government on selected crops and leave the farmers at the mercy of large corporations. The farmers instantly rejected the laws. They camped out on the highways of New Delhi and its outskirts and refused to move until the government overturned the laws. In fact, thousands of farmers lived at the protest sites for the entire duration of the movement which lasted for about thirteen months.

From the first day of the protest until its conclusion, the artists made a significant contribution in narrating the story of the difficulties faced by the farmers. Artists from India and from all around the world interpreted the struggles of the peasants in their own unique ways. In this essay I provide a few glimpses of this work.

### **Artists and their Artwork**

Artists have used various styles and mediums to narrate the difficulties encountered by the farmers from the start of the protest till its conclusion. Artists not only from different parts of India, but the world, interpreted the struggle of the peasants in their own unique ways.

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<sup>2</sup> Farmers’ Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Act, 2020; Essential Commodities (Amendment) Act, 2020; and Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement on Price Assurance and Farm Services Act, 2020.



Figure 1

**We the People, Kanwal Dhaliwal, 2021, Mixed media**

Courtesy of Artist Kanwal Dhaliwal

Figure 1 entitled “We the People” is by Kanwal Dhaliwal, an eminent artist who resides in London. Here, Dhaliwal shows the Indian tricolour flag with a tractor at its centre. Dhaliwal has painted faces against the backdrop of the Indian national flag to represent everyday, hard working men and women farmers. The tractor symbolises their livelihood which revolves around farming. By using the tricolor national flag as a backdrop, the artist is representing farmers’ patriotism and loyalty to the country which they fulfil by nourishing the nation and growing food.



Figure 2

**Untitled, Parveen Kumar, 2021, Acrylic colour on canvas**

Source: <https://ruralindiaonline.org/en/articles/from-punjab-to-singhu-painting-a-protest/>

In Figure 2, we see the work of Parveen Kumar, an artist from Ludhiana. He used a 28x6 feet long canvas painted with acrylic paint to depict the various incidents of protest. It was painted on the 48<sup>th</sup> day of the protest. He began to paint this canvas in Ludhiana and brought it to Singhu Border to complete it while sitting amidst protesting farmers. In this painting, Kumar shows the various ways in which the agitation progressed until January 10, 2021. The artist depicts the farmers sitting on a railway track in the very first scene of the painting. It is then followed by a second scene that shows the farmers' journey by road to participate in the protest. Along with this, he shows the farmers entering Haryana where the government officials attempted to stop them by digging the roads and spraying water cannons on them. The artist has also used the symbols, such as a snake with a lizard in its mouth. One possible interpretation of this imagery is that this is a representation of the high-handedness of the Union Government in imposing laws without considering farmers' needs or preferences. Kumar expressed a desire to be part of the community of farmers.<sup>3</sup> He completed the painting in fifteen days and it is now part of his collection.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/haryana/ludhiana-artist-showcases-farmers-protest-in-18-ft-long-painting-197469>

<sup>4</sup> An interview with artist Parveen Kumar on 22.03.2022.



Figure 3

**Untitled , Satish Acharya, 2021, Cartoon**

Source: <https://www.cartoonistsatish.com/farmer/>

Some artists used cartoons and satire to depict the deployment of police to block protestors from reaching the capital. In these cartoons, they represented incidents such as when the authorities used tear gas and water cannons to impede the farmers' arrival into the capital. It was the government's strategy to counter the farmers' agitation. In Figure 3, cartoonist Satish Acharya shows the police using violence and force to brutally suppress the farmers. The cartoon also shows an older farmer offering food to a member of the police force despite having been physically assaulted by them. The farmer's use of the word "son" presumably symbolises the nurture and care that farmers extend towards people without distinction and prejudice.





Figure 4

#### Farmers Protest, Kishore Meena, 2021, Cartoon

Courtesy of Cartoonist Dr. Kishore Meena

Similarly, in Figure 4, cartoonist Kishore Meena uses political satire to represent the double standards of the government. The cartoon shows cops ridiculing the farmers. The cartoon shows a Sikh farmer holding a newspaper with a headline that reads: “The paths are open for the farmers,” and signed off by the Indian Prime Minister, Narendra Modi. The cops are belittling the farmer by saying: “How did you like Mr. Modi’s sense of humor?” The farmer appears to be in shock. According to Meena, cartoons are the easiest and most accessible visual form because it attracts everybody’s attention. Cartoons can convey important and intense messages in an accessible manner. Meena further goes on to assert that cartoonists play an important role in reminding citizens of their duties through the unique medium of cartoons.



Figure 5

**Untitled, Ravi Ravraj and Gurdeep, 2020, Canvas painting**

Source: <https://www.dw.com/en/why-are-indias-farmers-protesting/a-56480047>

Two young freelance artists Gurdeep and Ravi Ravraj from Patiala also showed their support to the farmers with their artwork. Figure 5 shows one of their contributions. The 25 feet long painting depicts the pain and struggle of the farmers. The motivational quote on the top of the mural says “*Saanu gudti naluye di, naslaan de raakhe haan*” which means “We are baptised by (Hari Singh) Nalwa,<sup>5</sup> we are the protectors of our race.” It took them ten days to finish the painting. Ravraj had said that because this was not an ordinary protest, they did their part by expressing their opinions through art.

<sup>5</sup> Hari Singh Nalwa was one of the most truthful commanders in the army of Maharaja Ranjit Singh and was the Governor of Peshawar, Kashmir and Hazara. Nalwa attained fame after defeating the Afghans and establishing control over various regions along the boundary of Afghanistan. He also prohibited Afghans from entering Punjab through the Khyber Pass, which was one of the main routes from where invaders used to come in India from c. 1000 AD till the early 19th century. <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/hari-singh-nalwa-sikh-warrior-afghanistan-7472991/> retrieved on 22.03.2022.





Figure 5a (Closer view of Figure 5)

**Untitled, Ravi Ravraj and Gurdeep, 2020, Canvas painting**

Source: <https://www.facebook.com/nooreart/photos/1150496592035336>

Figure 5a focuses on a specific aspect of Ravraj and Gurdeep's painting. It shows the courageous spirit of the farmers who are ready to use their tractors to fight a bulldozer, symbolic of the corporate sector. The tractor bears the flag that came to symbolize the farmers' protest. The farmers marching behind that tractor represent various Indian states, showing the pan-Indian nature of the movement. Farmers from across India participated in the protest with enthusiasm and determination.



Figure 6

***Kankaan di Lori*, Ravi Ravraj, 2020, Oil on canvas**

Courtesy of <https://twitter.com/RaviRavraj>

In Figure 6, we see another painting by Ravi Ravraj, this time focusing on the farmers' relationship with their crop. The artist represents this relationship by drawing an analogy between a father and his new born child. The farmer as the father is shown holding his new born crop with utmost care and affection, just as a parent might look at their infant with intense love and passion. The "soft and pastel" shades in monochromatic tone add to the depth of the theme depicting an inseparable relation of a farmer with his crops. The grey shade represents the sadness of farmer about the current situation.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> An interview with artist Raviraj on 23.03.2022.

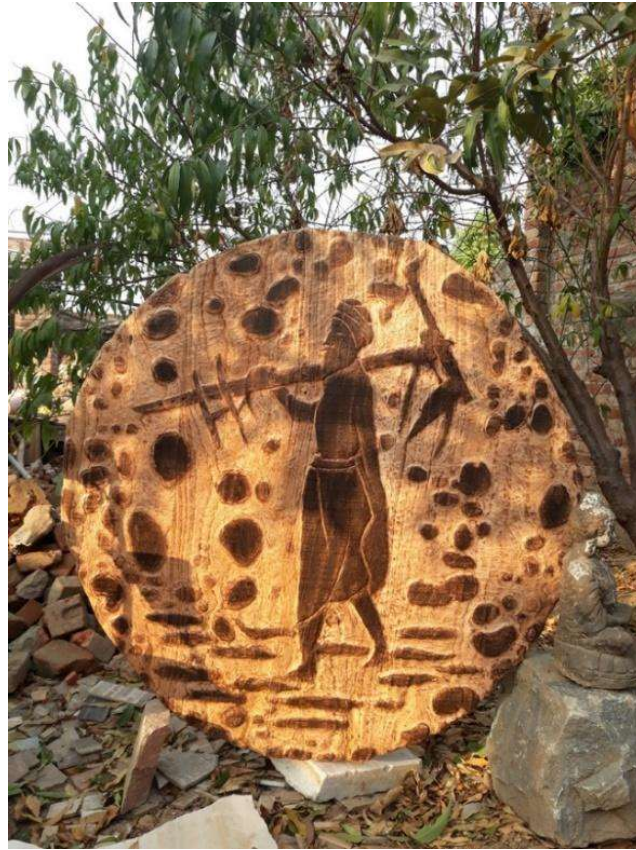


Figure 7

**Food Giver, Jaswinder Singh, 2021, Wood sculpture**

Source: <https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/ludhiana/artist-makes-roti-to-support-farmers-193914>

In Figure 7, we see a five feet circular shaped wood with an impression of rotī (Indian flatbread) and an image of a farmer carrying plough. The wood sculpture entitled “Food Giver” was made by Jaswinder Singh who hails from Khanna, a village in Punjab. Singh’s purpose here is to show the direct link between farmers and food. It is the artist’s way to bring attention to a popular slogan of the protest – “No Farmer No Food.” The slogan gained much attention during the farmers’ protest. In the sculpture, the farmer is shown going to his fields carrying a plough which represents his/her hard work. With this sculpture, the artist pays a tribute to the farmers who struggle hard in the fields to grow crops as well as extends his support to the protesting farmers.

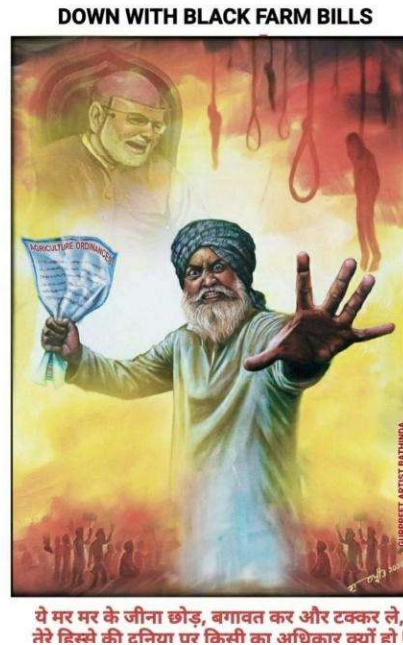


Figure 8

***Bas hun hor nahi*, Gurpreet Singh, 2020, Oil painting on canvas**

Source: @Gurpreet.artist (Instagram Account)

The artist Gurpreet Singh, who is also a social activist from Bathinda, created a number of posters to depict the farmers' story. In his paintings, he hopes to show the destruction that the farmers would have to face if the three farm laws were implemented. He also organized an exhibition of his paintings about the journey of the farmers' protest at Singhu Border.<sup>7</sup> His paintings and illustrations represent the innermost pain and suffering of farmers, something which they might not be able to express in words. In Figure 8 above, the crushed paper in the farmer's hand and his angry expression represents farmers' vehement and spirited opposition to the three farm laws. In the background, the silhouette of farmers committing suicide and the hanging body of the farmer are representative of the helplessness felt by farmers. In the left-hand side of the painting, we see what appears to be the mask of Indian Prime Minister worn by his influential subordinate minister. This likely represents the indifference with which these leaders responded to the farmers' angry protests.

<sup>7</sup> Bhasin, Sukhmeet, "Bathinda artist using paintings to highlight farmers' issues" *The Tribune*, February 2, 2021



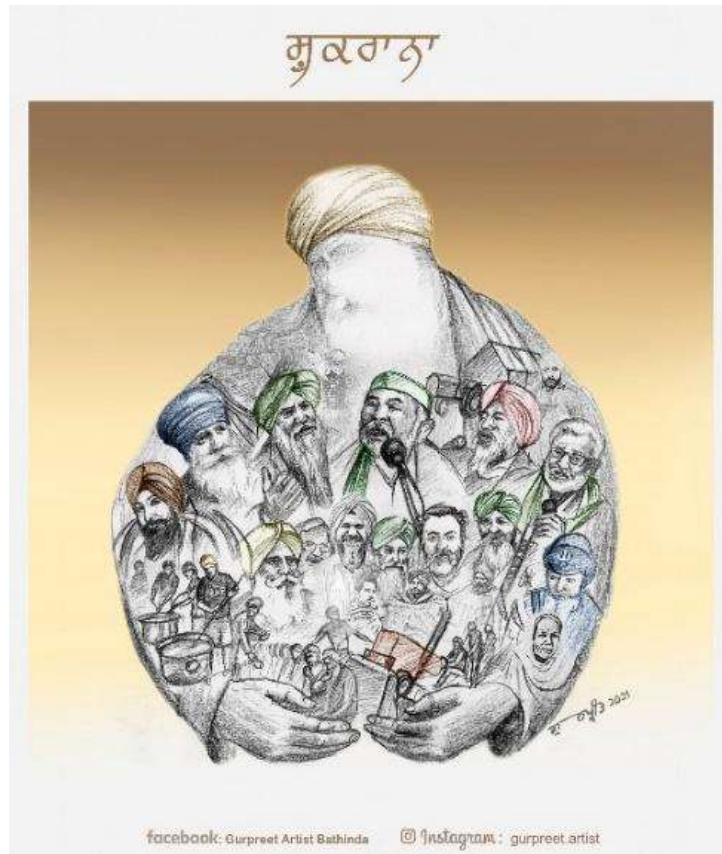


Figure 9

***Shukrana*, Gurpreet Singh, 2021, Mixed media**

Source: @Gurpreet.artist (Instagram Account)

In Figure 9 entitled “*Shukrana*,” Gurpreet has depicted the victory of farmers after the Indian government repealed the three farm laws. With this illustration, the artist expresses his gratitude to the first Sikh Guru, Sri Guru Nanak Dev. Guru Nanak is shown holding the leaders of the farmers’ protest. The artwork also includes glimpses of the main aspects of the movement including the *langar* or community kitchen that the farmers ran during the movement. The artist is expressing his gratitude to Guru Nanak for giving farmers’ forbearance to withstand the tyranny of the Indian state.



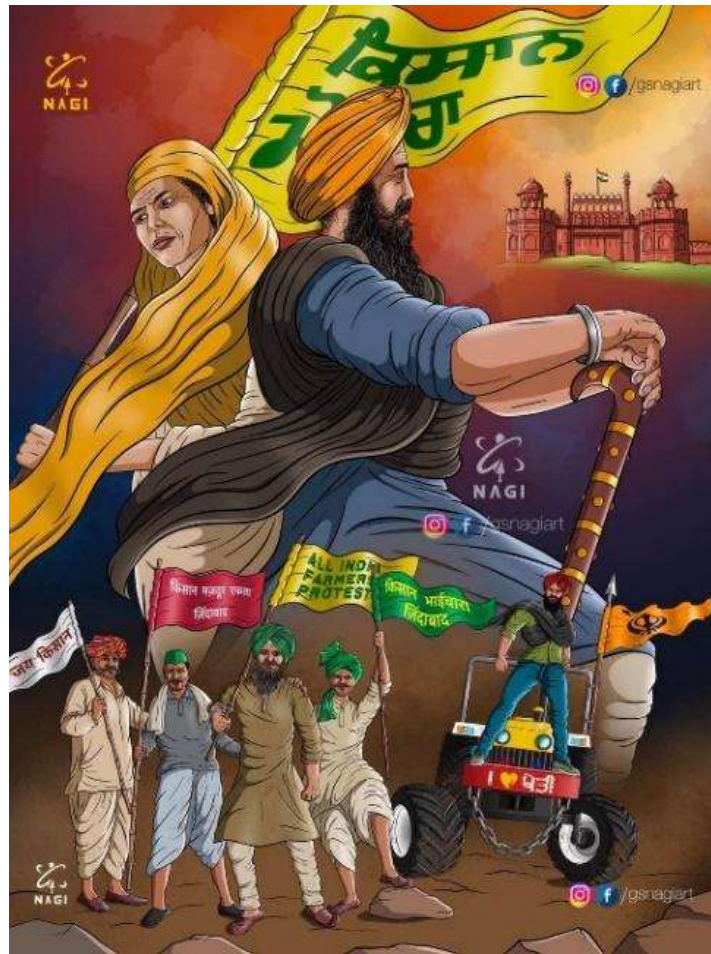


Figure 10

**Gurjinder Singh, Digital Art, 2021**

Source: <https://www.facebook.com/gsnagiart/>

In Figure 10, we see Gurjinder Singh Nagi's digital illustration that represents his dedication to the cause. It also shows the unity among farmers from various parts of India. The bright and vibrant colours symbolize the energetic spirit of farmers. Their bold stature shows their strength in tilling the soil and standing up to oppressive laws. The farmers who are shown holding flags of the farmers' protest look determined. In the background, the artist has painted the Red Fort – a reminder of the farmers' tractor parade on Republic Day, January 26, 2021 in New Delhi.



Figure 11

**Kisan Shaheed Samarak, Kulpreet Singh, 2021, Metal sheets and mixed media**

Source: <https://www.newsclick.in/kisan-shaheed-smarak-memorial-those-who-died-nationwide-farmers-protest>

Figure 11 depicts a homage to the farmers who sacrificed their lives while protesting on the borders of Delhi. It is the work of Kulpreet Singh, an artist from Patiala, Punjab. Singh's installation is made using metal sheets. The artist cut the metal efficiently and painted it black. In the installation, the images of grain along with farmers tilling the soil are shown. Also shown are bull and flame-shaped metal pieces. The depiction of the sun and the moon on the metal sheet represents the hard work that farmers perform day and night. The installation also contains the *Satyagraha Kalash* or earthen baked terracotta pots.<sup>8</sup> Besides these, a larger pot is also placed in the middle of the flames to symbolize the farmers' struggle as they resist the forces of nature, such as storms, heavy rains and floods, and fire in growing their crops and feeding the nation.

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.newsclick.in/kisan-shaheed-smarak-memorial-those-who-died-nationwide-farmers-protest>

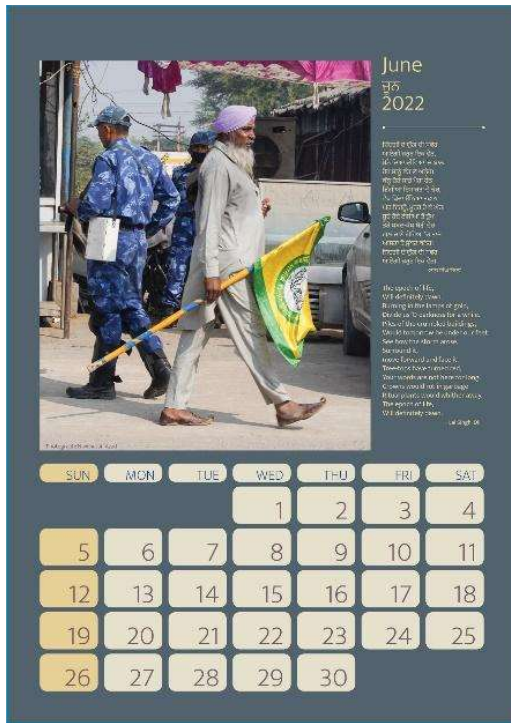


Figure 12

**Photograph by Preetinder Singh Bajwa**

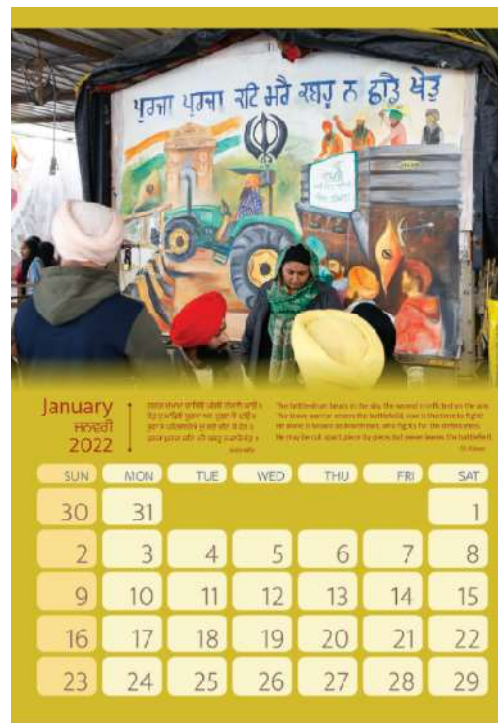


Figure 12a

**Photograph by Navchetan Azad**

Source: Calendar Images shared by artist Preetinder Singh Bajwa

In addition to the paintings and sculptures, artists showed their support with various other kinds of art. Posters, murals, graffiti and photographs are examples of a few other ways in which artists extended support to the farmers movement. The internet, including various social media platforms were flooded with photographs from the farmers’ protest showing their courageous struggle. Figures 12 and 12a are images from a calendar that was released on December 11, 2021, the day the agitation was “suspended” after the historic victory. This calendar contains a compilation of photographs highlighting the struggles of those living at the protest sites: the old and young, men and women. The text on the calendar reads: “This calendar is a humble contribution to the sacrifices (now over 700 people have been martyred) of those sitting at the borders. These photographs are provided by Randeep Maddoke, Navchetan Azad, Daljit Ami and Preetinder Bajwa. This calendar is the brainchild of Kanwal Dhaliwal, designed by Preetinder Singh Bajwa with support from Virinder Kalra. It celebrates the victory and commemorates the one-year

anniversary of the farmer's protest on Delhi's borders." The calendar also contains motivational quotes by Kabir, Surjit Patar, Sukhwinder Amrit, Bhagat Singh, Kuldeep Kaur, Lal Singh 'Dil', Pash, Baba Najmi, Ranjit Verma, Sant Ram Udasi and Vari Rai.

### **Conclusion**

This essay depicting the various artistic forms of support of the farmers movement is anything but exhaustive. It contains only a few examples of the many different artworks that emerged during and after the protest. Artists from India and across the world used many creative art forms to narrate the story of the farmers' struggle, both as a way to support the movement as well as to circulate their message to the wider world.

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