



The Farmers' Protest: Contours of the 'Popular' within the Dissensual

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Abstract

The 2020-2021 Indian farmers protest, against the three farm acts passed by the Indian Parliament, was one of the most exclusive and in other words the most popular and widely followed protest that India had seen in the recent decades. The objective is to explore how certain expressive forms that were used during more than a year-long farmers' agitation contributed to or borrowed from the popular culture. It is hard to ignore the sociocultural and political significance that popular culture plays when it comes to dissent. The elements of popular culture elements are helpful tools for protesters. Not only do they mirror common concepts that bring together all protests but they also provide relatable images that the public can associate and engage with.

Keywords: Culture, Music, Tractor, Farmers, Narrative

Across various stages, ages and eras of human history, there has been ample evidence of the existence of opposites in different forms of actions and processes. It is more than established through recorded history that the coexistence of any type of trajectories would give rise to some sort of conflict and, thus, resistance becomes an inevitable result of such a human situation. The phenomenon of resistance is as fundamental to human existence as is its permanence beyond all individual and collective effort to evade it. However, messages of peace and harmony have a cyclical emergence through the course of social evolution, nevertheless, resistance and its manifestation, through different forms of protest, has been essentially imperative to civilized human entity.

While assuming that the idea or the urge to protest is a crucial and an elemental component of human mentality, it may just be noted that protests are not merely rash or reckless and impetuous actions against or obstinate and prejudiced reactions to the establishment and its power. Rather, they have their place and purpose to play in the

society, and even contributing to socio-cultural, economic and even political life of people, irrespective whether there is an authoritarian or democratic set-up. More importantly, they point at the existing disgruntlement and dissention regarding a certain existing situation or the newly introduced laws and policies.

Unlike a mass revolution or a social movement, the incidence of protest may be seen as more of a spontaneous expression of resistance in a routine manner which may not necessarily be as insidious and well-thought of. It may occur in form of an impetuous reaction of a section of masses which may not essentially turn into a long-term resistance through a prior strategic action plan (Shah 2004). A dissent can be manifested in a variety of forms including public rallies, demonstrations, protest marches, raising voice through press, launching social media campaigns, etc. In order to study the concept of protest rather methodically, it becomes significant to investigate various aspects relating to the understanding of civil movement, concerted action and antagonistic policies and practices. In case of a collective action, which must be primarily directed by the common goals of the participating parties, organisation, mobilisation and opportunity play key role in ensuring a proper execution (Tilly 7).

The 2020-2021 Indian farmers protest, against the three farm acts passed by the Indian Parliament, was one of the most distinctive, the most popular and widely followed protests that India had seen in the recent decades. The Delhi borders, primarily, were the protest sites though protest camps, rallies and agitations were held in different parts of the country and even abroad in solidarity with the Indian farming community. The fact that India is predominantly an agricultural country remains true even today since, as per the Census-2011, more than half of India's working population belongs to agricultural sector. Hence, in some way or the other, the majority of the Indian demography was touched and impacted by the farmers' agitation.

The paper, however, makes no attempt to delve into the political and the economic aspects of the protest. Rather, it aims to study farmers' protest, primarily that by farmers of Punjab, in relation to the popular culture. The objective is to explore how certain

expressive forms that were used during more than a year-long farmers' agitation contributed to or were borrowed from the popular culture. During any protest, especially one that involves a large community and is against a strong establishment or authority, it is a given that the media, fashion agencies and even marketing industry pick up the imaginative and innovative expressions, slogans and symbolic signs being used by protesters. As these varied expressions are repeatedly showcased in various forms of the media at a given point of time, they get imbibed as style statements into the routines of the public (Fahlenbrach et al.). Over the years, facets of popular culture have percolated into the protest sites and the other way round, facilitating a mass accessibility and acceptance. For instance, metaphors from novels, poetry, mythology, folktales, music have been used to articulate the anger, annoyance and the sentiments of the protesting population. On the other hand, iconographic representations, images, signs and slogans from the protest sites are picked to punctuate the daily narrative of resistance. Thus, popular culture happens to drive protests that thereby balloons into a popular movement.

Framing the Protest: Tractor as the Signifier and the signified

Within a protest, manufacturing and structuring of meaning or signification is relevant to not only interpretation of protesters' demands, but also for acquiring social and cultural legitimacy and gaining mass support. The process, conceptualized as framing in Erving Goffman's work, in context of collective action, suggests:

meanings do not naturally or automatically attach themselves to objects, events or experiences we encounter, but arise, instead, through interpretative processes mediated by various contextual factors... the idea of framing problematizes the meanings associated with relevant events, activities... suggesting that those meanings are typically contestable and negotiable, and thus open to debate and differential interpretation (Fahlenbrach et al. 123).

Thus, frames are interpretative expedients, either material or linguistic or even both, that provide meaning to events and

occurrences, are often borrowed from or are founded on cultural repertoire and can invoke a collective consciousness and manifest a collective identity, thereby mobilizing that very collective in support of the protest.

During the farmers' protest, one such frame was the "tractor", a dominantly visible image which has come to be regarded as an entity all by itself. Every schoolbook would, on one page or another, offer the statement that India is an agricultural country and with that would accompany an image of a tractor. But tractor is much more than just a machine or a tool to be used on the farms. However, it was only in the 1960s that the agriculture sector of the country saw some revolution with import of sophisticated machinery and the tractor was one of them. While the Indian Government had then imported tractors from countries like Germany, the UK, and Poland, it was the DT 14 and Belarus brought from Russia under the scheme of Green Revolution that made a lot of news. Amidst all the cheering was also an apprehension— "Stalin's revolutionary transformation of the Soviet countryside, beginning in 1929, was an attempt to transform peasantry into a mechanized enterprise through the programme that was termed as 'tractorization' (*traktorizatsia*) of the countryside" (Oja). Will the Indian farmer and the new machine get along well? Tractor came to be seen as a mark of wealth and riches, representing the land-owning farmers, but it has also hinted at the exploitation and depravity among the tilling community. However, irrespective of the verdict and beyond scientific and technical boundaries, with at-home production, tractor not just became the staple, and of course a sign of modernization and innovation, but it also grew into a "thing" from merely being a tool or a functional object. This distinction comes from Heidegger, for whom objects turn into things when they do not merely perform their intended or pre-determined function but are rather seen to be useful and operating in other new ways. Thus, looking at the tractor within the frame of what scholars have referred to as the thing theory (Brown) — the dynamics between human subjects and inanimate objects—it becomes a mania, value, totem and an agent.

On the canvas of Punjab agriculture, beyond farming and related practices, tractor has been a status symbol, a cherished gift during the

weddings and similar occasions and a popular style statement. However, in the farmers' protest, the machine that had been at the centre of agriculture on the one hand and a product of luxury on the other hand acquired a certain agency, for it became representative of the unity of the farmers irrespective of the inner divisions. Framing of the tractor as an image in the context of farmers' protest designates it as not only warranting attention but also an extended pondering and deliberation. In fact, with the mounting awareness of and attention towards the significance of images, which serves as an extension to the phonological and textual methodologies of interpreting the world around, was summarized in the early 1990s by the notion of a 'pictorial turn', a phrase adopted by William J.T. Mitchell (1994). Since then, the varied cultural and theoretical permutations and combinations have incorporated visuals and images, rather becoming increasingly induced by them.

The impact and relevance of symbols rely upon how much persuasive they can prove about the projection of reality, its interpretation and panning out the narrative effectively. The significance of symbols and images depicted in validation of knowledge demonstrates added value in conveying the meaning more adequately in a sociological context, be it for the assimilation, deciphering or holding together vital pieces of information.

Interestingly, tractor—in its modern avatar during the protests—emerged as a symbol of the amalgamation of a popular highway living, on the one hand, and the rural culture at the grassroots, on the other hand. At the Singhu and Tikri borders, tractors are customized — some have two trolleys serving as a lounge and a store, others have just one which is serves as a bedroom and sitting room, a few tractors are only storing the groceries, or wood and cow dung cakes. There are still others that have been transformed into leisure cells, while a few all-purpose shelters. The tractor, as a frame, works to stitch together varied and diverse interspersed rudiments in such a way that only a particular and predesigned meaning or a set of meanings is conveyed and not any other. The tractor-trolley township that came up at the Delhi borders “breached the lines that divide town and country – an antithesis that was first identified in 1872 by Friedrich Engels, the German philosopher and revolutionary socialist

associated with Karl Marx, as an obstacle to solutions for agrarian problems” (Singh).

At the protest site, the tractor, covered with plastic sheet and cloth, represented both the home and the field of a farmer; a life was being lived in and around the tractor, while parked on the Delhi borders. It is the peculiarly designed image of the tractor that resonates with all and sundry and invokes a connect and solidarity among not only the farming community but the ordinary people striving to make a living. The altered forms and shapes of the tractor-trolley and the modification carried out to serve different purposes created metaphor for working class that required no private sponsorship. Haryana’s Sunil Gulia takes his tractor to the next level, having it modified especially for the protest at a cost of Rs. 40 lakh. “The trolley is equipped with Volvo seats and the tractor has a hi-tech music system and GPS installed,” he explains (NDTV). Certain trolleys were converted into gymnasiums and *gurughars* through innovative arrangement and engineering, locally called as *jugaad*, which also in way became a metaphor for protest. Yet another mutation of the tractor visible on the roads was a buffered one, a customized music system with heavy bass. The tractor no longer remained merely the subject of the narrative, it became the narrative of protest.

Yet another creation, the tractor had inspired and curated—*Trolley Times* The distrust on the part of mainstream media led the farmers to start their own biweekly, community-run newspaper with an aim to reclaim their discourse and write their narrative. Ajay Paul Natt, one of the three co-founders of *Trolley Times* based at the Tikri border, said, “We reached the Delhi border on tractor trolleys, live in them here and decided to start a newspaper called *Trolley Times* from a trolley” (Arora). With its first headline – ‘Unite, Fight and Win’, it caught everybody’s attention. The paper was started with an aim to share information and updates with the community and to reach out to a larger audience with the concerns of the farmers. But soon the paper, which was brought out in Hindi and Gurumukhi, had a good following: “The first edition of *Trolley Times* was published on December 18, 2020 and had a print run of 2,000 copies. The second edition had a run of 5,000 copies, and the

third 7,000, at the time of writing this report. Its slogan is a quote from Bhagat Singh: “The sword of revolution is sharpened on the whetting stone of ideas” (*Trolley Times*).

For any protest, not merely reaching out to the masses but also convincing them of the intended meaning becomes crucial to its success. Since meaning is a social production, it is fluid and in fact becomes the site of struggle (Storey). The editions of *Trolley Times* provided that deeper and elaborate meaning to the protest through stories of ordinary people and their acts, through simple jargon-free editorials in the language of the commoner.

The first edition carried an article, “*Janta ke Pratirodh Sangharsh ki Nai Ibarat Hai Kisano Ka Dilli Parao*”, by Purshotam Sharma, in which underscores the special facet of the farmers’ protest: “*Is andolan main nahi peedi ki baghidaari lagataar barh rahi hai, jo pichle 30 varsho se kisan andolan se lag bag kinara hi kiye rehti thi*” (“the new generation’s participation in this protest is continuously increasing, which in the past 30 years, in any farmers’ agitation, would remain only in the margins”) (*Trolley Times*, December 18, 2020, p. 3). It was not just the youth but also the women who became a very integral part of the farmers’ protest. The stories of women—making *pinnis*, knitting sweaters, cooking food and mobilizing other women back at home—subverted the whole idea of Punjab as a pure, rigid patriarchal society.

Then the second edition, December 22, 2020, of the *Trolley Times*, carried a story titled “*Pizza-Foot Massager Se Pare Sukha Ki Sewa*”, highlighting how popular articles make way into the narrative of the protest. The stories and narratives in 22-edition *Trolley Times* pan out a world in itself—an ordinary one but real and connected to the grassroots, and hence popular among the common masses. In the 18th edition of the *Trolley Times* (April 18, 2021), Apurva writes her experience of visiting the Tikri border. Having judged Punjabiya through the contemporary rap songs that endorse gun culture and represent the Jat boys as being over the board and far from being grounded, she stood corrected among the tractor trolleys: “We were sitting and looking around when a tall, strong young man with a bushy mustache came into the tent, carrying a tray with two steel

cups. As he served us tea, we were embarrassed.” Apurva is reminded of the image of masculinity in those pop songs and the contrast they draw. She wonders how these boys would continue to camp at the protest site while she will conveniently return to her home. *Trolley Times* did not merely serve as a newsletter, but a site where the popular culture of the grassroots was reiterated and represented.

Popularizing the Dissent: Self-Expression through Cultural Narrative

The liaison between protests and popular culture becomes extended and more defined because much engagement with politics takes place through the inherited cultural catalogue and repository. Moreover, self-expression through discursive narratives has been integral to popular culture, and it is during dissent that its manifestation becomes most crucial. Barthes and Bremond recognized the narrative as a “semiotic phenomenon that transcends disciplines and media” (Herman et al. 344). In fact, stories have been instrumental in comprehending the world around and even altering convictions and beliefs, achieving political and cultural goals and bringing about social makeovers (Lovins). Thus, it is these popular narratives that shape a protest’s rhetoric and works as a strategy towards mobilizing people and to accord legitimacy to the agitation. Stories are told in a few words that find place on placards, posters, banners and flyers—“No Farmers, No Food, No Future”; “Without Farmers No Country Can Progress”; “Repeal Black Laws”; “If You Ate Today, Thank a Farmer”; “MSP *abhi nahin toh kabhi nahin*”—and they attract attention, interest of the onlooker and even wrap up a message or even a political statement.

Adding weight to the words are images and photos — of leaders from history, of the elderlies and women participating in the protest—all building the narrative of protest. It is always important to have a means of communication, not only to gain the support, confidence and endorsement of masses, but also to communicate at low expense, and nevertheless be efficient in communicating. Protest can possibly be manifested in the poster itself, in the visual part of it, even before the content or the textual part has been read. The role of the poster in protest culture is primarily to catch immediate attention, attract the

interest of the onlooker, and to wrap political statements in an aesthetical package. A common poster seen during the farmers' protest was that carrying paintings of Baba Nanak as a farmer and alongside is written the poetry of Sant Ram Udasi and Lal Singh Dil, emphasising the value of labour: "*Utth Kirtiya, uthve, utthan da vela* [Rise, O, Worker (those who toil), for it is the time to rise (in protest)]". This was meant to invoke the passions of the commoners.

However, narratives, being linguistic and discursive phenomena, are "fluid, continuous, dynamic, and always constructed interactively—with an audience and within a context—out of the stuff of other narratives" (Ewick and Silbey). These narratives, through a multimodality approach — where a text is encoded with different semiotic codes like words and pictures—arouse emotions in the audience. Emotionalization in a protest becomes crucial to turn the tide for it "offers a multifaceted picture of human beingness that, without denying the reasoning capabilities of movement actors, posits emotion as a ubiquitous feature of social life" (Fahlenbrach et al. 161). However, there is the other side of the coin. "Indian national media on sale" reads a banner at the Singhu protest site, while another placard reads "We are farmers not terrorists". These are penned to counter the narrative build up by most mainstream media agencies, brushing the agitation in Khalistani colour or representing farmers as anti-nationalist and anti-social.

Striking Chords of Protest: The Symphony of Punjabi Pop Music

Music, emotions and human condition have intertwined threads, irrespective of borders, boundaries and temporality. Undoubtedly, music is regarded as a cultural artefact, upholding the cultural affinities of a community and, at the same time, becomes a means to articulate and represent a group's identity or reinforcing the projected identity. When a melody acquires a wider appeal among the ordinary people, reaches out to larger audiences and is enjoyed even by those with no formal musical training, it becomes a popular music. Astonishingly, popular music, however commonplace and innocuous in its nature, has always been able to offer sufficient space for social, cultural and political activism by challenging the established power

structures with quite an impact. As George Steiner puts it, music, much like art and literature is a critical act, akin to Arnold's notion of "a criticism of life" in that, whatever garb such criticism may wear, "the construct of the artist is a counter-statement to the world" (Steiner 1989).

Since popular music, along with other symbols and expressions such as clothes, gestures, insignia and speeches, becomes instrumental in the creation of what Pierre Bourdieu calls "symbolic power", protest music and songs use this popularity of the artist and of the genre—rap—to pull the masses and bring more attention to a specific issue. Music has come in handy, rather as a provocative tool, as and when people have felt let down by the authority, in checking the injustice meted out to them and to raise their voice against the impositions of the unacceptable. Such songs are usually either politically indicted about topical issues, taking an aim at the government, or are culturally focused songs pointing at the wrongs and discrimination faced by the marginalized groups or the ordinary masses. Also, to sustain a prolonged struggle, it requires a regular fuelling of motivation and energy through a variety of modes and actions and here music becomes useful to impart a supplement of enthusiasm and tenacity. Music with its mass appeal has the capacity to infuse fresh vigour among protesters when the agitation is getting dull, monotonous and full of hardships.

As has been witnessed during the farmers' protests, many contemporary Punjabi singers came out in support of the Indian farmers' struggle through their music. Their songs related to Sikh history and religion, stories of valour, Punjabis in the armed forces, pre-partition Punjab, the struggle for Independence, the Punjabi diaspora and the unity of the farmers of Punjab, Haryana and Uttar Pradesh. The Punjabi songs, with their homespun brand of foot-stomping music, have always been part of popular culture, appealing the masses even across linguistic barriers. Blending the folk sounds of *tumbi* and *dhol* with genres like hip-hop/gangsta rap and disco, Punjabi music composers and singers have managed to catch the pulse of the modern youth. The groovy notes and trippy beats along with relatable lyrics make a compelling package. With this kind of music being played out and using sarcasm in the lyrics, the singers

raised their voices against 'Delhi', the seat of the Union government, also bashing up the biased media and its fake narratives against the farming community.

The song "Sun Dilliye", by Rajvir Jawanda, pen down by Saab Pangota, says: "Tenu das k aaye ha hoja kaim ni, tere kad k jawage sare vaim ni, tere mann ch na reh j koi shaq dilliye, le k mudage...mudage Punjab asi haq dilliye..." It translates as: "we have come by warning you...we here to remove every doubt of yours...no doubt should be left in your heart.... we will go Punjab only when we will have our rights!" Another popular song that advocates for farmers' rights is Jass Bajwa's "Jatt Takda Hoja", which had 6.3 lakh views, urges Jatt farmers to fight for their land that they have been tilling since centuries: "O Center Ton Bill Pass Karake Kehnde Ne Hun Masla Behje O Haqq Tan Laike Shaddnage Bhawe Chakkna Asla Paije...Jatta Takda Hoja", translating into: "Center has passed the bills and now are expecting that farmers should accept it, we will not go back until we are given our rights backGear up boy!"

(<https://www.outlookindia.com/website/story/entertainment-news-kisan-vs-delhi-how-punjabi-singers-contributed-to-the-farmers-protest-by-words-and-melody/401790>)

A protest song carries an impact, shapes opinions and determines actions through semiotic means. Many more Punjabi songs became popular on YouTube, like Ranjit Bawa's *Punjab Bolda* crossed 35 million views, Rajvir Jawanda's *Sun Dilliye* got 7.5 million views, Gippy Grewal's *Zaalam Sarkaaan* 5.5 million views, and Himmat Sandhu's *Asi Vaddange* received 3.2 million views. It can be instrumental in building solidarity, uplifting activists and forming and asserting a collective identity. There have been instances in the past where some form of oppression found voice through musical expressions and could raise an uproar in an otherwise-silenced masses. For instance, in protest of the arrest of the famous poet Faiz Ahmad Faiz, Iqbal Bano had sung "Hum Dekhenge" at a jam-packed Lahore stadium in February 1986 and a crusade was launched, the defiance against the dictatorship of General Zia-ul Haq was unleashed as the singer appeared in a black saree and openly refused to follow the ban imposed on the wearing of sarees. Such is the power of music and the iconic image of the singers that crowds of ordinary

people can be set ablaze in a single stroke of challenging musical notes soulfully presented. Thus, popular music has the force and the influence in conjuring up a passionate sentiment of intense resistance among an otherwise subdued public known for its generally conforming track records.

Kisan Anthem is yet another song that features the struggles of farmers during the protests. Some part of lyrics read thus: "...*Bik gaya bhawe India da media, BBC de utte jatt chay ehoye ne* (So what if the Indian media has sold itself, Jatts are famous on BBC News).” The medley has been prepared by popular singers, belonging to both Haryana and Punjab, like Mankirt Aulakh, Nishawn Bhullar, Jass Bajwa, Jordan Sandhu, Fazilpuria, Dilpreet Dhillon, Dj Flow, Shree Brar, Afsana Khan, Bobby Sandhu. In a song titled *Punjab Bolda* (Punjab Speaks), singer Ranjit Bawa sang: "...*Dhakke nal dasi jande attwadi aj da, national media bhike dab hala chaj da* (Forcibly, they [the Indian media] are calling farmers terrorists, the national media is good for nothing).” Similarly, a couplet from renowned Punjabi singer Kanwar Grewal’s song *Ailan* became a slogan of the movement: "...*Tainu Delhiyee kath pareshan karuga, par faslan de faisle kisan karuga* (Delhi [Union government], this farmers’ gathering will trouble you, but it is farmers who will make decisions about their crops)”).

For centuries, popular culture has been a tool for ordinary people to externalize political frustrations even prior to the existence of advanced technologies. It was one of the few forms of soft power used by the public to catch their governments’ attention, and examples of these are found across cultures and times. Today, as agitations become a recurrent happening across the world, popular culture still serves as an appeasement for people’s conscience. It is hard to ignore the sociocultural and political significance that popular culture plays when it comes to dissent. The elements of popular culture elements are handy organic tools for protesters. Not only do they mirror common concepts that bring together all protests but they also provide relatable images that the public can associate and engage with. But this has also resulted in a blurring of the lines between what is considered to be cultural, political and ‘popular’.

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