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**Art of the Protest:  
A Selection of Paintings, Sculpture, Photographs, Graphics and  
Songs inspired by the *Kisan Mazdoor Andolan***

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India's farmers and farm workers have been protesting against the three new Farm Laws<sup>1</sup> since they were passed through an ordinance by the Indian parliament in September 2020 amidst the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown. They continue to sit in protest at the borders of Delhi even today.

Art, along with dominant modes of resistance, has been an important avenue of protest in the *Kisan Mazdoor Andolan*. The photographs of the Tikri border protest camps posted on social media by Himanshu Dua, were the first to catch my attention. Thereafter, I started to take note of the many paintings, sculptures, graphic art, photographs, films and scores of songs and poems, inspired by the protests. Just as this protest is an ongoing campaign, so is the art, which continues to be created. While some of these works are created to inspire and motivate the protesters, others are important ways to document and memorialize the protest itself. They also enable us to understand the deeper human sentiments and emotions fueling the *Kisan Mazdoor Andolan* (farmer and farm labor resistance). In this essay, I have put together a selection of artwork, which resonated with me. These selected works cover a range of artistic expression directly inspired by the protests.

**RUPINDER SINGH AULAKH (b. 1972)**

India celebrated its 72<sup>nd</sup> Republic Day with a traditional military style parade in Delhi, the nation's capital. On that day, the farmers and farm workers organized their own parade as another way to protest the Farm Laws.<sup>2</sup> Thereafter, the authorities attempted to confine the protestors in their camps by putting up barricades and metal spikes that were nailed into the roads. The police also attacked some of the protestors in the camps and injuring many.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://egazette.nic.in/WriteReadData/2020/222040.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.cnn.com/2021/01/26/asia/india-republic-day-farmers-protests-intl-hnk/index.html>



Figure 1a.



Figure 1b.

**Untitled, Rupinder Singh Aulakh, 2021, mixed media.**

Source: Courtesy of the artist

Such draconian visuals were widely shared by media outlets and social media accounts and reached audiences all over the world including Rupinder Singh Aulakh who is an engineer by profession from Seattle in Oregon, US. On one of his walks, he came across a random stone and a discarded piece of wood with nails protruding from it. These objects reminded him of the barricades of the protest camps in India<sup>3</sup> and led him to conceive the above shown artwork. Painting the nails in a bold red color, he wrote the words “Farmers Protest Delhi” on a yellow base on one side of the block (Figure 1a) and “*Kisan Morcha 2020-2021*” on the other (Figure 1b). The nails became a powerful representation of the spikes driven into the roads in Delhi and the red color symbolized the spilled blood of the farmers. Aulakh also painted the stone green – the color of the crops and also the flag of the farm unions - and placed it next to the wood. Together, the composition evolved into a powerful reminder of the response of the authorities to the protests.

<sup>3</sup> As recounted by Rupinder S. Aulakh

**GURPREET SINGH (b. 1976)**

Gurpreet Singh is an artist-activist from Bhatinda in Punjab, India and is actively engaged with the protests. On Valentine's Day in 2021, he dedicated his painting (Figure 2) titled "Her Voice" to all "mothers who are sitting at the borders of Delhi."<sup>4</sup> On the canvas is an elder woman, whom I see as someone who could be anybody's *Biji* (mother). Her face is weathered and her outstretched arm is devoid of any bangles except for a *kara*, representative of her Sikh faith. Her head is covered with a bright yellow *dupatta* (scarf) that is reminiscent of the color that thousands of women protestors wore when they gathered in the camps this year on International Women's Day.<sup>5</sup>



**Figure 2: "Her Voice"**

**Gurpreet Singh Bhatinda, 2021, oil on canvas, 36"x 24".**

Source: Surinder Kaur Dhami Family Collection

Furthermore, she appears to be reaching out of the frame painted onto the canvas. As a woman myself, I relate to this visual as being symbolically representative of women today reaching beyond the confines of the domestic space. More

<sup>4</sup> Artists post on [Facebook](#)

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.nbcnews.com/video/women-take-over-indian-farmers-protest-to-mark-international-women-s-day-102401605654>

importantly, I see her as representing all the brave and courageous women who are protesting the new farm laws.

And last, but not the least, the woman's *dupatta* is shown merging into the yellow mustard fields which, I believe, makes for a striking visual element in the painting. It also establishes the links between the women farmers and their farmland.

The artist has also included his self-portrait where he is shown standing amidst the fields holding the banner of the *Bharti Kisan Union Ekta Ugrahan*, proudly announcing his own association with the land as well as the organization.<sup>6</sup>

Gurpreet has created more than fifty artworks inspired by the protests.

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/bkuektaugrahan>

**DEBANJAN ROY (b. 1975)**



**Figure 3**

**Untitled, Debanjan Roy, 2021, mixed media.**

Source: [sabrangindia.in](http://sabrangindia.in)

Sir Chhotu Ram, was a colonial era *Jat* leader who championed the cause of the farmers and helped pass laws to stop their exploitation by unscrupulous moneylenders that led to the passing of the Punjab Land Revenue (Amendment) Act in 1929 and subsequent social reform legislation.<sup>7</sup> In this sculpture (Figure 3), he is shown carrying the lifeless body of Sant Ram Singh, who until recently, was the head of the Nanaksar Gurudwara at Karnal in Haryana, India. Sant Ram Singh shot himself at the Singhu border in December 2020 leaving a suicide note

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<sup>7</sup> <https://internationaljournalofresearch.com/2016/11/14/peasantry-society-and-ch-chhotu-ram-a-historical-study/>

expressing his distress at the plight of farmers.<sup>8</sup> I find it interesting that both the characters selected by the artist share the name “Ram,” though it could be just a coincidence.

Roy is well known internationally for his pop-art style sculptures of Gandhi, highlighting consumerism in today’s culture.<sup>9</sup> Perhaps the artist here also intended to highlight the protesting farmer’s commitment to non-violence by including visual reminders to the popular images of Gandhi during the Satyagraha movement wearing a *dhoti* (garment) and striding ahead with a staff in hand. Here the staff is replaced by an oversized plow, which I believe, is a direct visual reference to the farmer. Roy, through this sculpture, urges us to recall and reflect on the history of farm movements in India – one from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and the one that is contemporary.

#### SUKHPREET SINGH (b. 1969)



**Figure 4: Tractor March**

**Sukhpreet Singh, 2021, acrylic on canvas, 43”x 84.”**

Source: Khanuja Family Collection

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/haryana/unable-to-bear-farmers-plight-65-year-old-sant-commits-suicide-at-singhu-border-185185>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.seattleartmuseum.org/Documents/pop-departures-educator-resource-guide.pdf>

Sukhpreet Singh from Ludhiana in Punjab, India painted a large 6 feet long canvas (Figure 4) showing the Tractor March held on the 26<sup>th</sup> January 2021. The painting was commissioned by Dr. P.S Khanuja, a leading US Sikh art collector and benefactor of the Sikh gallery at the Phoenix Art Museum at Phoenix in Arizona, US.<sup>10</sup>

Of the two hundred or so individual figures in the painting, a large number are farmers holding banners of multiple farm unions and placards with slogans like “No farmers no food” and marching on foot or riding on their tractors. One placard reads, “We are farmers not terrorists” which directly aims to dispel the false narrative of farmers as “anti-national.” The visible tricolor in the melee also reinforces this message. Also, seen prominently in the painting are the police armed with batons and guns as well as journalists and camerapersons recording the events.

Amongst multiple scenes included in the painting are incidents of police brutality, many of which are primarily based on visuals broadcast on media platforms.<sup>11</sup> These include scenes of protestors, young and old, being beaten by the police with *lathis* (batons) and struck with water canons. A sharp contrast to these images are the farmers who are shown serving *langar* (free kitchen) to the policemen.

In the painting, the artist has also thoughtfully highlighted the important role of women in this protest, through scenes showing them marching holding banners, sitting in protest, riding tractors and motorcycles as well as preparing meals.

This masterpiece painting is set against the backdrop of Delhi cityscape, which helps us visualize the location of the events depicted in the painting. Between the high-rise buildings and the distinct colonial era architecture of Connaught Place, we see the gleaming golden dome of Gurudwara Bangla Sahib, perhaps inspiring the viewers to keep the faith.

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.ironwoodcrc.com/doctors/parvinderjit-khanuja-md-facp/>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-55156219>

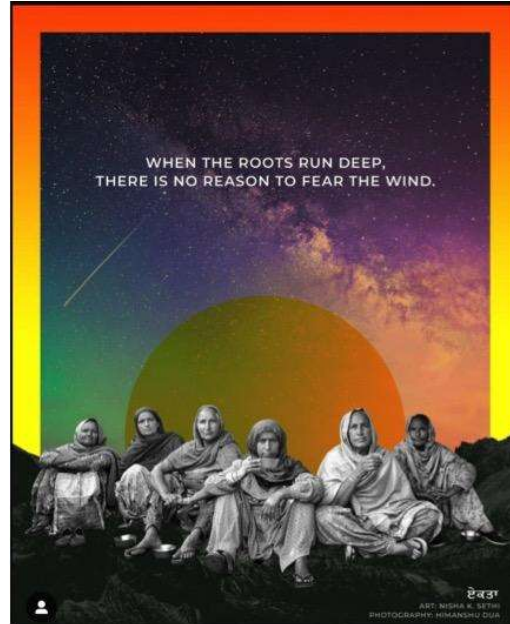


## HIMANSHU DUA (b. 1994) and NISHA K. SETHI



**Figure 5: Himanshu Dua, 2021, photograph**

Source: Surinder Kaur Dhama Family Collection 2021



**Figure 6: Nisha K. Sethi, photograph by Himanshu Dua**

Source: [@nisha.k.sethi](https://www.instagram.com/nisha.k.sethi)

Himanshu Dua,<sup>12</sup> a young photographer from Bhadurgarh in Haryana, India shot a series of photographs showing the daily activities at the Tikri border camp. Some of his eye-catching photographs bring out the spirited leadership and participation of women in the protest.

In Dua's photographs, we see women who have left the relative security and comfort of their homes to be at the protest, including staying at the camps. To me, these photographs reflect a broader social change towards the empowerment of women as evidenced by the notable presence of women at the protest sites, fighting alongside men as equal stakeholders in this resistance movement.

The photograph (Figure 5) of an elder woman with a determined and stoic expression on her face, sitting alongside her tractor trolley, reminds me of a quote

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.instagram.com/roundearthsquarepictures/?hl=enand>

from a news feature commemorating International Women’s Day published in *Time Magazine’s* March 2021 issue. With much gusto, Gurmer Kaur who is in her mid 70’s, said “I am an illiterate woman, I cannot talk well but I can sit tight – and I will sit here till the next elections if these laws are not called off.”<sup>13</sup>

Dua collaborated with artist and designer Nisha Kaur Sethi <sup>14</sup>of Oakland in California, US. Sethi digitally designed posters with images from Dua’s photographs enhancing them with powerful quotes both in English and Gurmukhi. The artists made the posters available on Instagram for free download. Dua and Sethi issued a statement asserting the importance of widely sharing their work. They said, “This artist collaboration serves as a bridge between India and the global diaspora to help build solidarity and continue spreading awareness about what’s happening. The photographs were taken on the ground at Tikri border in India and the collage art was created in Oakland, California. This series of work is being offered as a social justice tool and as a resource for the people. Please share with your communities and continue educating, speaking out, and showing up to your local action.”<sup>15</sup>

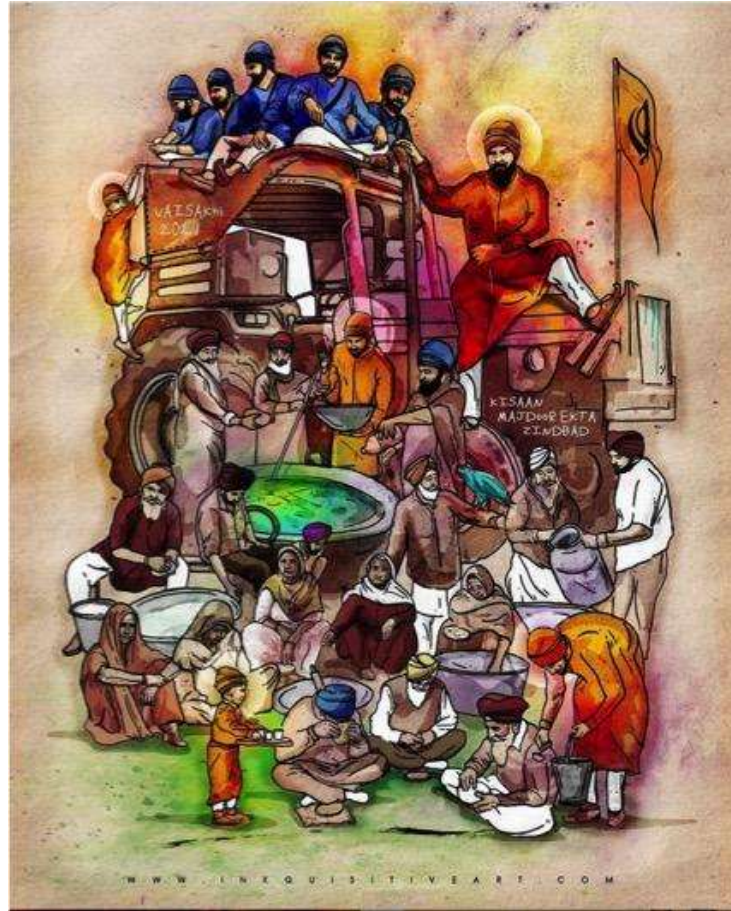
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<sup>13</sup> Time magazine March 4, 2021 pg. 87 <https://time.com/5942125/women-india-farmers-protests/>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.nishaksethi.com/>

<sup>15</sup> [https://www.instagram.com/p/CJ\\_wsbCA6W\\_/?utm\\_source=ig\\_web\\_copy\\_link](https://www.instagram.com/p/CJ_wsbCA6W_/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link)

**AMANDEEP SINGH – aka INKQUISITIVE**



**Figure 7: Vaisakhi 2021**

**Amandeep Singh, 2021, digital.**

Source: @inkquisitive

Amandeep Singh, widely popular on Instagram as “Inkquisitive,” is from the United Kingdom. His artwork style is distinctly multihued in bright and bold colors. Typically, Singh’s works are responses to various contemporary social and political events.

This year, since they were still at their makeshift camps protesting the farm laws, many farmers were unable to celebrate *Vaisakhi* (harvest festival) with their

families. Singh released a special art piece to honor the farmers urging them to continue to stay in *Chardi Kala* (rising spirit). The artwork (Figure 7) includes a larger-than-life figure of Guru Gobind Singh, alongside a *Nishan Sahib* (banner of the *Khalsa*) sitting atop the hood of a mechanical harvester. The Guru's *baaz* (hawk) is perched on a farmer's arm. On top of the same harvester are the *panj piyare* (five beloved of the Guru) dressed in blue robes. Their presence together with the Guru is to assure the farmers that their fight has their blessings and that they are not alone in their struggle.

The piece also includes the Guru's four sons who, history shows, embraced martyrdom to uphold their values. Their presence in the midst of the camp, working alongside and helping the farmers, is a proclamation of their support in this fight. The Guru and his sons appear distinct in their bright orange robes.

The farmers themselves are engaged in preparing, serving and partaking *langar* (free kitchen). The *degh* (cauldron) is being stirred. And one sees floating up to the surface of the food are the words '*Ek Onkar*,' the primal Sikh tenet. It means "God is one."

Accompanying the artwork posted on his Instagram account, the artist shares the following verses <sup>16</sup> referencing the qualities which the *Panj Pyare* personify through their respective names given to them by Guru Gobind Singh.

*"May the beautiful events of Vaisakhi 1699 remind you of the compassion of 'Daya'. To remain strong and determined through the righteousness of 'Dharam'. May any cold nights and lack of food/water continue to be a reminder of courage showcased by 'Himmat' when the Guru asked for a head. Commitment to be standing for 100+ days is a true reflection of 'Mokham' and as a community, we are all leaders and value that through 'Sahib'..."*

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<sup>16</sup> <https://www.instagram.com/inkquisitive/>

LALON (b. 1980)

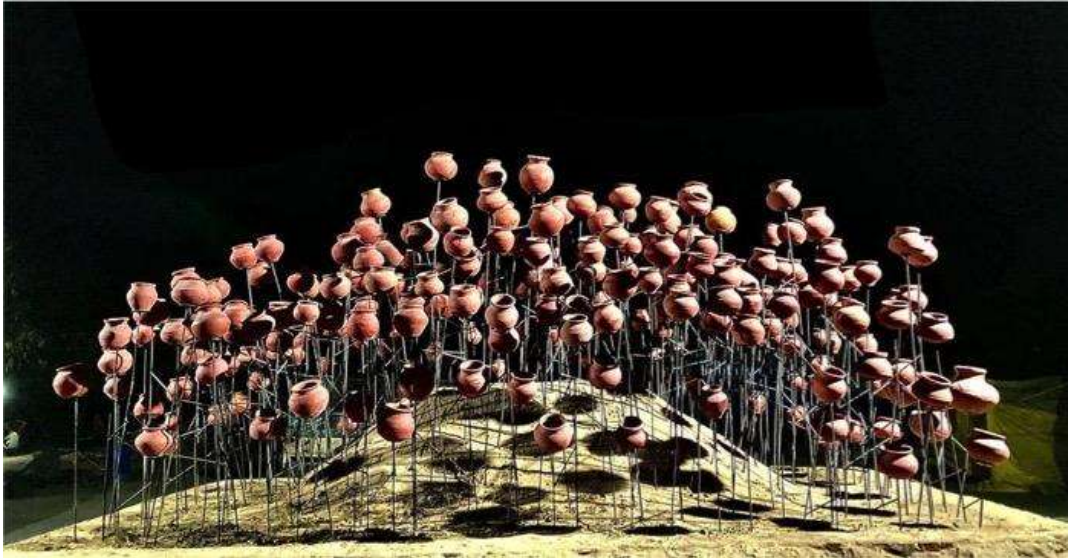


Figure 8: *Saheed Samarak* at Shahjahanpur, National Highway 48

Lalon, 2021, mixed media

Source: [indianculturalforum.in](http://indianculturalforum.in)

In April 2021, farmers launched the “*mitti satyagraha*” to honor the martyred farmers. They brought in *matkas* (earthen pots) filled with the soil from villages from different regions of India.

Just as this *satyagraha*<sup>17</sup> was concluding, Lalon, a Ph.D. student at the National Institute of Design Ahmedabad India, drove to Shahjahanpur on the Rajasthan-Delhi interstate border, to offer his contribution to the *Kisan Mazdoor Andolan*. On April 14, he finished this powerful installation, which he built on the road divider on National Highway 48.

The installation (Figure 8) comprises of pots arranged in the form of a flowerbed. There are in total 370 pots in honor of each farmer who died during the protest (count until April 14, 2021). The artists choice of using earthen pots reflects the fundamental association of the farmers with the soil they till. Having the pots upright with the opening facing the sky reminds me of the uncertainty surrounding the farmers’ livelihood. Their crops are forever dependent on the vagaries of nature.

<sup>17</sup> <https://simple.wikipedia.org/wiki/Satyagraha>

I believe the iron rods holding up the pots signify the steely resolve and strong commitment of the protestors. In keeping with the concept of a flowerbed, the base is not covered with concrete, rather it allows for grass to grow.

Lalon appreciates the support he got from the farmers to help him finish the memorial in time. In an interview to a news outlet, he poignantly recalls “The best moment for me was when I walked up to the top of the structure for finishing touches and one of the farmers who was helping out stopped me and asked me to take off my shoes and said to me - *yaha kisi ki samadhi hai* [this is a memorial].”<sup>18</sup>

### SARBJOT SINGH BEHL (b. 1965)

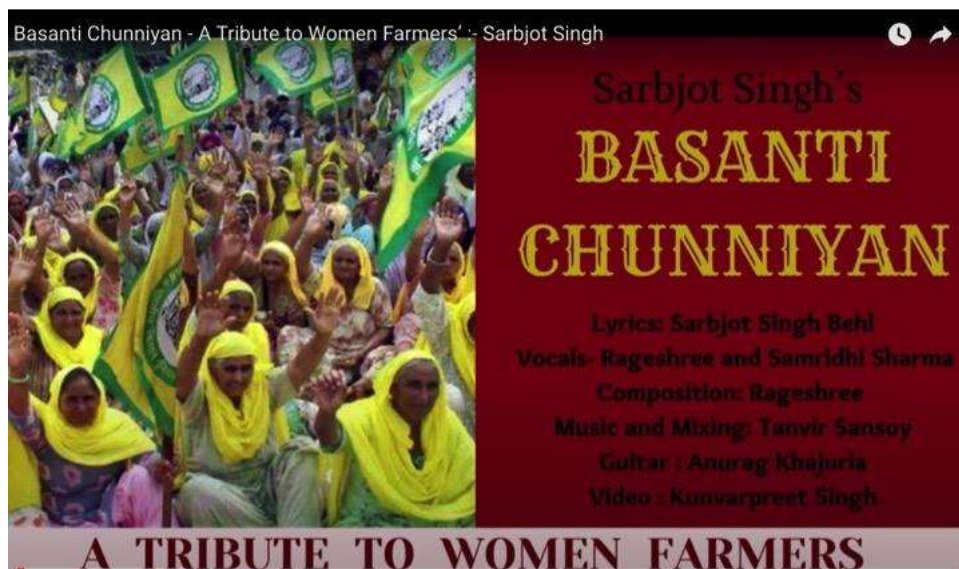


Figure 9: Basanti Chunnian

Sarbjot Singh Behl, 2021, video clip.

Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F14AIZtMnI>

The *Kisan Mazdoor Andolan* has also inspired hundreds of songs and poems. “*Basanti Chunnia*” (yellow scarfs) written by Sarbjot Singh Behl, a resident of Amritsar, is melodiously sung by the youthful student duo of Rageshri and

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.newsclick.in/Kisan-Shaheed-Smarak-Artists-Contributed-Farmers-Movement>

Samridhi Sharma. The song highlights the changing narratives around the roles of women in both the *Kisan Mazdoor Andolan* as well as their domestic spaces.

In the North Indian tradition, the color yellow is associated with revolutionaries. Behl's song (Figure 9) is inspired by the popular 1927 song by Ram Prashad Bismil "*Mera Rang de Basanti Chola.*" The song is about the enthusiasm and commitment of the revolutionaries during India's struggle for freedom from colonial rule. While Bismil's song implicitly associates revolutionary zeal with mainly men, Behl's composition celebrates the young women who proclaim their right to wear this color in parity with the men. They aspire to stride shoulder to shoulder with men both in happy and challenging times. The song was released on the eve of International Women's Day, which was marked, by thousands of women<sup>19</sup> joining the *morchas* (protests) from Punjab, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan.

### Conclusion

A structurally simple sculptural composition by Rupinder Aulakh, a figurative sculpture by Debanjay Roy, a painting on canvas of a woman by Gurpreet Singh, a densely populated canvas of Sukhpreet Singh, photography by Himanshu Dua, the digital creativity of Nisha K. Sethi, the digital art of Amandeep Singh, a large on-site installation by Lalon, and the inspiring lyrics of Sarbjot Singh Behl sung by the melodious Rageshri and Samridhi Sharma – these memorable artworks by artists from different regions of India, stand in solidarity with India's farmers and *Kisan Mazdoor Andolan*.

Art helps us to document, memorialize and express the struggle of the farmers and farm workers from across India. Some of these paintings are already in private art collections in the US. It is important that we continue to engage with these powerful works whether it is through display of these artworks in museums and galleries, sharing of their images on social media and webinars, or highlighting them in academic journals and other publications. These dynamic works educate the world about this historic struggle of the *kisans* (farmers) and *mazdoors* (laborers) of India. These thought provoking works will continue to inspire us to stand up and fight for our rights, even long after these protestors have all gone home in *Chardi Kala*.

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<sup>19</sup> <https://www.independent.co.uk/asia/india/farmers-protest-india-international-womens-day-b1813930.html>