

## Artists for Farmers; Farmer's Protest 2020-21

### Dr Anantdeep Grewal

Guest Faculty  
Department of Art History and Visual Arts,  
Panjab University, Chandigarh

### Abstract

*Farmers are not only the economic backbone of Punjab but also the custodians of its cultural heritage and identity. Their labour and stewardship of the land play a crucial role in sustaining the region's prosperity and vitality. If we explore the artistic culture of the state, we will find agrarian influences dominating Punjabi philosophy, art, music, poetry, and literature. A continuous portrayal of rural and agrarian subject matter is seen in the works of Punjabi visual artists. Their art has also shown various socio-political issues related to farmers and the region. During the 2020-21 farmers' protest, various artists, both singers and visual artists, visited the protest sites at the Delhi borders, and some of them reflected their concerns in their work as well. However, support from the Punjabi diaspora also provided an added strength to the protest. Some visual artists of Punjabi descent, both from India and abroad, created works that gave a pictorial voice to the protesting farmers. Jatinder Singh Durhailay from London painted subjects related to the Punjabi farmer community in Indian miniature style, while artist duo Jiten Thukral and Sumir Tagra incorporated installation to present their interpretation of the struggles faced by farmers of the region even before the protest of 2020. This paper aims to study different aspects that these artists have explored of farmers' protests and the use of different mediums to express their artistic concern.*

**Keywords:** Jatinder Singh Durhailay, Jiten Thukral and Sumir Tagra, farmers' protest, Punjabi diaspora

### Introduction

Farmers in India have been protesting even before India's independence. However, the farmer's protest of 2020-2021 was a significant movement in India, primarily centred around three contentious farm laws passed by the government. Farmers, primarily from Punjab, Haryana, and Uttar Pradesh, began protesting against these laws and demanded the repeal of the laws and the implementation of a legal guarantee for MSP. Farmers organised a massive protest march called "Delhi Chalo," converging on the outskirts of Delhi in November 2020. Despite facing police barricades, tear gas, and water cannons, they continued their march, eventually setting up protest camps at various Delhi border points. The protests gained international attention, with celebrities, activists, and global leaders expressing solidarity with the farmers. The movement also sparked debates about agricultural reform, corporate influence, and democracy in India. The government engaged in several rounds of negotiations with farmer unions but failed to reach a consensus. The farmers insisted on a complete repeal of the laws, while the government offered only minor amendments. After months of protests, the government announced the suspension of the farm laws in January 2021 and proposed to put them on hold for 18 months.

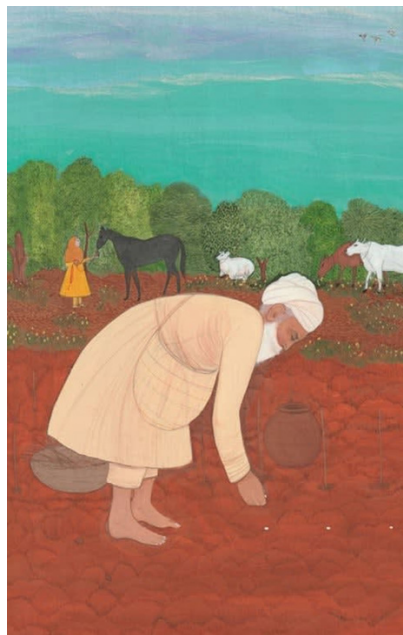
During the farmers' protest of 2020-2021 in India, several Punjabi actors and singers expressed solidarity with the farmers and participated in the movement. These artists used their creative talents to amplify the voices of the farmers and draw attention to their demands. Some notable artists who supported the farmers during the protest include popular actor-singers like Diljit Dosanjh, Ammy Virk, Harbhajan Mann, Gurdas Maan, and various others. Punjabi Sufi singer Kanwar Grewal actively participated in the farmers' protest, performing at protest sites and using his music to inspire and uplift the spirits of the farmers. Popular Punjabi singer Jazzy B also expressed their solidarity with the farmers' protest through social media posts and public statements. He used his platform to raise awareness about the farmers' demands and the importance of supporting agriculture. These artists, among others, played a significant role in mobilising support for the farmers' protest and drawing attention to their cause through their music, performances, and public statements. Their involvement helped to amplify the voices of the farmers and contribute to the larger discourse surrounding agricultural reform in India.

Besides singers and actors, visual artists also visited the protesting sites and spent time on the ground, capturing the spirit of the protest in their works. , Punjabi diaspora also showed solidarity with the protest, and many artists from the United Kingdom and Canada creatively expressed their support. However, it is to be noted that some of the artists in India were already voicing their concern for the farmers and agriculture even before the onset of the protest of 2020-21.

### **Jatinder Singh Durhailay**

Jatinder Singh Durhailay is one such artist from the United Kingdom who gave a visual voice to his empathy for the protest. He was born in 1988 in London and received his Bachelor of Arts from the University Arts London in 2011. Since then, he has dedicated himself to painting, showcasing a diverse artistic practice that encompasses painting and drawing. Durhailay is particularly fascinated by the use of naturally derived pigments and is also trained in Indian classical music, both of which influence his creative process. In his art, Durhailay blends myths with contemporary culture, offering a unique portrayal of the Sikh community and its culture. His works are characterised by a blend of humour, heroism, and poignancy. Durhailay's paintings often feature intricate and observant portraits and scenes, drawing inspiration from the Indian Mughal miniature painting tradition. His subjects range from environmentalism to cultural icons like Bruce Lee, reflecting a fluid movement between traditional themes and the complexities of the modern world. Through his art, Durhailay navigates the intersection of tradition and modernity, offering nuanced perspectives on cultural identity and societal issues. His work serves as a vibrant reflection of the diverse influences that shape his artistic vision and the rich tapestry of contemporary Sikh culture.

The people in Jatinder's paintings are real people who look like him, heroes who represent his race. In the Western world, it is not very often that he sees people belonging to Punjab hailed as heroes. The farmers, to him, represented those heroes who reminded him of his roots. Creating artwork inspired by the Farmer's protests wasn't merely a "social media moment" for Jatinder; it was an organic extension of his existing work and values. It was a connection that he always felt with Punjab while growing up in London. From a young age, Durhailay was instilled with values of sustainability and respect for all life. His 2021 painting, created with the agricultural issues in mind, features a painting of Guru Nanak Dev Ji, the first Sikh Guru born in Punjab in 1469. In the painting, Durhailay depicts Guru Nanak Dev Ji sowing seeds manually, referencing his famous line, "What you shall sow, so shall you reap." According to Durhailay, this painting serves as a commentary on both "the consequences of Farmer's subjugation and the interconnected nature of agriculture and Sikhi."



*Jatinder Singh Durhailay, Aape Beej Aape Hi Khao, 2021, Natural stone pigment and gouache on handmade hemp paper, 19 x 14 cm - 7 1/2 x 5 1/2 in*

The painting is done in the Indian miniature style, where in the foreground, Guru Nanak is seen bending down to plant the seeds dressed up as an old, humble farmer, and represented with no halo that reminds the viewer of his divinity. A clear reflection of the thousands of white-bearded farmers camped near the Delhi borders can be seen in the figure of the Guru. The figure is barefoot, and his posture is that of humility. Guru has travelled from a distance to come to this site; these are not his farms. Like the protesting farmers, he is in the process of growing food wherever he is, although ready to leave whenever his work is done, as his horse is waiting. In the background, a woman is shown standing, holding onto the reins of a horse, waiting for Guru Nanak to finish his work. She could be the figure of Guru's sister 'Nanki', who stood like a pillar of strength behind her brother since his childhood. She can also be seen as the symbol for the women who stood shoulder to shoulder with the farmers, both on the protest site and back at home, shouldering the responsibility of running their farms, often engaging in hard manual work. Besides this, the horizon is blocked by a thicket representing the barricaded borders of the capital. The freedom of the spirit is seen in the flight of the birds scaling the aquamarine blue sky, while cattle are peacefully grazing and resting near the trees. The mood of the painting emanates tranquillity, which gives a sense of assurance. Overall, although the painting was not made as a part of a social activist movement, it sums up the essence of the protest impeccably.



*Jiten Thukral and Sumir Tagra at their exhibition 'Farmer as Wrestler', 2019*

## Thukral & Tagra

Jiten Thukral and Sumir Tagra are leading contemporary artists of India. They work as a duo (Thukral & Tagra) and use modern mediums such as installation, videography, games, photography, etc, in their works. Out of the two, Jiten hails from Jalandhar, Punjab, and he studied at the Government College of Arts, Chandigarh. The Punjab Lalit Kala Akademi organised Thukral & Tagra's exhibition titled "Farmer as Wrestler" in 2019, during the ongoing Farmers' Protest in Punjab on the loan policy. The exhibition included paintings, sculptures, installations, and the use of games to engage the viewers. It also features a twenty-three-minute-long documentary on the Kisan Mukti Morcha of 29th-30th November 2018. In this exhibition, 'games' were used as a means to explore complex issues through interactive and playful methods. Their approach aims to evoke nostalgia and comfort in viewers while also challenging the current situation. "Farmer as Wrestler" confronts the pressing agrarian crisis afflicting farmers in India today. Across generations, issues such as land divisions, climate change, political manoeuvring, legal enforcement shortcomings, and the pervasive lack of formal education in rural areas have profoundly impacted the lives and livelihoods of Indian farmers. Employing the metaphor of sport and competition, the exhibition draws parallels to the practice of kushti—a traditional Indian wrestling form popular among rural communities. The wrestling match symbolises the physical and mental struggles, endurance, and resilience inherent in the farmer's battle against the agrarian crisis, which also included the ongoing protest.

The exhibition, "Farmer as Wrestler," highlights this fundamental aspect of the farmer's predicament: a life teetering on the edge. The duo has employed various mediums, including paintings and ink drawings on legal papers, depicting the Swaminathan Commission Report as a saviour and in the service of the farmers.



*Thukral & Tagra, Drawings on Swaminathan, Commission Report – Serving Farmers and Saving Farming – Reports 1,2,3,4,5 (vol 1+2), Medium: Inkjet print on legal paper, A4 legal paper, 265 prints, 2019*

## Conclusion

Jatinder Singh Durhailay viewed the Farmers' Protest through the lens of nostalgia and, of course, through video reports on social media. At the same time, Thukral and Tagra personally experienced



not only the 2020-21 protest but also the 2019 protest in Punjab. Durhailay's art has attributes of religious ideology associated with the farming culture of Punjab, and he gives a humble, simple, and peaceful interpretation of a protesting farmer, imparting dignity to them. His painting is a visual documentary of his understanding of the event. Thukral and Tagra understand the complexity faced by modern farmers in the region; hence, their art incorporates a more multifaceted approach. Their mediums, too, are diverse and engaging, enhancing the element of complexity. They also demonstrate a ruggedness associated with the men of the soil. Their art leans toward activism; it is not a mere interpretation but an introspective presentation. However, both Durhailay and the Duo have contributed by bringing the Indian farmer into the limelight, attuning with the visual culture of Punjab. We see two approaches here: one is the activist approach, where the protest is not only represented but its underlying issues are also explored in detail. The other approach is a direct representation of what was happening on the ground. Nevertheless, focusing on such protests, especially in art, brings the concerns of the farming community to the forefront, giving voice to otherwise invisible but significant members of our society.

### Reference:

Sharma, Aman, "Popular Punjabi singers throw weight behind farmers protesting against new agri laws", The Economic Times, Dec 2, 2020, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/popular-punjabi-singers-throw-weight-behind-farmers-protesting-against-new-agri-laws/articleshow/79518795.cms?from=mdr>

Vincent, Pheroze L., "Farmers protest: Raghu Rai covers Dakha Singhu and Tikri Kalan blockade", The Telegraph online, New Delhi, Published 01.01.21, 03:32 AM

Kalra, Vandana, "How the farmers' protest found resonance in art", The Indian Express, January 17, 2021 06:20 IST

Hoh-Hale, Becky, "How the creative Punjabi diaspora turned out in support of the Indian Farmers' Protest", It's Nice That, 7th May 2021, <https://www.itsnicethat.com/features/punjabi-disapora-sikh-farmers-protests-illustration-photography-070521>

Shukla, Vandana, "Thukral and Tagra's new exhibition presents sharp comment on Punjab's farmer distress, NRI culture", Firstpost, March 1, 2019, <https://www.firstpost.com/living/thukral-and-tagras-new-exhibition-presents-sharp-comment-on-punjab-farmer-distress-nri-culture-6148811.html>

<https://www.anantart.com/artists/199-jatinder-singh-durhailay/overview/>

Hoh-Hale, Becky, "How the creative Punjabi diaspora turned out in support of the Indian Farmers' Protest", It's Nice That, 7th May 2021, <https://www.itsnicethat.com/features/punjabi-disapora-sikh-farmers-protests-illustration-photography-070521>

Information is taken from Thukral and Tagra's official website on 15/4/24. <https://www.thukraland-tagra.com/farmer-is-a-wrestler/>