Felder des Widerstands: Die Rolle der zeitgenössischen Kunst bei der Bewältigung der Agrarkrise in Indien

Fields of Resistance: The Role of Contemporary Art in Addressing the Agrarian Crisis in India

Dissertation for obtaining the academic degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

At the University of Applied Arts, Vienna

by:

Preeti Kathuria

Vienna, November 2025

Supervised by:

Univ.-Prof.in Mag.A Dr.in Eva Kernbauer

Art History, University of Applied Arts, Vienna

Univ.-Prof.in Mag.A Dr.in Isabel Kranz

Cultural Studies, University of Applied Arts, Vienna

Examined by:

Prof. Kenneth Bo Nielsen, Social Anthropology, University of Oslo, Norway

Univ.-Prof.in Mag.A Dr.in Eva Kernbauer, University of Applied Arts, Vienna

Univ.-Prof.in Mag.A Dr.in Isabel Kranz, University of Applied Arts, Vienna

Fields of Resistance: The Role of Contemporary Art in Addressing the Agrarian Crisis in India

Preeti Kathuria
Doctor of Philosophy

Abstract English

This research focuses on how contemporary Indian artists, from 1994 onward, have addressed the agrarian crisis, particularly after the onset of neoliberal reforms. The research identifies the 2020-2021 farmer protests as a significant marker leading to a surge in artistic responses to the agrarian situation. The research describes and analyzes how diverse artistic projects and practices present their interpretations of the crisis, and exhibit them in varying rural-urban, local-national and global contexts. It examines how artists, curators, and gallerists engage with unique perspectives and material approaches, influenced by cultural and contextual constraints. The study investigates how these art practices are organized into meaningful networks, both institutionally and beyond, and how they contribute to knowledge production, meaning-making and social agency.

Abstract Deutsch

Diese Studie beschäftigt sich damit, wie zeitgenössische indische Künstler:innen nach 1994 die Agrarkrise, insbesondere seit Beginn der neoliberalen Reformen, thematisiert haben. Die Studie identifiziert die Bauernproteste der Jahre 2020 und 2021 als signifikanten Wendepunkt, der zu einer Zunahme künstlerischer Reaktionen auf die Agrarsituation geführt hat. Sie beschreibt und analysiert, wie verschiedene künstlerische Projekte und Praktiken die Krise interpretieren und diese in variierenden Kontexten - ländlich-städtisch, regional-national und global ausstellen. Sie untersucht, wie Künstler:innen, Kurator:innen und Kurator:innen sowie Galerist:innen mit einzigartigen Perspektiven und Materialansätzen umgehen, die von kulturellen und kontextuellen Zwängen beeinflusst sind. Die Studie untersucht zudem, wie diese Kunstpraktiken institutionell und darüber hinaus in sinnvollen Netzwerken organisiert sind und wie sie zur Wissensproduktion, Sinnstiftung und sozialen Handlungsfähigkeit beitragen.

List of Contents

Acknowledgements..... *9*
List of Publications..... *11*
List of Figures..... *13*
Chapter 1..... 21
Introduction.....21
1.1 Contemporary Art Signals the Agrarian Crisis.....21
1.2 The Indian Agrarian Crisis and Neoliberalism.....23
1.3 Theoretical Framework: Subaltern Studies..... 29
1.4 The Research Task.....36
1.4a "Determinants" and "Brokers".....37
1.4b Core Research Questions..... 39
1.4c Rationale of the Study.....42
1.4d Starting Points of the Research Inquiry..... 43
1.5 Research Methodology.....45
1.5a Art Historical Analysis and the Writing Position.....46
1.5b Thick Descriptions, Contextual Frameworks and Qualitative Analysis..... 48
1.5c Contextual and Comparative Mapping..... 50
1.5d Fieldwork and Selection of Case Studies.....51
1.6 Structure of the Thesis.....53
Chapter 2..... 60
Roman Antiquity as Testimony: Aditi Bhattad on Ignorance and Indifference.....60
2.1 Introduction..... 60
2.2 Documentary Film: 'Nero's Guests - The Age of Inequality' (2009)..... 61
2.3 Historical References of Emperor Nero..... 66
2.3a Polish Painting: 'Nero's Torches' (1876)..... 67
2.3b Italian Film 'Nero's Mistress' (1956)..... 70
2.3c American Documentary: 'Secrets of the Dead: The Nero Files' (2019).....71
2.3d Comparative Analysis.....72
2.4 Performance: 'Are You Nero's Guests?' (2017) and Protest Songs.....74
2.5 Concluding Discussion.....91
Chapter 3..... 94
Patriarchy, Caste, and Capitalism: Gram Art Project Collective Against the Triad.....94
3.1 Introduction..... 94
3.2 Performance: 'Cotton Stainers' (2020-2024)..... 98
3.3 Performance Relics.....104
3.4 Land as Artistic Canvas, Plants as Medium..... 120
3.5 Seed Saving and Enterprise..... 125
3.6 Performance: 'Climatical or Political' (2019).....135

3.7 'Performative Habitat' or a 'Theatre of the Oppressed'.....137
3.8 Concluding Discussion.....141
Chapter 4.....144
The Violence of Dispossession: Amar Kanwar on Sovereignty.....144
4.1 Introduction.....144
4.2 Documentary Film: 'Many Faces of Madness' (2000).....147
4.3 'The Sovereign Forest' (2011 - ongoing).....152
4.3a Films: 'The Scene of Crime' (2011) & 'A Love Story' (2010).....155
4.3b Three Handmade Books with Embedded Films.....159
4.3c 'The Evidence Room' - A Morgue of Seeds.....165
4.3d Six Folios of Textual and Photographic Evidence.....168
4.3e 'Listening Benches' at Yorkshire Sculpture Park.....173
4.3f 'Poetry as Evidence'.....175
4.3g 'The Sovereign Forest' - A Laboratory.....180
4.4 Concluding Discussion.....187
Chapter 5.....190
Thukral & Tagra's Inquiry: Wrestling Farmer and Weeping Farmland.....190
5.1 Introduction.....190
5.2 Wrestling: Combat, Control, Creativity.....192
5.3 Bread and Circuses: Roman Satire as Reference.....196
5.4 Farm Suicides, Pesticides and Berliner Blau.....215
5.5 'Weeping Farm': Theme and Survival Game Play.....223
5.6 'Kisan Mukti March' (Farmers Protest Against the Agrarian Crisis).....226
5.7 Concluding Discussion.....229
Chapter 6.....233
Artistic Response to the 2020-2021 Farmer Protests.....233
6.1 Introduction.....233
6.2 From Resistance to Reform: The Genealogy and Purpose of Protest.....234
6.3 Sagnik Samanta's 'Farmland to La La Land' (2021).....240
6.4 Pushpamala N.: Protest Slogans.....243
6.5 Kulpreet Singh's Artistic Re-enactment of Violence.....247
6.5a Angst or Resistance: Mark-making and Stone Pelting.....249
6.5b. Film: 'Indelible Marks'.....252
6.5c Violence and Trauma.....254
6.5d 'Fossils of Force' and 'Langar' (2025).....256
6.6 Vidyun Sabhaney & Orijit Sen: Zines, Comics and Graphic Novels.....258
6.6a 'Drawing Resistance' (2020) and 'Punjab Sketchbook' (2024).....258
6.6b. 'Food and Farming' (2024).....263
6.6c Non-Fiction Comic Tradition and the 'River of Stories' (1994).....269
6.7 Concluding Discussion.....275
Conclusion.....279

7.1 Summary....279
7.2 Reflection of Methodology....280
7.3 Research Findings....283
7.4 Directions for Future Research....290
7.5 Limitations of the Study....294
7.6 Final thoughts....295
Bibliography....297
Appendices....331
1A. Artist Database....331
2A. Poetry: Bismil Azimabadi....344
2B. Poetry: Dushyant Kumar....344
2C. Poetry: Gram Art Collective (2016)....345
2D. Poetry: Balli Singh Cheema....346
2E. Interview: Aditi Bhattad (September 2023)....347
2F. Transcription: Chat with Tanmay SJ, Member, Gram Art Collective (October - November 2024)....352
3A. Field Notes: Gram Art Collective Studio, Paradsinga, Madhya Pradesh, (February 2024)....355
3B. Interview: Shweta Bhattad (July 2023)....356
4A. Conversation: Jiten Thukral and Sumir Tagra (7 July 2023)....358
4B. Swaminathan Commission Report....365
5A. Transcription: Video - Amar Kanwar with Clare Lilley, Director Programmes, YSL, UK (2014)....367
5B. Transcription: Amar Kanwar: 'Louder than Words: Global Leaders on the Frontline of Culture' (2017)....369

Author's Declaration

Preeti Kathuria

Fields of Resistance: The Role of Contemporary Art in Addressing the Agrarian Crisis in India

I hereby declare, that I have written this dissertation independently in accordance with the principles of good scientific practice, have not used any sources or aids other than those indicated, and have not made use of any other unauthorized aids, that this dissertation has not yet been submitted for assessment in any form, either at home or abroad, and,
that this copy fully corresponds to both the work submitted electronically and the work uploaded for publication after assessment by the University Library of the University of Applied Arts Vienna.

Date: 5 November 2025
Place: Vienna, Austria

Signature: Preeti Kathuria

© Preeti Kathuria, 2025

Acknowledgements

Working on this thesis has been both challenging and invigorating, an experience that affected me more deeply than I had anticipated. Engaging with themes rooted in real-life experiences demanded care, focus, and a commitment to honoring the humanity of those involved. I delved into history and theory, wandered into unfamiliar disciplines, and explored the often opaque terrain of visual epistemology. I felt overwhelmed. There have been days when everything felt too banal in the face of miseries and tragedies all around us. I often questioned my process, and then realized that we all have something we are meant to do and sometimes the most radical act is simply doing your work sincerely. In retrospect, I feel deeply gratified to have taken these uncertain paths, buoyed and stretched by the unwavering support of family, friends, peers, scholars, and supervisors. I am richer for having been challenged in so many ways.

There are many people to thank for their companionship and generosity throughout this journey as without them, this thesis would have no content, and certainly no heart. I owe immense gratitude to all the participants: artists, farmers, activists, curators, filmmakers, collectives, gallerists, authors, journalists, and others, whose significant work served as both foundation and inspiration.

To my first supervisor, Prof. Eva Kernbauer, thank you for your constant encouragement, insightful feedback, and steady support. I have greatly appreciated your thoughtful comments, which consistently challenged me to clarify my arguments and strengthen the rigour of my work. I am equally grateful to my second supervisor, Prof. Isabel Kranz, whose critical engagement was thoughtful. I thank you both for believing in me and making this PhD journey an intellectually and personally enriching one.

To my colleagues at the Department of Art History: thank you for fostering a collegial and reflective environment. I am especially grateful to Professors, Authors and subject experts who shared feedback on my writing and publications: Julienne Lorz, Anita Hosseini, Mick Wilson, Amandeep Sandhu, Edward Chamberlain, and Andrea + Chiara from the Tint Journal, Graz. Your insights helped me refine and deepen my thinking. Special thanks to Ruth Anderwald and Leonhard Grond for your feedback during the Angewandte Research Week and for the opportunity to contribute to *The Art of Resistance* project. I am thankful to artists-and-curators Livia Pancu and Florin Bobu for actively engaging with my research and providing opportunities to present my work through Tranzit.ro – Iași. I can never

forget how Edda Thürriedl stepped in to support me at some of the most difficult organisational, administrative phases of this research, and I hold immense gratitude towards her. I extend my sincere gratitude to the Office of the Dean of Studies, Support Art and Research (SKF) and Zentrum Fokus Forschung (ZFF), University of Applied Arts, Vienna, for supporting the process of this research.

This journey would not have been possible without the steadfast love and support of my family. You all stood by me and never questioned my decision to leave my life and career in India, in order to pursue this research from the other side of the world. I am incredibly grateful to my partner, Prof. Satish Pandey, my first reader, sharpest critic, and an unwavering companion. You generously shared the gems of your doctoral wisdom, bought for me every book I ever needed, and tirelessly walked with me through countless exhibitions and talks, even the ones that were difficult to access and sometimes super boring for you. Your kindness and support created the conditions that made this doctoral journey possible. To my parents, Sunita and Manohar Kathuria, thank you for the values you instilled in me, your belief in hard work, consistency, and perseverance continues to guide me. To the most loving sibling, Poonam Nanda: your strength, serenity, and boundless optimism have been my anchor. To my elder brother, Dr. Mahesh Pandey, who in his own special ways encouraged me to give it my best. To Raluca in Romania, who encouraged and stood firmly around me in all the good and not-so-good phases of this journey. I met Ilsa Markl and Rudolf Ringsmuth by sheer coincidence and they became home for me in Vienna.

I am thankful for the warm, vibrant community of friends and peers in India, Austria, Sweden, and Romania. Your support offered through conversations, meals, lots of coffee, walks, and shared silences has meant more than words can express. The gardens, cafes, museums, bookshops, sidewalks, birds, and rivers of Vienna have also played a quiet yet vital role, offering spaces for reflection and inspiration and they, too, are part of this research journey.

List of Publications

The papers, interviews and book reviews listed below were published (or accepted for publishing) based on the research conducted within this thesis:

Kathuria, Preeti.'Book Review: Food & Farming - A Journey Through India in Comics'. *Food and Foodways -Explorations in the History and Culture of Human Nourishment*, Routledge, Taylor & Francis, June 2025. https://doi.org/10.1080/07409710.2025.2523630

———. 'Thick Descriptions: Articulating Human Contestation of the Crisis — In Conversation with Author Ranjana Padhi'. *Tint Journal*, April 2025. https://tintjournal.com/interview/thick-descriptions-articulating-human-contestation-of-the-crisis-in-conversation-with-author-ranjana-padhi

———.'Curate — Speculate: Indian Contemporary Art and the Socio-Ecological Contingency', *ONCURATING Journal,* February 2025. https://www.on-curating.org/issue-59-reader/curate-speculate-indian-contemporary-art-and-the-socio-ecological-contingency.html.

———. 'Threading a Way between Memoir, History and Reportage — In Conversation with Author Amandeep Sandhu'. *Tint Journal*, December 2024. https://tintjournal.com/interview/threading-a-way-between-memoir-history-and-reportage-in-conversation-with-author-amandeep-sandhu.

———. 'Iterations and Interventions: Temporal Agency of Indian Contemporary Art Amidst Agrarian Distress'. *The Wollesen: Contretemps | University of Toronto Art Journals* Vol. 11 No. 1. 2024. https://utaj.library.utoronto.ca/index.php/utaj/issue/view/2862.

———. 'Who's Wrestling? Agrarian Crisis and Artistic Combat', *Book Chapter: The Art of Resistance Project, Creative Europe Programme of the European Union, Verlag für Moderne Kunst, 2025. p.85-91*

———. 'Activism and Assertion: Posters and Prints as forms of Resistance in Indian Contemporary Art'. *Proceedings of International Symposium on Printmaking by International Print Exchange Programme (IPEP) India, 3-5 November 2023.* (Accepted for publication)

List of Figures

CHAPTER 2

2.1- 2.2	*Deepa Mehta, 'Nero's Guest', 2009, Film, Poster and Still of P. Sainath, 57 minutes, colour, Mistral Movies, India. Image Credits: IMDb (Internet Movie Database)*
2.3	*Deepa Mehta, 'Nero's Guest', 2009, Film, Stills, 57 minutes, colour, Mistral Movies, India. Image Credits: IMDb (Internet Movie Database)*
2.4 - 2.5	*Stefano Vanzina,'Nero's Mistress', 1956, Film, Poster and Still Images, 95 minutes, colour, Italy. Image Credits: IMDb (Internet Movie Database)*
2.6	*Henryk Siemiradzki,'Nero's Torches' or 'Candlesticks of Christianity', 1876, Painting, oil on canvas, 385 × 705 cm, National Museum, Kraków. Image Credits: Wikimedia Commons*
2.7	*'Alexamenos Graffito', AD 200, Graphic representation. Image Credits: Wikimedia Commons*
2.8	*Gram Art Project Collective, 'Eaten Cotton.. A Love Story.. A Cook Book' Pages 38-39, 2022, Artist Book, handmade, 80 pages, Paradasinga Village, Madhya Pradesh, India. Image Credits: Gram Art Project Collective*
2.9	*Gram Art Project Collective, 'Dear PM Please Grow in India', 2016, Crop Art/Land Art, Dimensions variable, Paradasinga Village, Madhya Pradesh, India. Image Credits: Gram Art Project Collective*
2.10	*Aditi Bhattad, 'Are You Nero's Guests?', 2017, Performance, 120 minutes, Vadehra Art Gallery, Delhi, India. Image Credits: Foundation for Indian Contemporary Art (FICA), New Delhi*

CHAPTER 3

3.1	*Gram Art Project Collective, 'Cotton Stainers', 2022, Performance, Threading the Horizon Exhibition, Khoj, Delhi. Image Credits: Gram Art Project Collective & Khoj*
3.2	*Gram Art Project Collective,'Cotton Stainers', 2022, Performance, Documentation image, Threading the Horizon Exhibition, Khoj, Delhi. Image Credits: Gram Art Project Collective & Khoj*
3.3	*Gram Art Project Collective,'Cotton Stainers', 2022, Performance, Installation shot, Threading the Horizon Exhibition, Khoj, Delhi. Image Credits: Gram Art Project Collective & Khoj*
3.4-3.5	*Gram Art Project Collective, 'Cotton Stainers', 2022, Embroidery Rings, wood, cloth, thread, Threading the Horizon Exhibition, Khoj, Delhi. Image Credits: Gram Art Collective & Khoj*
3.6	*Gram Art Project Collective,'kapaas Kapaas KAPAAS', Cotton Stainers, 2022, Threading the Horizon Exhibition, Khoj, Delhi, 2022. Image Credits: Gram Art Project Collective & Khoj*

3.7	*Gram Art Project Collective,'Humaare Jameen Ka Ek Tukda' (A Piece of Our Land), Cotton Stainers, 2022, Threading the Horizon Exhibition, Khoj, Delhi. Image Credits: Gram Art Project Collective & Khoj*
3.8	*Gram Art Project Collective, Making of the Seed Paper, 2023, Field visit, Paradsinga, Madhya Pradesh. Image Credits: Preeti Kathuria*
3.9	*Gram Art Project Collective, Seeds, Cotton Crop, 'Cotton Stainers', 2022, Khoj Delhi. Image Credits: Gram Art Project Collective*
3.10-3.11	*Gram Art Project Collective, 'Eaten Cotton.. A Love Story.. A Cook Book', 2022, Artist Book, 80 pages, handmade paper, Khoj, Delhi. Image Credits: Gram Art Project Collective*
3.12	*Gram Art Project Collective, 'Cotton Stainers', 2022, Textile Sculpture, hand-printed textile, kitchen utensils, thread, Threading the Horizon Exhibition, Khoj, Delhi. Image Credits: Gram Art Project Collective & Khoj*
3.13	*Detail of Fig. 3.12*
3.14	*Gram Art Project Collective,'Cotton Stainers', 2022, Performance, Threading the Horizon Exhibition, Khoj, Delhi. Image Credits: Gram Art Collective & Khoj*
3.15-3.16	*Gram Art Project Collective,'Cotton Stainers', 2022, pages from the exhibition catalogue, Threading the Horizon, Khoj, Delhi. Image Credits: Gram Art Project Collective & Khoj*
3.17	*Gram Art Project Collective,'Cotton Stainers' 2024, Iteration, Poster / Publicity material, ORA Ideas Festival, Khoj, Delhi. Image Credits: Gram Art Collective & Khoj*
3.18	*Gram Art Project Collective,'Cotton Stainers' 2024 Iteration, Installation shot on Social Media, ORA Ideas Festival, Khoj, Delhi. Image Credits: Gram Art Project Collective & Khoj*
3.19	*Gram Art Project Collective,'Cotton Stainers' 2024 Iteration, Performance, Photo Documentation, ORA Ideas Festival, Khoj. Image Credits: Gram Art Project Collective & Khoj*
3.20-3.21	*Gram Art Project Collective,'I have a Dream', 2014-16, Land Art, Global Community Project, collaboration with Vancouver Biennale. Image Credits: Gram Art Project Collective & Vancouver Biennale*
3.22	*Gram Art Project Collective,'Seed Saving', 2023, Paradsinga, Madhya Pradesh. Image Credits: Gram Art Project Collective*
3.23	*Gram Art Project Collective,'Seed Bands', 2024, Paradsinga, Madhya Pradesh, Image Credits: Gram Art Collective (Social Media Handle)*
3.24	*Gram Art Project Collective,'Seed Bands', 2023, Paradsinga, Madhya Pradesh. Image Courtesy: Gram Art Project Collective*
3.25	*Gram Art Project Collective,'Seed Crackers', 2023, Paradsinga, Madhya Pradesh. Image Courtesy: Gram Art Project Collective*
3.26	*Gram Art Project Collective, Woman doing embroidery on a seed calendar, 2021, Group Exhibition 'Can You Hear My Voice?', Margaret Lawrence Gallery, University of Melbourne, Australia. Image Courtesy: Gram Art Project Collective*

3.27	*Gram Art Project Collective, 'Seed Calendars with embroidery' (detail), 2021, Group Exhibition 'Can You Hear My Voice?', Margaret Lawrence Gallery, University of Melbourne, Australia, 2021. Image Courtesy: Gram Art Project Collective*
3.28	*Gram Art Project Collective, 'Seed Calendars', 2021, Installation Shot, Group Exhibition 'Can You Hear My Voice?', Margaret Lawrence Gallery, University of Melbourne, Australia. Image Courtesy: Gram Art Project Collective*
3.29	*Gram Art Project Collective,'Logo', 2-13, Paradsinga Village, Madhya Pradesh. Image Credits: Gram Art Project Collective*
3.30	*Gram Art Project Collective, Traditional Seed Saving methods, 2023, Gram Art Project Collective Studio, Paradsinga Village, Madhya Pradesh. Image Credits: Preeti Kathuria*
3.31	*Gram Art Project Collective, Shweta Bhattad, 2023, Gram Art Project Collective Studio, Paradsinga Village, Madhya Pradesh. Image Credits: Preeti Kathuria*
3.323.33	*Gram Art Project Collective, 'Climatical or Political?', 2019, Food, Performance and Dinner, Max Mueller Bhavan, Goethe Institute, Delhi. Image Courtesy: Gram Art Project Collective & Goethe Institute, Delhi*

CHAPTER 4

4.1	*Amar Kanwar, 'Many Faces of Madness', 2000, Film, 20-minutes loop, colour. Image Credits: Amar Kanwar*
4.2	*Amar Kanwar, 'The Scene of Crime', 2011, audio-visual Installation, 42 minutes, ©Photo: Centre Pompidou, Paris*
4.3	*Amar Kanwar, 'The Scene of Crime', 2011, audio-visual Installation, duration 42 mins. ©Marian Goodman Gallery*
4.4	*Amar Kanwar, 'The Counting Sisters and Other Stories', 2011, Silk-screen handmade banana fiber–paper book. ©Photo: Artist*
4.5	*Amar Kanwar, 'The Counting Sisters and Other Stories', 2011, Installation shot, Projection: HD Colour, silent, 40 min. ©Photo: Artist*
4.6	*Amar Kanwar, Portrait of Shankar Guha Niyogi with his tape-recorder, 2014, The Sovereign Forest Catalogue, p.227, TBA21. © TBA21 and Amar Kanwar*
4.7	*Amar Kanwar, The Prediction (1991-2012), Book: handmade banana fiber paper, screen print, hand sewn; single-channel video projection, Video, colour, 8 minutes*
4.8	*Amar Kanwar, 'The Constitution', 2012, Installation View, handmade book, wooden table, lamp and single-channel video projection, color, silent, 9 minutes, TBA 21, Vienna, Austria, 2014. © Amar Kanwar*
4.9	*Amar Kanwar, 'The Evidence Room', Installation View of 'The Sovereign Forest', Nepal Art Council, Kathmandu, 2023-24. Image credits: Photo Circle, Kathmandu*
4.10	*Amar Kanwar, '272 Varieties of Indigenous, Organic Rice Seeds', 2014, Installation View, detail. © Amar Kanwar*
4.11	*Amar Kanwar, 'The Seed Book', 2012, Digital prints, Dimensions variable. © Amar Kanwar*

4.12	*Amar Kanwar, 'Photo Album 1: The Lying Down Protest', Book, digital print, dimensions variable, Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary Collection, 2012 © Amar Kanwar*
4.13	*Amar Kanwar, Listening Bench #3, Recycled local wood, soundtrack: 11.06 minutes, 48 x 160 x 32.5 cm. © Amar Kanwar 2013*
4.14	*Amar Kanwar, 'Poetry as Evidence' 2024, Cover page, Outlook Magazine, January edition. © Amar Kanwar, Outlook Magazine*
4.15	*Amar Kanwar, 'Women farmers form a human chain to protest against farm laws in Noida in 2021', 2024, photograph accompanying 'Miniscule Minority' poetry penned by Akhil Khatyal, Outlook Magazine, p.94, January edition. © Amar Kanwar, Outlook Magazine*
4.16	*Amar Kanwar, 'The Sovereign Forest', 2012–13, Installation view, Kochi-Muziris Biennial, Aspinwall House, Fort Kochi, Kerala, India. © Amar Kanwar and Kochi -Muziris Biennial*
4.17	*Amar Kanwar, The Sovereign Forest', 2013-14, Installation view, TBA21, Augarten, Vienna, Austria. © Amar Kanwar, TBA21*

CHAPTER 5

5.1	*Thukral and Tagra,'Weeping Farm', 2022, Artist Book (Cover page), Delhi. Image Credits: Thukral and Tagra*
5.2	*Thukral and Tagra,'Weeping Farm', 2022, Artist Book (Illustration, inside page), p.27,Delhi. Image Credits: Thukral and Tagra*
5.3	*Thukral and Tagra,'Weeping Farm', 2022, Artist Book (inside page), p.11, Delhi. Image Credits: Thukral and Tagra*
5.4	*Thukral and Tagra,'Bread Circuses and Wifi', 2017, Exhibition Logo, Pearl Lam Gallery, Hong Kong. Image Credits: Thukral and Tagra*
5.5	*Thukral and Tagra,'Bread Circuses and You', 2017, Exhibition Logo, Art Fair Dubai. Image Credits: Thukral and Tagra*
5.6	*Thukral and Tagra,'Farmer is a Wrestler', 2019, Exhibition Logo, Multimedia (first Iteration), Lalit Kala Akademi, Chandigarh, Punjab. Image Credits: Thukral and Tagra*
5.7	*Thukral and Tagra,'Bread Circuses and I', 2019, Exhibition Logo, Multimedia, Nature Morte Gallery, Delhi. Image Credits: Thukral and Tagra*
5.8	*Thukral and Tagra,'Bread Winner', 2017, Installation shot, Board Game, 'Bread, Circuses & Wifi', Pearl Lam Gallery, Hong Kong. Image Credits: Thukral and Tagra*
5.9	*Thukral and Tagra,'Bread Winner', 2017, Rules of the Board Game, 'Bread, Circuses & Wifi', Pearl Lam Gallery, Hong Kong. Image Credits: Thukral and Tagra*
5.10	*Thukral and Tagra,'Bread Winner', 2017, Board Game (details), 'Bread, Circuses & Wifi', Pearl Lam Gallery, Hong Kong. Image Credits: Thukral and Tagra*

5.11	*Thukral and Tagra,'Bread Winner', 2022, Banners, 5th Biennial of Contemporary Art Mardin, Turkey. Image Credits: Thukral and Tagra*
5.12	*Thukral and Tagra,'Bread Winner', 2022, Banners, 5th Biennial of Contemporary Art Mardin, Turkey. Image Credits: Thukral and Tagra*
5.13	*Thukral and Tagra,'Bread Winner', 2022, Board Game installation, 5th Biennial of Contemporary Art Mardin, Turkey. Image Credits: Thukral and Tagra*
5.14	*Thukral and Tagra,'Out of Play', 2017, 'Bread, Circuses & Wifi', Pearl Lam Gallery, Hong Kong. Image Credits: Thukral and Tagra*
5.15	*Thukral and Tagra,'Out of Play' (detail), 2017, 'Bread, Circuses & Wifi', Pearl Lam Gallery, Hong Kong. Image Credits: Thukral and Tagra*
5.16	*Thukral and Tagra,'Bakers Dozen' (detail), 2017, Painting, Oil on canvas, 25.4x25.4 cm x 13 pcs, 'Bread, Circuses & Wifi', Pearl Lam Gallery, Hong Kong. Image Credits: Thukral and Tagra*
5.17	*Thukral and Tagra, 'Bread, Circuses & You', 2017, Installation shot,, Art Fair, Dubai. Image Credits: Thukral and Tagra*
5.18	*Thukral and Tagra,'Slash', 2017, Oil on Canvas, Set of 5, 30x6x2 inches, 'Bread, Circuses & You', Art Fair, Dubai. Image Credits: Thukral and Tagra*
5.19	*Thukral and Tagra,'Panem Coleus', 2017, Oil on Canvas, 60x84 inches, 'Bread, Circuses & You', Art Fair, Dubai. Image Credits: Thukral and Tagra*
5.20	*Thukral and Tagra, 'Farmer is a Wrestler', 2019, Exhibition Poster, Lalit Kala Akademi, Chandigarh, Punjab. Image Credits: Thukral and Tagra*
5.21	*Thukral and Tagra, 'Farmer is a Wrestler', 2019, Installation Shot, Lalit Kala Akademi, Chandigarh, Punjab. Image Credits: Thukral and Tagra*
5.22	*Thukral and Tagra,'Distress Equations', 2019, 'Farmer is a Wrestler', Lalit Kala Akademi, Chandigarh, Punjab. Image Credits: Thukral and Tagra*
5.23	*Thukral and Tagra, 'Farmer is a Wrestler', 2019, Installation Shot, Lalit Kala Akademi, Chandigarh, Punjab. Image Credits: Thukral and Tagra*
5.24	*Thukral and Tagra,'Farmer is a Wrestler' 2019, Installation shot, Interactive-Performative Game, 'Bread Circuses and TBD' Exhibition, Weston Gallery, Yorkshire Sculpture Park (YSP), UK. Image Credits: Thukral and Tagra*
5.25	*Thukral and Tagra,'Certificate of Sincerity', 2019, 'Farmer is a Wrestler' Interactive-Performative Game, 'Bread Circuses and TBD' Exhibition, Weston Gallery, Yorkshire Sculpture Park (YSP), UK. Image Credits: Thukral and Tagra*
5.26	*Thukral and Tagra,'Distress Equation (Infinity)', 2019, Oil on linen canvas, 72x48x2 inches, Bread Circuses & I, Nature Morte, Delhi. Image Credits: Thukral and Tagra*
5.27	*Thukral and Tagra,'Distress Mathematics (Zero)', 2019, Oil on canvas, unstretched, 120x192 inches, Bread Circuses & I, Nature Morte, Delhi. Image Credits: Thukral and Tagra*
5.28	*Thukral and Tagra, 'Bread Circuses & I', 2019, Installation View, Nature Morte, Delhi, 2019. Image Credits: Thukral and Tagra*

5.29	*Thukral and Tagra,'A Dozen – Distress Symbols', 2019, Cast Iron, 12 x (5 x 6 x 4 inches), 6kg each kept on wooden board 120 x 24 x 2 inches, Bread Circuses & I, Nature Morte, Delhi. Image Credits: Thukral and Tagra*
5.30	*Thukral and Tagra,'A Dozen – Distress Symbols' (Detail), 2019, Cast Iron, 12 x (5 x 6 x 4 inches), 6kg each kept on wooden board 120 x 24 x 2 inches, Bread Circuses & I, Nature Morte, Delhi. Image Credits: Thukral and Tagra*
5.31	*Thukral and Tagra,'Surjeet Singh', 2019, Single channel Video, duration: 27 minutes, Bread Circuses & I, Nature Morte, Delhi. Image Credits: Thukral and Tagra.*
5.32	*Thukral and Tagra,'Aftermath – Swaminathan Commission Report – Serving and Saving Farming, Reports on agrarian crisis', 2019, Fountain Ink on inkjet print (The residue of installation on paper with pesticide spray machine – 3-sec spray after every 30 mins), 72 x 120 x 72 inches, Bread Circuses & I, Nature Morte, Delhi. Image Credits: Thukral and Tagra*
5.33	*Thukral and Tagra,'Surjeet Singh', 2019, Single channel Video, duration: 27 mins, Group Exhibition: The Sundry Effect, Bikaner House, Delhi, 2020. Image Credits: Thukral and Tagra*
5.34	*Thukral and Tagra,'Aftermath – Swaminathan Commission Report – Serving and Saving Farming, Reports on agrarian crisis', 2019, Fountain Ink on inkjet print (The residue of installation on paper with pesticide spray machine – 3-sec spray after every 30 mins), The Sundry Effect, Bikaner House, Delhi. Image Credits: Thukral and Tagra*
5.35	*Thukral and Tagra, 'Surjeet Singh', 2019, Installation View, Group Exhibition: The Sundry Effect, Bikaner House, Delhi, 2020. Image Credits: Thukral and Tagra*
5.36	*Thukral and Tagra,'Verbal Kabaddi', 2019, Game, 7 offset printed card set, 2.5 x 3.5 inches. Image Credits: Thukral and Tagra*
5.37	*Thukral and Tagra,'Verbal Kabaddi', 2019, (detail) Game, 7 offset printed card set, 2.5 x 3.5 inches. Image Credits: Thukral and Tagra*
5.38	*Thukral and Tagra,'Verbal Kabaddi VII - Climate Anxiety in a single breath', 2021, Walthamstow Town Square, UK. Image Credits: Thukral and Tagra*
5.39	*Thukral and Tagra,'The Game Play -Weeping Farm', 2022, Game installation, Khoj, Delhi. Image Credits: Thukral and Tagra*
5.40	*Thukral and Tagra,'The Game Play -Weeping Farm', 2022, Game Cards and Instructions, 9.75x7 inches, Latitude28, Delhi. Image Credits: Thukral and Tagra*
5.41	*Thukral and Tagra,'Weeping Farm' Series, 2022, Pen & Ink Drawing on Paper, Khoj, Delhi. Image Credits: Thukral and Tagra*
5.42	*Thukral and Tagra,'Trolley Times', 2020, Newsletter, Hindi, Delhi. Image Credits: Thukral and Tagra*
5.43	*Thukral and Tagra,'Trolley Times', 2020, Newsletter, English, Delhi. Image Credits: Thukral and Tagra*
5.44	*Thukral and Tagra,'Trolley Times', 2020, Newsletter, digital footprint. Image Credits: Thukral and Tagra*

CHAPTER 6

6.1-6.3	*Sagnik Samanta, 'Farmland to La La Land', 2021, Set of 17, 12x18 inches, Edition 1 of 5, Digital prints on Hahnemühle Archival paper, Art Heritage Gallery, Delhi. Image Credits: Sagnik Samanta and Art Heritage Gallery*
6.4	*Pushpamala N., 'Nara', 2023, Set of 52, texts and drawings etched on copper sheet, coloured with patinas, 2020-2022, 8.5x10.5 inches (each framed plate), Group Exhibition: Archaeology of the Self: Archives, Anarchives and the Artist, Art Heritage Gallery, Delhi. Image Credits: Pushpamala N. and Art Heritage Gallery*
6.5	*Kulpreet Singh,'Indelible Black Marks I', 2022-24, Performance art. Image Credits: Kulpreet Singh*
6.6	*Kulpreet Singh,'Indelible Black Marks II', 2022-24, Performance art. Image Credits: Kulpreet Singh*
6.7	*Kulpreet Singh,'Indelible Black Marks I', 2022-24, Preparation for Stone-Pelting, Performance art, Punjab. Image Credits: Kulpreet Singh*
6.8	*Kulpreet Singh,'Indelible Black Marks I', 2022-24 Large scale print made at the performance, Performance art, Punjab. Image Credits: Kulpreet Singh*
6.9	*Kulpreet Singh,'Fossils of Force (Chair)', 2025, Letterpress ink on rice paper, 56.5 x 35.5 inches (143.5 x 90 cm), Galerie Mirchandani Steinreuke, Mumbai. Image Credits: Kulpreet Singh and Galerie Mirchandani Steinreuke*
6.10	*Kulpreet Singh,'Langar', 2025, Pond Room of Nine Fish Gallery, Mumbai. Image Credits: Kulpreet Singh and Nine Fish Gallery*
6.11	*Vidyun Sabhaney, 'Drawing Resistance', February 2020, Zine, page 11, Black and white, online. Image Credits: Vidyun Sabhaney*
6.12	*Vidyun Sabhaney,'Punjab Sketchbook', 2024, Illustration, Line drawing, Image Credits: Vidyun Sabhaney, Scroll Newspaper*
6.13	*Vidyun Sabhaney, Orijit Sen,'Food and Farming: A Journey Through India in Comics', 2024, Comic, 240 pages, Leftword publications. Image Credits: Leftword publications*
6.14-6.15	*Vidyun Sabhaney, Orijit Sen, 'Food and Farming: A Journey Through India in Comics', 2024, Comic, 240 pages, Leftword publications. Image Credits: Leftword publications*
6.16	*Orijit Sen, 'River of Stories', 1994, 2022, Graphic Novel, 78 pages, Blaft Publications. Image Credits: Blaft Publications*
6.17	*Orijit Sen, 'Downstream on the River of Stories', 2025, Public Lecture by Orijit Sen, Arthshila Art Gallery, Delhi. Image Credits: Orijit Sen and Blaft Publications*

6.18	*Orijit Sen, 'River of Stories', 1994, 2022, Graphic Novel, 78 pages, Blaft Publications. Image Credits: Orijit Sen and Blaft Publications*
6.19	*Orijit Sen, 'Narmada Bachao' ('Save Narmada'), 1985, Protest Logo, graphic, colour, Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA). Image Credits: NBA*
6.20	*Orijit Sen, 'Narmada Bachao' ('Save Narmada'), 1985, Photographic documentation of the Protest, Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA). Image Credits: NBA*

Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 Contemporary Art Signals the Agrarian Crisis

The Indian agrarian crisis has been signalled in many contemporary artworks. One example of this may be seen in the installation which comprised of a single-channel video titled 'Surjeet Singh' (2019) presenting an inventory of names of farmers who committed suicide due to the looming agrarian distress which unfolded at the onset of neo-liberal reforms in early 1990s in India. This installation was exhibited in Bikaner House, central Delhi in 2020 which was the year of nation-wide farmer protests against the passing of new farm laws by the government. It was shown as part of a larger contemporary art exhibition, and viewers walked inside a compact room with subtle lighting, towards a huge vertical screen. The video showed a silent, 27-minute film on data records of farm suicides floating over the appalling frontal portrait of Surjeet Singh. Singh was responsible for collecting factual statistics, reporting suicides and facilitating the paper-work for over 2000 families of deceased farmers in over 130 villages in the district Sangrur of Punjab in northern India.

The conspicuously static bearded face of Singh, sometimes blinked behind the rhythmically moving statistics of the death toll. Except for its unusual verticality, the colour screen appeared similar to the information screens commonly seen on airports and train stations. Adjacent to the screen on the walls, was the other part of the installation, a series titled 'Aftermath' which were frames of pesticide-blotted pages of the Swaminathan Commission Report[1] (2004-2006). There was a wooden bench in front of the screen for the viewer to sit and engage with the numbers

[1] The Swaminathan Committee commissioned by the National Commission of Farmers made a series of recommendations and reports from 2004 - 2006 on the Minimum Support Price (MSP) ensuring that the farmers receive higher returns from their produce. The recommendations were not accepted by the UPA government. (ET online, 'UPA Refused to Accept Swaminathan Committee's MSP Recommendations. Here's Why', *The Economic Times*, 14 February 2024) Details: Appendix:4B

performing themselves on the screen. Some viewers took reflexive photographs and some murmured to one another asking, if this is real?

Disconnected from the rest of the artworks of this large group exhibition titled 'The Sundry Effect' (2020), this installation by artist duo *Thukral and Tagra* could easily be bypassed as it was displayed in a separate room on another floor of the popular institution (Bikaner House) hosting the exhibition. There could be curatorial purpose in dispersing this part of the exhibition, even when there was no sonic interference from the video artwork. The timing of this exhibition (2020) and the carefully planned display of the installation coincide with the State's strategic introduction of new Farm laws during the Covid-19 pandemic and the subsequent protests of 2020-2021.

In the genealogy of the agrarian crisis, year 2020-2021 was a watershed moment as three new Farm laws[2] were enacted by the government of India. These new laws were modes to uphold and extend the neoliberal agenda where systems of power and commodification dictate economic transformations and decide how the natural environment should be used, governed and capitalised. Seeing these laws as pro-corporate exploitative agribusiness models, the farmers initiated a peaceful, nation-wide protest referred to as the 'Delhi Chalo' Movement.[3] The mass-mobilization and persistence of the year-long protests drew significant global attention as they exposed several deeper problems within the agricultural sector. These protests were a planned response to the farm laws and brought unprecedented visibility to the ongoing distress within the agrarian sector. This research project elaborates upon the contemporary art practices that address this agrarian crisis from 1994 onwards, giving particular attention to the changes in these artistic practices in response to the 2020-21 protests.

[2] Three Farm Laws: The Farmer Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Act, The Farmers Agreement on Price Assurance and Farm Services Act (Empowerment and Protection), and The Essential Commodities (Amendment) Act.
[3] Namita Waikar, *Farmers Protest! A Movement for Our Times* (Yoda Press, 2025).

1.2 The Indian Agrarian Crisis and Neoliberalism

Farming is at the heart of the agrarian crisis. Commonly understood as the process of growing food and fiber crops and raising food animals, farming is embedded in the larger agrifood system which includes productive factors such as land, soil, water, seeds, fertilizers, pesticides, tractors, fuel, implements, and the distributive operations of processing, transporting, wholesaling, and finally retailing of the farm produce in the marketplace. According to the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations, agri-food systems comprise all the interconnected activities and actors involved in getting food from the field to the fork.[4] In India, there are 200 million people who cannot access the food and nutrition they need.[5] The matrix of issues and problems in this agrifood system that constitute the agrarian crisis in India is development that manifest unevenly within and between disparities, structural poverty, gender inequality, food and water insecurity, energy and climate crisis, caste structures, and more. The nature of problems associated with the agrarian sector are both ecological and social. Oppression draws from an unequal play of power, privileges and hierarchies that are seeped deeply in the ideology of the rural sector of the country, making lives precarious with little or no significant shift in social and economic circumstances.

Neoliberalism in India reconfigures the relationship between the state, market, and the society. It is performed through policy changes that privilege market principles, constrain redistribution, and widen socio-economic disparities.[6] Since the 1990s, the policies have brought gradual change marked by the interplay of rollback and rollout neoliberal strategies over successive political regimes.[7] The complex transition from state-led development to a market-based one, was influenced by

---

[4] 'Agri-Food Systems', Evaluation, accessed 12 November 2024, https://www.fao.org/evaluation/highlights/agri-food-systems/en.

[5] Orijit Sen, Vidyun Sabhaney, and Harsho Mohan Chattoraj, *Food and Farming: A Journey Through India in Comics* (New Delhi: Leftword Books, 2024) p.28

[6] Kenneth Bo Nielsen and Alf Gunvald Nilsen, 'India's Evolving Neoliberal Regime of Dispossession: From the Anti-SEZ Movement to the Farm Law Protests', *Sociological Bulletin* 71, no. 4 (2022): 582–600, https://doi.org/10.1177/00380229221116932.

[7] Ibid.

both domestic and global economic pressures. Post-independent India carried with it a protectionist nationalism that was heavily influenced by Nehruvian[8] socialism which emphasized public sector undertakings (PSUs), and major state regulation. In the 1980s, the state began tentative liberalizing reforms such as relaxation of industrial licensing, encouraging private capital, and telecom reforms.[9] Due to a huge debt-crisis in the late 1980s the government implemented the New Economic Policy in 1991 and India opened itself to Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) leading to deregulated industries and fast liberalization of the financial and banking sector.[10] According to international organisations such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Trade Organisation (WTO), the implementation of neoliberal policies by the Indian government was the ideal way forward, in order to create faster economic growth and greater social equity.[11] However, this was not just an economic shift, it was a huge ideological shift from state-led growth structure to market-led growth models, encouraging public-private partnerships in various sectors leading to sustained attacks on state support to agriculture.

According to Partha Chatterjee, throughout the 1980s and 1990s, neoliberal governmental techniques aimed at satisfying public demands differentially, a tactical balancing of electoral heft of each particular interest against the constraint of resources.[12] The expansion of the neoliberal reforms primarily from early 1990s till about 2008 gradually and consistently shifted the role of the state from being a provider to being a mere facilitator in the increasingly privatized models of growth in large sectors such as health, education, and finance. In 1994, India signed the WTO's 'Agreement on Agriculture', a not-so-fair, “Fairtrade” agreement, which led to reduced import restrictions and soon imported food grain entered the Indian

[8] ‘Nehruvian’ refers to the ideas, policies, and philosophy associated with Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru who was the first Prime Minister of independent India (1947–1964).
[9] Vamsi Vakulabharanam and Sripad Motiram, ‘Mobility and Inequality in Neoliberal India’, *Contemporary South Asia* 24, no. 3 (2016): 257–70, https://doi.org/10.1080/09584935.2016.1203862.
[10] R. Nagaraj, *Growth, Inequality and Social Development in India: Is Inclusive Growth Possible?* (Springer, 2012). p.19
[11] Vamsi Vakulabharanam and Sripad Motiram, ‘Mobility and Inequality in Neoliberal India’, *Contemporary South Asia* 24, no. 3 (2016): 257–70, https://doi.org/10.1080/09584935.2016.1203862.
[12] Partha Chatterjee, *I Am the People - Reflections on Popular Sovereignty Today* (Columbia University Press, 2019). p.14

market.[13] Public investment in rural development was gradually cut, which was a huge blow to a sector that employed over 77% of the country at the time.[14] The most crude indication of the crisis has been the 350000 suicides in the agricultural sector over the thirty years following liberalization.[15] According to the Report of the Expert Group on Agricultural Indebtedness, there has been a significant decline in the living standards of the farmers, as their income is insufficient to meet their basic everyday sustenance.[16] In India the number of farmers increased from 1951 in every Census.[17] Land fragmentation or whatever may be the reasons, but farming was not seen as an undesirable, unsustainable profession. The situation was explained very well by rural journalist Palagummi Sainath (P. Sainath) in his recent talk at a book release event in Delhi, where he said,

> *According to the Census conducted in years 1951, 1961, 1971, and 1981 the number of farmers in the country was increasing but in 1991, when we embraced the brave new world of neoliberalism, extraordinary changes started to happen, such as: between the 1991 and 2001 Census the country had 7.2 million fewer full-time farmers or as they are called in the Census - 'Main Cultivators'. Between 2001 and 2011 - the drop in main cultivators was 7.7 million, which means that in 20 years we saw 50 million people quitting farming for whatever else they could find because farming was fast becoming an unsustainable nightmare.[18] (Sainath)*

---

[13] UCLA, 'Rising Number of Farmer Suicides in Rural India', 2014, https://www.international.ucla.edu/institute/article/145702. p.58-61

[14] Ibid.

[15] Anirban Bhattacharya, Pranay Raj, and Nancy Pathak, 'Average 30 Farmer Suicides Per Day in Modi Govt Years Points to a Systemic Apathy', *The Wire*, 18 December 2023, sec. Agriculture, https://thewire.in/agriculture/average-30-farmer-suicides-per-day-in-modi-govt-years-points-to-a-systemic-apathy

[16] Government of India, "Report of the Expert Group on Agricultural Indebtedness," Ministry of Finance, Government of India, New Delhi, July 2007

[17] Government of India, "Report of the Expert Group on Agricultural Indebtedness," Ministry of Finance, Government of India, New Delhi, July 2007

[18] P.Sainath, Book Release Talk, 'Farmers Protest! A Movement of our Times' by Namita Waikar, IIC, New Delhi, 22 April 2025.

Sainath further explains citing the example of the cotton farmers in the *Vidarbha*[19] region, who were such a prosperous community in 1974 that they could sell 1 quintal of cotton and buy 12 grams of gold.[20] However, in the present times, even if he/she sells 12 quintals of cotton, they cannot buy even 5 grams of gold.[21] With this example he explained the precipitous nature of the collapse of the farmer and the agrarian sector. Economic hardships, primarily debt is one of the core reasons leading to farmer suicides. Lack of sufficient institutional credit often pushes the farmers to approach private money-lenders and the cycle of precarity and debt begins. Rising agricultural input prices, especially the expensive pesticides (Sainath refers to the suicides as 'Pesticide Suicides')[22] and declining earnings result in the inability of farmers to service the debt, which is indexed in a wave of suicides.

According to the available data, 76% to 82% of farmers who committed suicide since 1995, were facing debt and had borrowed money from non-institutional lenders who charged interest rates as high as 36%.[23] The period from 1997 to 2003 witnessed unprecedented agrarian distress in large parts of the country.[24] In twelve years, i.e. from 1995 to 2006, the number of suicides was close to 200000, which would only be an underestimation since several states like Tamil Nadu (south India), Pondicherry (south India) and Rajasthan (north-west India) did not report any such incidents.[25] Thus, on an average, nearly 16000 farmers committed suicide

---

[19] *Vidarbha* is an important cotton-growing area in central India. On the political map of India, it is situated in the eastern part of Maharashtra, the wealthiest state in India in terms of gross state domestic product. This state is also home to the country's financial and commercial capital Mumbai. It has been a frontier, both geographically and culturally, as well as in terms of reshaping the worldwide cotton production and manufacturing system since the mid-nineteenth century. (Sarthak Gaurav and Thiagu Ranganathan, eds., 'A Brief History of Vidarbha', in *Accidental Gamblers: Risk and Vulnerability in Vidarbha Cotton* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), 13–59, https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108935814.002.)

[20] P.Sainath, Book Release Talk, 'Farmers Protest! A Movement of our Times' by Namita Waikar, IIC, New Delhi, 22 April 2025.

[21] Ibid.

[22] P.Sainath, Book Release Talk, 'Farmers Protest! A Movement of our Times' by Namita Waikar, IIC, New Delhi, 22 April 2025.

[23] Samir Bhatnagar, 'Economics of Indian Farmers' Movement: A Study of Agrarian Distress and a Vicious Debt Cycle', *Yale Journal of International Affairs*, 15 May 2021

[24] Madhura Swaminathan and Sandipan Baksi, *How Do Small Farmers Fare? Evidence from Village Studies in India*, No. 5 (New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2018), p.9

[25] K. Nagaraj, *Farmers' Suicides in India: Magnitudes, Trends and Spatial Patterns* (Chennai: Bharathi Puthakalayam, 2008) p.5-6

every year over the last decade, implying that every seventh suicide that was committed in the country was a farm suicide.[26] The earliest recorded instances of these farmer suicides in India occurred among the cotton cultivators of Andhra Pradesh (south-east India), and soon after these first instances, similar reports started to emerge from the *Vidarbha* region (western and central India) and from Karnataka (south India), primarily the red gram cultivators.[27] Since then, the issue has persisted and acquired disturbing proportions.

Economist and Nobel Prize winner Amartya Sen, in his writings in 1987, critiqued the liberal and neoliberal belief that self-interests and rational behaviour are one and the same thing.[28] In strong disagreement with Scottish economist Adam Smith's 1776 work 'The Wealth of Nations', Sen said, "the neglect of his ethical analysis of sentiment and behaviour fits well into the distancing of economics from ethics that has occurred with the development of modern economics".[29] Neoliberal reforms being one of the results of modern economics, according to Sainath, "have a uniform taste everywhere, but the effects vary greatly depending on the class and susceptibility of the individuals it impacts".[30] He asserts that in India, neoliberal policies have triggered a swift shift of the country's wealth from the poor to the extremely rich.[31] This shift is termed as 'economic apartheid' by activist-author Arundhati Roy.[32] In her book, 'Capitalism: A Ghost Story', she states,

> *In contemporary India, the biggest criminal activity going on is the fraudulent grabbing of land and natural resources by corporate entities with the complicity of the state. This is accompanied by a transfer of wealth from the public to the private sector, creating a new form of economic apartheid, where the rich get richer and the poor are systematically*

---

[26] Ibid.
[27] Nilotpal Kumar, *Unraveling Farmer Suicides in India: Egoism and Masculinity in Peasant Life* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2017) p.iv.
[28] Amartya K. Sen, *On Ethics and Economics* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).
[29] Linda Martín Alcoff and Eduardo Mendieta, eds., *Thinking from the Underside of History: Enrique Dussel's Philosophy of Liberation* (Lanham, Md.: Bloomsbury Academic, 2000). p.33
[30] UCLA, 'Rising Number of Farmer Suicides in Rural India', 2014, https://www.international.ucla.edu/institute/article/145702.
[31] Ibid.
[32] Roy, Arundhati. *Capitalism: A ghost story*. (Haymarket Books, 2014). p.12

> *dispossessed. Neoliberalism has turned citizens into consumers, democracy into a market, and public goods into commodities.*[33] *(Arundhati Roy)*

This explains how neoliberal transformation has altered the relationship between the citizens and the state, deepening social divisions by prioritizing profit over basic sustenance and well-being. Anthropologist Arjun Appadurai's seminal work on globalization points towards the rise of urban middle classes benefiting from neoliberal policies that produce new forms of citizenship based on consumer identity (which includes gender, indigeneity, and caste).[34] But these policies silence, exclude and canonize those who cannot participate fully, thereby leaving out large sections of the country's growing population to face systemic exclusion and insecurity.[35]

Popular Indian historian, Ramachandra Guha critiques neoliberalism and points out the human and environmental costs of unregulated market-driven policies in pursuit of modernization.[36] Speaking further on the neoliberal agenda, Aseem Shrivastava and Ashish Kothari in their book, 'Churning the Earth: The Making of Global India', critically observe that the reckless exploitation of natural resources, privileging corporate profits over ecological sustainability and social justice has deepened societal fractures, particularly amongst the most vulnerable.[37] Adding a rather significant labour perspective to the discourse, Jan Breman's 'At Work in the Informal Economy of India' explains the precariousness that neoliberal policies have imposed specifically on the informal sector that constitutes a majority of India's labor market.[38] These policies have left workers (including agricultural labour) vulnerable with little or no access to social protection, fair wages, and any kind of job security. These perspectives from economists, historians, anthropologists, activists, authors, and theorists reflect how neoliberal policies have

---

[33] Roy, Arundhati. *Capitalism: A ghost story*. (Haymarket Books, 2014). p.12
[34] Arjun Appadurai, *The Future as Cultural Fact: Essays on the Global Condition* (Verso, 2020).
[35] Ibid.
[36] Ramacandra Guha, *India after Gandhi: A History* (Picador, 2023).
[37] Shrivastava, Aseem., & Kothari, Ashish. *Churning the Earth: The Making of Global India*. (India: Penguin Books, 2012)
[38] Breman, Jan. *At Work in the Informal Economy of India*. (*Oxford University Press, 2016*).

affected rural lives, pushing them deeper into poverty. All these writings are active discourses of literary resistance against development-driven economic shifts, which leave behind the subaltern lives struggling to hold on to their land, resources, generational knowledge systems and their right to dignity. Together, these critiques reveal that India's neoliberal project has not been able to successfully foster inclusive development, and has entrenched the country in corporate dominance, ecological harm, and grave social and economic marginalization.

1.3 Theoretical Framework: Subaltern Studies

There exists an intricate relationship between agriculture and culture which is pivotal to the development of human societies. Historically agricultural practices have carried within them cultural, social, economic and symbolic capital. They have always had a symbiotic relationship with cultural systems that thrive on co-existence, and sustainable patterns of domestication.[39] Multidimensional community farming practices have shaped and been shaped by cultural norms, beliefs, and identities. For instance, traditional farming practices are embedded with non-scientific, natural, ecological and medicinal knowledge which is passed down through generations, integrating agricultural practices within broader cultural contexts.[40] Agriculture, therefore, is not just an economic activity, rather it is a culturally embedded system that sustains community values and worldviews.[41]

The social capital of the farmer connects with marginality, stratification and the caste system. Chronic sense of inferiority, deprivation, dispossession and erasure based on caste, class, and gender hierarchies under neoliberal policies have perpetuated historical patterns of subaltern marginalization. The research adopts Subaltern Studies as a theoretical framework that focuses on agency, voice and marginality in the Indian context. It recognizes farming communities especially

[39] Paul Gepts et al., eds, *Biodiversity in Agriculture: Domestication, Evolution, and Sustainability* (Cambridge University Press, 2012).
[40] Robert Netting, *Smallholders, Householders: Farm Families and the Ecology of Intensive, Sustainable Agriculture* (Stanford University Press, 1995).
[41] Heidi Vinge and Siri ØyslebØ SØrensen, 'From Agri-Culture to Agri-Nature: New Alliances for Farmland Preservation in Norway', in *Finance or Food?*, with Hilde Bjorkhaug et al. (University of Toronto Press, 2020), https://doi.org/10.3138/9781487517236-012.

small and landless farmers, agricultural labour including women as the vulnerable subaltern actors who have a lowered position in the social hierarchy and therefore lack the symbolic capital of position, honour and prestige.[42] They face discrimination on individual, familial and structural levels, leading to marginalisation.[43] They have faced exclusion and dismissal from the social order and from the dominant linear narratives of history. The subaltern often accuses history of not taking sufficient care of its poor and its centralizing tendencies of mediation of social and class relations. Situating the research inquiry within subaltern studies, therefore deepens and restores the analysis of silencing and resistance in artistic practice.

The research engages with Subaltern Studies as a broader body of literature in order to define and apply key concepts. Through the unfolding of artistic practices, these key concepts either align with or diverge from the framework provided by the Subaltern discourse. The analysis of the ensemble of practices described in the thesis do not engage directly with the subaltern discourse. However, the artworks and the artistic strategies attend to the underlying questions of who speaks, who is heard, and how art mediates, amplifies, disrupts, and/or performs the subaltern experience within and beyond institutions. The aim is to interrogate the extent to which artistic inquiry fosters subaltern visibility without commodifying or maybe even romanticizing suffering. The study privileges by magnifying the subaltern art historical discourse as it is closest to this inquiry.

According to anthropologist Peter Van Dommelen, Eric Wolf's essay "Peasants" (1966) laid the foundations for studying rural communities.[44] Wolf emphasized that peasants should not be understood as 'just farmers', as they are a meaningful social category that is profoundly and seamlessly integrated into wider communities and

---

[42] Nanda Kishore Kannuri and Sushrut Jadhav, 'Cultivating Distress: Cotton, Caste and Farmer Suicides in India', *Anthropology & Medicine* 28, no. 4 (2021): 558–75, https://doi.org/10.1080/13648470.2021.1993630.
[43] Ibid
[44] Peter van Dommelen, 'Rural Works and Days – a Subaltern Perspective', World Archaeology 51, no. 2 (2019): 183–90, https://doi.org/10.1080/00438243.2019.1704570.

larger societies.[45] Wolf pointed out that the peasant does not operate an enterprise in a purely economic sense; the peasant runs a household on the farmland, and not a business model.[46] Emerging from a branch of Cultural Studies, Subalternity was proposed and first elaborated by Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci in his 'Prison Notebooks'.[47] It served as a radical model of post-colonial and post-imperial inquiry and a complex negotiation of the real ambit of colonial discourse. In the late 1970's - early 1980's, Subaltern Studies were initiated by Indian historian Ranajit Guha (1923-2023) where the suppressed voices of Indian peasants, urban factory workers, plantation laborers, and rural millenarian visionaries, were loosely defined as 'subalterns'.[48] In 1981, Guha introduced the first collection of essays, which became famous as the Subaltern Studies Series, with the following clarification:

> *The word 'subaltern in the title stands for the meaning as given in the Concise Oxford Dictionary, that is 'of inferior rank.' It will be used in these pages as a name for the general attribute of subordination in South Asian society, whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender, and office, or in any other way.[49] (Ranajit Guha)*

The definition appears similar to what one may understand from the definition of 'victims'. 'Victims' as agents of historical processes, can be traced back to Christianity while the 'subaltern' has its roots in Marxism. Argentine-born philosopher Enrique Dussel's 'Philosophy of Liberation' and the concept of 'living labor' referring to that which is exterior to the system, are closely aligned theories, however, these were produced in Spanish in the context of post-independence Latin America.[50] According to Dussel, 'capitalism is the process of transforming 'living labor' (which includes land and people) into a commodity, thus dominating

---

[45] Peter van Dommelen, 'Rural Works and Days – a Subaltern Perspective', World Archaeology 51, no. 2 (2019): 183–90, https://doi.org/10.1080/00438243.2019.1704570.
[46] Eric Wolf, *Peasants* (Upper Saddle Ruver, NJ: Pearson, 1966).
[47] Antonio Gramsci, *Subaltern Social Groups: A Critical Edition of Prison Notebook 25*, ed. Joseph A. Buttigieg and Marcus E. Green (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021).
[48] Linda Martín Alcoff and Eduardo Mendieta, eds., *Thinking from the Underside of History: Enrique Dussel's Philosophy of Liberation* (Lanham, Md.: Bloomsbury Academic, 2000). p.40
[49] Ibid. p.40
[50] Ibid.. p.41

exteriority and subsuming into the totality'.[51] It is important to mention here that 'exteriority' to the system is a paradigm of Subalternity. Often referred to as the 'global ethicist' Dussel's theories were concerned with the negative effects of economic globalization on the Third World and his insistence that ethics must begin from the perspective of the poor.[52]

The Liberation philosophy is therefore, not very far removed from Subalternity, except that they have their distinct geographical and historical rhythms and that the former was a philosophical and ethical project while Subalternity was a historiographical project. Subalternity emerged in the context of South Asia, from the writings of the triad of Ranajit Guha, Dipesh Chakrabarty, and Partha Chatterjee. It bears connections with Gayatri Spivak who is hugely celebrated in the West as a pioneering figure in postcolonial studies, alongside Edward Said and Homi Bhabha, on the fringes too.[53] Spivak refers to reading subalternity as the 'transactional or performative relationship with the social fabric, social textile and the social text'.[54] Her idea of the subaltern takes into account that which falls between the cracks of dominant narratives of hegemony and resistance, what connects their continuity, and what surpasses and escapes them. Her 1988 essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?", became an important text, questioning the systemic silencing of the voices of the oppressed, especially colonized women, both in representation and discourse. However, the work has generated critical debate due to its theoretical opacity, stemming from its extensive engagement with thinkers such as Derrida, Foucault, Marx, and Gramsci, and its synthesis of Marxist political economy with post-structuralist deconstruction.

Viewed through a Marxist lens, hegemony is multi-layered, it is not simply political or economic, but also ideological, creating false consciousness, obscuring exploitation, using capitalism to mask systemic inequality, and promoting

[51] Ibid. p.3-4
[52] Ibid.p.14
[53] Vinayak Chaturvedi, ed., *Mapping Subaltern Studies and the Postcolonial* (Verso, 2000).
[54] Joseba Gabilondo, 'The Subaltern Cannot Speak But Performs: Women's Public and Literary Cultures in Nineteenth-Century Spain', *Hispanic Research Journal* 5, no. 1 (2004): 73–95, https://doi.org/10.1179/hrj.2004.5.1.73.

individualism, consumerism and meritocracy.[55] Gramsci's idea of cultural hegemony adds another layer of flexing power by influencing and winning the consent of the governed through institutions like schools, media, and religion.[56] Such processes naturalise control and make power structures appear inevitable and aligned with the interest of the public at large.

In 1983, Guha published the subaltern school's founding document titled 'Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India', which was seen as a new theoretical paradigm within historiography.[57] It highlighted the peculiarity of the socio-cultural predicaments though the principal concern was with politics and its essentially displaced forms.[58] It tried to address the question of what history can and cannot do and whom it can really address. Challenging the idea that peasants were powerless agents who rebelled blindly against the British imperialist oppression and local landlord exploitation, Guha laid great emphasis on their awareness and willingness to participate towards effecting political change.[59] He suggested that the rebellions represented the birth of a theoretical consciousness and asserted that India's long subaltern tradition added significant power to Mahatma Gandhi's landmark insurgence for independence.[60] The 2020-2021 farmer protests can find some of its roots in the peasant insurgency of the colonial discourse, however it should not be overlooked that these two events are embedded in distinct historical times and conditions.

Another caveat in the two theories (The Liberation philosophy and Subalternity) is that subaltern scholar Dipesh Chakrabarty's dilemma that the history of the Third World cannot be written as a discipline as long as it remains a discipline of the First World, finds its answer in the Liberation philosophy.[61] The dilemma was of a

---

[55] Linda Martín Alcoff and Eduardo Mendieta, eds., *Thinking from the Underside of History: Enrique Dussel's Philosophy of Liberation* (Lanham, Md.: Bloomsbury Academic, 2000).
[56] Ibid.
[57] Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (Oxford, 1983).
[58] Ibid.
[59] Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (Oxford, 1983).
[60] Ibid.
[61] Linda Martín Alcoff and Eduardo Mendieta, eds., *Thinking from the Underside of History: Enrique Dussel's Philosophy of Liberation* (Lanham, Md.: Bloomsbury Academic, 2000). p.41

disciplinary nature in the domain of historiography, and more specifically referred to the tension between place and knowledge (both knowledge as a discipline and knowledge about).[62] From the perspective of the Liberation philosophy, the way out was a double articulation which would include a project of liberation and a critique of the limits of the First World philosophy while simultaneously recognising the 'exteriority' of 'living labor'.[63] For more clarity, let us deconstruct the idea of the Liberation philosophy as 'living labour'. It refers to labour as that which engages critically with the totality of the system, and that constantly marks its borders and its limits, instead of being subsumed by and from the perspective of the system.[64] Therefore, a way out of this dilemma is to turn the analysis of the logic of the capital in its appropriation and subalternization of living labor on its head and to honor and claim the exteriority of 'living labor' as the goal of liberation.[65] Dussel's theory empowers one to read the discourse of history from its underside in a way that one is able to move beyond the false manipulative alternatives of post-modernist cultures that have yielded a globalization which excludes billions of people from full participation as equals.[66] As a whole the theory envisions an authentic globalization, which is pluralistic and demands the processes to be initiated not from the centres of power, but from the margins.

In the 1990s, influenced by the South Asian Subaltern Studies project, the Latin American Subaltern Studies project emerged in the United States.[67] It was an intellectual movement that emerged amongst the interdisciplinary group of literary criticism, cultural studies, historiography and anthropology, operating at the intersection of the colonial collapse of the Soviet Union and the failure of the Sandinista movement in Nicaragua.[68] It sought to rethink Latin American history,

---

[62] Ibid.
[63] Linda Martín Alcoff and Eduardo Mendieta, eds., *Thinking from the Underside of History: Enrique Dussel's Philosophy of Liberation* (Lanham, Md.: Bloomsbury Academic, 2000). p.41
[64] Ibid.
[65] Linda Martín Alcoff and Eduardo Mendieta, eds., *Thinking from the Underside of History: Enrique Dussel's Philosophy of Liberation* (Lanham, Md.: Bloomsbury Academic, 2000). p.190
[66] Ibid. p.192
[67] Ibid.p.41
[68] Ibid.

culture, and politics by focusing on the perspectives and agency of the subaltern groups of Indigenous communities, Afro-descendants, peasants, and the poor.

With the influence of the post-modernist and post-colonialist ideologies, there began a shift in the approach of subaltern studies. New York University sociology professor Vivek Chibber's 2014 book 'Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital' became the dominant critical narrative and challenged the theoretical fundamentals of the influential Indian Subaltern School. Chibber directed his critique mainly against Guha's 'Dominance Without Hegemony' from 1997 and Chakrabarty's 'Provincializing Europe' from 2000.[69] Chibber made two strong charges against Subaltern Studies: "obscuring capitalism" and "resurrecting orientalism".[70] He argued that capitalism in the West relied heavily on interpersonal coercion up until the 20th century.[71] He emphasized that capitalism does not transform all social practices but the only thing it fundamentally changes is the economy, which plays out very differently in the East as against the West.[72] Chibber believes that the movements of the oppressed can be sustained and strengthened only if they involve issues of economic justice. The subaltern historiography insists on filling the gaps and breaking the silences to ensure that the masses occupy the ground from which they have been evacuated.

Social subordination and integration as frameworks continue to make Gramsci's concept of subalternity a powerful tool for understanding rural households and communities, even today. The diasporic venture of subalternity is a purely theoretical paradigm which does not inform most of the Indian artists directly and this gets clarified in the chapters ahead. Amongst all the artists discussed in the research, only Thukral and Tagra mention the term subalternity in connection with one of their series of artworks that deal with the impact of demonetization (2016), which was one of most significant and controversial economic moves in the recent

[69] Vivek Chibber, *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital* (London: Verso, 2013).
[70] Ibid.
[71] Vivek Chibber, *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital* (London: Verso, 2013).
[72] Ibid.

history of India. Demonetization had a huge impact on the cash-based informal sectors which include farmers and agricultural labour. This is discussed in greater detail in chapter four. The research builds upon a dialogic analysis in line with subaltern studies, with connections of artistic practices employing terminology such as capitalism, class, labour, privilege, globalisation, exteriority, marginalisation, etc.

In this study, Subaltern Studies along with Liberation Philosophy offer essential theoretical bases that influence the approach and objectives of empirical research in this study, especially in relation to underrepresented visual cultures. With its focus on retrieving voices and experiences of those historically excluded from hegemonic narratives, Subaltern theory encourages a detailed analysis to identify markers of agency, resistance, and concealed meanings within the artworks. Similarly, the Liberation Philosophy demands a decolonial ethics to centre the lived experiences of the oppressed and interrogate structures of power that remain embedded in cultural production. Together, these frameworks guide the interpretive approach of the study that along with formal analysis, unpack the socio-political contexts in which the artwork was produced and received.

1.4 The Research Task

This research project seeks to describe and analyse the addressing of the agrarian crisis within the context of contemporary Indian art. The crisis is understood here as an unstable, contested construct where there are a range of competing accounts and theories to delimit the nature and extent of the crisis. However, inspite of these competing accounts of the crisis, it is consistently identified by one clear index, that being the farmer suicides.

This research aims to unpacks realms of knowledge embodied by members of societies that experienced and are experiencing in everyday life the collapse or the unfinished project of being independent. The research examines the agency of a range of artists, curators, gallerists who have felt the need to respond with their

unique points of view and work through their different material practices. The analysis seeks to attend to the cultural variables, constraints and their specific means of rendition, reflection and in some cases, regeneration at work in these different art practices. The research seeks to understand how such artistic practices are organized and interpreted, emphasizing their contextual and relational character with the agrarian crisis. The inquiry lays emphasis on the meanings of the agrarian crisis both implicitly and explicitly at work in these different artistic practices while also considering how these practices get organized into structured networks of dissemination, both curatorially and institutionally.

In order to proceed with the research inquiry, some terms with specific characteristics need to be established. These are discussed in the next section.

1.4a "Determinants" and "Brokers"

Among the several essential conditions shaping the crisis are what I term as the "determinants" (or markers), referring to the social, economic, and political forces that shape how the crisis takes form, evolves and is experienced across Indian society. These "determinants" do not operate in isolation, rather they interact and connect in complex ways, influencing not only the unfolding of the crisis but also how it is understood and interpreted. The many conflicting readings of the crisis can often be traced back to these ten structuring forces, the "determinants": indifference, patriarchy, inequality, caste-class-community divide, urban-rural divide, dispossession, displacement, food politics and food security, climate change, and farmer protests. Competing perspectives on the crisis often reflect the degree of emphasis placed on these "determinants" which are explained in greater detail in the subsequent chapters.

Crises often make ideal conditions for the emergence of "brokers" who function as 'intermediaries' and 'facilitators' in the process of translation, information dissemination and connection of different actors within the power dynamics.[73] The

[73] Birgit Bräuchler et al., 'Conceptualizing Crisis Brokerage: Brokering Crisis or Brokers in Crisis', *Cultural Studies* 39, no. 2 (2025): 176–203, https://doi.org/10.1080/09502386.2024.2437428.

brokers navigate and mediate between the state, corporate players, and the vulnerable communities. Working within a web of incompatible rationalities and hierarchies of perpetrators and victims, between domination and resistance, the intermediary role ascribed to the brokers makes their position rather ambiguous. With critical access to information, resources, and mechanisms, their role is never neutral, rather, it is shaped by the power asymmetries and the vested interests of the different players which they have to mediate.[74] After coining the determinants of the crisis, I term the artists and collectives as "brokers" in the agrarian crisis. These brokers have either emerged from the crisis (artists with agrarian ancestry) or being urban dwellers have studied and researched the crisis. By selectively enabling some of the determinants (discussed above) of the crisis, the (artistic) strategies of the brokers leverage either by adding agency or by reinforcing the existing inequalities. Acting as double-edged instruments of inclusion and exclusion, the very presence of brokers is an indicator of the gaping and fragmented nature of governance and citizenship. Understanding the role of artists as brokers is therefore crucial to unpacking how authority and influence are exercised and redistributed under the guise of artistic response.

With reference to this research the agrarian crisis and the spate of distress in the larger agriculture sector has provoked a response from several contemporary artists, although not in a consistent manner as we shall see from the shift that happens in 2020-2021 discussed below. The research seeks to map, describe and analyze specific contemporary art practices that substantially address one or more of the entangled determinants of the agrarian crisis. My working assumption here is that art has the capacity to inform publics and to render complex realities in more accessible and sometimes more democratic (in the sense of allowing for plurality of perspectives) forms. My starting position is that because art has this capacity to critically interrogate, imagine alternatives and offer solutions, some contemporary Indian art practices have emerged as a critical body of knowledge and representation with respect to the crisis. The focus of my investigation is to study

[74] David Lewis and David Mosse, *Development Brokers And Translators: The Ethnography of Aid And Agencies* (Kumarian Press, 2006).

and analyze Indian contemporary artworks from 1994 onwards (when the neoliberal reforms started to kick-in) which address the crisis and call for the awareness and agency of the public at large. While the study begins from 1994, it is important to note that the 2020-2021 protests mark a significant moment in this mapping as there is a sudden surge in the number of artistic practices responding to the agrarian situation. In the genealogy of the crisis, this period is informed by extensive media coverage and enhanced visibility due to large-scale farmer mobilizations.

The agrarian crisis is the unifying thread linking the contemporary art practices mapped in this research. However, it is important to mention here that the diverse artistic projects discussed in this research do not share a common or consistent analysis of what the crisis is, reflecting the multiple and contested accounts of the crisis by the brokers and the role of its determinants.

1.4b Core Research Questions

The research task comprises three interrelated questions. The first question asks: **How contemporary Indian artists and collectives (brokers) represent, interrogate, and interpret the (determinants of) agrarian crisis through diverse artistic mediums and methods, including performance, installation, film, and socially-engaged art?** This inquiry covers both individual and collective artistic practices with a focus on how artists mobilize the agrarian crisis through historical references, subaltern positions, material choices and artistic strategies. The inquiry necessitates a detailed analysis of practices and how the crisis is objectified in material artistic production, to see if they are merely mirroring a situation or acting as salutary agents of change. The research looks at artworks and practices that address issues of the agrarian sector by confronting existential dilemmas of the artist's relationship to the farmland or towards rural degradation and urban development. It investigates how artists position themselves and the artworks within the crisis and in the larger framework of contemporary art practices in India. The process entails looking at multiple sometimes contradictory aspects,

for example, attending to artworks that tend to explore power, authority, and hierarchy, on the one hand, and which also address vulnerability, subjugation and oppression, on the other hand, as these contrasting themes are simultaneously played out in the work.

The second question asks: **How do artists and collectives (brokers) contribute towards shaping, questioning and reconfiguring common understanding of the (determinants of) agrarian crisis within the frameworks of power, representation and subalternity?** The inquiry pivots around the agency of artists, curators and institutions and their strategies to negotiate or disrupt hegemonic portrayal of the powerless farmers. It explores how exhibitions, performances and artistic collaborations function as sites of negotiating power, visibility and the contested discourses around the agrarian crisis. The contrast between the modest and limited agency of the individual artist or artwork and the overwhelming scale of the crisis can produce a sense of impossibility and pointlessness. Looking at how contemporary art practices address the crisis is also a matter of looking at how they mirror and reinforce the different ideologies at work in framing and accounting for the crisis or how they disrupt these existing ideological frames. What kind of engagements do the artworks demand and how artists and curators perceive consumption patterns? Is there a functionalist logic to the process of production? Exhibitions as spaces for patterned social interaction and sanitized projection of what is otherwise positioned invisible and inferior can function in a way that is very different from how the same material operates with the milieu of activism. On occasion, some artistic practices tell us more about the artists and their institutional allegiance than the subject at hand. The contesting priorities between aspirations for individual visibility and the pursuit of the greater common good through raising awareness and promoting public discourse are the very sutures of politics.

The third question that arises then, building upon the first two is: **What are the social, political, and cultural implications of displaying, circulating, and interpreting artistic practices addressing the (determinants of) agrarian crisis**

within local, national, and global circuits, including the times of heightened protest and public mobilization? This inquiry investigates how artworks move through networks of meaning-making, how the reception is shaped by context, and how the strategies of exclusion and amplification play out in the public domain. The question analyzes how artistic practices mediate subaltern knowledge and visibility amidst the dichotomies of local and global. Showing artistic practices in global or local contexts has a significant social impact both in terms of belonging and excluding. These categories of local and global do not primarily indicate mere proximity and distance, but rather point towards factors of selectivity, movement and reconfiguration. These aspects of expanded visibility for the art practices under study here should also be investigated as it has a bearing on how their accounts of the agrarian crisis and the social relations that they proceed from may be reconstructed or transformed in these wider circuits of visibility. Is this movement from the local to global an elevation in prestige and importance? How does this hierarchical order play itself in the face of the social engagement and action for change that is an integral feature of at least some of the art practices under examination here? Even in repetitions, or iterations, certain meanings and practices are chosen for emphasis, while others are neglected and excluded, often for the sake of cohesion. Stripped of context, do the artworks romanticize and reduce complex characteristics of the crisis into simplified marketable experiences? Not only is this a matter of circulation within the glocal network, for neither the artwork nor the artist is sitting still and over a period of time, both artists' intentions and the artworks may shift, grow or transform.

Sometimes the language of artistic presentations remains 'newspeak'[75] meaning propagandistic or an inversion of customary meaning, in order to avoid critical confrontations with the dominant authorities. How then does the narrative remain alive and what are its patterns of influence? In some ways these questions are connected with the idea of home, where the entropy exists and inspires change. If the dialogue is rooted in the local context but the activist expectancy gets deployed

[75]'Newspeak': Term coined by Geoge Orwell in his 1949 book 'Nineteen Eighty-Four'.

elsewhere, are engagements amplified or distorted? This line of inquiry seeks to elaborate upon the carefully curated and gated echo-chambers of critical artistic practice, which tend to suffer from the perplexing challenge of negotiating and navigating meaning within multilayered networks of exchange. It also touches upon the dual, often polar, role of digital media, which on one hand is leading at least some audiences away from real encounters with artworks but on the other hand, opening easy access to a boundless global audience.

1.4c Rationale of the Study

The historical silencing of the subaltern voice in mainstream discourse raises critical questions about the post-Independence developmental trajectory of India. One such question being why the disparities, especially in the agrarian sector, have intensified despite growth-driven structural reforms and neoliberal policy shifts. The agrarian issues are contingent, and the purpose of writing this thesis is not about containing, constructing and narrating victim stories through artistic practices.

The rationale of this study is to bring forth a composite of practices embedded in and with institutions, communities and contexts, that render or maybe fail to render the crisis literally. However, the more the narrative is expected to contain the idea, the more it exceeds its remit, for example the performance artworks are prescriptive revelations arising straight out of oppression, but its specter cannot be fully circumscribed or contained. Theoretician and artist K G Subramanyan in his book 'Moving Focus' says, there is something in the very nature of art practice itself that invites change and to understand what it is we have to investigate the nature of the art practices, which is a hard thing to do.[76] It is particularly difficult because the subject is varied and nebulous as the geography of feeling and thinking and there are no easy generalisations. However all kinds of art practices, whatever the difference in attitude, objective, style, technique or content, share by common consent, a certain quality, which is, to produce lively works of art, and for which

[76] K G Subramanyan, *Moving Focus : Essays On Indian Art* (Lalit Kala Akademi, 1978). p.3

they have to keep close with the pulsebeat of the human experience.[77] Through visual analysis of art practices, theoretical contextualization, and agrarian facts, this study mobilizes the crisis in order to recover its latent subaltern agency and critique the systems of domination.

The unencumbered power to connect the disconnected and replay the crisis in different temporalities, is an exemplary matter of knowledge production. It is a way of documenting a string of erasures and violence. Even though this is not a purely environmental discourse, it aligns with author Rob Nixon's notion of slow violence, i.e. the 'violence that occurs gradually out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all', which has become significant for thinking through the challenges of making the crisis meaningful in today's fast-paced image culture.[78] The research looks at artistic practices with an aim to understand and disclose this invisible slow violence in the socio-environmental context of the Indian agrarian sector, that eludes attention in the mainstream public discourse. In the next section I describe the methodological tools employed in this research.

1.4d Starting Points of the Research Inquiry

One of the key starting points for this research was making a list of brokers in the crisis. This required a detailed enlisting of artists and their artistic practices into a database[79]. The process required gathering authentic, verified information on the artists, their biography, their geographical location, place and materials of production, and the duration of engagement with the crisis.

The collected data was then used to mapping the frequency and consistency of artistic response over the last thirty years from 1994 to 2024. From this collected data it emerged that the 2020-2021 farmer protests mark an important shift in the volume and frequency of artistic address to the crisis. The protests were a

[77] Ibid. p.4
[78] Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Harvard University Press, 2011), https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt2jbsgw. p.2
[79] Appendix 1A - Artist Database

complicated phenomena of confrontation that was shaped by economic, social and political axes of contention. The protests can be best understood in the light of what Aruna Roy in her book 'The Personal is Political' says, 'Woven into the political, personal life became public theatre'.[80] Stoking public sentiments, the media coverage of the protests made the crisis much more visible and pushed further the debates around agricultural policies, farmers' persistence and the agency of voicing their rights. India's contentious caste system, and the inequalities and discrimination intrinsic to it, and their role in the crisis were made even more visible and clear through the protests and the media coverage. Usage of the words "farmer"[81] or "peasant"[82] as gendered terminology that completely excludes the role of women in the farmland are also something that gets addressed by some art practices. Often constrained within a village community and a caste-class system, average women remain conditioned to powerlessness and invisibility. The terms "farmer" or "peasant" are laced with certain expectations and standards of traditional understanding of masculinity where the role of a man is characterized by stoicism, dominance and emotional restraint. There are numerous problems related to healthcare, sanitation and broader aspects of social welfare, that also get addressed.

The research seeks to elaborate upon artistic practices agentially and not just in terms of visual and formal analysis. The research process began by identifying a network of entangled practices, processes and conditions that address the agrarian crisis. It mapped the artists and their artistic practices from 1994, and the start of neoliberal reforms, until the present. I then sifted through this longer list of selected practices based on the criteria that some practices are more elaborate and consistent in terms of scale, duration, production, presence and geographical visibility. The research gives primacy to 'question-driven' practices that do not proceed from

---

[80] Aruna Roy, *The Personal Is Political: An Activist's Memoir* (Harper Collins India, 2024), p.4.
[81] According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the definition of "Farmer" is "a person who owns or manages a farm". *Oxford English Dictionary*, accessed September 6, 2025, https://www.oed.com/search/dictionary/?scope=Entries&q=farmer.
[82] According to the Oxford Dictionary, the definition of"Peasant" is "a farmer who owns or rents a small piece of land". *Oxford English Dictionary*, accessed September 6, 2025, https://www.oed.com/search/dictionary/?scope=Entries&q=peasant

theory rather they are engaged in the production of theory through practice. With these criteria the research curated a selection of case studies of artworks by the following artists: Aditi Bhattad, Gram Art Project, Thukral and Tagra, and Amar Kanwar which are then subjected to a close reading and analysis bringing the three key research questions into focus of these four case studies. Additionally, because of the impact of the 2020-2021 protests, the research makes a survey of five direct artistic responses.

1.5 Research Methodology

The research employs traditional art historical methodology, which is an empirical approach to study, analyze, and interpret works of art by integrating theoretical context with visual analysis in order to disclose meaning, authorship, chronology, and relevance. In conducting this research, the artist database, discussed above (Appendix 1A) served as a foundational empirical resource. It offers structured biographical and contextual data on over 100 Indian artists, and artworks that were actively addressing the crisis between 1994 and 2024. This database enabled systematic cross-referencing of available materials such as localised artistic production in the sprawling national geography, exhibition records, and the visibility of artworks. This process was useful in identifying patterns in artistic production, mobility, and institutional affiliations. By integrating quantitative insights from the database with qualitative analysis, the study aligns with methodological approaches in art history. The use of the database (Appendix 1A) thus underpins both the scope and validity of the study's analytical framework.

The first step was to approach the artworks, get familiarized, without burdening them with historical interest or literary theories, as these can hinder evidence that indicate natural tendencies of the artworks. The study approaches the artworks in an objective way, which is to look at them with every last scrap of attention possible. The initial steps in the approach seem like an apostasy, or an insult to feeling, which was rather difficult, simply because of the sustained and direct contact with the works over several years. The idea was to stay in a living

relationship with the artworks and learn to recognize what they hold and unfold as texture or meaning or aesthetic character, and what are their formal particularities that make them suited for this research. The research was driven to examine artistic practices with purely scientific aims. As indicated in the description of the thesis structure, the research builds four singular case studies of artistic practices that in different ways work to unmask different symptoms of the crisis. While resolutely empirical and grounded in the study of specific works and practices, the methods employed are the following:

1.5a Art Historical Analysis and the Writing Position

The research employs empirical art historical methodology which includes close visual analysis, documentation, and theoretical contextualization of artworks, performances, and installations that address the agrarian crisis from 1994 to the present times. Each chapter is premised on at least one of the ten "determinants" of the crisis (e.g. indifference, patriarchy, caste, capitalism, dispossession) and examines selected case studies in detail, including performances, films, multimedia installations, zines, and graphic novels by contemporary artists alongside a survey of artistic responses to the 2020-2021 farmer protests. Four core case studies on Aditi Bhattad, Gram Art Project, Thukral and Tagra, and Amar Kanwar are examined for their long-term engagement with the agrarian crisis and their innovative, often participatory, approaches to representing the rural distress. Each case study is an independent and context-sensitive analysis which unfolds their specific formal, aesthetic, theoretical and social dimensions. The selection of these case studies emphasizes diversity in artistic medium, geography, gender, community collaboration, and an explicit or implicit centering of the subaltern issues.

The research looks at how artists and artworks enact the possibility of doing, re-doing, authoring, re-authoring, while carefully assessing their own ethical dimension of representing, displaying and performing the crisis. The research is local in scope but takes into consideration the implicit and layered historical,

political and cultural contexts of production and display. With significant focus on artistic and curatorial strategies, the writing position I have adopted is akin to that of Janine Jembere's writing in the *Paperlands* project which she describes as follows:

> *The documents I am looking for are expressions of the struggle for land and sovereignty; ... Within the abstraction that is a file, letter, or article, land and place are very present. It seems like there are always at least two places present in the writing: first, the place that the writer is writing from, and second, the place where the writer is writing with.*[83]

The research recognises that placing this India-centric research within a European knowledge system problematizes the nature of encounter and subsequently the writing. The currency of this research is embedded in the task of an agent of a European university gathering objective data (a debatable assumption due to the subject-object dichotomy, rooted in the contrasts of *Geisteswissenschaft* and the *Naturwissenschaft*) from the native land and producing knowledge; which comes with an asymmetrical power relationship and has potential to distort and unbalance the subject. In 'The Origin of a Work of Art' Martin Heidegger[84] further developed the familiar construct of *Hermeneutischer Zirkel* (Hermeneutic Circle) which explains the process of one's understanding of the individual part and the whole through an active and adaptive recontextualisation; an endless revision of possibilities. Hermeneutics as an analytical tool in art history faces numerous limitations today, especially in the context of newer theoretical frameworks and contemporary art practices which may be ephemeral, performative, collaborative, participatory, or multimedia-based. Even though the alignment between the analyst and analysand can shift in sudden and unexpected ways, the research mechanism is

---

[83] Janine Jembere, "Paperlands" part of the exhibition: 'Eurovizion: Crossing Stories and Spaces'. Published: 'Despite Dispossession: An Activity Book'(Berlin, Germany, 2021), p.127

[84] Torsen, Ingvild. "'The Origin of the Work of Art' and Its Legacy." Encyclopedia of Aesthetics, 2nd Ed., Oxford U. P., 2014. doi:10.1520/STP162820190169.

focussed on responsibly theorizing the creative labor of art practices performed in specific contexts. For example, Amar Kanwar's use of poetry as a tool aligns with the hermeneutic phenomenology, discussed in chapter five, in greater detail.

1.5b Thick Descriptions, Contextual Frameworks and Qualitative Analysis

The study employs thick descriptions of case studies as a methodology to elaborate upon the experiential, affective, and critical qualities of artistic practice, attending to the formal, conceptual, and social dimensions of each individual artistic work. The analysis further builds upon artists' intentions, curatorial choices, and ethical considerations, recognizing the changing dynamics between intent and effect, insider and outsider, activism and institution, and the role of materiality and site-specificity. Interviews, fieldwork, and documentation are integrated to bring fresh perspectives of lived narratives, creative processes, and the situated agency of artists and curators.

The term "thick description", was introduced by American anthropologist Clifford Geertz in 1973 in his seminal work titled *The Interpretation of Cultures*.[85] The term refers to a detailed account of cultural practices that not only describe behavior but also interpret meaning within specific contexts. In art historical research, thick description is a powerful methodological tool to disclose the layered social, historical, and symbolic meanings embedded in artistic practices. Moving beyond the aesthetic and formal characteristics of the artwork, this approach enables the study to reconstruct the cultural significance embedded in the artwork's creation, reception, and function. It enables the study to analyse artworks and artistic practises within their lived environments, rituals, and symbolic systems, allowing for a nuanced interpretation. This process of study aligns with what Geertz calls a "microscopic" analysis.[86] The method builds upon the intricate connections between art and the social fabric. By situating artworks within their broader

[85] Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (Basic Books, 2009).p6
[86] Ibid.

socio-cultural contexts, the study uncovers layers of meaning that extend beyond surface appearances.

Delving further into contextual frameworks, the study aligns with the concept of "period eye"[87], coined by art historian Michael Baxandall in the context of 15th century Italian art. The concept refers to a cognitive approach to understanding art within specific contextual frameworks and historical moments. Working at the intersection of science and art history, Baxandall suggested that scientific studies of artworks align with the way the viewing eye shapes the production and reception of art and that the visual experiences are largely determined by cultural contexts.[88] This approach emphasizes that there is a reciprocal relationship between the observer and the artwork, and understanding an artwork's meaning requires examining both the scientific properties of the object and the cultural frameworks that shape it.

Qualitative analysis as a research tool offers a symbiotic relationship with thick description. Through interpretive methods such as interviews, archival material, mapping and thematic categorisation, the study uncovers subjective and intersubjective layers in the art practices. Within the discipline of art history, this method involves analyzing artist and curator statements, strategies, curatorial practices, audience reception, and socio-political discourses associated with the artworks. This methodological synergy makes space for a multi-layered reading of the available visual artworks and materials, extending beyond the iconographic and stylistic analysis. The study examines institutional, political, and personal dimensions with reference to each case study, according to the collected information. This approach of applying qualitative and interpretive methodologies aligns with American art historian Amelia Jones extensive work on performative and feminist art practices and the absolute necessity of considering embodiment and positionality in critical visual analysis.[89] The study combines thick description,

---

[87] Michael Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy: A Primer in the Social History of Pictorial Style* (Oxford University Press, 1988).
[88] Pavle Ninkovic, *In Search of the Period Eye*, n.d., accessed 7 September 2024, https://www.academia.edu/380051/In_Search_of_the_Period_Eye.
[89] Amelia Jones, *Body Art/Performing The Subject* (University of Minnesota Press, 1998).

contextual frameworks, and qualitative analysis in order to work within the paradigm of contemporary art history as a discipline invested in the social and experiential dimensions of artistic practice.

1.5c Contextual and Comparative Mapping

The study maps artists and artworks both chronologically (tracking the shifts in artistic response during the 2020-2021 farmer protests) and thematically (according to the "determinants" of the crisis), facilitating a comparative approach across the chapters. The research methodology chooses to resist linearity in favor of a non-sequential juxtaposition of artistic practices in order to unpack the agrarian crisis for the reader, for example, the first case study looks at Aditi Bhattad's performance artwork because it unfolds the three core questions to introduce the crisis: What is the agrarian crisis? How does the agrarian crisis get operationalised? And what does it achieve?

The seven chapters cumulatively map the artistic practices and in an indirect way, the agrarian crisis. The fact that the tangible and intangible aspects of the crisis are usually data-driven, and artists make it more relatable, more visually readable, similar to the film installation 'Surjeet Singh' discussed at the very beginning - explains one of the core purposes here, which is to enhance mainstream awareness. By employing this framework, my purpose has been to demonstrate how contemporary artistic representations of the crisis can crush the determinants such as indifference, and ignorance and foster systemic change.

The study draws on interdisciplinary frameworks from subaltern studies, critical theory, cultural studies, performance theory and art criticism, situating artistic practices within debates on visibility, mediation, marginality, and knowledge production. The approach of combining the social, cultural and political contexts with some aspects of ecology, economy and capitalism, provides new ways of thinking about contemporary art practice, especially for the uninitiated. The contribution of this study to knowledge is thus multifaceted, as the focus on contemporary art practice within the remit of the crisis is relatively new.

1.5d Fieldwork and Selection of Case Studies

The research methodology is embedded in a selection of case studies of artistic practices, both individual artists and collectives, chosen for their significance, diversity, duration, public engagement and working in varied media across rural and urban settings. A supplementary analysis includes responses from five other contemporary artists whose work directly engaged with the 2020–2021 farmer protests, broadening the perspective of the crisis at the intersection of art and activism.

The fieldwork combined first-person testimonies and interviews which provided depth to the case studies. By conducting in-depth discussion during field visits and remotely, the research captured diverse perspectives along with personal narratives. The discussions with artists often meandered from specific to generic. The work involved extensive note-making, and writing memos to record facts and document my own ideas as they took shape. In some instances due to distance or lack of availability of the subjects, the research migrated online and the conversations took place over emails and audio/video calls. The selection of subjects aimed to achieve diversity of subject-positions and participatory experiences. The task of filming and recording bears the risk of denaturing the discursive space. Even though the boundaries of documenting and recording are inherently slippery and difficult to manage, the research has been conscious of the fact that it is not entirely extractive. The research was conscious of not placing undue demands upon the contributors, especially when filming and recording in their homes and personal spaces.

Images of artworks are crude visual signifiers of the actual, especially in the context of performance art, installation art, land art, crop art and various *in-situ* art practices. The writing explores the conflicting subjectivities of ephemeral and durable artworks and the innate confrontational tone of certain mass produced artistic media such as printmaking, graphic art and newsletters. Sustained visibility and dissemination being an important modality for some artworks, the mapping analyzes the situational autonomy of the artworks and the artists vis-a-vis the local,

global and the -in-between spaces. The aim has been to strategically resist the hegemonic center-periphery discourse of reading images. When the artwork travels to a transnational artscape how does it renew its context; does it foster new connections, eschews assimilations or does it incite confusion?

> *... literary and art historians have yet to figure out how to conceptualize the relationships among an individual aesthetic work, the historical events or forces that informed its production, and the role that our interpretations play in constituting the object of our analysis. - (Mary Poovey)*[90]

Taking a cue from American cultural historian and literary critic, Mary Poovey's paper 'Mediums, Media, Mediation: Response' in the Victorian Studies Journal, 2006, this research bears a healthy caution towards the dynamics of mediation of specific case studies, their richness, texture and their interpretive relationship with my understanding, interests, discoveries, choices and priorities. The research recognises that viewing artworks in itself is a political practice that generates multiple alternatives over singularity. The idea has been to look closely at the tangibles and the illusory, in order to unpack and enable the content in a more meaning-making way. A lot of new findings were uncovered during the fieldwork such as author Amandep Sandhu's[91] connection with the farmer protests and his networking with the *Trolley Times* and *Karti Dharti* newsletters. Another such example is author Ranjana Padhi's[92] direct connection with the state of Odisha, and subsequently Amar Kanwar's 'Sovereign Forest' project.

The non-chronological juxtaposition of the case studies enables the identification of relational patterns, similarities and differences across the urban and rural contexts of artistic production and dissemination. However, there is no authentic knowing of the success of this study because there is no realistic knowing of what is perceptible

---

[90] Mary Poovey, 'Mediums, Media, Mediation: Response', *Victorian Studies* 48, no. 2 (2006): 249–55.
[91] Amandeep Sandhu, *Panjab: Journeys Through Fault Lines*, Revised edition (Gurugram, Haryana, India: Penguin Random House India Pvt. Ltd, 2023).
[92] Ranjana Padhi and Pramodini Pradhan, 'Women in Resistance Struggles in Odisha - Mainstream Weekly', 3 August 2013, https://www.mainstreamweekly.net/article4367.html.

and what isn't in the vast heterogeneity of practices and their access, both physical and digital. The question of what amounts to success or an outcome in the subjective visual world is in itself contentious. Claire Bishop's[93] concept of 'literalness' is useful to contest the idea of visibility in contemporary art because it demonstrates that vision alone is not the only means of creating a spectacle. The artworks chosen for analysis in this thesis also contest the equation between visibility and spectacle simply by aiming to draw attention to certain specific conditions of the crisis that are not often visually accessible. However, contemporary artistic affinities can undo any linear unidirectional mode of thought into an exemplary multitude of possibilities. Therefore, the success of the research lies in effectively highlighting the role of art in knowledge production and conceptualisation of a very specific context here. The research should be able to draw close and critical attention towards the less visible subaltern narratives of violence and erasure that often exist outside the mainstream contemporary art production.

1.6 Structure of the Thesis

In Chapter 1, this Introduction, I have established the basic phenomenon under study, which is contemporary Indian art addressing the agrarian crisis (Section 1.1). I have indicated what the agrarian crisis entails and how it is contested while underlining the farmer suicides as the key index in most accounts of the crisis I have explained how neoliberal reforms from 1990 onwards created conditions for the agrarian crisis to begin and foster (Section 1.2). In the subsequent section, I have drawn upon the theoretical framework of subaltern studies as a discourse that is closest to this inquiry (Section 1.3). Then I have specified the basic research task, established the terms of use and explained the three core questions that drive the research process (Section 1.4). The next section of the Introduction describes in detail the process of this study as an art historical research and what methodological tools are employed (Section 1.5). The last section provides a nuanced overview of the overall structure of the thesis (Section 1.6).

[93] Claire Bishop, ed., *Participation: Documents of Contemporary Art*, (London: The MIT Press, 2006).

Chapters 2 to 5 of the thesis provide 'thick descriptions'[94] of specific practices, indicating the textures of the encounter with the artwork, its curation and/or its documentation, and addressing some specific determinants of the crisis (identified above as including: indifference, patriarchy, inequality, caste-class-community divide, urban-rural divide, dispossession, displacement, food politics and food security, climate change, and farmer protests). The description of artworks should be able to evoke something close to its true nature and form in the mind of the reader who isn't acquainted with the work. This involves direct perception of the visible form, its interpretation in terms of what it is meant to represent, emotional qualities inherent in the perception of form or tied to it by association and finally the artists' intellectual and imaginative activity.[95] Description, therefore, is a careful deconstruction of the represented form. The writing involves describing and analyzing of each individual artistic practice, how these practices become organized or curated within structured networks of dissemination comprising both formal institutions and other organisational forms. The focus throughout is on elaborating the fundamental relational character of the artistic practices in the context of the crisis while also seeking to find order in the pattern of similarity and difference across the different practices. Some practices are reflective, some are restorative, and for some food is a cultural artifact - the study takes a closer look at what delimits the artist and what remains impossible to address. The process of production of artworks sometimes is not always necessarily made visible by the artists, however, this aspect is also addressed in the description and analysis of the artworks. The description also records the systematic reuse/variation, and iteration (varying temporal and spatial formats) of artistic practices across diverse social, spatial, geographical contexts.

The mapping of artistic practices offers a chronological list of the artworks, however the detailed analysis of the selected art practices does not follow any

[94] Coined by philosopher Gilbert Ryle in the 1960s, the term 'thick description' refers to an account that explains the context, meaning, and intention in great detail. The term was popularized and developed further by anthropologist Clifford Geertz in his 1973 book *The Interpretation of Cultures*.
[95] Vernon Lee and Dylan Kenny, *The Psychology of an Art Writer* (NY: David Zwirner Books, 2018). p.23

production or exhibition chronology. It unfolds a non-linear conceptual curation of artistic practices that may collectively be seen as socio-cultural acts of radicality and resistance. Close readings of artistic practices is the main method of engagement throughout this research and the study gains significantly from personal narratives of artists, authors, curators and the discursive post-production interviews. Some artistic practices exemplify lived relations and add specificity to the work and sometimes the artist renders the narrative like a functionalist or even an ethnographer. There are a variety of tropes that the artists and the curators employ in order to negotiate the harsh complicity, without intentionally being purely functionalist and/or reductive.

Following the introduction, each chapter is premised on at least one of the several determinants (mentioned above) of the crisis. The research positions these practices as generative intensities in order to probe their potential for an exploration of impact and to understand their capacity to imagine and effect change. Chapter two introduces the crisis through the performance artwork of Aditi Bhattad and its deeper genealogy in Sainath's documentary film. The chapter unpacks the crisis through the three pertinent and direct questions raised by Sainath: What is the agrarian crisis? How does it get operationalised? And what does it achieve? Aditi Bhattad's performance reiterates the three questions in the format of a performance that further hinges onto the determinants of ignorance and indifference. It teases out the concept of 'Necropolitics'[96] by Achille Mbembe to delve further into the idea of inequality and its disempowering effects. The performance by Aditi Bhattad situates the concept of observation and consumption as intrinsic components of the fast-paced consumer culture. It highlights the urban alienation towards consumption of food and facts, which is further analysed in the context of the 'Implication theory'[97] of Michael Rothberg.

[96] Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics* (Duke University Press, 2019).
[97] Michael Rothberg, *The Implicated Subject: Beyond Victims and Perpetrators* (Stanford University Press, 2019).

Rooted in village Paradsinga in Madhya Pradesh, artistic and cultural interventions of siblings Aditi and Shweta Bhattad and their foundation Gram Art Project unfold in chapter three. Arjun Appadurai's theories of global systems[98] along with theories and writings of Audre Lorde, Zygmunt Bauman, Sandra Terdjman, Khadar Vali, and Egle Oddo form an analytical apparatus in the chapter, while largely addressing the concept of oppression through the triad of patriarchy, caste, and capitalism. The aim is to analyse the role of women in the farming sector and the lines of tension that emerge from phrases such as 'care work' or 'domesticity as unpaid labour', in the light of historical lived realities explained by subaltern theorist Dipesh Chakrabarty, and modern historian Tanika Sarkar in her book 'Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation'[99]. In the process of analysing the performance artwork, the chapter delves into the material understanding of 'performance relics', a term coined by Claire Bishop in her essay 'The Performativity of the Archive'[100]. It also teases out the invisible grammar of performativity, perishability, and agency in employing plants and vegetation as medium, and their role in knowledge production. Analysing the Collective's practice in the light of Augusto Boal's 'Theatre of the Oppressed'[101], is another task of understanding the role of the collective which seems to expand the ways of being an artist and simultaneously, being a farmer, and moreso, a woman farmer.

Chapter four builds upon one of the most popular and internationally visible contemporary artist Amar Kanwar's multi-scalar, multi-layered artistic inquiry into sovereignty, violence and dispossession. It elaborates upon the different and disproportionate impact of displacement and resettlement on diverse social groups, with reference to gender, class, caste and tribe. Highlighting subaltern theorist Gyandendra Pandey's critique of the homogenising tendencies of the nationalist discourse, the study substantiates how the vulnerable disenfranchised communities

---

[98] Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press, 2005).
[99] Tanika Sarkar, *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation: Community, Religion, and Cultural Nationalism* (C. Hurst & Co. Publishers, 2001).
[100] Claire Bishop, *Disordered Attention: How We Look at Art and Performance Today* (Verso Books, 2024).
[101] Frances Babbage, *Augusto Boal* (Routledge, 2004).

are considered dispensable and erasable in the face of violence. By analysing the aspects of scale and collaboration, the chapter opens a discussion on the negotiations of local and global visibility, of a continuously, almost organically evolving artistic project - 'The Sovereign Forest'. It explores poetry as expression and methodology in Kanwar's creative practice and the idea of liberation through form, connotation, meter, grammar and possibly even intention. Anthropologist, Saba Mahmood's[102] work on the conceptual entanglement of agency and resistance, adds another layer of theoretical discourse to analyse Kanwar's practice. The chapter also discusses Kanwar's films in relation to the socialist tradition of documentary filmmaking exemplified in the 1970's by activist filmmaker Anand Patwardhan. The analysis builds on Kanwar's use of collaboration, archive/counter-archive and dialectical mechanisms, as methods that shape the artwork's meaning.

Chapter five elaborates upon the diverse, multi-media artistic practice of collaborative duo Thukral and Tagra and their over fifteen years of research-centric engagement with contemporary consumerism and the effects of neoliberalism on the farmland. The artistic language of the duo has some sharp references to Roman Antiquity, in some ways similar to Aditi Bhattad (Chapter 2). Known for using sports, games and the idea of 'play' as rhetorical tools, the chapter describes the artistic strategies of Thukral and Tagra to tease out George Orwell's[103] concept of 'newspeak' and how difficult conversations are substantiated amidst an invasive political climate. The widely visible presence of prussian blue or *Berliner Blau* ink in their practice also demands unpacking and further analysis, which connects with Gram Art Collective's commitment to use blue in their artists book, discussed in the previous chapter. The color blue bears a strong caste-related symbolism. Often associated with B.R. Ambedkar[104], who is revered for his vision of social justice,

---

[102] Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton University Press, 2011).
[103] George Orwell and Erich Fromm, *1984* (New York, New York, USA: Signet Classic, 1961).
[104] B. R. Ambedkar was a social reformer, and the chief architect of the Indian Constitution, known for his lifelong struggle against caste-based discrimination and advocacy for Dalit rights, inclusivity and social justice.

artists and activists use blue as a symbol of *Dalit* identity representing dignity, equality, and defiance against caste-based oppression. Punjab (a north-western State in India) being the geographical context of artistic research for Thukral and Tagra, the chapter draws connections with author, journalist Amandeep Sandhu's work on Punjab and specifically the farmer protest and the 'Delhi Chalo' movement. The chapter delves deeper into the autonomy, political capacity and functional significance of an ephemeral newsletter with reference to the protests, in the light of Oliver Marchart's idea of 'conflictual aesthetics'[105].

Having already introduced the 2020-2021 farmer protests in the Thukral and Tagra case study in chapter five, the next chapter, number six, offers a survey of five artistic practices that were direct contextual reactions to the protests. These artistic practices were not only signifiers of the crisis and its constituent determinants but also reflected upon new forms of social organization, resistance and identity that emerged during the protests. When media reports beamed with reportage on the agrarian issues due to the protesting farmers in Delhi, it drew the attention of several artists and they responded. Other than a few isolated cases, four of which are discussed in previous chapters, a large section of artistic response can be understood as media-dependent and responsive to the 2020-2021 protests. The chapter expands on the idea of artistic agency that aligned with the divisive agenda of the protests, and challenged the establishment. Most of the artworks discussed in this chapter have been exhibited in Delhi, the national capital, in order to triage the viewing by those in positions of power. Through individual analysis of different art practices, the chapter argues upon the divergent artistic sensitivities and relational antagonism of an urban artist from that of an agrarian dweller or a farmer-artist. Being a farmer-artist is not a precondition for contributing meaningfully towards addressing the agrarian crisis, however, the outsider-insider dichotomy and how artists position themselves is discussed in the study.

[105] Oliver Marchart, *Conflictual Aesthetics* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2019).

In the last chapter, the conclusion, I provide a summary overview of insights gained by the study and suggest further directions for future research.

Chapter 2

Roman Antiquity as Testimony: Aditi Bhattad on Ignorance and Indifference

2.1 Introduction

In 2017, contemporary artist Aditi Bhattad[106] presented a performance piece titled 'Are You Nero's Guests?' at Vadehra Art Gallery in Delhi.[107] Performed in a popular contemporary art space for over two hours, the performance carried the concept of endurance in order to confront the audience with the prolonged and often invisible suffering associated with India's ongoing agrarian crisis. The title of the performance artwork is a reference to the ignorance and indifference of the elite guests of Roman Emperor Nero towards the plight of his subjects. According to the Cambridge dictionary definition, 'Ignorance' is defined as lack of knowledge, understanding or information about something.[108] And 'Indifference' refers to not-caring about or the lack of interest in someone or something.[109] Both these determinants together indicate a sort of neutrality and disengagement with something. The title of the performance refers to ignorance and indifference as tropes to highlight systemic injustices, socio-economic disparities, and policy failures embedded in India's agricultural sector.

In this chapter, the artworks function as an artistic lens to introduce and acknowledge the agrarian crisis and the systemic issues embedded within it. Born in a family of migrant farmers and raised in the city of Nagpur (in Maharashtra), Aditi Bhattad's artistic practice synthesizes her identity with the agrarian crisis prevailing in her rural countryside, in Madhya Pradesh, central India. The fact that Aditi Bhattad comes from a farming family background is a productive paradox, as it layers her artistic vocabulary with a complex personal reality of the crisis. Her intimate and inherited lived experience of the farmland straddles the boundaries of

[106] The research writing uses the full name of the artist Aditi Bhattad in order to avoid confusion with artist Shweta Bhattad (chapter 3)
[107] 'Are You Nero's Guests? Aditi Bhattad Performance', The Foundation for Indian Contemporary Art, accessed 30 October 2024, https://ficart.org/aditi-bhattad-performance.
[108] 'Ignorance', 20 August 2024, https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/ignorance.
[109] 'Indifference', 20 August 2024, https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/indifference.

privilege and precarity; the urban experience and the rural reality. With strong familial ties to her native farmland, the performance can be understood as 'the discomfort of conscience' as Gopalkrishna Gandhi mentions in the foreword of Aruna Roy's book 'Personal is Political'.[110] Before describing and analysing her artistic practice the chapter will delve into the title of her performance and its connection with a documentary film.

2.2 Documentary Film: 'Nero's Guests - The Age of Inequality' (2009)

Aditi Bhattad's performance was a visual retelling of the 2009 documentary film 'Nero's Guests - The Age of Inequality' (Fig.2.1) directed by filmmaker Deepa Bhatia. The film is an hour long account of the agrifood system, the complex agrarian crisis, how it gets operationalized and what it eventually achieves. The narrative shadows and documents the primary research work of 'The Hindu' newspaper's Rural Affairs Editor, P. Sainath[111] (discussed earlier in the introduction) (Fig.2.2) on farmer suicides with a sharp focus on the *Vidarbha* region (Maharashtra). The narrative captures Sainath's efforts to vocalize the agrarian issues and his sojourn into villages, district headquarters, local hospitals, 'Kisan Sabhas' (Farmer Union Meetings), conference rooms, convocation halls and the Parliament in New Delhi. Through this documentary, Sainath elaborates upon the prose written by the Roman historian, orator and politician Tacitus[112] and after five and a half years of covering farmer suicides, he serves us his own understanding of who are the real guests of the infamous Roman Emperor Nero?[113] Reigned from 54–68 CE, Nero is seen as one of the most infamous Roman emperors - an emblem of imperial excess, corruption, and decadence.[114] Often in literature and philosophy, Nero is cited as an example of unchecked power,

---

[110] Aruna Roy, *The Personal Is Political: An Activist's Memoir* (Harper Collins India, 2024), p.xxi
[111] 'About P. Sainath', *P. Sainath* (website), 28 January 2010, https://www.psainath.com/about-p-sainath/.
[112] Ellen O'Gorman, 'Tacitus (1), Roman Historian', in *Oxford Classical Dictionary* (Oxford University Press, 2016), https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199381135.013.6205.
[113] Nero was the 5th emperor of Rome and the last of Rome's first dynasty, the Julio-Claudians, founded by Augustus. 'Who Was Nero? | British Museum', accessed 30 October 2024, https://www.britishmuseum.org/blog/who-was-nero.
[114] Miriam T. Griffin, *Nero: The End of a Dynasty* (Routledge, 2001).

egotism, and one who found pleasure in torture and spectacle.[115] His guests ranged from nobles, senators, political allies, to artists and philosophers, and they were his confidants who witnessed his atrocities, often performed as large public spectacles.

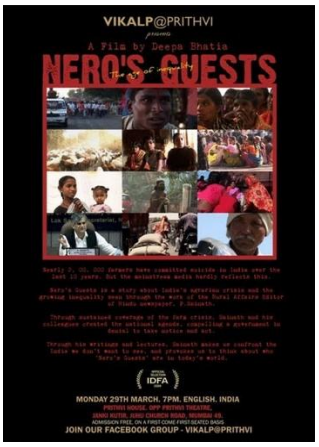


Fig. 2.1 & 2.2: *Deepa Mehta, 'Nero's Guest', 2009, Film, Poster and Still of P. Sainath, 57 minutes, colour, Mistral Movies, India. Image Credits: IMDb (Internet Movie Database)*

In Bhatia's film, Sainath's written text and spoken words are weighted with urgent facts, pressing accusations and an evocative tone that demands accountability. He speaks about government subsidies, global trade, hunger deaths, farmer protests, women farmers, farmer suicides, power shortage, migration (depeasantization), land grabbing, responsibility of the press/media, crisis of hunger amidst plenty and the deeper issues of poverty.[116] Sainath's narration is a powerful socio-political commentary that exposes the failures of state and market institutions. In the film, Sainath poses three core questions and answers them succinctly:

> *What is the agrarian crisis? How does this agrarian crisis get operationalised? And what does it achieve? (Answering these he says) The drive towards corporate farming - that is the agrarian crisis. It gets operationalized by the predatory commercialisation of the countryside and what it achieves is the biggest displacement in Indian history.[117] (Sainath)*

---

[115] Cornelius Tacitus et al., *The Annals: The Reigns of Tiberius, Claudius, and Nero* (OUP Oxford, 2008).
[116] 'Nero's Guests', Movies that Matter, accessed 12 November 2024, https://moviesthatmatter.nl/en/film/neros-guests/.
[117] *'Nero's Guests' Documentary - Deepa Bhatia | P. Sainath*, 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y2IsSs6JSZM.

This perspective simplifies the complicated social and economic transformation into a straightforward cause-and-effect chain that connects governance, financial gain, and loss. Corporate farming refers to large industrial agribusiness enterprises that are owned and managed by private players such as Reliance Agro in India, and Monsanto (acquired by Bayer, Germany in 2018) in the US. In these giant corporations, agricultural production is solely motivated by profit sidelining the needs for subsistence and local food security.[118] Corporate control over farming is globally criticized for impacts of chemical-intensive farming, loss of seed sovereignty, seed piracy and patenting, and marginalization of small farmers. Fiercely condemning industrial agriculture, Vandana Shiva calls it a recipe for ecological and economic disaster.[119]

Sainath's account in the documentary film highlights how commercialized, and monopolistic practices in farming support capitalist goals while negatively impacting the lives of people in rural areas. The texture of this 57-minutes long film is grindingly real and raw, capturing a visceral sense of urgency. It is composed with abrupt stitching of video footage from Sainath's field trips, his studio work, conversations, interviews and public speeches. Juxtaposing on-the-ground field visuals with Sainath's provocative public addresses and intimate studio moments, the film discards the linear, sanitized format in favour of content. It is a sharp, objective documentation where Sainath is both a participant and an observer in his interaction with the subjects in combative social spaces.[120] Using disjointed editing of unrehearsed, raw footage naturally evokes a sense of disorientation and exhaustion in the viewer. The collage-like format mirrors the layers of complex reality in the agrarian sector. It calls the viewer to attend to the disorientation and exhaustion of viewing this film and then piece together the realities of displacement, debt, and degradation.

---

[118] Raj Patel, *Stuffed and Starved: The Hidden Battle for the World Food System* (Melville House, 2012).
[119] Vandana Shiva, *Soil Not Oil: Environmental Justice in an Age of Climate Crisis* (North Atlantic Books, 2015).
[120] Angelica Fenner, 'The Subject of Documentary by Michael Renov. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2004', *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 25, no. 3 (2008): 251–56, https://doi.org/10.1080/10509200601091540.

The film unfolds further with Sainath stating 'if one looks at the Food and Agricultural Organisations's Report, State of World Food Insecurity Report between 1995-1997 and 2000-2002, hunger statistics fell in Ethiopia, East Africa and rose in India. Hunger fell in two sub-Saharan countries and rose in our rich country. The net per capita availability of food grain actually fell and fell massively during the economic reform years. There has been a severe acute compression of the diets of the poorest Indians. During this period of spectacular rise in hunger, India exported twenty million tonnes of food grain for the cattle of Europe, when our own people were starving'.[121]

Sarcastically quoting his friend and leading agricultural thinker Vijay Zhavandia, Sainath remarks that the dream of the Indian farmer is to be born a European cow, simply because the cow in Europe is the most food secure creature on the planet and about 2.7 dollars per day is spent on its food security. According to the United States Department of Agriculture, India as a country has the largest number of cows worldwide and they are protected for being sacred.[122] However, Germany has the largest dairy cow population within the EU, recording 3.8 million animals, accounting for 17% of the total EU (excluding the UK) dairy population.[123] This highlights the stark contrast between reverence and sustenance. Indian cows enjoy cultural and religious sanctity, and more recently even vigilantism, but their nutritional and living conditions remain poor.

---

[121] *'Nero's Guests' Documentary - Deepa Bhatia | P. Sainath*, 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y2IsSs6JSZM.

[122] 'News │Agrovet │Vet Pharma - Top 10 Countries with the Highest Number of Cows Worldwide', Agrovetmarket, 27 September 2016 https://www.agrovetmarket.com/en/vet-pharma-news/detail/top-10-countries-with-the-highest-number-of-cows-worldwide

[123] Tony McDougal, 'A Look at Dairy Cow Numbers across the EU', Dairy Global, 26 April 2023, https://www.dairyglobal.net/industry-and-markets/market-trends/a-look-at-dairy-cow-numbers-across-the-eu

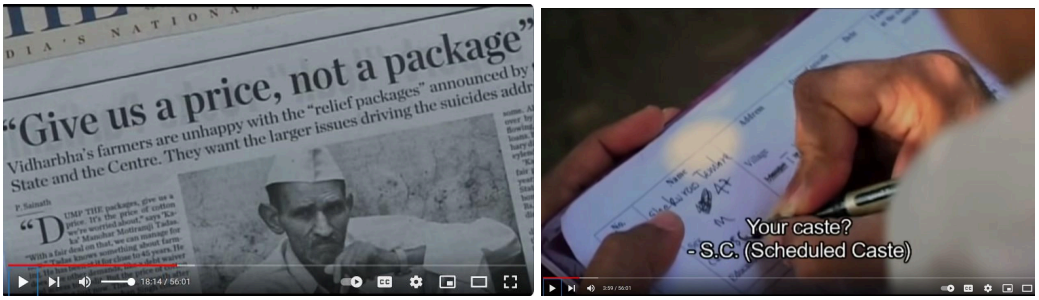


Fig. 2.3: Deepa Mehta, 'Nero's Guest', 2009, Film, Stills, 57 minutes, colour, Mistral Movies, India. Image Credits: IMDb (Internet Movie Database)

Even though class and caste are not exclusive praxis for understanding power in the Indian society, they are a strong determinant in the agrarian crisis. This can be understood in the light of Amartya Sen's writing on 'Class in India' in his international bestseller 'The Argumentative Indian' where he says that class is not the only source of inequality and that class as a source of disparity needs to be placed within a larger context that includes other divisive and additive influences such as gender, caste, region, community and so on.[124] These different sources of vulnerability are very significant individually and they strengthen the impact of each other because of their complementarity. For example, a congruence of class deprivation and gender discrimination can blight the lives of poor women severely. Sen asserts that class stratification has a very special role in the establishment of social inequality and it often makes the influence of other sources of disparity (such as gender, caste etc) much sharper.[125]

A large section of the rural poor belong to lower-caste communities and these include debt-ridden agricultural labour and landless farmers. These are the people living on the margins, whose accounts were recognised by the subaltern theorists. The film exemplifies this in several instances when during filed-visits, Sainath meets the grieving family of a farmer who has committed suicide. The camera footage zooms into the official Form that one of the representatives is filling that asks the caste of the deceased farmer (Fig. 2.3). The film captures and zooms into a

[124] Amartya Sen, *Argumentative Indian : Writings On India: Writings on Indian History, Culture and Identity* (Penguin UK, 2006). p.205
[125] Ibid.

bureaucratic gesture that is not merely procedural, rather it reifies the social ontology of caste as an instrument of control. The caste of the farmer is not just a statistical category, it is an identity. Since millenia, caste has created victims of oppression, it has been a symbolic index of vulnerability that translates into disposability in the agrarian sector.[126] The film not only documents rural despair but also renders visible the structural violence embedded in class and caste-based social stratification. Class and caste do not act independently in creating and reinforcing inequality, yet no other source of inequality is fully independent of them.[127] The film establishes caste and class as deeply entangled determinants within the lived realities of the rural agrarian crisis.

Both Sainath and Aditi Bhattad invoke Roman Emperor Nero in the title of their work. Sainath teases out this historic reference in a public lecture and that footage is a part of Bhatia's documentary film. And Aditi Bhattad through her performance questions the viewers of her work for their ignorance using Nero as a reference point. Understanding Nero's historical legacy is therefore necessary to grasp the critical framework employed by both of them.

2.3 Historical References of Emperor Nero

An examination of the historical narratives of Nero and his guests would enable the study to understand its use by Aditi Bhattad and Sainath to critique urban ignorance of the agrarian crisis. The three selected works for analysis are: Henryk Siemiradzki's painting 'Nero's Torches' (1876), Italian film 'Nero's Mistress' (1956), and a documentary 'Secrets of the Dead: The Nero Files' (2019). These three collectively reflect upon the similarities and differences in historical and cultural interpretations of Emperor Nero and his guests, across time, medium, and ideological frameworks.

---

[126] Provakar Palaka, ed., *Reading the Margins: History, Culture and Literature* (Peoples Literature Publication, 2020).
[127] Amartya Sen, *Argumentative Indian : Writings On India: Writings on Indian History, Culture and Identity* (Penguin UK, 2006). p.207

2.3a Polish Painting: ‘Nero’s Torches' (1876)

One of the earliest references to Nero comes from Polish history, a massive oil on canvas painting titled, ‘Nero’s Torches' (Fig.2.6). Famous for his academic depictions of ancient and biblical themes, Polish artist Henryk Siemiradzki (1843–1902), painted this work and later donated it to the National Museum of Krakow.[128] Also referred to as ‘Candlesticks of Christianity, the painting shows the moment when Emperor Nero ordered to set alight a group of Christians, as punishment for starting the Great Fire of Rome. The painting is a visual representation of the scene described by Tacitus in the *Annals* XV.44, recalling catastrophe after the Great Fire of Rome. The brutal execution of large numbers of Christians, some scholars believe, was Nero’s way of creating a distraction in the face of bad publicity.[129]

Fig.2.6: Henryk Siemiradzki,‘Nero's Torches’ or ‘Candlesticks of Christianity’, 1876, Painting, oil on canvas, 385 × 705 cm, National Museum, Kraków. Image Credits: Wikimedia Commons

The painting shows this specific moment in front of Nero’s golden palace, famously called Domus Aurea in Latin, a vast and lavish complex constructed after the fire had devastated most of the city. It is believed that the Domus Aurea

[128] Dominika Sarkowicz, ‘The application of modern analytical techniques to the examination of the Henryk Siemiradzki’s large-size painting “Nero’s Torches”’, *Museum Pamphlets* 23 (2015), volume 23 s. 83-99 (3 June 2016), https://doi.org/10.4467/20843852.OM.15.008.5386.
[129] ‘The Copy Book › Nero’s Torches’, accessed 5 November 2024, https://claylane.uk/copybook/?title=neros-torches.

spanned at least 50 hectares (123 acres) in the heart of the city of Rome; the walls were covered in frescoes and decorations; had over 300 rooms, massive lush gardens, an artificial lake, and a rotating dining room. With an unending labyrinth of rooms and corridors, it was the most opulent imperial place constructed at that time.[130] The palace was conceived as a part of the project that Nero had devised in order to convert and transform Rome into a new city to be known as 'Neropolis'.[131] The name of the new city 'Neropolis' bears close alignment with Achille Mbembe's critical theory of 'Necropolitics'[132] that shows how modern societies, bearing legacies of colonialism and slavery, have departed from democracy in order to establish death worlds embedded in a society of division. Historically, the city of Neropolis was destroyed and its archival memory remains close to the site where the famous Colosseum stands today.

Fig.2.7: 'Alexamenos Graffito', AD 200, Graphic representation. Image Credits: Wikimedia Commons

Siemiradzki's painting shows a massive cohort of guests and Nero reclining on a golden couch, ornately decorated with symbols of Imperial power, the eagle of Rome and the Winged Victory. Wearing a golden wreath on his head, purple and golden clothing, holding authoritatively a chain clamped on the neck of a tiger, symbolize his decadence and imperial power. At the feet of each victim, there are

[130] Jessica Mingoia, 'Smarthistory – The Rediscovery and Impact of the Domus Aurea', 14 May 2023, https://smarthistory.org/rediscovery-domus-aurea-renaissance-grotesque/.
[131] Rome Museum, 'Domus Aurea of Rome - Useful Information - Rome & Vatican Museums', accessed 10 November 2024, https://www.rome-museum.com/domus-aurea.php.
[132] Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics* (Duke University Press, 2019).

pinned signs listing their crimes and a replication of *Alexamenos graffito* (Fig.2.7) which is one of the earliest representation of the Crucifixion (AD 200 and found in 1856 in the Paedagogium on the Palatine Hill).[133] The scale, technique and the compositional elements of the painting indicate that Siemiradzki was clearly influenced by the classical techniques used in the Renaissance and Baroque traditions. Currently, in the collection of the National Museum in Krakow, this huge painting is a symbolic representation of the unpopularity of Christianity in the time and the cold indifference of the guests, depicted as beautiful ladies and handsome young men witnessing the brutality.[134]

At the time Siemiradzki painted 'Nero's Torches', Poland was not an independent state. The work therefore can be seen in the light of Polish Catholic identity and anti-imperial propaganda, where several Polish artists and intellectuals employed Christian imagery to depict Poland's suffering under foreign domination. Another way of interpreting the composition lies in the Latin quote from the Gospel of St.John (Jn 1:5), positioned on the frame of the painting: *Et Lux In Tenebris Lucet / Et Tenebrae Eam Non Comprehenderunt* (And the light shines in the darkness and the darkness cannot overcome it). The juxtaposition of power and oppression creates a polar narration of tyranny and martyrdom; of Realism and Romanticism; of sacrifice and amusement. The contrast between light and darkness is further highlighted by the composition, split into two opposing zones. The opulent realm of Roman aristocrats and elites is enveloped in a lavish array of marble, textiles, pottery, and luxurious ornaments, and it notably overshadows the domain of valiant martyrs who are shrouded in obscurity. The work draws the observer towards its vibrant array of colors and spatial divisions, with portions portrayed in a lucid, impasto style that disregard intricate details.[135] Siemiradzki's academic-style painting, rooted in 19th-century historicism evokes a moral compass to view Christian martyrdom and the decadence of imperial Rome.

---

[133] 'Alexamenos and Pagan Perceptions of Christians' (University of Chicago), accessed 5 November 2024, https://penelope.uchicago.edu/encyclopaedia_romana/gladiators/graffito.html.
[134] 'Nero's Torches', accessed 2 November 2024, https://muzea.malopolska.pl/en/objects-list/328.
[135] 'Nero's Torches', accessed 2 November 2024, https://muzea.malopolska.pl/en/objects-list/328.

2.3b Italian Film 'Nero's Mistress' (1956)

Almost a century later, the second example is the film 'Nero's Mistress'[136] that is a mid-20th-century Italian cinema's blend of spectacle and eroticism, which reimagines Nero as a melodramatic figure of excess.[137] Directed by Stefano Vanzina, 'Nero's Mistress', the film shows Nero on a seaside holiday with his second wife Poppaea Sabina, trusted friend-poet-philosopher Lucius Annaeus Seneca, along with many other guests. Seneca, a rhetorician, satirist, playwright, and author of several books of natural history, had a very powerful influencing position in the life and decisions of Nero.[138] Veteran Italian artist Alberto Sordi, known for satirizing his country's social ways into black comedies and grim drama, plays the character of Nero in the film.

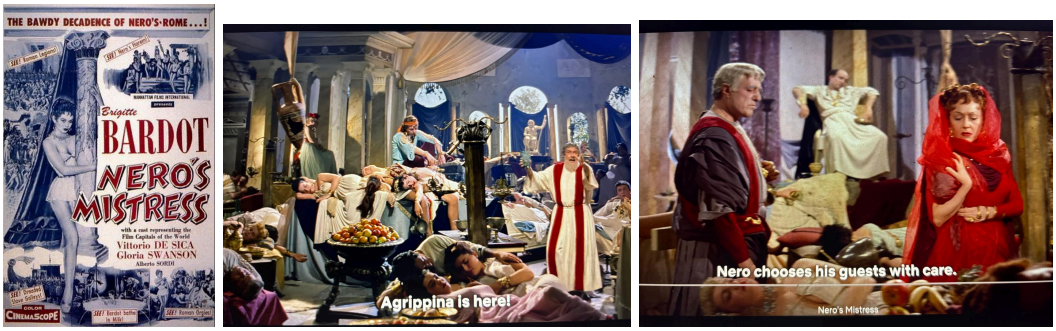


Fig. 2.4 & 2.5: Stefano Vanzina, 'Nero's Mistress', 1956, Film, Poster and Still Images, 95 minutes, colour, Italy. Image Credits: IMDb (Internet Movie Database)

The film has a sequence where Nero's mother, Julia Agrippina unexpectedly visits him and Seneca tries to deter her from meeting Nero, while showing her the palace and Nero's guests. The camera glides over a massive group of drunk people lying around and Agrippina questions: Who are these people?, to which Seneca replies - 'The experts I was talking about. Nero's Guests. Architects, mathematicians, artists. All people who excel'. Agrippina snaps back and asks, 'excel in what? In

---

[136] *Mio Figlio Nerone*, Comedy, History (Les Films Marceau, Produzione Cinematografica F.I.D.E.S., Titanus, n.d.).
[137] Maria Wyke, *Projecting the Past: Ancient Rome, Cinema, and History* (Psychology Press, 1997). p.110
[138] Elizabeth Kolbert, 'Such a Stoic', *The New Yorker*, 26 January 2015, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/02/02/stoic-2.

vices? Is he literate?' (pushing one drunk person's feet out of her way). Seneca then elaborates, 'No, he's a General, he is a Senator.. Nero chooses his guests with care. She is the daughter of a Praetor, she is the wife of a Consul'. This short sequence in the film is a vivid, cinematic reconstruction (Fig. 2.5) of Nero's wealthy guests and their absolute indifference towards everything that is happening around them. There is massive debate around whether or not historic cinema is/should be necessarily true to history. Its accuracy and pedagogical value is often contested. However, historic cinema has always been and continues to remain an intense and powerful instrument to reconstruct the past and transmit historical consciousness.

2.3c American Documentary: 'Secrets of the Dead: The Nero Files' (2019)

After the two historic accounts, a more contemporary take on Nero is the 2019 documentary: 'Secrets of the Dead: The Nero Files- Cause for a Cold Case Investigation', produced by Interspot Film, directed by Austrian filmmaker, Klaus T. Steindl. Adopting a forensic documentary approach, the film is informed by modern historiography and archaeology, in order to reassess the skepticism around the image of Nero.

The film was aired as part of American broadcaster Public Broadcast Service's (PBS) 'Secrets of the Dead' television series in partnership with other major broadcast channels like ORF (Der Österreichische Rundfunk), ZDF (Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen), France 5, and SBS (Special Broadcasting Service). The documentary re-examines Nero through the findings of an Austrian criminal psychologist Dr. Thomas Müller along with a team of scientists and historians who empirically investigate and discover the truth about the controversial emperor.[139]

According to the documentary film, three Roman writers are primarily responsible for having recorded the details of Nero's life and creating the image of an insane power-hungry tyrant, we all know. These three writers or historians were not

[139] 'AA History Documentary - The Nero Files: Secrets of the Dead - HD', 18 January 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1X4RAFuaRNo.

objective witnesses as none of them ever met him; Tacitus was ten years old, when Nero died; Suetonius was born two years later and Cassius Dio wasn't born until a century later after the end of Nero's reign. The writings could have been biased and/or politically motivated or just written as stylistically sophisticated, personal versions of exciting, dramatic tales. These writings continue to shape perceptions of Nero, until this day.

The film highlights different episodes of Nero's life where he was blamed for being on the wrong side of things. One such major event was the Great Fire of Rome, that began on the 18th of July, 64 AD and the three writers give very distinct accounts of what exactly conspired. Under immense social pressure and a natural psychological quest to put the blame of the great fire on someone, Nero chose the unpopular, notorious cult of the times, Christianity, who believed that the world would end up in flames, as a target. Tacitus, in his writing, also states that the Christians admit to starting the fire. Nero had these Christians burnt at stake in public view, so that his guests' and people's sense of pain and loss could be drowned in a thrilling spectacle of revenge. There is no other evidence of Nero targeting Christians ever again, in history. According to Historian Martin Zimmerman, Nero was neither an insane ruler nor was he psychologically ill. The writers painted a picture of him, but in reality, he simply behaved in a manner that did not suit the political atmosphere of the times. The documentary concludes by saying that the writings of Tacitus and other two writers were subjective, speculative conjectures and that Nero was an artist, a victim and not a decadent, insane emperor.[140]

2.3d Comparative Analysis

The merit of viewing these three artworks (a painting, a commercial Italian film and a forensic documentary), in chronological sequence is that they reflect the constantly shifting historiographical and cultural narratives surrounding Nero. All three examples center on the same historical figure but are set in different historical

[140] 'AA History Documentary - The Nero Files: Secrets of the Dead - HD', 18 January 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1X4RAFuaRNo.

times and places. The depictions carry interesting ruptures and discontinuities in their portrayal of the emperor's persecutions. These reflect the changing mode of historical reconstruction and the changing cultural force of the narratives within and between the countries of their production and viewership. The examples provide useful points of entry into understanding the work of Aditi Bhattad and Sainath.

Circling back to Deepa Bhatia's documentary film, Sainath speaks about Tacitus, both at the beginning and while concluding the film. Sainath strongly asserts that Tacitus was an extremely dispassionate historian, because he absolutely detested Nero. However, he also says that Tacitus never blamed Nero (for the nine-days long fire, burning a large part of the city of Rome, including Nero's own palace and his beloved art collection).[141] This argument of Sainath finds some support in the 2019 forensic documentary: 'Secrets of the Dead: The Nero Files- Cause for a Cold Case Investigation', in which historians mention that Tacitus was the only one who did not blame Nero. Rather in his writings, Tacitus credited Nero with effective crisis management and coordinating the rescue operations during the fire.[142]

Sainath states that Nero, in his beautiful gardens, hosted the greatest party ever seen in the ancient world but the problem was how to illuminate such a gigantic party. So Nero brought his enslaved criminals, prisoners and burnt them at stake. As they were doused in fire, the party continued in its nightly illumination. This statement also finds historical reference in Henryk Siemiradzki's painting. However, Sainath promptly clarifies that for him, Nero was never the issue; the real issue was Nero's guests. Who were these guests? In the film, Sainath burdens the viewer with the following questions, 'what sort of a mindset did it require for you to pop one more fig into your mouth as another human being burst into flames? What sort of a mindset did it require for you to drop those grapes into your jaws as

---

[141] *Nero's Guests' Documentary - Deepa Bhatia | P. Sainath*, 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y2IsSs6JSZM.
[142] 'AA History Documentary - The Nero Files: Secrets of the Dead - HD', 18 January 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1X4RAFuaRNo.

another pathetic person on a crucifix or a stake burnt to provide you illumination?'[143] A more visual representation of this is visible in the Italian film 'Nero's Mistress' discussed above. The film shows that the mute spectators at Nero's gathering were drunk, self-absorbed, unconscious members of the society. These were powerful senators, nobility, artists, musicians, singers, historians and the elite literati of Rome.

2.4 Performance: 'Are You Nero's Guests?' (2017) and Protest Songs

The narrative of emperor Nero and his elite guests as illustrated through the examples above reveals a complex picture with deep historical roots shaped by layers of political, cultural, and literary interpretation. It is therefore clear that there is no linear monolithic account of Nero and his guests' seemingly insane behavior.

The research places greater importance on the closer scrutiny of Aditi Bhattad's performance artwork 'Are You Nero's Guests?' that attempted to transfer or fundamentally renew the intensity of this divided historic narrative in a completely different temporal and spatial context. The question of projection or transference or appropriation is very important here and will be teased out in greater detail ahead. As stated earlier, the agricultural catastrophe and the exploitation that Aditi Bhattad witnessed in her village became her inspiration to perform and voice her dissent against urban ignorance towards the genocide of farmers.

For the duration of the performance, which was over two hours, Aditi Bhattad as a solo actor clad in a traditionally draped cotton saree, sat on the floor around a low-table, in an enclosed space, writing on postcards. The make-shift table had an impression of a dinner table for eight members, with plates and cutlery impressed on its visible top surface. The center of the table was hollowed out in the shape of a coffin and had real microgreens and plants growing in the soil. Aditi Bhattad started the performance with plucking out the edible microgreens from the center

[143] *Nero's Guests' Documentary - Deepa Bhatia | P. Sainath*, 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y2IsSs6JSZM.

and serving it on each plate on the table, a representation of how the farmer feeds and nourishes everyone. She then pulled out a bright red colour fabric-bound *bahikhata* (external account book) from under the table and started writing the name, age, village and date of suicide of each farmer who committed suicide in and around her village. Then she piled them up in a stack for anyone to engage with or take away.

The postcards were personally handed over to the viewers by a few members from the Gram Art Collective, cofounded by Aditi Bhattad along with her elder sibling Shweta Bhattad. These postcards had indigenous seeds embedded in them and were affixed with a five rupees postage stamp so that the viewer may choose to write the appropriate address and post it. Looking beyond the primacy of her act, a number "3,22,028…" was sunburnt on her back. The digits were clearly visible to the audience, as she sat down to fill the postcards in this two-hour long performance. The number 3,22,028 (the specific way in which the number was written with commas is explained in detail ahead in the chapter) represented the total count of farmer suicides that were recorded and reported in India from year 1995 to 2015. The artist used her body as a trope and the proximate boundary of skin as a surface of exchange. Aditi Bhattad did not make any direct eye contact with the visitors or with the other members of the Collective, she was busy in her own actions in the gallery space, totally absorbed in the gravity and responsibility of her task amidst open public scrutiny. Her own indifference towards the presence of the audience further heightened the concepts of 'ignorance' and 'indifference' portrayed in her work. This connects with Marcel Duchamp's concept of 'beauty of indifference'[144] which (in the context of readymades and conceptual art), signified an intentional dismissal of conventional standards and an absolute impartiality towards the concept. The stance adopted by Aditi Bhattad in her performance is similar, as it aims to detach and unsettle the neutrality of viewing the crisis.

[144] Garrett, Stephen M. "The Difference of Indifference: Marcel Duchamp and the Possibilities of Dialogical Personalism" *Religions* 15, (2024) no. 4: 438. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15040438

Artists often include sound in their work to engage with themes of memory and identity. Listening to sounds or music impacts the perception and interpretation of an otherwise visually dominant artwork. A group of four boys, also hailing from farming ancestry, from the Gram Art Collective sang and played music during the performance. Kunam Humane and Adarsh Dhoke were the main vocalists, Abhiveer Shivraj played the guitar and Parvinder Sing played the beats on Cajon. Four songs were sung, and each carried a revolutionary protest-oriented fervor. Music and the intensity of the words became a meta-language of the performance. The music significantly claimed the gallery space with a revolutionary seriousness that enabled the viewers to grasp the intensity of the issue at hand. The first song that was sung is a very popular couplet by Urdu nationalist poet Bismil Azimabadi (1901 – 1978)[145], '**वक़्त आने पर बता देंगे तुझे, ए आसमान, हम अभी से क्या बताएँ क्या हमारे दिल में है**', meaning '*When the time comes we'll prove it to the sky, Why should we tell you now itself, as to what's there in our hearts'*, which in a way sets the tone for the beginning of the performance[146]. Bismil Azimabadi's real name was Syed Shah Muhammad Hasan who was a descendant of Makhdoom Syed Shah Fareed-ud-Din Tawela Bakhsh Chishti of Chand Purah Bihar. Azimabadi composed this poem in 1920 and it was published from Delhi in the subsequent year in an Urdu Daily called 'Sabah' edited by Qazi Abdul Ghaffar. Composed in ornamental Urdu language, these lines highlight the willingness of courageous but disciplined freedom fighters to sacrifice their life for their motherland while being succinctly aware of the worst possible action from the opponent.[147] Evoking the texture of political action, songs of protest tend to have more fire than music in them.[148] Sung collectively the words, the rhythm, metre, rekindle shared memories, outrage and conviction. Most of the songs sung during the performance were popular protest songs, mostly familiar for the local and national audiences. However, for those who

---

[145] Appendix 2A

[146] Krupa Shandilya, 'The Many Bismils of Today: Ram Prasad "Bismil", "Bismil" Azimabadi and Recovering the Legacy of a Muslim Intellectual', *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 47, no. 3 (3 May 2024): 534–57, https://doi.org/10.1080/00856401.2024.2350888.

[147] Khalid Bin Umar, 'Sarfaroshi Ki Tamanna – Bismil Azimabadi – TAWARIKH KHWANI', accessed 6 November 2024, https://tawarikhkhwani.com/sarfaroshi-ki-tamanna-bismil-azimabadi/.

[148] Aruna Roy, *The Personal Is Political: An Activist's Memoir* (Harper Collins India, 2024),p.xx

might be unfamiliar with the songs, there was no supplementary reading material or translation provided during the performance in the exhibition space.

The lyrics of the second song were from the popular modern hindi literature poet Dushyant Kumar's (1933 - 1975) poem 'हो गई है पीर पर्वत-सी पिघलनी चाहिए', meaning 'Insurmountable like the mountain, is our sorrow'[149]. This verse is often cited in serious protest campaigns such as the recent Anti-Corruption Movement campaign (2011–2012) in Delhi which saw political leader Arvind Kejriwal reciting it.[150] Conveying both compassion and vigor, the words in this verse announce that now the pain has become like a mountain and it should melt, just like the river Ganges melted from the mighty Himalayas.[151] According to poet Dushyant Kumar, injustice and atrocities leading to suffering have crossed all limits and that there is a need for a deep, foundational change. This call for change, this struggle does not just belong to a single man; it is a fire, a wave, that should reach every village, street, and, road, it should reach every person's mind in a way that even the dead come to life and carry this torch ahead. He clarifies that just making a noise is not the intention here, instead, the aim is to restore the society and the country.

When the musicians stopped singing the silence in the gallery space suddenly got filled with readings of the postcards. Nutan Dwivedi, Suman Humane, Ganesh Dhoke and Adarsh Dhoke (also members of the Gram Art Collective)[152] read out the the name, age, village and date of suicide of each farmer who committed suicide in and around their village, in a one-to-one monologue with the present viewers. Holding the postcards in their hands, the hand-tied, mute spectators appeared lost, as if they had been unaware, helpless and maybe even indifferent to this reality. Most of the viewers were either sitting on the floor with their back

---

[149] Appendix 2B
[150] OV Digital Desk, 'Remembering Dushyant Kumar', *Observer Voice*, 29 December 2021, https://observervoice.com/remembering-dushyant-kumar-5306/.
[151] Poetry Desk, 'हो गई है पीर पर्वत-सी पिघलनी चाहिए', *Amar Ujala*, accessed 9 November 2024, https://www.amarujala.com/kavya/irshaad/dushyant-kumar-poetry-on-life-struggle.
[152] Appendix-3 - QnA with Tanmay SJ, Member, Gram Art Collective

rested against the gallery wall or standing leaning on a wall, trying to find some sort of support to be able to bear the burden of what was being shown and said. Some viewers were taking photographs, some were reading the postcards, flipping both sides of it. The air had a heaviness, while no one was talking or asking; a lot had to be seen, understood, absorbed and maybe even reacted to.

Towards the end of the performance the artist with a small pair of red colour scissors cut her own hair and offered it as a tribute to every farmer who lost hope and took to the extreme measure of ending life. The critical yet liberating act of cutting one's own hair has a worldly rationale of mourning; a signifier of losing a loved one, a way of symbolically releasing the pain, grief and memories. The act itself being so experiential, makes one think, what does it mean to perform a ritual in a public space - where the performer artist is alone and yet together with an audience. Encompassing this commonly recognised phenomenon of giving up one's hair, the act reductively calls for social cohesion and offers resonances that traverse pre-established social constructs.

After cutting locks of hair and spilling them on the gallery floor, Aditi started to cry profusely and helplessly, not knowing how to contain her emotions. Her hyper-ventilating breaths added another layer to the criticality of the situation being addressed. Soon her elder sibling Shweta Bhattad (co-founder, Gram Art Collective) and brother-in-law Tanmay SJ (Member, Gram Art Collective) walked towards her and asked her to get up from the floor and stand together with the rest of the participants. The performance concluded with Shweta Bhattad holding Aditi's hand along with all the present members of the Collective standing together in the gallery space and singing the protest songs along with the musicians. As the music scaled, the intensity of the lingering, unanswered questions also heightened.

While Aditi Bhattad sat in the gallery space, randomly cutting locks of her hair, the musicians sang another piece of poetry by Balli Singh Cheema 'The torches have

started moving'[153]. Another catalyzing verse which has a direct reference to a mass movement, the awakening of people of 'my village'. Employing a simple, easy and effective language, Cheema's poem combines sensitivity with a revolutionary approach.[154] It says that the people of his village are now walking with torches in their hands to kill the darkness and break the chains of suffering. It is important to mention here that Aditi Bhattad confirmed that the performance was never practiced or rehearsed by the team[155] (musicians, Aditi and other members of the Collective), the words of this verse synced with Aditi Bhattad's act of cutting her hair and crying profusely, symbolically referring to the idea of awakening after a very deep darkness. According to Aditi Bhattad, 'It was a deeply intense and emotional experience for me and it can never be adequately explained; no words would be enough'.[156] To a large extent, Aditi Bhattad's body became a carrier of the music being sung, challenging the norms of believability in the context of the performance and the reality of the agrarian crisis. This explains the improvisatory nature of this performance. It makes evident that a performance is more than an ethnographic or anthropological phenomenon, and it has a social and psychological perspective as well.[157] It might be suitable to say that just like so many struggles go unrecorded for the sake of posterity, this performance was never repeated by the artist and neither was its recording shown as an artwork ever again.

In David Arnold's popular essay, 'The Colonial Prison: Power, Knowledge, and Penology in the 19th Century India', he begins with Michael Foucault's idea of public torture, punishment and execution (of Robert-Francois Damiens in Paris, 1757) as a grisly spectacle in the history of repression and then suggests that by the 1830s, the age of sobriety in punishment had begun.[158] However, in this new system, these punishments were aimed to strike the soul, and not the body; it was

---

[153] Appendix 2D - Poetry: Balli Singh Cheema
[154] Suhani Gahtori, 'Dushyant Kumar दुष्यंत कुमार की 5 कविताएं', *Prabhat Khabar*, 28 June 2024, sec. Prabhat Literature, https://www.prabhatkhabar.com/prabhat-literature/dushyant-kumar-5-poems.
[155] Appendix 2E - Transcription of Interview with Aditi Bhattad
[156] Appendix 2E - Transcription of Interview with Aditi Bhattad
[157] Marvin Carlson, *Performance: A Critical Introduction* (Psychology Press, 1996), p.30
[158] Ranajit Guha, *Subaltern Studies Reader, 1986-1995* (Minneapolis: Univ Of Minnesota Press, 1997), p.140.

not about a violent expiation of the body anymore, instead, it was meant to act in the depths of the heart, thoughts, will and even in the inclinations of the prisoner and this was the structure of colonial power and penology.[159] In the 19th century, India saw the mechanisms of power become more complicated, layered and pervasive than just a set of laws or state policies. Even though brutal punishments became redundant, the state apparatus assured that defiance is crushed and that an automated flow and functioning of power prevails, and pervades within the social fabric of the country. In the light of this theory, it would be correct to say that the performance has its own internal logic of power struggles that stem from lived realities of the agrarian crisis.

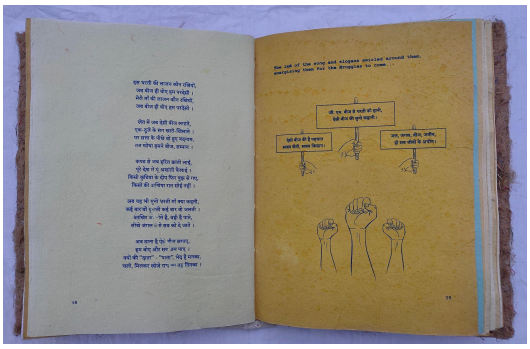


Fig. 2.8: (Left) Gram Art Collective, 'Eaten Cotton.. A Love Story.. A Cook Book' Pages 38-39, 2022, Artist Book, handmade, 80 pages, Paradasinga Village, Madhya Pradesh, India. Image Credits: Gram Art Collective
Fig. 2.9: (Right) Gram Art Collective, 'Dear PM Please Grow in India', 2016, Crop Art/Land Art, Dimensions variable, Paradasinga Village, Madhya Pradesh, India. Image Credits: Gram Art Collective

The last song that was sung by the artist was co-authored collectively by the Gram Art Collective members, '**इस धरती की लाजन कौन रखियों, जब बीज ही बोए हम परदेसी**'[160] meaning 'Who can save the honor of this land, when we are sowing foreign seeds'. This verse was written by the group, collectively, in 2016 while working on a land art project titled 'Dear Prime Minister Please Grow in India'[161] (Fig.2.8). It is published in Hindi (with no English translation) on pages 38-39 of the Collectives' handmade artist book (Fig.2.9) of a total 80 screen-printed pages

[159] Ibid.
[160] Appendix 2C. Poetry: Gram Art Collective
[161] Artwork discussed in greater detail in Chapter 3 (Gram Art Collective).

titled, 'Eaten Cotton.. A Love Story.. A Cook Book'.[162] The essence of this verse of the song is to question the prevailing farming trends of mono-cropping, excessive reliance on hybrid seeds and an absolute loss of traditional- local- indigenous knowledge systems. It was an attempt to promote seed saving and emphasizing local seeds against the toxic, genetically engineered and modified seeds commonly referred to as *Bt* crops[163] (*Bacillus thuringiensis*) and GMO (Genetically Modified Organisms). *Bt* cotton is the only *Bt* crop cultivated in developing countries and cultivation of *Bt* cotton in India started in 2002.[164] GM crops were first commercialized in 1996 and the global surge in using GM and *Bt* crops has been an attempt to reduce the possibility of crop failure from various crop pests but it has an irreversible effect on the soil and the overall agricultural ecosystem.[165] Environmental activist Vandana Shiva fiercely advocates for the preservation of native seeds, which she sees as integral to ecological biodiversity, food sovereignty, and traditional knowledge systems.[166] She strongly voices how multinational agrochemical corporations like Monsanto steal indigenous knowledge systems, patent them and create economic dependency for the debt-ridden farmers.[167] This is discussed again in greater detail in chapter three.

Protest songs tend to have a significant psychological, social, and political impact on listeners. Not only do they evoke strong emotions, but also foster empathy and a sense of solidarity towards a cause. For the performers, the songs are a tool for social change; a rallying cry; a form of activism, and narrating them is a form of emotional release which comes from voicing dissent against injustice and discrimination. Carrying historical memory, protest songs serve as familiar

---

[162] Appendix-2F. Transcription: Chat with Tanmay SJ, Member, Gram Art Collective.
[163] Most common Bt crops are corn and cotton.
[164] Mohamed Samir Tawfik Abbas, 'Genetically Engineered (Modified) Crops (Bacillus Thuringiensis Crops) and the World Controversy on Their Safety', *Egyptian Journal of Biological Pest Control* 28, no. 1 (19 June 2018): 52, https://doi.org/10.1186/s41938-018-0051-2.
[165] Isik Icoz and Guenther Stotzky, 'Fate and Effects of Insect-Resistant *Bt* Crops in Soil Ecosystems', *Soil Biology and Biochemistry* 40, no. 3 (1 March 2008): 559–86, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.soilbio.2007.11.002.
[166] Vandana Shiva, ed., *Seed Sovereignty, Food Security: Women in the Vanguard of the Fight against GMOs and Corporate Agriculture* (North Atlantic Books, 2016).
[167] Vandana Shiva, *The Violence of the Green Revolution: Third World Agriculture, Ecology and Politics* (Zed Books, 1991).

metaphors embedded in social, political, and economic injustices, used time and again, to narrate and reframe contemporary issues and aspirations. Viewing the performance in an exhibition space as an alternative public discourse, one can agree with American scholar Nancy Fraser's emphasis on how songs tend to become political tools in the hands of the 'subaltern counterpublics' - a term coined by her to refer to the members of subordinated or marginalized social groups who create counter-discourses against the dominant power structures.[168] In a nutshell, protest songs are evergreen social scripts that have stood the test of time and are continuously employed by artists and activists to align historical trauma with the embodied knowledge of the present.

Fig. 2.10: Aditi Bhattad, 'Are You Nero's Guests?', 2017, Performance, 120 minutes, Vadehra Art Gallery, Delhi, India. Image Credits: Foundation for Indian Contemporary Art (FICA), New Delhi

Elaborating upon the origin and context of this performance, Aditi Bhattad explained, 'my father, at the age of 60, closed down his shop/business of 22 years to go back to his village and pursue his dream of full-time farming again. It was a tough job because it was not only physically demanding but also mentally challenging as the whole farming landscape had changed. All his childhood friends in the village who were farmers had switched to mono cropping of GMO Cotton seeds, backed by chemical fertilizers, pesticides, weedicides and what not. My father wanted to farm against this flow, practice sustainable agricultural practices, and realize his dream of a green farm with birds, insects, and animals together in

[168] Nancy Fraser, 'Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy', *Social Text*, no. 25/26 (1990): 56–80, https://doi.org/10.2307/466240.

harmony with nature. Our dinner-table conversations shifted and we as a family only spoke about the challenges and needs of the farmland.[169] Back then, Aditi Bhattad had just finished her graduation in fine arts from Arts College Khamgaon, Buldana district, Maharashtra, and all the discussions at home inspired her to synergize this latent knowledge to not only question but also act upon. The Gram Art Collective team at the Paradsinga village collectively applied for a public grant, in which Aditi Bhattad was involved as a small part but also included artists, social workers, local village youth, women, and farmers to create and celebrate a whole new Land Art Festival. A series of events, meetings, exhibitions, public projects and performances were planned by the Collective and one of them was this particular performance by Aditi Bhattad.[170] Taking lead, Aditi Bhattad aspired to inform, inspire, and unite people from her village to create an alliance for public discourse and social transformation.

For Aditi, this performance started almost a month prior when she was home in Paradsinga village, Madhya Pradesh. She wore a sticker with the number 3,22,028 on her back while she worked in the sun in her farm wearing a green-colour 'Lugda' (traditional saree). She spent this month collecting data available in the government records on the reported farm suicides that happened in *Vidarbha* region from the year of the great green revolution till the date of the performance. She prepared her own 'bahikhata' (external account book) and when on the day of the performance she removed the sticker, the staggering number was naturally visible, sunburnt on her back. Bhattad explains her performance, saying 'I was the motherland, who in turn was watching her children, the farmers committing suicide'. It was aimed at staging a compelling narrative of erosion, impermanence, uncertainty and despair in the lives of the farmers and the indifferent, mute, gaze-exchanging society. The reference also brings to mind the metaphor 'The Wretched Earth' used by Gros and Sheikh in their essay on botanical conflicts, which says about the soil, that it is a thin layer of earth upon which life is

[169] Appendix-2E - Transcription: Interview with Aditi Bhattad
[170] Ibid.

dependant, but it is contaminated, eroded, drained, burnt, exploded, flooded, and impoverished on a global level.[171] The implications of the act were formal but also historical, social, cultural, emotive and intellectual all in the same instance. It is worth analyzing how Aditi Bhattad mediated the overwhelming publicness and the all consuming privateness of her creative process. The performance objectified a cloud of problems with simplistic, reducible and muted actions that unfasten comfort. Bhattad's voiceless narration, expression and gaze as a performer is a reified verbal construct that echoed turmoil and lamentation.

One important observation is that the number 3,22,028 inscribed on Aditi Bhattad's back uses the Indian place-value system in which we insert a comma after three digits then after every two-digit (i.e., after every two digits after hundreds place from right to left). It is fairly clear and obvious for an Indian/Asian (This notation system is also used in Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal and Myanmar) viewers to understand this but for a foreigner it is confusing. Having said this, it is worth thinking if this performance and its documentation, dissemination etc. was meant for a specific geographical context and audience or if it was an artistic oversight? It would be appropriate to agree that the performance was meant for a specific audience, because the protest songs and narration of Postcards was also in Hindi, without any translation-transcription available on-site. It is therefore appropriate to assume that the guests of Nero were very specific people.

The aim of the artist was to bring agency to the idea of social change and mobilize civic participation. With a critical wedge, this artistic performance orchestrated the exhibition space as an active-participative site of negotiation between the observers and the observed. It came across as transactional in terms of its social, political, cognitive and critical expectations that exhort the audience to be receptive and sensitive or even feel like a victim of ignorance. Claiming to personify the motherland and dressed like a farmer, Aditi Bhattad carried a textured image with a

[171] Ros Gray and Shela Sheikh, '"The Wretched Earth: Botanical Conflicts and Artistic Interventions"', *Third Text* Vol.32, no. Issue 2–3 (May 2018), http://www.thirdtext.org/issues?item_id0=1511&issue_number=Volume%2032,%202018&offset=0.

feminist confrontational gesture, and the performance permeated into the gendered term farmer and the patriarchal nature of the rural sector in India. The non-committal and subversive role of women in the farming sector exposes a bedrock of probable issues that remain unseen. Sainath also indicated this problem by referring to a young girl, Sudhamani and her mother who was a farmer in the Anantpur District of the 'Vidarbha' region (Maharashtra) and when the mother committed suicide, the dependent family was not entitled to any compensation since it is only systemic to not recognise women as farmers. It is a cruel reality that a woman in the rural farmland is simply a farmer's wife. When Sainath asked Sudhamani what remains her most endearing memory of her mother, she replied, 'I wish I had a memory of my mother when she was not working. When I slept she was working, when I woke up, she was working..'.[172] Back-breaking, underpaid, unacknowledged work of women on the family farm is key to its very survival but is systemically normalized as surplus.[173]

The artists, whether they/he/she like it or not, are in a constant relationship with the public, with society and the diverse disciplinary debates around community art, and social practice. French art theorist and curator, Nicolas Bourriaud in his theory of 'Relational Aesthetics' asserts that art has always been a factor in sociability, the basis of a dialogue and an ensemble of units which get activated by the viewer's manipulation. He states that art has the ability to compress relational space and is a site that produces a specific kind of sociability.[174] Aditi's performance was enacted within the quiet white cube walls of Vadehra Art Gallery, Delhi and was supported by the Foundation for Indian Contemporary Art (FICA). Established in 1987, Vadehra Art Gallery is a popular private art space which recognises itself as a confidante to art history and a paladin to contemporary art practice. Private players as institutions can push the matrix of activism in seminal multiscopic ways. A very contested aspect of performance involves the question of to what extent

---

[172] *'Nero's Guests' Documentary - Deepa Bhatia | P. Sainath*, 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y2IsSs6JSZM.
[173] Aruna Roy, *The Personal Is Political: An Activist's Memoir* (Harper Collins India, 2024) p.83.
[174] Claire Bishop, ed., *Participation: Documents of Contemporary Art*, unknown edition (London: The MIT Press, 2006),161.

performance itself results from something the performer does and to what extent it results from a particular context in which it is done.[175] To situate this performance in a famous gallery in the political heart of the country also positions the place as an arena where negotiations are forced and the inscribed body performs meaning by materializing the urban site.

The act itself did not cling to any existent criteria of a space, rather it unfolded a radical critique on the arbitrary patterns of modern consumption of art and ideas. The performance was fluid, transient and demanded mutuality; it offered a way of thinking about trauma. The performance opened up numerous key questions to grapple with and at the same time served as a brave step towards progressive and socially transformative cultures. Though the challenge remained as to how one can convert the polemic into possible routes for empowering collective action and change.

Performance being a site of negotiations includes: who is watching it, reporting it, and what are the social, political and cognitive implications of these transactions.[176] Aditi's work directly addresses the social roles and responsibility of implication of collective memories of past violence, trauma, and suffering. Michael Rothberg's[177] critical inquiry of the victim-perpetrator binary, in his book 'The Implicated Subject: Beyond Victims and Perpetrators' offers an interesting framework to analyse Aditi Bhattad's artwork. Rothberg's exploration of the intersections of memory between different groups who have experienced different forms of violence, such as the Holocaust, colonialism, slavery, etc and how these constantly evolving memories influence contemporary discourse aligns with Aditi's transference of the trauma in her village. However, the fluidity of implications or transference often comes with an underdeveloped vocabulary with significant risks of oversimplification of complex events and identities.

---

[175] Marvin Carlson, *Performance: A Critical Introduction* (Psychology Press, 1996), 15.
[176] Marvin Carlson, *Performance: A Critical Introduction* (Psychology Press, 1996), p.16, 29.
[177] Michael Rothberg, *The Implicated Subject: Beyond Victims and Perpetrators* (Stanford University Press, 2019), p.8

Rothberg very rightly says, implications carry discomfiting forms of belonging to a context of injustice that cannot be immediately grasped because of spatial, temporal, or social distances.[178] Even though Aditi Bhattad belongs to the vulnerable context of which she is speaking of and from, the representation does not preclude the recognition of the collective trauma and vice-versa. Accentuating the binary she stokes collective and personal memory within the immediacy of the performance but simultaneously obscures the roles of other actors (and stakeholders), thereby limiting ethical reflection. The performance raises pertinent questions about how the artist who is neither a victim nor a perpetrator, can reflect upon their ethical entanglement, regain the space to tell personal memory and address equality and justice within a complex and nuanced context of the crisis. It remains unclear if the artist clearly recognizes and represents her own position within these networks and creatively moves beyond a limited moral vocabulary.

Aditi Bhattad and Rothberg converge in their interrogation of memory, trauma, and ethical responsibility. Both are overriding the enduring legacies of historical violence and the moral-ethical entanglements of those who inherit these memories, which Rothberg terms as "implicated subjects".[179] Bhattad's performance-based work becomes a real-time site of negotiations, engaging with the actuality of collective memory and social responsibility. Her body in the performance is itself the actuality of the phenomenon. The body, as potentiality and duration, leans towards the future (hope, awareness) while still retains past experiences (farmer suicides, rituals), and this is the phenomenon. Being a reservoir of knowledge, the body carries the temporality of the performance, recreates the lives of the farmers in such a way that it turns a notion into material.[180] The body therefore, is the

---

[178] Ibid.
[179] Michael Rothberg, *The Implicated Subject: Beyond Victims and Perpetrators* (Stanford University Press, 2019)
[180] Gert Melville and Carlos Rafael Ruta, *Thinking the Body as a Basis, Provocation, and Burden of Life: Studies in Intercultural and Historical Contexts*, Challenges of Life (Berlin : Boston, Mass. : De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2015). p.41

carrier of knowledge, which through the performance positions itself to allow the strange unknown to become familiar.

Aditi Bhattad and Rothberg diverge in their positioning of the subject within the frameworks of memory, trauma and responsibility. Rothberg's theoretical discourse provides a critical tool to understand Aditi Bhattad's artwork by dismantling the binary of victim and perpetrator and reflecting upon the complicity of those who are neither. However, while Rothberg emphasizes the fluid, often obscured nature of implication across time and space, Bhattad's approach is deeply personal and immediate, which risks the articulation of her own positionality within the matrix of implication. Thus, even though the concepts align in seeking to map the ethics of remembrance and accountability, they differ and delineate significantly in methodology and implementation. Rothberg is held by a theoretical distance, and Aditi Bhattad's embodied artistic expression, reveals and complicates the moral-ethical terrain.

Performances as strategies in many ways already distance themselves from static singular representation in favour of functional, activity-based tectonics. Most artists and curators strategize on ways to enhance the longevity and reach of a durational performance, either through photographs or video recordings as documentation. Though some performances emphasize live presence in order to harness their objective. On being asked about the documentation, Aditi Bhattad did not herself have anything but suggested that FICA curator Vidya Shivadas might be able to guide further. Shivadas shared a weblink and elicited a video recording of the performance on FICA's youtube handle which does not surface easily through a random google search. The video documentation of the performance sits deep and drowned in the FICA archive and has never been shown in a public viewing context. However, Claire Bishop's idea that documentation in the contemporary times lies in the hands of every viewer of the transient act, and not just a professionally hired photographer/ videographer - is an important argument that

supports the evolving dynamics of looking at art performance.[181] Social media handles therefore are active carriers of documentation and dissemination across diverse demographics and these channels manifest a range of response and fill almost all deficits of visibility in the present times.

Seeing Aditi Bhattad's performance as an act of mourning, bears a powerful intersection between embodied grief, ritual and ceremony. The act of mourning in public is a transformative act as it spreads the ambit of loss and grieving in a larger social space, making it a site for resistance, recognition, and reimagining communal thought. According to Judith Butler, public mourning has the ability to challenge normative frameworks of expression by raising questions about what is considered grievable, in the first place.[182]

Aditi Bhattad's performance can be understood in the light of 'The Archive and the Repertoire' theory by performance studies scholar Diana Taylor, in which performance, gestures, orality, movement, and ritual exist a repertoire of knowledge and are transmitted in real-time through living bodies in specific contexts, without employing any actual objects or memorablia. The repertoire also refers to how the knowledge is played out and passed on in the context of a performance.[183] Aditi Bhattad internalized the crisis and her actions ritualized the common understanding of care and remembrance. For the duration of Aditi's performance, the actors, while exploring pain and memory, successfully created a liminal zone, collapsing temporality of the past and present, and resisting closure. The act preserved the memory of the lost lives, reenacted their erasure, and transformed personal grief and loss into a collective acknowledgment of injustice. The act was ephemeral and live, not necessarily easy to preserve, keep/record or recreate - similar to the embodiment of loss, where the body is the sole singular entity responsible for storing, processing and transmitting.

---

[181] Claire Bishop, *Disordered Attention: How We Look at Art and Performance Today* (Verso Books, 2024), p.4.
[182] Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (Verso, 2020).
[183] Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*, Second Printing edition (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2003).

The fact that the artist herself does not have any recording of the performance and did not ever showcase the work as an iteration or a documentation, brings one to American feminist scholar Peggy Phelan's popular assertion that performance disappears and cannot be documented without altering it.[184] This viewpoint of privileging liveness and ephemerality over inscription and documentation, can be criticized for being less stable but offers a broad framework of understanding history, memory, and identity, especially in the context of the marginalized and the excluded.

Aditi Bhattad's performance piece in the context of the crisis, is not an independent shout on ignorance and indifference. It is however the first performative enactment of the crisis pinned on the structural scaffolding of a historic narrative already teased out by Sainath in Deepa Bhatia's film. In agreement with Sainath's account, Aditi expressed that, 'the bigger problem is not the existence of this factual reality, but the sheer death of our collective conscience as a society, as a nation'.[185] The metaphorical parallel or a renewal of an existing antiquarian subject matter, of Nero's guests used by Aditi and Sainath is somewhat questionable. Both Sainath and Aditi make a clear reference to Nero, and as mentioned earlier, Sainath talks about Tacitus and his accounts of Nero, as well. It is important to question why Sainath does not mention the other two Roman writers/historians - Suetonius and Cassius Dio? Or it might be correct to argue that if this was considered by Sainath, he would be aware of the incoherence of the historic narrative. Both the documentary film and the performance appear as examples of concrete, real-time, engagement with the crisis, but they appear cloaked in a redundant historical pretense.

The rather inadequate generic reference to Nero negotiates the ideological position of responsibility in knowledge production. Enshrining Nero in one incident which

---

[184] Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*, Repr. (London [u.a.: London u.a. : Routledge, 2004).
[185] Appendix 2E - Transcription- Interview with Aditi Bhattad

also lacks sufficient historic evidence, permanently shifts the criticality of the crisis being discussed. If callousness and lack of sensitivity of the invitees was the reigning objective, maybe this fable of Nero and his guests are a very narrow and normative criteria to juxtapose against a gigantic crisis. If the idea of the performance was to pursue, confront, shame, and mock at the inactive stubbornness of the audience (including institutions and others) towards an unsustainable agrifood system and its tragic reality, how significant is it to dogmatically empower the subject with a monological indoctrination of Nero? There exists a sufficient perception gap between the artistic point of view and the subject being represented here, as if pushing a predetermined output. It is also worth thinking about how many people in the viewers would already know about Roman history, the sheer powerlessness of those who don't, and what they are being held responsible for.

2.5 Concluding Discussion

The chapter describes and analyzes Aditi Bhattad's 2017 performance "Are You Nero's Guests?" as a case study of how a contemporary Indian artist addresses the agrarian crisis. Let us assess how the chapter answers the three research questions of this thesis.

The case study uses performance and installation as artistic medium to present an embodied and durational interpretation of the crisis. The performance involved the artist writing names and details of farmer suicides on postcards, cutting her own hair as a ritual of mourning, and using symbolic objects such as: a dinner table with a hollow coffin, nascent growing microgreens, and recoding names of farmers in a *bahikhata* (record-keeping book). The performance integrated protest songs with members of the Gram Art Collective, who share farming backgrounds and add a socially-engaged and participatory dimension to the artwork. The study contextualizes the performance within the framework of Deepa Bhatia's documentary film "Nero's Guests - The Age of Inequality" which investigates the agrarian crisis through historical references and the research-led journalism of

Sainath. Through this contextualization, the film becomes another medium to elaborate upon the agrarian crisis.

Evoking 'ignorance and indifference' through her performance, Aditi Bhattad challenges the detached and complacent urban elites of the city. Her personal familian rootedness in the crisis bridges the urban-rural divide on one hand and exposes the complexities of privilege and precarity on the other. The performance situates itself as a site of negotiation and active engagement, reframing the crisis as a matter of awareness, social consciousness and responsibility. Aditi Bhattad's performance is indicative of the regressive power structures in the contemporary times and this bears connection with the subaltern theory's discourse on the mechanisms of power and how colonial discourse marginalizes and silences the agency of subaltern classes. The artwork's relation to subaltern theory can be explained through its idea of disrupting prevailing hegemonic narratives of a distant agrarian crisis and creating a counterpublic space to voice the collective memory, trauma and resistance of the silenced subjects (farmers). The artwork demonstrates social inequities and systemic violence through an embodied performance and communal participation (Gram Art Collective).

The case study not only introduces the agrarian crisis but also highlights some of its structural determinants such as: indifference, inequality, dispossession, caste-class divide, food security, and the key index of the crisis which is the farmer suicides. The broker, Aditi Bhattad, performs the subaltern agency, orally and bodily, refusing choreographed rehearsals, fixity and documentation. By physically inscribing the number of farmer suicides on her body and engaging in the ritual of cutting her hair, the artist-broker embodies the crisis and mediates between rural lived reality and the urban elite audience. Through evocative protest songs and rituals, she deploys a moral vocabulary which invites civic engagement and collective remembrance. As a performer, she navigates the ethical dilemma of representing suffering without necessarily being a victim or a perpetrator. This is a poignant intervention that articulates the determinants of the agrarian crisis, enacts

subaltern memory and resistance, and exemplifies the artist-broker's critical intermediary role in addressing socio-political injustice.

In a local context, through ritualized acts and objects, the performance evokes a powerful sense of social cohesion. The protest songs carry deep regional and historic resonance both amongst the farming communities and the local audience. Situating the performance in an elite urban art gallery in the national capital makes for an inevitable compelling confrontation with the harsh reality of the crisis. However, there are a few challenges of cultural specificity that limit broader understanding, such as the use of Indian numeric notation, protest songs sung in Hindi with no translations and localized references of objects such as the *bahikhata*. These challenges raise questions about how such works would be seen in global circuits and whether translations, sharper contextualizations or alternative strategies are necessary for a wider impact. Culturally, the performance serves as a repository of grief and trauma associated with the lived reality of the crisis. In a political context, the artwork bears an activist tone that resonates in the protest songs which call for critical engagement, social mobilization and agrarian justice.

The durational nature of the performance and the challenges of documentation reflect that the dissemination of this artwork relies heavily on secondary accounts. The performance poses the question of the role of the audience as consumers of this act. It invokes a more inclusive, interconnected understanding of shared trauma in the viewer, in order to calibrate social responsibility. Overall, the case study recognizes Aditi Bhattad's work as a poignant intervention that is deeply intertwined with the conceptual powers of social engagement and the pragmatic realities of the farming communities. Her articulation of the systemic determinants of the agrarian crisis and the enactment of subaltern memory and resistance are an important contribution in addressing the crisis.

Chapter 3

Patriarchy, Caste, and Capitalism: Gram Art Project Collective Against the Triad

3.1 Introduction

The problems of the agrarian sector are both ecological and social. Oppression draws from an unequal play of power, privileges and hierarchies that are seeped deeply in the ideology of the rural sector of the country, making lives precarious with little or no significant shift in social and economic circumstances.

In the rural agrarian sector, women are significantly engaged in farming as much as in the household but are invisible, undervalued, unaccounted for, and remain dependent on men. Peasant farms are exceedingly dependent on care work and family labour, which is a euphemism for unpaid, intensive employment of women and children of the household, excessive frugality, and undermining their health and education.[186] In 2021, The Global Hunger Index ranked India at 101 out of 116 countries, which identified India as a country with the highest levels of under-nutrition in the world. 15% of the population is believed to be chronically undernourished. Four out of every 100 children don't make it alive past the age of five. According to UNICEF, India reported 8,82,000 deaths of children under the age of 5 in 2018, which has been the highest in the world that year.[187] The role of women in education, health, nutrition, self-dignity and decision-making remains bleak, marital abuse and violence are prevalent; and, economic security for women remains grossly inadequate. Agrifood corporations are exploitative; tend to pay women less than men and the rural masculinities govern everything.[188] According to the 2019-2021 National Family Health Survey, the data provides important

[186] Madhura Swaminathan and Sandipan Baksi, *How Do Small Farmers Fare? Evidence from Village Studies in India*, No. 5 (New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2018), p.5.
[187] Orijit Sen, Vidyun Sabhaney, and Harsho Mohan Chattoraj, *Food and Farming: A Journey Through India in Comics* (New Delhi: Leftword Books, 2024) p.33.
[188] Carolyn Sachs and Margaret Alston, 'Global Shifts, Sedimentations, and Imaginaries: An Introduction to the Special Issue on Women and Agriculture', *Signs* 35, no. 2 (2010): 277–87, https://doi.org/10.1086/605618.

insights into women's status, safety and economic positioning in the country: 'Women's employment remains low across India, with only one in four women (25%) working for cash in 2019-2021. Just over two in five women in India (43%) own a house and/or land[189] Tanika Sarkar in her book 'Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation', mentions the ambiguous status of women who could not legally inherit property or land, neither from their father nor from their husband, and lived like permanent refugees who were given away in a marriage.[190] She elaborates upon the complex ways in which women's roles and responsibilities were defined as nurturing functions in the traditional cultural structures and how that fulfilled the colonial and nationalist agenda.[191] Out of the many others, three major biases that persist against women, more gaping in the rural sector are: 'It's a woman's work', 'Women's work is no work' and 'financial literacy is inconsequential for women'.[192]

The arrogance of discrimination is not limited to gender alone, it is layered with biases related to caste (called 'Jati' in Hindi), ethnicity and income. An overview of India's caste system and its evolution over time is necessary to understand caste-based discrimination. Historically, an individual's caste was determined by the occupation of the family into which he/she was born; however it could, albeit rarely, change over time. The term caste was first introduced in 1901, by a British ethnographer, while conducting a census of India, thus, making it a product of a historical colonial encounter between India and Britain.[193] Caste classification in post-colonial India is considered to be a rigid symbol of social identity and has four formal categories, in the order of increasing social disadvantage: General Caste, Other Backward Caste (OBC), Scheduled Caste (SC), and Scheduled Tribe (ST).

---

[189] Lotus McDougal, Anita Raj, and Abhishek Singh, 'What Does NHFS-5 Tell Us about Women's Status, Safety, and Economic Positioning in India?', *The Times of India*, accessed 27 November 2024, https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/blogs/voices/what-does-nhfs-5-tell-us-about-womens-empowerment-in-india/.

[190] Tanika Sarkar, *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation: Community, Religion, and Cultural Nationalism* (C. Hurst & Co. Publishers, 2001), p.19

[191] Ibid. p.7

[192] '3 Gender Biases to Break in Rural India for Empowering Women - WOTR', 9 March 2022, https://wotr.org/2022/03/09/3-gender-biases-that-need-to-be-broken-in-rural-india-to-empower-women/.

[193] Nicholas Dirks, *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India.* (Princeton University Press, 2001).

SC and ST castes are comprised of *Dalit* and *Adivasi* people, respectively.[194] According to UNICEF, a quarter of India's women are undernourished.[195] Caste hierarchies result in resources being dominated by upper castes across religions. Dalit women have to bear the burden of both gender and caste marginalisation. In fact, a recent study has shown that dalit women die 15 years younger than the average dominant-caste women.[196] There are other socio-economic classifications too in each village such as landlords, capitalist farmers, peasants, manual workers, and dependent households that are defining factors in terms of differences and inequalities.

What further ruptures the precarity of the agrarian community as a whole is capitalism, because the economic principles under which peasant farming operates shifted fundamentally under modern capitalism. Then in the beginning of the 1990s came neoliberal reforms which indicated sustained attacks on state support to agriculture and peasantry. The period from 1997 to 2003 witnessed unprecedented agrarian distress in large parts of the country.[197] David Harvey in his book 'A Brief History of Neoliberalism', 2005, defines neoliberalism as "a theory of political and economic practices that propose that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade". The logistics of neoliberalism focus primarily on efficiency, standardization, competition, enterprise, and market gain against equity, social justice, civic engagement and self-awareness.[198] According to social anthropologists, India's

---

[194] Jasmine Khubchandani et al., 'Caste Matters: Perceived Discrimination among Women in Rural India', *Archives of Women's Mental Health* 21, no. 2 (April 2018): 163–70, https://doi.org/10.1007/s00737-017-0790-1.

[195] Lotus McDougal, Anita Raj, and Abhishek Singh, 'What Does NHFS-5 Tell Us about Women's Status, Safety, and Economic Positioning in India?', *The Times of India*, accessed 27 November 2024, https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/blogs/voices/what-does-nhfs-5-tell-us-about-womens-empowerment-in-india/.

[196] Orijit Sen, Vidyun Sabhaney, and Harsho Mohan Chattoraj, *Food and Farming: A Journey Through India in Comics* (New Delhi: Leftword Books, 2024) p.48.

[197] Madhura Swaminathan and Sandipan Baksi, *How Do Small Farmers Fare? Evidence from Village Studies in India*, No. 5 (New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2018), p.9.

[198] Vidya Shah, 'Capitalism and Neoliberalism', Systems of Oppression, accessed 28 November 2024, https://www.yorku.ca/edu/unleading/systems-of-oppression/capitalismandneoliberalism/.

experience with neoliberal restructuring since the early 1990s emphasized regulatory changes, proactive state development, and the management and restriction of those sections of the population that had been sidelined earlier.[199] In 1991, India needed a loan from the IMF and the World Bank. This loan came with conditions that required restructuring the economy and these changes were called Structural Adjustment Programmes. Privatisation of public services like banks, healthcare, transport and education began. New policies that favoured big business houses were introduced and protections for Indian goods, like restrictions on imports were threatened via international trade agreements. The basic infrastructure and support that the farmers need - like seeds, fertilizers, irrigation and agricultural research are now hugely underfunded. Farmers have been made very vulnerable by a systematic dismantling of the support they need in order to thrive. Farmers don't often get a good price for their produce and so like others, they are growers but remain dependent on the public distribution system to get enough to eat.[200] With neoliberal capitalism, peasant agriculture continues to be a "sink" to which the distressed urban workers return, and which is witnessing growing distress over time.[201] With multinational agribusiness and the domestic monopoly capitalists entering, agriculture has been facing a consistent and systemic withdrawal of support from the state. It is valuable to connect this discussion with Enrique Dussel's 1988 work[202] on the negative effects of economic globalization, where he proposes three ethical principles: the material, the formal communicative and the feasibility. He developed and defended these principles in dialogue with the history of philosophy, ethics and critical theory and applied them to demonstrate how global capitalist models outrageously violate these three principles.[203] Some parts

---

[199] Kenneth Bo Nielsen and Alf Gunvald Nilsen, 'The Kisan Andolan and India's Rollover Neoliberalism', in *The Indian Farmers' Protest 2020-2021*, 2024, pp.44-57, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003515050-5.p.45

[200] Orijit Sen, Vidyun Sabhaney, and Harsho Mohan Chattoraj, *Food and Farming: A Journey Through India in Comics* (New Delhi: Leftword Books, 2024) p.55-61.

[201] Prabhat Patnaik, 'Why Agriculture Remains a "sink" for Indian Capitalism', *Peoples Dispatch*, 20 April 2020, https://peoplesdispatch.org/2020/04/20/why-agriculture-remains-a-sink-for-indian-capitalism/.

[202] "Etica de la liberacion en la edad de la globalizacion y la exclusion" 1988, Enrique Dussel

[203] Linda Martín Alcoff and Eduardo Mendieta, eds., *Thinking from the Underside of History: Enrique Dussel's Philosophy of Liberation* (Lanham, Md.: Bloomsbury Academic, 2000). p.4

of these are discussed in Dussel's 'Philosophy of Liberation' in the introduction chapter.

In an attempt to unpack the oppressive triad of patriarchy, caste and capitalism, this chapter takes a closer look at two performances 'Cotton Stainers'(2020-24) and 'Climatical or Political'(2019) along with the broader vision and activities of the Gram Art Collective, founded by artist Shweta Bhattad in her village in Paradsinga, Madhya Pradesh in 2013, and the numerous lines of tension and oppression that get highlighted in their artistic practice. The practices of the Collective are rooted in collaboration within the village communities and focused on addressing social issues, raising awareness, fostering dialogue, and aspiring for change. Tailored to the local needs of the people and the soil, the consistently expanding team of the Collective remains actively engaged in creating, educating and performing. Site visits to Paradsinga provided a more tactile immersion with the workings of the Collective and helped the research in finding a deeper, more nuanced understanding of the subject in its natural or social context.

3.2 Performance: 'Cotton Stainers' (2020-2024)

'Cotton Stainers' was a process-based project by Shweta Bhattad, that began in 2020-2021, grew and developed over the years with two performance-based iterations in Delhi, one in 2022 and another in 2024. In 2022, the performance was part of the opening event of a group exhibition titled 'Threading the Horizon - Positions on Worldmaking through Socially Engaged Art Practice', hosted by Khoj International Artists Association[204], Delhi.

[204] Khoj (meaning Quest) is a not-for-profit contemporary arts organization based in New Delhi. It began operations in 1997.

Fig. 3.1: Gram Art Project Collective, 'Cotton Stainers', 2022, Performance, Threading the Horizon Exhibition, Khoj, Delhi. Image Credits: Gram Art Project Collective & Khoj
Fig. 3.2: Gram Art Project Collective,'Cotton Stainers', 2022, Performance, Documentation image, Threading the Horizon Exhibition, Khoj, Delhi. Image Credits: Gram Art Project Collective & Khoj

The durational performance by five women from rural agrarian backgrounds presented different ways of sharing their memories, hopes, dreams, secrets, and burdens. Seemingly autobiographical in nature, the sharings were performed in a continuous loop for an hour. According to Shweta Bhattad, who was one of the performers, the sharings were multifaceted, multi-layered and were meant to be seen as collective testimony, a performance, a dance, and a fashion show. The project was supported and funded by Goethe Institut as part of their annual residency called the Invisible Dance Project.[205]

The performance began without the actors/performers in a space which had five four-legged white stools, one high-rise thin side table again with four legs, stationed near a wall, some stuff strewn on the floor - most prominent being a gun and five masks placed meticulously on the right side of each stool. And then there was some momentum, five women walked in a linear pattern, entered the space and took their individual position, standing upright in front of their respective white stools (Fig.3.1). In a few seconds together they sat on the stools, heads upright, looking straight, staring blankly, expressionless, and hands resting on the knees.

[205] 'India | Goethe-Institut Dance Programme for South and Southeast Asian Artists', ASEF culture360, accessed 21 November 2024, http://culture360.asef.org/opportunities/india-goethe-institut-dance-programme-south-and-southeast-asian-artists/.

Shweta Bhattad sat in the center accompanied by two women on either side of her. The first performer on the far left clad in a white saree and a jacket had her right hand tied with a rope to one of the legs of the side table. The first performer who stood up and stepped ahead was the girl seated on the left of Shweta Bhattad wearing an earthy-color jumpsuit and a white t-shirt. After pausing for a bit, she bent down to uncover some objects covered with a cloth, to share them as memorabilia. She picked up a steel plate and showed it to the audience saying ‘2005, near the wall’, then picked up another kitchen utensil - a steel bowl saying, ‘2001, in the kitchen’, then a steel glass ‘2013, on the stairs’, a bangle, ‘2019, near the bed’, a wired earplug, ‘2015, in the bedroom’, a chain, ‘2017, on the bed’, a pressure cooker whistle, ‘2003, near the Cooker’, and finally a rolling pin, rhythmically saying, ‘2001, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2005 … 2020’.. She unwrapped her memories of the instruments of abuse with which she was beaten in her life, by men - father, brother, husband - mostly.

Overlapping with the first act, another performer seated on the right hand side of Shweta Bhattad stepped up and stood inside a circular wooden hula hoop ring. After a brief pause, she sat down to arrange some red seeds in five linear rows on a white board. She then picked up the hula hoop and turned it around her waist and in sheer joy raised her hands and smiled. But soon the hoop fell on the ground, scattering the red seeds all over. She then put the hoop back on the floor, cleared the white board of the seeds, turned around and took her seat on the stool. Again, before this act finished, another performer on the far right stood up. She was clad in a powder pink colour long dress and a white customized headband with a headphone on one ear and a loud speaker on the other. She stepped ahead asking the audience directly in Hindi, ‘I want to tell you something, can you please come’. When a young girl from the audience stepped closer, the performer said ‘I want to tell you something in your ear, please come close to me’. The girl went closer and the performer uttered something in her ears. There was no visible reaction. The performer went on to say, ‘Do you want to tell me something? You can say it in my ears’. And so the girl leaned in and put her face in the white loudspeaker and

uttered something, which was not audible to the audience. After the sharing the performer turned around and took her place on the stool against the wall. The exchange between the performer and the audience was choreographed in a way that it was partially audible to the public and partially hidden in whispers, therefore making the performance public yet personal.

In simultaneity, the performer on the extreme left, clad in a saree and jacket prepared tea in a steel kettle and strained it in a mug through a cotton cloth which appeared to be the fag end of her saree. She then walked ahead with a mug in her hand but her movement was restricted by the rope tied to her hand. She could not walk any further. She sipped her tea and then went back to her place to sit. Amidst all this, Shweta Bhattad got up and slowly came to the center of the space and very slowly, with a sense of burden, picked up the gun lying on the floor. She caressed the gun for a while and then pointed it outwards and shot, it's a shot that had sound but no bullet, it was symbolic of the rampant sexual violence against women. This was a strong self-representation of herself as a radical fighter or a soldier, with a gun offering the unmistakable proof of her blowing up of the limitations of the patriarchal society.[206] At this sound, all performers arose and stepped forward to perform their testimonies again, but this time in the same duration, simultaneously. They were sharing the space and the stage but were preoccupied in their own individual acts. After completing their acts, they receded to the stools and picked up the masks lying on the floor next to their stools. Each mask had an animal face painted on it and it was a method to hide their vulnerability, the mask offered comfort.[207] They wore the masks (Fig. 3.2) and with generic identities they re-performed the act. After almost an hour of this not-so consistent loop, they retreated silently from the space, in the same linear fashion, in which they arrived. And once again the space was without the actors - only the objects remained - now

[206] Teresa Hiergeist, 'The Difference between a Shooting and an Armed Woman: Representations of Louise Michel's Militancy in Contemporary French Biographical Portraits', in *Ladies in Arms: Women, Guns, and Feminisms in Contemporary Popular Culture*, ed. Teresa Hiergeist and Stefanie Schäfer (transcript Verlag, 2024), 23–36, https://www.degruyterbrill.com/document/doi/10.1515/9783839469552-002/html p.26.
[207] Appendix 3A - Field Notes from Gram Art Collective Studio, Paradsinga, Madhya Pradesh, February 2023

imbued with meaning. Parading a collective desire to share, these narratives presented five different formats of expressing oppressive memories: leisure, play, action, speech and silence. The presented narratives were an attempt to mobilize the struggles and dreams that were deeply embedded in the body and were integral to each of these performer's identity, which constantly negotiates questions of caste, class, gender, and sexuality. They were meant to leave a mark, very similar to the stains often left on one's clothes, bodies and memories.

Conceptualized by Shweta Bhattad, artist and founder, Gram Art Collective, 'Cotton Stainers' was conceived as a project that could create and hold a safe space for women and their lived experiences through conversations on violence, sustainability and agricultural practices. The performance can be understood in the light of feminist writer, activist Audre Lorde's essay 'Uses of Anger', where she says,

> *"Every woman has a well stocked arsenal of anger potentially useful against those oppressions, personal and institutional, which brought that anger into being. Focussed with precision, it can become a powerful source of energy serving progress and change. And when I speak of change, I do not mean a simple switch of positions or a temporary lessening of tensions, nor the ability to smile or feel good. I am speaking of a basic and radical alteration in those assumptions underlining our lives."*[208] *(Audre Lorde)*

The statement aligns with the radical sentiments of the women of Gram Art Collective and the powerful channelising of their anger towards systems of oppression. The performance aimed to highlight the role of women farmers and weavers of Paradsinga village in Madhya Pradesh, where their unique creative expression lies in the production and use of woven cotton. The yarn and fabric worn by the performers and used for the performance was handcrafted from naturally dyed, hand-spun and hand-woven indigenous cotton. The cotton was grown organically, free of Intellectual Property Rights, not genetically modified,

[208] Lorde Audre, *Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle The* (Penguin UK, 2018). p.26

non-hybrid and indigenous, with rural women playing a central role in its making. 90% of producing processes and planning decisions are taken by women at the Gram Art Project which is a stark contradiction to the highly patriarchal society they operate in[209].

Cotton Stainers as a project created a space run by the women in Paradsinga that became a space for expression for their stories and concerns through sustainable clothing. Right from the sowing of cotton to spinning it into yarn, hand-weaving it into fabric and stitching it into garments, everything was undertaken by women from the rural agrarian space. They presented a clothing collection made of organic cotton, partly sourced from their own fields and those that bear the traces of violence inflicted on women, including those by household items such as a rolling pin. Cloth and its organic materiality became a vehicular medium for the performance to carry and deliver stories of subjugation, abuse, violence and unfair practices against women.

The performance and the project as a whole was a co-creation yet (auto)biographical in nature and offered sharp insights into domestic abuse and violence along with the myriad historical, economic, sociopolitical and cultural complexities of everyday life of women in the agricultural sector in the country. It was in some way interactive and opening up the criticality of laws of the land, the laws of the cotton crop amidst the frugality of everyday existence[210]. It also shows the rationale of the rural women, where personal is political and who do not live in the fragments of thought and emotion; for them emotion and thought are a continuum, consistently trying to break conservative propriety.[211]

---

[209] Meghana Injeti, 'A Prodigy from the Village: Gram Art Project', peopleplaceproject, 14 August 2020, https://www.peopleplaceproject.com/post/a-prodigy-from-the-village-gram-art-project.
[210] Samiksha Sharma, 'Threading the Horizon', 22 December 2022, https://www.platform-mag.com/art/threading-the-horizon.html.
[211] Aruna Roy, *The Personal Is Political: An Activist's Memoir* (Harper Collins India, 2024) p.5-6.

Fig. 3.3: Gram Art Project Collective,'Cotton Stainers', 2022, Performance, Installation shot, Threading the Horizon Exhibition, Khoj, Delhi. Image Credits: Gram Art Project Collective & Khoj

Fig.3.4 & 3.5: Gram Art Project Collective, 'Cotton Stainers', 2022, Embroidery Rings, wood, cloth, thread, Threading the Horizon Exhibition, Khoj, Delhi. Image Credits: Gram Art Project Collective & Khoj

3.3 Performance Relics

After the performance was over, the exhibition space carried prominent residues or relics (Fig.3.3) of it, like the stained fabrics hanging on the stools, seeds, utensils along with some additions such as long horizontal seed papers, a sculpture using fabric and kitchen utensils and five embroidered rings on the wall. Speaking at the

intersections of performance and documentation, Claire Bishop in her essay 'The Performativity of the Archive', examines how contemporary performance art generates 'relics' or tangible remnants or traces of a performance that frequently acquire a life of their own after the live experience concludes. According to Shweta Bhattad, 'the embroidery pieces (Fig.3.4-3.5) were a medium to document our experiences of being a woman, a canvas for the expressions it churned out and a way to heal through the collective sharing'.[212] Enforcing the virtues of modesty, obedience and stillness, embroidery and needlework have been essential skills taught to girls as key indicators of their marriage suitability. Characterized by a bowed head and lowered eyes, the very act of embroidery-making embodies traditional expectations of women: patience, silence and a focus on the domestic.[213] However, in these five rings of embroidery there are hints of celebrating the self using a traditional medium with all its glitches and cliches. The depictions of women in these embroidered pieces are also directly connected to the five women who shared their lived experiences and memory of trauma in the performance - i.e. one making tea, another with a hula-hoop and the other three in a not so direct representation continue to exist in the exhibition space, long after the performance was over.

The women depicted in the embroideries are also encircled and restrained by the embroidery ring, symbolizing women as prisoners in their own homes, unable to tell their stories or get any sort of assistance. This depiction is a visual representation of the Subaltern theorist Gyanendra Pandey's notion of "inner" and "outer" worlds; the "private" and "public" spheres of activity. According to Pandey, the South Asian domestic order has historically created discriminatory structures where violence is based on gendered hierarchies, male privilege and women subordination.[214] In his book 'Men at Home', Pandey draws attention to the

---

[212] *Peripheries & Crossovers: Threading the Horizon*, 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=42Vu0AmdbXk.

[213] Katherine Grayson, 'The Art of Embroidery: How Domestic Craft Became Feminist Expression', *Harpy Magazine*, 8 April 2021, https://harpymagazine.com/home-1/2021/4/7/the-art-of-embroidery-feminist-expression.

[214] Gyanendra Pandey, *Men at Home: Imagining Liberation in Colonial and Postcolonial India* (Duke University Press, 2025). p.2-3

physical, psychological and emotional costs incurred by the routinely disenfranchised women, especially those belonging to the subordinated and stigmatized sections of the society.[215]

In the rural agricultural sector, women's identity is primarily that of a homemaker, which allows them to engage in various activities to fulfill their roles as homemakers and support household sustenance such as food supply, clothing, etc. In addition to working in the fields, they also take on wage work when necessary, gather forest products, raise livestock, and participate in local crafts.[216] The project started as a participatory community space to exchange personal, social and cultural capacities of the women in the village. The women of Paradsinga found this space at the village 'Anganwadi'[217] (literal meaning: courtyard shelter) and made it theirs, solely for them, where they were free to chatter, talk and express themselves. Also, they could work together and while co-working, they often confide their vulnerabilities, their deep inner world would open up and this hand-holding would give confidence to one another. They started making seed bands out of cotton on a spinning wheel, they created a jacket using tea stain cloth, which was given to the women to use in their houses every time they made tea for themselves. The project encouraged these women to enjoy a cup of tea in their favorite corner of the house and for this task they would get paid, it was called 'freedom chai'. Gradually the community space grew and their bonds started to get documented into materials such as seed bands, and jackets. The aim was to comment on the unaccounted household tasks undertaken by women and the complex negotiations between duty, responsibility and happiness. 'Cotton Stainers' as a project stages a pragmatic and creative layered terrain of insignificance of women in pre-existing hegemonic narratives and the possible means of empowerment.

---

[215] Ibid.
[216] Lyla Mehta, *Displaced by Development: Confronting Marginalisation and Gender Injustice* (SAGE Publications Ltd, 2009) p.52
[217] 'Anganwadi' refers to a rural child care program started by the Indian government in 1975 as part of the Integrated Child Development Services program.

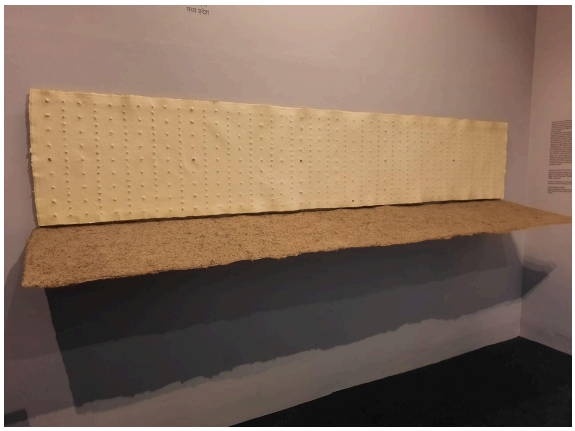


Fig.3.6: Gram Art Project Collective,'kapaas Kapaas KAPAAS', Cotton Stainers, 2022, Threading the Horizon Exhibition, Khoj, Delhi, 2022. Image Credits: Gram Art Project Collective & Khoj
Fig.3.7: Gram Art Collective,'Humaare Jameen Ka Ek Tukda' (A Piece of Our Land), Cotton Stainers, 2022, Threading the Horizon Exhibition, Khoj, Delhi. Image Credits: Gram Art Project Collective & Khoj

Fig.3.8: Gram Art Project Collective, Making of the Seed Paper, 2023, Field visit, Paradsinga, Madhya Pradesh. Image Credits: Preeti Kathuria

Two walls of the exhibition space carried pastel hued scrolls of hand-crafted seed paper. The core ingredients of the seed paper were waste paper, waste cloth and hand-spun naturally dyed threads made from organically grown indigenous cotton. The pastel green scroll of handmade paper titled 'kapaas Kapaas KAPAAS' (Fig.3.6) had sequential imprints of a cotton flower with the hindi text 'kapas' (meaning cotton) handwritten in red in the bud of the white cotton. The sequential

linear arrangement of the cotton flower was strategic, as it was scaled according to the actual sowing distance between the plants in the soil. According to the Collective, the 3 centimeters of cotton plant distance on paper is equivalent to 3 feet on agrarian land. The wall text displayed under this work explains the deep connection of abuse and oppression with farming practices,

> *"With the advent of industrial agriculture and trade liberalisation, cropping patterns and farming technologies have resulted in reduction of workdays for women and their appropriation from the decision-making processes. This has not translated to a positive transition towards more efficient farming but rather simply replaced women with hazardous methodologies and technologies like monocultures and herbicides. These monocultures mine the land, robbing it of its nutrients and sucking out its very soul; with women, an inherent part of agriculture, facing the same, abuses and consequences"*

According to the government records of National Food Security Mission, cotton is one of the most important fiber and cash crops of India which provides the raw material (cotton fibre) to the cotton textile industry and the crop is highly prone to pests and diseases. Cotton in India provides direct livelihood to 6 million farmers. Cotton yields are reduced by 50 to 85% if weed growth is unchecked.[218] Monoculture farming refers to growing only one type of a crop at one time on a specific field. It enables farmers to use machinery thereby increasing the efficiency of activities like planting and harvesting but on the hindsight, it is responsible for eroding and depleting the soil and reducing biodiversity.[219] Herbicides are chemicals used to get rid of weeds that would otherwise compete for light,

---

[218] Government of India, 'NFSM: National Food Security Mission', accessed 27 November 2024, https://nfsm.gov.in/.

[219] Allison Balogh, 'The Rise and Fall of Monoculture Farming', *Horizon: The EU Research & Innovation Magazine*, 13 December 2021, https://projects.research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu/en/horizon-magazine/rise-and-fall-monoculture-farming.

moisture, and nutrients with the crops, affecting the quality and quantity of produce. There has been an increased concern about the effects of herbicides on human health because of its run-off from agricultural applications and entrance into the drinking water supply.[220] The artwork unpacks core agrarian issues and privileges them with reflective lived experiences of women from the farm.

The other scroll of handmade paper was embedded with seeds of indigenous cotton, green gram, black gram, corn, rice bean roselle, cowpea, pearl millet and sorghum (Fig.3.7). The sequential linear arrangement of the seeds was strategic, as it was scaled according to the actual sowing distance between the plants in the soil; 6 centimetres of seed distance on paper was equivalent to 1 foot and 6 inches on land. The seed sowing distance is important because it directly affects the growth, health, and yield of the crops - managing the nutrient, sun and water availability alongside sufficient air circulation. The recreation of the seed sowing process in the context of an exhibition has much larger connotations. Scientifically speaking, each seed carries the genetic blueprint of its parent plant and has the potential to sustain ecosystems and biodiversity. With reference to farming and food systems, each seed represents potential food, economic security, and cultural continuity. The representation also situates and promotes the concept of seed sovereignty which is having small and family farmers control, manage and save seeds especially the indigenous and local communities. Seed preservation leading to crop resilience is fundamental to the larger concepts of food sovereignty and agricultural sustainability. If we see the representation metaphorically, the seeds represent potential, ideas, identity and that no act is too small to not matter in a larger schema. Every idea is instilled with the potential to grow, so every effort or contribution, no matter how small, can influence the larger system, in a way self-reflective of the efforts of the Gram Art Collective.

[220] P K Gupta, 'Herbicide - an Overview | ScienceDirect Topics', in *Encyclopedia of Analytical Science*, 2014, https://www.sciencedirect.com/topics/agricultural-and-biological-sciences/herbicide.

The scroll was attached with a table-like ledge (Fig.3.7), representing the smokeless *Paraali* (meaning stubble) made of roselle and paddy crop residue along with residue of handspun yarn or indigenous cotton. Burning stubble or *Paraali* is an age-old practice employed to clear paddy crop remnants and straw from the fields in preparation for planting wheat, typically undertaken between the last week of September and November, every year. In simple terms, stubble is the remaining portion of rice plants after harvesting; farmers for the sake of convenience, tend to harvest the rice while leaving stalks and roots behind. This massive left-over is of no practical use to the farmer and as an immediate and easy way to clear their fields in order to start growing the next crop, they simply burn the stubble.[221] Typically, this is necessary in regions where the combined harvesting technique is employed, allowing crop residue to remain in the field. It is believed that the burning of farm residue is a significant contributor to air pollution in regions of northern India, leading to a decline in air quality.[222] Out of the several adverse consequences of burning stubble, such as the release of potentially dangerous pollutants into the air, increased smog production, and worsened human health, it has an extreme and detrimental effect on the nutrition and mineral value of the soil. According to the Ministry of New and Renewable Energy, India yields about 500 million tonnes of crop leftovers in a year. The residue is utilized as fodder and fuel for various industrial and domestic uses but there is an excess of 140 million tonnes, of which 92 million tonnes are burnt annually.[223]

The title of the work originally in Hindi was written in English as 'Humaare Jameen Ka Ek Tukda' (translation: A Piece of Our Land). It is extremely important to take a closer look at the wall text again:

---

[221] 'What Is Parali and Why It Is Being Linked to Delhi's Air Pollution', *The Times of India*, 28 October 2024, https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/etimes/trending/what-is-parali-and-why-it-is-being-linked-to-delhis-air-pollution/articleshow/114691992.cms.

[222] Business Standard, 'What Is Stubble Burning ? Impact on Air Pollution, Alternative of Parali Burning', accessed 25 November 2024, https://www.business-standard.com/about/what-is-stubble-burning.

[223] Malvika Kadian et al., 'Stubble Burning in India: Environmental Concern and Alternative Tools – Current Agriculture Research Journal', *Current Agriculture Research Journal* Volume 12, no. Number 1 (20 April 2024), http://dx.doi.org/10.12944/CARJ.12.1.13.

Land, as part of a diverse agro-ecological process, transforms into a canvas to paint our dreams; especially for us women, the majority of the workforce making agriculture happen on a day-to-today basis, rather than being just a means of production. In an industrial agricultural system, all that is living has to be converted into machines. Mere objects to fulfill the needs of their masters and to be discarded off after all their utility has been squeezed out of them; without acknowledging their sovereignty over their own being. With respect to crops being produced, this "discarding off" leads to stubble which is considered as an agricultural waste and mostly burnt off leading to a considerable amount of contribution to global warming. The "Paraali" or the stubble here is a piece of paper-cum-cloth made out of crop residue of a conscious agroecological system with women playing a sovereign role in its being-cycle. As a result, every form of each being can be seen for its inherent beauty and doesn't end up being a wasteful burden.

Bringing a part of their land from their village to an urban contemporary art space for the urban audience was the purpose of this artwork. It is a good example of how artistic and cultural practices can open opportunities for the expression and definition of underrepresented and misunderstood identities and negotiate new ways of thinking.

Fig.3.9: Gram Art Project Collective, Seeds, Cotton Crop, 'Cotton Stainers', 2022, Khoj Delhi. Image Credits: Gram Art Project Collective

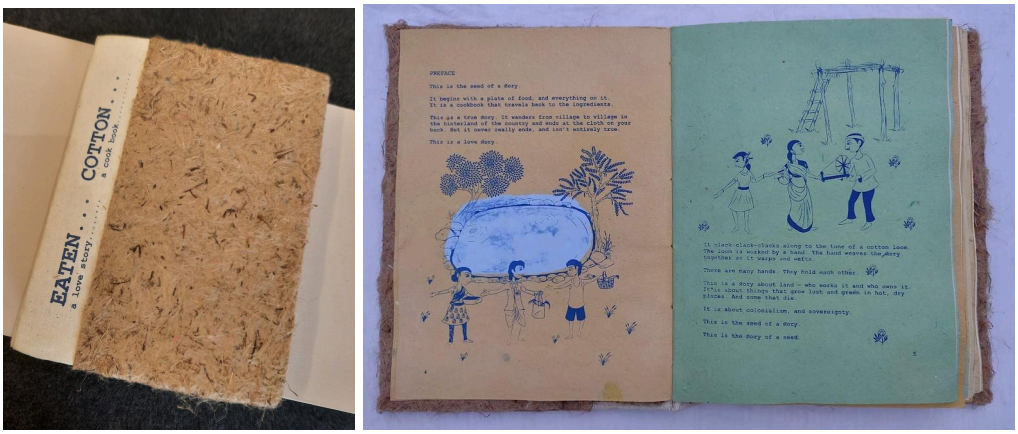


Fig.3.10 & 3.11: Gram Art Project Collective, 'Eaten Cotton.. A Love Story.. A Cook Book', 2022, Artist Book, 80 pages, handmade paper, Khoj, Delhi. Image Credits: Gram Art Project Collective

The exhibition space carried cotton seeds in terracotta plates (Fig.3.9) and the limited edition artist book titled 'Eaten Cotton.. A Love Story.. A Cook Book' (2022) (Fig.3.10-3.11). This handmade artist book of 80 pages carried text by Mukta Patil from Pune and only ten copies of it were produced with the financial support of Max Mueller Bhavan, Mumbai and Shyama Foundation, Delhi. There was only one exhibition-display copy available in the exhibition. Screen printed at Paradsinga, the cookbook begins with a plate of food and attempts to take its readers deeper and further into the ingredients. The book begins with a few pages of acknowledgements to all the creatives involved in the project, a customary list of institutions and foundations, along with the hunting-fishing-gathering communities such as Dheemars and Adivasis, traditional bamboo-work artisan communities such as Bansod and Lodhi, weaving communities like the Muslims, Koshti, Kunbi and Dhangar from the farming and shepherd communities, Maang-Matangs of the Shindi-palm-work artisan community and the cows, dogs, honey bees, plants and trees. The preface of the book sets the premise by stating that it carries the story about land, and those who work on it and also those who own it. Blue colour dominates the textual content, both in image and text on pastel shades of handmade paper (Fig.3.11). Several contemporary artists use blue as the colour of equality against otherness and inferiority, since it is the colour of the sky, and the sky that treats each living and non-living entity equally. Adding a socio-political layer, it is

important to mention that blue is also the colour of Dalit-Bahujan-Adivasi resistance, which demands equality in all forms.[224] The yellow pages of the book are hand-dyed with turmeric. There are pages with pulp-patch work where the pulp is made by upcycling diverse coloured waste papers. With detailed line drawing illustrations, the book elucidates that cotton is definitely more than a crop, it is cloth, food, fodder, knowledge, skill, art, science and it is political.

Further the book illustrates the dos and don'ts of agriculture as part of nature, i.e a tabular presentation of the good and bad practices towards ecological sensitivity. It is a chronicle of awareness and resilience, both of which are contained in agrarian life. The pages of the book are embedded with seeds and can be sown in the soil, making it an ideal expression of everything the Collective stands for. The book operates across the lines of history, culture, genre and synthesized a collective expression through storytelling and the inexhaustible pleasures of working with the hands. It is interesting how the activities associated with bookmaking are socially coded as feminine, for example the sewing of pages, deft handling of material and attention to detail, offer a tactile satisfaction[225]. This artbook was created by rural women who add their personal experiences, memories, struggles and dreams to the process of creating and binding this volume. One of the greatest joys has been to have held this book in the hands, because in the depth of its deceptive overall rawness, exist pages that bear the weight and texture of the Collective's struggles and intent. It is a good balance of dreams and experiences juxtaposed with the aim of raising public consciousness. The artbook is a fairly simplified execution of various complex issues associated with the agrarian sector and the vulnerability of lives dependent on farming. It is an appropriate example of a design that truly serves its content.

---

[224] Shraddha Nair, 'Art & Voices Matter: Bakeryprasad a.k.a. Siddhesh Gautam on the Dalit Movement', *Stir World*, 17 May 2021, https://www.stirworld.com/see-features-art-voices-matter-bakeryprasad-a-k-a-siddhesh-gautam-on-the-dalit-movement.

[225] Krystyna Wasserman, Johanna Drucker, and Audrey Niffenegger, *The Book As Art: Artists' Books from the National Museum of Women in the Arts*, 2nd edition (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2011) p.16.

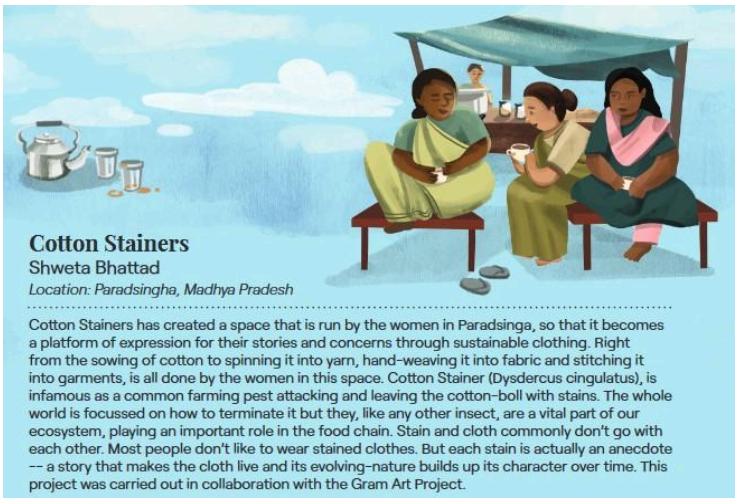
Fig.3.12: Gram Art Project Collective, 'Cotton Stainers', 2022, Textile Sculpture, hand-printed textile, kitchen utensils, thread, Threading the Horizon Exhibition, Khoj, Delhi. Image Credits: Gram Art Project Collective & Khoj
Fig.3.13: Detail of Fig. 3.12
Fig.3.14: Gram Art Project Collective,'Cotton Stainers', 2022, Performance, Threading the Horizon Exhibition, Khoj, Delhi. Image Credits: Gram Art Project Collective & Khoj

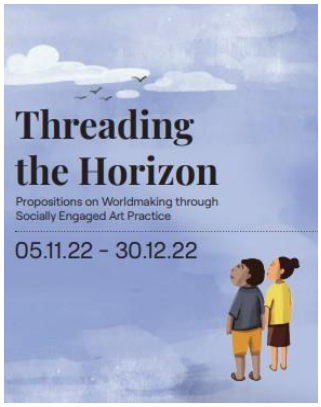
The space exhibited a textile sculpture (Fig.3.12 - 3.13) attached to the stained cloth similar to the jumpsuit (Fig.3.14) worn by one of the performers and possibly an extension of the performance. The sculpture had kitchen utensils tied together in cotton fabric and yarn, partially leaning on the wall and then flowing naturally to the floor. Some of the prominent and immediately recognisable kitchen utensils being the rolling pin, spatula, plates and bowls. The tying together in knots builds a visceral connection to how the performer narrated her memories, the knots in her identity of the instruments of domestic abuse.

Circling back to the ecological concerns in the context of the artworks and the performance, the title 'Cotton Stainers' literally translates into *Dysdercus cingulatus*, a species of true bug in the family Pyrrhocoridae, popularly referred to as the red cotton stainer. The infamous crop pest sucks the sap, damages cotton plants and destroys the cotton balls by staining them with the excrement. Stains cause discolouration, differ from general dirt and can stay on a surface for much

longer.[226] In a literal physical sense, a stain is referred to something that sticks and thereby has a remaining character. A stain is a resultant, reminder and revealer of a previous action. In a metaphorical sense, a stain refers to a taint or a stigma that tends to stay in mind with reference to some specific event or happening.

Stains are seen as spoilers, they appear unattractive, and tend to tarnish materials and mostly people don't prefer to wear stained clothes. The red cotton stainer pest is found in India, however, it is more common in southern Florida and Cuba and the focus is always on finding ways to terminate it. Shweta's project opposes this destructive ideology and presents the true characteristics of these spots and the environmental importance of these pests in enabling a flourishing ecology. Like any other insect, cotton stainers are an important part of the larger ecosystem, playing a small yet significant role in the food chain. According to Shweta Bhattad, each stain is actually an anecdote that makes the cloth live and its evolving-nature builds up its own unique character over a period of time.[227] The project was an attempt to suggest that if one looks beyond the unattractiveness of a stain, one would realize that a stain is actually a surface addition, a mark that adds value to the character of the cotton fiber.





[226] F.W. Mead, 'Cotton Stainer - Dysdercus Suturellus (Herrich-Schaeffer)', Entomology Circular 48 (University of Florida, June 2004), https://entnemdept.ufl.edu/creatures/field/bugs/cotton_stainer.htm.
[227] Appendix 3B - Interview: Shweta Bhattad

Fig.3.15 & 3.16: Gram Art Project Collective,'Cotton Stainers', 2022, pages from the exhibition catalogue, Threading the Horizon, Khoj, Delhi. Image Credits: Gram Art Project Collective & Khoj

The 'Cotton Stainers' project was part of a larger construct of an exhibition titled 'Threading the Horizon' (Fig.3.16) showcasing fourteen community-based projects from different parts of India, highlighting issues of patriarchy, gender discrimination, urban inequality, violence, abuse, marginalized identity, women safety and ecological concerns.[228] In order to document the exhibition Khoj along with Chambal Media Productions, created a video showcasing four projects revealing the essence of gender-based violence. In the short 14-minute video, curator from Khoj, Manjari Dube, elaborated upon the concept behind the project, saying:

> *'The exhibition aimed at bringing out acts of resilience through building voice, bearing witness, negotiating visibility and foregrounding spaces of leisure, healing and catharsis. The projects actually are in alternate framing of the experience of violence as experienced by women and gendered others in the public realm, through an artistic lens'.*[229] *(Manjari Dube)*

The statement describes the exhibition's thematic and conceptual objectives, which focus on resilience in the face of violence, especially against women. Amartya Sen in his book 'The Argumentative Indian' asserts that first we must acknowledge that the frequency of assault on women is very high in the country and it is connected with particular social features such as dowry and natality.[230] He refers to the obvious physical asymmetry of women and men but indicates that the behavioural and attitudinal factors that lead to domestic violence and physical victimisation (to settle a dispute or gain advantage over) need to be countered through social

---

[228] Sukanya Deb, 'Khojs Group Show: Threading the Horizon Presents 14 Socially-Engaged Projects', *Stir World*, 16 December 2022, https://www.stirworld.com/see-features-khoj-s-group-show-threading-the-horizon-presents-14-socially-engaged-projects.

[229] *Peripheries & Crossovers: Threading the Horizon*, 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=42Vu0AmdbXk.

[230] Amartya Sen, *Argumentative Indian : Writings On India: Writings on Indian History, Culture and Identity* (Penguin UK, 2006). p.237

reform.[231] Subaltern Studies historian Dipesh Chakrabarty, while examining the characteristics of household life in colonial Bengal, argued that comprehending the way femininity and the private sphere were envisioned provides a valuable perspective for grasping the underlying political structures of colonial nationalism.[232] The exhibition revisits these colonial structures and situates the gendered private realm into a purposeful and politically involved act of defiance, remembrance, and reclamation. The common ideological thread across these diverse projects was to propose a new equitable order of worldmaking by bringing to the fore popular beliefs, opinions and debates in the public sphere, and synergizing the existing discourse through collective creative engagement.[233] The exhibition establishes its premise clearly as an effort to "bring out acts of resilience," suggesting that its purpose is to highlight how artists and communities respond to violence not with passivity, but with strength, creativity and collaboration. Often difficult conversations around social justice lead to collective healing mechanisms and this exhibition proposed to be such an initiative.

The artists and artist collectives who were part of the exhibition were Aravani Art Project, Aryakrishnan R, Baaraan Ijlal, Divya Chopra and Rwitee Mandal, Gram Art Project, Shweta Bhattad, Jasmeen Patheja, Padmini Ray Murray, Princess Pea, Saleha Sapra and Riddhi Batra, Sanyukta Saha, Sumedha Garg and Nitin Bathla, Sumona Chakravarty and Nilanjan Das, Swati Janu and Stuti Pradhan. The beautifully illustrated catalog of the show was conceptualized and designed by Pooja Dhinga who runs a primarily online campaign titled 'Posts for the Patriarchy', a graphic voicing of feminist writings, and experiences.[234]

---

[231] Ibid.
[232] Bill Schwarz, 'Subaltern Histories', *History Workshop Journal* 89, no. 1 (2020): 90–107, https://doi.org/10.1093/hwj/dbz046.
[233] KHOJ Studios, 'Threading the Horizon: Propositions on Worldmaking through Socially Engaged Art Practice', Khoj, accessed 18 November 2024, https://khojstudios.org/event/threading-the-horizon-propositions-on-worldmaking-through-socially-engaged-art-practice/.
[234] Pooja Dhingra, 'Threading the Horizon', THAT THING I DO, 10 May 2023, https://that-thing-i-do.com/projects/khoj.

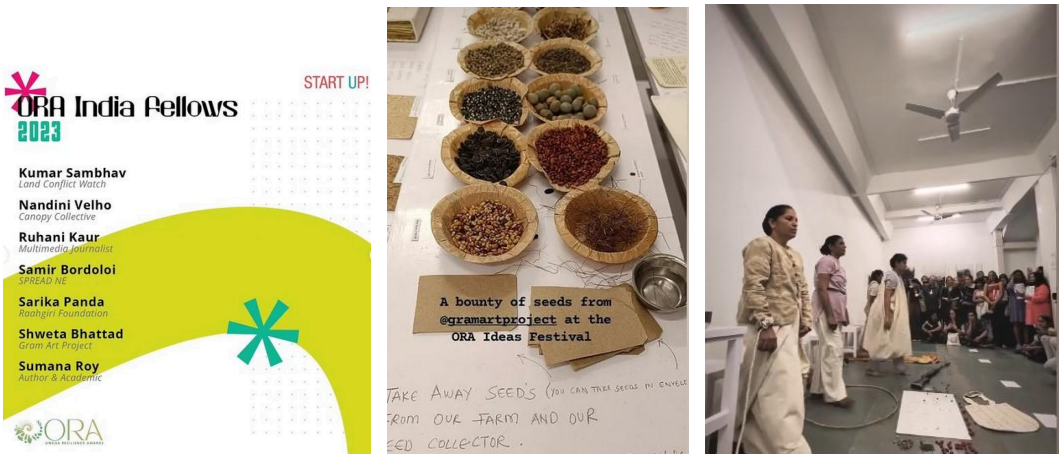


Fig.3.17: Gram Art Project Collective, 'Cotton Stainers' 2024, Iteration, Poster / Publicity material, ORA Ideas Festival, Khoj, Delhi. Image Credits: Gram Art Project Collective & Khoj
Fig.3.18: Gram Art Project Collective, 'Cotton Stainers' 2024 Iteration, Installation shot on Social Media, ORA Ideas Festival, Khoj, Delhi. Image Credits: Gram Art Project Collective & Khoj
Fig.3.19: Gram Art Project Collective, 'Cotton Stainers' 2024 Iteration, Performance, Photo Documentation, ORA Ideas Festival, Khoj. Image Credits: Gram Art Project Collective & Khoj

'Cotton Stainers' had a second iteration, more recently in October 2024, as part of the ORA Ideas Festival, (Fig.3.17) again hosted by Khoj, New Delhi. Co-curated by ORA India Fellows (one of whom is Shweta Bhattad), ORA India Advisory Board, Khoj Artists International Association and Studio Eksaat, the festival was a convergence of artists, changemakers, media-makers, narrative builders, scientists, and other allied networks. The sole objective was to collectively experience, learn, and share grassroot narratives of resilience and hope.

The 'Cotton Stainers' project is one of the many examples of the growing number of artists making a conscious choice to engage with contingent issues and expand their practice beyond the safe confines of a studio-space or the enclosed space of a gallery and entering into the complexity of a layered and unpredictable public sphere. This can also be explained in the words of French curator Sandra Terdjman, founding member of Afield, "Unfortunately, the number of social initiatives led by artists may be rising at the same pace as the world's crises".[235] Terdjman's

[235] Kabir Jhala, 'Socially Engaged Practice Has Become the Art Form Du Jour—This International Network Is at the Forefront of the Sphere', *The Art Newspaper - International Art News and Events*,

observation that many contemporary artists are no longer confined to galleries or traditional art spaces. Instead, the artists are initiating social projects which involve working with communities, addressing social justice, climate change, migration, inequality, etc, which are creative responses to real-world crises. It is an agreeable statement, but maybe her use of "unfortunately" signals a concern, not directly related to artists' creative work, but about its reception and how it is seen. As viewers, does this reactive art serve as a symptom of the increasing severity of systemic failures? On one hand Terdjman's quote is latent with an acknowledgment of the power of artists to effect change, and on the other offers a sharp critique of the global conditions that make these interventions inevitable.

'Cotton Stainers' is just one of the many creative endeavors undertaken along with years of invisible work put in by the Shweta Bhattad, her younger sibling Aditi Bhattad along with their family and friends. Born in a farmer's family, in 1984, Nagpur, Maharashtra, Shweta Bhattad graduated in fine arts (sculpture) from the Central India School of Fine Arts, Nagpur in 2009 and subsequently pursued Masters in visual arts, specializing in sculpture at the Maharaja Sayajirao University (MSU), Vadodara, Gujarat.[236] Her childhood memories are rooted in her village Paradsinga, that is situated in Sausar Tehsil of the Chhindwara district of Madhya Pradesh, where her parents lived and worked as farmers before her birth. They moved to the city of Nagpur in search of a better life and future for their children. The connection was not lost as her grandparents continued to live in Paradsinga and she visited them to celebrate harvests, festivals and spend holidays, as often as possible. All her childhood friends from the village kept the connection alive in her and she was consistent in keeping in touch with them. As a curious child, she would wonder why there is no food with some farmers when they are the producers of grain? Why is their acute poverty amidst vast spreads of fertile land?

---

24 October 2024, https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2024/10/24/socially-engaged-practice-has-become-the-art-form-du-jourthis-international-network-is-at-the-forefront-of-the-sphere.

[236] Appendix 3B - Interview: Shweta Bhattad

3.4 Land as Artistic Canvas, Plants as Medium

Besides the 'Cotton Stainers' project, the Gram team has repeatedly seen and projected land as their canvas and employed plants as medium to voice concerns related to the agrarian sector. In 2015, a global farming initiative was created by Shweta Bhattad and over 27 countries participated in this initiative. The project was a collaboration between artists and farmers to sow fields or grow gardens spelling out 'I have a dream' in their native language in their respective fields, gardens and balconies.

Fig.3.20 & 3.21: Gram Art Project Collective,'I have a Dream', 2014-16, Land Art, Global Community Project, collaboration with Vancouver Biennale. Image Credits: Gram Art Project Collective & Vancouver Biennale

The title 'I have a dream' (Fig.3.21) came from Martin Luther King's speech and was also the theme of the Vancouver Biennale 2014-16, curated by Marcello Dantas (Brazil). The idea was to use art and agriculture as tools to activate and empower communities globally. The project involved joint planting moments, documentation and several meetings with the local community, artists and regional groups. In these meetings, information was exchanged, memories were made and internal connections were made with the local community. Reflecting on the situation in the countryside, modern agriculture and ever-increasing urbanization, the group discussed the landscape and its constantly changing cultural structure and stakes in the ecosystem. The project spread from Japan to India, and Italy to Squamish, British Columbia and people created art in their fields and gardens, and participated in important conversations about human rights, environment, and sustainable farming practices. Shweta Bhattad collaborated with a sculptor and

built large wooden letters (Fig.3.20) that read "I have a dream" punctuated with video screens showing narratives and interviews from all the participating countries. Through the video screens, participating farmers and artists were able to share their stories, creating a record of diverse farming practices and the history of agriculture from around the world. The implementation of this project and the collaboration of artists and farmers from various regions, professions and backgrounds opened the space for intercultural exchange. The work was an ecological reclamation of a lost impulse, which is to be able to dream. It also reflected upon the complexity of human beings' non-committal and apolitical interaction with the food, food production and land. Employing vegetation as a medium offers a unique radical and temporal dimension to the project. Plants are unconventional artistic media. The definition of the word 'radical' in its original sense, 'radicalis' which means firmly rooted—indicates a viewpoint important to how we view plants. They have deep roots that bind them to the earth. Their only movements are ones of expansion and unfolding. The process of growth includes the transformations of birth, development and death, which typically occur gradually but continuously. Because of this, despite their continuously changing shape and dimension, plants are perceived as reliable.[237]

Shweta Bhattad seeks to challenge the viewers' urban indoor passivity and take them outside of their stasis to be able to see, listen, think, feel, engage, experience and reconnect with the land. In this context, Cuban artist Ernesto Pujol's 2003 project 'Becoming the Land' curated by Saralyn Reece Hardy, is an interesting example to see how more and more artists, globally, are trying to walk, map and review the landscape. Pujol invited the grandchildren and great grandchildren of Kansas homesteaders and farmers for a meditated mobility of their ancestral landscape and make conscious, personal, meaningful discoveries on their way. Pujol traveled back and forth between Kansas and New York, collaborating with local residents to bridge the gap between art and society, through the seemingly

[237] Barbara Nemitz, *Trans Plant: Living Vegetation in Contemporary Art* (Ostfildern-Ruit, Germany: Hatje Cantz, 2000) p.8.

insignificant yet humble practice of mindful walking.[238] The idea of being mindful refers to paying full attention to the present moment, with deliberation and intentionality and without any judgment. It is a sort of physical-emotional regulation; an embodied perception, which involves being a means and a witness to one's own thoughts, feelings, bodily sensations, and the immediate environment, observing with openness and acceptance. Walking art projects involve creative initiatives that blend walking with artistic expression, often turning the obvious act of walking into a form of performance, social commentary, and exploration. Hamish Fulton's artistic focus on walking as a form of art and documenting his personal walks was his way of showing his interest in the environment and native cultures. This 20th century practice is rooted in the Land Art movement of the late 1960s and 1970s which emerged as a reaction against the commercialization of art and the limitations of art galleries and museums as spaces that inhabit art. Closely tied with minimalism, conceptual art, the aim of the artist was to create artworks directly in the landscape, using natural, available materials.

Similar to Pujol, Shweta Bhattad's projects can be seen as socially engaged public performances that not only had a diagnostic, meaningful alignment with the ideas of memory, displacement and sustainability but was also a socially transformative experience. They are both repetitive in a way, with site-specific overlapping of pressing urgent social narratives. They are also suggestive of how the need for laborious food production is commonly associated with class, lack of resources and poverty. The project merged several parallel realities and dualities of humanity and nature. The actual practice of sowing seeds and nurturing vegetation can offer a mindful synchronicity to all the stakeholders, way beyond the temporal, tactile outcome.

In 2016, an on-site crop art project was undertaken by the Gram team, which spread over 72 hundred square feet in the Paradasinga village, Madhya Pradesh.

---

[238] Ernesto Pujol, *Walking Art Practice: Reflections on Socially Engaged Paths* (England: Triarchy Press, 2018) p.8.

Created with naturally growing crops on land, it read 'Dear Prime Minister, Please Grow in India' (Fig.2.9 - Chapter 2). Planned and executed over a span of three months, the aim was to encourage the youth to become farmers. It was a public urge to launch a campaign 'Grow in India' just like in 2014 the Prime Minister launched the campaign 'Make in India', an initiative to focus on domestic production and manufacturing. In a country, where access to food is extremely uneven, the project draws upon the long standing need to feel involved and receptive towards the farmland. It was like a temporal public sculpture nestling a political appeal. Mostly plants are experienced in a positive context - they provide food, serve as decoration and make people happy. It bears inevitable connections with the mid 1960's Land Art movement as it betrays the conflicted attitudes of the time towards the earth and the environment; it is both an immediate and visceral reflection on the industrially scarred landscape; and it is about birth and burial; life and death.[239] The general perception of the vegetation seems calm and people enjoy natural green. Because of its popularity, flora as a material can cause irritation in the context of art.

The use of plants in contemporary art raises long-neglected basic questions about the tension between nature and beauty, and it opens the way to a new approach to the denounced subject.[240] A socially engaged practice has sufficient rights to make ethical demands on its aspirants. These ethical requirements or demands are the actual rubric of the practice. Socially engaged practice is not simply a new method and form of production. Rather it is a consequential, socially changing effect. Without social change, making art as traditionally defined in a social context is nothing more than a distortion of style. The difference between a static product and a living product is its capacity for social transformation.[241]

---

[239] Ben Tufnell, *Land Art* (London: Harry N. Abrams, 2006) p.15
[240] Barbara Nemitz, *Trans Plant: Living Vegetation in Contemporary Art* (Ostfildern-Ruit, Germany: Hatje Cantz, 2000) p.8-9.
[241] Ernesto Pujol, *Walking Art Practice: Reflections on Socially Engaged Paths* (England: Triarchy Press, 2018) p.12.

The project bears close semblance to the 1982 outdoor Land Art project 'Wheatfield: A Confrontation' by the American conceptual artist Agnes Denes (b.1931, Hungary). Denes was invited by the US Public Fund for Art to create an outdoor sculpture and she planted a wheat field on two acres of the Battery Park landfill in downtown Manhattan, strategically located just a few blocks away from the Wall Street, the World Trade Centre and the Statue of Liberty. For her the wheat field was not just a political symbol to confront food related hunger, sustenance, ecological concerns, speculative commerce, world trade etc. but also a recreation of the small golden paradise of her childhood memories. She said the idea came from 'a long standing concern and need to call attention to our misplaced priorities and deteriorating human values'.[242] Through scents, odors, colors and shapes, vegetation can stimulate the senses of the viewer significantly. Right from sowing the seeds to tendering the crop and then slowly changing from green to golden, the wheat field became a kinetic repository, an animated and synergized horizontal, paradoxically stuck between the skyscraper verticals.

Even though Shweta Bhattad's crop art project uses language to echo the passive ambivalence more literally it bears a similar political potential. Both projects may be seen as a spectacle of the harvest with an undercurrent of premeditated performativity. Another common strand is that both the projects work as definers, they dwell outside the conventional notion of artistic media and skill and using harvest as a mode of expression eliminates the myth of expectancy from both art and the artist. The projects constitute the same passive yet powerful conjuncture, a sort of universality, a moral panic to amplify the crisis of hegemony. The political weight borne by plants is well explained by French curator Clelia Coussonnet in her essay 'Waking Dormant Seed: Artistic and Curatorial Interventions in Plants and Politics' where she elaborates upon the need to deconstruct 'botanical imperialism'.[243] She asserts an urgent need to confront the deceptive and romantic perceptions of the vegetal world as devoid of agency and create space to foster

---

[242] Ben Tufnell, *Land Art* (London: Harry N. Abrams, 2006) p.101.
[243] Clelia Coussonnet, *Waking Dormant Seeds: Artistic and Curatorial Interventions in Plants and Politics*, *Theatrum Botanicum* (Sternberg Press, 2018), 287 – 296

reflections on the potential of plants as mechanisms of change.[244] It is a way of telling that the audiences need to be sufficiently empowered to understand the innate entanglement and embeddedness of plants in the political realm.

3.5 Seed Saving and Enterprise

The Gram team has an unwavering focus on seed saving (Fig.3.22) and spreading the knowledge around growing and cultivation, as discussed earlier in the 'Cotton Stainers' performance They put seeds in a variety of products and the seed paper is used to create calendars that can be also planted and nurtured. *Beejpatra I* (Fig.3.23) (i.e. Seed Bowl/Container) is the officially registered name for the enterprise wing of the Gram Art Collective. The Seed Festival has been an initiative to introduce a series of eco-friendly, exploitation-free alternatives to the current methods of festivities and celebrations that are socially and ecologically exploitative. Since Neolithic times, farmers have been setting aside some of their harvested seeds in order to replant them in the next season. They selected seeds on the basis that the plants producing them possess desirable traits such as high yields, disease resistance and frost tolerance.[245] This natural and laborious saving of seeds has undergone tremendous change since the late 19th century and the dependence on the commercial seed industry has increased significantly. Gram Art Collective has been actively engaged in reviving the age-old tradition of seed saving.

[244] Uriel Orlow, *Theatrum Botanicum* (Sternberg Press, 2018) p.289
[245] Geoff Tansey, *The Future Control of Food: 'A Guide to International Negotiations and Rules on Intellectual Property, Biodiversity and Food Security'* (Routledge, 2012) p.27.

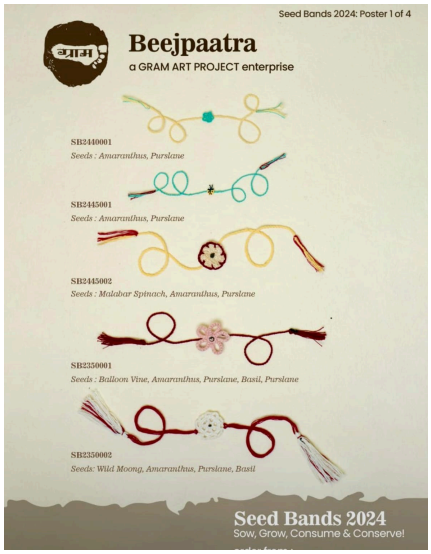


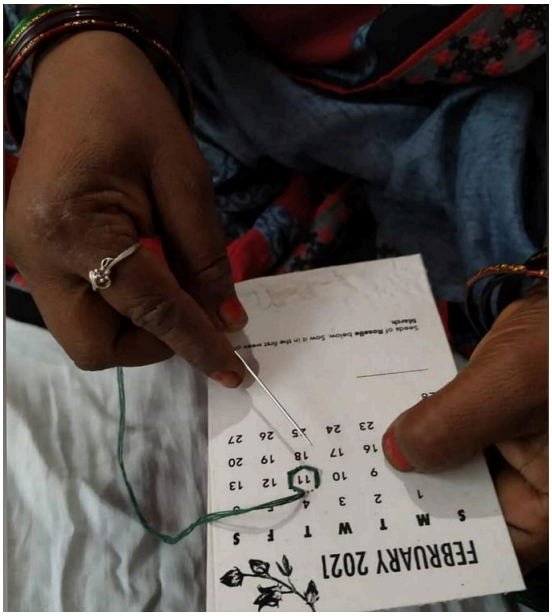
Fig.3.22: Gram Art Project Collective,'Seed Saving', 2023, Paradsinga, Madhya Pradesh. Image Credits: Gram Art Project Collective
Fig.3.23: Gram Art Project Collective,'Seed Bands', 2024, Paradsinga, Madhya Pradesh, Image Credits: Gram Art Project Collective (Social Media Handle)

The Collective makes theme-based seed bands every year near the festival of 'Raksha Bandhan'[246], a celebration of the bond of protection and care between siblings. More than two hundred women from ten villages near the border of Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra worked on the seed bands (Fig.3.24) and in a span of one month they collaboratively created 1000 bands. Even though they could only sell eight bands in their first year of production, they have continued this process as Shweta Bhattad felt committed to the idea of reusing crop residue (or 'Paraali' as discussed earlier in the scroll artwork) into a life-process of mobilized sustenance for women. And, 2023 was Gram Art Collectives' eighth consecutive year of growing indigenous, non-GMO (Genetically Modified Organism), IPR-free (Intellectual Property Rights), rainfed cotton and making seed bands out of it. These sellable seed bands were actively promoted by the Gram team on the Gram Art website and on various social media platforms.

[246] Raksha Bandhan is a traditional Hindu festival where the sister ties a rakhi (band or thread) on her brother's wrist and the brother wishes that the sister is happy, healthy and safe.

Fig.3.24: Gram Art Project Collective,'Seed Bands', 2023, Paradsinga, Madhya Pradesh. Image Courtesy: Gram Art Project Collective
Fig.3.25: Gram Art Project Collective,'Seed Crackers', 2023, Paradsinga, Madhya Pradesh. Image Courtesy: Gram Art Project Collective

An innovative method to spread the message of seed saving and smart usage was the introduction of hand-made firework crackers (Fig.3.25). Replacing the conventional highly toxic and non-degradable materials, the Collective introduced biodegradable, pollution-free crackers made from waste paper and recycled material. The project worked with a slogan 'Let's choose HATCHERS, instead of Crackers' to promote the plantable characteristic of the crackers, which can be sown, watered and hatch into edible plants and microgreens that can be consumed after nurturing. In 2021, a series of hand embroidered seed paper calendars (Fig.3.26-3.27) were shown as part of the five-artists group exhibition 'Can You Hear My Voice?' at Margaret Lawrence Gallery, University of Melbourne, Australia. The exhibition dealt with the notion of borders - real, imagined and psychological and Gram Art Collective's contribution echoed a similar theme as the 'Cotton Stainers' project, which was the invisible yet inevitable societal constraints of the non-dominant gender in a largely patriarchal society.



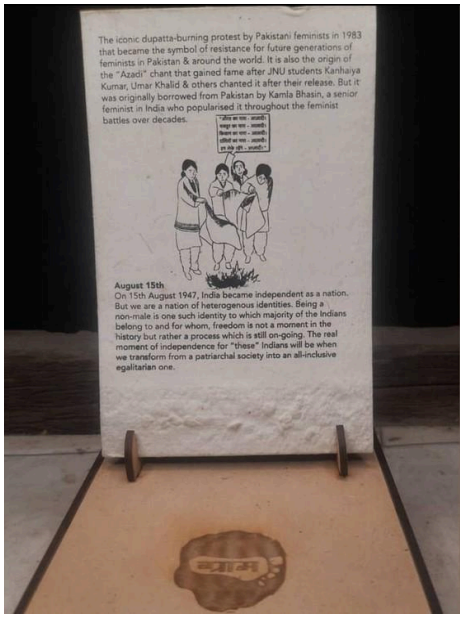


Fig.3.26 (Left): Gram Art Project Collective, Woman doing embroidery on a seed calender, 2021, Group Exhibition 'Can You Hear My Voice?', Margaret Lawrence Gallery, University of Melbourne, Australia. Image Courtesy: Gram Art Project Collective

Fig.3.27 (Right): Gram Art Project Collective, 'Seed Calendars with embroidery' (detail), 2021, Group Exhibition 'Can You Hear My Voice?', Margaret Lawrence Gallery, University of Melbourne, Australia, 2021. Image Courtesy: Gram Art Project Collective

Fig.3.28: Gram Art Project Collective, 'Seed Calendars', 2021, Installation Shot, Group Exhibition 'Can You Hear My Voice?', Margaret Lawrence Gallery, University of Melbourne, Australia. Image Courtesy: Gram Art Project Collective

The asymmetric non-linear display (Fig.3.28) indicated the need to revisit common understanding of borders not just as a geopolitical force of division but as a larger intellectual and social condition. One day of each month was hand-embroidered with indigenous cotton hand-spun yarn as a reminder of the rights and struggles of women. Handcrafted from local resources, each page of the calendar was embedded with seeds and at the end of each month, the biodegradable page can be buried in the soil so that the seeds are sown, grown, cultivated and eventually consumed. In a review for Frieze Magazine, writer Shaad D'Souza states,

> *..a wall display of hand-embroidered seed cards made by female workers in the Indian village of Paradsinga – commemorates the struggles of women in India. That viewers are encouraged to take a card and plant the seeds turns the work itself into a contested site. Is our sowing of these non-native species liberating for the women of Paradsinga, or is it a new marker of colonial power in a still-colonized Australia? Perhaps Seed Calendar offers a real-time picture of unintentional ideological conflict between different strains of liberation.*[247] *(D'Souza, 2021)*

According to David Sequeira, Curator-Director, Margaret Lawrence Gall, the Seed Calendar is an expression of weaving local and universal issues into a sensitive and imaginative understanding of time and place. The calendar, through its monthly leaves, is a swift reminder of the passing of the seasons and the presence of seeds within the fiber of each page is suggestive of innate potential and growth. In spite of the arbitrary borders of human existence, it is impossible to deny that the human connection with the land is largely dependent on the forces of nature.[248]

---

[247] Shaad D'Souza, 'The Complexities of Being Heard in Kashmir', *Frieze*, no. 220 (April 2021), https://www.frieze.com/article/can-you-hear-my-voice-2021-review.
[248] David Sequeira, 'Can You Hear My Voice? Margaret Lawrence Gallery 18 March—1 May 2021 Melbourne Australia', 2021 p.4.

When Shweta Bhattad went to the popular MS University, Vadodara, for higher studies, it was a very different learning experience for her as she had stepped out of her familiar and comforting territory at Nagpur. During the final year art exhibition, numerous gallerists and collectors visited the campus with offers to collaborate and exhibit in metropolitan cities of Mumbai and Bengaluru. This appeared like any other multinational company's campus placement opportunity and Shweta Bhattad in her head was constantly questioning why none of the artists are thinking about going back to their home or hometown and carrying their knowledge to where they belong? It was a time when she started to question the very purpose of art and what it meant to her. On impulse, she chose to go back to her village and not let an art gallery control her practice of creating and being seen in a certain way.

One can draw connections with the transformative experience of Kirstin Kimball who was a freelance writer in New York and later turned towards working as a full-time farmer in Essex Farm near Lake Champlain. In her memoir 'The Dirty Life: On Farming, Food and Love' Kimball narrates her transformation amidst a celebration of food and farming. According to Kimball, 'Farms are basically plot generating machines, taking in desire and adversity, mixing them with hopes and dreams, and spitting out a story'.[249] The memoir is a deeply personal and evocative narration of her journey from an urban journalist to a rural farmer and she compares farms to "plot generating machines" due to the sheer unpredictability of farm life due to unforeseen weather changes, crop failure, and the financial strain. She asserts that in spite of the odds, farming is about hope, intent, optimism, and new narratives of transformation - similar to Shweta Bhattad's journey in her village -Paradsinga so far.

While Shweta Bhattad was already doing some studio-performance based artworks in Vadodara, she had not yet stepped out openly in the public arena. She wanted to

[249] Ernesto Pujol, *Walking Art Practice: Reflections on Socially Engaged Paths* (England: Triarchy Press, 2018) p.13.

use art to enact or articulate a more direct, non-representational engagement with the audience in order to create new deliberations of thought. In 2012, with 'Food and Ecology part III', Khoj Artists' Residency, she realized that her practice could be projected as public art or performance-based art. Subsequently she was offered the Barbil Art Residency which was an opportunity to closely interact with the mine workers in Barbil, Orissa and lead to a public performance titled 'Faith III' in 2012. Another residency in the same year that shaped her early practice was the 'Sowing Seeds Residency' in village Jedhpur, Rajasthan which dealt with the non-conformity of educational rights for the girl child. All these projects were triggering in her a critical, interpublic progressivism where she wanted art to mimic community-building.

Besides participating in residencies, she was pursuing smaller collaborations with women and artists in Paradsinga village. While she was closely observing life in her village, one day her close childhood friend was brutally abused by her alcoholic husband and her young daughter witnessed it. It was a harsh reality but the worst part was her friend's unwillingness to file a police complaint about this abuse. This idea of compliance due to social stigma was extremely disturbing for Shweta Bhattad and it seeped into her work in the village. Along with her sister Aditi Bhattad, she set up the Gram Art Project (later became Gram Art Collective) which served as a collective of farmers and artists based in village Paradsinga, Madhya Pradesh, doing residencies, exhibitions, community workshops and performances to challenge the social milieu of a tiny village through art and culture. The logo (Fig.3.29) of the Collective carries a white footprint of a woman on a cow dung cake ('Uplah' in Hindi). The 'Uplah' is a symbolic representation of one more unaccounted task undertaken by rural women, where with their bare hands they mix cow dung with straw or hay, then dry them out in the sun and use it as fuel for cooking. The word 'Gram' has several meanings (such as: a unit of measurement; it refers to 'chickpea' from the legume family; and in South Asia it refers to a village) but for Shweta Bhattad, the word Gram is a direct reference to her village and the logo brings agency to the invisible role of women in the rural agrarian sector.

In 2013, the Gram Art Project organized its first International art residency in Paradsinga village where artists connected with women, farmers, children to ask questions, discuss, debate and find solutions. The same year she was funded by Khoj to participate in a residency at Bamboo Curtain Studio Taiwan. She performed a piece titled 'Bharat Mata' which was inspired by her own constant struggle to overcome the fears of being a woman residing in her own country. Focussing on social aims, the discourse started to grow wider and deeper and in 2014 the Gram Art Project organized an Eco Sanitation Irrigation residency in collaboration with the Khoj project 'Ecologies of Byways', in the Paradsinga village. The involvement was much deeper this time and the group initiated seed saving projects, celebrating the harvests and mono seeding.

Shweta Bhattad was looking at the politics of the land, gender inequality, abusive harsh living standards of women, market dependency and the polycrisis at its very grassroot level. Her aim has been to make the village self-sufficient and create a tillage-free land where the people and the soil decides for itself and the ecosystem functions independently. Agriculturalist and food expert, Khadar Vali, popularly known as the 'Millet Man of India'[250], refers to no-tillage land as 'Kadu Krishi' (in Kannada language) which means 'Forest Agriculture'.[251] He actively promotes tillage-free land in order to preserve soil health, maintain biodiversity, and reduce soil degradation without any chemical intervention. Rooted in traditional farming methods, he asserts that a small forest of about 20 percent of the total area should be grown in every farmland. Citing his own example, he says, 'I bought 7.5 acres of barren land in 2009, and 3 acres is reserved as a forest and my crops grow in the remaining 4.5 acres. The reason is that the forest spread in those 3 acres of land

[250] Yemen S, 'India's Millet Man Embarked on Millet Journey at the Age of Six', Karnataka, *The Hindu*, 5 December 2023, https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/karnataka/indias-millet-man-embarked-on-millet-journey-at-the-age-of-six/article67600246.ece.

[251] 'Growing, Cultivating & Harvesting Siridhanya through Kadu Krushi/Jungle Farming', *Organic Sphere*, 26 January 2019, https://organicsphere.in/growing-cultivating-harvesting-siridhanya-through-kadu-krushijungle-farming-d14/.

protects the crops which grow in its vicinity till about 10 acres'.[252] Shweta Bhattad has adopted this methodology on her farm, where a small portion of the farmland is allowed to propagate on its own - which she calls the tillage-free land and can be understood as a sovereign forest (which ties up with the case study discussed in chapter 4).

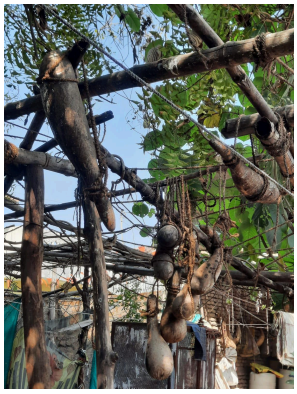


Fig.3.29: Gram Art Project Collective,'Logo', 2-13, Paradsinga Village, Madhya Pradesh. Image Credits: Gram Art Collective
Fig.3.30: Gram Art Project Collective, Traditional Seed Saving methods, 2023, Gram Art Project Collective Studio, Paradsinga Village, Madhya Pradesh. Image Credits: Preeti Kathuria
Fig.3.31: Gram Art Project Collective, Shweta Bhattad, 2023, Gram Art Collective Studio, Paradsinga Village, Madhya Pradesh. Image Credits: Preeti Kathuria

Shweta Bhattad's art practice has been shown globally in numerous group exhibitions, including 'And the Falcon Passed Through His Neck' at Latitude 28 Gallery, Delhi, curated by Jasmine Wahi, Art Asia Miami, Lalit Kala National Exhibition, Delhi and the Bombay Art Society. Shweta Bhattad does not see herself as just an artist, she takes pride in her multifaceted roles of also being a mother, a farmer and an activist. The motive of her laborious sojourn has been to have a shared, real-time presence in her village and grow a community focused on issue-based activism through the medium of art. She is immersed multitudinously in her functional collectivity, dispensing a voice to the voiceless. Her medium is literal, functionalist, ethnographic and pragmatic, all at the same time. Shweta Bhattad asserts, 'my aim is not to glorify rather it is a process of self-realization

[252] Ibid.

achieved through mobilizing and activating the available resources in a shared space. Our performances give us the strength to keep our dialogue in the public realm. We learn everyday and we simply perform our life'. A passage from John Berger's 1978 essay 'The Storyteller' is a good analogy to explain Shweta Bhattad's practice in the *Paradsinga* village:

> *What distinguishes the life of a village is that it is also a living portrait of itself: a communal portrait, in that everybody is portrayed and everybody portrays… A village's portrait of itself is constructed not out of stone, but out of words, spoken and remembered: out of opinions, stories, eyewitness reports, legends, comments and hearsay. And it is a continuous portrait; work on it never stops.*[253] *(John Berger)*

Gram Art Collective represents a team of engaged citizens with artistic gestures of remediation and convergence towards the potential of natural process, carrying out performative acts of healing the wounds of the depleting vitality of humans, soil and land. They incorporate new scientific findings as well as traditional wisdom and plant knowledge. Through rituals, music, dance, performance and acts of care, artists work through the cascading implications of the crisis and simultaneously decode an eco-conscious way forward.

Fundraising is an important part of their practice in order to realise larger community projects and they are constantly seeking grants (governmental, private foundations, arts councils), sponsorships from local businesses that align with their values and collaborations with institutions and other collectives. They do face financial difficulties, and constantly seek support from gallerists, curators and art collectors, while simultaneously utilizing a combination of ingenuity, community help, and economic, cost-effective artistic media and strategies. They are in the process of developing alternate revenue generating systems such as selling seed bands, seed paper, and organic merchandise.

---

[253] John Berger, *Landscapes: John Berger on Art* (London: Verso Books, 2016), p.63 https://www.versobooks.com/products/230-landscapes.

3.6 Performance: 'Climatical or Political' (2019)

In 2019, the Gram Art Collective hosted a celebration in Delhi, titled 'Climatical or Political - an evening of performances, artworks and dinner' (Fig. 3.32- 3.33). The aim was to make the urban consumers aware about the food security issues and activate the public debate on agricultural problems. Using the farm produce, they hosted an evening of snacks and drinks, which were prepared from both successful and failed, damaged harvests, edible and non-edible artworks aimed at making guests feel the burden of hunger. At the end a bill was raised enlisting the process and cost of the presented outcome. This project aimed to make urban consumers realize how foolish it is to take food security policies for granted. It intended to increase the inclusion of key agricultural topics in the framework of public debate, using media developed by the agricultural resources and processes of the Gram Art Collective. These artistic and cultural interventions enabled local impact while encouraging a global exchange on the common understanding of sustainability and climate justice.

Fig.3.32 & 3.33: Gram Art Project Collective, 'Climatical or Political?', 2019, Food, Performance and Dinner, Max Mueller Bhavan, Goethe Institute, Delhi. Image Courtesy: Gram Art Project Collective & Goethe Institute, Delhi

Enormous challenges are faced in ensuring and providing a sustainable, secure, safe, sufficient and nutritious, equitable and culturally appropriate diet for all,

which should, in reality, be the top priority of our food policy. However, few governments have consciously made efforts to link different elements of national policy to food and produce coherent, food related policies.[254] The politically motivated performance carried conceptual and imaginative richness beneath a very durational and simplistic garb of social engagement. It strongly critiqued the urban dwellers' capitalist appetite and consumption patterns. The wasted agricultural produce is used as a metaphor to highlight the systematically excluded and disposed presence of the subaltern actors. The idea of waste and disposal aligns with Zygmunt Bauman's book *Wasted Lives: Modernity and Its Outcasts*, that explores how developing societies produce "human waste" in the form of individuals and communities that are rendered disposable by the upscaling economic, political, and social systems that only prioritize power and control.[255]

The performance artwork was a kind of aspirational protest performance with enriching, peaceful demonstrations and civil conduct. Characterized by interaction it proposed a radical role for the artist in a society which is not the usual romanticized given. The incredible vigor and energy in nature, vegetation and food production belies an unwritten facelessness and this evening of events was a direct confrontation of urban misplaced priorities. Combining aesthetics with politics, the initiative put the audiences into a visceral contact with the looming agrarian crisis and its impact. This performance, along with other creative practices of the Collective, can be understood in the light of anthropologist Arjun Appadurai's theories of global systems.[256] He asserts that globalization operates through five distinct but overlapping "scapes": ethnoscapes, mediascapes, technoscapes, finanscapes, and ideoscapes.[257] Each of these scapes interact with one another in complex ways and represent different dimensions of global cultural flows. Just like the fluid, disjunctive, and unpredictable nature of global cultural exchange, the

---

[254] Geoff Tansey, *The Future Control of Food: 'A Guide to International Negotiations and Rules on Intellectual Property, Biodiversity and Food Security'* (Routledge, 2012), p.7.
[255] Zygmunt Bauman, *Wasted Lives: Modernity and Its Outcasts* (Polity, 2011).
[256] Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (University of Minnesota Press, 2005). p.33-49
[257] Ibid.

Gram Art Collective is operating across the dynamic scapes in order to consistently challenge the fixed notions and the social agency of culture and identity.

3.7 'Performative Habitat' or a 'Theatre of the Oppressed'

In India, there are 200 million people who cannot access the food they need and one has to look closely at the statistics to understand the scale of this humanitarian crisis.[258] Food as an essential commodity demands critical self-awareness from all its consumers and agriculture needs social solidarity and ecological sustainability. The key words that emerge from this detailed explanation of the Collective's social-artistic practice are: land, food, seeds, soil, sustenance, livelihood and women. The projects generated knowledge and livelihood and most importantly it brought people together in a mobilized, free space. They operate outside any rigid institutional framework and aim to sensitize and engage people in sustainable approaches to farming, built around *in-situ* biodiversity and ecology. Institutions can and do incentivize research-based practice and the Gram team constantly seeks non-exploitative, meaningful institutional collaborations. They explore the power of participatory programming and foster collaboration and mutuality of communities through shared narratives. Shweta Bhattad's vision has been to work in a research oriented, hands-on experimental way, and not necessarily preach and promote a specific material, method or process. Land and their village informs their way of living and their artistic practice and the task at hand has been to look at small incremental shifts which would later become significant changes.

Indian art scene does not necessarily demand categorisation of contemporary artistic practices, however art writers, curators and academics prefer to work within theoretical frameworks to give context, coherence, and deeper meaning within broader discourses. There is considerable debate around the closely related terms 'Land Art' and 'Environmental Art' and different artists prefer different names for their own specific reasons. In 2022, Italian artist Egle Oddo coined the expression

[258] Orijit Sen, Vidyun Sabhaney, and Harsho Mohan Chattoraj, *Food and Farming: A Journey Through India in Comics* (New Delhi: Leftword Books, 2024) p.28.

‘Performative habitat’ and in order to explain its attributes, drew upon the difference between Land Art and Environmental Art.[259] She states that unlike Land art, Environmental art, which is a broader term, wants to have a functional role for the living, and environmental artists have abandoned the anthropocentric attitude of domination historically characterising the monumental pieces of Land art, in favor of a consensual approach where they cultivate empathy and sympathy, while building relations of reciprocity with nature. With an integrative approach of the two concepts, Oddo created an interdisciplinary process designated as ‘performative habitat’ - which abandons plants as fetishes for biological experimentation or as metaphors and allegories of something else in contemporary art.[260]

According to Oddo, performative habitats are an artistic form where all the bodies present on-site perform an extemporaneous action, every observer is a participant, and there is no difference between the observer and the agent.[261] Hers is a contextual approach to the habitat, which is conveyed by participating and affirming oneself within the ecosystem. Eddo’s reference to artistic practices as ‘performative habitats’ aligns seamlessly with Gram Art Collective’s immersive, experiential relationship with the land in their village. For them, land is a living system, with interdependent relationships with plants, animals, weather, seasons, water cycles, and human influence. Daily life in the farmland demands patience, observation, and routine, aligning the artist’s rhythm with that of the natural time that works through seasonal change, growth, and decay. This is the performative habitat of the Collective, one that prioritizes heightened awareness, process, and interaction

The activities of Gram Art Collective are defined by embodied methodology, situated collaborations, concern for reciprocity and supportive mutuality. Their

[259] Lori Adragna and Egle Oddo, *Performative Habitats: Tra arte, filosofia e scienza* (Postmedia Books, n.d. 2022).
[260] Ibid.
[261] Ibid.

practices are restorative, reparative, active engagements with groups of people and their notions which aren't limited to any one coherent phenomenon. Much of socially engaged art today lays emphasis on the social process rather than the outcomes; on the attitude rather than achievement.[262] This is partially correct in the context of the Collective, however, their process itself is an outcome, they take the work literally in their own hands and are invested in the mess of everyday reality of the farming community. Privileging humanist ethics of care over aesthetics, their methods build and hold space for real-genuine interpersonal human relations to develop and grow. The activities are almost organic in nature, providing an existential scaffolding to lives by engaging and confronting specific issues in the Indian agrarian sector. In many ways, they expand their ways of being an artist and being a farmer, in simultaneity and in some unique coherence. The activities of the Collective align with feminist thinker, Simone de Beauvoir's statement, "it is in the knowledge of the genuine conditions of our lives that we must draw our strength to live and our reasons for acting"[263]. Societal constraints and personal circumstances are not seen as hindrances, rather, they inspire and empower the members of the Collective to meaningfully confront and change their reality.

It might be correct to argue that the spirit of the Collective has many similarities with the mid-1900s Augusto Boal's 'Theatre of the Oppressed', which is a much cited point of reference in the context of participatory art. This connection is not made by the Collective themselves. Written in direct response to the repressive political situation in Brazil, Baol's aim can be explained in the following lines:

> *In stable countries, artists know where they stand - serene and unperturbed. They know what they want and what is expected of them. In a Brazil, cast adrift, everything was and is possible: we asked where we were, who we were, where we wanted to go. (Boal 2001:264)*[264]

---

[262] Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London New York: Verso, 2012), p.179.
[263] Lorde Audre, *Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle The* (Penguin UK, 2018). p.20
[264] Frances Babbage, *Augusto Boal* (Routledge, 2004) p.2

The construct of concepts and methods that form the rubric of the 'Theatre of the Oppressed' did not emerge solely or mainly from artistic choices and experiences, but organically developed from a resolute struggle to create socially relevant, life-affirming theatre in an environment characterized by severe repression.[265] Boal's theatre and performances aligned closely with Marxist ideas about class struggle and the role of art in revolution. It operated on the assumption that dialogue is the most basic, common, healthy dynamic between all humans, that all human beings inherently desire and are capable of dialogue, and that when a dialogue gets replaced by a monologue, oppression is inflicted. Boal's approach puts power directly into the hands of the audience, transforming them from passive spectators into active participants, which he called "spect-actors".[266] All these ground assumptions align closely with the ethos of the Gram Art Collective, who interact, intervene and empower through their self-organised, curated projects, encourage collective problem-solving and directly influence the process.

This research, therefore, does not categorize the activities of the Collective into any singular category due to the array of complex cultural production and a deep entanglement with the adherents. Solidaric empathy plays a very crucial role in our interactions with the world, determining who is met with warm compassion instead of cold indifference.[267] It shapes attitudes, public opinion and policy. The Collective's work is empathy-driven and inspires participatory, non-hierarchical approaches towards rural agrarian development, with a primary focus on women. A lot of their work is also an unconscious process of breaking deep-rooted prejudices and internalized stereotypes that bear strong overtones of powerful determinants such as patriarchy, caste divisions and capitalist scavenging.

---

[265] Ibid.
[266] 'What Is Theatre of the Oppressed?', Acting Now, 22 January 2015, http://actingnow.co.uk/what-is-theatre-of-the-oppressed/.
[267] Cynthia Willett and Julie Willett, 'Solidaric Empathy and a Prison Roast with Jeff Ross', in *Uproarious*, How Feminists and Other Subversive Comics Speak Truth (University of Minnesota Press, 2019), https://doi.org/10.5749/j.ctvr69540.8.

3.8 Concluding Discussion

The chapter describes and analyzes Gram Art Collective's role in addressing the agrarian crisis, with special reference to their performances 'Cotton Stainers' and 'Climatical or Political' and their activities as a rural community-based collective. The key determinants addressed in the chapter are: patriarchal oppression, caste-based discrimination and capitalist exploitation. The case study highlights neoliberal transformations and capitalist policies such as privatization, market dependency and decreasing state support as structural contributors to the crisis.

The artist-broker is embedded in the lived reality of the crisis and documents the undervalued and invisible work of women farmers. Shweta Bhattad along with the members of the Collective function both as intermediaries or brokers and as a participant in active transformation. The artist-broker prioritizes experiential testimonies and autobiographical narratives in their performances in order to break the silence of the subaltern subjects - primarily the rural women farmers. The practices of the artist-broker reference subalternity through caste, gender and rurality and work their way from the ground upwards. By empowering the silenced narratives of women and creating counterpublic spaces for collective memory and resistance, the artist-broker is negotiating power and identity. Their primary role is remediation, agency-building and participatory problem-solving. Let us assess how the chapter answers the three research questions of this thesis.

The chapter provides a comprehensive account of the activities of the Gram Art Collective and their use of performance, installation, and socially-engaged art to interrogate the determinants of the agrarian crisis. They employ multiple artistic mediums and methods such as durational performances, site-specific land/crop art, collaborative installations using handmade paper, fibre, stubble, straw, seeds and textiles, with an aim to unpack the lived realities and material conditions of the agrarian life. The detailed descriptions and analysis of 'Cotton Stainers', 'Climatical or Political' and the global collaborative project 'I Have a Dream'

showcase their artistic strategies in visualizing and representing the crisis through personal and communal narratives.

The writing in this chapter explores how Gram Art Collective questions and reconfigures the common understanding of the crisis, within the framework of the subaltern experience, gender and caste-based oppression, and the dangerous effects of neoliberal capitalist reforms. The case study engages with the following theoretical frameworks: Subaltern Studies, Theory of Global Systems, Performative Habitats and the Theatre of the Oppressed, in order to analyse the workings of the Collective towards resistance, collective consciousness and communal solidarity. Through iterations of their site-specific practices and participatory performances, the Collective displaces the locations of power within discursive spaces and redefines the agency of the agrarian crisis both in rural and urban contexts.

The case study analyzes the social, political and cultural implications of performing and exhibiting these artistic practices locally and globally. The dynamics of public mobilization, protest, and community are highlighted through the positioning of performances and site-specific projects within the global art arena, for example, Khoj residencies in Delhi, The Vancouver Biennale, and the Margaret Lawrence Gallery in Melbourne. The study elaborates upon the impact of these contexts on common understanding and visibility of rural art. There is explicit reflection on the limits and potentialities of scaling up visibility, translation and the entrepreneurial strategies (e.g., seed bands, seed crackers, merchandise) adopted by the Collective.

On the whole, the case study provides a substantive analysis of a critical picture of challenges and interventions enacted by the Collective in their artistic and social practice. With time, Shweta Bhattad discovered her inheritance, found her place and started creating realms of resistance and recovery for her village. With memories of loss, subjugation and indignity, she chose to confront the struggles and complexities of her inheritance. With a vision and the potential to disrupt epistemic structures and explore the emancipatory potential of collective action, she has firmly positioned herself on the margins. Her long term rootedness and engagement

from within the crisis has created multiple empowering methodologies that are scaling up support and visibility in national and international forums. It is her way of rewriting knowledge from below, focussing on what was left out in dominant narratives. A way of unsettling the positions of power and privilege, and answer in the most sophisticated way, how the subaltern needs to speak in the contemporary discourse.

Chapter 4

The Violence of Dispossession: Amar Kanwar on Sovereignty

4.1 Introduction

Artist filmmaker Amar Kanwar uses poignant methodologies and mediums to highlight the scale of developmental madness, the challenges to the rights and sovereignty of the residents of India and the need for social justice. Further explaining some other aspects of the crisis, this chapter elaborates upon the deepening menace of the so-called development in the name of public-good and economic growth, primarily leading to human displacement, disappearance of land, livelihood and resources, suppression of rights and dispossession of the stateless and disenfranchised communities.

Before delving deeper into the question of sovereignty, it is essential to unpack its glory, and relevance. Going by the English dictionary meaning of the term sovereignty refers to supreme power or authority; it is the authority of a state to independently govern itself territorially. Sovereignty is the very bedrock of international relations as it is the right of a nation to remain a self-governing entity. The preamble to the Indian Constitution affirms:

> *WE, THE PEOPLE OF INDIA, having solemnly resolved to constitute India into a SOVEREIGN SOCIALIST SECULAR DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC and to secure to all its citizens:*
> *JUSTICE, social, economic and political;*
> *LIBERTY of thought, expression, belief, faith and worship;*
> *EQUALITY of status and of opportunity;*
> *and to promote among them all*
> *FRATERNITY assuring the dignity of the individual and the unity and integrity of the Nation;*

> *IN OUR CONSTITUENT ASSEMBLY this twenty-sixth day of November, 1949, do HEREBY ADOPT, ENACT AND GIVE TO OURSELVES THIS CONSTITUTION.*[268]

As per the preamble, the primary task of the state therefore, is to execute the collective will of its people while ensuring justice, freedom and equality in exercising its powers. Falling within the ambit of civil liberties, sovereignty often becomes an issue, according to Monika Halkort,[269] mostly due to extreme, fundamental disagreements between the state and its people regarding: where does sovereignty reside?[270] A radical rejection to align with the state's propagandistic vision of progress and development while compromising livelihoods, land rights, biodiversity and sacred geography, is seen as a way to disrupt capitalistic logic and reclaim sovereignty.

Law and rights researcher Usha Ramanathan, very succinctly points out that the state's relationship with commonly held resources has never undergone a proper process of constitutional investigation. Therefore the capacity of the state to act as the sovereign owner of all public national assets lacks a clearly defined legal mandate, which can only be enforced based on a decision by the Supreme Court. Ramanathan's analysis clearly voices a long-standing critique of state sovereignty as fundamentally opposed to the democratic principles of equality and justice.[271] With these reflections in sight, one is inclined to ask - is the state the owner of all territories and resources related to the land? If the expansions and encroachments of the state are constitutionally correct, how does the legal compass move in protecting the sovereignty of its lawful citizens? All these questions inform the core of Kanwar's artistic research and practice, especially the two projects: 'Many Faces

---

[268] 'Preamble - The Constitution of India', accessed 28 January 2025, https://www.constitutionofindia.net/articles/preamble/.
[269] Monika Halkort is visiting professor of Communication Arts, Lebanese American University, Beirut and has been researching the concept of 'Expressive Sovereignty'.
[270] Amar Kanwar et al., *Amar Kanwar, The Sovereign Forest: ["The Sovereign Forest" at TBA21 - Augarten ; November 23, 2013 - March 23, 2014]* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2014) p.60.
[271] Ibid. p. 60

of Madness' (2000) and 'The Sovereign Forest' (2011) discussed in greater detail in this chapter.

According to curator Daniela Zyman, Kanwar's project(s) highlight three main emergencies that lead to undermining sovereignty in contemporary times: the first one was in 1991, when Kanwar was a mere witness to the aftermath of the assassination of a social thinker, activist and trade union leader Shankar Guha Niyogi in Chhattisgarh[272] - a tragic violent outcome of the ruthless industrial war unfolding in Odisha. The second one dates to 2013, when twelve small bodies of local governance - the village councils in the Niyamgiri Hills of southwest Odisha unanimously resisted to claim their sacred land from the extractive bauxite mining projects proposed by a corporate giant. And the third, since 2012, the Samadrusti Media activist group in Bhubaneswar, Odisha stood firmly against the odds, hosting Kanwar's project, establishing and consistently reaffirming its network of educational, journalistic, evidentiary and social functions.[273] These three emergencies, amongst numerous others, created a stir in Kanwar to reignite the lucid, fragile discourses over rights, sovereignty and democracy.

Amar Kanwar was born in 1964, in New Delhi and according to his own statements, felt inspired to become a social activist after the crucial occurrences of 1984.[274] While he was studying history at the University of Delhi, two major incidents influenced his philosophical and creative thinking: on October 31, Sikh bodyguards assassinated Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, sparking widespread retaliation against Sikhs in Delhi. The same year, on December 3, a deadly gas leak at the Union Carbide pesticide facility, known as the Bhopal catastrophe, killed thousands and endangered hundreds of thousands more. Kanwar enrolled in the film department at Jamia Millia Islamia University's Mass Communications

---

[272] Chhattisgarh is a land-locked state between Odisha and Madhya Pradesh, in central India. It used to be a part of Madhya Pradesh but in year 2000 it was recognised as a separate state.
[273] Amar Kanwar et al., *Amar Kanwar, The Sovereign Forest: ["The Sovereign Forest" at TBA21 - Augarten ; November 23, 2013 - March 23, 2014]* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2014) p.28-30
[274] 'Amar Kanwar', The Guggenheim Museums and Foundation, accessed 26 March 2024, https://www.guggenheim.org/artwork/artist/amar-kanwar.

Research Center in Delhi and began to explore the boundaries of documentary filmmaking. Kanwar also worked as a researcher in coal mining areas in central India. His artistic practice is invested in the separation of families, sectarian strife, and border disputes, intertwined with explorations of gender and sexuality, philosophy and faith. Amongst his most celebrated works are *A Season Outside* (1997), *A Night of Prophecy* (2002), and *The Lightning Testimonies* (2007), each demonstrating his fierce determination and lyrical articulation of highly political realities. Kanwar is clearly one of the most visible Indian artists in the international art scene with countless exhibitions and screenings in his repertoire, including four participations in the *documenta* editions in Kassel, Germany. His work bears a significant social mandate that relies heavily on extensive research, testimonies, narration and collaboration.

4.2 Documentary Film: 'Many Faces of Madness' (2000)

The 20-minute documentary film is a capsule narration of extreme ecological destruction that has happened in the country in the name of national growth and development. According to Kanwar, the film was created in haste in 2000, when he was invested in another hour-long film called 'Freedom' and was simultaneously working with a very large non-profit, ecological and dairy cooperative. A high-profile delegation along with the Prime Minister was going to visit the site in Gujarat (western India) and he was requested to compile and create something to engage directly with the highest decision-making authority. In about three weeks, Kanwar created this documentary film with images of systemic ecological damage in India.[275] With his roots in Kerala, southern India, physician and author, Abraham Verghese very aptly says, 'with every change in geography, destinies change'[276]. These changes are at the heart of Kanwar's inquiry. Kanwar's film charts and scales the renderings of geographical facts amidst a complex cartography of social, political and historical contexts.

---

[275] Conversation with Amar Kanwar

[276] Jahnavi Sen, '"With Every Change in Geography, Destinies Change": Abraham Verghese', *The Wire*, 28 January 2025, sec. Books, https://thewire.in/books/abraham-verghese-the-covenant-of-water-interview.

The film begins with a serene yet serious voice of Kanwar asking "Can there be one single image that shows both wisdom and end of wisdom, all in one moment?"[277] and then the camera glides over a traditional water canal system over the vast plateau region of the deserts in Gujarat, a state with echoes of the Gandhian legacy along the western coast of India. A unique and visionary one wall canal system was created over four hundred years ago in order to harness natural rain water but with developmental changes, the plateau stands divided into grids of land and ownership, making the canal dysfunctional and the region prone to droughts and floods. The visually probing irony and loss is further accentuated by the high notes of a Gujarati regional folk song that plays along the rhythm of the distancing camera continuously hovering over the arid terrain. The film opened up a physical geographical space, but simultaneously activated a sensorial, social, and ecological space for the viewer to absorb and experience the unsettling constructs of development.

Fig.4.1: Amar Kanwar, 'Many Faces of Madness', 2000, Film, 20-minutes loop, colour. Image Credits: Amar Kanwar

[277] *Many Faces of Madness (A Film by Amar Kanwar)*, directed by Foundation For Ecological Security, 2012, 0:06, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FKQUyThMQ-g.

The film stitches together multiple sequences of geographical terrains that have undergone drastic changes and describe madness, insanity, acute delusions of human existence, logic of commerce, greed and extractivism. One of the key concerns is the groundwater contamination that is happening due to chemical waste being routinely dumped into ravines and the earth, by drilling holes. The documentary mentions that the more alarming aspect is that there are numerous studies, reports and tests conducted to verify the excessive level of contamination and it is already in the knowledge of the State Pollution Board, the State government, the Central government, Ministry of Environment, the World Bank, Indian Institute of Technology Delhi and obviously the farmers know about it.

The visuals capture a young boy filling surface water from a local ravine in a bottle (Fig.4.1) and showing it on the camera that the collected water is deep black in color. The film clarifies that the primary reason for such laxity is colonial legacy and national agency for economic growth and therefore the regulations are relaxed and the soil and the groundwater is continuously poisoned. This can be understood in the light of Kathryn Yusoff succinct examination of the grammar of geology[278] in her book, 'A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None', where she asserts that 'the superimposition of colonialism was an act of shearing of subjects from geography[279] into the category of geology which objectified and recorded them as property, thereby wiping out the extraordinary possibilities of geography in relation to the earth'.[280]

Geography and Geology are both earth sciences, but they focus on different things: Geography is a broader term that involves the study of how people, places, and environments are connected in space. It combines both the natural world and human activities. On the other hand, Geology is about the Earth's physical makeup,

[278] According to the Cambridge Dictionary, Geology is 'the study of the rocks and similar substances that make up the earth's surface' (https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/geology)
[279] According to the Cambridge Dictionary, Geography is 'the study of the systems and processes involved in the world's weather, mountains, seas, lakes, etc. and of the ways in which countries and people organize life within an area'. (https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/geography)
[280] Kathryn Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* (Minneapolis, MN: Univ Of Minnesota Press, 2018).

the materials it is made of, the processes that shape it, and its long history. Geography has its roots in ancient cartography (map-making) and exploration, Geology, however, began with studying nature and mining, and it focuses on rock formations when the Earth's plates moved (tectonics).[281] Mapping the modalities of development and economic progress, the images in the film serve as pieces of evidence of the criticality of this 'shearing' and breach of earth's geography and geology. It is performative, in a way that it unfolds the operations, their impact and the need to activate, modify and resignify existing developmental models.

Periodically, some gripping factual information runs over the visuals in the film. These statements capture the spectator's searching, reading and wandering eye, whenever Kanwar's voice takes a heavy weighted down pause:

- *80% of India's drinking water needs are met by groundwater.*
- *Several water samples from wells in this area have shown mercury, arsenic and lead levels to be 100 to 700 times more than the permissible limit (1999 data).*
- *Dense natural forests now cover only 12% of India's geographical area*
- *Today in Orissa 40,00,000 hectares of forest land is protected and managed by village communities.*
- *More than 80% of the coal production of India occurred beneath forest land.*
- *Conservative estimate of persons displaced by different projects is approximately 20 million.*
- *49 medicinal plant species have disappeared from the forests of Bastar (Chattisgarh, central India).*[282]

These statements based on research data float across the visuals and sometimes overlap with the subtitles of Kanwar's narration. The text appears and slides away on the screen like waves of anger amidst encounters of developmental fanaticism. The visual, text and voice together form a disruptive rhythm in the film with all this visual and textual referencing maintaining a fragile equilibrium on screen while succinctly condensing diverse examples of intense depletion and destruction. The

[281] Ron J. Johnston et al., *The Dictionary of Human Geography* (Blackwell Publishers, 2000).
[282] *Many Faces of Madness (A Film by Amar Kanwar)*, directed by Foundation For Ecological Security, 2012, 0:06, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FKQUyThMQ-g.

film reflects upon gaping holes and lapses in the ways of the government and by citing the example of Gautam Buddha and enlightenment, attempts to ignite in its audience some sort of consciousness and wisdom to understand the reality. It makes radical statements such as, "we are a nation at war with our own land and water, with our own people and we do not even know it. We have all the information but it doesn't lead to consciousness..".[283] With all its factual insights, the film mocks at the inability to resist these changes against the loud slogans of growth and progress. The film makes an allegory of the life-changing holes drilled in the earth to pour chemical waste, by saying, "when there is a hole like this one near your village, your sons will not find brides to marry because from now on entire families will be on the run, the land that they have nurtured but never owned has been sold. If they resist they will face the wrath of many, they will become the illiterate opponents of growth - the more articulate ones will face criminal prosecution or be offered MLA election tickets".[284]

Presented by the National Tree Growers Cooperative Federation, the film puts together a narrative from different regions and States across India, namely Assam, Orissa, Himachal Pradesh, Rajasthan and Gujarat. Even when the visuals were sullen with ecological disaster, the film's conclusion was complemented with Kanwar's devoted and optimistic temperament, saying, "..The market has not totally taken control. There has to be a way out. Wisdom must arise again!"[285] Unlike critical theorists or conceptual artists, Kanwar embraces facts and presents a raw, un-engineered information system for the viewer to confront. He does not mince words, his language is a descriptive sign system that produces meaning to elevate diminutive realities without taxonomy or distortion. Even though the artwork can be recognised as a simple factual presentation, there is a strong radical undercurrent that explores, presents and disrupts order in this condensed

[283] *Many Faces of Madness (A Film by Amar Kanwar)*, directed by Foundation For Ecological Security, 2012, 0:06, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FKQUyThMQ-g.
[284] *Many Faces of Madness (A Film by Amar Kanwar)*, directed by Foundation For Ecological Security, 2012, 0:06, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FKQUyThMQ-g.
[285] *Many Faces of Madness (A Film by Amar Kanwar)*, directed by Foundation For Ecological Security, 2012, 0:06, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FKQUyThMQ-g.

compilation of significant information. After viewing the film, one is left wondering at the moral bankruptcy and intellectual idiocy of a country that is mindlessly pursuing its goals of development. The film's content and formal aesthetics problematize ideologies of indexing development, issues of territory and political hegemony, while simultaneously demanding a reassessment of the epistemology of human wisdom amidst the maddening web of relations and systems.

Being a documentary film, created with a specific purpose in mind, it actualizes and reminds the viewers of the unseen reality. Looking at the genealogy of documentary filmmaking, it was in the 1980s when documentary cinema started to adopt a more artistic and experimental style, with filmmakers investigating more personal, subjective, and expressive approaches. Spearheaded by filmmakers such as Arvind Desai and Anand Patwardhan, socially significant and politically infused documentaries started to become popular. Anand Patwardhan's films, such as 'Prisoners of Conscience' (1980) and 'Bombay: Our City' (1985), examined topics of civil liberties, violence, and urban development, and are regarded as significant landmarks in the history of Indian documentary cinema. Patwardhan is discussed again further in this chapter and also the belief that Patwardhan had no contemporaries. He is often seen as an institution by new generation documentary filmmakers, but his style is more journalistic while Kanwar's engagement with filmmaking is also aesthetic. However, this film, 'Many Faces of Madness' is an exception as it is a very formal reaction to the brutality and violence that Kanwar witnessed.

4.3 'The Sovereign Forest' (2011 - ongoing)

Initiated in 2011, 'The Sovereign Forest' has been one of Kanwar's largest ongoing project which comprises films, books, photographs and documents showcased in evolving iterations with a sharp focus on exploring and presenting the social and environmental impact of mining in Odisha (formerly Orissa), a resource-rich,

largely tribal state in eastern India. For over a decade, Kanwar remained occupied in observing and documenting the industrial interventions that have altered and impacted Odisha's landscape. 'The Sovereign Forest' addresses the violence of what sociologist Michael Levien refers to as the 'neoliberal regime of dispossession'[286] in the state of Odisha and nearby areas, especially the effect of mining activities in the Niyamgiri hills by meganational and multinational firms. Kanwar offers a moving-image installation that serves as ongoing research into the various aspects of this dispossession, coupled with an investigation of the resilience and inventiveness of anti-dispossession activism.[287] In collaboration with Sudhir Pattnaik, a social activist and editor of *Samadrusti* News Magazine in Odisha, and designer and filmmaker Sherna Dastur, the project emerged as an artistic response to crime, politics, violence, human rights, justice and ecological crisis. Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary, popularly known as TBA21, has supported Kanwar's projects since 2006.

Multiple works make up the ever-expanding constellation of 'The Sovereign Forest', but at its core exist two films: 'The Scene of the Crime' (2011), a film that documented landscapes selected for industrial development prior to their obliteration, and 'A Love Story' (2010), which delved on the experience of loss. The project installation, evolved and grew over time and included three large handmade books: 'The Counting Sisters and Other Stories' (2011), 'The Prediction' (1991–2012), and 'The Constitution' (2012) with their own films projected on its pages; six small books or compilations: 'The Seedbook' (2012), 'In Memory of' (2012), 'Photo Album 1: The Lying Down Protest' (2012), 'Photo Album 2: Kalinganagar' (2012), 'Time' (2005-13), and 'Referendum' (2013); 'Listening Benches' (2013); '272 Varieties of Indigenous Organic Rice Seeds'; and reflections from the 'Evidence Archive' (2012-14). In a 2013 interview with Emilia Terracciano, Kanwar said, 'The Sovereign Forest has overlapping identities. It

[286] Michael Levien, 'From Primitive Accumulation to Regimes of Dispossession: Six Theses on India's Land Question', *Economic and Political Weekly* 50, no. 22 (2015): 146–57.
[287] Karin Shankar, 'Amar Kanwar: Neoliberalism on Trial', *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 45, no. 3 (135) (1 September 2023): 1–13, https://doi.org/10.1162/pajj_a_00677.

continuously reincarnates as an art installation, an exhibition, a library, a memorial, a public trial, an open call for the collection of more "evidence," an archive, and also a proposition for a space that engages with political issues as well as with art'.[288]

Odisha (eastern India) has a vast farming community predominantly made up of small and marginal farmers. Roughly 70 percent of its residents rely on agriculture. In terms of demographics, about 40 percent of the population of Odisha is Scheduled Castes (SC) (16 percent) and Scheduled Tribes (ST)[289] (22 percent). It is also significant to recognize the geographical aspect of this demographic: over 80 percent of the STs reside in the wooded areas of Odisha, which also coincide with the mining region, referred to as the Zone of Extraction.[290] Historian, cultural critic and one of the members of the Subaltern School, Gyanendra Pandey observes that the mainstream culture in India has always represented the 'national culture' and that stands in stark contrast with the smaller religious and caste communities, tribes, industrial workers and women groups.[291] And all these minority cultures characterize and represent the subaltern communities.[292] 'The Sovereign Forest' project engages deeply with these fundamental yet delicate realities of Odisha and has simultaneously been a field of inquiry and a site of encounter which particularized a wide range of visual, social, cultural, economic and political concerns. Comprehensive, multi-layered installations originated in probing narratives drawn from zones of conflict/extraction and were characterised by poetic polemics of the personal, social and political.

'The Sovereign Forest' captures the magnitude of scams and hardship of the affected population and asks critical probing questions: How to understand crime

[288] Urs Stahel, Daniela Janser, and Amar Kanwar, *Amar Kanwar: Evidence* (Göttingen Winterthur: Göttingen : Steidl : Winterthur : Fotomuseum Winterthur, 2012) p.276.
[289] Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe (abbreviated as SCs and STs) are constitutionally designated groups of people/community that are socio-economically disadvantaged in India.
[290] Ranjana Padhi and Pramodini Pradhan, 'Women in Resistance Struggles in Odisha - Mainstream Weekly', 3 August 2013, https://www.mainstreamweekly.net/article4367.html.
[291] Nandana Dutta, 'Nationalism and Otherness: Reading Nation in the Literature Classroom', *The Global South* 2, no. 1 (2008): 71–90.
[292] Ibid.

and the conflict around us? Who defines evidence? Is an illusion more real than a fact? Can 'poetry' be used as 'evidence' in a trial? How do we see, know, understand, and remember disappearances? How to look again?[293] Kanwar's practice bears an intense weight of reality which by virtue of its mere existence performs critical interrogation.

4.3a Films: 'The Scene of Crime' (2011) & 'A Love Story' (2010)

'The Scene of Crime' is a 42-minutes duration, single channel, colour, audio-video installation film, co-commissioned by Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary, Vienna and Public Press, New Delhi. The film is a reality document that showcases the experience of the landscape of Odisha just prior to erasure as the territories got marked for acquisition for development by corporates, cartels and industries. Every image in this film lies within specific geographical territories that are proposed for industrial take-over and are in the process of being acquired by the government and corporations in Odisha. Every location, every blade of grass, every water source, every tree that is seen in the film would vanish and is meant to not exist anymore. 'The Scene of Crime' is an experiential gaze at the physical, geographical, human terrain of conflict and the personal lives that exist within its natural landscape and ecology, explained Kanwar.[294] He kept a close eye and was observing, recording the changes, the industrial interventions and the resistance of local communities in Odisha since 1999. He returned to the state in 2010 with an intention to film and articulate his quest and this film marked the beginning of his multi-layered project 'The Sovereign Forest'.

According to Kanwar there is a severity and brutality to this developmental appropriation or taking over of the natural resources. The film is an investigation into how a crime is defined by law and which evidence is legally permissible? He felt that since we lack the understanding of the meaning of a crime, perhaps one

[293] 'Press Release - The Sovereign Forest - NTU CCA', 2016, https://archive.ntu.ccasingapore.org/news/press-release-amar-kanwar-sovereign-forest//.
[294] 'Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary - The Scene of Crime', 2013, http://www.tba21.org/.

needs to find another way to look at crime and simultaneously devise a fresh vocabulary to understand the true meaning and real depth of crime. He then explored and proposed poetry as a medium to become evidence in a crime and then he questioned if he would be allowed to put poetry as formal evidence alongside the forensic evidence? And then with profound discontent, he asked, "If a crime continues to occur regardless of the enormous evidence available then is the crime invisible or the evidence invisible or are both visible but not seen?"[295]

Fig.4.2: Amar Kanwar, 'The Scene of Crime', 2011, audio-visual Installation, 42 minutes, ©Photo: Centre Pompidou, Paris
Fig.4.3: Amar Kanwar, 'The Scene of Crime', 2011, audio-visual Installation, duration 42 mins. ©Marian Goodman Gallery

'A Love Story' (2010) is a relatively short 5-minute 37-seconds high-definition, colour and sound video which forms the second important arm of the Sovereign Forest project. It documents the breakup of a young romance in four acts through music, text and visual sequences. Commissioned by the Independent Cinema Office and LUX with support from the National Lottery through the Arts Council England, the film is divided into four parts with captions and a soft stringed-instrumental music playing in the background. Shot exclusively in the dumping grounds of Delhi, the film begins with a four-wheel vehicle approaching with headlights beaming in the dark of the night and the text reads 'The suddenness of your departure is still hard to believe'. Part two opens with blurred patches of green leaves slowly dancing to a mid breeze on a sunny afternoon and the text

[295] Efi Michalarou, 'ART CITIES:Singapore -Amar Kanwar – Dreamideamachine ART VIEW', accessed 7 January 2025, http://www.dreamideamachine.com/?p=17014.

reads ‘no moment is worth living anymore and yet it seems I can wait for her forever’. It slowly transitions to part three which shows very fine patches of light streaming under the dark evening shadow of a huge tree. The text running in white reads, ‘I remember I had said, if I were to describe how beautiful you are, you may think that I’m making a proposition. You had answered, 'that depends on the words you use’. And then the last frames of part four show a massive disposal landfill site with an MCD (Municipal Corporation of Delhi) dumper truck, scavenging birds and a few men carrying out the task of waste disposal. The film takes a turn back to the first frame of the four-wheel vehicle approaching and the text reads one more time ‘the suddenness of your departure is still hard to believe’. The film concludes by circling back to where it started, indicating the vicious circularity of pain and loss.

NayanTara Gurung Kakshapati of photo.circle, the presenter of ‘The Sovereign Forest’ in Kathmandu, Nepal very accurately elaborates upon the reasons behind Kanwar’s work - ‘Love, she suggested, lends you the lens of compassion to internalise loss in a different, potent way—there is care and understanding there’.[296] From a philosophical and existential point of view, the notion of love often makes people more aware of how fragile life is, which makes them act morally and feel compassion in every task.[297] Love, in this sense, enables and empowers the bereaved to process loss and grief with compassion, not only towards what is lost but also for themselves, by recognizing the continuity of connection despite someone’s physical absence. Because of this, love has the capacity to bring about a powerful change: it not only makes grief feel stronger but also helps see it as a meaningful and important part of being human.

At the Creative Time Summit in Stockholm, 2014, after the screening of this film and before starting a conversation with Kanwar, Art Historian Carol Becker, said, ‘one of the really great functions that artists can serve is to help keep the complexity alive and one of the great gifts that Kanwar has is the capacity to use

[296] Manushree Mahat, ‘An Ode to Odisha’s Resilience’, *The Kathmandu Post*, 3 February 2024, https://kathmandupost.com/art-culture/2024/02/03/an-ode-to-odisha-s-resilience.

[297] Martha C. Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (Cambridge University Press, 2003).

beauty and elegance, sound and image to seduce us into the problem as opposed to seducing us away from the problem'.[298] Further explaining the genesis of this film, Kanwar said that the film defines a sort of exhaustion with super articulation and searches for ways to cut through the stasis of time. The film is a result of a stage where dialogues between adversaries, between divergent positions, got articulated but also solidified into specific arguments and confrontations, without bringing any meaningful shifts in positions of thinking and action. He then started to look into poetry as a medium of expression and investigation. It was during the making of this film when Kanwar felt a need to pull back, to disempower, to retreat even further from time and poetry, to learn what it is to talk before knowing dialogue or to simply learn to look. Explaining the film, Kanwar says,

> *"Sometimes it is only in the deep core of separation that one can comprehend the meaning of life, of compassion. In order to enter this core, perhaps we need to slip into a state of mind where we can momentarily distill the image and see the bareness of human existence, of the inner life of nature. Sometimes it becomes useful to see or experience the poetry of love outside the territory of one's own comfort".*[299] *(Amar Kanwar)*

Kanwar's impulse to 'pull back' or 'retreat' from time and language, leads to a shift toward poetry and contemplative seeing. This resonates deeply with theories in aesthetic philosophy and phenomenology, especially In *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945), by Maurice Merleau-Ponty, which suggests that perception precedes language and true understanding comes from an embodied, pre-reflective engagement with the world.[300] Kanwar's inclination towards poetry comes from the idea that there exists value in the unspoken, in pausing before conceptual framing, and allowing for a flow of poetic attention that lets the world disclose itself. This concept aligns with hermeneutic phenomenology, especially in the works of Heidegger, who posited that poetic dwelling, or '*poiesis'* is a method that resists

---

[298] Appendix 5.5: Transcription of Interview: Amar Kanwar in conversation with Carol Becker, 2014.
[299] Amar Kanwar et al., *Amar Kanwar, The Sovereign Forest: ["The Sovereign Forest" at TBA21 - Augarten ; November 23, 2013 - March 23, 2014]* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2014).p.270
[300] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (Routledge, 2013), p.32

specific instrumental framing of human experience.[301] Kanwar's withdrawal from raw narrative or linear temporality makes way for a method of deeper inquiry, where meaning must be sensed rather than explained.

Arguing against reductive analysis of artworks and their underlying assumptions, scholar Trinh T. Minh-ha emphasizes upon the politics of seeing and unseeing, suggesting that stepping back both visually and narratively, is in itself an act of resistance.[302] Critiquing dominant modes of representation that impose authority, and arguing for prioritizing poetic ambiguity over fixed meaning, she works with theorizations of displacement and marginalization in the third world. Rejecting polished representation, Kanwar uses poetry as a medium of investigation, which serves both the political and epistemological stance of his work. There is an intentional refusal to claim mastery over the found subject, and opting for a more vulnerable, searching gaze. This mode of inquiry invites viewers to unlearn knowing and relearn how they see, and to inhabit a space where not-knowing is the only method of knowing. The short film with its slow rhythmic pace, pivots on the idea of love, loss, suffering and the irreversibility of pain. On the first viewing, the film comes across as a minimalist take on the crisis but it holds a strong condensed cry towards irreparable ecological destruction.

4.3b Three Handmade Books with Embedded Films

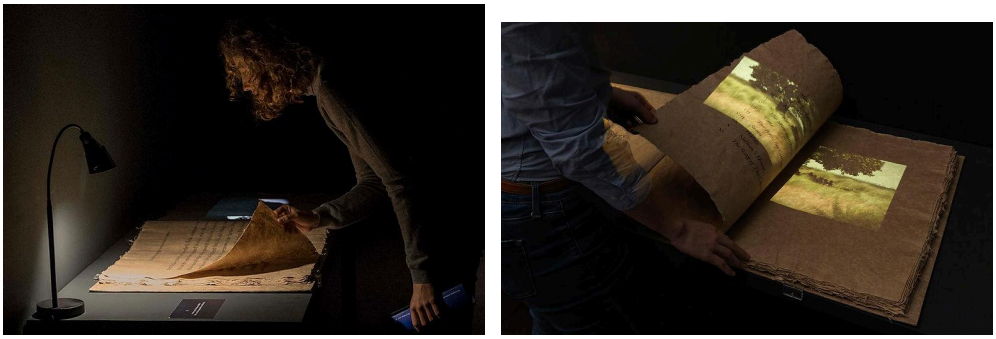


Fig.4.4: Amar Kanwar, 'The Counting Sisters and Other Stories', 2011, Silk-screen handmade banana fiber–paper book. ©Photo: Artist

[301] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (HarperOne, 1975).
[302] Trinh T. Minh-ha, *When the Moon Waxes Red: Representation, Gender and Cultural Politics* (Routledge, 1991).

Fig.4.5: Amar Kanwar, 'The Counting Sisters and Other Stories', 2011, Installation shot, Projection: HD Colour, silent, 40 min. ©Photo: Artist

'The Counting Sisters and Other Stories' (2011) is one of the three handmade, handsewn banana fiber paper books with screen-printed text and a high-definition, 40-minutes silent projection overlaid on the book pages. The installation included the handmade book, a wooden table, a lamp and the single-channel video projection which invited the viewers to come and directly engage with the work by reading the book and turning its pages (Fig.4.4). The Counting Sisters refers to six women mourners who count the dead, the disappeared and 'The One Alone' refers to one woman who works alone and counts the living. The book offered a collection of short stories written by Kanwar, about the six friends who were women farmers of different ages, all twice-displaced and were called to sing whenever there was a death in the state. They kept an invisible network and a detailed record of every name, address, date and photograph and maintained several notebooks for every village. They offered advice and became experts in calculating compensations, rates of bank interests and other complex financial transactions. The stories discuss how disputes between local communities, the government, and corporations over control of forests, rivers, minerals, and agricultural lands have resulted in the forced relocation of farmers, fishermen, and indigenous communities as well as an ongoing cycle of violence which remains mostly unpredictable and largely invisible. The work refers to the concept of 'accumulation by dispossession'[303] by citing examples of forced relocation of farmers, fishermen, and indigenous communities along with environmental injustice, and land grabbing. The concept is built upon mindless processes that involve accumulating capital through privatization and commodification of public resources. These processes are an example of 'slow violence'[304] as they occur gradually across time and space, with little or no legal recourse or public attention.

---

[303] David Harvey, *The 'New' Imperialism: Accumulation by Dispossession*. (Socialist Register, 2004). p. 63–87.
[304] Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Harvard University Press, 2013).

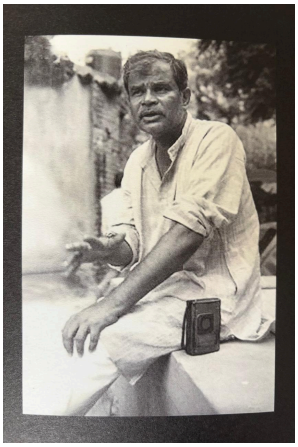
Historian Ramachandra Guha writes about 'Freedom for the Tribals' in his book 'Makers of Modern India' and says that we, as a country, need to fight for three freedoms - freedom from fear, from want, and from interference.[305] We must see that the aboriginals get a square deal economically, they are safe from cheats and corrupt imposters, and that they receive education (in crafts like carpentry, or agriculture), and medical aid without feeling dishonoured. He asserts that we do not have to 'uplift' them into a social and economic sphere to which they cannot adapt to, rather, we need to restore to them the liberties of their own land.[306] Guha is suggesting that the aim is neither isolation nor assimilation; we should not rob them of their songs, dances, festivals and laughter, instead, their integrity and culture needs to be safeguarded.

The violence of displacement is not just a byproduct of development but a manifestation of deeper social inequities. The stories document and stir the reader with the intense changes in the lives of displaced people who lost their land, livelihood, village, childhood, youth, and so many unspoken parts of their existence. The narration succinctly investigates the meaning of change, healing, exhaustion, and memory. The pages of the book carried traces of evidence of the stories that were embedded in its fiber, such as a fishing net, a cloth garment, rice seeds, betel leaf, and a newspaper.

A second version of the film 'The Scene of Crime' was projected next to the screen-printed text. This version subverted the original film despite using the exact same visuals, image length, it was mathematically reorganized with a new sequence of visuals, silent and without text. It was separated from the original film's plot and shown overlapping 'The Counting Sisters' written stories in a way that the banana-fiber paper's texture altered and distorted the look of the high-definition image. The varied speeds of reading and page flipping with an overlaid projection (Fig.4.5) resulted in different random juxtapositions, revealing a new interaction

[305] Ramachandra Guha, *Makers of Modern India* (Penguin India, 2012). p.478-9
[306] Ibid. p.479

between text and image. The presentation of the work activated a new way of looking, reading, and viewing.



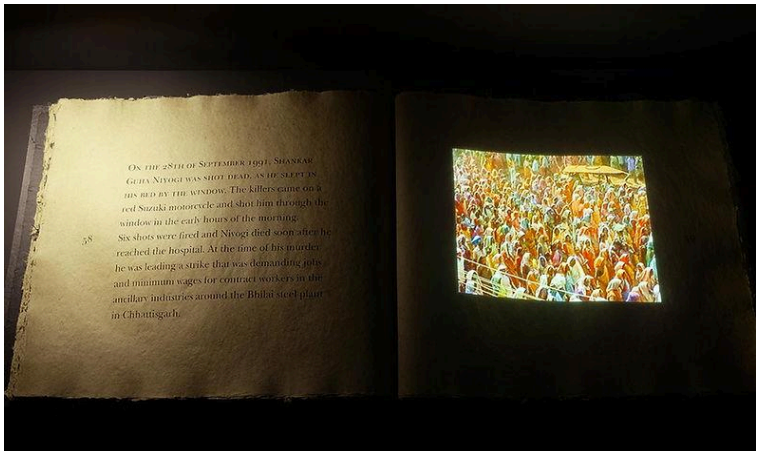


Fig.4.6: Amar Kanwar, Portrait of Shankar Guha Niyogi with his tape-recorder, 2014, The Sovereign Forest Catalogue, p.227, TBA21. © TBA21 and Amar Kanwar
Fig.4.7: Amar Kanwar, The Prediction (1991-2012), Book: handmade banana fiber paper, screen print, hand sewn; single-channel video projection, Video, colour, 8 minutes

The second handmade book, 'The Prediction'(1991–2012) captured the assassination of Shankar Guha Niyogi, the leader of Chhattisgarh Mukti Morcha[307], one of the largest democratic mass movements of workers, peasants and tribals against the industrial onslaught of Odisha in post Independent India. Niyogi represented the bewildered villagers trying to protect their land from the mining and power industries. He was an active trade union leader and knew that his voice would soon be silenced, he therefore predicted his own murder, which finally occurred on 28th September 1991. Leading industrialists were convicted of the crime in 1997 by the Madhya Pradesh Sessions Court, but the Supreme Court of India overturned the rulings in 2005.

The hand-made book serves as a compendium of fiction, facts, legal documents - such as Niyogi's Memorandum to the President of India, personal statements - the transcription of Niyogi's audio recording, and photographs. Prints of archival

[307] "an organization representing mine workers, tribals, and agricultural and bonded workers that is well known for its strikes and negotiations for the enforcement of basic labor laws and the observance of constitutional provisions" (https://tba21.org/Prediction)

booklets, pamphlets and legal documents presented as evidence in the book were made possible by the extensive research conducted by the Supreme Court lawyer and human rights activist Vrinda Grover (b. 1964, New Delhi). Grover was one of the lawyers representing the Chhattisgarh Mukti Morcha in the Niyogi murder legal trial.[308] Kanwar calls this a reference to the evidence of an old scene of crime and a counterpoint to a contemporary unfolding crime, which narrates the events leading to and following an assassination. This statement connects with historian Carlo Ginzburg's idea of 'Evidential Paradigm', which refers to a system of knowledge that analyses and interprets small, insignificant findings, traces, and fragments in order to uncover hidden deeper truths.[309] Unlike scientific practices, this methodology involves practices like close observation, intuition, detective work, and psychoanalysis where indirect signs and gestures unfold and reconstruct complex realities.

Niyogi was aware of what was coming, so he tape-recorded (Fig.4.6) a personal statement prior to his murder, identified the conspirators, and explained the possible reasons for his killing. The book also works as a testimonial that recounts, through legal records and trade union pamphlets, the legal murder trial, which spread over two decades, yet remained non-conclusive. The video displayed on the book (Fig.4.7) was primarily recorded by Kanwar on September 29, 1991, the day following Niyogi's assassination in the town of Dalli Rajhara, located in Chhattisgarh.

This work is an example of how demands for justice often get tempered by the complexity of human reactions, conditioned by prejudice, ignorance and the deliberate denial of factual conditions. Justice in a case of violence is overlaid by power and often descends immediately into layered intersectional loyalties and social hierarchies of inequality, such as caste, religion, gender - leading to endless

---

[308] Amar Kanwar et al., *Amar Kanwar, The Sovereign Forest: ["The Sovereign Forest" at TBA21 - Augarten ; November 23, 2013 - March 23, 2014]* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2014) p.310
[309] Carlo Ginzburg, *Clues, Myths, and the Historical Method* (JHU Press, 2013) p.12

delays and eventually to an undecided compromise.[310] Voicing dissent and critiquing these power structures often demands an internalizing that would lead to questioning of these horrific manifestations of prejudices. Kanwar's work retains a discerning eye for the gravity of politics and offers a withering critique of the oblivion and disposability of life in a crisis.

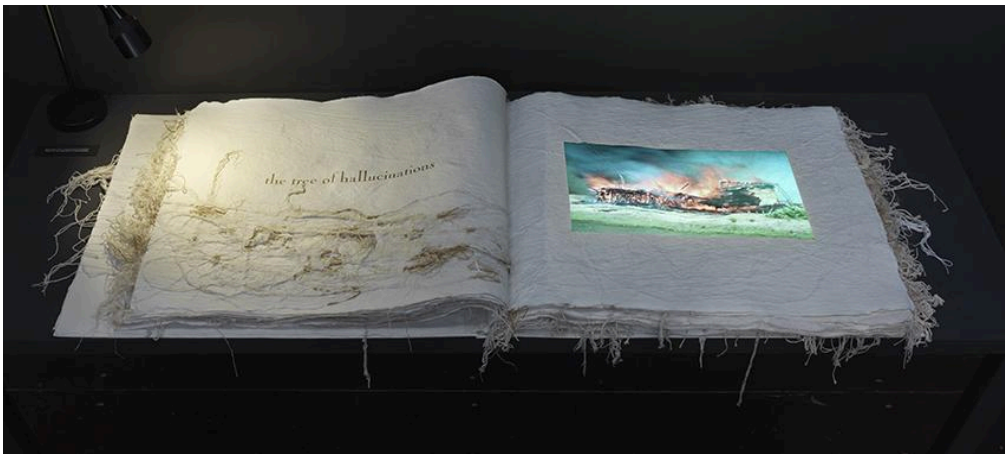


Fig.4.8: Amar Kanwar, 'The Constitution', 2012, Installation View, handmade book, wooden table, lamp and single-channel video projection, color, silent, 9 minutes, TBA 21, Vienna, Austria, 2014. © Amar Kanwar

Crafted from ramie (plant fiber) and cotton fiber paper, 'The Constitution' is the third hand-made book or folio with a video projection. According to Kanwar, it is a book that focuses on knowledge that is unwritten, containing nearly no text aside from the printed chapter titles, each title reveals lines of wisdom that are absent in official national constitutions. Some of these titles are 'the tree of hallucinations', 'the tree of the nomad', 'the tree of insurgency', 'the forest of time' etc. The handmade pages carry threads that are embedded and interwoven into them (Fig.4.8), creating a collection of distinct scripts. Each page relates to, interacts with, and expands upon the meanings of the titles, each plotting trajectories of wisdom that seem to be missing from formal national constitutions. The book demands to be experienced through its physicality, the feel of the paper, the textures visible in the interplay of transparency and light, and the ephemeral film overlaid and projected onto its pages. Grown in South Asian countries, Ramie

[310] Aruna Roy, *The Personal Is Political: An Activist's Memoir* (Harper Collins India, 2024), p.7.

fibre,also known as 'China Grass', is one of the strongest, natural plant fibres in the world, obtained from the bark of the plant 'Boehmeria nivea', which is one of the oldest fibre crops domesticated by man.[311] The weight of the fibre, the rawness, roughness of the pages, slows down the page-flipping ability in the viewer. In a way it calls the viewer to slow down, witness the hustle of despair, the pessimism of intellect against the optimism of progress. Designer Sherna Dastur collaborated with the Nirupama Academy of Handmade Paper in Kolkata for the handmade papers of the various books and folios. The varying degrees of light and dark fibres within the surface of the paper played with the projected light, adding new physical dimensions to the overlaid images.

4.3c 'The Evidence Room' - A Morgue of Seeds

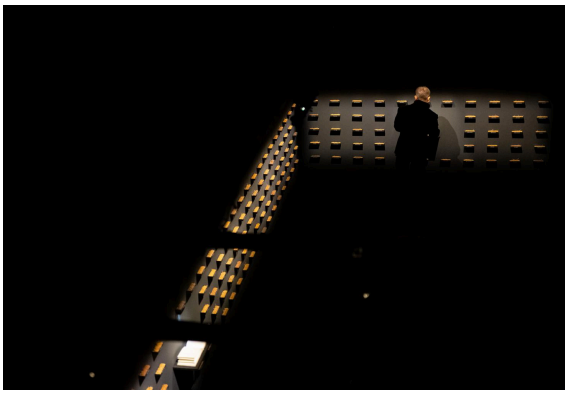


Fig.4.9: Amar Kanwar, 'The Evidence Room', Installation View of 'The Sovereign Forest', Nepal Art Council, Kathmandu, 2023-24. Image credits: Photo Circle, Kathmandu
Fig.4.10: Amar Kanwar, '272 Varieties of Indigenous, Organic Rice Seeds', 2014, Installation View, detail. © Amar Kanwar

The Sovereign Forest project had an 'Evidence Room' where Kanwar installed 272 varieties of rice seeds in black containers resembling small coffins (Fig.4.9). Each individual species of rice was represented, with each type of seed displayed in a handmade wooden container, labelled (bilingually - Oriya and English), and archived with utmost care. The seeds are labelled (Fig.4.10) according to variety,

[311] Sabyasachi Mitra et al., *Ramie: The Strongest Bast Fibre of Nature*, Technical Bulletin No. 8 (Central Research Institute for Jute and Allied Fibres, Indian Council of Agricultural Research, Barrackpore, Kolkata - 120, 2014), https://doi.org/10.13140/2.1.3519.5842.p.1

such as ‘Champa’, ‘Bobblibhuta’, ‘Kulia’, ‘Potia’, ‘Bankosa’ and ‘Benibhog’. The seeds belonged to the soil of Odisha, and remain on the verge of extinction, due to massive industrialisation occupying ancestral agricultural land. The dark, mortuary-like silence in the room invited scrutiny and possibly a righteous anger in the viewer towards the loss of an intangible knowledge system. However, it remains a question to ponder how one should view this awkward labyrinth arrangement of histories, objects, and environments. Do the seeds serve as markers of uniqueness and novelty or does the arranged pattern-like display mobilize intimate feelings of melancholia, loss and mourning? What implications does this softly-lit library or archive have besides serving as a mnemonic device or an emotional, nostalgic trigger? What does the encounter provoke? As a viewer, this intricate arrangement holds a transformative power to turn the archive into a contemplative space where seeds become symbols of renewal and relics of what has been lost, simultaneously evoking wonder and sorrow. The encounter brings agency to the fragility of memory and the emotional weight of loss.

The rice seeds emerged from Kanwar’s friend Rajinder Sarangi who unfortunately had passed away and his father, who was a school teacher and at the age of 70 started to grow and farm multiple species of indigenous rice on a piece of land in his village Narisho, about 35 kilometers from Bhubaneswar, Odisha. The father, Natabar Sarangi, actualized his search and planted over 300 varieties of rice that were traditionally planted for different uses and in different soil conditions, used primarily for everyday main meals. He asked a young farmer Yuvaraj Swain to join him and together they started to experiment and plant several varieties in the lowlands, medium lands and uplands, in red soil, black soil, sandy soil and in the hills. With a shared belief and painstaking quest, they planted drought tolerant, flood, cold and saline varieties, stored them and also offered the saved seeds to all the farmers around the village.[312] This precious knowledge of the seeds and the resultant food emphasizes that food can be an embodiment of an ideology and a

[312] Amar Kanwar et al., *Amar Kanwar, The Sovereign Forest: ["The Sovereign Forest" at TBA21 - Augarten ; November 23, 2013 - March 23, 2014]* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2014) p. 168.

medium of exercising social power and control.

Rice as food has several origin myths. The word 'rice' is said to be derived from the ancient Greek word 'Oriza' which means 'originally from Asia'. The hindi word for rice is 'dhanya' which roughly translates as 'supporter of human beings'.[313] Also, throughout Asia, other than being a staple main meal, rice is seen as a mythic symbol of fertility and growth, with various customs and traditions associated with it. According to Kanwar, this collection of rice seeds was an act of consciousness, of careful re-looking and became a living archive of evidence which might soon disappear. It is more than just rice seeds, a knowledge system, a biological agricultural resource, an indigenous resource that has been tried and tested and experimented over several hundred years to get a certain kind of variety that can grow in certain kinds of conditions.

According to the exhibition wall text, there used to be 30,000 varieties of traditional paddy seeds in Odisha which assured very high yields but now only 20 high-yielding varieties persist, all of which require massive amounts of water and chemical fertiliser to cultivate, and are also unable to withstand adverse climatic conditions.[314] It also clearly points at corporate patenting and Intellectual Property Rights (IPRs) leading to seed monopolies and destruction of indigenous knowledge systems (also discussed in Chapter 3, Gram Art Collective). This directly connects with Vandana Shiva's concept of 'biopiracy', according to which patenting biodiversity and the embodied, generational knowledge is a sort of violence in which variety and diversity is rapidly becoming the property of corporations.[315] According to Shiva, biodiversity is a valuable people's resource and there are two primary causes for the large-scale erosion and destruction of biodiversity: one, habitat destruction and displacement due to internationally financed infrastructure

[313] Leon Rappoport, *How We Eat: Appetite, Culture, and the Psychology of Food* (ECW Press, 2010) p.37
[314] Emilia Terracciano, 'Amar Kanwar's Latest Installation Captures Life and Its Extinction, in Rural Odisha and Elsewhere', *Caravan Magazine*, 1 February 2014, https://caravanmagazine.in/reviews-and-essays/disappearing-worlds.
[315] Vandana Shiva, *The corporate control of life: Documenta (13), [9. 6. 2012 - 16. 9. 2012] = Die Kontrolle von Konzernen über das Leben*, 100 notes - 100 thoughts (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2011).

megaprojects that build dams, highways, or extract minerals and resources; secondly the technological and economic push to replace diversity with homogeneity and monoculture in agriculture, forestry, fishery etc. and the Green Revolution is an example of this.[316] The accelerated exploitation of biodiversity creates massive and unresolvable conflicts of identity, ownership, and sustainability.

Aptly stated by curator Daniela Zyman, 'the seeds sat at the centre of the exhibition space like a protected shrine of wisdom and expertise, representing local food sovereignty'.[317] As an artwork, the vast labyrinth of seed varieties in an art space, serves as another kind of evidence to understand that if the land is taken or if these multiple varieties of rice disappear, one does not just lose seeds, one loses an entire culture around each of these rice species.[318] So the rice served as a metaphor, a visual discourse of evidence that demanded receptivity and analysis along a dialectic between presence and possible absence, even extinction. It is a call towards self-awareness, to look beyond the conveniences of our food systems, which very often, we tend to take for granted. The evidence room opened a space of simultaneity that synergized documentation, mediation, archiving, reviving, curating, educating, translating, and historicizing - in the same vein.

4.3d Six Folios of Textual and Photographic Evidence

Accompanying the seeds are six small books or folios, that compile texts and photographic evidence, which Kanwar gathered over the years of his research, further expanding and growing the project of 'The Sovereign Forest'. These are: 'The Seedbook' (2012) (Fig.4.11), 'In Memory of' (2012), 'Photo Album 1: The

[316] Vandana Shiva, *Biopiracy: The Plunder of Nature and Knowledge* (Berkeley, California: North Atlantic Books, 2016), p. 65-66.
[317] Amar Kanwar et al., *Amar Kanwar, The Sovereign Forest: ["The Sovereign Forest" at TBA21 - Augarten ; November 23, 2013 - March 23, 2014]* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2014) p.30.
[318] Interview: Amar Kanwar + Shanay Jhaveri | Crisis and Creativity: Artists Speak Series, September 21, 2021, Institute for South Asia Studies, Berkeley

Lying Down Protest' (2012), 'Photo Album 2: Kalinganagar' (2012), 'Time' (2005-13), and 'Referendum' (2013).

Fig.4.11: Amar Kanwar, 'The Seed Book', 2012, Digital prints, Dimensions variable. © Amar Kanwar

Fig.4.12: Amar Kanwar, 'Photo Album 1: The Lying Down Protest', Book, digital print, dimensions variable, Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary Collection, 2012 © Amar Kanwar

They recount the manifold levels of resistance, not only against political and corporate violations but also against the loss of memory of the dead and disappeared and of the passage of time in the struggle to preserve, resist, and survive. Kanwar's work sheds light on those who took pride in their rootedness and risked everything in their struggle for their rights. These include small but significant victories as well, such as 'The Lying Down Protest', which documents how the villagers of Dhinkia, Gadkujang, Govindpur, and Nuagaon villages in Jagatsinghpur District of Odisha, took a firm stand (Fig.4.12) against the forcible land grabbing by the Government of Odisha and Korean Steel company POSCO in 2011.[319] It is a compendium of many pictures taken by locals, passerbys, activists, amateurs etc, as evidence that impacted local and mainstream news, eventually turning the tide. Similar situations persist in most resource-rich states of the county, even today, after almost 20 years.

[319] Amar Kanwar et al., *Amar Kanwar, The Sovereign Forest: ["The Sovereign Forest" at TBA21 - Augarten ; November 23, 2013 - March 23, 2014]* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2014) p.141

The process of land acquisition has intensified nationwide since the 1990s, driven by the reforms defining the neoliberal era; and similarly, the rise of numerous resistance movements has occurred.[320] Popular writer and commentator on the agrarian situation, author Amandeep Sandhu's research-based book titled 'Panjab: Journeys Through Fault Lines' (2019) is a brilliant example of the horrors of governance, the undercurrent of resistance to power and hegemony and the massive crisis in Punjab, a northern state, also called the food basket of India. While speaking about the recent waves of farmer protests, Sandhu emphasized that these are very sincere attempts to reclaim India's food security and sovereignty. States of Punjab and Haryana alone contribute about 75% of India's food pool, so the protesting farmers cannot be our enemies, rather their role in our society is fundamental to the society's very existence.[321]

This Folio is an example of effective-resistance, or to say, an instance of hope and success through resistance, is the book 'Referendum' documents the 2013 legal, non-violent, endless battle won by the Dongria and Kutia tribes residing in the Niyamgiri Hills against attempts to extractively use their forests and mountains for mining of Bauxite, proposed by the Vedanta Resources. The referendum saw the coming together of tribal village councils and was held only in 12 mountain villages located in Districts Rayagada and Kalahandi, in July and August, 2013, while in reality a total of 112 villages were being affected by the mining activities.[322] One of the reasons (which Kanwar calls an 'ace') given by the tribes against mining was that such activities violate the residence of God, who lives in the mountains. The work carries images alongside data related to this local resistance against oblivious decision-makers. Another small book titled 'Time' carries a detailed timeline from 2005 to 2010, of the successful anti-POSCO

---

[320] Ranjana Padhi and Pramodini Pradhan, 'Women in Resistance Struggles in Odisha - Mainstream Weekly', 3 August 2013, https://www.mainstreamweekly.net/article4367.html.
[321] Preeti Kathuria, 'Threading a Way between Memoir, History and Reportage — In Conversation with Author Amandeep Sandhu', *Tint Journal*, 2 December 2024, https://tintjournal.com/interview/threading-a-way-between-memoir-history-and-reportage-in-conversation-with-author-amandeep-sandhu.
[322] Amar Kanwar et al., *Amar Kanwar, The Sovereign Forest: ["The Sovereign Forest" at TBA21 - Augarten ; November 23, 2013 - March 23, 2014]* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2014) p. 222

resistance in Jagatsinghpur District, Odisha. The research was conducted by journalists in Samadrusti and they collated information and data from diverse sources by conducting personal field visits, internet reports, fact-checking, emails, press releases and news archives. A rather dense document highlighting the sequence of events entails a large section of this book where Kanwar, mentions '...no timeline, no history is ever complete.'[323]

In stark contrast is 'Photo Album2: Kalinganagar' where six non-violent, stubbornly resilient local tribals were killed in police repression and violence. In 2005-06, facing the threat of forced displacement, loss of ancestral land and livelihood, the tribals of Kalinganagar protested against the boundary wall construction of Tata steel plant and faced indiscriminate police firing, disappearance and body mutilation.No report was released to the public and the judicial inquiry was never completed.[324] Kanwar's book documents the genealogy of events, with images, and names, age and village of the victims of this violence. This openly contemptuous display of murderous violence gets cautiously embraced and documented in the book; it is an intentional, distilled attempt to mediate, investigate, shame and expose flagrant horrific crime. On similar lines is a small folio titled 'In Memory Of', which serves as a substantive record of sustained oppression. It is a poignant documentation of the suicides of deeply indebted farmers in Odisha over recent years, depicted through a selection of photographic portraits of these farmers along with information regarding their deaths.

The supplementary text elucidates the relentless cycle of dispossession and migration triggered by the intrusion of mining cartels and corporations such as Tata, Posco, Vedanta, and Jindal into rural Odisha. Neoliberal economic expansion and extractive capitalism has destabilized the already precarious agrarian communities in rural Odisha. Kanwar very rightly asserts: "Farmers are becoming migrants. The migrants are becoming refugees. The refugees are becoming

---

[323]Ibid. p.86

[324] Amar Kanwar et al., *Amar Kanwar, The Sovereign Forest: ["The Sovereign Forest" at TBA21 - Augarten ; November 23, 2013 - March 23, 2014]* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2014) p. 194

workers. The workers are becoming prisoners. The prisoners are sitting in the courtyards because the cells are over-crowded".[325] This statement opens a larger global problem of land loss and relocation throughout the global south. Kanwar's work in rural Odisha is not an isolated case. For example in Marange, Zimbabwe, sub-Saharan Africa, mining-induced displacement has uprooted thousands of farming families, stripping them of land and natural resources, and pushing them into vulnerable to cycles of insecure labour arrangements, migration, refugee-status, informal labour, and erasure from policy and law.[326] Land grabbing, therefore, is not just about changing ownership, it is a dispossession of territorial sovereignty, eroding traditional rights and pushing rural communities into new, frequently exploitative, labour systems.

For a farmer to locationally displace or migrate to an urban setting as a daily-waged, unskilled labourer is a loss of identity and status, often leading to escalation of violence.[327] The experience of displacement and migration is extremely difficult to generalise and most artists can only address some preliminary peripheral contours of the distance, both physical and imagined, that the migrant traverses. Only a deeper ethnographic study can explain the layered journey of migration and its critical agency. However, the critical engagement of the Folios can be aligned with theorist, anthropologist Saba Mahmood's work on the conceptual entanglement of agency and resistance. Critiquing the liberal assumptions of freedom, Mahmood questions if resistance is the only paradigm of agency? And how movements of moral reform reconfigure the normative liberal account of politics? [328] Mahmood argues for an analytical notion of agency, and the performative effect of the concept of agency - that is delinked from the goals of

---

[325] Emilia Terracciano, 'Amar Kanwar's Latest Installation Captures Life and Its Extinction, in Rural Odisha and Elsewhere', *Caravan Magazine*, 1 February 2014, https://caravanmagazine.in/reviews-and-essays/disappearing-worlds.

[326] Simbarashe Gukurume and Felix Tombindo, 'Mining-Induced Displacement and Livelihood Resilience: The Case of Marange, Zimbabwe', *The Extractive Industries and Society* 13 (March 2023): 101210, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.exis.2023.101210.

[327] Lyla Mehta, *Displaced by Development: Confronting Marginalisation and Gender Injustice* (SAGE Publications Ltd, 2009) p.51

[328] Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton University Press, 2011).

progressive politics.[329] Therefore the slippage between agency and resistance needs new methodologies to perform, and Kanwar's artistic practice makes that happen by kneading the subaltern voice/agency into film, folios, and poetry.

Kanwar's work has the radical-activist fervor similar to the resolutely uncompromising documentary filmmaker working in the socialist tradition, Anand Patwardhan (b.1950, Mumbai). Knowledge of this legendary and heavily censored filmmaker is useful when viewing Kanwar's practice. In 1981, a 40-minute documentary film titled "A Time to Rise" by Anand Patwardhan and Jim Monro was released. The film captures the trials of East Indian farm workers in Canada who made relentless efforts to unionize.[330] It documented the lives of Indian immigrants sustaining on sub-minimum wages and suffering from a constant fear of not being given work the next day. The film constantly lapses into rhetoric without losing sight of its critical aim. It is believed that Patwardhan has no peers in India, and he has documented all major political milestones and nothing surpasses his discerning eye. Like most of Patwardhan's work, this film too faced censorship[331] but in his five decades of filmmaking career, nothing could deter him from actively portraying the capitalist scavenging of human dignity and the often dismissive moral costs of development, which are some stark convergences with Kanwar's practice.

4.3e 'Listening Benches' at Yorkshire Sculpture Park

With 'Listening Benches' (Fig.4.13) the sovereign forest project spread out into the landscape, for the first time. The benches were a special commission for the Yorkshire Sculpture Park (YSP) with seven seats made from a dismantled 19th-century organ from Bretton Hall's estate chapel. Kanwar's use of the wood to create listening sculptures, from the organ which had a voice for over 100 years, offers continuity to the wood to once again have a voice, this time, out in the

---

[329] Sarah Bracke, 'Is the Subaltern Resilient? Notes on Agency and Neoliberal Subjects', *Cultural Studies* 30, no. 5 (2016): 839–55, https://doi.org/10.1080/09502386.2016.1168115.
[330] Anand Patwardhan, 'A Time to Rise', 1981, https://patwardhan.com/a-time-to-rise/.
[331] Vinay Lal, 'Travails of a Nation: Some Notes on Indian Documentary', *Third Text* 19, no. 2 (2005): 177–87.

landscape.[332] The open-air sculptural installations offered a space to sit, pause and contemplate while simultaneously listening to the sound coming from the bench.

Fig.4.13: Amar Kanwar, Listening Bench #3, Recycled local wood, soundtrack: 11.06 minutes, 48 x 160 x 32.5 cm. © Amar Kanwar 2013

The benches added to the Park's existing memorial seats that had a profound personal connection with locals, visitors and with the landscape, while the audio installation provided a voice to a dead organ and enabled the artist to carry on the oral traditions of storytelling using his own words and narratives.[333] 'The Sovereign Forest' had a specific meaningful resonance at YSP since the 500 acres estate is situated right above the South Yorkshire coalfield and is ringed by former, now destitute, mining towns. Coal as a natural resource involving labor-intensive extraction methods, played a significant role in the Industrial Revolution, especially in Britain. Using the square wooden pipes of the Organ, Kanwar created the 'Six Mourners and the One Alone' in a sculptural form for the YSP landscape. The pipes were inscribed with a line of text painted in gold, from 'The Scene of Crime', also the stories of which could be heard sitting on the 'Listening Benches'.

The works reconfigured themselves into newer forms of telling and seeing, retaining their resolute testimonial strength. Curated by Clare Lilley, the exhibition

[332] Appendix 5A: Transcription of Conversation: Amar Kanwar with Clare Lilley, Director Programmes, Yorkshire Sculpture Park, UK, 2014.
[333] 'Amar Kanwar: Major New Exhibition At The Yorkshire Sculpture Park', Artlyst, 2013, https://artlyst.com/news/amar-kanwar-major-new-exhibition-at-the-yorkshire-sculpture-park/.

coincided with the 30th anniversary of the miners' strike and the YSP created programs in collaboration with the National Coal Mining Museum for England (NCMME) to reflect upon the historical and continued impact of mining both internationally and locally.[334] Mining extractivism therefore has a global history of violence of the imperial powers associated with it.

4.3f 'Poetry as Evidence'

The association with poetry as evidence has been a long one for Kanwar and it is deeply entangled with the exhaustion or the crisis of super-articulation (this has been discussed earlier in this chapter while explaining Kanwar's film 'A Love Story'). In an attempt to bridge the gap between the numbing attempts of super articulation and understanding, between resistance and its explanation, in 2002, Kanwar made the film 'A Night of Prophecy' documenting the voices of protest of minorities and dispossessed as he travelled and filmed across the states of Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Nagaland, and Kashmir. The oral history and the sounds in the film are sullen with sadness, anger, dignity and resistance that emerge from a layered haptic intimidation on account of caste, religion, and gender. The 73-minutes colour film, sets a sensory tone to corroborate new ways of seeing and understanding; simultaneously acknowledging that all reasoning has its limitations and the vocabulary of poetry and fiction can effectively confront this crisis of intellect. The cyclical rhythm of poetry is a sort of expressive sovereignty that opens us to rethink the thresholds of crime and evidence. On 6 December 2017, Amar Kanwar received the Prince Claus Award from HRH Prince Constantijn of the Netherlands. Elaborating upon Kanwar's uniqueness, one of the members of the Awards Committee, Solange Farkas, said, Kanwar has a special way to deal with video; he caters to many many layers of language and then beautifully balances the poetical language with a strong political subject.[335]

---

[334] 'Amar Kanwar: The Sovereign Forest + Other Stories', Yorkshire Sculpture Park, 11 October 2013, https://ysp.org.uk/whats-on/exhibitions/past-exhibitions/amar-kanwar-the-sovereign-forest-other-stories.

[335] Appendix 5.3: Transcription: 'Louder than Words: Global Leaders on the Frontline of Culture' At the Compagnietheater, December 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O7P95sPBki0

In a political context, the written word in language tends to supplement and support the explanation of the logic of a personal choice, in turn, making the language more universal.[336] Roy suggests that language not only clarifies and sharpens personal reasoning but also facilitates broader understanding and engagement across diverse audiences. Diminishing personal and political boundaries, language, especially poetry can thus mobilize and even canonize formless ideas. American writer, and activist Audre Lorde had extraordinary belief in the power of language and the articulation of selfhood. In her essay, 'Poetry is Not a Luxury' she says,

> *"Poetry is the revelation or distillation of experience, not the sterile word play that too often, the white fathers distorted the word poetry to mean -in order to cover a desperate wish for imagination without insight. Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought. The farthest horizons of our hopes and fears are cobbled by our poems, carved from the rock experiences of our daily lives. It is not idle fantasy, but a disciplined attention to the true meaning of 'it feels right to me'. We can train ourselves to respect our feelings and to transpose them into a language so they can be shared. As they become known to and accepted by us, our feelings and the honest exploration of them become sanctuaries and spawning grounds for the most radical and daring of ideas. They become a safe-house for that difference so necessary to change and the conceptualization of any meaningful action. And where the language does not yet exist, it is our poetry which helps to fashion it. Things are made realizable through poems - that give us the strength and courage to see, to feel, to speak , and to dare."*[337] *(Audre Lorde)*

In this succinctly written statement, Lorde explains how living within structures defined by profit, linear power, and institutional dehumanisation, our feelings find it difficult to survive, but poetry is the crack from where the light enters and emanates. In early 2024, Kanwar guest edited an issue of the Outlook news magazine (Fig.4.14) and elaborated upon the concept of poetry as evidence. Closely aligned with Lorde's reflection on poetry, Kanwar said that poetry provides

[336] Aruna Roy, *The Personal Is Political: An Activist's Memoir* (Harper Collins India, 2024),p.14.
[337] Audre Lorde, *Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle The* (Penguin UK, 2018).

that range which not only influences us but also holds experiences; it broadens the range of storytelling and serves as proof of other people's lives in our era.[338] Similar to what Roy asks in her book, 'Personal is Political', 'every narrative holds its own internal logic, but what if the sum total of many narratives tells a truth born not out of indoctrination but of experienced realities?'[339]

The first double spread page of the magazine has just two lines printed against a grey sky of a landscape with a single tree, 'a sleep has descended over language' and 'our eardrums are covered with curtains'.[340] These lines are indicative of how the written word has appropriated dominant discourse and how we are accustomed to not listening to the recall of stories anymore. In the introduction of the magazine, Kanwar unfolds his thought process and says, how can we connect with the various disappearances of individuals, communities, languages, ecosystems, and different ways of living and existing? Could the poet's thoughts and expressions assist us in uniting and discovering alternative perspectives, revitalizing senses that have become dulled so that we can understand once more? Could we overturn the mental tricks and re-envision the news? What if we could envision the daily newspaper crafted and designed by poets instead of by corporations, governments, political factions, and ideological agendas?[341]

---

[338] Amar Kanwar, ed., *Outlook. Poetry as Evidence*, 2024, p.4-5.
[339] Aruna Roy, *The Personal Is Political: An Activist's Memoir* (Harper Collins India, 2024),p.14.
[340] Amar Kanwar, ed., *Outlook. Poetry as Evidence*, 2024, p.4-5.
[341] Appendix 5.6: Transcription of Video: Amar Kanwar, ed., *Outlook Magazine, Poetry as Evidence*, 2024. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UxnXSuRlXZQ

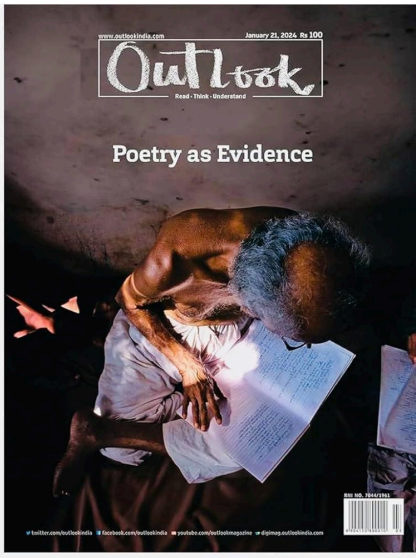


Fig.4.14: Amar Kanwar, 'Poetry as Evidence' 2024, Cover page, Outlook Magazine, January edition. © Amar Kanwar, Outlook Magazine

Fig.4.15: Amar Kanwar, 'Women farmers form a human chain to protest against farm laws in Noida in 2021', 2024, photograph accompanying 'Miniscule Minority' poetry penned by Akhil Khatyal, Outlook Magazine, p.94, January edition. © Amar Kanwar, Outlook Magazine

For the special issue of the magazine, Kanwar offered the Outlook team of researchers and reporters, with three sets of propositions, so that the issue carries poetry as evidence and response to these propositions: one, simultaneous viewing of multiple time, second, the formal presentation of poetry as news of the day, and third, can poetry help us understand the passage of time and get a glimpse of the future? These propositions reflect the structural framework of Kanwar's use and understanding of the fluid medium of poetry. Kanwar's work clearly proves that the non-linearity and fragility of verse has an innate power to circumvent the most horrific, tragic and violent narratives. And narratives often stay embedded in human consciousness and show up unexpectedly as answers to deep and knotty dilemmas.[342] Rekindling memories of violence, protests, and loss, the special issue of the magazine, about 124 pages, is a compendium of poems penned by writers from all over India. Reading these pieces of struggle - individual and collective

[342] Aruna Roy, *The Personal Is Political: An Activist's Memoir* (Harper Collins India, 2024),p.14

-together in a book format evokes a sense of posterity and a collectively shared commitment towards unsaid, unrecorded personal memory.

One example from the magazine is the short prose titled 'Miniscule Minority' by Delhi based writer Akhil Khatyal, which reads 'miniscule minority, miniscule minority - the judges kept on barking, clearly they've never been on Sunday evening to the park above Palika parking'.[343] The prose was accompanied with a photograph (Fig.4.15) of two hands embellished with glass bangles and nail paint, holding onto each other - representing the women farmers who formed a human chain during the farmer protests of 2020-2021. The protests, as Sainath says, 'were the greatest, longest, democratic, constitutional protest for justice and against inequality on the planet'[344] and therefore by no means were a miniscule minority. For once these informal narrations in human voice are not politically distorted and have still found space in the printed medium. Kanwar's long association with poetry, of more than twenty years, is an important mitigating tool to understand Kanwar's practice. It is also important to note that while Kanwar employs poetry as a medium in his practice, he dialectically alters and shifts the narrow and normative understanding of poetry itself.

Kanwar's integration of poetry into the visual and narrative components of his artworks, aligns with hermeneutic phenomenology, particularly in the way it seeks to uncover meaning through lived experience. Articulated by thinkers such as Hans-Georg Gadamer, Hermeneutic phenomenology emphasizes that in order to understand an event, the unfolding must be analyzed through its language, history, and context, and not just through an empirical analysis alone.[345] Kanwar's use of poetry is not an aesthetic embellishment alone, rather, it is a method of engagement that prioritizes subject experience and reflection. His films are not just pure documentations, they are invitations to feel, interpret, align, with the hermeneutic

---

[343] Amar Kanwar, ed., *Outlook. Poetry as Evidence*, 2024, p.94
[344] P.Sainath, Book Release Talk, 'Farmers Protest! A Movement of our Times' by Namita Waikar, IIC, New Delhi, 22 April 2025
[345] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (Continuum Intl Pub Group, 2003).

idea that truth is not fixed - its existence depends on interpretation and disclosure. With poetry his work offers openness towards multiple interpretations, with outright refusal to assert a singular truth or judgement. The works bear a phenomenological imperative, which is to let the phenomena show themselves as they are, thus opening spaces for diverse interpretive engagement.

4.3g 'The Sovereign Forest' - A Laboratory

Looking at the vastness of 'The Sovereign Forest' as a project, it is important to tease out the different interpretations and terms used to describe it. Some call it an archive, a site for demonstrating collective ideology or collective memory that stages multi-faceted violence of institutions and infrastructures. According to Kanwar, the idea of the archive is fundamentally authoritative, because archives possess or cultivate a deep connection with power. The rulers, the leaders, the government—all ultimately highlight, encompass, dominate and reaffirm authority. However, for Kanwar, an archive should acknowledge its own limitations instead of asserting authority. He had sought to highlight this limitation in The Sovereign Forest and he said, "Limitations are at the core of this archive, it is dynamic."[346] He also clarified that this vast collection of evidence was not meant to sentence or accuse anyone, nor is it a public trial, instead the aim has been to evoke a specific time and place through the medium of poetry.

Curator Daniela Zyman calls it 'a counter-archive of images and sounds, moments and durations, evidence and fictions, traces and records that unfold in a fluid poetic perspective…'.[347] The idea of counter-archives denotes alternative collections or frameworks of documentation and remembrance that confront mainstream narratives often influenced by the government, media, or significant historical forces. Offering new ways to remember history, counter-archives display viewpoints of the marginalized, silenced, or sometimes eliminated in traditional

---

[346] Emilia Terracciano, 'Amar Kanwar's Latest Installation Captures Life and Its Extinction, in Rural Odisha and Elsewhere', *Caravan Magazine*, 1 February 2014, https://caravanmagazine.in/reviews-and-essays/disappearing-worlds.

[347] Amar Kanwar et al., *Amar Kanwar, The Sovereign Forest: ["The Sovereign Forest" at TBA21 - Augarten ; November 23, 2013 - March 23, 2014]* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2014) p.30.

archives. In a conversation with Kanwar, curator Hans Ulrich Obrist chooses to call it a school, a tool, a production of news, and a channel.[348]

Kanwar poetically connects intimate personal experiences to far-reaching, insistent social and political changes. Probably because of its emotional palpability, some critics have called this project an eulogy—a moving but futile statement of loss. However, it is not agreeable, as the project has not been sitting still, rather it has been expanding, constantly stirring something, it continuously reconfigures the viewer's habitual relationships with text and images. As Kanwar in an interview with Sherna Dastur, says, the installation continuously has been a work in progress; it ends only to begin again.[349] It thrived on its unique cinematic vocabulary that opens up multiple layers of experience and comprehension, looking deeply into the causes and effects. Hence, it might be a good proposition to call 'The Sovereign Forest' a resolutely uncompromising 'laboratory' of socio-political materials that exist and operate on multiple registers of seeing and understanding. The experimental laboratory examines and enables the viewers to open their senses towards seeing and experiencing depletion and loss - as Kanwar puts it 'what is missing, what is continually missing or is in the process of missing'[350]. The laboratory does not stay cocooned in a safety net, instead, it strictly remains non-ideological, non-threatening, while closely examining distress, dislocation and dispossession of isolated tribes and marginalized rurals in the modern capitalist society. It looks in the eye of the erasure of the country's founding constitutional principles and seeks to return sovereignty to the forest and, ideally, to each one of us.

One determining aspect of Kanwar's practice is - collaboration. He works collectively with a vast and diverse range of players such as: artists, designers, researchers, legal experts, scholars, volunteers, farmers, protesters, journalists,

---

[348] Ibid. p.67
[349] Ibid. p.237
[350] Amar Kanwar et al., *Amar Kanwar, The Sovereign Forest: ["The Sovereign Forest" at TBA21 - Augarten ; November 23, 2013 - March 23, 2014]* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2014) p. 70

neighbours and friends. His collaborators cut across the lines of power, privilege and capacity. Collaborating is a way of incorporating dialogue and multiple perspectives into the project, inherently - it opens the practice for learning, co-learning in a deep, personal way. The projects make space for differences and growth, while building trust in the stakeholders and participants. Needless to say, collaborations come with added responsibility of ethics and trust. It is extremely hard to embed a project into a wider context with multiple players and yet retain a firm grip on the process and intent. There are arguments, decisions - based on emotional, experiential, cognitive alignments or divergences. There could be biases or blind spots in the process of documenting - since archives are a site of power. It is important to unpack how Kanwar manages these dynamics - how to connect, overlap or remain separate? How to examine what mechanisms and structures to facilitate, promote or restrict? How to transfer the research findings in a deliberate, intentional way? How to structure the complexity of the material? How to support actions and reflections? What is his system of categorization?

Curator Clare Lilley, in a way, answers some of these aspects by sharing Kanwar's methodology - born out of a continuing lineage that includes Mahatma Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, Aung San Suu Kyi; it's an ethos that Kanwar uses in negotiating projects, even with curators. He settles into a contained silence instead of engaging in a forceful argument; and the silence seeps around him and others align to his pace, his vision. She clarifies that this is not a strategy for Kanwar, it is a manner, a very personal way.[351] Dean of the School of Arts at Columbia University, Carol Becker, said, one of Kanwar's great strengths is that he never accuses anyone.[352] Intentionally choosing non-confrontational ways, Amar Kanwar communicates through presence, allowing silence to shape the discourse around his artworks.

---

[351] Amar Kanwar et al., *Amar Kanwar, The Sovereign Forest: ["The Sovereign Forest" at TBA21 - Augarten ; November 23, 2013 - March 23, 2014]* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2014) p.287
[352] Amar Kanwar in conversation with Carol Becker.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OyOlvZx8aqM

In a conversation with curator Shanay Jhaveri, Kanwar candidly expresses that when he felt confused and did not know what to do, he met people who basically showed him how to do things; who said to him that there's a way to understand something that you cannot see or you cannot tell; there's a way to listen; there's a way to figure out how silences work.[353] Silence surely has an important role to play in the vast heterogeneity of the project and its conditions of production and reception. Chair of Advisory Board, Helsinki Commission, Finland, Paula Toppila elaborated upon the uniqueness of Kanwar, saying his creative investigations on crime, politics, human rights, and ecology are a reminder of the importance of compassion, encounters and listening as we scale towards a sustainable and resilient future.[354] Kanwar's approach is more dialectical than confrontational, as even when he suffers exhaustion, he wishes to learn from doubt and continues to offer an innovative mandate to seeing, listening and understanding.

Fig.5.16: Amar Kanwar, 'The Sovereign Forest', 2012–13, Installation view, Kochi-Muziris Biennial, Aspinwall House, Fort Kochi, Kerala, India. © Amar Kanwar and Kochi -Muziris Biennial

Fig.5.17: Amar Kanwar, The Sovereign Forest', 2013-14, Installation view, TBA21, Augarten, Vienna, Austria. © Amar Kanwar, TBA21

Kanwar adopted a multi-scalar perspective and presented multi-layered works which explore the concept of change through many divergent claims. His films, along with the constellation of objects that accompany them, orchestrate actual

[353] Appendix 5.3: Transcription: Amar Kanwar + Shanay Jhaveri | Crisis and Creativity: Artists Speak Series, September 21, 2021

[354] 'IHME Helsinki Commission 2022', IHME Helsinki, accessed 30 January 2025, https://ihmehelsinki.fi/en/ihme-helsinki-2022-commission/.

found and collected images, traces, records, fables, fiction, and personal stories in multiple vocabularies to go beyond fact and reveal a richer, more fluid, and poetic perspective on reality and the meaning of what is happening. The process of "seeing" in this scenario leads to a deeper and more comprehensive awareness of the link between life and politics, between the intimate and the unfathomable ramifications of violence.[355] Iterations to some extent are a sort of deconstruction, the different locations tend to shift the arena to insist and emphasize that things are viewed from elsewhere and otherwise. As a pre-existing nexus of contemplative spectacle and political storytelling, the project has been presented in numerous contexts, the first one being the film 'The Scene of Crime' which was shown at the Centre Pompidou, Paris in a group exhibition titled 'Paris-Delhi-Bombay', in 2011. The artwork, which was a 42-minute colour film, was acquired by the Museum collection on the occasion of this exhibition.

The project was inaugurated in 2012, on August 15 - India's Independence Day, often marked by official ceremonies of flag hoisting and a nationalist rhetoric. The project opened to the public at the Samadrusti Campus, Bhubaneshwar, Odisha inviting a deeper interrogation of the very idea of freedom. It showcased 'The Evidence Archive' which consisted of over 157 photographs and documents on permanent display. This growing archive served as a resource relating to the imposition of industry on Odisha's predominantly agricultural population.

Ever since the project has continuously travelled to all the big-ticket events such as: Documenta 13 (2012), Kochi-Muziris Biennale (2012–13) (Fig.5.16), 11th Sharjah Biennial (2013), the Yorkshire Sculpture Park (2013–14) and Edinburgh Art Festival (2014). TBA 21, Vienna, showcased the project in 2013-14 (Fig. 4.17) and produced a voluminous, over 300 pages catalogue, edited by Daniela Zyman, co-published with Sternberg Press, Berlin and Yorkshire Sculpture Park, UK. The publication was awarded as one of the most beautiful books made in Austria in

[355] 'Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary - The Scene of Crime', 2013, http://www.tba21.org/.

2015.[356] The project then travelled to NTU Centre for Contemporary Art, Singapore in 2016, where it was curated by Ute Meta Bauer, Khim Ong, and Magdalena Magiera. In 2020, the project was shown at NYUAD Art Gallery, Abu Dhabi, UAE and more recently it was hosted by the Nepal Art Council, Babar Mahal, Kathmandu (2023-24).

Amar Kanwar's project cannot be enshrined in any singular purpose, category or definition. The installation changed, grew, was reconceived for each space and context, but according to Kanwar, perhaps the most difficult was its origin, its home, the Samadhrusti space at Bhubaneswar, Odisha (eastern India). Kanwar's association with Samadrusti is a long one. He came in contact with Sudhir Pattnaik in 2002 while organizing the First People's Film Festival and after that Kanwar's films such as - 'The Many Faces of Madness', 'Baphlimali 173', 'Freedom', and 'A Night of Prophecy' travelled throughout Odisha.

In 2005, Pattnaik launched The Samadrusti as an independent fortnightly news magazine and in 2012, 'The Sovereign Forest' was opened to the public. Even though new works and positions layered and reconfigured the project, it is essential to look at the struggles of how it took shape in its original seedbed, Chandrasekharpur, slightly away from the city of Bhubaneswar (Odisha). The installation was made for a local audience, placed above the Samadrusti office in an industrial shed. Due to Sudhir Pattnaik's nature of journalistic work and long association with the people's movement in Odisha, the exhibition viewership comprised primarily of people associated with various resistance movements within the state. So the installation was in its real-time context and it was a boiling pot of viewpoints. The exhibition carried a text requesting visitors to engage and contribute their knowledge and material in any form as evidence. According to Sherna Dastur, all the evidence was on the wall like an amorphous collage or a map, which visually worked well but ideologically felt completely wrong.[357] She

[356] 'Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary -Publications', 2014, http://www.tba21.org/.
[357] Amar Kanwar et al., *Amar Kanwar, The Sovereign Forest: ["The Sovereign Forest" at TBA21 - Augarten ; November 23, 2013 - March 23, 2014]* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2014) p.237

elaborates further that however the archive of evidence was collectively beautiful, it muted and subverted individual stories and some photographs of violence, when put on display, appeared like a disrespectful spectacle.[358] The team had to then rethink the presentation, which later gave way to several small books or folios, that encouraged a personal engagement and reading.

The latest public showing of the project was at the Nepal Art Council, Kathmandu, for about four months in 2023-24. The exhibition in Kathmandu was part of the IHME Helsinki Commission 2022[359], and produced by the photo.circle[360] with support from the Foundation for a Just Society[361]. The project was densely programmed with viewings, guided tours, symposiums, workshops, and educational public engagement activities. One such public engagement activity was a five-week hybrid course called 'Learning from Doubt', in which 28 young artists and researchers had an opportunity to engage deeply with The Sovereign Forest project and draw their own analysis. In an attempt to enhance its reach and accessibility, the exhibition was translated into Nepali language in its entirety, including all the textual material in the exhibition and the subtitles for all the films. According to the photo.circle records, 'The Sovereign Forest' received over 12,000 visitors in the four month period (2023-24) when it was showcased in Kathmandu, Nepal.

The TBA21 catalogue, indicated that the project has no corpus funds or any financial resource to continue beyond 2014.[362] Kanwar recently confirmed that the

---

[358] Amar Kanwar et al., *Amar Kanwar, The Sovereign Forest: ["The Sovereign Forest" at TBA21 - Augarten ; November 23, 2013 - March 23, 2014]* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2014) p.237

[359] 'IHME Helsinki Commission 2022', IHME Helsinki, accessed 30 January 2025, https://ihmehelsinki.fi/en/ihme-helsinki-2022-commission/.

[360] Established in 2007, photo.circle is a transdisciplinary platform in Kathmandu that supports a local community of visual storytellers, artists, researchers, educators and organizers. photo.circle runs Nepal Picture Library, a digital photo archive that strives to create a broad and inclusive visual archive of Nepali social and cultural history.

[361] 'Foundation for a Just Society | Braver Strategies. Bolder Leadership.', accessed 30 January 2025, https://fjs.org.

[362] Amar Kanwar et al., *Amar Kanwar, The Sovereign Forest: ["The Sovereign Forest" at TBA21 - Augarten ; November 23, 2013 - March 23, 2014]* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2014)

archive in Bhubaneswar, Odisha is completely shut now.[363] However, looking at its last and most recent iteration in Nepal, it would be correct to say that the dynamic laboratory created by Kanwar is still reconfiguring, mediating and is very much active and alive.

4.4 Concluding Discussion

The chapter describes and analyzes the large and layered ensemble of artworks created by Amar Kanwar, as a case study of how a contemporary Indian artist addresses the agrarian crisis. The key determinants highlighted in this chapter are dispossession and displacement caused by neoliberal developmental models, resource extraction, ecological degradation and erosion of communal sovereignty. The study unpacks how corporate scavenging has triggered cycles of social and environmental violence. Let us assess how the chapter answers the three research questions of this thesis.

Kanwar employs diverse mediums such as documentary film, installation, archives, handmade books, performance, and poetic intervention to unpack and represent some of the determinants of the agrarian crisis. Both his artworks 'Many Faces of Madness' and 'The Sovereign Forest' consist of assemblages of images, sound, text and testimony to highlight the violence of ecological destruction, displacement and loss. The study draws connections with another filmmaker Anand Patwardhan, who uses documentary film as a medium to confront social violence and crisis.

There are several factors that set Kanwar apart as an artist-broker. He acts as a mediator of knowledge and experience between the marginalized communities, subject experts, scholars and the wider publics. He is a facilitator of dialogue, collaboration and collective memory who co-creates meaning in order to sustain resistance. He is a translator of complex social, cultural and political realities embedded within the crisis, and uses poetic, sensory aesthetics to reveal and provoke reflection. Sensitively navigating the challenges of representation and

[363] Excerpts from an Email Conversation with Amar Kanwar (September-October 2024)

avoiding mindless exploitation and appropriation of his subjects, makes Kanwar a compassionate and ethical agent. His practice is layered with active listening, silent observing and partnering with the subaltern subjects, specifically in Odisha. Thus, Kanwar acts beyond a mere creator. His long and sustained democratic engagement with subaltern empowerment makes him an activist-scholar.

The study highlights collaboration, testimony, poetry and archives as Kanwar's methodology to engage with frameworks of domination and subalternity. His artistic strategies reconfigure the peripheric voices and visibility of the displaced farmers, activists and indigenous communities. The theoretical framework of the subaltern school by Gyanendra Pandey, along with the discourses of Saba Mahmood, Vandana Shiva, David Harvey, Audre Lorde, Aruna Roy, Ramachandra Guha and Trinh T. Minh-ha, contextualizes how Kanwar's practice interrogates dominant developmental narratives. Kanwar's use of poetry as an evidence destabilizes traditional understanding of crime and proof, in favour of vulnerable, subjective ways of knowing violence. The artworks engage with Subaltern theory by prioritizing voices, experiences, and generational knowledge of the historically oppressed communities of displaced farmers, and the indigenous and tribal people. Using testimonies, oral histories and poetic expression as forms of counter-memory and witness, Kanwar's art practice challenges hegemonic power structures of the state and the corporates. With the production of a counter-archive, Kanwar strategizes ways of resisting epistemic violence and enabling ways of knowing that embody the subaltern agency.

The case study pays attention to the local, national and global visibility of the two artworks. The documentary film 'Many Faces of Madness' was created within a timeline for a purpose and a specific audience. It was displayed in the local-national context and is accessible online. However, 'The Sovereign Forest' project had a multi-scalar ambit, which travelled and evolved with each showing - Bhubaneshwar, Kochi, Vienna, Yorkshire, Kathmandu, etc. Over the years, the project has grown almost organically, questioning its own ethics of representation,

and reshaping engagement according to the audience, and the socio-cultural contexts. Challenging the static understanding of archives, the mobilization of the project catalyzed inquiry, memory, debate, and resistance in diverse local and global contexts.

Chapter 5

Thukral & Tagra's Inquiry: Wrestling Farmer and Weeping Farmland

5.1 Introduction

The crisis in the agrarian sector in India gets highlighted and indexed by the alarming number of farmer suicides. This chapter delves into the contemporary art practice of artist duo Thukral and Tagra (*Jiten Thukral b.1976, Jalandhar Punjab and Sumir Tagra b. 1979, Delhi)* which highlights three fundamental aspects that constitute the crisis: the everyday struggles of being a farmer, voicing of these struggles through farmer protests and the deep precarity of farm suicides.

Fig.5.1: Thukral and Tagra,'Weeping Farm', 2022, Artist Book (Cover page), Delhi. Image Credits: Thukral and Tagra
Fig.5.2: Thukral and Tagra,'Weeping Farm', 2022, Artist Book (Illustration, inside page), p.27,Delhi. Image Credits: Thukral and Tagra
Fig.5.3: Thukral and Tagra,'Weeping Farm', 2022, Artist Book (inside page), p.11, Delhi. Image Credits: Thukral and Tagra

"Weeping Farm" is a published compendium of artistic research and visual methodologies undertaken by Thukral and Tagra. It carries deft documentation of a decade of site visits, interviews and details of nine iterations/exhibitions that focussed on the several determinants of the agrarian crisis. The book elucidates a variety of interventions and engagements undertaken by the artists to elaborate upon the struggles against gender inequality, stagnating productivity, shrinking employment, food insecurity, privatization, mounting indebtedness, and climate

change. The rich prussian blue spilled ink dominates the design of the book (Fig.5.1) making imminent connections with some of the artworks resonating with the pesticide spray and the Swaminathan Commission Report, details of which would unfold in the description of the artworks in this chapter. Strategically divided into five phases of: research, lexicon, explorations, process and exhibitions, the book carries illustrations (Fig.5.2), diagrams, and photographs (Fig.5.3) that serve as detailed documentation of the primary artistic research and the chronological creative process. The publication offers a fine convergence of three distinct aspects of the artist duo's practice: a long-standing interest in the socio-economic structures of society; an increasing focus on the development of research and a specialized vocabulary pertaining to the existing systems; and thirdly, a desire to convey the urgency of the subject matter through the metaphorical vocabulary of sports, gaming and play as pedagogical tools.[364]

After graduating in Fine Arts from Chandigarh Art College Thukral pursued post graduation at the College of Art, New Delhi. Tagra on the other hand pursued a course in Communication Design at the graduate school, National Institute of Design, Ahmedabad in 2006 after graduating from the College of Art, New Delhi. Both Thukral and Tagra belong to the generation of artists who came of age during the 1990s, the early years of globalization when information and products from overseas had a massive influx in India. The two artists met and began collaborating while studying at the Art College in Delhi. In 2003 they established a company, Bosedk design, that dealt with advertising, interior and product design projects.[365] From 2005, the duo began to create paintings, sculptures and installations with a fresh sensibility and a seamless integration of local and global cultures. Their work was marked by compositions blending Indian traditions with Japanese subcultures. Since 2009 the duo diversified their artistic practice across a variety of media such as film, photography, games and publishing. Thukral and Tagra's research-based

[364] And Archive – Thukral and Tagra. 'And Archive – Thukral and Tagra'. Accessed 3 December 2024. https://andarchive.in.
[365] Essl Karlheinz, *Chalo India A New Era of Indian Art* (Essl Museum, Munich [u.a.] : Prestel, 2010, p.228

practices analyze inconsistent government policies and funding toward sustainable living in the rural sector. Working from their studio in Gurgaon (near Delhi), they create new formats of public engagement and attempt to question and expand the threshold of what art can do. Their research and active engagement with the agrarian crisis started in 2010. In order to understand and critically analyse their dense creative response to the persisting agrarian distress, one can divide their work into three thematic categories: Wrestling, Farm Suicides and Farmer Protests.

5.2 Wrestling: Combat, Control, Creativity

Wrestling is a form of sport known as 'Pehlwani' or 'kushti' in Hindi. It is more popular in the rural parts of the Indian subcontinent. In traditional 'kushti', two wrestlers with similar weight and strength, known as 'pehelwans', would engage in a physical combat to overpower one another to the ground or force each other to submit. The wrestlers traditionally wore only a loincloth, known as a 'langot', and would oil massage their bodies in order to make it difficult for their opponent to get a firm grip. The contests happened on a clay or mud soil surface representing mother earth, in an open-air arena or gymnasium known as 'Akhaara', which is considered a sacred space and gets supervised by a referee. Before beginning the combat, wrestlers coat their bodies with clay, becoming one with the strong and resilient earth. The aim of the sport has been to show both strength and resilience by establishing strength-based superiority over the opponent, using a variety of grappling techniques, holds and technical manoeuvres. These techniques include throwing the opponent to the ground, pinning the opponent down, and forcing the opponent to submit by applying pressure to the joints and sometimes even choking the opponent. The combat is considered conclusive when either one wrestler is declared the winner by the referee, or when one wrestler concedes defeat.

Practiced for some 3000 years, wrestling has been much more than a sport, it is seen as a lifestyle that demands moral grounding, commitment and rigorous

discipline, very similar to the martial arts.[366] According to P. Sainath, 'kushti' remains a deeply embedded sport in the rural economy as it operates at the praxis of sports, politics, culture and economy, not to forget most wrestlers emerge from the villages, many from poor farming backgrounds.[367] Today, the practice of 'kushti' and 'akhaaras' is seeing a significant decline in India as the youth is clearly more drawn towards popular global sports like cricket and football. In 2003, the Wrestling Federation of India banned mud wrestling in the country and advised wrestling clubs to train on mats instead of mud in order to improve their chances of winning at the Olympics.[368] The State decided to provide mats and other necessary equipment to all the wrestling arenas but this was not taken well by the wrestlers.[369]

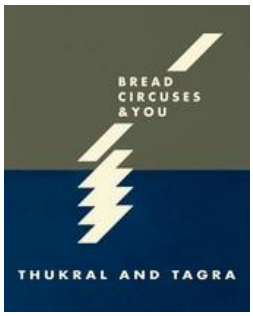
Thukral and Tagra firmly believe that wrestling has absolute direct connections with farming, even though this fact has remained largely invisible. They have been interested in the act of 'kushti' as a peculiar social construct, and the coded vocabulary of the sport and its playing field, i.e. the 'Akhaara'. They decided to revisit and this time look deeper into their families and relatives in Punjab. Both Thukral and Tagra's families are originally from Lahore who migrated to Punjab, post-partition. Tagra's father landed in Khanna, Ludhiana in Punjab and did his graduation there, got married and then moved to make a life in Delhi. Thukral's father left Lahore, settled in Jalandhar, Punjab and started to actively participate in the activities of the 'Akhaara' (wrestling ring) which was later given to him to manage. 'Akhaara' therefore is a very important central pivot point in their practice.[370] Since 2006, when the duo first began supporting the 'Akhaara'

---

[366] Barbara Davidson, 'A Look at India's Ancient Form of Wrestling, Kushti, in Practice for 3,000 Years', *Los Angeles Times*, 17 May 2016, sec. World & Nation, https://www.latimes.com/world/la-fg-india-wrestling-photo-gallery-20160517-snap-htmlstory.html.
[367] 'Wrestling with the Rural Economy', People's Archive of Rural India, 19 December 2014, https://ruralindiaonline.org/en/articles/wrestling-with-the-rural-economy/.
[368] PTI, 'Wrestling Federation of India Bans Mud-Wrestling', *The Times of India*, 12 January 2003, https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/wrestling-federation-of-india-bans-mud-wrestling/articleshow/34178510.cms.
[369] Our Bureau, 'Mud-Wrestling on the Mat - Federation Ban Tries to Take the Fight out of Akharas', *The Telegraph*, 12 January 2003, https://www.telegraphindia.com/india/mud-wrestling-on-the-mat-federation-ban-tries-to-take-the-fight-out-of-akharas/cid/843995.
[370] Appendix 1. Interview with Thukral and Tagra, July 2023

community in Jalandhar, the hometown of Jiten Thukral in their first project titled 'Match Fixed', 2010, the duo began to understand the intricate details of the lives, trials and tribulations of the agrarian community. They started doing research around it and started to sponsor the annual wrestling matches which became an interesting site for them - just like an exhibition space - the aim being to understand the larger issues. Over the years, their involvement evolved to supporting the establishment of a community kitchen as a space for care and empathy, run by and for the families of farmers that have been affected by suicides.[371] The artistic entanglement operated with a set of internal relations but the idea always was to spiral out and extend beyond the immediate visible spatiality.

When British curator Helen Pheby, enquired as to how 'kushti' serves a wider significance in their artistic practice than it being just a sport, Thukral and Tagra replied by saying, 'The work means the world to us. It may be just a subject, for us it's art, for the players it's a sport, for wrestlers, it is the bout. The training ground is hard, it requires muscle, mental capacity and strategy. Our artistic agency allows us to learn more and comment in a way that allows us to organize our thoughts and analyse our changing times'.[372] For the artists, wrestling is an important metaphor to deliver the underlying terminology of combat, grappling, takedowns, strength, discipline, strategy, resilience, endurance, and routine.



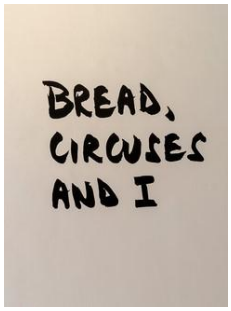


Fig.5.4: Thukral and Tagra,'Bread Circuses and Wifi', 2017, Exhibition Logo, Pearl Lam Gallery, Hong Kong. Image Credits: Thukral and Tagra
Fig.5.5: Thukral and Tagra,'Bread Circuses and You', 2017, Exhibition Logo, Art Fair Dubai. Image Credits: Thukral and Tagra

[371] Jiten Thukral and Sumir Tagra, *Weeping Farm*, 2022, p.112.
[372] Ibid. p.23.

Fig.5.6: Thukral and Tagra,'Farmer is a Wrestler', 2019, Exhibition Logo, Multimedia (first Iteration), Lalit Kala Akademi, Chandigarh, Punjab. Image Credits: Thukral and Tagra
Fig.5.7: Thukral and Tagra,'Bread Circuses and I', 2019, Exhibition Logo, Multimedia, Nature Morte Gallery, Delhi. Image Credits: Thukral and Tagra

'Farmer is a Wrestler' and 'Bread Circuses' are two dense and layered research-based projects of Thukral and Tagra, that have been absolute direct responses to the agrarian crisis. With a background in graphic design and also working as curators, the duo created impactful exhibition logos (Fig.5.4-5.7) for each iteration that had the fluidity of the repetition and built a latent resonance of the theme. Emphasizing clarity, minimalism, and effective communication are the key characteristics of their typographical design and in many ways it encourages readability and the visual harmony of the display. These logos become carriers of meaning, values, and mission, besides serving as artist signatures on the gallery walls and in the published material. For a visitor these become an engaging starting point of contextualizing and drawing links with the show. They also can be seen as recycled mediators of the same theme, repurposed for different contexts of display. There exists a complex overlap and entanglement in the two project 'titles' as they were used to varying degrees in different exhibition constructs. According to the artists, the seriousness and the complexity of the rural agrarian premise demanded a vertical investigation and an extremely cautious layered substantiation. The following pages uncover how the keywords Farmer, Wrestler, Weeping, Bread, Circuses - resonate in different exhibition contexts and how their repeated occurrence serves as a stimulus to undo or shift the layered receptacle.

The timeline of iterations of these projects is as follows:

1. 'Bread, Circuses & Wifi', Pearl Lam Gallery, Hong Kong, 2017
2. 'Bread, Circuses & You', Art Fair, Dubai, 2017
3. 'Farmer is a Wrestler', Lalit Kala Akademi, Chandigarh, Punjab, 20 February to 6 March, 2019
4. 'Bread, Circuses & TBD', Yorkshire Sculpture Park, United Kingdom, 30 March - 1 September, 2019
5. 'Bread, Circuses and I', Nature Morte, Delhi, October 2019
6. 'Farmer is a Wrestler, Lexicon of Distress', Art at a Time Like This, 2021
7. 'Bread Winner', 5th Biennial Contemporary Art, Mardin, Turkey, 2022

8. ‘The Game Play – Weeping Farm + NetZero 2030’, Multiple Locations, (KHOJ, Air Expo, DLF Select City Walk, Saket, & Pulp Society), New Delhi, 2022

5.3 Bread and Circuses: Roman Satire as Reference

‘Bread Circuses’ has been a recurring theme for the artists since 2017. Adopting the tools of satire and self-mockery, Thukral & Tagra question the notion of survival within the capitalist-consumerist economy that is powered by singularity. According to the artists, the exhibition title ‘Bread, Circuses and I’ attempted a ‘self-absorption’ of one's status in the midst of a severe social crisis and by making the viewer confront these distress equations, the aim was to engage in social communication and highlight the gaps between urban and rural ways of living.[373] In the book ‘Weeping Farm’, the artists elaborate upon the title saying, ‘Bread Circuses’ draws from the metaphor of the Roman arena as a stage not only for competition and for the display of sportsmanship, but equally as a mode of survival strategy and the earning of daily bread. It is a body of work that reflects on the lives of Indian people affected by daily politics, society and cultural norms’.[374] The exhibition title has its roots in the phrase ‘Bread and Circuses’ which according to Gregory S. Aldrete, is

> *One of the few concepts about ancient Rome that has penetrated the mass cultural consciousness is the notion that its rulers kept the populace complacent and politically inert by distracting them with violent entertainments and free food, an idea often expressed by the phrase “bread and circuses,” which appears in a poem by the Roman author Juvenal.[375] (Gregory S. Aldrete)*

This phrase ‘bread and circuses’ has an original Latin version ‘panem et circenses’ that surfaced in ancient Roman poet Juvenal’s (his full Latin name was Decimus Iunius Iuvenalis) poem *Satire X*, written in the early 2nd century AD/CE, according

[373] ‘Bread, Circuses, and I’, *Platform Magazine*, 2019, https://www.platform-mag.com/art/bread-circuses-and-i.html.
[374] Jiten Thukral and Sumir Tagra, *Weeping Farm*, 2022, p.112
[375] Gregory S. Aldrete, ‘“Bread and Circuses”: Ancient Rome, Modern Science Fiction, and the Art of Political Distraction’, *Film & History* 51, no. 2 (2021): 4–20, https://doi.org/10.1353/flm.2021.0004.

to which, during the Roman Empire the devoted and politically active Romans traded their political power in exchange for staple food and wild entertainment. The 'bread' mentioned by Juvenal was the complimentary monthly grain distribution that residents of the capital city could claim, and the 'circuses' were brutal public entertainments, including gladiatorial contests in the amphitheater and chariot competitions held in the vast racecourse known as the Circus Maximus.[376] The rulers of Rome deliberately kept the people in a complacent and inert state, providing them with a constant flow of free food and lavish displays of violence. Juvenal created numerous satires as well as coined popular phrases, including 'who will monitor the monitors', 'no one turns evil all at once' and 'a sound mind in a sound body'. Juvenal's satires, nonetheless, garnered him more adversaries than supporters, as they illustrated the social and political decay of ancient Rome. 'Bread and circuses' aptly illustrates how ancient Rome appeased its populace with complimentary sustenance and amusements in a city that was severely overcrowded, frequently famished, and frustrated with the politicians.

To ensure that the citizens remained content and uncritical of the regime, emperors offered free bread and daily spectacles such as parades, festivals, gladiator contests, animal fights, chariot races. However, this was not an act of kindness; it was merely practical for sustaining their political and military authority. Additionally, the entertainment mirrored life broadly under the empire, encompassing both the savagery of violence and the rampant evasion of hunger.[377] The phrase was later used by American author and theorist Patrick Brantlinger for his 1983 book[378] to summarize mass culture and social decay. Brantlinger's work remains relevant today, as the distractions of popular culture seem prescient in the age of streaming services and digital media, where continuous entertainment is easily accessible. The continuous onslaught of trivial material continues to desensitize the general

[376] Gregory S. Aldrete, '"Bread and Circuses": Ancient Rome, Modern Science Fiction, and the Art of Political Distraction', *Film & History* 51, no. 2 (2021): 4–20, https://doi.org/10.1353/flm.2021.0004.
[377] Dr Linda Ellis, 'A Brief Look at the Juvenal's "Bread & Circuses"', *Medium* (blog), 23 August 2019, https://medium.com/@lindaellisphd/a-brief-look-at-the-juvenals-bread-circuses-a5ffe5770dba.
[378] Patrick Brantlinger, *Bread & Circuses: Theories of Mass Culture as Social Decay* (Cornell University Press, 1983).

public, much like the ancient Roman "bread and circuses" metaphor, in which the empire kept the people placated with food and entertainment. One such example is 'Agristack' - India's centralized agriculture database, which according to the world economic forum is aiming for a technological revolution in the agriculture sector by facilitating digital services and support to the farmers.[379] According to Sainath, corporate giants like Amazon and Bayer have full and free access to this database and soon they will have their hands on the plant-plasma through the 'gene-bank'.[380] According to the research work of Colin Todhunter, the high-tech and big data giants, like Facebook, Google, Microsoft, and Amazon along with traditional agribusiness behemoths like Corteva, Bayer, Cargill, and Syngenta are attempting to force their vision of food and agriculture onto the rest of the globe.[381] And consumers remain largely unaware of these dispossessive strategies of powerful associations which operate in the name of growth and development.

It is interesting how Thukral and Tagra have employed Juvenal's satire to address the contemporary agrarian dystopia, where again, the control lies in a handful of giant corporations that operate in a close nexus with the government and provide generous basic necessities at the extortionate cost of suppressing individuality and knowledge. Thukral and Tagra delve deep into their own personal histories and memories to address the socio-cultural changes most visible in Punjab, their home state. Shifting family values, a common desire for 'escape' via migration, and changing middle-class expectations, have been the recurring subjects in their artistic research.

The first public showing of the 'Bread Circuses' theme by Thukral and Tagra was the 2017 exhibition 'Bread Circuses and Wifi' at Pearl Lam Gallery, Hong Kong.

---

[379] 'India's Farmers Are on the Cusp of an Agritech Revolution', World Economic Forum, 14 November 2023, https://www.weforum.org/stories/2023/11/indias-farmers-are-on-the-cusp-of-a-technological-revolution-agristack/.

[380] P.Sainath, Book Release Talk, 'Farmers Protest! A Movement of our Times' by Namita Waikar, IIC, New Delhi, 22 April 2025.

[381] Colin Todhunter, *Food, Dependency and Dispossession: Resisting the New World Order* (Centre for Research on Globalization (CRG), Montreal, Canada, 2022).

Elaborating upon the idea, the artists explained that the environment in which one resides tends to divert our attention by engaging us in routines, and one becomes deeply absorbed in these distractions. The greater the absorption, the less one attends to the actions of the state. Similarly in the realm of art, the arrangement of grand exhibitions and events are attempts to provide continuous entertainment to fulfill curiosity and consumeristic urges. The WiFi denoted an enclosed and pervasive network of individuals and relationships interconnected in a dematerialized fashion; an ordered relationship between content and object, while concurrently linking the concepts of survival and the circus.[382] Through the use of satire, Thukral and Tagra challenged the concept of survival and highlighted our ignorance within an authoritarian, knowledge-driven economy. By presenting a compilation of paintings, performances, objects, and games as part of an installation, this exhibition replicated the rationale of cultural production and involved the audience in a performance aimed at proposing fresh alternatives through a strategic diversion from the immediate.

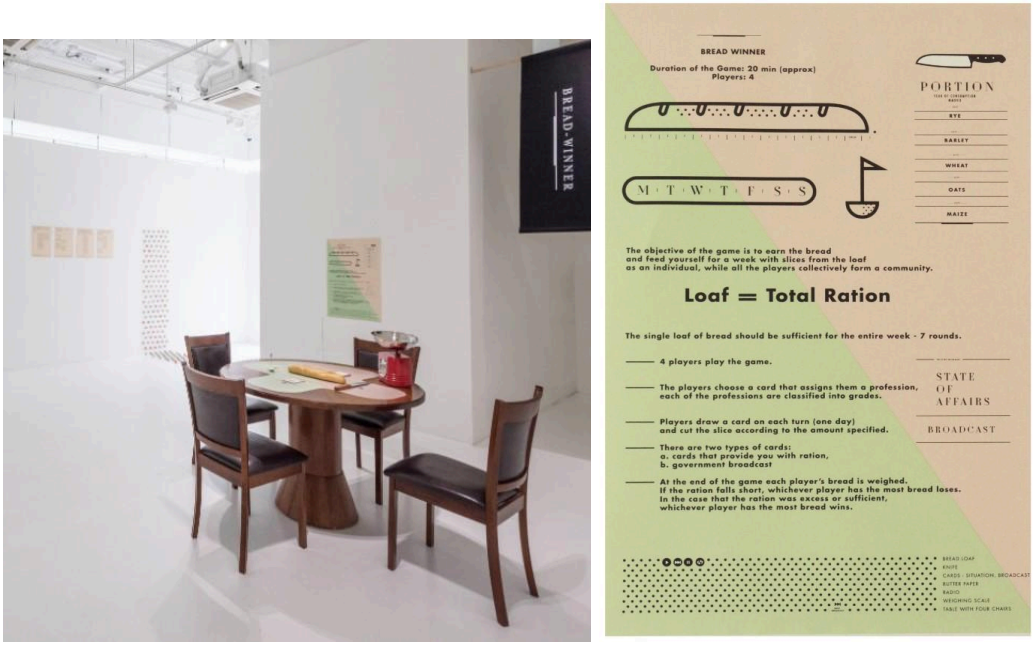


Fig.5.8: Thukral and Tagra,'Bread Winner', 2017, Installation shot, Board Game, 'Bread, Circuses & Wifi', Pearl Lam Gallery, Hong Kong. Image Credits: Thukral and Tagra

[382] 'Bread, Circuses & WiFi | Pearl Lam Galleries', 2017, https://www.pearllam.com/exhibition/bread-circuses-wifi/.

Fig.5.9: Thukral and Tagra,'Bread Winner', 2017, Rules of the Board Game, 'Bread, Circuses & Wifi', Pearl Lam Gallery, Hong Kong. Image Credits: Thukral and Tagra

Fig.5.10: Thukral and Tagra,'Bread Winner', 2017, Board Game (details), 'Bread, Circuses & Wifi', Pearl Lam Gallery, Hong Kong. Image Credits: Thukral and Tagra

The exhibition included an interactive board game installation titled 'Bread Winner' with logical rules, and which the audience could play (Fig.5.8). The phrase 'breadwinner' is a colloquial term commonly understood as the one whose wages bring food, support and run the family and traditionally, men are seen as primary breadwinners of a household. However, the game subverted and dismantled the traditional biases, as it adopted the phrase in its literal sense and meaning. The 20-minute game, requiring four players, encouraged them to question the forms and means of everyday sustenance and how these things connect with every other living thing in the universe. The practical objective of the game was to treat the loaf of bread (Fig.5.10) as a weekly ration, the player would earn the bread and feed oneself with it for a week and understand what exactly is sufficiency or the lack of it. Each player chose a card that assigned a profession and each profession was categorised into grades. On each player's turn they drew a card and cut a slice of bread according to the amount specified on the card, while there were two types of cards: cards that provided ration and Government broadcast cards. As per the instructions (Fig.5.9), after playing seven rounds, each player's bread loaf was weighed - if the ration fell short, the player with the maximum bread lost and if the ration was sufficient, the player won.

This game was exhibited again (Fig.5.13) at the 5th edition of Contemporary Art Biennial, Mardin, southeast Turkey from 20 May – 20 June, 2022. With a focus on the Levant, the cradle of civilisation and its allied geographies along the ancient silk route, the Biennial titled 'The Promise of Grass/The Gift of Dispossession' was curated by Delhi-based curator and theorist, Adwait Singh.[383] It saw a gathering of over 30 artists from Turkey and beyond, representing around 25 countries. The Biennial theme investigated the potential for a mystical cosmopolitics or a social-ecology rooted in the concept of renunciation, in relation to the shared vulnerabilities of disenfranchised humans as well as a physical rise in sea levels.[384]

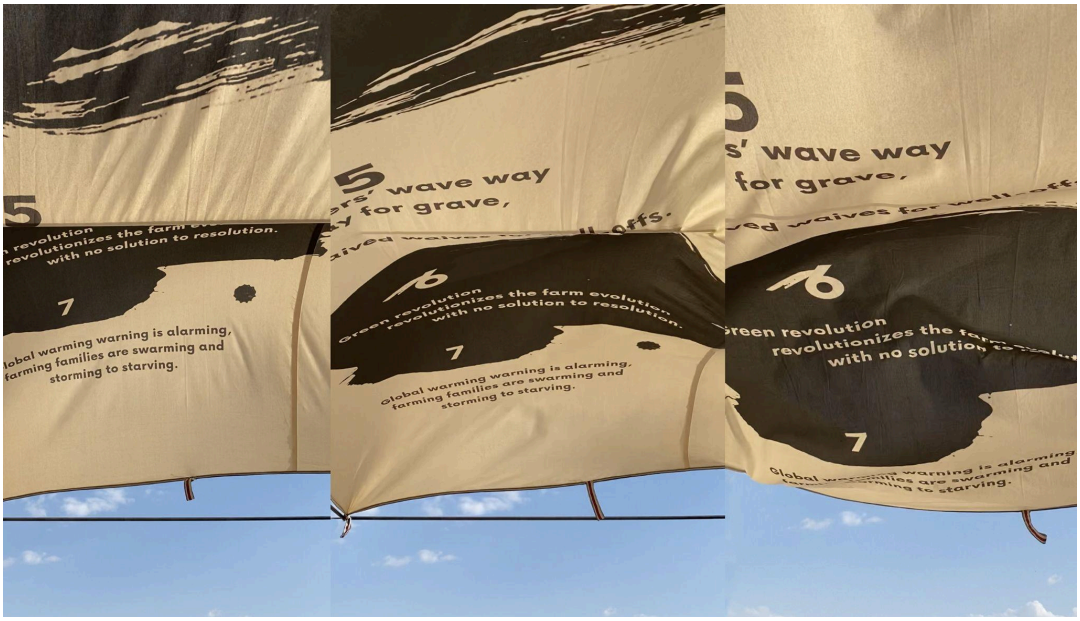


Fig.5.11: Thukral and Tagra,'Bread Winner', 2022, Banners, 5th Biennial of Contemporary Art Mardin, Turkey. Image Credits: Thukral and Tagra

Through a mix of visual art, text, and symbolism, Thukral and Tagra used banners (Fig.5.11) as a medium to convey and communicate the agrarian narrative in the Contemporary Art Biennial, Mardin. Historically, banners were used for proclamation, as symbols of allegiance, and for decoration purposes at events and

[383] 'The Fifth Edition of Mardin Biennial: The Promise of Grass / The Gift of Dispossession', International Biennial Association, 2022, https://www.biennialassociation.org/article/the-fifth-edition-of-mardin-biennial-the-promise-of-grass-the-gift-of-dispossession/.
[384] '5th Mardin Biennial', 2022, https://www.saha.org.tr/en/projects/5th-mardin-biennial.

gatherings. Nowadays, banners have significantly evolved beyond their utilitarian origins to popular commercial usage and powerful forms of ideology-driven expression. Extremely popular in public spaces, banners are designed as a way to engage with the world in a minimalist, agential way. The artists explored the impeccable ability of banners as a form of street art, to communicate both visually and politically, thereby creating a crossroad between culture, identity, and artistic expression. Inked with spilled prussian blue, the banners carried numbered tongue twisters such as “Loan waivers’ wave way to pay for grave” (Fig.5.12). This phrase is indicative of how numerous small farmers tend to lean towards borrowing money and taking loans in order to purchase seeds and pesticides. And then the debt-cycles become a persistent concern, making them more impoverished, and radically altering the social dynamics in rural areas.

Fig.5.12: Thukral and Tagra,‘Bread Winner’, 2022, Banners, 5th Biennial of Contemporary Art Mardin, Turkey. Image Credits: Thukral and Tagra

Fig.5.13: Thukral and Tagra,'Bread Winner', 2022, Board Game installation, 5th Biennial of Contemporary Art Mardin, Turkey. Image Credits: Thukral and Tagra

The Costs of Demonetisation: Dampening Spirits, Farmers Struggling

JANUARY 2017

Fig.5.14: Thukral and Tagra,'Out of Play', 2017, 'Bread, Circuses & Wifi', Pearl Lam Gallery, Hong Kong. Image Credits: Thukral and Tagra
Fig.5.15: Thukral and Tagra,'Out of Play' (detail), 2017, 'Bread, Circuses & Wifi', Pearl Lam Gallery, Hong Kong. Image Credits: Thukral and Tagra

The 2017 exhibition 'Bread Circuses and WiFi' carried an installation titled 'Out of Play' (Fig.5.14) which was a series of ball sculptures made with cement, resin, and grain, arranged in a linearity that ran across the wall, floor and the adjacent glass window. This artwork was a playful subversion of materiality and took reference from the then recent protest against demonetization in India. Demonetization is the process of stripping a specific currency unit of its legal tender status, and involves discontinuance of old currency. It is a measure adopted by the government to deal with inflation, corruption, counterfeiting or a shift towards digital currency.[385] The catalogue of the exhibition mentions that this artwork refers to the impact of demonetization of the 'subaltern class and its survival' while there are no further details on who exactly is being referred to as 'subaltern'. There is no confusion that demonetization affected the livelihoods of the subaltern by disrupting their primarily cash-based existence, making them economically vulnerable due to limited access to the formal banking systems. The informal sector work-force and marginalized communities lack necessary documentation and digital literacy, and therefore face systemic exclusion from financial services during the currency transition.[386] When the government announced the discontinuance of the 500 Rupees note, it was like an economic shock that highlighted and intensified pre-existing structural inequalities.[387] It further reinforced the socio-economic marginalization of the subaltern within India's neoliberal system.

The four pieces of paper stuck on the wall near the installation, carried content dated November 2016 to January 2017 from various national newspapers such as the Hindu, The Hindustan Times, The Indian Express, Times of India etc and one of the headings (Fig.5.15) read 'The Costs of Demonetization: Dampening Spirits, Farmers Struggling' - which might be a reference to the 'subaltern class' as mentioned by the artists. The argument of the subaltern remains surface level and still ties very loosely to the construct of the exhibition.

---

[385] Kenneth S. Rogoff, *The Curse of Cash* (Princeton University Press, 2016).
[386] Ananya Roy, *Poverty Capital: Microfinance and the Making of Development* (Routledge, 2010).
[387] Banik, Nilanjan, and Parthapratim Das. "Demonetization, Digital India and the Subaltern: Economic Inclusion or Exclusion?" *Economic and Political Weekly* 54, no. 6 (2019): 45–52.

Fig.5.16: Thukral and Tagra,'Bakers Dozen' (detail), 2017, Painting, Oil on canvas, 25.4x25.4 cm x 13 pcs, 'Bread, Circuses & Wifi', Pearl Lam Gallery, Hong Kong. Image Credits: Thukral and Tagra

The same exhibition showcased a series of thirteen paintings titled 'Baker's Dozen' (Fig.5.16) simulating slices of bread, each representing a phenomenon or an object such as luxury, masonry, technology, fishing, power infrastructure, transportation, wood lumber, grain and crops etc. Painted with richness of colour, texture and details, the oil on canvas works bore semblance to graphic grainy loafs of bread. In medieval England, a legislation connected the price of bread to the cost of the wheat utilized in its production, as a measure to assure that the bakers did not cheat their patrons by charging excessive prices for inadequately sized loaves. Even with meticulous preparation, it remained challenging to guarantee that all of one's baked goods emerge in uniform sizes; variations would occur due to rising, baking, and air content, and numerous bakers would lack the tools and scales to measure their dough accurately. In order to avoid the risk of unintentionally falling short, and as a cautionary measure, the bakers would incorporate a small additional quantity to ensure they would not face an unexpected flogging afterward. Therefore a baker's

dozen consisted of 13 or sometimes even 14 loaves, in order to be extra cautious.[388] The series of 13 paintings were sequentially arranged on a white cube wall keeping the 13th one hung separately to draw visual and conceptual emphasis.

Fig.5.17: Thukral and Tagra, 'Bread, Circuses & You', 2017, Installation shot,, Art Fair, Dubai. Image Credits: Thukral and Tagra
Fig.5.18: Thukral and Tagra,'Slash', 2017, Oil on Canvas, Set of 5, 30x6x2 inches, 'Bread, Circuses & You', Art Fair, Dubai. Image Credits: Thukral and Tagra

Fig.5.19: Thukral and Tagra,'Panem Coleus', 2017, Oil on Canvas, 60x84 inches, 'Bread, Circuses & You', Art Fair, Dubai. Image Credits: Thukral and Tagra

The second showing of the 'Bread Circuses' theme was an exhibition titled 'Bread, Circuses & You' shown at the Art Fair, Dubai (Fig.5.17) from 15–18 March 2017. The exhibition text stated that the narrative of civilization can be conveyed through the tale of grain and that Bread as a metaphor for nourishment could communicate

[388] Alison Eldridge, 'Why Is a Baker's Dozen 13? | Encyclopaedia Britannica', in Britannica, 29 March 2017, https://www.britannica.com/story/why-is-a-bakers-dozen-13.

the annals of policies and politics in a universally understandable language.[389] The text suggests that the history of civilization can be traced through the cultural significance of grain and bread being a universal staple, should not be understood as a mere symbol of sustenance, rather it reflects broader dynamics of power and socio-political governance.

Represented by the private gallery in Mumbai called Chatterjee and Lal, Thukral and Tagra presented the 'Bread Circuses' theme with a series of paintings, an inkjet print on butter paper roll with the phrases including 'We constantly repeat ourselves' stamped on them and a series of brick blocks of currency. Responding directly to the then recent demonetization of currency, were 13 blocks in the shape of a brick, each of 6.5x3x1.5 inches, made from shredded Rupees 500 notes in coloured cement titled 'Reverentia'.[390] The oil on canvas paintings showcased were titled 'Orbis - N-S-E-W' series of four, 'Panem Coleus' (Fig.5.19), and 'Slash'(Fig.5.18), a series of five works. Blue being the dominant hue, the paintings had a sharp, photo-finish quality. 'Orbis' literally means the ring or a circle or sphere but also refers to the ancient Roman map called 'Orbis Terrarum', meaning 'the whole world'. 'Panem' is a Latin word meaning Bread and 'Coleus' in Greek refers to 'sheath' or protection; it also is an indoor flowering plant, believed to be a signifier of determination. 'Slash' is a commonly used oblique stroke punctuation that is a signifier of alternatives, options, choices and is an effective symbolic separator of alternatives for example: good/evil; it is also used in mathematical fractions; and can also refer to reduction, decrease or lowering of prices. In the context of the exhibition, it appears to have connections with the demonetization and the subsequent loss of value. On being asked about the reasons to take Indian art, specifically the works of Thukral and Tagra, to Dubai, Mumbai gallerist-dealer Mortimer Chatterjee said, 'we feel comfortable at Art Dubai being

[389] 'Bread, Circuses & You – Art Dubai 2017 | Chatterjee & Lal', 2017, https://chatterjeeandlal.com/shows/bread-circuses-you/.
[390] Stephanie Bailey, 'All in One Place: Art Dubai 2017', *Ocula Magazine*, 24 March 2017, https://ocula.com/magazine/features/all-in-one-place-a-report-from-art-dubai-2017/.

able to take risks'.[391] It is an assumption rooted in the possible political implications of exhibiting these works in a local or national context.

The third iteration of the 'Bread Circuses' theme was titled 'Bread, Circuses & TBD' (TBD being the acronym for 'To Be Discussed') exhibited at Yorkshire Sculpture Park (YSP), United Kingdom, from 30 March - 1 September, 2019 and within the show, the title 'Farmer is a Wrestler' was the central installation of this exhibition. Before teasing this third iteration, it might be a better to substantiate the genesis of the title 'Farmer is a Wrestler'(Fig.4.20), which was first shown from 20 February to 6 March 2019 at the Lalit Kala Akademi (National Academy of Art), Chandigarh, Punjab, supported and directed by the President of the Akademi, Diwan Manna. It drew parallels to the act of 'kushti', the aforementioned form of traditional Indian wrestling to highlight the stressful condition of the farmers. Wrestling being primarily about physical and mental endurance was used as a metaphor to illustrate the life of farmers against the agrarian crisis.

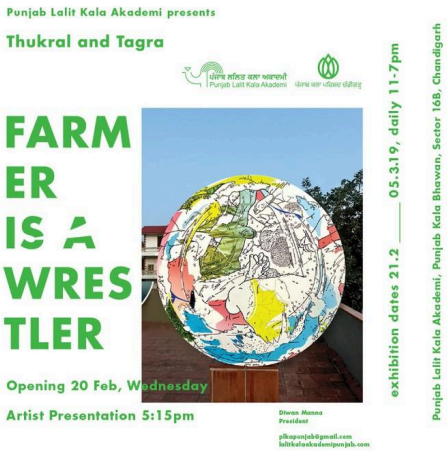
There have been seven iterations of this exhibition and the format changed and adapted almost organically according to the viewing context both temporally and spatially. Chandigarh as a city held an important place for the artists as when they were students, they met for the very first time in the Chandigarh Art College where Thukral was studying and Tagra was making an application to study. They met each other again at Delhi College of Art and a common aesthetic and willingness to share visual dialogues almost organically brought them together.[392] On being asked what inspired them to work on the agrarian crisis, Thukral in a 2019 interview, said, "It was a research that was published in a daily about 10 years on the lack of government interest that provoked our interest to work on this subject".[393]

---

[391] Gareth Harris and Anna Wallace-Thompson, 'Why Galleries and Collectors Keep Coming Back to Art Dubai', *The Art Newspaper - International Art News and Events*, 15 March 2017, https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2017/03/15/why-galleries-and-collectors-keep-coming-back-to-art-dubai.

[392] Punjab LKA, 'Thukral and Tagra Interview with Parul: Punjab Lalit Kala Akademi (State Academy of Art)', 4 May 2019, https://punjablalitkalaakademi.com/thukral-and-tagra-interview-with-parul-punjab-lalit-kala-akademi/

[393] Swati Bhan, 'Brush with Reality: The True Colours of Indian Farmers', *The Times of India*, 21 February 2019,



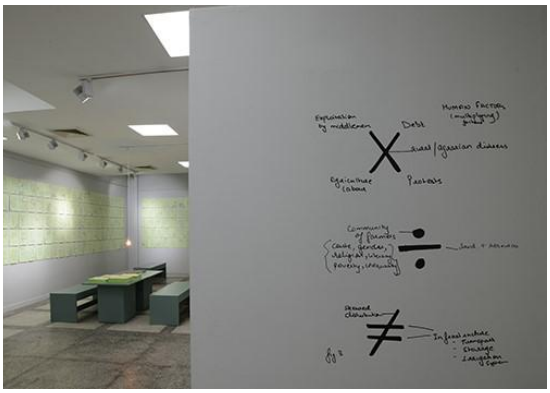


Fig.5.20: Thukral and Tagra, 'Farmer is a Wrestler', 2019, Exhibition Poster, Lalit Kala Akademi, Chandigarh, Punjab. Image Credits: Thukral and Tagra
Fig.5.21: Thukral and Tagra, 'Farmer is a Wrestler', 2019, Installation Shot, Lalit Kala Akademi, Chandigarh, Punjab. Image Credits: Thukral and Tagra

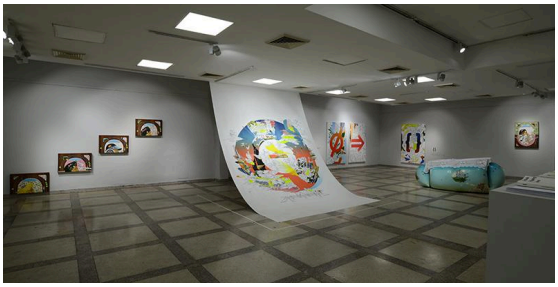


Fig.5.22: Thukral and Tagra,'Distress Equations', 2019, 'Farmer is a Wrestler', Lalit Kala Akademi, Chandigarh, Punjab. Image Credits: Thukral and Tagra
Fig.5.23: Thukral and Tagra, 'Farmer is a Wrestler', 2019, Installation Shot, Lalit Kala Akademi, Chandigarh, Punjab. Image Credits: Thukral and Tagra

The Lalit Kala Akademi, Chandigarh offered a huge open exhibition space for this show making ample room for diverse spatial interventions and choreography of the public. Self-questioning 'Distress Mathematics'(Fig. 5.21-5.22) some painted in vibrant hues, using the oil on canvas technique, punctuated the exhibition. Through a blend of canvas and sculpture displayed in the gallery space, the artists gave texture to the agrarian sorrow, expressing their ideas as unresolved symbols of

https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/chandigarh/brush-with-reality-the-true-colours-of-indian-farmers/articleshow/68093116.cms.

inquiries and the mathematical calculation of everyday sustenance against the burden of loans.

On 20th February 2019, at the opening of the exhibition, the duo spoke to the press and said, 'We are not experts, we don't know what a farmer goes through… the questions raised are an artistic enquiry', clarifying their role and purpose.[394] On the concluding day of the exhibition, the President of Punjab Lalit Kala Akademi, Diwan Manna organised an over two hours long panel discussion titled 'Agrarian Distress' inside the gallery space where the panelists and the audience sat surrounded by the displayed artworks. The speakers on the panel were economist Professor Sucha Singh Gill, Punjabi author Professor Baldev Singh Dhaliwal, along with Thukral and Tagra as speakers.[395] The panel started with Diwan Manna addressing the audience, introducing, and welcoming the panelists in 'Punjabi', which is the official language of the Indian state of Punjab and seamlessly switching to Hindi and English in between. Tagra spoke in English and started the session speaking about their research process and active engagement with the farming community. He also mentioned that the success of the exhibition for them is to open the topic for further discussion. Prof. Gill spoke in Punjabi about how the government waivers and support does not reach the landless peasants, the problems in counting of actual numbers of suicides, land ownership, unseen labour and insufficient rights of women etc. He concluded by saying that amidst the capitalist structures of power, there is no visible solution to the agrarian crisis.

Prof. Dhaliwal started his talk, also speaking primarily in Punjabi, by quoting author Prof. Romilla Thapar and her famous book, 'Narratives and Making of History' where she speaks about health as a signifier or a point of perspective to view the condition of a community, society and a nation. He emphasized that art does exactly the same thing, even when it cannot offer solutions, it propels people

---

[394] Vandana Shukla, 'Thukral and Tagra's New Exhibition Presents Sharp Comment on Punjab's Farmer Distress, NRI Culture', *Firstpost*, 27 February 2019, sec. living, https://www.firstpost.com/living/thukral-and-tagras-new-exhibition-presents-sharp-comment-on-punjabs-farmer-distress-nri-culture-6148811.html.

[395] Video - Panel Discussion- Punjab Lalit Kala Akademi, State Academy of Art, 2014, https://punjablalitkalaakademi.com/videos/.

to be aware and acknowledge the circumstances. The speakers teased out various dimensions of the crisis and how art opened up the most dynamic and visual method of showcasing the deep and layered crisis, without romanticizing peasantry from a distance as commonly seen in popular media.

Circling back to the third iteration of the 'Bread Circuses' theme exhibition at the YSP, UK and the interactive installation, titled 'Farmer is a Wrestler', which invited families, friends, and everyone in the general audience as players to enter the wrestling arena on a mat on the floor and wrestle with the real issues faced by the farmers. The participant players, only one at a time, had to try out seven traditional wrestling manoeuvres for which detailed guidelines were given on a paper handout.[396] The player would rest their hands and feet on numbers marked on the wrestling mat which individually represented a specific trial faced by the farmers. The work explored the psyche of the player when the body itself became a site for endurance and strength. It was also a way of staging manual dexterity, strategies of coping and surviving against the complex challenges. On completion of the seven thresholds, or being able to relate with the problems, the player could self-award themselves with a certificate of sincerity. The stamped and dated certificate could be taken by the participant and remain with them as a reminder of the issues and their experiential physical, mental, cerebral and emotional entanglement. The idea was to deeply engage the audience with the subject matter and give them an opportunity to experience the distress not just physically but on various conscious and subconscious levels of understanding.

[396] Uma Nair, 'Design-Duo Thukral & Tagra Wrestle with Daily Life in New Installation', *Architectural Digest*, 2019, https://www.architecturaldigest.in/content/thukral-tagra-bread-circuses-yorkshire-sculpture-park/.

Fig.5.24: Thukral and Tagra,'Farmer is a Wrestler' 2019, Installation shot, Interactive-Performative Game, 'Bread Circuses and TBD' Exhibition, Weston Gallery, Yorkshire Sculpture Park (YSP), UK. Image Credits: Thukral and Tagra
Fig.5.25: Thukral and Tagra,'Certificate of Sincerity', 2019, 'Farmer is a Wrestler' Interactive-Performative Game, 'Bread Circuses and TBD' Exhibition, Weston Gallery, Yorkshire Sculpture Park (YSP), UK. Image Credits: Thukral and Tagra

Curated by Helen Pheby, the walls around the central installation carried split pieces of huge paintings in the shape of a wrestling ring. The paintings were layered with drawings of wrestlers, grains, crops, sand, blue sky, farming activities and the experiences that the artists gathered during their research work that involved meeting the farmers and their families. One of the walls carried the Lexicon which was the agrarian distress vocabulary created by the duo. The Lexicon carried a specific, pin-pointed list of 100 issues faced by the agrarian community, which were categorized into the following seven headings: 'Authorities and Institutions', 'Socio-economic Factors', 'Economy', 'Environmental Factors', 'Developmental Factors', 'Human Factors' and 'Nature of Agriculture'. These categories carried numbered issues in words and phrases such as: 'Economic Crisis', 'Consumption', 'Green Revolution', 'Caste', 'Land Reforms', 'Disguised Unemployment', 'Intensive Farming', 'Corruption', 'Borrowings', 'Tariffs', 'Insurance', 'Subsidies', and so on. These numbers were replicated on the Wrestling mat where the participant players performed the seven wrestling manoeuvres.

The Lexicon was shown again during the pandemic in a digital iteration in 2021 titled 'Farmer is a Wrestler, Lexicon of Distress, Art at a Time Like This', and in this iteration the Lexicon transformed itself from a place of protest to a safe space carrying information and spreading awareness about the plight of Indian farmers who question their rights, existence and daily survival in an increasingly authoritarian and privatized world. For this iteration, Thukral and Tagra created an site-specific interactive digital glossary of terminology that remains central to understanding the characteristics of the Indian agrarian community. As the viewer looks through the elaborate glossary, images and illustrations of the ever-changing

agricultural landscape float in the hanging space, creating a shifting and unstable environment. The aim was not just to open up the agrarian situation for a global audience but at the same time introspecting and inquiring their own authority as artists to address this subject matter. The work later materialized into a publication with the same title which unconditionally held and outlived the ephemerality of physical iterations. According to the artist duo, wrestling as a language within the artwork does not only apply to a localised context, rather, it opens up larger cyclical dialogues of the society and everyone is a stakeholder in it. To re-emphasize every individual's role in the agrarian crisis, it would be appropriate to quote writer, journalist, Amandeep Sandhu who has written extensively on the agrarian crisis, the farmer protests and the situation in Punjab. In a recent interview, he said, 'the voices, the protests are important because the farm laws are a complete violation of our right to food and everyone who eats food is a stakeholder in this'.[397]

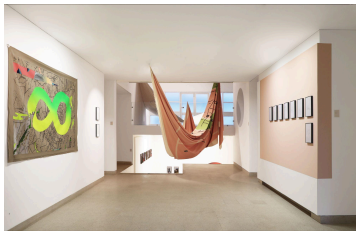
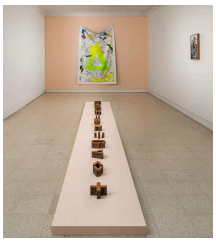
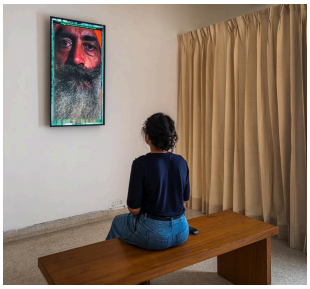


Fig.5.26: Thukral and Tagra,'Distress Equation (Infinity)', 2019, Oil on linen canvas, 72x48x2 inches, Bread Circuses & I, Nature Morte, Delhi. Image Credits: Thukral and Tagra
Fig.5.27: Thukral and Tagra,'Distress Mathematics (Zero)', 2019, Oil on canvas, unstretched, 120x192 inches, Bread Circuses & I, Nature Morte, Delhi. Image Credits: Thukral and Tagra
Fig.5.28: Thukral and Tagra, 'Bread Circuses & I', 2019, Installation View, Nature Morte, Delhi, 2019. Image Credits: Thukral and Tagra





[397] Preeti Kathuria, 'Threading a Way between Memoir, History and Reportage — In Conversation with Author Amandeep Sandhu', *Tint Journal*, December 2024, https://tintjournal.com/interview/threading-a-way-between-memoir-history-and-reportage-in-conversation-with-author-amandeep-sandhu.

Fig.4.29: Thukral and Tagra,'A Dozen – Distress Symbols', 2019, Cast Iron, 12 x (5 x 6 x 4 inches), 6kg each kept on wooden board 120 x 24 x 2 inches, Bread Circuses & I, Nature Morte, Delhi. Image Credits: Thukral and Tagra
Fig.4.30: Thukral and Tagra,'A Dozen – Distress Symbols' (Detail), 2019, Cast Iron, 12 x (5 x 6 x 4 inches), 6kg each kept on wooden board 120 x 24 x 2 inches, Bread Circuses & I, Nature Morte, Delhi. Image Credits: Thukral and Tagra
Fig.4.31: Thukral and Tagra,'Surjeet Singh', 2019, Single channel Video, duration: 27 minutes, Bread Circuses & I, Nature Morte, Delhi. Image Credits: Thukral and Tagra
Fig.4.32: Thukral and Tagra,'Aftermath – Swaminathan Commission Report – Serving and Saving Farming, Reports on agrarian crisis', 2019, Fountain Ink on inkjet print (The residue of installation on paper with pesticide spray machine – 3-sec spray after every 30 mins), 72 x 120 x 72 inches, Bread Circuses & I, Nature Morte, Delhi. Image Credits: Thukral and Tagra

The fourth iteration of the 'Bread Circuses' theme was titled 'Bread, Circuses and I', and was exhibited at a private art gallery called Nature Morte in New Delhi in October 2019. It was a closely guarded, restrictive opening keeping in view the strong and obvious political undercurrents of the artworks. The wall text of the exhibition read,

> *The exhibition title "Bread, Circuses and I" attempts a 'self-absorption' of one's status in the midst of a severe social crisis. By making the viewer confront these distress equations, the artists continue their pursuit in social communication and attempt to address the gaps between the urban and rural ways of living.*[398]

The carefully worded wall text did not unpack the specific rationale of the show, instead it packaged and glossed the compelling representations. Treading the safe path, the exhibition text abandoned necessary information and became disreputable.

According to the artists, this exhibition represented a continuation and synthesis of works and concepts derived from two prior exhibitions showcased in 2019: 'Farmer is a Wrestler' at the Punjab Lalit Kala Akademie in Chandigarh, India, and 'Bread, Circuses and TBD' at the Yorkshire Sculpture Park in the United

[398] 'Thukral & Tagra Biography, Artworks & Exhibitions', 5 February 2024, https://ocula.com/artists/thukral-and-tagra/.

Kingdom.[399] The 'Distress equations' were the same artworks shown earlier in the third iteration, though this time they were also executed as a set of 12 heavy, cast iron sculptures (Fig.5.29-5.30), spaced rhythmically on a moderately raised wooden plinth.

5.4 Farm Suicides, Pesticides and *Berliner Blau*

A 27-minute video artwork titled 'Surjeet Singh' (Fig.5.31) was shown in this exhibition, which was a vertical screen showing an appalling portrait of a 50-year old Sikh man, Surjeet Singh, layered with data records of farm suicides running over it, similar to the information screens on airports or train stations. Singh has been reporting suicides and facilitating the paper-work for 130 villages for the Sangrur district of Punjab. The film was a silent apocalyptic screening of Singh's presence and the data collected over the span of 10 years, where he met around 2000 families of the deceased farmers on the day of the deaths to fill out the application of their demise. The Baru Sahib Academy, located in Himachal Pradesh (north India), spoke with the families of farmers who took their own lives in Punjab seven years prior.

As part of their artistic research, Thukral and Tagra travelled to eight villages within the Sangrur district of Punjab, where incidents of suicide among cotton farmers were prevalent, as well as to around a dozen villages in Haryana. However, upon reaching the residences of the farmers, they found themselves unable to speak, and their cameras and recording devices remained untouched. It was a difficult process for them as they faced the harsh realities such as in one village, they encountered three generations of a farming family that had died by suicide.[400]

---

[399] 'Nature Morte – Thukral & Tagra', www.naturemorte.com, accessed 2 May 2024, http://www.naturemorte.com.

[400] Vandana Shukla, 'Thukral and Tagra's New Exhibition Presents Sharp Comment on Punjab's Farmer Distress, NRI Culture', *Firstpost*, 27 February 2019, sec. Living. https://www.firstpost.com/living/thukral-and-tagras-new-exhibition-presents-sharp-comment-on-punjabs-farmer-distress-nri-culture-6148811.html.

All this complex mediation and field-work fed into their artworks alongside their own experiential trauma.

A time-based performance piece titled 'Aftermath' (Fig.5.32) was displayed in this exhibition where three seconds of deep blue colour pesticide spray was sprinkled every thirty minutes, on pages of the Swaminathan Commission report 2004-06.[401] According to the artists, this frequency was crucial to the artwork, as it reflected the average time gap between two farmer suicides in the country. The powerful touch of colour created a multi-modal sensory and immersive environment for the viewer to inevitably become a part of this durational process.

Pesticides play a controversial yet crucial role in pasture management and enhancing crop productivity. Pesticides are often sprayed on pastures or crops to protect vulnerable seedlings and established crops to reduce resident and damaging pests. In reality, the term 'Pesticide' refers to a broader category of chemical substances, which include insecticides, fungicides, herbicides, rodenticides, molluscicides, nematicides, plant growth regulators, and more. Pesticide usage in India is different from the rest of the world in general, as in India 76% of the pesticide used is insecticide, as against 44% globally and is primarily used for cotton crops (45%), followed by paddy and wheat.[402] For the ease of use and understanding, pesticides are always colour coded (red, yellow, blue or grey) according to the level of toxicity and hazard category; blue is the third category which is much less toxic and hazardous than the red and yellow ones.[403]

'Aftermath' consisted of a cobalt blue colour, tarpaulin knapsack, which was a battery-operated, pesticide spray machine with a 16 litre tank capacity, installed on the gallery wall. On the floor were placed piles of pages from the Swaminathan

---

[401] Appendix 4B: Swaminathan Commission Report - Details

[402] Md. Wasim Aktar, Dwaipayan Sengupta, and Ashim Chowdhury, 'Impact of Pesticides Use in Agriculture: Their Benefits and Hazards', *Interdisciplinary Toxicology* 2, no. 1 (March 2009): 1–12, https://doi.org/10.2478/v10102-009-0001-7.

[403] Ministry of Agriculture & Farmers Welfare,Government of India, 'Label on Pesticides Products', 2015, https://pib.gov.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=124297.

Commission Report. A three-second fountain of prussian blue spray emerged from the pesticide knapsack every 30-minutes and tinted the originally white pages of the Report, drawing attention towards indiscriminate utilisation of chemical pesticides, the redundancy of the Reports and the irreparable trauma of suicide. A spectacle, the temporal rhythmic rain of blue on white, created a dark, damp cogitative sensation in the gallery space. It was like a rupture into meaning and effect, creating blobs of blue involving thinking about how to position its viewer in its relation. It worked like an algorithm that laid the claim on the audience to figure out what social, economic or political processes were shaping that moment of rupture.

Artists often work with 'shock' as a tool in order to confront, sensitize, and provoke the audience with a harsh factual reality. The approach has deep historical roots such as the Duchampian 'Fountain' (1917) showing the urinal as art, or Damien Hirst's formaldehyde shark titled 'The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living' (1991). These examples did not just attempt to shock the audience, but also questioned the very premise of what is acceptable as art in that particular time and place. Bringing the idea of pesticide spray in a white cube space is layered with this idea of shock, political subversion and a clear artistic intent to make the viewer a witness of the reality of the crisis. Challenging repression, the work employs shock to satirize the commodification of art itself.

Both the artworks, 'Sujeet Singh' (Fig.5.31) and 'Aftermath' (Fig.5.32) were shown the second time as part of a group exhibition titled 'The Sundry Effect', (Fig. 5.35) curated by Meena Vari, at Bikaner House, Central Delhi in 2020. In 2022, The installation 'Aftermath' was shown alongside the cast iron 'Distress Symbols' and the 'Weeping Farm' Game and publication at the Kochi Muziris Biennale, Kerala. The work 'Aftermath' was shown again the next year in a group exhibition titled 'Prussian Blue - A Serendipitous Colour that Altered the Trajectory of Art' at the Kiran Nadar Museum of Art, Noida, Uttar Pradesh, from 19 September - 20 December 2023. In this iteration, there were three yellow colour

pesticide spray machines or knapsacks placed on the floor of the gallery that sprayed prussian blue ink on the wall carrying ten vertical panels of line drawing illustrations depicting the despair of farmers. The expanse of the performative piece durationally was of 40-minutes this time, according to the fatality statistics of Oxfam. In a review of this huge 19-artists' group exhibition, which explored the history, genealogy and possibilities of the prussian blue colour, a critic asked: Why has the colour blue had such a profound impact on artists? The answer came through a detailed survey of the artworks shown in the group exhibition and explained that prussian blue transcends its status as potentially the first completely synthetic pigment of the modern era to become a gentle emotion that brings to mind nostalgia, warmth, and even a sense of loss.[404] The prussian blue ink in Thukral and Tagra's artwork unpacked the toxicity of the pesticides amidst the rising toll of farmer suicides.[405] Arshiya Lokhandwala's lengthy curatorial essay of the show mentions that the pigment was created by a sheer accident in 1704, in a Berlin laboratory when two German alchemists, Jacob Diesbach and Johann Konrad Dippel were creating a batch of cochineal red (made from bugs). They accidentally used potash which turned the concoction into a deep blue – which became known as Prussian blue or *Berliner Blau*, due to its geographic origins and because the Prussian army dyed its soldiers' jackets with the colour.[406]

---

[404] Shankar Tripathi, 'Is Blue Simply the Warmest Colour? - The Karachi Collective', 26 October 2023, https://thekarachicollective.com/is-blue-simply-the-warmest-colour/.

[405] Arshia Dhar, 'KNMA's Prussian Blue Unpacks the Colour's Historical Significance and Myriad Connotations', *Architectural Digest India*, 5 December 2023, https://www.architecturaldigest.in/story/knmas-prussian-blue-unpacks-the-colours-historical-significance-and-myriad-connotations/.

[406] 'Prussian Blue: A Serendipitous Colour That Altered the Trajectory of Art', Kiran Nadar Museum of Art, 18 September 2023, https://www.knma.in/prussian-blue-serendipitous-colour-altered-trajectory-art.

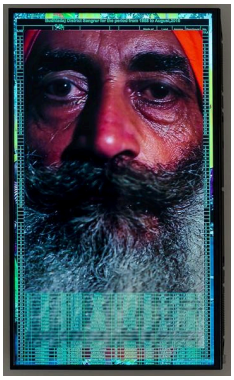


Fig.5.33: Thukral and Tagra,'Surjeet Singh', 2019, Single channel Video, duration: 27 mins, Group Exhibition: The Sundry Effect, Bikaner House, Delhi, 2020. Image Credits: Thukral and Tagra
Fig.5.34: Thukral and Tagra,'Aftermath – Swaminathan Commission Report – Serving and Saving Farming, Reports on agrarian crisis', 2019, Fountain Ink on inkjet print (The residue of installation on paper with pesticide spray machine – 3-sec spray after every 30 mins), The Sundry Effect, Bikaner House, Delhi. Image Credits: Thukral and Tagra
Fig.5.35: Thukral and Tagra, 'Surjeet Singh', 2019, Installation View, Group Exhibition: The Sundry Effect, Bikaner House, Delhi, 2020. Image Credits: Thukral and Tagra

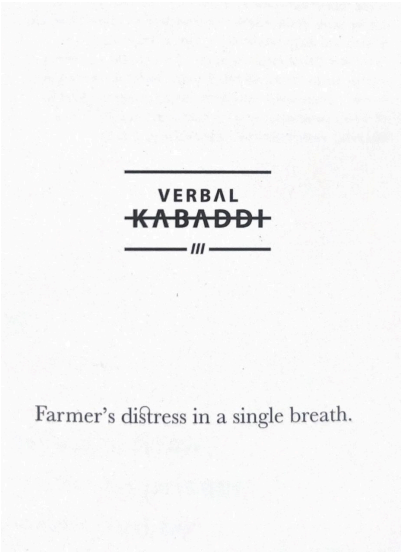
In order to clearly understand the farm suicides, one needs to get a bit more clarity on the colossal statistical ignorance of India's actual engagement with agriculture. The common understanding of over 600 million Indians being dependent on agriculture is incorrect as they are not all farmers; many work in an array of related activities — including fisheries. As per the 2011 Census, there are 95.8 million cultivators for whom farming is the main occupation, which is less than 8 percent of the total population. Counting together all cultivators and agricultural labourers, the total number would be around 263 million which is 22 percent of the population. The Census categorizes the population into workers and non-workers. The non-workers include infants, children, students, homemakers, the unemployed, elderly, and retired individuals. Farmers, or cultivators, fall under the 'Workers' category — a rather broad classification encompassing numerous diverse groups. Currently, rural workers represent nearly 70 percent of the total workforce. Rural workers are composed of farmers, agricultural laborers, and non-farm workers. Such significant factual ignorance leads many to dismiss the country's massive farmers' suicides as trivial. There are many more greys in the system defining the

farmer, who gets counted and reported, how the categories operate and change, etc.[407]

Farm suicides are a symptom of the systemically ill-defined conditions in the agricultural sector. According to the data of National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), five States - Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh, account for two-thirds of the total number of farm suicides in the whole country.[408] Since 1995, a total of 296,438 farmers in India have committed suicide.[409] According to NCRB, at least ten farmers have killed themselves every day, on an average, for a straight ten years in the relatively rich state of Maharashtra, the western peninsular region of India.[410] According to Sainath, around 46 farmers commit suicide each day, on average, orr nearly one every half-hour since 2001. The cumulative total of farmer suicides in the nation since 1995 surpassed the 300,000 threshold in year 2014. Nonetheless, the 2014 statistics cannot be compared with the previous 19 years of farm suicide statistics, because of significant alterations in the methodology and new ways of classifying data adopted by the NCRB. Under the updated criteria, the count of farmer suicides in 2014 reduced to 5,650. That figure is less than half of the 2013 total of 11,772. This occurred merely by reallocating the suicide figures into new or modified classifications within the NCRB tables. The "decline" in farmer suicides coincides with a remarkable rise in suicides amongst the rather prejudiced category of "others".[411]

---

[407] P Sainath, 'Over 2,000 Fewer Farmers Every Day | P. Sainath', 2 May 2013, https://www.psainath.com/over-2000-fewer-farmers-every-day/.
[408] P. Sainath, 'Farmers' Suicide Rates Soar above the Rest', 18 May 2013, https://www.psainath.com/farmers-suicide-rates-soar-above-the-rest/.
[409] Ibid.
[410] P Sainath, 'Maharashtra Crosses 60,000 Farm Suicides | P. Sainath', 15 July 2014, https://www.psainath.com/maharashtra-crosses-60000-farm-suicides/.
[411] P Sainath, 'The Slaughter of Suicide Data | P. Sainath', 5 August 2015, https://www.psainath.com/the-slaughter-of-suicide-data/.



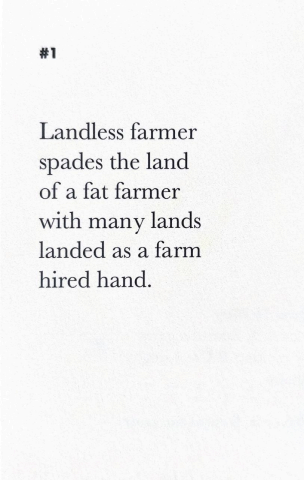


Fig.5.36 : Thukral and Tagra,'Verbal Kabaddi', 2019, Game, 7 offset printed card set, 2.5 x 3.5 inches. Image Credits: Thukral and Tagra
Fig.5.37 : Thukral and Tagra,'Verbal Kabaddi', 2019, (detail) Game, 7 offset printed card set, 2.5 x 3.5 inches. Image Credits: Thukral and Tagra
Fig.5.38 : Thukral and Tagra,'Verbal Kabaddi VII - Climate Anxiety in a single breath', 2021, Walthamstow Town Square, UK. Image Credits: Thukral and Tagra

Circling back to the Nature Morte exhibition, another game titled 'Verbal Kabaddi - Farmer's distress in a single breath' (Fig.5.36) was on display alongside the other artworks. Kabaddi is a popular Indian combative sport in which a match is contested between two teams of seven players each, where participants alternate in pursuing and attempting to tag players from the rival team while simultaneously avoiding being caught by them. Originally played in a circular sand court, the players attempt to tag or capture opponents and must hold their breath while running, repeating the word 'kabaddi' to show that they are only inhaling while speaking and are fully engrossed in the purpose of the game. Thukral and Tagra very creatively picked up the core determinants and essential cues of the game and created their own gameplay, which was a compilation of seven tongue twisters in English, to be spoken in a single breath. It was a self-motivated game-play of 4 to 5 minute play duration, that allowed players to recite urgent criticalities in a single breath. The participants recited tongue-twisting sentences such as: '#1 Landless farmer spades the land of a fat farmer with many lands landed as a farm hired hand' (Fig.5.37), '#2 Green revolution revolutionizes the farm evolution with no solution

to resolution' and '#3 They've sown the known, where weather was unknown, what is grown is loan to mourn' simultaneously exercising some breath control. Each of the carefully sequenced phrases carried additional detailed explanation along with factual statistics and citations, for the audience to engage with. One such text with #3 was:

> *Agriculture is a high-risk occupation (Agarwal, 2011, p.11), the changes in the frequency and severity of droughts, erratic patterns of rainfall distribution and other calamities disrupt the ecosystem and pose challenges for farmers, thereafter threatening food safety and security. Overall, climate change could make it more difficult to grow crops, raise and rear animals. The effects of climate change are also considered along with other evolving factors that affect agricultural production like myriad farming practices and technology.This situation makes it difficult for agriculturists, pastoralists to recover from financial capacity to make further investments in agricultural operations and allied activities.*[412]

After reading these elaborate explanations supplemented with each tongue-twister, the audience could gather that the tongue twisters were not merely difficult to recite, instead, these were real-life, difficult to live-with, complicated agrarian situations which were creatively condensed into a game-play. At the end of the game, after successfully reciting seven of these tricky distress monologues the player received a stamp of sincerity as a winning reward. Kabaddi being a game of strategy, team effort and discipline in the form of breath control, served as an excellent metaphor to suggest how the complexities of the agrarian situation could possibly be dealt with. The game was rehashed into a playable installation as banners in a park by the artists and shown as an iteration in 2021 as 'Verbal Kabaddi VII - Climate Anxiety in a single breath' (Fig.5.38) near Walthamstow Town Square, United Kingdom. This time the emphasis was to let the players breathe upon the ecological emergency of melting glaciers, rising temperatures, burning forests, dying reefs and drowning habitats. Typographical design plays an

[412] Jiten Thukral and Sumir Tagra, *Weeping Farm*, 2022, p. 273.

important role in this work as well, just like the exhibition text logos discussed at the beginning of the chapter. Their designs thrive on a restrictive colour palette with clean legible content prioritizing functionality and purpose.

5.5 'Weeping Farm': Theme and Survival Game Play

Coming back to the overarching title 'Weeping Farm', Thukral and Tagra created another game titled 'Weeping Farm – 40 minutes for survival' (Fig.5.39) which was installed at multiple locations in Delhi in 2022. The game was categorized as educational and unpacked the invisible work of women farmers in the agrarian sector across India and acted as an intervention to familiarise the players with the harsh realities of rural life. A total of 3 to 6 players could participate at a given time and each player had to roleplay the character of a woman farmer from across India for one year which would mean at least two farming cycles. The roleplaying cards carried prussian blue monochromatic illustrations of women (Fig.5.40-5.41) working in the farm and their occupation on the card read: 'Farm Labourer' along with their age, number of family members, crop and State such as Uttar Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Punjab etc. Each roleplay character was created keeping in view the specific regional clothing style and a situation - which could be a pre-existing loan, discriminatory wages, being a migrant etc, which the player seamlessly adapted. Periodically, the player earned a salary to stay afloat and remain out of debt while simultaneously facing unforeseen circumstances of financial stress. At the end of 40-minutes, the player with the highest amount of debt got out of the game, signaling how due to the inability to sustain, every 40 minutes, a farmer commits suicide.

Fig.5.39: Thukral and Tagra,'The Game Play -Weeping Farm', 2022, Game installation, mixed media, Khoj, Delhi. Image Credits: Thukral and Tagra

Fig.5.40: Thukral and Tagra,'The Game Play -Weeping Farm', 2022, Game Cards and Instructions, 9.75x7 inches, Latitude28, Delhi. Image Credits: Thukral and Tagra
Fig.5.41: Thukral and Tagra,'Weeping Farm' Series, 2022, Pen & Ink Drawing on Paper, Khoj, Delhi. Image Credits: Thukral and Tagra

Games and play bear a historical resonance with performance as a form and medium in contemporary art practice. It is important to mention here that

performance does not exist 'atemporally' for the spectator, rather, the spectator intersects in its trajectory of continuous production and visibility.[413] Being interactive in nature, games as performances, serve as enacted narratives that allow the user to act out specific roles and confront planned encounters within the embedded diegesis. The emergent narratives are usually reflexive, experiential, and provide players with the tools to construct stories of their own. Inviting active participation, games are in some way investigative and operate in close alignment with the dimension of player agency, both as medium and methodology. One of the early precursors was Japanese artist Yoko Ono whose 'Instructions for Paintings' (1962) broke the barrier between the artwork and its audience and invited the viewer to step-in and complete the artwork.[414] The idea was to break free from the distance and the passivity of viewing an artwork and create a tactile relationship between the artwork and its audience.

Games are usually not tied to a definitive medium and offer a framework or a sort of an arrangement of information structured around a subject matter. Needless to say, the visual appearance and the design of a game should be functionally adequate and ludically compelling in order to engage the audience effectively. Thukral and Tagra have been very crafty in seamlessly integrating the agrarian crisis into a representative play. Their games create an alternative reality which offers a means of dealing metaphorically with the harsh but significant real world and simultaneously burden the player/viewer with a distant rural character's existence in relation to the impervious agrarian narrative. The process-oriented, participative, and interactive dimension of games create a spectacle which mandatorily shifts the viewer/participant's attention from the objecthood of art to a more immediate, tactile experience of art. One of the most pertinent things about games is that it allows its users to make decisions - forcing reflection, empathy and a lingering impact.

---

[413] Marvin Carlson, *Performance: A Critical Introduction* (Psychology Press, 1996), p.4.
[414] 'Yoko Ono's 22 Instructions for Paintings | Magazine | MoMA', The Museum of Modern Art, accessed 19 May 2025, https://www.moma.org/magazine/articles/61.

5.6 'Kisan Mukti March' (Farmers Protest Against the Agrarian Crisis)

Amongst all the iterations discussed in the chapter, the Nature Morte exhibition (2019) was the most dense and elaborate. Along with all the diverse media shown in previous iterations voicing the crisis, this exhibition showcased a 23-minutes documentary film titled 'Kisan Mukti March - Farmers Protest Against the Agrarian Crisis'. The film was a real-time documentation undertaken by Thukral and Tagra on farmer's distress and protests across the country. The full-colour recordings captured the farmers narrating their problems, their trials and tribulations and how helpless they felt. It was based on the farmer protests of November 2018 in which over one lakh farmers had marched towards Delhi to protest against the agrarian crisis.

According to the documentary, it was a peaceful protest with farmers, farmer unions and farming households including women and children from all over the country participating. Each group carried a colour-coded flag bearing its demands and the motive behind the protest. Some groups made folk performances, others recited regional folk songs to express their precariousness and some carried with them skeletal human remains to draw serious attention towards the situation. Students from the Delhi University joined the protests and voiced slogans against the rampant lawlessness. The protests saw diversity of India in terms of language, clothes, gestures, cultures but each protestee stood in solidarity asking for their basic demands, such as the Tamil Nadu (south India) farmers who were protesting at the Jantar Mantar monument in Delhi demanded profitable crop sale prices, writing off loans and a sustainable pension for over 60-year old farmers. A lot of farmers said that they are not interested in staying away from their fields, their homes and wasting their time on the streets of Delhi but they had no choice as they are simply unable to feed their families and pay the bank debt. The film was a Thukral and Tagra studio production and the starting frame of the documentary film was embedded with social media hashtags of: #ArtistsforFarmers and #Farmerisawrestler.

Fig.5.42: Thukral and Tagra,'Trolley Times', 2020, Newsletter, Hindi, Delhi. Image Credits: Thukral and Tagra
Fig.5.43: Thukral and Tagra,'Trolley Times', 2020, Newsletter, English, Delhi. Image Credits: Thukral and Tagra
Fig.5.44: Thukral and Tagra,'Trolley Times', 2020, Newsletter, digital footprint. Image Credits: Thukral and Tagra

In 2020, during the protests, Thukral & Tagra collaborated with like-minded artists, writers, activists and brought out a newsletter titled 'Trolley Times'. It was directly aligned with offering support to farmers when about 95,000 trolleys lined up in the depth of winter at Delhi borders, protesting over farm bills. The protests were symbolically represented with tractors and trolleys as these vehicles are deeply embedded in the daily lives and identities of Indian farmers. A tractor is a valuable asset for the farmer as it stands for self-reliance and power. The trolley is usually attached to a tractor for transporting crops, goods, produce, straw etc. During the protests, the tractors and trolleys were used to carry food, bedding, supplies and makeshift- shelters. When hundreds of tractors and trolleys stationed themselves on the borders of Delhi, it became an iconic symbol of agrarian solidarity and resistance. The newsletter used this iconic image of the trolley to reflect upon the dependency of the trolley on the tractor, the material reality of rural agricultural life and the symbolic language of peaceful protest.

Twenty-two editions of the newsletter were published in prussian blue ink on white paper in various Indian languages (Fig.5.42-43). This was the second time[415]

[415] First time being the documentary film 'Kisan Mukti March' in 2019, discussed earlier

Thukral and Tagra made an important artistic intervention in an ongoing protest.[416] Temporally, due to its frequency and reach, a newsletter creates its own confrontational identity but this newsletter was not a mouth-piece, it tried to dialectically engage with defining the crisis and catalyzing the process of public awareness. The use of blue ink in the newspaper was a conscious collective choice to indicate marginalization (also discussed earlier in the chapter). The digital archive of the newspaper faced some political backlash, censorship and remained suspended and inaccessible for a long time. However, it is now accessible online.[417] The protests had a digital footprint on a website 'kisanekta.in' (Fig.5.44) which is a farmer's union page and remains difficult to access. Amidst the labyrinth of ethical issues, these remain some undemocratic ways of exercising control and curtailing the fast paced digital mobility of images and information.

A very good example here is the Russian artist-activist collective *Chto Delat?* (What is to be done?) who explained the relevance of running a newspaper in the words of Lenin, who believed that 'a newspaper is not only a collective propagandist and collective agitator but also a collective organiser'.[418] So the essentialist strategic triad of revolutionary activist work is agitating, propagating and organising. Dmitry Vilensky of the *Cho Delat?* Collective emphasized the element of organising as a key aspect of the process and its efficacy. Practices have to be structured and organised in order to survive over a period of time.[419] A newspaper is therefore a means of constructing a collectivity around instituting practices, of organising not only an editorial collective but also a comprehensive network of people, practices and debates.

The newsletter served as a tool of resistance and this can be clearly understood in the light of a statement made by Sainath on the occasion of the book release event

---

[416] Preeti Kathuria, 'Iterations and Interventions: Temporal Agency of Indian Contemporary Art Amidst Agrarian Distress', *The Wollesen: Contretemps | University of Toronto Art Journals* Vol. 11 No. 1 (2024), https://utaj.library.utoronto.ca/index.php/utaj/issue/view/2862.
[417] https://trolleytimes.com/editions-2/
[418] Marchart, Oliver. *Conflictual Aesthetics*. Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2019 p.36.
[419] Ibid. p.36

of the book titled 'Farmers Protest! A Movement of Our Times' by Namita Waikar in Delhi. He said, that 'one take-away from the 2020-2021 protests is that the farmers taught all of us the meaning of the word 'Resistance', the protests were not about winning and losing - they displayed effort and resistance and all of us can definitely resist'![420] This statement highlights how the newsletter was more than just a source of updates, it became a voice of the movement, carrying emotions, anxieties, struggles, and the determination of the farmers. It was a peaceful, elitist way to build a shared sense of purpose and resistance from within the crisis.

5.7 Concluding Discussion

The chapter describes and analyzes the thematically layered body of works created by Thukral and Tagra, as a case study of how a contemporary Indian artist addresses the agrarian crisis. The chapter highlights several determinants of the agrarian crisis, including indebtedness, food security, gender inquality, and farmer suicides. It also addressed dispossession and corporate control in nexus with the state. Acting as cultural brokers and intermediaries, Thukral and Tagra mediate between the marginalized agrarian communities of Punjab and the urban audiences, to bridge access to the socio-political realities of food, food-growers and the food-consumers. With research, documentation and creative play, they amplify the subaltern narratives. They recognise their role as facilitators and not experts or advocates. Their task has been to connect the subaltern with the broader audiences through innovative art interventions that carry activism, research and play in a critically packaged artistic framework. This mediation empowers both representation and resistance, aligning it with contemporary critical discourse on subalternity and cultural agency. Let us assess how the chapter answers the three research questions of this thesis.

The case study demonstrates how Thukral and Tagra use film, installation, games, performance, sculpture, painting and graphic design to interrogate the key

[420] P.Sainath, Book Release Talk, 'Farmers Protest! A Movement of our Times' by Namita Waikar, IIC, New Delhi, 22 April 2025.

determinant of the crisis. Their layered projects such as ‘Weeping Farm’, ‘Bread Circuses’ and ‘Farmer is a Wrestler’ use interactive strategies, play, and performance to embody the lives and struggles of the farmers. Thukral and Tagras’ artistic vocabulary and apparatus pivots around the formal tropes of content, colour and spatial construction. Their work methodology, especially the production, composition, display and documentation, deeply resonates with the principles and conventions of design and a non-stereotypical aesthetic. For the purpose of circulation and audiencing, their practice mutates and adapts to the sometimes harsh existing modalities of time, space etc., but remains strategic and unforgivingly critical in the toughness of their chosen task, for example ‘The Sundry Effect’, 2020 group show (Fig.5.35), where their artworks were tucked away in another corner of the building, and appeared completely disjointed, both spatially and conceptually, from the rest of the show.

The study analyses how thukral and Tagra shape the common understanding of the crisis, within the frameworks of its determinants and subalternity. The works engage with Roman antiquity, reference government policies, and offer a statistical documentation of the farmer suicides, in order to generate awareness and empathy. Their work has the ability to remain critical, see and address the issue(s) from diverse perspectives and add political, social, economic contexts while still retaining a sense of play without compromising on human details. Their artistic practice did not stagnate on any fixed conception on how something can work or how the crisis can be pinned down visually; instead they lead the viewers into vivid experiential arenas of observation and participation. Knowing that just announcing the crisis does not solve it, the artworks evoked, animated, or even compelled the viewer to step in and reconstruct the crisis. The participative element in the exhibitions reflects an openness and a demonstration of the cause and effect theory, without necessarily demanding any pre-existing knowledge of the crisis.

The political undercurrents in art often challenge established standards, question authority, and critique political power, which unfortunately result in cancellations, censorship, legal disputes, blasphemy, and sometimes even criminal charges,

depending upon the governance in different countries and diverse contexts. Thukral and Tagra have been fully conscious of the dangers of working on this politically charged subject, yet they have meticulously created a digital archive of their practice which is openly accessible. The capacity to both act and be activated is the primary ground assumption of their artistic agitational strategy, without which it would make no sense to speak about their critical political position.[421]

Shown in diverse locations over a span of over 15 years, their artistic practice and their approach towards the crisis is very strategic. Calling it a command from the higher self, the duo feel deeply invested and responsible towards their motherland.[422] Their artwork might have received labels like 'irreverent', 'playful', 'unconventional', 'kitschy', 'approaching pop-art', and 'blurring the boundaries between art and design', but the central theme of their creations is the issues facing their home and the Punjabi society.[423] The iterations were not really repetitions, they were mutations with fine, imperceptible links, which became more real, much more probable, verified and informed each time.

With an aim to re-emphasize the intensity of a perilous crisis, Thukral and Tagra stayed committed to showing the same artworks, year after year, even when the tectonics of display were constantly changing and challenging them. For Thukral and Tagra, the idea and substance of the artwork are at once a whimsical challenge to authority and a complete absence of it. It might seem like the identical artwork displayed multiple times, but throughout the years, it almost organically evolved, broadened, and transformed to enhance its purpose, pursuit, and the conversation. These closely connected and temporally aligned versions of the same piece not only collaborated and affirmed the revolutionary undercurrent but also provided a chance to revisit and reassess the narrative in fresh formats of presentation,

---

[421] Oliver Marchart, *Conflictual Aesthetics* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2019), p.38.
[422] Appendix 4A. Conversation with Thukral and Tagra,, 2023
[423] Vandana Shukla, 'Thukral and Tagra's New Exhibition Presents Sharp Comment on Punjab's Farmer Distress, NRI Culture', *Firstpost*, 27 February 2019, sec. living, https://www.firstpost.com/living/thukral-and-tagras-new-exhibition-presents-sharp-comment-on-punjabs-farmer-distress-nri-culture-6148811.html.

visibility, and audience engagement.[424] The works were shown in different social contexts, in diverse locations, and conditions, with an aim to offer new viewing positions and mobilise both new and existing viewership.

The continuity, compression and intensification of the artistic projections has created a clear divide amongst institutions, curators and gallerists who could or could not support the duo. Some gallerists in order to steer away from the risks of censorship have clearly expressed their ease of showing these works in an international context - but then that is not just a geographical shift. It raises the question as to who is the intended audience for this work? Well, the answer lies in Sainath's poignant observation in saying that, 'the farmers have to be at the forefront of this struggle but only if we build large alliances that fight this direction that Indian economy and development is taking, we have hope'.[425] Sainath expressed a pressing need to collaborate and develop mechanisms to assert and resist the slaughter of the agrarian sector. This observation closely aligns with author-journalist Amandeep Sandhu's assertion that everybody who eats food is a stakeholder in this cause, clearing the air around geographical boundaries.[426] Therefore, in spite of the risks involved, Thukral and Tagra have been hammering the crisis, carefully yet steadily, both on macro and micro levels, across geographical parameters, and there has been no real stasis in their strategic mechanism of mutated iterations.

---

[424] Preeti Kathuria, 'Iterations and Interventions: Temporal Agency of Indian Contemporary Art Amidst Agrarian Distress', *The Wollesen: Contretemps | University of Toronto Art Journals* Vol. 11 No. 1 (2024), https://utaj.library.utoronto.ca/index.php/utaj/issue/view/2862.

[425] P. Sainath, Book Release Talk, 'Farmers Protest! A Movement of our Times' by Namita Waikar, IIC, New Delhi, 22 April 2025.

[426] Preeti Kathuria, 'Threading a Way between Memoir, History and Reportage — In Conversation with Author Amandeep Sandhu', *Tint Journal*, December 2024, https://tintjournal.com/interview/threading-a-way-between-memoir-history-and-reportage-in-conversation-with-author-amandeep-sandhu.

Chapter 6

Artistic Response to the 2020-2021 Farmer Protests

6.1 Introduction

After an in-depth analysis of four artistic practices, this chapter provides a detailed description and analysis of five specific artistic practices that emerged as a response to the nation-wide, year-long, 'Kisan Andolan' or the Indian farmers' protest of 2020-21. The protests mark an important moment in Indian history - the first significant defeat inflicted on the state through a mass social movement. They were also significant as the first time a wide cross-section of the society displayed public interest in the agrarian crisis. This in turn led to the beginning of awareness about the direct connection between agrarian policies, food access and public well-being.[427] According to Sainath, this was the first time in Independent India that 'farmers as a class' were uniting to confront the corporate world. The last time Indian farmers unitedly confronted the corporate world was against the East India Company and they were big enough - to force a government that never steps back, to eat crow (to roll back)![428] It was significant for it was the first time a cross-section of society displayed public interest in the issues associated with the agrarian crisis.

Some aspects of the artistic practices of Thukral and Tagra were aligned with the protests and have been discussed in the last section of the previous chapter. There exists significant ignorance and indifference towards agricultural practices amongst the urban population. The primary reason for this enhanced visibility is the enormous media reportage and significant global attention, which made the crisis pervade all spheres of public debate. The newspapers and television channels kindled curiosity about the agrarian sector amongst a cross-section of Indians, and

[427] Namita Waikar, *Farmers Protest! A Movement for Our Times* (New Delhi: Yoda Press, 2025), p.ix
[428] P.Sainath, Book Release Talk, 'Farmers Protest! A Movement of our Times' by Namita Waikar, IIC, New Delhi, 22 April 2025.

strengthened the resolve to speak against inappropriate use of power.[429] 2020 saw the contemporary art scene's relatively new shift towards artists recognizing the impact of alliances between corporations and state policies in the previously sidelined crisis. This chapter analyzes contemporary art and artists' articulation of the agrarian crisis as a situational response. This shift was mobilized due to the increased visibility of the protests due to extensive media coverage and global attention. The purpose is to describe and analyze specific artistic practices and in the process of analyzing stay watchful of the plurality of artistic viewpoints, systems of thought, and visibility of the artworks thereby finding common and forging ties with the crisis, if they exist. But before moving to the artworks, it is important to understand the genealogy and the objective of the protests.

6.2 From Resistance to Reform: The Genealogy and Purpose of Protest

For a country with a population of over 1.4 billion, it is dangerous to take food and land security for granted. In 2018, about 200 farmer organisations formed a coalition and staged protest marches in Mumbai and Delhi. Tired of cultivating losses, the farmers demanded increased Minimum Support Prices (MSP)[430], one-time unconditional loan waiver and most importantly, a special session in the parliament to discuss agrarian distress.[431] The farmers were seeking support and representation within government schemes and policies.

The protests grew into mass gatherings and rallies primarily in the states of Punjab, Haryana and Uttar Pradesh.[432] Year 2020 saw a nation-wide protest called the

---

[429] Namita Waikar, *Farmers Protest! A Movement for Our Times* (New Delhi: Yoda Press, 2025) p.ix
[430] Minimum Support Price (MSP) is a market intervention by the Government to ensure that the agricultural producers are guaranteed a minimum price for selling their agricultural produce, even when market prices fall sharply. It is a state-led safety measure. (Commission for Agricultural Costs and Prices. 2021. https://cacp.dacnet.nic.in, accessed on 15 September 2024)
[431] Nanda Kishore Kannuri and Sushrut Jadhav, 'Cultivating Distress: Cotton, Caste and Farmer Suicides in India', *Anthropology & Medicine* 28, no. 4 (n.d.): 558–75, https://doi.org/10.1080/13648470.2021.1993630.
[432] 'Bharat Bandh: India Farmers Strike to Press for Repeal of Laws', *BBC*, 22 September 2020, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-54233080.

'Delhi Chalo' Movement. The timeline of this mass movement is important to grasp the artistic entanglement:

- June 5, 2020: Indian government promulgated three Farm Bills/Laws: Farmer's Agreement on Price Assurance and Farm Services Act, 2020; Farmers' Produce Trade and Commerce Bill, 2020; and the Essential Commodities Bill, 2020. These three laws push the agricultural sector from a Government-run to a Private-run sector.
- September 14, 2020: Ordinance is brought to the Parliament.
- September 17, 2020: Ordinance is passed in the Lok Sabha (Lower House).
- September 20, 2020: Ordinance is passed in the Rajya Sabha (Upper House) through voice vote.
- September 25, 2020: Farmers across India take to the streets in response to a call by the All India Kisan Sangharsh Coordination Committee (AIKSCC)
- September 27, 2020: Farm Bills are given presidential assent; notified in the Gazette of India; become Farm Laws.
- November 25, 2020: After sporadic protests and a nationwide road blockade, farmers' unions call for a 'Delhi Chalo' movement.
- January 4, 2021: Seventh round of talks between government and farmer leaders.
- January 12, 2021: The Supreme Court stayed the implementation of the three contentious farm laws.
- March 6, 2021: Farmers complete and mark 100 days of protesting in peak winter on the streets of Delhi's borders.
- May 27, 2021: Farmers observed a 'black day' to mark six months of the process of agitation.
- November 19, 2021: Prime Minister announces repeal of the Farm Laws.[433]

More recent protests were in February 2024 where a 12-point charter of demands was made. some of them being:

- Full waiver of debts for farmers and laborers, a severe crisis that has contributed to over 100,000 suicides in India's agricultural sector since 2014
- A law guaranteeing Minimum Support Price (MSP) procurement for 23 crops, in alignment with the M S Swaminathan Commission, which had recommended that MSP be fixed at 50 percent above the cost of production.

[433] Express Web Desk, 'Farmers End Year-Long Protest: A Timeline of How It Unfolded', *The Indian Express*, 9 December 2021, https://indianexpress.com/article/india/one-year-of-farm-laws-timeline-7511961/.

- Implementation of the 2013 Land Acquisition Act, which mandates that written consent must be obtained before land is acquired, and that the compensation must be four times the collector rate.
- Implementation of a monthly minimum wage of Rs. 26,000 (USD 312.9); Pension for Farmers.
- Penalties and fines on Companies that produce and sell fake seeds, fertilizers and pesticides
- Establishment of a National Commission for Spices.[434]

The three Farm Laws: The Farmer Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Act, The Farmers Agreement on Price Assurance and Farm Services Act (Empowerment and Protection), and The Essential Commodities (Amendment) Act proposed significant market alterations which favoured private companies. This would have been in stark contrast to the present times where the majority of Indian farmers sell most of their agricultural produce at government-regulated wholesale markets or 'mandis' at the guaranteed MSP.[435] Under the existing regulations in India, the MSP framework ensures guaranteed procurement of produce at a secured price for farmers, safeguarding their earnings in the event of unforeseen inflation in commodity prices.

Contrary to the farm laws is the fact that for over the last decade, political parties have been talking about implementing the Swaminathan Commission Report (discussed in greater detail in previous chapters) on the basis of which they will ensure that the MSP doubles by 2022 and further empowers the farmers.[436] Facing endless restrictions to enter Delhi, the farmers planned a 180 km long farmers' march in the dark of the night, from Nashik to Mumbai in 2018. A 2-day long protest in November 2018[437], highlighted government inaction in fulfilling their promise to the farmers to double their income and fix the MSP according to the

---

[434] Ibid.
[435] 'Farm Laws: India PM Narendra Modi Repeals Controversial Reforms', 19 November 2021, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-59342627.
[436] Amandeep Sandhu, *Panjab: Journeys Through Fault Lines*, Revised edition (Gurugram, Haryana, India: Penguin Random House India Pvt. Ltd, 2023) p.51
[437] '"The Last Straw": Tens of Thousands of Indian Farmers Protest against Modi', *ABC News*, 30 November 2018, https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-11-30/tens-of-thousands-of-indian-farmers-protest-against-modi/10573542.

recommendations of the Swaminathan Commission Report.[438] The anger amongst the farmers was brewing for a long time and erupted in the form of the protests beginning 26 November 2020 and lasted till 11 December 2021.

With numerous entangled issues in the garb of neoliberalism, the farmers understood that if implemented, the proposed ordinances would eliminate regulatory support, weaken them, decimate their livelihoods, and empower greedy private players to dictate and control the prices. They started to prepare for a democratic, non-violent protest and in November 2020, hundreds of thousands of farmers converged towards Delhi - from the borders of Ghazipur on the east, Singhu to the north and Tikri on the west. They put tents and temporary shelters as peaceful gestures to indicate that this time they were in no hurry to return to their villages and farms, without resolving the matter.

Some artists were deeply invested in the protests and how the farmers were living. Some artists were recording the protests on ground while others were observing the news reportage and responding to it. One such example is the 2024 documentary film 'Déjà vu -Where the past meets the future', directed by Indian-American filmmaker Bedabrata Pain, which showed how farmers, old and young, men and women, created make-shift camps along the roadside and stayed for a peaceful protest, clearly in no hurry to return. The press and media were reporting this mass movement, such as the BBC reportage saying, "Since early February, iron nails, rods, barbed wire, boulders and makeshift walls have been used to barricade the capital's entry points against the protesters".[439] The protests and its media coverage transformed the farmers into activists, collaborating with artists, street demonstrators holding placards, voicing slogans and relentlessly demanding justice. The mass protests saw the emergence of politically resistant voices in the name of peace, human dignity, and justice.

---

[438] Namita Waikar, *Farmers Protest! A Movement for Our Times* (New Delhi: Yoda Press, 2025), p.xxi
[439] 'Bharat Bandh: India Farmers Strike to Press for Repeal of Laws', *BBC*, 22 September 2020, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-54233080.

The sit-in protest continued for one year and during this time, the protesting farmers were sprayed with water cannons, beaten up, thrown in prison and even mowed down by cars. Around 700 farmers lost their lives during the protests.[440] Earlier in the thesis, chapter five explains how artist duo Thukral and Tagra participated in the protests and worked on a documentary film along with the newsletter Trolley Times. Even though the media was actively reporting the protests, farmers were unhappy with the way press media and news channels were representing them and therefore decided to publish their own multilingual, bi-weekly newsletter called Trolley Times. It was a collaborative effort that used social media to connect, align and gather content, said Gurdeep Dhaliwal, a documentary photographer and writer who played an active part in the newsletter team.[441]

On social activist Sangeet Toor's request, New York University Professor Nosheen Ali wrote an article for Trolley Times, and that gave way to a women-led Punjabi newsletter called 'Karti Dharti' ('Karti' means a woman who does work with hands and 'Dharti' means earth or land). The title originated from the popular Hindi phrase 'Karta Dharta', referring to the gendered understanding of the male doer.[442] Designed by Navjit Kaur, the newsletter 'Karti Dharti' was circulated during the protests and set out to reverse the conventional gender roles, create space for shared narratives and affirm the integral and indispensable presence of women in the protests and on the farmland.

---

[440] Sabrang India, 'Déjà Vu -- A Film That Depicts Chilling Effects of Corporate-Contract Farming', *NewsClick*, 13 March 2024, https://www.newsclick.in/deja-vu-film-depicts-chilling-effects-corporate-contract-farming.

[441] Taran Deol, '"Media Not Portraying Us Well", so Farmers Print Trolley Times — Their Own Newsletter', *ThePrint*, 18 December 2020, https://theprint.in/india/media-not-portraying-us-well-so-farmers-print-trolley-times-their-own-newsletter/569615/.

[442] Parul, '"Karti Dharti" Tells Stories of Women Integral to Ongoing Farmers' Protests', *The Indian Express*, 5 April 2021, https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/chandigarh/karti-dharti-tells-stories-of-women-integral-to-ongoing-farmers-protests-7259036/.

Historic acts of resistance have stood against the systematic destruction of ways of knowing, living and listening and it is epistemicide in contemporary times. The protests were a unique historical resistance, an uneven combat between the power flexing governance and the alliance of the determined oppressed, and as Sainath says, between the family farmers and the corporate farmers.[443] It drew significant international attention, when Barbadian singer Rihanna tweeted about the awareness of the demonstrations,[444] and Swedish environmental activist Greta Thunberg expressed her support for the farmers.[445] Prominent voices from the diaspora, civil and human rights attorneys from the Indian-American community - were drawn towards the sustained mass protests and suddenly the problems of the agrarian sector became clearly visible to everyone.

In support of the farmers, several nationwide strikes started to occur with over 250 million Indian citizens participating in solidarity.[446] All this volatility and expressions of global dissent informed the artistic practice of some Indian artists and they responded to the immensely political yet revolutionary protests. However, it would be incorrect to presume that the protests were just about the farm laws, rather they emerged out of India's longstanding and largely overlooked persisting agrarian crisis. The protests reflected a transformative social movement and served as grounds for constructive alliances across caste and class. This mass resistance was an act of collective reform both from within the social structures and on the outside against state violence.

---

[443] P.Sainath, Book Release Talk, 'Farmers Protest! A Movement of our Times' by Namita Waikar, IIC, New Delhi, 22 April 2025

[444] 'Farmers' Protest: Rihanna Tweet Angers Indian Government', accessed 20 May 2025, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-55914858.

[445] 'Greta Thunberg's Comments On Farmers' Protests Not Bilateral Issue Between India, Sweden: Ministry', accessed 20 May 2025, https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/greta-thunbergs-comments-on-farmers-protests-not-bilateral-issue-between-india-sweden-ministry-2384655.

[446] Nanda Kishore Kannuri and Sushrut Jadhav, 'Cultivating Distress: Cotton, Caste and Farmer Suicides in India', *Anthropology & Medicine* 28, no. 4 (n.d.): 558–75, https://doi.org/10.1080/13648470.2021.1993630.

There can never be a coherent expression of a cause but it can still remain powerful in its oblique, disparate ways - simply making something visible, fostering connection and situating the viewer in an uncomfortable arrangement of reality. This chapter elaborates upon four artistic practices that appear to have emerged almost reflexively as direct responses to the protests and employed art as a strategic tool to critique this national spectacle.

6.3 Sagnik Samanta's 'Farmland to La La Land' (2021)

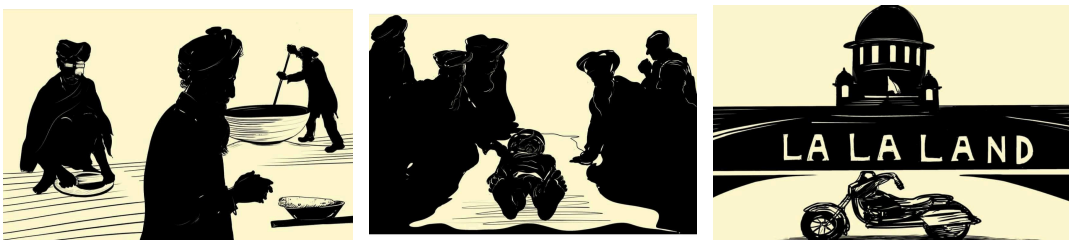


Fig.6.1-6.3: Sagnik Samanta, 'Farmland to La La Land', 2021, Set of 17, 12x18 inches, Edition 1 of 5, Digital prints on Hahnemühle Archival paper, Art Heritage Gallery, Delhi. Image Credits: Sagnik Samanta and Art Heritage Gallery

Interdisciplinary artist Sagnik Samanta (b.1994, Bolpur, Santiniketan, Kolkata) created a series of woodcut prints titled 'Farmland to La La Land' as a reflexive action to his observations of the farmer protests. The title 'La La Land' reminds one of the popular American, romantic musical film of 2016, directed by Damien Chazelle.[447] The film follows the love story of an aspiring actress and a jazz musician as they chase their ambitions in the dream-like city of Los Angeles. The artwork makes a mocking reference to the 'La La Land' as a dream-chasing, delusional, rich and powerful world and the image shows the Parliament House in Delhi, the house of the government in the political capital of India and a luxurious, imported motorbike parked right in front of it (Fig.6.3). Farmers who lived and worked collectively against the state, were Samanta's subjects and he observed them closely during the protests. The series of 12 small-sized, black silhouette prints, documented how the old and young farmers came together for the protests;

[447] 'La La Land (2016) - IMDb', accessed 20 May 2025, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt3783958/.

simple chores like cooking (Fig.6.1) and discussing issues, or mourning the loss of one of them (Fig.6.2), became the subject to document for Samanta.. His prints are devoid of any background details, as though black silhouettes of farmers and the state are lurking in an open, unresolved space. The turban clad, wearied, farmers appear as faceless and repetitive motifs in the series of prints. Samanta plays with the compositional elements of depth, perspective and shadows in a sharp, yet minimalistic way.

The series was exhibited in a group show at Art Heritage Gallery, which is a popular white-cube, private gallery in central Delhi in 2021. It occupied a wall space with multiple frames of prints displayed in a synchronous spatial rhythm. The display offered a clear indication of how the series was organised. It built two clusters with an increased spatial indent between them, suggestive of the rural-urban divide. The seven frames on the left represented the protests, community cooking, and death associated with the farmland and five frames on the right represented the comfortable delusions of the 'La la land', such as leisurely gossip over smoking a pipe or a cigarette, and reading the newspaper on the toilet seat. Assuming that the works would be read or viewed from left to right, one sequential indicator was that the first frame on the far top-left depicted a tractor on the farm referring to the farmland and the last frame on the lower right showed the urban institutional centre with the text 'La La Land' (Fig.6.3). The series therefore unfolded like a narrative of contrasts and events leading the viewer to self-mediate the disclosure.

Within the larger framework of the group exhibition, this was the only work that was addressing the farmer protests. According to Samanta the format of exhibiting the works wasn't well thought out as he was much interested in printing the series as small, accordion-format zine or else an animation clip so that it had a wider reach and could be circulated amongst the public.[448] With a strong belief in the power of printmaking as a medium to express and assert, Samanta's aim of creating

[448] Conversation with Sagnik Samanta

these artworks was to visually recreate the lives of the farmers during the times of the protests and generate awareness through wide dissemination. However, looking at the prints there are a lot of hints that point out the fact that one need not only think of them in terms of documenting the protests. For instance, one of the works shows the highly mediatised image of a large-scale community kitchen, reflecting upon a shared sense of care, well-being and solidarity amongst the farmers against the powers of the state. In several ways, the works depict inclusivity and the successful flattening of some prevalent divisions and hierarchies between small and marginal farmers, labourers, Dalits and women. A similar observation was made by author-journalist Amandeep Sandhu in his book Punjab where he says, 'ailing together in poverty, the protests demonstrated a strong caste cohesion, but caste division had not disappeared'.[449]

In a conversation with Samanta, he said that this series was some sort of an intense outburst from within towards the farmer agitation, however, it was very superficial because he was not on the ground with the protestors and was gazing at the spectacle from far.[450] He admitted that he felt a colossal distance due to his perspective as an urban city dweller who thrives on the positive potential of neoliberalism, which in reality, continues to exploit the rural population. Samanta stated that he felt sad as an ignorant urban consumer who had no knowledge of the production chain or the food system. He therefore decided to create a visual narrative which mocks the privileges of the urban inhabitants and the seat of power and decision-making - the centre, the so-called 'La La Land'. Contrary to Samanta's view that his response is superficial, for a viewer the works foreground a sort of presentness, trying to make the viewer look into the images and in a way into the protests. The message-driven, reactionary prints were a kind of proscenium, presenting a world for you to look at closely.

---

[449] Amandeep Sandhu, *Panjab: Journeys Through Fault Lines*, Revised edition (Gurugram, Haryana, India: Penguin Random House India Pvt. Ltd, 2023) p.43.
[450] Conversation with Sagnik Samanta

In a somewhat gendered (more men than women) representation, the works operate as sites of memory, especially now, when the protests are recent history. The artist agreed to how his situational autonomy encouraged him to create but has not clarified if these works were meant for a time-specific consumption. It makes one question if such a representation is intended to glorify/dignify or exploit the subjects through commercialization? Are these examples of how the subversive becomes commercially valuable? In what capacity do artists aestheticize pain, narrate victimhood, especially when they are not themselves a victim? Isn't this a form of re-authoring of agency? All these enquiries have been historically present in many artworks associated with war, propaganda, and vulnerability. This is an ethically complex space and sometimes feels like the fine line between empathy and voyeurism is often crossed on the pretext of engagement - which on one hand reinforces the cause but at the same time, destabilizes social protocols.

If seen as activism, one would think in the light of Jean Fisher's observation that, 'activism operates on a naive faith that words and images are directly communicable'.[451] Documenting violence, and loss, the series emerges like victim imagery and is undeniably both a witness and a testimony. It is a visual storytelling that objectifies injury, suffering, trauma, injustice, and death. It is also an indicator of how the protests were seen and understood.

6.4 Pushpamala N.: Protest Slogans

Layering further the plausibility of artistic practices connecting with the farmer protests is Bengaluru-based artist Pushpamala N. (b. 1956, Bengaluru, south India). Famous for her photo-performances which are staged ethnographic photographs, Pushpamala's artistic practice involves embodiment and re-enactment of the roles of the subject and the photographer, in simultaneity. A large part of her artistic oeuvre has been a critical social commentary that involves a sharp and pointed investigation into identities and their representation. A clear divergence from her

[451] Grant H. Kester, *The One and the Many: Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context* (Duke University Press, 2011), p.70.

artistic style was her work 'Nara', a Hindi word meaning 'slogan', which was a set of 50 texts and drawings etched on copper sheet (Fig.6.4), shown as part of a group Exhibition: 'Archaeology of the Self: Archives, Anarchives and the Artist', at the Art Heritage Gallery, Delhi (the same private gallery where Samanta's prints, discussed earlier in this chapter, were displayed).

Similar to Samanta discussed earlier, no other artwork in this group show was connected with the agrarian crisis or the farmer protests. These two examples of Samanta and Pushpamala are important indicators of how private art galleries can make room for activist tendencies by veiling them within the larger discourse of a group exhibition. In this way, the radicality gets shown in Delhi but also remains safely guarded within a divergent context.

According to the artist, 'Nara, commemorates the slogans and poems of recent popular protests in India. They are designed like posters, with words and images etched onto copper plates, artificially aged with patinas, and framed to look like school slates'.[452] The plates carry slogans in various languages and scripts, primarily in Hindi, English and Kannada (State language of Karnataka, south India), for example 'Humein humara hak chahiye' meaning 'we want our rights', 'Pagdi Sambhal Jatta' meaning 'hold onto your Turban man' and English such as 'End Islamophobia' and 'We will Resist: No CAA, NRC, CAB'. It is hard to trace the genealogy of these slogans. Author-activist Aruna Roy in her book 'Personal is Political' says, 'good slogans are a finely arranged string of words and rarely have a single author. They emerge out of collective experiences that have sifted through several years of consistent struggle.[453] Most slogans are designed to confront and carry within them the power of truth that evokes history and intention, creating a connection between theory and practice.

---

[452] 'Pushpamala N's Solo @ Chemould Prescott Road Mumbai', accessed 9 February 2025, http://mattersofart.blogspot.com/2022/11/pushpamala-ns-solo-chemould-prescott.html.
[453] Aruna Roy, *The Personal Is Political: An Activist's Memoir* (Harper Collins India, 2024), p.15

Distilling complex ideologies into short, simple, effective words, slogans are created to share and communicate a protest or movement's goals, emotions, and demands. The chanting of slogans draws deeply from the rich oral traditions of narration. When protestors chant the same slogan, its language, rhyme, and repetition creates solidarity and a feeling of shared purpose, strength and identity. Slogans facilitate visibility, and swift mobilization of ideas and ideologies associated with a specific event in history.

Fig.6.4: Pushpamala N., 'Nara', 2023, Set of 52, texts and drawings etched on copper sheet, coloured with patinas, 2020-2022, 8.5x10.5 inches (each framed plate), Group Exhibition: Archaeology of the Self: Archives, Anarchives and the Artist, Art Heritage Gallery, Delhi. Image Credits: Pushpamala N. and Art Heritage Gallery

In an email conversation with Pushpamala, she said that she was already working with epigraphy where she was studying and analyzing inscriptions. In an attempt to expand it further, she thought of commemorating poems and text from the protests. According to the wall text in the exhibition, the designs were inspired by early 20th

century Russian posters, collections of nationalist typographic fonts, protest posters and various other pedagogical materials. Protest posters often utilize typographic fonts that evoke cultural heritage, historical identity, and political strength to reinforce an authoritative aesthetic. Geometric, bold sans-serif typefaces carrying a revolutionary energy were commonly used on Soviet propaganda posters.[454] Posters are important historical artifacts that document the sentiments, slogans, and aesthetics of a movement.

Pushpamala's idea of framing the different length, language and context slogans into the same size of wood, echoes not just a visual rhythm but also the ideas of unity, equality, inclusivity, community, and the voice of the public at large. In appearance they look like small slates, which historically were used by children to write and practice their lessons on, especially before paper and notebooks became popular and affordable. These erasable and reusable slates were small, rectangular boards made from slate stone and framed with wood. It was a compulsory object in every child's hand going to school and children wrote on them using a slate pencil or chalk, which could be easily wiped off with a cloth or sponge. Students used them to practice handwriting, arithmetic, and drawing and in schools, teachers often gave exercises to be completed and shown directly on the slate.

It is important to note that the artist's choice of material highlights the educational and prescriptive nature of protests and slogans. However, the horizontal display of these pieces on a table in the gallery space, really made them look like scribbled slates of children from a school. And only on a closer look, would one identify them as protest posters carrying slogans. On being asked about her involvement with the agrarian protests, she clarified that her work does not specifically address the agrarian crisis as she is an urban dweller and this work was an attempt to memorialize the protests.[455] Her response reflects the complexities of positionality

[454] Paul McNeil, *The Visual History of Type: A Visual Survey of 320 Typefaces* (Laurence King Publishing, 2017).
[455] Conversation with the Artist.

in artistic entanglement with the crisis. It reveals how geographic and social context shapes artistic intent and interpretation of artworks.

6.5 Kulpreet Singh's Artistic Re-enactment of Violence

The first lot of protesting farmers, about 75000 of them, first arrived on the borders of Delhi and found that the police had barricaded the capital. They were repeatedly attacked with tear gas and water cannons.[456] The scale of violence during the protests and its media coverage built a compelling narrative for people to step-up and confront the consequences of ignorance.

Fig.6.5: Kulpreet Singh,'Indelible Black Marks I', 2022-24, Performance art. Image Credits: Kulpreet Singh

Fig.6.6: Kulpreet Singh,'Indelible Black Marks II', 2022-24, Performance art. Image Credits: Kulpreet Singh

Feeling restless after witnessing the atrocities on the voiceless farmers during the farm protests, is artist Kulpreet Singh (b.1985, Punjab) who started to develop his ideas of mark-making which eventually gave way to an ongoing - developing project titled 'Indelible Black Marks'. Over the years, the works in this project included drawings, performances, films, and installations. The ick to respond began

[456] Namita Waikar, *Farmers Protest! A Movement for Our Times* (New Delhi: Yoda Press, 2025), p.51-52.

with ‘Indelible Black Marks I’, which was an artistic re-enactment of violence, primarily stone-throwing, baton strikes, water-cannons, and foam-rubber bullets used during the Farmers’ protests.[457] He collaborated with a group of men and with them pelted stones and small rocks, for a specific duration on a white fabric (Fig.6.7). Each act of violence left its mark on a large piece of fabric adhered to an inked medium (Fig.6.8), asserting restlessness and loss of dignity. The artistic process was a collaborative recall of the violent incidents associated with the protests and was documented as a colour film.

Fig.6.7: Kulpreet Singh,‘Indelible Black Marks I’, 2022-24, Preparation for Stone-Pelting, Performance art, Punjab. Image Credits: Kulpreet Singh

[457] Rahul Kumar, ‘“Indelible Black Marks” by Kulpreet Singh Seeks to Be a Mirror to the Society at Large’, *Stir World*, 18 October 2021, https://www.stirworld.com/see-features-indelible-black-marks-by-kulpreet-singh-seeks-to-be-a-mirror-to-the-society-at-large.

Fig.6.8: Kulpreet Singh,'Indelible Black Marks I', 2022-24 Large scale print made at the performance, Performance art, Punjab. Image Credits: Kulpreet Singh

6.5a Angst or Resistance: Mark-making and Stone Pelting

Historically the act of stone-pelting can be seen as an act of aggression, defiance and civil disobedience, popularly seen in global news reportage during civil unrest. It is seen and understood as a violent form of protest and often leads to serious injuries and even fatalities. However, in the Islamic culture, stone-pelting has a religious connotation as it is performed in the form of a ritual to oppose and reject sin and temptation as the devil, at the Hajj pilgrimage in Mecca, Saudi Arabia.[458] In this context the act is a non-violent, symbolic act of faith in the good. In both cases the motivation behind the act itself is to show angst and resistance.

One of the most noticeable contemporary examples of stone-pelting is the youth of Kashmir swinging stones at the Indian defence forces including the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) and the Jammu-Kashmir police. This unarmed street

[458] Bassam Hatoum and Lujain Jo, 'Muslim Pilgrims Take Part in Symbolic Stoning of the Devil as Hajj Pilgrimage Winds Down', AP News, 29 June 2023, https://apnews.com/article/hajj-islam-saudi-pilgrimage-devil-pillars-a2835a79c87f46a27ea87fbafa27a14a.

rebellion is locally referred to as 'Kanni Jung' or 'war of stones', and the act became a signature form of revolt, beginning in 2008 during the 'Ragdo Protests'. According to a news report, in 2016, there were around 2500 incidents of stone-pelting in the Kashmir Valley.[459] Pellet guns are referred to as 'non-lethal weapons' by the police, but doctors believe they have the potential to cause lasting damage to a person's health, loss of vision, impairment and even death.[460] Protesters and pelters are often detained by police under the provisions of Public Safety Act.

According to Adfer Shah, a Kashmiri analyst, sociologist, and associate editor for Eurasia Reviews, the act of stone throwing cannot be understood without taking its context into account. He asserts that the term 'stone-pelter', has two meanings: for the locals, the act of stone-pelting is an emotional reaction to the intense violence inflicted by the 'other', however, for an outside observer, the stone pelter is seen as a furious, indoctrinated youth who lacks reasoning. He further asserts that the reality on the ground is different, and each incident requires deep contextual comprehension.[461] Therefore by exporting these contexts to an unfamiliar environment, such actions can never be fully comprehended. But isn't this exactly what Singh has done in his performance-based artwork. The act of stone-pelting has been de-contextualized from its source and presented as an independent act of force. A real-life scenario is uprooted, gets performed as a powerful gesture, and summons the performers and the audiences to witness the immoral moments bringing agency to both power and powerlessness of this form of resistance. The act itself being all-consuming communicates the uncomfortable ugliness of consciously aiming to hurt someone and making a visible mark. It must have

---

[459] EurAsian Times Desk, 'How Lucrative Is the Stone Pelting Business in Kashmir?', *EURASIAN TIMES*, 5 May 2017, https://www.eurasiantimes.com/stone-pelting-kashmir/.
[460] Observer News Service, 'How Stone Pelting Is Different from Kanni Jung', *Kashmir Observer*, 10 July 2017, sec. FEATURE, https://kashmirobserver.net/2017/07/10/how-%c2%91stone-pelting%c2%92-is-different-from-%c2%91kanni-jung%c2%92/.
[461] Observer News Service, 'How Stone Pelting Is Different from Kanni Jung', *Kashmir Observer*, 10 July 2017, sec. FEATURE, https://kashmirobserver.net/2017/07/10/how-%c2%91stone-pelting%c2%92-is-different-from-%c2%91kanni-jung%c2%92/.

brought fresh insight and experience for the performers who might have otherwise been complacent of this method of resistance.

An important observation made by Adfer Shah is that the vernacular phrase 'Kanni Jung' cannot be adequately translated into the English language. The term 'stone-pelting' denotes an action, whereas 'Kanni Jung' denotes reaction. The word 'Jung', meaning 'war' suggests that two parties are engaged in a reciprocal dispute, and in stark contrast, the target of the stones is the only thing the word 'pelt' focuses on. Therefore, by omitting that party from the definition, it places the authorities in the role of a silent and passive victim, which is incorrect.[462] The victim-perpetrator binary is thus more understandable in the phrase 'Kanni Jung' against the one-sided act of stone-pelting. It is important to mention here that for Singh, the act of pelting stones was the performance but the title of the artwork refers to the marks - the damage, and the loss of dignity - sustained by the act - which is the end-result of the act. During the performance the physical act of throwing stones took the centre-stage with no specific incidental context attached to it. But the recording of the performance was exhibited and played in loops during the farmer protests in 2021, in a way contextualizing it within the broader framework of historic episodes of resistance, discussed ahead.

In 'Indelible Black Marks II', Singh presented a large-scale performance (Fig.6.5), spreading enormous canvases across the fields in Punjab, in order to reinterpret the annual stubble-burning ceremony (Discussed in detail in Chapter 3, Gram Art Collective). The performance was a collaboration where Singh invited friends and colleagues to a full-day activity of spreading and marking endless scrolls of canvas across the lengths of burning fields. It was a laborious exercise where the canvas became one with the land and could permanently carry the marks.

---

[462] Observer News Service, 'How Stone Pelting Is Different from Kanni Jung', *Kashmir Observer*, 10 July 2017, sec. FEATURE, https://kashmirobserver.net/2017/07/10/how-%c2%91stone-pelting%c2%92-is-different-from-%c2%91kanni-jung%c2%92/.

In 'Indelible Black Marks III' (Galerie Mirchandani + Steinruecke, Mumbai, 2024), the burning of the fields took a sharper focus as the artist directed the flames to create particular images of words, species, and trees on the land. He recorded aerial perspectives of the charred fields to provide a broader view of the gradual decline in biodiversity.[463] In all the three iterations, the underlying process of repetitive mark-making has been a unifying feature, which in some ways connects with his training as a printmaker.

Singh asserts that the scale of his projects is important for him, in order to reflect the magnanimity of this humanitarian crisis. The impressions of persistent acts of violence serve both as a testament and inquiry; the marks render a process and reflect a site, simultaneously. The project is indicative of several irreversible black marks rendered on the land, and the community and mark-making is a way of translating the cruelty of violence. The massive white fabrics used in the performances opened a space that allows one to see alterity in its absence and then it metamorphoses into a black stained cartograph embedded with forceful impacts of violence. It is interesting how the fabric organically absorbs ink indicating the transference of every violent confrontation. The fabrics, when detached from the ink-bed or the burning farmland, emerged as stained and tattered retrospective mapping of accumulated wounds. The abstract, chaotic black patches on the surface of the fabric serve as testimonies of horror, which are radical to the in-between white spaces.

6.5b. Film: 'Indelible Marks'

The three iterations were documented as a short (6:20 minutes) colour film with the same title as the iterations and shown repeatedly during the farmer protests in 2021. The film carried a mix of the process of mark-making of the three works interspersed with archival and media footage of riots, global protests and resistance movements. The title of the film was written in Punjabi, English and Hindi while

[463] 'Essay - Indelible Black Marks - Exhibitions - Galerie Mirchandani + Steinruecke', accessed 19 February 2025, https://www.galeriems.com/exhibitions/indelible-black-marks/essay.

the voice of the narrator speaks in English. The film begins with setting its premise of 'dedicating it to those who always fight for the social interests of the others'.[464] In some ways the film has a much broader ambit than the three iterations it covers, because it begins with archival media footage of rebellion movements and protests in geographically dispersed continents such as Newark, New Jersey, in New Delhi, then in Minnesota and then in Auckland, New Zealand.

To explain this further, the narrator begins by saying that the world has witnessed countless rebellions seeking justice and upholding human and civil rights. And then it leaps into footage from the Lower House (Lok Sabha) of the Indian Parliament where a Member of Parliament is announcing and tearing to pieces a Bill on the Citizenship Amendment Act of 2019. The camera moves quickly to show an Indian woman politician speaking assertively in Hindi, a readiness towards violence if needed to save religion.

And after the first 37-seconds of the film, we see the drone-footage of Singh's performative work in which two massive cranes along with several collaborators are lifting the fabric above ground to place it over the inked bed (Fig.6.4). The narrator meanwhile bridges the abrupt change and says, 'driven by hunger for power, placing the crown of immorality on religion they have started using gullible devotees as a deadly weapon'.[465] And then the performance involving stone-pelting on the fabric begins. Singh's work is like contemporary performance drawing, where the act of creating is emphasized as much as the outcome; where the process of pelting stones or burning the crops is as essential as the impact of these acts. It has an authentic charge to it and serves a sensory impact on the viewer.

The first 40 seconds of the film - a montage of global rebellion - is important to understand how the film leads the viewer into the artwork. The immediacy of moving from one footage to another in a non-linear, layered and almost cryptic way

---

[464] *INDELIBLE BLACK MARKS | Kulpreet Singh | Contemporary Indian Artist | Art Documentation Art Activism*, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0lxvP7d2iNg.
[465] Ibid, 0:32 - 0:36 (Video)

does not prepare the ground for what the viewer is being initiated to see. The narration however fills in the gaps and intervals sometimes individuating the artistic stance, sometimes diluting it. For instance, the voice says 'art is a medium to awaken the asleep conscious of people - the horror inflicted by Hitler on Jews, the riots of 1984 in India, the *Jalian Wala Bagh* (Punjab) massacre, the Gujarat riots of 2002, the Indo-Pak partition - in all such events, despite theses being history, the generations continue to carry an inherited heartache'[466] - this is a rather confusing historic account of violence.

The film ends with a written statement saying 'every year countless lives are lost to riots, this video is just for awareness..'. Directed by Vipin Malawat, the film shares the title with the three iterations but in its content it becomes a non-linear site of unresolved difficulty. There are so many fragments and dimensions to the film that it is difficult to conceive it in its totality. Other than the intelligent usage of drone-recording, the intense strength and scale of the performances are not clearly substantiated in the format of the film, and this was important because once the performances are over, the film becomes the primary entry-point to the artwork. Each medium has its unique properties, but for the purpose of analysis, a film needs to be different from a video-recording of the performance artwork. Even with the same title, a film need not correspond to the real-time dynamics of the performance but if it cannot substantiate, at least it should not subordinate meaning; because the experience of the film is free to be radically different from a video footage.

6.5c Violence and Trauma

Singh stated that his artworks are representative of the violence and the unforgettable pain of the Covid-19 pandemic. The protests brought to public memory the impact of the pandemic on the agrarian community and the rural population as a whole. The pandemic led to a mass reverse-migration of the rural population and Sainath explains it further saying, 'everybody kept asking - why are

[466] *INDELIBLE BLACK MARKS | Kulpreet Singh | Contemporary Indian Artist | Art Documentation Art Activism*, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0lxvP7d2iNg.

they going back to their villages? Don't they have a better chance of survival in the city? And these questions reflected the urban population's selfish need for cheap labour'.[467] He further added, 'The real question to ask is why did they leave their villages and come to the cities in the first place? And the answer to that is just two words: 'Agrarian Crisis'.[468] The traumatic memories of Singh's work as a volunteer at the cremation grounds during the pandemic are embedded in his artwork. There exists a physical material dimension to his association with the pandemic, as he gathered a handful of ash from the pyre of several victims and used that ash as a pigment on his white canvas.[469] The large white fabrics used by Singh are a symbolic reminder of the funeral shrouds which wrap the body of the deceased.

Art theorist Rosalind Krauss, elaborated upon the 'post-medium condition' in her popular essay 'A Voyage on the North Sea' (1999), where medium-specificity gives way to conceptual hybridity and wider heterogeneity of practices.[470] Singh's artistic strategy involves a cross-medium dictum, where gesture, language, and evidence, all are at play. Representing violence is about transiting across the intimate and public terrains of experience. Mark-making as an expression of resistance is a powerful concept that challenges authority, asserts identity, and critiques power structures. Indigenous communities around the world have used the technique of mark-making to assert cultural identity and communicate histories, and knowledge-systems.

In public spaces mark-making in the form of street art and graffiti can be an intentional disruption of mainstream discourse. In the context of Singh, the act of mark-making belies the complex ideas of violence, its experience and memory. As

---

[467] P.Sainath, Book Release Talk, 'Farmers Protest! A Movement of our Times' by Namita Waikar, IIC, New Delhi, 22 April 2025.
[468] P.Sainath, Book Release Talk, 'Farmers Protest! A Movement of our Times' by Namita Waikar, IIC, New Delhi, 22 April 2025.
[469] Rahul Kumar, '"Indelible Black Marks" by Kulpreet Singh Seeks to Be a Mirror to the Society at Large', *Stir World*, 18 October 2021, https://www.stirworld.com/see-features-indelible-black-marks-by-kulpreet-singh-seeks-to-be-a-mirror-to-the-society-at-large.
[470] Rosalind Krauss, *A Voyage Om the North Sea - Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition* (UK: Thames and Hudson, 1999).

an individual mode of expression, mark-making (e.g., scratches, smudges, drips) serves as a performative incarnation of psychological or emotional resistance, particularly for those living under oppressive conditions. It can be a way to reclaim one's individual or collective sense of self and agency. Contemporary use of '#' hashtags' is an example of digital mark-making, one that unifies and mobilizes voices and narratives through social media handles for change and action.

6.5d 'Fossils of Force' and 'Langar' (2025)

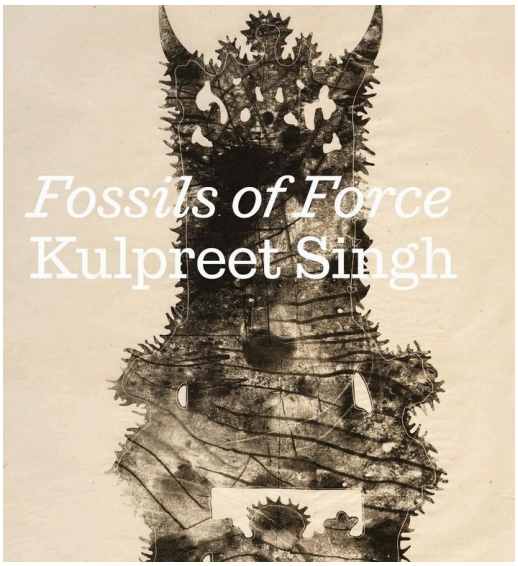


Fig.6.9: Kulpreet Singh, 'Fossils of Force (Chair)', 2025, Letterpress ink on rice paper, 56.5 x 35.5 inches (143.5 x 90 cm), Galerie Mirchandani Steinreuke, Mumbai. Image Credits: Kulpreet Singh and Galerie Mirchandani Steinreuke
Fig.6.10: Kulpreet Singh, 'Langar', 2025, Pond Room of Nine Fish Gallery, Mumbai. Image Credits: Kulpreet Singh and Nine Fish Gallery

More recently, Singh presented his second solo exhibition titled 'Fossils of Force' (Galerie Mirchandani + Steinruecke, Mumbai, 2025) (Fig.6.9) re-emphasizing his take on the farmers and the farmland. The exhibition stated its role to serve as a memorial site for the 738 farmers who died during the year-long farmers' protests and hosted a 'langar' (Fig.6.10), a communal meal symbolic of nourishment, equality and servitude, a given in the Sikh tradition. The 'langar' embodies the Sikh principle of 'seva' (selfless service), where community kitchens serve free

meals to all visitors, regardless of their background, social status, and religion. Without any expectation of reward, volunteers prepare, serve, and clean up after the meals as an act of devotion, and a sense of shared responsibility - something very similar that the farmer protests showed to the world. During the protests, farmers emerged as a unified class which lived together as a community on the streets of Delhi. Together they fostered a sense of belonging, equality, compassion, sharing meals, problems and aspirations - symbolizing unity and collective responsibility. Therefore, by hosting a 'langar' in a contemporary art gallery space, the spiritual was dove-tailed into the physical. The artist not only recreated the public memory of the protests but also built a narrative of comparing the protests to a ritualised and devotional duty of the farmers. This is a wonderful example of how rituals that often involve symbolic actions, gestures, and behaviors and are performed in a set space and time, can be re-contextualized and aligned with performances.

British anthropologist Victor Turner's point of view that rituals work like 'social dramas' in the context of performance theory, explains the structure of many contemporary art performances. He introduced the concept of 'communitas', which is the sense of unity and equality that emerges during rituals as a caveat in understanding the emotional and collective power of ritualistic acts.[471] It is important to state that even though Singh lives and works in Punjab, northern India, closer to Delhi, he has exhibited all his works only in Mumbai, except the film 'Indelible Marks' which was shown in Delhi during the protests. On being asked if he wishes to exhibit his work in Delhi, Singh said, yes it is important and he is finding ways to do that.[472] Despite the natural and political relevance of Delhi, Singh's exhibitions reveal his noticeable absence from the capital's art scene. The reasons for this absence are the shrinking space for dissent and the heightened scrutiny of politically charged subjects in the capital, making it a difficult space for voicing resistance and agency.

---

[471] E. Turner, *Communitas: The Anthropology of Collective Joy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).
[472] Conversation-chat with the artist

Hailing from a farming ancestry in Patiala, Singh is extremely defensive about the community of farmers and sees his task to address these issues as his moral responsibility. Speaking about the farmers, in an interview with Chintan Girish Modi for the Art India magazine, Singh said, 'they are my friends, they trust me, they have seen me during the protests. I am not an artist who has a transactional relationship with them'.[473] If we compare the two artists, both Samanta and Singh are trained printmakers, they were angered and reacted to the protests in their own vocabulary but they positioned themselves very differently. While Samanta feels it was just a reaction to something distant, Singh emphasizes his innate rootedness in the crisis. Without necessarily being reductive, this comparison of the two artistic practices might be an example of divergent sensitivities of an urban and an agrarian dweller.

6.6 Vidyun Sabhaney & Orijit Sen: Zines, Comics and Graphic Novels

We now look at the artistic practice of Vidyun Sabhanay (b.1988, New Delhi), and Orijit Sen (b.1963, West Bengal), individually and as collaborators. Sabhaney is a Gurugram, Haryana (north India) based writer and illustrator of graphic narratives and comics, both fiction and non-fiction, and Sen is a Goa-based (south-western coast of India) graphic artist known as the author of India's first graphic novel, 'River of Stories'. The common thread in Sabhaney and Sen's artistic practices is their choice of medium, which is graphics, published in different formats such as Zines, press reportage, comics, and graphic novels. Another important connection between the two artists is their individual and collective association with protests and resistance movements in the country.

6.6a 'Drawing Resistance' (2020) and 'Punjab Sketchbook' (2024)

Having majored in Journalism from University of Delhi in 2008, Sabhaney co-edited 'Drawing Resistance', a bilingual zine with two published issues in February and August 2020. Working collaboratively with Shefalee Jain, Shivangi Singh and Lokesh Khodke, the zine was a crowdfunded project and the first zine

[473] Modi, Chinta Girish. *Interview with Kulpreet Singh*. ART India Magazine, Issue Vol.27, Issue 03, 2025.

was published in response to and in support of the nationwide protests in India against Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), National Register of Citizens (NRC) and National Population Register (NPR) which impacted everyone, including the suicide inflicted agrarian sector. The zines were distributed free of cost at protest sites and also circulated digitally. The tone of writing and illustrating in the zines was rhetorical yet radical such as the following lines, 'The fertile land is sprouting venom from every pore. The sky is turning red from endless cries of gore.'[474] The first edition carried illustrations depicting the farmer suicides in Punjab and the river Chenab carrying floating corpses (Fig.6.11). The zine was an explicit response, did not mince words, and brought together visual art, poetry, short stories, essays, reports, and conversations reflecting critically on the socio-political climate of the country.

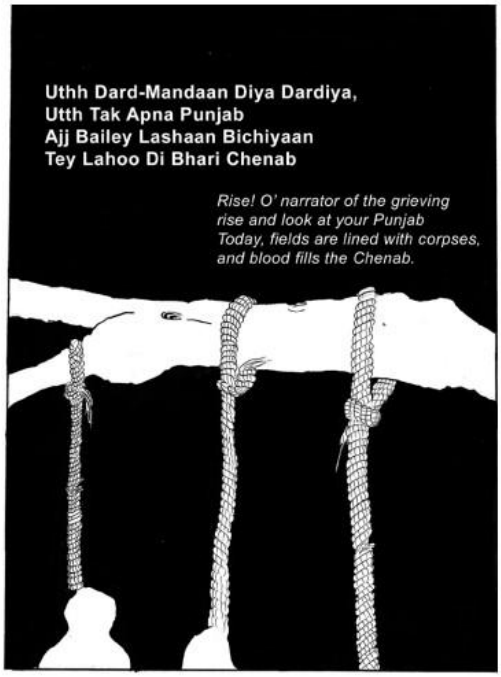


Fig.6.11: Vidyun Sabhaney, 'Drawing Resistance', February 2020, Zine, page 11, Black and white, online. Image Credits: Vidyun Sabhaney

The evolution of Zines can be traced back to self-published pamphlets and broadsides that have been tools of resistance across centuries. Many of these

[474] 'Drawing Resistance', Drawing Resistance, accessed 14 February 2025, https://drawingresistance.wordpress.com/.

pamphlets and broadsides carried texts that were critical of the state and governance, and had to be secretly produced, printed and circulated. Today, with multi-genre content, Zines are a medium that carry a do-it-yourself spirit that is free from commercial and institutional limitations. Zines position themselves as a platform for artists, writers and activists to convey dissent, and an unapologetic critique that challenges power dynamics, and fosters unity within communities.[475] Their capacity to enable the formation of non-geographical communities through e-mail and digital media is powerful. This is further explained by theorist Stephan Duncombe, who says, that Zines offer an alternative culture, a way of understanding and acting in the world, that focuses on accelerated consumer capitalism.[476] Over time, Zines grow and become visible through word-of-mouth appraisal and community-driven distribution. Their direct, unrefined content in the form of essays, arguments, opinions, and drawings, connect easily with audiences, especially in times of turmoil within social movements. Zines are usually mass copied through xerox machines or printed or downloaded digitally on devices by readers. They can be quickly circulated to a wide audience through mail, and their material access (in print or digital copy) provides a more personal connection between the creator and reader.

Sabahaney's Zines were well-timed and became popular on social media. They preserved dissenting perspectives on the resistance movements that were either silenced and excluded, or distorted by mainstream media. Defying and disrupting the binaries between urban-rural and private-public spaces, the Zines brought together voices from geographically isolated places to center their participation, and narrative. It is an example of how artists resist their positions in society as passive consumers and take control of the cultural production. The Zine networks and communities, thus, allowed marginalized subaltern voices to transcend their invisibility and reflect upon their personal lived experiences and identities.

---

[475] Tobi Vail, *Jigsaw*, no. 4 (Olympia, WA: Self-published, 1991).
[476] Stephen Duncombe, *Notes From Underground: Zines and the Politics of Alternative Culture* (Microcosm Publishing, 2017). p.29

Fig.6.12: Vidyun Sabhaney, 'Punjab Sketchbook', 2024, Illustration, Line drawing, The Scroll, Online. Image Credits: Vidyun Sabhaney, Scroll Newspaper

In the summer of 2024, weeks before the state elections, Sabhaney travelled extensively in Patiala, Sangrur (discussed earlier in chapter 5 - Thukral and Tagra's work), Mansa and Khadoor Sahib in the state of Punjab gathering insights into the lives of women impacted by farm suicides and the overall agrarian crisis. Based on her research, she produced a report with portrait-illustrations, titled 'Punjab sketchbook' (Fig.6.12) highlighting debt and unemployment as the two primary inheritances of poorly implemented policies and a reflection of failure of the

democratic processes of the state.[477] According to the data from the National Crime Records Bureau, 157 farmers in Punjab died by suicide in 2023. Sabhaney was aware of this alarming statistic and felt the need to delve deeper. Her research elaborated upon the lonely yet determined battle of rural women when farm debt pushes the men (farmer) to the extreme suicidal edge.

One such case which Sabhaney reported was of a 45 year old woman, Veerpal Kaur, who faced agricultural hardships, extreme debt, precarity and suicidal-death of three members of her family.[478] Her father committed suicide in 1995 due to crop failure and sustained debts on his one-acre cotton farm. At the age of 15 Veerpal Kaur had to drop out of school to work as a daily wage laborer, selling bangles, harvesting cotton, and doing household chores. In 1990, before Kaur got married, her husband's father, who was also a cotton farmer with 1.5 acres of land, had committed suicide. In 2003, four years after she was married, her husband also committed suicide. After such precarity and erasure, Kaur joined the *Kisan Mazdoor Khudkhushi Peedit Parivar Committee*, an organisation which defends the rights of families of farmers and laborers who have committed suicide. The committee's goal is to obtain compensation in accordance with the 2015 Punjab government's policy of paying rupees 3 lakh to farming households that have suffered suicide deaths.

Sabhaney's report was published in The Scroll newspaper and carried several line drawing illustrations (Fig.6.12) of the women she met and interviewed. Using the cross-hatching technique of line drawing, Sabhaney was able to illustrate and give face to the ambiguous identities of the victims of farmer suicides. Her monocolour, stylized, line drawings, along with text, similar to zines and comics, play a critical

---

[477] Vidyun Sabhaney, 'Debt and Distress: The Women of Punjab Wage a Lonely, Determined Battle', *The Scroll*, 15 February 2025, https://scroll.in/article/1078488/punjab-sketchbook-the-lonely-determined-battle-of-rural-women-as-farm-debt-pushes-men-to-the-edge.

[478] Vidyun Sabhaney, 'Punjab Sketchbook: The Lonely, Determined Battle of Rural Women as Farm Debt Pushes Men to the Edge', *Scroll.In*, 15 February 2025, https://scroll.in/article/1078488/punjab-sketchbook-the-lonely-determined-battle-of-rural-women-as-farm-debt-pushes-men-to-the-edge.

role in making the content more accessible and emotionally resonant to the reader. In her graphic memoir 'Fun Home' Alison Bechdel mentions that, drawing enables the past to be relived and understood anew, a practice that is crucial to reportage illustration, which frequently explores themes of trauma, identity, and memory using personal and emotional visual expression.[479] Additionally, critic Hillary Chute states that comics and hand-drawn images emphasize the existence of the hand, which makes them particularly effective for narratives centered on activism and testimonial writing.[480] Thus, unlike photography, Sabhaney's hand-drawn illustrations supplement textual reportage with an interpretive, testimonial layer that invites empathy. Using line drawing illustrations, therefore, becomes not only an aesthetic decision but a political one, signaling resistance to colourful, glossy, commercial publishing methods.

6.6b. 'Food and Farming' (2024)

A recent work co-designed by Sabhaney, along with Orijit Sen and Harsho Mohan Chattoraj is a comic book titled 'Food and Farming' (Fig.6.13) which documents the complexities of the Indian food system and the agrarian sector. It is a creative, visual narration-documentation of a call to protect the constitutional right to food and food sovereignty. The book carries an introductory text by researcher Ranjani Basu and Executive Director of the think-tank Focus on Global South[481], Shalmali Guttal which states that the inspiration for the comic book came from the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and the highly disputed passing of the Farm Laws and the subsequent mass protests. It also says that the book owes its existence to the urgency and dynamism of decades of deepening agrarian crisis in the country.[482] Employing the medium of visual storytelling, the book is loaded with textual

---

[479] Alison Bechdel, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2007). p.103
[480] Hillary L. Chute, *Disaster Drawn: Visual Witness, Comics, and Documentary Form* (Belknap Press: An Imprint of Harvard University Press, 2016). p.3
[481] Focus on global South - India - is a policy think-tank that provides research and analysis on issues such as globalisation, trade, climate change, agriculture etc.
[482] Harsho Mohan Chattoraj, Orijit Sen, and Vidyun Sabhaney, *Food and Farming: A Journey Through India in Comics* (LeftWord Books, 2024), p. 11-13.

information and reads like a textbook divided into fifteen chapters. Directed towards public education and awareness, the narrative of the book unfolds when two curious co-travelers embark on a journey across India asking questions about food consumption, production and distribution. On their sojourn, they meet and interact with numerous stakeholders in the larger agrifood system who in candid conversations explain their everyday problems and constraints related to food. The crisis unpacks itself with an introduction to the constitutional right to food, nutrition, hunger, food policies, food security, the politics and corporatization of food.

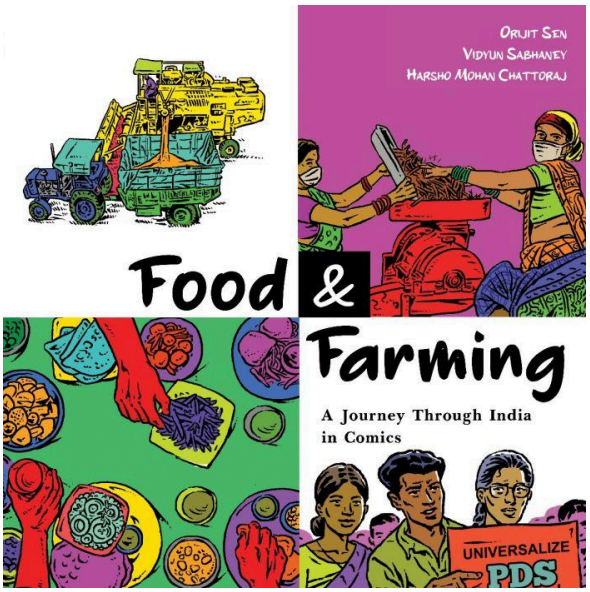


Fig.6.13: Vidyun Sabhaney, Orijit Sen, 'Food and Farming: A Journey Through India in Comics', 2024, Comic, 240 pages, Leftword publications. Image Credits: Leftword publications

'Food and Farming' offers a lengthy discourse wherein the politics exacerbates the crisis, perpetuates disparities, thereby pushing the vulnerable groups deeper into social stratification and poverty. This is articulated in assertions such as, "the state cannot impose a narrow view of what food is, based on religious and caste beliefs of a select few. It must enable all Indians to meet their nutritional needs, without prejudice.".[483] This examination begins with timelines of government policies and systems such as the Public Distribution System which has its roots in the wartime

[483] Ibid. p.150

rationing scheme of 1939 and how it changed post-independence, the impact of the Green Revolution and the Minimum Support Price (MSP), the New Economic Policy of 1991 and the Food Security Act of 2013.

The comic is heavily punctuated with research-backed data (Fig.6.14-6.15) such as, 'According to National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), more than 10,000 farmers across the country died by suicide in year 2020 alone and agriculture now being capital-intensive, the main reason is debt'. It highlights how the land ownership patterns, rooted in historical inequities, still continue to leave the marginalized communities on marginal lands or into migration, or a debt-driven death. The narrative of the comic weaves-in a social worker and researcher who was in town for a conference on nutrition, and happens to meet the two travelers. She sheds a spotlight on corporate hegemony through monopolisation and food fortification, and the precarities of the marginal and small farmers working on rain-fed plots, who dominate Indian agriculture. In essence she aligns with Vandana Shiva's emphasis on enhancing biodiversity rather than chemical monocultures, seed slavery and biopiracy.[484] Her voice clearly echoes Shiva's belief that corporate patents and intellectual property rights are actively scavenging on the variety and diversity of life-forms, which further aligns closely to the United Nations nutrition and food security report stating that land degradation and rapidly shrinking biodiversity constitutes a major threat to India's food and environmental security.[485]

The comic book bursts with the usage of strong primary colours (Fig.6.14) paired with dynamic line work and sketchy rendering of human figures. Employing bold reds, blues, and yellows, the visual intensity and emotional charge of the illustrations adds agency to the text. These colours are not strong aesthetic choices that heighten the drama of the plot, often associated with classic comic book storytelling. The comic makes use of colour not merely to decorate and draw

---

[484] Vandana Shiva, *Biopiracy: The Plunder of Nature and Knowledge* (Berkeley, California: North Atlantic Books, 2016), p.23

[485] Preeti Kathuria, 'Book Review: Food & Farming -A Journey Through India in Comics', *Food and Foodways -Explorations in the History and Culture of Human Nourishment*, n.d.

attention, but to narrate and emphasize power struggles, systemic inequalities, internal conflicts, and resistance. The text is written in bold letters (Fig.6.15) with varying font sizes, and italicization as though leaning, shouting, whispering, and commanding attention according to the message being conveyed. This typographic dynamism adds another layer of seriousness and works well with the strong colour scheme of the book.

Fig.6.14 -6.15: Vidyun Sabhaney, Orijit Sen, 'Food and Farming: A Journey Through India in Comics', 2024, Comic, 240 pages, Leftword publications. Image Credits: Leftword publications

Amidst the endless challenges that plague the agrarian sector, the book in its conclusive chapter offers a way forward, one which needs serious consideration, innovations and better policies. It suggests solutions such as increasing government investments in rural, local, agro- ecosystems in order to enhance the ecological interaction between soils, water, plants, animals and trees and the need to diversify, decentralize and universalise the public distribution system. The comic recommends that the farmers be provided with a fixed income and the government intervenes to actively negotiate the skewed and coercively controlled regulations and agreements of the World Trade Organisation. Highlighting the monopolizing tendencies of the corporations, and the vulnerabilities of farmers in an unequal

world, in the final pages, the travelers bid adieu, smiling and cycling their way out of the fields.

American cartoonist Frank Miller very aptly said that narration is not just a description, and the illustrations are not mere representations, there exists a gap and in that gap is the reality.[486] It is clear that the comic book's visual story-telling approach towards the agrarian issues is deeply invested and intentional, however, the mutation of it being a comic throws a two-way whimsical challenge on the reader. Firstly, the images offer a vivid experiential arena but are loathed with critical, bold textual information layered with political, social and economic concerns that prime the crisis. Even if the graphics are a rhetorical tool to enact a precarious narrative, the embedded diegesis of a comic seems vaguely oppositional to the compelling agency of a human crisis. The other possibility could be that integrating the crisis into a representative, conveniently-radical medium is rather strategic, in a way that it is functionally adequate yet remains succinctly conscious of the dangers of a politically charged subject matter; as American cartoonist Art Spiegelman (who is an inspiration for Sen) said, 'comics fly below the critical radar'.[487] It is true that comics are a popular, non-stereotypical, aesthetic medium that can spread faster and wider in spite of the existing wayward modalities of freedom of speech and expression.

There is definitely a real sense in saying that the dramatic medium of comics privileges a space of play, a site where nobody is critically looking and where one can flex some creative-communicative muscle, without much fear of analysis. However, there remains a third possibility to see the metaphor of two travelers as intrinsic variants of Darwinian and Marxist theory, suggested by Rambo and Sajise in the introduction of 'Human Ecology Research on Tropical Agriculture in Southeast Asia'.[488] It could be an alternate reading that illustrates how natural

---

[486] Stephen Becker, *Comic art in America: a social history of the funnies, the political cartoons, magazine humor;* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1959).
[487] Stephen Becker, *Comic art in America: a social history of the funnies, the political cartoons, magazine humor;* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1959). p.24
[488] A. Terry Rambo and Percy E. Sajise, 'Introduction to Human Ecology Research on Agricultural Systems in Southeast Asia', 1984, http://hdl.handle.net/10125/30618. p.21

scientists research the ecological context of agriculture and social scientists feel invested in the inherent man-environment relationship.

In 2011, the right to food was recognised as a fundamental right. It is a part of Article 21 of the Indian Constitution, which refers to our right to life and liberty.[489] In simpler words, it is the National Food Security Act (NSFA) which was passed in 2013, binding the state with the responsibility to ensure that for every citizen, there is access to adequate nutritional food.[490] Food connects us all, yet all the global pledges, policies and negotiations to create a well-fed, hunger-free world, are empty words, far from reality.[491] There are a range of players with different interests in the food system but it all inevitably begins with the cultivators, peasants and farmers. And, the farmers continue to acrimoniously exist as a dominant yet sidelined partner in the food chain indicating serious systemic flaws in the capital-intensive agrarian sector.

'Food and Farming' highlights these systemic flaws and calls for a transformation of agriculture, with radical changes and improved practices both from within the community and the state. The resistance towards exploitative corporatisation is however a much larger murk than the textual ambit of this book and the contradictions of capitalism in the ideological mindsets of the people of the world's largest democracy, should not be overlooked. For example, just prior to Delhi state elections, The Hindu, a national daily newspaper wrote, "Water, waste, traffic, safety, and air quality—everything is political. From how resources are delivered to how cities function, your vote shapes the future, make your voice count."[492] The national newspaper somehow forgot to add food to the list - which is a reflection of how the urban dweller perceives food as a passive given.

---

[489] Harsho Mohan Chattoraj, Orijit Sen, and Vidyun Sabhaney, *Food and Farming: A Journey Through India in Comics* (LeftWord Books, 2024), p.109-110.
[490]Ibid. p.109-110.
[491] Geoff Tansey, *The Future Control of Food: 'A Guide to International Negotiations and Rules on Intellectual Property, Biodiversity and Food Security'* (Routledge, 2012), p.1
[492] 'The Hindu on Instagram: "Water, Waste, Traffic, Safety, and Air Quality—Everything Is Political. From How Resources Are Delivered to How Cities Function, Your Vote Shapes the Future. Everything about You Is Political. Make Your Voice Count. Vote on February 5th. #EverythingIsPolitical #DelhiElections"', Instagram, 30 January 2025, https://www.instagram.com/p/DFc3G4Kyx2P/.

There is no second-guessing the urban populations' relationship with food, it begins from the supermarket and ends on the dining table; few have little or no idea about the farming, food security, food subsidies, inflation, Minimum Support Price (MSP), Public Distribution System (PDS) and the associated politics. The comic, through its materiality and content, therefore is an important deliberation that analyses and presents the agrarian crisis in the most direct and understandable form. It is engaging, research-backed and is layered with almost all the determinants of the crisis. The collection of frames, stuffed with accumulated data, interlaced with multiple temporarities, calls attention to itself as evidence.

6.6c Non-Fiction Comic Tradition and the 'River of Stories' (1994)

A significant part of India's traditional comic culture revolved around mythology, folklore, epics, and adventures involving superheroes and fantasies, such as the 'Amar Chitra Katha' (1967).[493] Traditionally comics have always assumed the status of popular entertainment for both adults and children. The beginning of non-fiction comic narratives reflected a shift in handling of the subject matter. With the introduction of historical figures, freedom fighters, saints, prophets, and real events into comic stories, the genre became more layered and pluralistic. The most important development in socio-political and non-fiction comic art occurred in the 1990s with the release of Sen's 'River of Stories' (1994), which is recognized as the first graphic novel from India.

Western graphic novels such as Art Spiegelman's 'Maus' are seen as touchstones for global comic studies. However, graphic art in the Global South has its own unique trajectory and should not be compared with the western counterparts. As rightly observed by sociologist Roma Chatterji, 'India's subculture of alternative comics is distinct, as it is based on creative experimentation with diverse pictorial

[493] 'Amar"¯Chitra"¯Katha: Is India's Storybook Relevant in Digital Era?', accessed 16 September 2024, https://www.forbesindia.com/article/bharatiya-vidya-bhavan039s-spjimr/amarchitrakatha-is-indias-storybook-relevant-in-digital-era/96392/1.

techniques, such as folk art, rituals etc.'[494] During the 2000s and 2010s, the non-fiction comic format in India evolved significantly and branched out into graphic biographies, reportage comics, travelogues, and narratives focusing on social justice.[495] For example, Subhas Vyam and Durga Bai Vyam's 'Bhimayana: Experiences of Untouchability' (2011), is a graphic biography of B R Ambedkar that articulates caste-based atrocities by supplementing folk art pictorial style with real life incidents.[496] Another popular example is Bharath Murthy's 'The Vanished Path: A Graphic Travelogue' (2015), which investigates ancient Buddhist sites and their historic relevance employing elements of travel writing along with historical references.[497] Recognizing that comics and graphic novels are a significant category in south asian literature, Pramod K. Nayar in his book, 'The Indian Graphic Novel: Nation, History and Critique', observes that "the graphic narrative gives not just words but visuals to the unspeakable and the unrepresentable".[498] The creative medium of non-fiction comics, has therefore established itself as a safe space for marginalized voices and research-centric, investigative storytelling.

'Food and Farming' in many ways is a stylistic reminder of Sen's first graphic novel titled 'River of Stories' (Fig.6.16), and his association with the river Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA). The first edition of the 'River of Stories' was published in 1994 and tells the story of the 'Rewa Andolan' – a fictional people's movement closely-based on the NBA (Fig.6.19). Over the course of a decades-long struggle, the NBA sought to prevent the construction of the Sardar Sarovar Dam as it would displace thousands of tribal Adivasis (Fig.6.18) and other communities from the Narmada Valley (Madhya Pradesh). The novel narrates this significant social movement of peaceful protests through the stories of the subalterns (Dalits and Adivasis). It highlights the place-based knowledge, wisdom, and rituals of the

[494] Roma Chatterji, *Graphic Narrative and the Mythological Imagination in India* (Routledge India, 2019).
[495] Neha Dixit, 'First Hand: Graphic Non-Fiction from India Vol 1', *Neha Dixit*, 21 January 2022, https://nehadixit.in/first-hand-graphic-non-fiction-from-india-vol-1/.
[496] Srividya Natarajan and S. Anand, *Bhimayana: Experiences Of Untouchability*, with Subhash Vyam (Navayana, 2011).
[497] Bharath Murthy, *The Vanished Path: A Graphic Travelogue* (Collins, 2015).
[498] Pramod K. Nayar, *The Indian Graphic Novel: Nation, History and Critique* (Routledge India, 2016).

local subaltern communities and their dependence on the riverine ecosystem for their livelihoods and sustenance.

For Sen, graphic novels and comics are a medium of simultaneity, where everything gets kneaded together - words, illustrations, space and the timing. Sen felt inspired by Art Spiegelman's 'Maus'(1986) and Keiji Nakazawa's 'Barefoot Gen' (1973) as radical comics that explored the impact of significant historic events such as the Holocaust and the bombings of Hiroshima. He wanted to create something deeply personal and yet historically relevant. The 'River of Stories' documents the personal narratives of the people of the Narmada Valley and offers a piercing critique of the myth of development and politics in India. For example, one of the panels in the novel shows a state official saying, "You say they need food and water? We'll give them potato chips and Pepsi Cola.."[499] This unrealised dream of development, connects very well with theorist Vivek Chibber's argument that one of the most significant failures of the post-Independent rulership in India has been to allow the capitalist class to overthrow the government.[500] Author, activist Arundhati Roy, in the foreword of Sen's graphic novel, observes that Sen has an angry, pugnacious political understanding of the NBA.[501] His work is a reflection of his deep understanding and anger towards the arbitrariness of power-hungry governance. Elaborating upon his vision, Sen says,

> *"In joining these varied and naturally unconnected works into a continuous thread, my intention was to try to break through the temporal and spatial specificities and present a mosaic of indigenous resistance to the materialistic, exploitative view of nature, that we so-called educated urban elites with our colonised world-view, have adopted as our default setting."*[502] *(Orijit Sen)*

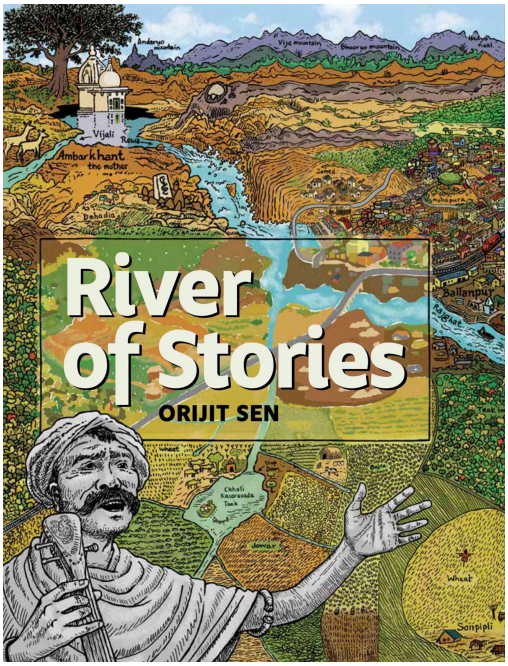
---

[499] Orijit Sen, *River of Stories* (Blaft Publications, 2022).
[500] Vivek Chibber, *Locked in Place: State-Building and Late Industrialization in India* (Princeton University Press, 2003). p.252
[501] Orijit Sen, *River of Stories* (Blaft Publications, 2022). p.3
[502] Orijit Sen, *River of Stories* (Blaft Publications, 2022). p.7

In 1990, Sen was working in Delhi, as a coordinator in an advocacy-driven Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) called 'Kalpavriksha'. Even though he was working on some comics, which he never managed to finish, he had this feeling of not having the right story to tell. Then he made a trip to the Narmada river in Gujarat and met social activist Baba Amte, who had left his 'aashram'[503] and was residing in the Narmada valley. Baba Amte has decided to never leave from the banks of the river - as a form of protest and his deep concern for the destruction of ecosystems, loss of traditional livelihoods, and the injustice to marginalized communities. The place had some epiphany and a mysterious conviction drew him towards the subject of the protests. His extensive travels taught him the meaning of the words 'rooted' and 'uprooted' and he understood the privileges of urban dwellers.[504]

While living near the Narmada river and witnessing and photo-documenting the protests (Fig.6.20), Sen realized that losing land for the tribal and Adivasi community is like losing a part of themselves; and a compensated land is not the same land. The cover page (Fig.6.16) of the graphic novel 'River of Stories' shows a map of the valley created by Sen and the place depicted is 'Amarkantak', a pilgrim town in Madhya Pradesh, which is the point of origin of the river Narmada. He roamed around with his camera, captured the visuals, internalised the landscape and then created a story.

[503] In India, an ashram is a traditional religious retreat or hermitage where individuals reside and engage in spiritual education, yoga, and meditation under the tutelage of a guru.
[504] Notes from ''Downstream on the River of Stories', Public Lecture by Orijit Sen, Arthshila Art Gallery, Delhi, April 2025



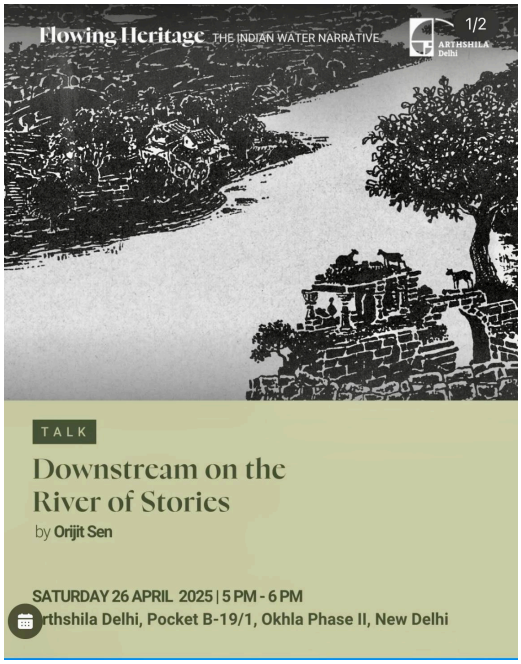


Fig.6.16: Orijit Sen, 'River of Stories', 1994, 2022, Graphic Novel, 78 pages, Blaft Publications. Image Credits: Blaft Publications

Fig.6.17: Orijit Sen, 'Downstream on the River of Stories', 2025, Public Lecture by Orijit Sen, Arthshila Art Gallery, Delhi. Image Credits: Orijit Sen and Blaft Publications

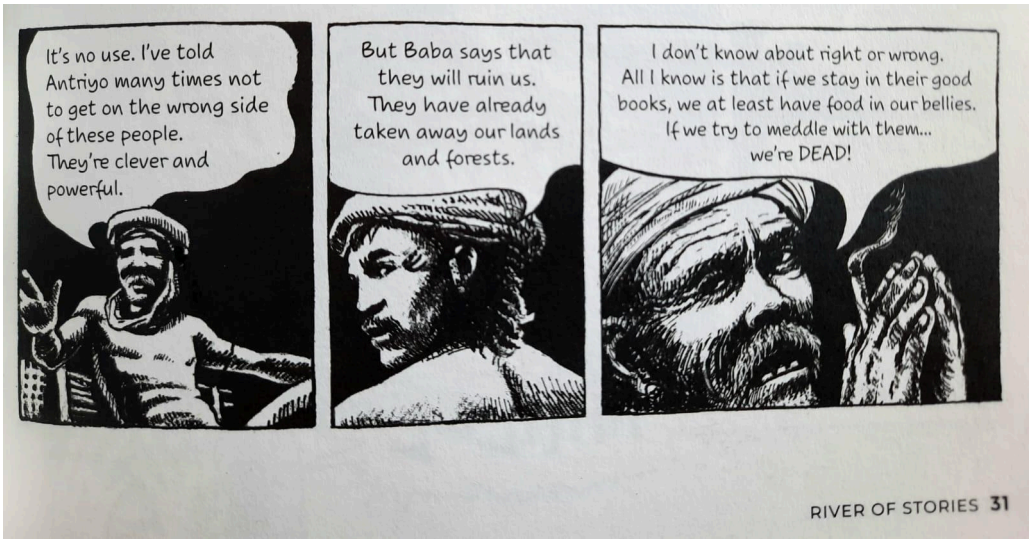


Fig.6.18: Orijit Sen, 'River of Stories', 1994, 2022, Graphic Novel, 78 pages, Blaft Publications. Image Credits: Orijit Sen and Blaft Publications

The graphic novel carries many threads of narratives - the houses, the layout of the village, the flowers, animals, animal shelters, the mahua tree, importance of a

‘mela’ or ‘fair’ in village life, the festivals - such as ‘Bhagoria Holi’ or the ‘match-making’ festival, local deities, temples and shrines, the relation of the Adivasis with the exploitative traders, etc. As part of the NGO *Kalpavriksha*, lead by Ashish Kothari in those days, Sen had managed to receive a small grant of a few thousands from the Ministry of Environment, government of India, which made it possible for him to publish this graphic novel.[505] The novel is a compendium of a variety of media and techniques such as charcoal pencil drawings, cross-hatched ink drawings (Fig.6.18), woodcut prints, and the pages seamlessly meander between colour and black-n-white renderings of the narrative.

Even though the dam was ultimately built, the questions – for example, “development for whom?” – raised by the movement remain as relevant today as when it began in the 1980s. By foregrounding the communities affected by this dam – some of whom are the most vulnerable in the country – ‘River of Stories’ raised the pertinent question of who this country is really for. In 2022, Sen released the 25 year anniversary edition of the graphic novel which was published by Blaft Publications. In an interview with Vidyun Sabhaney, Sen said that during his student days at National Institute of Design (NID), Ahmedabad, he started to read writers like Paulo Friere and Frantz Fanon in the library.[506] Being brought up in a middle-class family, Sen was never political, by any standard. Possibly, later in life, listening to musicians like Dylan and Lennon made him feel that art should be political, and that it should address questions of and for society. He said he has never been inclined to practice art in isolation and his time in NID made room for change.[507]

---

[505] Notes from ‘‘Downstream on the River of Stories’, Public Lecture by Orijit Sen, Arthshila Art Gallery, Delhi, April 2025

[506] Vidyun Sabhaney, ‘‘‘My Story Springs from Nature’’: Orijit Sen on Creating First Indian Graphic Novel “River of Stories”’, *Scroll.In*, 28 January 2023, https://scroll.in/article/1042587/my-story-springs-from-nature-orijit-sen-on-creating-first-indian-graphic-novel-river-of-stories.

[507] Vidyun Sabhaney, ‘‘‘My Story Springs from Nature’’: Orijit Sen on Creating First Indian Graphic Novel “River of Stories”’, *Scroll.In*, 28 January 2023, https://scroll.in/article/1042587/my-story-springs-from-nature-orijit-sen-on-creating-first-indian-graphic-novel-river-of-stories.

Fig.6.19: Orijit Sen, 'Narmada Bachao' ('Save Narmada'), 1985, Protest Logo, graphic, colour, Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA). Image Credits: NBA
Fig.6.20:Orijit Sen, 'Narmada Bachao' ('Save Narmada'), 1985, Photographic documentation of the Protest, Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA). Image Credits: NBA

Both 'River of Stories' and 'Food and Farming' have Sen's signature style of illustrations that are sharp critiques clothed in conversations of the ordinary, such as farmers, peasants, labourers or forest dwellers (Fig.6.18). The forest and its indigenous dwellers remain a consistent presence throughout Sen's graphic narrative. His methodology to resist and protest is seen in the richly abundant tribal heritage, mythology, folklore, generational knowledge systems which are all present in his rendering of the novel. There is no denying that non-fiction comics or novels are hardly seen or understood as an artistic medium in India, yet Sen has been persistent in creating awareness through socio-political works with a firmly liberal and humanistic worldview. Sen's work highlights the graphic medium as one of creative expression, critical exploration and eco-conscious, social activism.

6.7 Concluding Discussion

The chapter describes and analyzes artistic practices of Sagnik Samanta, Puspamala N., Kulpreet Singh, Vidyun Sabhaney and Orijit Sen, as a case study of how contemporary Indian artists address the agrarian crisis, specifically during the farmer protests of 2020-2021. The chapter highlights multiple intertwined

determinants of the crisis such as: corporatization, displacement, dispossession, food politics, through the lens of the farmer protests that emerged against the threat to eliminate the regulatory support of Minimum Support Price (MSP). The study discussed systemic issues such as debt-driven distress, forced migration, food corporatization, land ownership inequities and ecological degradation. The role of the artist-broker, in this case study, has been to facilitate dialogue and visibility of the farmer protests and the overall agrarian crisis. The artists mediate complex social realities and translate the layered crisis into accessible, visual, and narrative forms, while being careful about their own limitations of presentation. The artist-broker is an observer of order and conflict, sometimes a bystander, and sometimes an active intervener who uses their own position and creative autonomy to catalyze a shift in the ways publics understand the crisis.

Let us assess how the case study provides a substantive and multi-layered response to the three research questions of this thesis.

The five artistic practices discussed in this chapter examine the different aesthetic devices and materials used by the artists to communicate their understanding and position in the farmer protests and the larger agrarian crisis. They use printmaking (woodcuts, zines, comics, graphic novels), performance, installation, film, collaborative activism, and socially engaged art practices as methods to synthesize modes of representation and intervention of the crisis. The artists are committed to subvert and destabilize the determinants of the crisis through narratives, testimony, metaphors, and direct activism. Some works serve as powerful metaphors (such as 'La La Land' in Sagnik Samanta's work), others come from deep personal associations (such as mark-making in Kulpreet Singh's work) and a few just meander within a flowing cause (such as Pushpamala's slogans). They employ a wide variety of materials such as fabric, ash, rice paper, copper, etc. to make visible the complexity of the distress.

With all these artistic practices the idea is to make visible the entanglement of artists alongside the diverse stakeholders, who portray, shape and galvanise the agrarian crisis. A complete identification with the generality of the protests is unquestioned, but each artist-broker ferments resistance in their own tactical way. With their unique creative methodologies, the artistic practices center the voices, bodies and lived experiences of the marginalized farmers. Speaking across the several determinants of the crisis, the artists do not reify any monolithic domain, which is confounding, however this does not mean that their practices are mere generalisations. The artistic practices shed light on the obscure subaltern anxieties through direct memorialization (performance and ritual in Kulpreet Singh's 'Fossils of Force' and 'Langar') and critical commentary (narration in Vidyun Sabhaney and Orijit Sen's zines, comics, graphic novels). Subaltern studies reveal that mockery and various types of humor act as tools of cruelty and instruments of control; they also offer narratives and strategies for reversing power dynamics, disrupting hierarchical structures by flipping them over.[508] Thus, through mocking counter-narratives, artistic practices expose and ridicule the centralized mechanisms of power.

From the five artists, only one of them comes from a farming ancestry and clearly indicates his association. The degree to which Singh challenges his own position as a farmer living in Patiala, Punjab and as an artist exhibiting his work in Mumbai, is clearly aligned with his practice. The observations establish the fact that urban, city-dwelling artists see the crisis differently and distantly. However within the urban dwelling artists, there are distinctive approaches towards viewing the crisis. The artistic intent is reflected in the way the works get theorized, for example, Samanta said, he feels sad for his own ignorance towards food and food growers, while Pushpamala clearly identifies herself as urban and unconnected, and her work was a situationist response. Sabhaney is a city-born, Delhi-based artist and she has dived into researching the crisis by visiting the villages and meeting her

[508] Cynthia Willett and Julie Willett, 'Can the Animal Subaltern Laugh? Mocking Alpha Males with Georgia and Koko', in *Uproarious*, How Feminists and Other Subversive Comics Speak Truth (University of Minnesota Press, 2019), https://doi.org/10.5749/j.ctvr69540.6.

subjects for real. But then we have artists such as Sen who is a city-dweller and the activist tone demanding justice, in almost all his works makes it difficult to assess his position. Although it is an understatement that he is not bothered about the repercussions of his sharp criticism of the state.

The artworks, thus amplify and perform the subaltern voices with reflexivity that interrogates positionality (urban-rual) and the ethics of representation (empathy versus aestheticisation). Artistic autonomy is an opportunity with immense potential to confront and show resistance but it has its own physical, mental, emotional distance and often some limitations - could be personal, social, political and so on. They all invariably act as agents who shape, question and reconfigure the understanding of the crisis within the structures of power, representation and subalternity.

The crisis activates the artistic mind in multiple ways and this becomes symbiotic when the artist creates and intervenes to activate the crisis in the public space. The study attends to the implications of display of artworks in different settings (Delhi art galleries, Mumbai exhibitions, protest sites, and online-accessible zines). The realm of display often adds more neutralizing layers - curatorial, textual, and institutional- to the artistic impulse, sometimes these layers are translucent and sometimes they are opaque. An example of this is discussed earlier in the case of Samanta and Pushpamala's work displayed in group exhibitions within a different thematic umbrella. When the artwork becomes visible in the public space, it can stay tamed to institutional, cultural, social preconditioning or it can choose to challenge privileges and positions. The study highlights how institutional and curatorial frames can dilute or highlight activist intent and how public engagement (through rituals such as hosting a 'langar' at a gallery, or using social media for zine circulation) can mobilize collective action and resistance, in times of protest.
Therefore, every practice discussed above, every process and every production can be situated as a micro-political roadmap framing some specific determinants of a vast, complex, and a largely diffused crisis.

Chapter 7

Conclusion

7.1 Summary

This thesis has examined how contemporary Indian art practices enable and shape the production of meaning of the multifaceted agrarian crisis, through a variety of creative, performative and mediatory practices. The research acknowledges the complexity of the crisis and its demand for engagement as a political possibility against easy opinions and populism. Through different case studies, the research established that the root of the agrarian crisis lies in its unchecked and predatory commercialization. Description and analyses, including fieldwork, have been the scaffolding used to build interpretations of specific contemporary artistic practices and their negotiations with the determinants of the complex agrarian crisis. The study situates the analysis within the theoretical frameworks of subaltern agency, politics of representation, and the agency of art in social transformation.

The research demonstrates how over the last three decades, including the 2020-2021 farmer protests, some specific artistic interventions have addressed and presented the crisis to the rural-urban local and global audience. In six substantive chapters, the study analyses the artistic presentation of the determinants of the crisis within the historical, social, political and ecological contexts. The study emphasizes the importance of reading this work in its cultural and historical context, as these contextual limitations are important in assessing the divergent responses to the crisis. In concluding this thesis, I seek to summarize the key findings, reflecting on the core research questions and the study's contribution to the creative and theoretical praxis. This chapter will indicate how the research contributes to a wider discussion of resistance and can lead towards liberatory shifts and changes with respect to both the analysis and the response to the crisis itself.

7.2 Reflection of Methodology

In this study, the crisis is conceptualized as an unstable and contested construct, characterized by a multiplicity of competing narratives and theoretical frameworks that seek to define its nature and scope. The research addresses several aspects of the crisis, but does not encompass the whole. Despite its divergent interpretations, the crisis is consistently marked by a singular, unambiguous indicator: the incidence of farmer suicides. The chapters in the study do not presume readers who are already acquainted with the agrarian crisis, rather they provide accessible perspectives of the many aspects that contribute to the crisis. Central to understanding the crisis has been a set of conditions which I termed in Chapter 1 as "determinants" or the structural forces and socio-political arrangements embedded within Indian society that shape, influence, and mediate the manifestation of the crisis. These include: systemic indifference, patriarchy, socio-economic inequality, caste-class-community dynamics, the urban-rural divide, processes of dispossession and displacement, food politics and food security concerns, climate change, and the emergence of farmer protests. The diversity of interpretations by the artists, in part, can be attributed to the varying degrees of emphasis placed on these ten determinants, which were elaborated upon in the case studies.

As a methodological tool, the chronological data of artistic practices recorded since 1994 in India creates a temporal map that shows that there has been a gradual increase in the number of artists addressing the crisis and a greater increase in engagement during and after the 2020-2021 protests. On one hand, the chronology foregrounds and underscores different temporal and geographical markers in the study, and on the other hand, it offers a way of discerning the logic of coherence in artistic voices and their discordant outlooks. In many ways, it is a self-serving itinerary of the crisis that spans diverse fields of resistant voices in a variety of media, yet staying attentive to the logic of the agrarian crisis. The gradually rising inclination to render the crisis visible, is evidence that all is not well in India, a country in which the farmers and peasants constitute a majority of the 'most poor'.

According to the quantitative analysis in the research, close to a hundred Indian artists[509] have in some way responded to the agrarian crisis, which may at first appear a large number, however, this no longer appears so when taking account of India's population of over 1.4 billion. The research theorizes the importance and the limitations of works of art in specific time and space and their tropes in sustaining difficult dialogues, also remaining aware of their conceptual and imaginative richness. It makes legible contemporary art that is more than decoration, more than an artefact, and little more than just experience. Besides the formal ambits of scale and visibility, some artistic practices attend to the crisis more personally, where the unease is put to implicative use, indicating that the privilege of segregating the political from the personal is not a common affordance.

The research has investigated how four artistic practices and projects in India have mobilized the agrarian crisis. Using a case study approach, I carried out detailed examination of these artists and their long-term association with the crisis. Using the crisis itself as a framework to understand the circumstances and processes, the study uncovers that contemporary art's voice and view on the agrarian crisis has significant social, cultural, economic and political dimensions and is aimed to act as an intermediary (crisis broker)[510] to generate awareness and foster change through action, research, writing, and advocacy. The analysis makes it evident that the artistic interventions are not separate from the crisis, many of them are implicated within it, due to their proximity and relationality. Acknowledging the visibility and potential of the artistic practices leads to the question of speculation - to understand one, the gaps between artists' own version and the interpretation, and two, the degree to which the claims are made, in terms of access. These layered entanglements and creative negotiations between the data-backed, statistical information of the crisis and the subjective, personalised projection(s) of the artists, appear speculative and therefore demanded closer examination through the thesis.

---

[509] Appendix 1A: Artist Database

[510] Birgit Bräuchler et al., 'Conceptualizing Crisis Brokerage: Brokering Crisis or Brokers in Crisis', *Cultural Studies* 39, no. 2 (2025): 176–203, https://doi.org/10.1080/09502386.2024.2437428.

The three core research questions identified at the beginning of the research were:

1. How contemporary Indian artists and collectives (brokers) represent, interrogate, and interpret the (determinants of) agrarian crisis through diverse artistic mediums and methods, including performance, installation, film, and socially-engaged art?
2. How do artists and collectives (brokers) contribute towards shaping, questioning and reconfiguring common understanding of the (determinants of) agrarian crisis within the frameworks of power, representation and subalternity?
3. What are the social, political, and cultural implications of displaying, circulating, and interpreting artistic practices addressing the agrarian crisis within local, national, and global circuits, including the times of heightened protest and public mobilization?

In order to approach these questions, the research identified four major artistic practices that had a longer and consistent relation with the crisis much before the farmer protests of 2020-2021 and were exploring indifference, inequality, discrimination, violence and dispossession as key determinants of the crisis.

The criteria for selection of these four artistic practices was their long and sustained association with the crisis on grassroot level, their research-based approach towards the reality of the crisis, and their consistent efforts to lend agency to the farmers and the farming community. These artistic practices get unpacked with thick descriptions and analysis of different mediums, namely performance, film, installation, print, zines, comics, graphic novels, and archives, along with the theoretical discourses on these mediums and their visibility. In order to get to these criteria, the research mobilized some operational concepts to look at artworks - which included - formal analysis, contextual analysis and discourse analysis. This can be understood in the light of art critic John Berger's assertion in his iconic

television series, 'Ways of Seeing', that artistic creations have a way of working on the viewers and that this unique characteristic lends art its psychological and social urgency.[511] For a clearer understanding, let us look at the process and the research findings of each chapter individually and then summarize the findings to answer the three research questions.

7.3 Research Findings

The first chapter which is the Introduction of a thesis sets the stage for the entire research project. It highlights how contemporary art signals the agrarian crisis, the connection between the crisis and the neoliberal policies, the research task, the structure, methodology and the theoretical relation of the subaltern school with the research approach. Being the first encounter with the study, the introduction defines and establishes the context, purpose, and significance of this research.

Chapter two draws a close reading of Aditi Bhattad's performance *Art You Nero's Guests?*, bringing an introduction to the agrarian crisis and how urban audiences often ignore or remain indifferent towards this reality. The performance situated the role of the artist-broker as a torch-bearer who carries the agrarian narrative to the city in order to confront and mock at the ignorance of the audience towards an unsustainable agrifood system. However it remains unclear how the performance transgresses the separation of an inactive audience from a larger systemic policy-grievance. Framed within Sainath's research, Deepa Bhati's documentary film and the rather incoherent Roman antiquity, the performance permeates and mediates several layers of meaning-making demanding mutuality from the viewers. The chapter demonstrated that being a product of the agrarian environment in which Aditi grew up, her motivations are personal and extremely vulnerable. Historically, the female body has been stereotyped as 'nature' in the nature-culture binary. And, the body is constituted within the social relations of class, age, gender - each contributing to the construct of the representation. Using her body as a trope,

[511] Landon E. Beyer, *The Arts, Popular Culture, and Social Change* (New York; Washington D/Baltimore; Boston; Bern; Frankfurt: The University of Michigan, 2000) p.75.

the theatricality of the performance encompassed Aditi's attire, the sun-tanned number on her back and the formal rituals, all of which reinforced class identity through the staged ceremony. Calling her performance an 'embodiment' of the crisis and the subaltern subject is justified in many ways, as it described a process which is inscribed in and through the body, rather than being translated in language. Her artistic practice is a self-organised initiative rooted in being faithful to her *zeitgeist* and that has been her point of departure. Situating herself as Mother Earth, mourning the loss of her dying children, Aditi along with her team from the Gram Art Project curated this performance to raise concerns about the crisis and the notions of care, more precisely, the lack of care, in contemporary societies.

The hegemonic paradigm is further disputed in chapter three where the collaborative, community-centric practices and performances of Gram Art Collective confront the misplaced priorities of the urban population. Rooted and informed by their land and their village, their artistic initiatives are politically motivated but carefully weaved a thinly veiled garb of social engagement. Placing local knowledge at the centre, they present a model of growth that generates opportunities for the local community, especially women. It is an excellent example of co-creating processes embedded in collective entrepreneurial action, where women predominate and their authority is not subject to doubt. The intent and motivation of their practice is closely aligned with the process they undertake as farmers but in order to keep the arguments alive, they make themselves accessible and visible in the national and global contexts. The field work enabled the research to closely examine the Collective's daily activities in the village - to acknowledge, understand and heal from lost nurturance and fiercely protect and pass-on generational knowledge systems. Their work enables discussions on the site/non-site dialectic and land art but the analysis negates classification, simply because of the limitations of such categories. The research found that their performances in the city are only partial reflections of the actual visual currency of their life in the village but then it is not always possible to scale the full system and its rooted relationality to a site. It offers a small window to how they negotiate with

the realities of their small village and experiment with what the realities allow them to do and what they don't. Closely aligning with the expression or term 'performative habitats',[512] the workings of the Collective demonstrate a practical example of how the agrarian community can turn without debt explosions, and addiction to growth and still function democratically with a higher level of contentment amongst its people.

Chapter four and five discuss artist duo Amar Kanwar and Thukral and Tagra respectively - both these studies found a common thread of heightened international visibility. Kanwar's association with Gujarat and Odisha dates back to 2000 and 2011 and Thukral and Tagra have been associated with the crisis in Punjab since 2010. Another common strand of analysis that emerged in these two chapters was that their artistic interventions have been consistent and ongoing till as recent as 2025. Their involvement and consistency in presenting the crisis is similar to an epigenetic transmission that runs through the matrilineal line of the motherland. Another noticeable factor in these two studies is how the two artistic practices employ unconventional methodological tropes to deconstruct and access the crisis; they introduce new formats of art-making and thinking - Thukral & Tagra use sports and games as metaphors, while Amar Kanwar employs poetry to substantiate erasure and violence. Both practices work with 'evidence' of the violence inflicted - whether it is the film installation of 'Surjeet Singh' by Thukral & Tagra or 'Poetry as Evidence' by Amar Kanwar. The practices create a space for the viewers to engage with the evidence of the crime that is ongoing. They call for slower and deeper contemplation, where the past, present and future could enter into a dialogue, indicating the historical embeddedness of the criminality associated with the determinants of the crisis. Together these artistic practices straddle and unite, serving as defiant metaphors that underlie our current societal predicament, where short sighted policy decisions have left many trapped in precarity and distress.

---

[512] Lori Adragna and Egle Oddo, *Performative Habitats: Tra arte, filosofia e scienza* (Postmedia Books, 2022).

In chapter six, the focus is on describing and analysing the artworks that emerged as reactions to the 2020-2021 farmer protests. There are five artists (Sagnik Samanta, Puspamala N., Kulpreet Singh, Vidyun Sabhaney and Orijit Sen) discussed in this chapter and only one of them, Kulpreet Singh, comes from a farming ancestry and clearly indicates his deep personal association. The degree to which Singh challenges his own position as a farmer living in Patiala, Punjab and as an artist exhibiting his work in Mumbai, is clearly aligned with his practice. This observation establishes that urban, city-dwelling artists see the crisis differently and distantly. However within the urban dwelling artists, there are still several distinctive approaches towards viewing the crisis. Amongst the discussed artworks, some are more wobbly, gentle responses, such as N. Pushpamala's 'Nara' series, while others are more direct critiques, for example, Kulpreet Singh's 'Indelible Black Marks' performance installations. Nevertheless, they all facilitate reflection on the obscure subaltern anxieties through direct memorialization (performance and ritual in Kulpreet Singh's 'Fossils of Force' and 'Langar') and critical commentary (narration in Vidyun Sabhaney and Orijit Sen's zines, comics, graphic novels). The research found that mostly aware of the socio-political ramifications, the imaginative capacities of artistic interventions act as self-reflexive measures ideated from the local, context-specific to national, and sometimes global spaces. Whether they appease the pressures or not, they certainly bear a circumspect undercurrent, which mobilizes and scales-up the rather diffused understanding of the crisis, simultaneously questioning viewer complacency.

When I started this research, I did not limit my understanding of the crisis and its multidimensional facets. The aim was to let its layers unfold through the contemporary artistic lens. The study found that the four artists/artist groups stemming from different geographical settings, through a wide range of subjects and objects, navigate their own specific relationality with the crisis. The sequencing of case studies in the research does not indicate a finitude to what might be said about the crisis, but refers to their own place in a potentially infinite

discussion around the crisis. And their order outlines my own trajectory rather than any deliberate imposition of order. However, placing the Thukral and Tagra case study as chapter 5 is strategic. The last section of chapter 5 describes Thukral and Tagra's active involvement in the farmer protests and that connects and leads the reader into the next chapter that focuses primarily on the protests. Having said that, each case study is still a fragment and can be read out of the order or sequence without the compulsion or need to see the whole. Therefore the first case study does not have to be read at the beginning, while it articulates the most important question - the central claim - as to what exactly is the agrarian crisis and that there is an ignorance around the very existence of the crisis.

After harvesting the findings of each chapter above, I would circle back to summarize the answers to the three research questions. First one being how artists interrogate and interpret the crisis. The study found that the artists create a wide variety of subjects and objects, reflecting on the cultural, political, social, and economic aspects of the crisis. They employ diverse media ranging from painting and sculpture to prints, zines, comics, graphic novels, posters, film, performance, and multimedia installations. The analysis shows that the artists do not merely represent the crisi, rather, they actively intervene and disrupt it through strategies such as embodied action, play, rhetoric, symbolism, testimony and narration. Artistic practices are embedded with the determinants of the crisis aiming to give voice to underrepresented perspectives. Artists create for both themselves, trying to explore their own understanding of the crisis, and for others, hoping to connect, challenge, and provoke.

The concept of the artist-broker emerged as a critical analytical lens to reflect upon the function of artists as mediators in the crisis and reformative action. The subaltern agency is highlighted when the artist inhabits, translates, and navigates power relations of voice, visibility and vulnerability. The study found that the choices made by the artists in terms of subjects and objects, and the determinants were conditioned by their own position which consists of personal narratives, belonging, nostalgia, experiences, oral histories, systemic injustice, protests,

non-human/ more-than-human agency, and planetary consciousness. The deliberation of these art practices does not avoid the politics of the crisis, rather it finds new access to its determinants. It is not about the privileging of art, but a privileging of practice, of process, the act of doing, of experiencing, that affords glimpses on what things actually do and how it could be done. Through collective and contextual practices, the artists on one hand created blueprints of resistance, and on the other hand, mobilized the visibility of the crisis, with at least one determinant being highlighted. Through their practice, the artists invited the possible into practice and into discourse, thereby acknowledging the unseen dimensions of the crisis and of our limitations at understanding it. In practices such as the Gram Art Project Collective, their contingent formulations of production and participation is an ideological celebration of identity and collective strength. Their lack of access to finance, resources, and public recognition, necessitates a different strategy of working and that itself enables new knowledge and imagination. In many ways, the practices discussed in the study break the barriers of our habitual systematic readings of the crisis, and present possibilities to delimit common understanding.

The study deep dives into the works of theorists and historians such as Partha Chatterjee, Gyanendra Pandey, Vivek Chibber, Ramachandra Guha, Amartya Sen, Arundhati Roy, Vandana Shiva, and several others to examine and elucidate the determinants of the crisis, such as class stratification and the many faces of inequality. Theories such as Gyanendra Pandey's views on social hierarchies and how categories like caste, religion, and community have been historically constructed and politically mobilized, add layers of dialogue and dissent in the analysis.[513] Amartya Sen's view on social justice connects meaningfully with the subaltern theory as it emphasizes pushing public thinking, expanding people's material liberties, and ensuring everyone has the opportunity to live a life of democratic participation.[514] The theoretical framework of reading the crisis and the

[513] Gyanendra Pandey, *Men at Home: Imagining Liberation in Colonial and Postcolonial India* (Duke University Press, 2025).
[514] Amartya Sen, *The Idea of Justice* (Penguin UK, 2010).

artistic response is centred around subaltern thought but bears innate connections with theories and views of the above mentioned scholars.

Regarding the implications of display and visibility in local, national and global contexts, the study found that it is a huge misunderstanding that artists do not carefully calculate the display and visibility of the artworks. This was best understood in the displays of the works of Thukral and Tagra who work seamlessly across the boundaries of being artists and curators of their own work. The kind of agency exercised by them is much less deliberate than a self-conscious process of curating a show - concerned with control of the physical environment and the objects of display. The sensitivity of the issues associated with the crisis make it imperative for the artists to use adaptability and careful discretion while planning the display strategies. The almost organic reconfiguration of the function and format of their installations in different iterations, according to the contexts of display, clearly explain the apparent political implications that the works could invite. Thus, creative interventions can be constrained by cultural specificity and institutional gatekeeping. The study thus found that the potential not only lies in the artwork and its projection, but also in the encounters it invites. The realisation is dependent not only on the artwork but also on what it holds before the encounter and the context that frames the confrontation and enables actions that in reality are its possibilities.

In a broad sweep, the research studies the nature of relationship between those who have power and those who resist it. By integrating subaltern framework, performance theory, postcolonial and neoliberal critiques, the study enriches the understanding of the politics of artistic representation, memory and agency in a crisis. Empirically, it documents an array of artistic practices that are embedded with resistance and activism. It explores how mines, highways, power plants, airports, townships and strategic developments of national importance, function as unrehearsed decisions in the name of development. And how the authorial voices of artists act as a conduit for subaltern voices, building activist alliances and reimagining development.

7.4 Directions for Future Research

The research expands the common understanding of the agrarian crisis, and the ineffable sadness for social regression that has been appearing in frightening guises of death. The analysis of artistic practices establishes that the farmer suicides are a symptom that the agrarian crisis cannot handle, however, there is hope in aiding cooperation, transformation and re-calibrating justice. Contemporary art practices not only explore and intervene in the politics and systems of the crisis but also attend to the desires and violences generated through interaction, action and resistance. In the ongoing battle of dignity and reform, one can recall Dr. B R Ambedkar's emphasis on individual dignity and freedom as a fundamental clause to materialize social progress in a collective democracy.[515] Another important shift that seems to have happened during the three years of this research is the expanse at which the crisis is increasing. According to Sainath's recent public talk, we are way past the agrarian crisis and what we are looking at is a 'Civilizational Crisis', where the entire class of farmers are at risk because of three things: farmland is going to corporations, farmland in farming hands is shrinking , and the farmer populations are plummeting. And he asserts that this phenomenon is not limited to India, it is happening all over the world.[516]

A country that thrives within organised systems of inequality, and where domination and subordination shape practical consciousness, it is extremely difficult to imagine shifts or radical change through contemporary art's intervention, collective action and civic engagement. Even though artistic practices such as the Gram Art Collective create ethical and affirmative modes of engaging with the roots of the crisis, it is difficult to assess their true capacity to replace critical distance with transformative proximity. Their initiatives align closely with what is known as 'Community Supported Agriculture' - a system that connects farmers directly with the consumers within the food system, sharing the risks and

[515] Nithya N.R., 'Relevance of Ambedkar's Vision on Social Democracy in India', *International Journal of Research and Analytical Reviews (IJRAR)* Volume5, no. 3 (September 2018).
[516] P. Sainath, Book Release Talk, 'Farmers Protest! A Movement of our Times' by Namita Waikar, IIC, New Delhi, 22 April 2025.

benefits of production.[517] This model is beneficial as it brings the farm closer to everyone and offers a dignified living to the farming household. Gram Art Collective's engagement and empowerment methodologies for women farmers foster ways of following that make the moving materiality of art intensively felt. In his publication, 'An Uncertain Glory: India and its Contradictions', Nobel laureate Amartya Sen emphasizes that nations with increased female involvement in policy-making experience improved health results and enhanced nutritional conditions. He contends that enabling women frequently results in higher domestic expenditures on health and education, which consequently fosters considerable social advantages.[518] Artistic practices such as the Gram Art Project serve as models of ecological sustainability, offering a process-oriented, and localised approach against the grinding infrastructures of large museums and biennials.

Drawing on long-term engagements with selected contemporary artists and their art-in-process, the research expands the concept and practice of collaboration from human interactions to working with, and between, materials. The idea for several artists has been to rethink core tenets of artistic engagement, bring fresh urgency and propose new ways of being and thinking. In an engaging way, some artistic practices provide potential solutions such as increasing government investments in rural, local, agro-ecosystems in order to enhance the ecological interaction between soils, water, plants, animals and trees and the need to diversify, decentralize and universalize the public distribution system.

The crisis can be seen in the light of this popular question raised by Sadat Hasan Manto - 'when we were enslaved, we could imagine freedom, but now that we are free, how will we imagine subjection?'[519] Millions of farmers today are actively

---

[517] 'Community Supported Agriculture | National Agricultural Library', accessed 23 May 2025, https://www.nal.usda.gov/farms-and-agricultural-production-systems/community-supported-agriculture.

[518] Jean Drèze and Amartya Sen, *An Uncertain Glory: India and Its Contradictions* (Penguin UK, 2013).

[519] Dr Barnali Saha, 'Borders and Boundaries: Reading Saadat Hasan Manto: Toba Tek Singh The Last Salute & Yazid', *INDRAPRASTH: An International Journal of Culture & Communication Studies*, 1 January 2017,

advising their children not to come into farming. According to the report of 'Situation Assessment Survey of Farmers' (2005), it was found that 40% of farmers would quit farming if given an option.[520] With gigantic inequalities, it is clear the agrarian sector is not sustainable anymore. Expressing his concern, Sainath in all seriousness asserts, '60 years from now , our great-grandchildren could be living in a world without farmers except that farmers would be retained as tokens for "agri-tourism home-stays" which is already happening in Europe and India is going fast.[521] While it is true that art is pushing the boundaries, in order to make these interventions scalable, the potential needs to be embraced by critical policy interventions allied with significant societal transformations. Through conversations with artists, farmers, curators, journalists, authors, and researcher, the research unfolds a sharp spotlight on corporate hegemony through monopolization and food fortification. Building inclusive infrastructures of care and a micro-political roadmap to social justice might be meaningful affirmations.

This research would be of interest to undergraduate students, scholars and researchers in the fields of environmental studies, food studies, sociology, and the liberal arts. It offers insights of the present and suggests improved practices for the future, both from within the community of farmers and through the artistic research, in order to create a regenerative, equitable, and a resilient food system.

The study has the potential to contribute to the field of contemporary art history and curatorial studies by offering a nuanced understanding of collective self-organisation as an artistic methodology. The study challenges the familiar dominance of urban-centric narratives in artistic and curatorial discourses, specifically in the contemporary Indian context. On a broader level, the study explores the relationship between human culture and the natural environment,

---

https://www.academia.edu/39878585/Borders_and_Boundaries_Reading_Saadat_Hasan_Mantos_Toba_Tek_Singh_The_Last_Salute_and_Yazid_.

[520] NSS, 'Situation Assessment Survey of Farmers.Pdf', 2005, https://www.mospi.gov.in/sites/default/files/publication_reports/496_final.pdf.

[521] P.Sainath, Book Release Talk, 'Farmers Protest! A Movement of our Times' by Namita Waikar, IIC, New Delhi, 22 April 2025.

enhancing generative listening not only to humans, but also more-than-humans, landscapes and their ecological systems, which may be a contribution to the field of Green Humanities. Some of the artistic projects discussed in the thesis are situated reflections of the forests and land which bear connection with the field of Arboreal Arts and humanities. There is an element of social work and care in the embodied practices of some of the artists, which has the potential to offer new perspectives in understanding the complexities of social work in the light of lived human experiences.

This study constitutes an initial step towards knowledge production of artistic practices that are informed by and address the agrarian crisis. It is clear that contemporary artistic explorations challenge the ways in which the crisis is seen and understood. However, there is clearly no linear response and therefore the question of speculation lingers. The way forward can be best explained in the words of Sainath, 'I think all of us have to take much more interest in - who grows the food? Can we identify a face?'[522] It is clear that at least some artistic practices are successfully giving an identifiable face to the crisis. It is not for nothing, that the artists are building alliances for insurgent knowledge, that seek to change the terms and values under which we currently live, such as the violence and discriminations based on class-class-community divide, rural-urban divide, and patriarchy. A future inquiry should consider expanding the geographic and artistic breadth of studying additional responses to the crisis, with greater focus on regional and vernacular practices. Employing ethnographic research to further understand engagement could be a possibility. Another way forward could be to conduct comparative transnational studies situating Indian agrarian art practices within global contexts of rural and indigenous activism.

[522] P.Sainath, Book Release Talk, 'Farmers Protest! A Movement of our Times' by Namita Waikar, IIC, New Delhi, 22 April 2025

7.5 Limitations of the Study

The research acknowledges its scope and limitations and that there are aspects that could not be achieved. One of them being the impact of digital technologies employed by artists and curators in circulation and visibility of their work, raising pertinent questions about democratization, authorship, and other ethical challenges. Also how these digital mechanisms will be viewed by the less privileged audiences - who are represented but unable to participate in it due to the naive universalizing claims of a digital world. It would be useful to know that while living in an increasingly automated, digitized world, how does the digital presence and circulation of these artistic practices operate and stay in the fast fading social media space. It would be interesting to study in greater detail the fiercely fast-moving digital content in the context of the crisis and how art practices situate and negotiate the decentring vision of the finger-swept digital screens and also safeguard from political colouring. Through digital imprint, how would the enhanced reach and access of artworks recreate real-time encounters that involve the human senses -visually, aurally, and haptically. Possibly these soft encounters would add more layers of placelessness and dispossession already embedded within the crisis. It remains a matter to be studied further.

The aspect of obsessive technological advancement is already showing its ugly face in the agrarian sector. According to Sainath, we have already used new technology in the last 20-30 years and have contributed significantly to soil damage and climate change, but with Artificial Intelligence (AI) glaring at us, there will be sharp rise in the use of intensification technologies that will harm the environment, and affect the climate exponentially. He asserts, AI and robotics will bring an end to the rural family farmers.[523] Talking about the future of food and farming, Vandana Shiva in a public lecture speaks about fake food already entering the

[523] P. Sainath, Book Release Talk, 'Farmers Protest! A Movement of our Times' by Namita Waikar, IIC, New Delhi, 22 April 2025.

market. She quotes an employee of Monsanto saying, 'we need farming without farmers because by getting rid of farmers we have new markets for surveillance robotic and artificial intelligence'[524] These are some very scary projections and it is worth thinking about how creative practitioners understand and respond to them.

The reliance of secondary documentation and mediated accounts of artistic works brings constraints of immediacy and experiential research. Looking further and deeper into artistic understanding of futuristic technological challenges such as fake food, AI etc would have added another layer to the study.

7.6 Final thoughts

To conclude, I would say that through its examination of contemporary artistic practices, this thesis affirms contemporary art's deep capacity to act as a conduit for the marginalized, subaltern subjects. By cultivating collaborative artistic, activist and scholarly alliances, it holds with firmness, a space to resist predatory corporatization and a positive socio-political transformation. The heterogeneity of multiple artistic narratives offer fields of resistance that break the monolithic approach of viewing the crisis and offer ways to reconfigure the arbitrariness in our relationship with food and knowledge. The study asserts that in times of crisis, art remains an essential meaning-making and redefining site that fosters memory, resistance and change.

I hope that the readers of the study would feel invited to delve deeper into the pressing questions raised by artists that animate the crisis, the geopolitics of production of knowledge, the obscure perceptions of society and the increasing impoverishment of the invisible underside. I believe the experiences of the artist groups examined in this research can be used as a roadmap for other artists and curators, who could be considering the crisis as a subject to be addressed or be

[524] *Vandana Shiva - Two Paths to the Future of Food and Farming - EcoFarm 2020 Keynote*, directed by EcoFarmVideo, 2020, 50:58, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9vNPGwqR4TQ.

actively engaged with. My hope is that this thesis will also provide insights for policymakers and cultural funders to understand social cohesion and the realities of critical, self-organised artistic practices that promote active citizenry, and collective stewardship of place.

Bibliography

'5th Mardin Biennial', 2022. https://www.saha.org.tr/en/projects/5th-mardin-biennial.

2017 Prince Claus Laureate Amar Kanwar (India), 2017. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ilUbXettES8.

'AA History Documentary - The Nero Files: Secrets of the Dead - HD', 18 January 2023. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1X4RAFuaRNo.

Abbas, Mohamed Samir Tawfik. 'Genetically Engineered (Modified) Crops (Bacillus Thuringiensis Crops) and the World Controversy on Their Safety'. *Egyptian Journal of Biological Pest Control* 28, no. 1 (19 June 2018): 52. https://doi.org/10.1186/s41938-018-0051-2.

Abir Space. 'Sapna Kuniyal'. Accessed 5 February 2025. https://www.abirspace.com/collections/sapna-kuniyal.

'About - Trolley Times'. Accessed 2 May 2024. https://trolleytimes.com/about-2/.

Abraham, Sara. 'Itineraries of Insurgency in Rural India - Interview with Ranjana Padhi'. *Jamhoor*, 31 March 2022. https://www.jamhoor.org/read/itineraries-of-insurgency-in-rural-india.

Achar, Deeptha, and Shivaji Panikkar. *Articulating Resistance: Art and Activism*. New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2012.

'Activists Promoting Desi Cotton Seeds For "Eco-Friendly" Rakhis'. *News18*, 12 July 2017. https://www.news18.com/news/india/activists-promoting-desi-cotton-seeds-for-eco-friendly-rakhis-1459399.html.

Ade, Vikas V. 'Trends and Causes of Farmers Suicide in Maharashtra State, India'. *International Journal of Scientific Research in Science, Engineering and Technology*, 2021. https://doi.org/10.32628/ijsrset218145.

Adragna, Lori, and Egle Oddo. *Performative Habitats: Tra arte, filosofia e scienza*. Postmedia Books, 2022.

Aftermath (2023) | Thukral & Tagra, 2023. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CoO-ZYTZG7k.

Agrawal, Shreya. 'Eco-Friendly Celebrations: This Diwali, Sow Crackers Instead of Bursting Them'. *The Indian Express*, 3 November 2021. https://indianexpress.com/article/lifestyle/life-style/this-diwali-sow-crackers-instead-of-bursting-them-7603807/.

Agrovetmarket. 'News | Agrovet | Vet Pharma - Top 10 Countries with the Highest Number of Cows Worldwide', 27 September 2016.

https://www.agrovetmarket.com/en/vet-pharma-news/detail/top-10-countries-with-the-highest-number-of-cows-worldwide.

Aktar, Md. Wasim, Dwaipayan Sengupta, and Ashim Chowdhury. 'Impact of Pesticides Use in Agriculture: Their Benefits and Hazards'. *Interdisciplinary Toxicology* 2, no. 1 (March 2009): 1–12. https://doi.org/10.2478/v10102-009-0001-7.

Alcoff, Linda Martín, and Eduardo Mendieta, eds. *Thinking from the Underside of History: Enrique Dussel's Philosophy of Liberation*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2000.

Aldrete, Gregory S. '"Bread and Circuses": Ancient Rome, Modern Science Fiction, and the Art of Political Distraction'. *Film & History: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 51, no. 2 (2021): 4–20.

'Alexamenos and Pagan Perceptions of Christians'. University of Chicago. Accessed 5 November 2024. https://penelope.uchicago.edu/encyclopaedia_romana/gladiators/graffito.html.

ALONE, Y. S. 'CASTE LIFE NARRATIVES, VISUAL REPRESENTATION, AND PROTECTED IGNORANCE'. *University of Hawai'i Press* 40, no. 1 (1 January 2017): 140–69.

Alone, Yashadatta, and Anupam Roy. 'Perspectives on Ambedkarian Aesthetics and Social Movements'. *South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal* 31 (2023). https://doi.org/10.4000/11vwx.

Alphen, Ernst van, Lorenzo Benadusi, Jeannette Christensen, Marlene Dumas, and Adeola Enigbokan. *Shame! And Masculinity: White Contributions by Ernst of Alphen, Lorenzo Benadusi, Times Goldshedt, Wahbo Long, Mothers Miller, Andrea Petâ€*. 1st ed. Amsterdam: Valiz, 2021.

'Amar Kanwar - The Sovereign Forest - NTU CCA', 2016. https://archive.ntu.ccasingapore.org/exhibitions/amar-kanwar//.

'Amar Kanwar and Shanay Jhaveri'. *Marg* Vol.61 (3), no. 3 (2010): p.92.

'Amar Kanwar. Sharjah Biennial 2013'. Accessed 7 January 2025. https://universes.art/en/sharjah-biennial/2013/tour/bank-street/24-amar-kanwar.

'Amar Kanwar- The Scene of Crime - Centre Pompidou', 2011. https://www.centrepompidou.fr/fr/offre-aux-professionnels/enseignants/dossiers-ressources-sur-lart/art-et-ecologie/amar-kanwar.

Amar Kanwar: The Sovereign Forest + Other Stories, 2013. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0SchgxoejKc.

Amjito. 'Selection of Gopa Roy for Gästeatelier Krone Residency Program in Aarau',. Shared Ecologies, 22 November 2024. https://sharedecologies.org/selection-of-gopa-roy-for-gasteatelier-krone-residency-program-in-aarau-switzerland/.

And Archive – Thukral and Tagra. 'And Archive – Thukral and Tagra'. Accessed 3 December 2024. https://andarchive.in.

Anderson, Kym, and Will Martin. *Distortions to Agricultural Incentives in Asia*. 1st ed. Trade and Development. : : World Bank, 2009.

Appadurai, Arjun. *Globalization*. Duke University Press, 2001.

Appadurai, Arjun. *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press, 2005.

Appadurai, Arjun. *The Future as Cultural Fact: Essays on the Global Condition*. Verso, 2020.

Artlyst. 'Amar Kanwar: Major New Exhibition At The Yorkshire Sculpture Park', 2013. https://artlyst.com/news/amar-kanwar-major-new-exhibition-at-the-yorkshire-sculpture-park/.

Asokan, Ratik. 'Against the Grain'. *Artforum*, 23 April 2021. https://www.artforum.com/columns/ratik-asokan-on-randeep-maddokes-landless-2018-249770/.

Attfield, Judy, Eduardo Staszowski, Clive Dilnot, and Daniel Miller. *Wild Things: The Material Culture of Everyday Life*. London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2020.

Babbage, Frances. *Augusto Boal*. Routledge, 2004.

Bailey, Stephanie. 'All in One Place: Art Dubai 2017'. *Ocula Magazine*, 24 March 2017. https://ocula.com/magazine/features/all-in-one-place-a-report-from-art-dubai-2017/.

Balakrishnan, Pulapre, Ramesh Golait, and Pankaj Kumar. 'Agricultural Growth in India since 1991'. *Department of Economic Analysis and Policy Reserve Bank of India, Mumbai*, 2008. https://scholar.google.com/scholar?cluster=7777858837018065980&hl=en&oi=scholarr.

Banerjee, Atreyo. 'Do Indians Really Have a Right Against the Adverse Effects of Climate Change?' *The Wire*, 19 October 2024, sec. Law. https://thewire.in/law/do-indians-really-have-a-right-against-the-adverse-effects-of-climate-change.

Bates, Crispin. *Cities in South Asia*. 1st ed. With Crispin Bates and Minoru Mio. Routledge New Horizons in South Asian Studies. Taylor & Francis, 2015.

Bauer, Ute Meta, and Anca Rujoiu. 'On The Sovereign Forest: In Conversation with Amar Kanwar'. *Afterall* Volume 49, no. 1 (2020): 7–14. https://doi.org/10.1086/709629.

Bauman, Zygmunt. *Wasted Lives: Modernity and Its Outcasts*. Polity, 2011.

Baxandall, Michael. *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy: A Primer in the Social History of Pictorial Style*. Oxford University Press, 1988.

Bechdel, Alison. *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2007.

Beck, Ulrich. *Risk Society - Towards a New Modernity*. London: Sage, 1992. https://uk.sagepub.com/en-gb/eur/risk-society/book203184.

Becker, C. *2012. Microutopias: Public Practice in the Public Sphere. In Thompson, N, et al. (Eds.), Living as Form. Socially Engaged Art from 1991–2011.* Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2012.

Becker, Stephen. *Comic art in America: a social history of the funnies, the political cartoons, magazine humor;* New York: Simon and Schuster, 1959.

Begum, Laili. 'Brahmaputra Erosion Hits 25 Kurigram Villages -'. *The Daily Observer*, 11 February 2018. https://www.observerbd.com/news/121733.

Berge, La, and Leigh Claire. *Wages Against Artwork: Decommodified Labor and the Claims of Socially Engaged Art*. Duke University Press, 2019. https://doi.org/10.1215/9781478005278.

Berger, John. *Landscapes: John Berger on Art*. London: Verso Books, 2016. https://www.versobooks.com/products/230-landscapes.

Bhan, Swati. 'Brush with Reality: The True Colours of Indian Farmers'. *The Times of India*, 21 February 2019. https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/chandigarh/brush-with-reality-the-true-colours-of-indian-farmers/articleshow/68093116.cms.

Bhatia, Gayatri, Rajkumar Mathur, and Manish Roshan Thakur. 'Portrayal of Suicide in Bollywood Movies Over Last Two Decades: A Content Analysis'. *OMEGA - Journal of Death and Dying*, 2023. https://doi.org/10.1177/00302228231161814.

Bhatnagar, Samir. 'Economics of Indian Farmers' Movement: A Study of Agrarian Distress and a Vicious Debt Cycle'. *Yale Journal of International Affairs*, 15 May 2021. https://www.yalejournal.org/publications/economics-of-indian-farmers-movement-a-study-of-agrarian-distress-and-a-vicious-debt-cycle.

Bhattacharya, Anirban, Pranay Raj, and Nancy Pathak. 'Average 30 Farmer Suicides Per Day in Modi Govt Years Points to a Systemic Apathy'. *The Wire*, 18 December 2023, sec. Agriculture. https://thewire.in/agriculture/average-30-farmer-suicides-per-day-in-modi-govt-years-points-to-a-systemic-apathy.

Bhise, Vikrant. 'Dr. Ambedkar and Farmer's Movement'. vikrantbhise.com. Accessed 5 February 2025. https://www.vikrantbhise.com/dr-ambedkar-and-farmer-s-movement.

Bhoot, Mrinmayee. 'Sustaina India Invites One to Keep "Eyes to the Ground, Heart to the Horizon"', 10 February 2024. https://www.stirworld.com/see-features-sustaina-india-invites-one-to-keep-eyes-to-the-ground-heart-to-the-horizon.

Bhullar, Dilpreet. ‘Collective Actions to Haul Muffled Voices from an Abyss of Convoluted Noise – A Staged Hearing “In the Matter Re: Rights of Nature”’. *Take Art Magazine*, 15 March 2023. https://takeonartmagazine.com/reviews/collective-actions-to-haul-muffled-voices-from-an-abyss-of-convoluted-noise-a-staged-hearing-in-the-matter-re-rights-of-nature/.

———. ‘Engulfed by Impediments, Kochi-Muziris Biennale Survived to Return with the 5th Edition’. *Take Art Magazine* (blog), 2 February 2023. https://takeonartmagazine.com/reviews/engulfed-by-impediments-kochi-muziris-biennale-survived-to-return-with-the-5th-edition/.

Bhuyan, Avantika. ‘India Art Fair 2023: Showcasing Multiplicity of Voices’. *Mintlounge*, 8 February 2023, sec. How To Lounge. https://lifestyle.livemint.com//how-to-lounge/art-culture/india-art-fair-2023-showcasing-multiplicity-of-voices-111675770093185.html.

———. ‘The Farming Canvas’. *Mintlounge*, 21 December 2016, sec. News. https://lifestyle.livemint.com//news/talking-point/the-farming-canvas-111647434305284.html.

Biel, Robert. *Sustainable Food Systems: The Role of the City*. : : UCL Press, 2016.

Billing, Johanna, Maria Lind, and Lars Nilsson. *Taking the Matter into Common Hands: [On Contemporary Art and Collaborative Practices]*. London: Black Dog Publ., 2007.

Birnbaum, Daniel. ‘THE LAY OF THE LAND: AN EXPERIMENT IN ART AND COMMUNITY IN THAILAND’. *Artforum*, 1 June 2005. https://www.artforum.com/features/the-lay-of-the-land-an-experiment-in-art-and-community-in-thailand-171622/.

Bishop, Claire. *Disordered Attention: How We Look at Art and Performance Today*. Verso Books, 2024.

———, ed. *Participation: Documents of Contemporary Art*. Unknown edition. London: The MIT Press, 2006.

Bjørkhaug, Hilde, Philip McMichael, and Bruce Muirhead. *Finance or Food?: : The Role of Cultures, Values, and Ethics in Land Use Negotiations*. Toronto ; : Buffalo ; : London : : University of Toronto Press, 2020.

Bodh, P. C. *Farmers’ Suicides in India: A Policy Malignancy*. Taylor & Francis, 2019.

Bonham-Carter, Charlotte, and Nicola Mann. *Rhetoric, Social Value and the Arts: But How Does It Work?* Springer, 2017.

Bose, Sugata, and Ayesha Jalal. *Modern South Asia: History, Culture, Political Economy*. 5th ed. London, New York: Routledge, 2023. https://www.routledge.com/Modern-South-Asia-History-Culture-Political-Economy/Bose-Jalal/p/book/9781032124186.

Bracke, Sarah. 'Is the Subaltern Resilient? Notes on Agency and Neoliberal Subjects'. *Cultural Studies* 30, no. 5 (2016): 839–55. https://doi.org/10.1080/09502386.2016.1168115.

Bradley, Will. *Art and Social Change: A Critical Reader*. London: Tate Publ., 2007.

Brantlinger, Patrick. *Bread & Circuses: Theories of Mass Culture as Social Decay*. Cornell University Press, 1983.

Brass, Tom. *New Farmers' Movements in India*. Routledge, 2014.

Bräuchler, Birgit, Nadeeka Arambewela-Colley, and Kathrin Knodel. 'Conceptualizing Crisis Brokerage: Brokering Crisis or Brokers in Crisis'. *Cultural Studies* 39, no. 2 (2025): 176–203. https://doi.org/10.1080/09502386.2024.2437428.

Braungart, Michael, and William McDonough. *Cradle to Cradle*. Random House, 2009.

'Bread, Circuses & WiFi | Pearl Lam Galleries', 2017. https://www.pearllam.com/exhibition/bread-circuses-wifi/.

'Bread, Circuses & You – Art Dubai 2017 | Chatterjee & Lal', 2017. https://chatterjeeandlal.com/shows/bread-circuses-you/.

Brown, Wendy. *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty*. Zone Books, 2010. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv14gpj55.

Bulba, Eva. 'Art as a Catalyst'. In *ResearchGate*. MaHKUscript: Journal of Fine Art Research, 4(1): 4, pp. 1–8. Accessed 4 May 2024. Bubla, E. 2020. Art as a Catalyst. MaHKUscript: Journal of Fine Art Research, 4(1): 4, pp. 1–8. DOI: https://doi.org/10.5334/mjfar.71 RESEARCH ESSAY Art as a Catalyst E.

Bureau, Our. 'Mud-Wrestling on the Mat - Federation Ban Tries to Take the Fight out of Akharas'. *The Telegraph*, 12 January 2003. https://www.telegraphindia.com/india/mud-wrestling-on-the-mat-federation-ban-tries-to-take-the-fight-out-of-akharas/cid/843995.

Bureau, The Hindu. 'Right against Climate Change a Distinct Fundamental and Human Right, SC Judgment'. *The Hindu*, 8 April 2024, sec. India. https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/right-against-climate-change-a-distinct-fundamental-and-human-right-sc-judgment/article68041693.ece.

Butler, Judith. *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. Verso, 2006.

Carlson, Marvin. *Performance: A Critical Introduction*. Psychology Press, 1996.

Chatterjee, Badri. 'Green Diwali: Women from Maharashtra's Border Village Make Seed Crackers, Sweets'. *Hindustan Times*, 8 November 2020. https://www.hindustantimes.com/mumbai-news/green-diwali-women-from-maharashtra-s-border-village-make-seed-crackers-sweets/story-gGwPqEWceHFPnhX3vdIXeL.html.

Chatterjee, Partha. *I Am the People - Reflections on Popular Sovereignty Today*. Columbia University Press, 2019.

Chatterji, Roma. *Graphic Narrative and the Mythological Imagination in India*. Routledge India, 2019.

Chaves, Alexandra. 'How Artist and Filmmaker Amar Kanwar Presents New Ways of Understanding Justice'. *The National*, 27 January 2020. https://www.thenationalnews.com/arts-culture/art/how-artist-and-filmmaker-amar-kanwar-presents-new-ways-of-understanding-justice-1.970372.

Chawla, Noor Anand. 'An Equal Canvas'. *Open The Magazine*, 9 December 2022. https://openthemagazine.com/art-culture/an-equal-canvas/.

Chibber, Vivek. *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital*. Verso, 2013.

Chibber, Vivek. *Locked in Place: State-Building and Late Industrialization in India*. Princeton University Press, 2003.

Chute, Hillary L. *Disaster Drawn: Visual Witness, Comics, and Documentary Form*. Belknap Press: An Imprint of Harvard University Press, 2016.

Chowfla, Sitara. 'Thukral and Tagra | Conversation', 5 February 2024. https://ocula.com/magazine/conversations/thukral-and-tagra/.

Cometti, Jean-Pierre. 'Activating Art'. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 58, no. 3 (2000): 237–43. https://doi.org/10.2307/432106.

Constitution of India. 'Preamble - The Constitution of India'. Accessed 28 January 2025. https://www.constitutionofindia.net/articles/preamble/.

Copeland, Colette. 'Challenging Tradition: Performances at the India Art Fair'. *Glasstire* (blog), 4 May 2024. https://glasstire.com/2024/05/04/challenging-tradition-performances-at-the-india-art-fair/.

Cotton Stainers by Gram Art Project Collective, 2022. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ldnT7kK_IoI.

Crawfurd, Lee, Theodore Mitchell, Radhika Nagesh, Saintis-Miller Christelle, and Rory Todd. 'Lessons in Inequality: Gender Bias in Indian Textbooks and Its Link to Societal Attitudes Towards Women'. *The Wire*, 31 August 2024, sec. Education. https://thewire.in/education/lessons-in-inequality-gender-bias-in-indian-textbooks-and-its-link-to-societal-attitudes-towards-women.

Creative Time Summit | Amar Kanwar in Conversation with Carol Becker, 2014. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OyOlvZx8aqM.

Cumming, Laura. 'Edinburgh Art Festival 2014 Review – a Vintage Year'. *The Observer*, 2 August 2014, sec. Art and design. https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2014/aug/03/edinburgh-art-festival-2014-review-vintage-year.

Da Costa, Beatriz. *Tactical Biopolitics: Art, Activism, and Technoscience*. Leonardo. Cambridge, Mass. u.a. : MIT-Press, 2008.

Dalmia, Nikunj. 'Farmers Protest 2.0: What Do They Want? What Is Their Strategy?' *The Economic Times*, 20 February 2024. https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/economy/agriculture/farmers-protest-2-0-what-do-they-want-what-is-their-strategy/articleshow/107623281.cms?from=mdr.

Dasgupta, Shubhagato, Kaustuv Kanti Bandyopadhyay, Anju Dwivedi, Sumona Das Gupta, and Ms Bharti. *Social Innovations in Urban Sanitation in India: Meeting Unmet Needs*. 1st ed. Vol. 1. United Kingdom: Taylor & Francis, 2023. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003197102.

Dastidar, Sharmi Ghosh. 'Art Rebels: They Turn the Tables on Convention with Their "cool" Art'. *India Today. North American Edition*, 2010.

Dave, Ranjana. 'A Scripted Performance in Chandigarh Puts Stubble Burning in Focus'. *Frontline, The Hindu*, 18 May 2023, sec. Arts & Culture. https://frontline.thehindu.com/arts-and-culture/theatre-in-the-matter-re-rights-of-nature-khoj-international-artists-association-performance-chandigarh-stubble-burning-air-pollution-in-focus/article66825661.ece.

Davidson, Barbara. 'A Look at India's Ancient Form of Wrestling, Kushti, in Practice for 3,000 Years'. *Los Angeles Times*, 17 May 2016, sec. World & Nation. https://www.latimes.com/world/la-fg-india-wrestling-photo-gallery-20160517-snap-htmlstory.html.

Dawson, Barry. *Street Graphics India*. London: Thames & Hudson, 1999.

Deja vu V13.3F LR2.1 subT 18M, 2024. https://vimeo.com/971075141.

Demos, T J. *Decolonizing Nature - Contemporary Art and the Politics of Ecology*. Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2016. https://www.sternberg-press.com/product/decolonizing-nature-contemporary-art-and-the-politics-of-ecology/.

Deol, Taran. '"Media Not Portraying Us Well", so Farmers Print Trolley Times — Their Own Newsletter'. *ThePrint*, 18 December 2020. https://theprint.in/india/media-not-portraying-us-well-so-farmers-print-trolley-times-their-own-newsletter/569615/.

Desk, OV Digital. 'Remembering Dushyant Kumar'. *Observer Voice*, 29 December 2021. https://observervoice.com/remembering-dushyant-kumar-5306/.

Desk, Poetry. 'हो गई है पीर पर्वत-सी पिघलनी चाहिए'. *Amar Ujala*. Accessed 9 November 2024. https://www.amarujala.com/kavya/irshaad/dushyant-kumar-poetry-on-life-struggle.

Dhar, Arshia. 'KNMA's Prussian Blue Unpacks the Colour's Historical Significance and Myriad Connotations'. *Architectural Digest India*, 5 December 2023. https://www.architecturaldigest.in/story/knmas-prussian-blue-unpacks-the-colours-historical-significance-and-myriad-connotations/.

‘Dhi Artspace - Pallov Saikia’. Accessed 3 February 2025. https://dhiart.com/#/artists/7c795151-5642-4217-ad20-b3b0a5b0a32c.

DHNS. ‘Sow the Seeds of Love’. *Deccan Herald*, 2016. https://www.deccanherald.com/india/karnataka/bengaluru/sow-seeds-love-2081781.

Dickie, George. *Art and the Aesthetic: An Institutional Analysis*. First Edition. Ithaca, NY London: Cornell University Press, 1974.

Dirks, Nicholas. *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India.* Princeton University Press, 2001.

Dispatch, Peoples. ‘Indian Farmers March on Delhi to Protest Unfulfilled Demands’. *Peoples Dispatch* (blog), 13 February 2024. https://peoplesdispatch.org/2024/02/13/indian-farmers-march-on-delhi-to-protest-unfulfilled-demands/.

Dore, Bhavya. ‘Not Bored of the Bard’. *Hindustan Times*, 29 March 2010. https://www.hindustantimes.com/india/not-bored-of-the-bard/story-wRkJnSfVSryX2Z6J5H1GSK.html.

Doshi, Riddhi. ‘Sketched from the Soil: Art from the Farm Protests’. *Hindustan Times*, 3 September 2021. https://www.hindustantimes.com/lifestyle/art-culture/sketched-from-the-soil-art-from-the-farm-protests-101630656751981.html.

Drawing Resistance. ‘Drawing Resistance’. Accessed 14 February 2025. https://drawingresistance.wordpress.com/.

Drèze, Jean, and Amartya Sen. *An Uncertain Glory: India and Its Contradictions*. Penguin UK, 2013.

Duncombe, Stephen. *Notes From Underground: Zines and the Politics of Alternative Culture*. Microcosm Publishing, 2017.

D’Souza, Shaad. ‘The Complexities of Being Heard in Kashmir’. *Frieze*, 27 April 2021. https://www.frieze.com/article/can-you-hear-my-voice-2021-review.

Dworkin, Ronald. *Sovereign Virtue: The Theory and Practice of Equality*. Harvard University Press, 2000.

———. ‘What Is Equality? Part 4: Political Equality’. In *Philosophy and Democracy: An Anthology*, edited by Thomas Christiano, 0. Oxford University Press, 2003. https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780195136593.003.0006.

E. Beyer, Landon. *The Arts, Popular Culture, and Social Change*. New York; Washington D/Baltimore; Boston; Bern; Franfurt: The University of Michigan, 2000.

EcoFarmVideo, dir. *Vandana Shiva - Two Paths to the Future of Food and Farming - EcoFarm 2020 Keynote*. 2020. 50:58.

Vandana Shiva - Two Paths to the Future of Food and Farming - EcoFarm 202…

Edinburgh Art Festival. ‘Edinburgh Art Festival 2014’, 2014. https://www.edinburghartfestival.com/about/edinburgh-art-festival-archive/edinburgh-art-festival-2014/.

e-flux. ‘Amar Kanwar: The Sovereign Forest’. 16 October 2017. https://www.e-flux.com/announcements/157290/amar-kanwarthe-sovereign-forest/.

Eldridge, Alison. ‘Why Is a Baker’s Dozen 13? | Encyclopaedia Britannica’. In *Britannica*, 29 March 2017. https://www.britannica.com/story/why-is-a-bakers-dozen-13.

Ellis, Dr Linda. ‘A Brief Look at the Juvenal’s “Bread & Circuses”’. *Medium* (blog), 23 August 2019. https://medium.com/@lindaellisphd/a-brief-look-at-the-juvenals-bread-circuses-a5ffe5770dba.

Emelife, Aindrea. *A Brief History of Protest Art*. Tate Publishing, 2022.

‘Essay - Indelible Black Marks - Exhibitions - Galerie Mirchandani + Steinruecke’. Accessed 19 February 2025. https://www.galeriems.com/exhibitions/indelible-black-marks/essay.

Evaluation. ‘Agri-Food Systems’. Accessed 12 November 2024. https://www.fao.org/evaluation/highlights/agri-food-systems/en.

‘Farm Laws: India PM Narendra Modi Repeals Controversial Reforms’. 19 November 2021. https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-59342627.

Felshin, Nina. *But Is It Art?: The Spirit of Art as Activism*. Seattle: Bay Press, 1995.

Fenner, Angelica. ‘The Subject of Documentary by Michael Renov. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2004’. *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 25, no. 3 (2008): 251–56. https://doi.org/10.1080/10509200601091540.

Firstpost. ‘Thukral and Tagra’s New Exhibition Presents Sharp Comment on Punjab’s Farmer Distress, NRI Culture’, 27 February 2019. https://www.firstpost.com/living/thukral-and-tagras-new-exhibition-presents-sharp-comment-on-punjabs-farmer-distress-nri-culture-6148811.html.

‘Foundation for a Just Society | Braver Strategies. Bolder Leadership.’ Accessed 30 January 2025. https://fjs.org.

Fraser, Nancy. ‘Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy’. *Social Text*, no. 25/26 (1990): 56–80. https://doi.org/10.2307/466240.

Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. London: Penguin, 1996.

Friedman, Susan Stanford. *Contemporary Revolutions: Turning Back to the Future in 21st-Century Literature and Art*. London New York Oxford New Delhi Sydney: London : New York : Oxford : New Delhi : Sydney : Bloomsbury Academic / Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2019.

Gabilondo, Joseba. 'The Subaltern Cannot Speak But Performs: Women's Public and Literary Cultures in Nineteenth-Century Spain'. *Hispanic Research Journal* 5, no. 1 (2004): 73–95. https://doi.org/10.1179/hrj.2004.5.1.73.

Gahtori, Suhani. 'Dushyant Kumar दुष्यंत कुमार की 5 कविताएं'. *Prabhat Khabar*, 28 June 2024, sec. Prabhat Literature. https://www.prabhatkhabar.com/prabhat-literature/dushyant-kumar-5-poems.

Gaurav, Sarthak, and Thiagu Ranganathan, eds. 'A Brief History of Vidarbha'. In *Accidental Gamblers: Risk and Vulnerability in Vidarbha Cotton*, 13–59. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108935814.002.

Geertz, Clifford. *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*. Basic Books, 2009.

Gepts, Paul, Thomas R. Famula, Robert L. Bettinger, et al., eds. *Biodiversity in Agriculture: Domestication, Evolution, and Sustainability*. Cambridge University Press, 2012.

Ginzburg, Carlo. *Clues, Myths, and the Historical Method*. JHU Press, 2013.

Google Arts & Culture. 'The Sovereign Forest - Amar Kanwar', 2013 2012. https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/the-sovereign-forest-amar-kanwar/QwENPbfQHubZPA.

'Gopa Roy: My Native Land | Emergent Art Space'. Accessed 6 February 2025. https://emergentartspace.org/gopa-roy-native-land/.

'GRAM ART PROJECT'. Accessed 17 April 2023. https://gramartproject.org/.

Gram Art Project | Performance by Aditi Bhattad | FICA Homepage 2017, 2024. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m8rj4OiZ9rQ.

'Gram Art Project - Climatical or Political-Goethe-Institut Max Mueller Bhavan | Indien'. Accessed 4 May 2024. https://www.goethe.de/ins/in/de/kul/art/fmi/gap.html.

Gram Art Project Presentation | Part 2, 2017. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qhjo1QSFgQs.

Grande, John K. *Art Nature Dialogues: Interviews with Environmental Artists*. State University of New York Press, 2012.

Gray, Ros, and Shela Sheikh. '"The Wretched Earth: Botanical Conflicts and Artistic Interventions"'. *Third Text* Vol.32, no. Issue 2–3 (May 2018). http://www.thirdtext.org/issues?item_id0=1511&issue_number=Volume%2032,%202018&offset=0.

Green, Charles. *The Third Hand: Collaboration in Art from Conceptualism to Postmodernism*. U of Minnesota Press, 2001.

Guha, Ramacandra. *India after Gandhi: A History*. Picador, 2023.

Guha, Ramachandra. *Makers of Modern India*. Penguin India, 2012.

Guha, Ramachandra. 'Ramachandra Guha: Can India Forge Its Own Environmentally Responsible Path to Economic Growth?' *Scroll.In*, 23 February 2025. https://scroll.in/article/1079487/ramachandra-guha-can-india-forge-its-own-environmentally-responsible-path-to-economic-growth.

Gupta, Nidhi. 'Thukral & Tagra's "Sustaina India" Trains the Spotlight on Climate Change'. *The Hindu*, 9 February 2024, sec. Art. https://www.thehindu.com/entertainment/art/sustaina-india-climate-change-jiten-thukral-sumir-tagra-ceew-bikaner-house/article67817521.ece.

Gwalani, Payal. 'In MP Village, Weather App Helps Farmers Clear Clouds of Doubt'. *The Times of India*, 16 July 2015. https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/nagpur/in-mp-village-weather-app-helps-farmers-clear-clouds-of-doubt/articleshow/48090869.cms.

Harper, Charles, and Monica Snowden. *Environment and Society: Human Perspectives on Environmental Issues*. 6th ed. New York: Routledge, 2017. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315463254.

Harris, Gareth, and Anna Wallace-Thompson. 'Why Galleries and Collectors Keep Coming Back to Art Dubai'. *The Art Newspaper - International Art News and Events*, 15 March 2017. https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2017/03/15/why-galleries-and-collectors-keep-coming-back-to-art-dubai.

Harvard University Graduate School of Design, Mohsen Mostafavi, and Gareth Doherty. *Ecological Urbanism / Edited by Mohsen Mostafavi with Gareth Doherty (Harvard University Graduate School of Design)*. Baden, Switzerland: Lars Müller Publishers, 2010.

Harvey, David. *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.

Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*. HarperOne, 1975.

Helguera, Pablo. *Education for Socially Engaged Art: A Materials and Techniques Handbook*. Jorge Pinto Books, 2011.

Herbert, Martin. 'Manifesta 7'. *Artforum*, 1 October 2008. https://www.artforum.com/events/manifesta-7-186233/.

Herbst, Graz Steirischer, and Keti Čuchrov. *A War in the Distance*. Berlin Graz: Berlin : Hatje Cantz : Graz : steirischer herbst, 2023.

Hiergeist, Teresa. 'The Difference between a Shooting and an Armed Woman: Representations of Louise Michel's Militancy in Contemporary French Biographical Portraits'. In *Ladies in Arms: Women, Guns, and Feminisms in Contemporary Popular Culture*, edited by Teresa Hiergeist and Stefanie Schäfer. Transcript Verlag, 2024.

Higgie, Jennifer. ‘Sharjah Biennial 11’. *Frieze*, 16 June 2013. https://www.frieze.com/article/sharjah-biennial-11.

Hindahl, Philipp. ‘“Still Present!” 12th Berlin Biennale for Contemporary Art |’. *Flash Art*, 15 September 2022. https://flash---art.com/article/12th-berlin-biennale/.

Holly, Michael Ann. *What Is Research in the Visual Arts?: Obsession, Archive, Encounter ; [Based on the Proceedings of the Clark Conference ... Held 27 and 28 April 2007 at the Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Massachusetts]*. Clark Studies in the Visual Arts. New Haven, Conn. [u.a.: New Haven, Conn. u.a. : Yale Univ. Press, 2008.

Hussain, ftikhar. ‘Socio-Economic Importance of Bamboo in Assam: A Brief Analysis’. *International Journal of Engineering, Management and Humanities (IJEMH)* Volume 3, no. Issue 1 (1 February 2022): pp: 97-103.

‘“I Have A Dream” Community Project | Vancouver Biennale’. Accessed 4 May 2024. https://www.vancouverbiennale.com/artworks/i-have-a-dream-community-project/.

IANS. ‘A Performance Highlighting Women’s Fear for Safety’. *Hindustan Times*, 29 January 2014. https://www.hindustantimes.com/art-and-culture/a-performance-highlighting-women-s-fear-for-safety/story-6CiTsj0cc2Xb7f7XxOFSRN.html.

———. ‘Farmers’ Widows Inspire Kota Neelima’s Art’. *TheQuint*, 18 May 2018. https://www.thequint.com/hotwire-text/farmers-widows-inspire-kota-neelima-s-art.

———. ‘Gulzar Pens Poem on Climate Change’. *The Statesman*, 11 November 2017. https://www.thestatesman.com/entertainment/gulzar-pens-poem-climate-change-1502526353.html.

Icoz, Isik, and Guenther Stotzky. ‘Fate and Effects of Insect-Resistant *Bt* Crops in Soil Ecosystems’. *Soil Biology and Biochemistry* 40, no. 3 (1 March 2008): 559–86. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.soilbio.2007.11.002.

IHME Helsinki. ‘IHME Helsinki Commission 2022’. Accessed 30 January 2025. https://ihmehelsinki.fi/en/ihme-helsinki-2022-commission/.

Ikerd, John. *Small Farms Are Real Farms: Sustaining People Through Agriculture*. Acres U.S.A., 2008.

Ikerd, John E. *Crisis and Opportunity: Sustainability in American Agriculture*. University of Nebraska Press, 2008. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1dgn4cr.

Impact of Rising Sea Levels on the Sunderbans. ‘Impact of Rising Sea Levels on the Sunderbans’, 11 October 2020. https://climatechangesunderbans.wordpress.com/.

INDELIBLE BLACK MARKS | Kulpreet Singh | Contemporary Indian Artist | Art Documentation Art Activism, 2021. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0lxvP7d2iNg.

India, Sabrang. 'Déjà Vu -- A Film That Depicts Chilling Effects of Corporate-Contract Farming'. *NewsClick*, 13 March 2024. https://www.newsclick.in/deja-vu-film-depicts-chilling-effects-corporate-contract-farming.

International Biennial Association. 'The Fifth Edition of Mardin Biennial: The Promise of Grass / The Gift of Dispossession', 2022. https://www.biennialassociation.org/article/the-fifth-edition-of-mardin-biennial-the-promise-of-grass-the-gift-of-dispossession/.

Islam, Rafiqul. 'Bangladesh River Eats up Land and Homes, Trapping Poor Villagers'. *Reuters*, 22 June 2016, sec. Environment. https://www.reuters.com/article/business/environment/bangladesh-river-eats-up-land-and-homes-trapping-poor-villagers-idUSKCN0Z80JN/.

Iyer, Lalita. 'Food for Thought'. *The Week*, 2017. https://www.theweek.in/webworld/features/society/land-art-festival.html.

Jackson, Shannon. *Social Works: Performing Art, Supporting Publics*. 1. publ. New York, NY [u.a.: New York, NY u.a. : Routledge, 2011.

Jaffrelot, Christophe, Hemal Thakker, and Vignesh Rajahmani. 'It's Not Just Food Price, India Is Facing a Food Security Challenge'. *The Wire*, 20 August 2024, sec. Food. https://thewire.in/food/its-not-just-food-price-india-is-facing-a-food-security-challenge.

Jagga, Raakhi. 'Farmers Back on Road to Delhi: How the Current Protest Differs from the 2020-21 Edition'. *The Indian Express*, 12 February 2024. https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/explained-politics/farmers-how-current-protest-differs-from-2020-21-9157982/.

Jayemanne, Darshana. *Gaming and the Arts of Storytelling*. MDPI, 2019. https://doi.org/10.3390/books978-3-03921-232-3.

Jha, Praveen. 'Growing Restiveness of the Peasantry in Contemporary India: Context and Challenges'. *Agrarian South: Journal of Political Economy* 13, no. 1 (1 March 2024): 41–61. https://doi.org/10.1177/22779760231226295.

Jhala, Kabir. 'How an Artist-Led Newspaper in Delhi Is Helping to Organise the "World's Biggest Protest"'. *The Art Newspaper - International Art News and Events*, 25 January 2021. https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2021/01/25/how-an-artist-led-newspaper-in-delhi-is-helping-to-organise-the-worlds-biggest-protest.

Jhaveri, Shanay. *Outsider Films on India: 1950 - 1990*. Mumbai London: Mumbai : Shoestring : London, 2009.

Jones, Amelia. *Body Art/Performing The Subject*. University of Minnesota Press, 1998.

JosephPX, Krispin. ‘How to Reappear and Appear in the Social World’. *Abirpothi* (blog), 3 February 2023. https://www.abirpothi.com/how-to-reappear-and-appear-in-the-social-world/.

Joshi, Namrata. ‘INTERVIEW | “Farmer Suicides Can’t Be Stopped by Curing Depression”: Kinshuk Surjan’. *The New Indian Express*, 18 December 2024. https://www.newindianexpress.com/entertainment/2024/Dec/18/interview-farmer-suicides-cant-be-stopped-by-curing-depression.

Jumabhoy, Zehra. ‘Amar Kanwar - Yorkshire Sculpture Park’. *Artforum*, 1 February 2014. https://www.artforum.com/events/amar-kanwar-203652/.

Kakar, Bhavna. ‘TAKE Quarantine: Editor’s Note’. *Take Art Magazine*, 1 May 2021. https://takeonartmagazine.com/editors-note/take-quarantine-editors-note/.

Kalra, Vandana. ‘How the Farmers’ Protest Found Resonance in Art’. *The Indian Express*, 17 January 2021. https://indianexpress.com/article/express-sunday-eye/farmers-protest-art-resonance-7149189/.

———. ‘Rooted in Tradition’. *The Indian Express*, 13 August 2016. https://indianexpress.com/article/lifestyle/rooted-in-tradition-farmers-of-paradsinga-village-2971482/.

Kannuri, Nanda Kishore, and Sushrut Jadhav. ‘Cultivating Distress: Cotton, Caste and Farmer Suicides in India’. *Anthropology & Medicine* 28, no. 4 (2 October 2021): 558–75. https://doi.org/10.1080/13648470.2021.1993630.

Kanwar, Amar. ‘Embracing Doubt’. *Marg*, 2018.

———, ed. *Outlook. Poetry as Evidence*, 2024.

———. *The Torn First Pages: Part I, Part II, Part III ; 19 Channel Video Installation ; Loop, Colour and b/w, Sound ; [... Presented along with the Film Installation ...]*. Köln New Delhi: Köln : König : New Delhi : Public Press, 2008.

Kanwar, Amar, Daniela Zyman, Sudhir Pattnaik, Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary, and Yorkshire Sculpture Park. *Amar Kanwar, The Sovereign Forest: ["The Sovereign Forest" at TBA21 - Augarten ; November 23, 2013 - March 23, 2014]*. Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2014.

Kapila, Kriti. *Nullius: The Anthropology of Ownership, Sovereignty, and the Law in India*. 1st ed. Chicago: Hawoo Publishing Company, 2022.

Karlheinz, Essl. *Chalo India A New Era of Indian Art*. Essle Museum, Munich [u.a.] : Prestel, 2010. https://www.zvab.com/9783791343044/Chalo-India-New-Indian-Art-3791343041/plp.

Karlholm, Dan, and Keith Moxey. *Time in the History of Art: Temporality, Chronology, and Anachrony*. Studies in Art Historiography. London: New York, 2018.

Kathuria, Preeti. ‘Curate — Speculate: Indian Contemporary Art and the Socio-Ecological Contingency - ONCURATING’, 2025. https://www.on-curating.org/issue-59-reader/curate-speculate-indian-contemporary-art-and-the-socio-ecological-contingency.html.

———. ‘Iterations and Interventions: Temporal Agency of Indian Contemporary Art Amidst Agrarian Distress’. *The Wollesen: Contretemps | University of Toronto Art Journals* Vol. 11 No. 1 (2024). https://utaj.library.utoronto.ca/index.php/utaj/issue/view/2862.

———. ‘Threading a Way between Memoir, History and Reportage — In Conversation with Author Amandeep Sandhu’. *Tint Journal*, December 2024. https://tintjournal.com/interview/threading-a-way-between-memoir-history-and-reportage-in-conversation-with-author-amandeep-sandhu.

Kaur, Banjot. ‘Globally, Highest Number of “Undernourished” People Are In India: UN Report’. *The Wire*, 25 July 2024, sec. Health. https://thewire.in/health/undernourished-highest-global-india-un-report.

Kester, Grant H. *The One and the Many: Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context*. Duke University Press, 2011.

Khan, Murtaza Ali. ‘“Kalira Atita” Review: Nila Madhab Panda Proves Why He’s Our David Attenborough’. *A Potpourri of Vestiges* (blog). Accessed 10 February 2025. https://www.apotpourriofvestiges.com/2021/09/kalira-atita-review-nila-madhab-panda.html.

Khoj. ‘Gram Art Project -Khoj’. Accessed 4 May 2024. https://khojstudios.org/person/gram-art-project/.

KHOJ. ‘In the Matter Re: Rights of Nature - A Staged Hearing - Khoj’. Accessed 2 May 2024. https://khojstudios.org/event/in-the-matter-re-rights-of-nature/.

Khoj. ‘KHOJ-Sangita Maity’. Accessed 19 February 2025. https://khojstudios.org/person/sangita-maity/.

Kilby, Patrick. *NGOs in India: The Challenges of Women’s Empowerment and Accountability*. 1st ed. Vol. 35. Routledge Contemporary South Asia Series. Milton: Routledge, 2010. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203842720.

Kiran Nadar Museum of Art. ‘Prussian Blue: A Serendipitous Colour That Altered the Trajectory of Art’, 18 September 2023. https://www.knma.in/prussian-blue-serendipitous-colour-altered-trajectory-art.

Kolbert, Elizabeth. ‘Such a Stoic’. *The New Yorker*, 26 January 2015. https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/02/02/stoic-2.

Kontturi, Katve-Kaisa. *Ways of Following: Art, Materiality, Collaboration*. Open Humanities Press, 2018.

Krejs, Christiane, Ursula Maria Probst, and Kunstraum Niederösterreich. *Touch the Reality: Rethinking Keywords of Political Performance*. Wien: Verlag für moderne Kunst, 2016.

Kulkarni, Sarang. 'Trolley Times'. Fonts in Use, 26 June 2022. https://fontsinuse.com/uses/47673/trolley-times.

Kumar, Awanish. 'B R Ambedkar on Caste and Land Relations in India'. *Review of Agrarian Studies*. Accessed 3 February 2025. https://ras.org.in/b_r_ambedkar_on_caste_and_land_relations_in_india.

Kumar, Nilotpal. *Unraveling Farmer Suicides in India: Egoism and Masculinity in Peasant Life*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2017.

Kumar, Rahul. '"Indelible Black Marks" by Kulpreet Singh Seeks to Be a Mirror to the Society at Large'. *Stir World*, 18 October 2021. https://www.stirworld.com/see-features-indelible-black-marks-by-kulpreet-singh-seeks-to-be-a-mirror-to-the-society-at-large.

Kumar, Satendra. 'Rise and Fall of the Bharatiya Kisan Union: The Farmers' Protests of 2020–2021 in the Making of New Rural Politics'. *Sociological Bulletin* 71, no. 4 (1 October 2022): 551–65. https://doi.org/10.1177/00380229221116996.

Lal, Nimshi, and Rahul Sharma. 'The Food Divide: How Solving Nutritional Inequality Can Fuel India's Economic Progress'. *The Wire*, 30 October 2024, sec. Gender. https://thewire.in/gender/the-food-divide-how-solving-nutritional-inequality-can-fuel-indias-economic-progress.

Lal, Vinay. 'Travails of a Nation: Some Notes on Indian Documentary'. *Third Text* 19, no. 2 (2005): 177–87.

Latitude 28. 'Latitude 28 -Thukral and Tagra'. Accessed 2 May 2024. https://www.latitude28.com/artist/thukral-and-tagra/.

Lennard, Debra. 'MoMA | "We Are the Museum": From the Kochi-Muziris Biennale to Mumbai', 17 June 2013. https://www.moma.org/explore/inside_out/2013/06/17/we-are-the-museum-from-the-kochi-muziris-biennale-to-mumbai/.

Levien, Michael. *Dispossession Without Development: Land Grabs in Neoliberal India*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018.

———. 'From Primitive Accumulation to Regimes of Dispossession: Six Theses on India's Land Question'. *Economic and Political Weekly* 50, no. 22 (2015): 146–57.

LKA, Punjab. 'Thukral and Tagra Interview with Parul: Punjab Lalit Kala Akademi (State Academy of Art)', 4 May 2019. https://punjablalitkalaakademi.com/thukral-and-tagra-interview-with-parul-punjab-lalit-kala-akademi/.

Lorde, Audre. Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle The Master's House. Penguin UK, 2018.

Louder than Words with Amar Kanwar, 2018. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O7P95sPBki0.

Lovegrove, Keith, and Andrew Hasson. *Graphicswallah: Graphics in India*. London: Laurence King, 2003.

Lum, Ken. *Everything Is Relevant: Writings on Art and Life, 1991-2018*. Montreal: Concordia University Press, 2020.

Lütticken, Sven. *Life, Once More: Forms of Reenactment in Contemporary Art ; January 27 - March 27, 2005, Witte de With, Center for Contemporary Art Rotterdam ; [Exhibition]*. Rotterdam: Witte de With, 2005.

Maareesha, Anagha. 'How Artist Duo Thukral and Tagra Contrast Natural with the Digital in Their Latest Show, Arboretum | Art-and-Culture News - The Indian Express'. *The Indian Express*, 26 January 2023. https://indianexpress.com/article/lifestyle/art-and-culture/jiten-thukral-sumir-tagra-arboretum-latest-art-show-8404624/.

Magdoff, Fred, Frederick H. Buttel, and John Bellamy Foster. *Hungry for Profit -The Agribusiness Threat to Farmers, Food, and the Environment.* NYU Press, 2000.

Mahat, Manushree. 'An Ode to Odisha's Resilience'. *The Kathmandu Post*, 3 February 2024. https://kathmandupost.com/art-culture/2024/02/03/an-ode-to-odisha-s-resilience.

Mahmood, Saba. *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. Princeton University Press, 2011.

Malhotra, Shruti Kapur. '#Throwback Thursday with Thukral & Tagra'. *Platform Magazine*, 2014. https://www.platform-mag.com/art/throwbackthursday-1412.html.

Malzacher, Florian and Steirischer Herbst. *Truth Is Concrete: A Handbook for Artistic Strategies in Real Politics*. Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2014.

'Manifesta7'. Accessed 6 February 2025. http://www.manifesta7.it/.

Marchart, Oliver. *Conflictual Aesthetics*. Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2019. https://mitpress.mit.edu/9783956792045/conflictual-aesthetics/.

Marian Goodman. 'Amar Kanwar - Marian Goodman Gallery'. Accessed 8 January 2025. https://www.mariangoodman.com/artists/48-amar-kanwar/.

Masood, Almaas, and Ananya Bhattacharya. 'Microsoft's Giant Data Centre in Telangana Village Accused of Dumping Waste, Encroaching on Lake'. *Scroll.In*, 30 August 2024. https://scroll.in/article/1072506/microsofts-giant-data-centre-in-telangana-village-accused-of-dumping-waste-encroaching-on-lake.

Mathur, Barkha. ‘City Artist Buries Herself in Coffin for 3 Hours to Highlight Farmers’ Plight during COP21’. *The Times of India*, 12 December 2015. https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/nagpur/city-artist-buries-herself-in-coffin-for-3-hours-to-highlightfarmers-plight-during-cop21/articleshow/50152168.cms.

———. ‘“I Have a Dream Will Highlight Farmers” Problems’’. *The Times of India*, 29 June 2014. https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/nagpur/i-have-a-dream-will-highlight-farmers-problems/articleshow/37415253.cms.

———. ‘Nagpur Artist’s Unique Social Initiative’. *The Times of India*, 16 July 2012. https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/nagpur/nagpur-artists-unique-social-initiative/articleshow/14970946.cms.

Mathur, Saloni. *A Fragile Inheritance: Radical Stakes in Contemporary Indian Art*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019.

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Phenomenology of Perception*. Routledge, 2013.

Mbembe, Achille. *Necropolitics*. Duke University Press, 2019.

McDougal, Tony. ‘A Look at Dairy Cow Numbers across the EU’. Dairy Global, 26 April 2023. https://www.dairyglobal.net/industry-and-markets/market-trends/a-look-at-dairy-cow-numbers-across-the-eu/.

McNay, Anna. ‘Prabhakar Pachpute – Interview: “I Juxtapose Memories and What Is Happening in Real Life”’. Accessed 5 February 2025. https://www.studiointernational.com/prabhakar-pachpute-interview-coal-mining-india-artes-mundi-9-juxtapose-memories-and-real-life.

McNiff, Shaun. *Art as Research: Opportunities and Challenges*. 1. publ. Bristol [u.a.: Bristol u.a. : Intellect, 2013.

Meet Our Artist: Shweta Bhattad (India), 2022. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RMP7tYLO73k.

Meet Thukral and Tagra, Internationally Acclaimed Artists Who Are in Search of New Visual Language, 2023. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Iu3DcHvwTPI.

Mehta, Lyla. *Displaced by Development: Confronting Marginalisation and Gender Injustice*. SAGE Publications Ltd, 2009.

Melville, Gert, and Carlos Rafael Ruta. *Thinking the Body as a Basis, Provocation, and Burden of Life: Studies in Intercultural and Historical Contexts*. Challenges of Life. Berlin : Boston, Mass. : De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2015.

Merali, Shaheen. *The Indian Parallax, Or, the Doubling of Happiness*. Birla Academy of Art & Culture, 2012.

Meredieu, Florence de. *Digital and Video Art (Chambers Arts Library)*. Chambers, 2005.

Meskimmon, Marsha. *Women Making Art: History, Subjectivity, Aesthetics*. 1. publ. London [u.a.: London u.a. : Routledge, 2003.

Michalarou, Efi. 'ART CITIES:Singapore -Amar Kanwar – Dreamideamachine ART VIEW'. Accessed 7 January 2025. http://www.dreamideamachine.com/?p=17014.

Mikiewicz, Gabriella. 'Vanishing Villages: How Migration Transformed the Western Himalayan Communities in India'. *Routed Magazine*, 26 May 2024. https://www.routedmagazine.com/post/vanishing-villages-how-migration-transformed-the-western-himalayan-communities-in-india.

Miles, Ned Carter. 'AMAR KANWAR'. *Art and AsiaPacific* 2017-11 (106), no. 106 (2017): p.133-133.

Mingoia, Jessica. 'Smarthistory – The Rediscovery and Impact of the Domus Aurea', 14 May 2023. https://smarthistory.org/rediscovery-domus-aurea-renaissance-grotesque/.

Minh-ha, Trinh T. T. *When the Moon Waxes Red: Representation, Gender and Cultural Politics*. Routledge, 1991.

Ministry of Agriculture & Farmers Welfare, Government of India. 'Label on Pesticides Products', 2015. https://pib.gov.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=124297.

Mio Figlio Nerone. Comedy, History. Les Films Marceau, Produzione Cinematografica F.I.D.E.S., Titanus, n.d.

Mitra, Sabyasachi, Suprakash Saha, Biswajit Guha, and Krishanu Chakrabarti. *Ramie: The Strongest Bast Fibre of Nature*. Technical Bulletin No. 8. Central Research Institute for Jute and Allied Fibres, Indian Council of Agricultural Research, Barrackpore, Kolkata - 120, 2014. https://doi.org/10.13140/2.1.3519.5842.

Mohan, Deepanshu, and Aryan Govindakrishnan. 'What Are the Disparities Widening the Inequality Gulf for Households Across India?' *The Wire*, 1 October 2024, sec. Economy. https://thewire.in/economy/what-are-the-disparities-widening-the-inequality-gulf-for-households-across-india.

Mohanty, Aishwarya. 'The Fertiliser Addiction of Indian Farming Is a Crisis'. *Scroll.In*, 24 February 2025. https://scroll.in/article/1079153/the-fertiliser-addiction-of-indian-farming-is-a-crisis.

Moliner, Christine, and David Singh, eds. *The Indian Farmers' Protest of 2020–2021: Agrarian Crisis, Dissent and Identity*. Routledge, 2025.

Möntmann, Nina. *Art and Its Institutions: Current Conflicts, Critique and Collaborations*. London: Black Dog, 2006.

Morton, Timothy. *Being Ecological*. A Pelican Book 17. London: Pelican, an imprint of Penguin Books, 2018.

———. *The Ecological Thought*. 1. paperback ed. Cambridge, Mass. [u.a.: Cambridge, Mass. u.a. : Harvard Univ. Press, 2012.

Movies that Matter. 'Nero's Guests'. Accessed 12 November 2024. https://moviesthatmatter.nl/en/film/neros-guests/.

Mreiwed, Hala, Mindy R. Carter, and Claudia Mitchell. *Art as an Agent for Social Change*. Leiden, Boston: BRILL, 2021.

Murthy, Bharath. *The Vanished Path: A Graphic Travelogue*. Collins, 2015.

Museum, Rome. 'Domus Aurea of Rome - Useful Information - Rome & Vatican Museums'. Accessed 10 November 2024. https://www.rome-museum.com/domus-aurea.php.

Nagaraj, K. *Farmers' Suicides in India: Magnitudes, Trends and Spatial Patterns*. Chennai: Bharathi Puthakalayam, 2008.

Nagree, Zeenat. 'Gram Art Project: A Collective Rooted in the Land'. *Mintlounge*, 27 January 2024, sec. How To Lounge. https://lifestyle.livemint.com//how-to-lounge/art-culture/gram-art-project-collective-paradsinga-madhya-pradesh-111706254106177.html.

Nair, Rukmini Bhaya, and Peter Ronald deSouza. *Keywords for India: A Conceptual Lexicon for the 21st Century*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020.

Nair, Shraddha. 'Art & Voices Matter: Bakeryprasad a.k.a. Siddhesh Gautam on the Dalit Movement'. *Stir World*, 17 May 2021. https://www.stirworld.com/see-features-art-voices-matter-bakeryprasad-a-k-a-siddhesh-gautam-on-the-dalit-movement.

Nair, Uma. 'Design-Duo Thukral & Tagra Wrestle with Daily Life in New Installation'. *Architectural Digest*, 2019. https://www.architecturaldigest.in/content/thukral-tagra-bread-circuses-yorkshire-sculpture-park/.

———. 'Shakespeare in an Indian Classroom'. *The Times of India*. Accessed 2 November 2024. https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/blogs/plumage/shakespeare-in-an-indian-classroom

Narayanamoorthy, A., R. V. Bhavani, and R. Sujatha. *Whither Rural India?: Political Economy of Agrarian Transformation in Contemporary India : A Festschrift for Venkatesh B. Athreya*. New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2019.

Natarajan, Srividya, and S. Anand. *Bhimayana: Experiences Of Untouchability*. With Subhash Vyam. Navayana, 2011.

Nayar, Pramod K. *The Indian Graphic Novel: Nation, History and Critique*. Routledge India, 2016.

Negi, Neetu, and Gurcharan Singh. 'Social Metaphors In The Installation Art Of Contemporary Indian Women Artists'. *ShodhKosh: Journal of Visual and*

Performing Arts January-June 2023 4(1), 484–494 (2023). https://dx.doi.org/10.29121/shodhkosh.v4.i1.2023.373.

Nemitz, Barbara. *Trans Plant: Living Vegetation in Contemporary Art*. Ostfildern-Ruit, Germany: Hatje Cantz, 2000.

'Nero's Guests' Documentary - Deepa Bhatia | P. Sainath, 2023. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y2IsSs6JSZM.

'Nero's Torches'. Accessed 2 November 2024. https://muzea.malopolska.pl/en/objects-list/328.

Nielsen, Kenneth Bo, and Alf Gunvald Nilsen. 'The Kisan Andolan and India's Rollover Neoliberalism'. In *The Indian Farmers' Protest 2020-2021*, pp.44-57, 2024. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003515050-5.

Nixon, Rob. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Harvard University Press, 2011. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt2jbsgw.

Nochlin, Linda. *Representing Women*. NY: Thanmes & Hudson, 1999.

Noord, Gerrie Van, Paul O'Neill, and Mick Wilson. *Kathrin Böhm: Art on the Scale of Life*. MIT Press, 2023.

Nussbaum, Martha C. *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions*. Cambridge University Press, 2003.

O'Gorman, Ellen. 'Tacitus (1), Roman Historian'. In *Oxford Classical Dictionary*. Oxford University Press, 2016. https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199381135.013.6205.

O'Neill, Paul. *Curating Subjects*. 1. publ. Amsterdam: De Appel, 2007.

online, ET. 'UPA Refused to Accept Swaminathan Committee's MSP Recommendations. Here's Why'. *The Economic Times*, 14 February 2024. https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/india/upa-refused-to-accept-swaminathan-committees-msp-recommendations-heres-why/articleshow/107681227.cms?from=mdr.

Orlow, Uriel. *Theatrum Botanicum*. Sternberg Press, 2018.

Orsini, Francesca, and Katherine Butler Schofield. *Tellings and Texts: : Music, Literature and Performance in North India*. Cambridge, England: : Open Book Publishers, 2015.

P. Sainath. 'About P. Sainath', 28 January 2010. https://www.psainath.com/about-p-sainath/.

Padhi, Ranjana. *The Journey of the Farmers' Rebellion: A Compilation of Interviews on the Farmers' Movement in India (2020-2021)*. GroundXero, 2023.

———. *Those Who Did Not Die: Impact of the Agrarian Crisis on Women in Punjab*. SAGE Publications, 2012.

Padhi, Ranjana, and Pramodini Pradhan. 'Women in Resistance Struggles in Odisha - Mainstream Weekly', 3 August 2013. https://www.mainstreamweekly.net/article4367.html.

Palaka, Provakar, ed. *Reading the Margins: History, Culture and Literature*. Peoples Literature Publication, 2020.

Pandey, Gyanendra. *Men at Home: Imagining Liberation in Colonial and Postcolonial India*. Duke University Press, 2025.

Parasuraman, S. *The Development Dilemma: Displacement in India*. Springer, 2016.

'Paris-Delhi-Bombay… India through the Eyes of Indian and French Artists - Centre Pompidou', 2011. https://mediation.centrepompidou.fr/education/ressources/ENS-PDB/index-en.html.

Parul. '"Karti Dharti" Tells Stories of Women Integral to Ongoing Farmers' Protests'. *The Indian Express*, 5 April 2021. https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/chandigarh/karti-dharti-tells-stories-of-women-integral-to-ongoing-farmers-protests-7259036/.

Passi, Shalini. 'Shalini Passi In Conversation With Thukral and Tagra'. Digital platform. MASH India, 4 January 2019. https://www.mashindia.com/shalini-passi-in-conversation-with-thukral-and-tagra/.

Patnaik, Utsa. 'Monthly Review | Origins of the Food Crisis in India and Developing Countries'. *Monthly Review*, 1 July 2009. https://monthlyreview.org/2009/07/01/origins-of-the-food-crisis-in-india-and-developing-countries/.

Patwardhan, Anand. 'A Time to Rise', 1981. https://patwardhan.com/a-time-to-rise/.

People's Archive of Rural India. 'People's Archive of Rural India'. Accessed 30 October 2024. https://ruralindiaonline.org/en/.

People's Archive of Rural India. 'Wrestling with the Rural Economy', 19 December 2014. https://ruralindiaonline.org/en/articles/wrestling-with-the-rural-economy/.

Perinchery, Aathira. 'Deaths, Destruction on the Rise Due to Extreme Weather Events: Grim Statistics in India Climate Report 2024'. *The Wire*, 9 November 2024, sec. Environment. https://thewire.in/environment/deaths-destruction-india-climate-report-2024-grim-statistics.

———. 'Forest Cover Claims Mask Deeper Crisis: ISFR 2023 Reveals Large-Scale Forest Degradation'. *The Wire*, 2 January 2025, sec. Environment. https://thewire.in/environment/isfr-2023s-grey-areas-forest-degradation-decline-and-fra-2006-cited-as-being-linked-to-these.

Peters, Sibylle. *Playing up: A Live Art Game for Kids and Adults*. Second edition. London: Live Art Development Agency, 2019.

Phelan, Peggy. *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*. Repr. London [u.a.: London u.a. : Routledge, 2004.

photo.circle. 'The Sovereign Forest - Nepal Art Council', 2023. https://www.photocircle.com.np/exhibitions/the-sovereign-forest/.

Pichler, Melanie, and Dayana Lengauer. 'Editorial: Activism and Social Movements in South-East Asia'. *ASEAS : Österreichische Zeitschrift Für Südostasienwissenschaften* 6 (1 January 2013). https://doi.org/10.4232/10.ASEAS-6.1-1.

Platform Magazine. 'Bread, Circuses, and I'. 2019. https://www.platform-mag.com/art/bread-circuses-and-i.html.

Poddar, Sandhini and Deutsche Guggenheim. *Being Singular Plural: Moving Images from India ; [Published on the Occasion of the Exhibition 'Being Singular Plural ...', Deutsche Guggenheim, Berlin, June 26 - October 10, 2010]*. New York, NY: Guggenheim Museum Publ., 2010. http://www.gbv.de/dms/weimar/toc/632165030_toc.pdf.

Popovici, Iulia. *Metaforă, protest, concept: performance art din România şi Moldova = Metaphor, protest, concept : performance art from Romania and Moldova*. Colecţia (Expoziţii). Cluj: Idea Design & Print, Editură, 2017.

'Prabhakar Kamble - Participants - 12th Berlin Biennale', 2022. https://www.berlinbiennale.de/en/personen/3126/prabhakar-kamble.

'Prabhakar Kamble - Teilnehmer*innen - Berlin Biennale'. Accessed 12 February 2025. https://www.berlinbiennale.de/de/personen/3126/prabhakar-kamble.

'Press Release - The Sovereign Forest - NTU CCA', 2016. https://archive.ntu.ccasingapore.org/news/press-release-amar-kanwar-sovereign-forest//

Princenthal, Nancy. 'AMAR KANWAR'. *Art in America* Vol.98 (6), no. 6 (2010): p.176.

Priyanka Kumar. 'Gram Art Project -Residency'. Accessed 4 May 2024. https://www.priyanka-k.com/project09.

PTI. 'Canvassing Caste: Artist Vikrant Bhise Paints Ambedkar, Continuing Dalit Struggles at India Art Fair'. *New Indian Express*, 12 February 2023. https://www.newindianexpress.com/nation/2023/Feb/12/canvassing-caste-artist-vikrant-bhise-paints-ambedkar-continuing-dalit-struggles-at-india-art-fair-2546842.html.

———. 'Wrestling Federation of India Bans Mud-Wrestling'. *The Times of India*, 12 January 2003. https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/wrestling-federation-of-india-bans-mud-wrestling/articleshow/34178510.cms.

Pujol, Ernesto. *Walking Art Practice: Reflections on Socially Engaged Paths*. England: Triarchy Press, 2018.

‘Pushpamala N’s Solo @ Chemould Prescott Road Mumbai’. Accessed 9 February 2025. http://mattersofart.blogspot.com/2022/11/pushpamala-ns-solo-chemould-prescott.html.

Quadri, Shireen. ‘“Threading the Horizon”: KHOJ’s New Show Spotlights Everydayness of Gender-Based Violence’. *Https://Thepunchmagazine.Com/*, 2022. https://thepunchmagazine.com/arts/art-design/amp-lsquo-threading-the-horizon-amp-rsquo-khoj-amp-039-s-new-show-spotlights-everydayness-of-gender-based-violence.

Ramnath, Nandini. ‘Documentary | Quarter Number 4/11’. mint, 17 December 2013. https://www.livemint.com/Leisure/F9o3A1ki2ujc9CFT9gOiSP/Documentary--Quarter-Number-411.html.

———. ‘Marching in the Dark Review: A Moving Account of a Woman Farmer Coping with Suicide and Neglect’. *The Scroll*, 22 October 2024. https://scroll.in/reel/1074516/marching-in-the-dark-review-a-moving-account-of-a-woman-farmer-coping-with-suicide-and-neglect.

Rana, Pratishtha. ‘5 Questions with Jiten Thukral and Sumir Tagra on the Critical Connection of Art and Climate’. *ELLE DECOR*, 13 February 2024. https://elledecor.in/article/5-questions-with-jiten-thukral-and-sumir-tagra-sustaina-india

Rappoport, Leon. *How We Eat: Appetite, Culture, and the Psychology of Food*. ECW Press, 2010.

Reddy, Gautami. ‘3 Years in the Making, the Thukral & Tagra-Designed Rado Watch Is Finally Here’. *Architectural Digest India*, 30 August 2021. https://www.architecturaldigest.in/story/the-thukral-and-tagra-designed-rado-watch-is-finally-here/.

Roncaglia, Sara, Angela Arnone, and Pier Giorgio Solinas. *Feeding the City: Work and Food Culture of the Mumbai Dabbawalas*. 1st ed. Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2013. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt5vjtm6.

Rosa, Eugene A., and Fred Magdoff. ‘Hungry for Profit: The Agribusiness Threat to Farmers, Food, and the Environment’. *Human Ecology Review* Vol. 9, No. 2 (2002). https://doi.org/10.2307/3088998.

Rose, Gillian. *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to Researching with Visual Materials*. 4th edition. Los Angeles London New Delhi Singapore Washington, DC Melbourne: Los Angeles : London : New Delhi : Singapore : Washington, DC : Melbourne : SAGE, 2016.

Rothberg, Michael. *The Implicated Subject: Beyond Victims and Perpetrators*. Stanford University Press, 2019.

Roy, Ananya. *Poverty Capital: Microfinance and the Making of Development*. Routledge, 2010.

Roy, Aruna. *The Personal Is Political: An Activist's Memoir*. Harper Collins India, 2024.

Ruf, François, and Frederic Lançon. *From Slash-and-Burn to Replanting: Green Revolutions in the Indonesian Uplands?* 1st ed. Regional and Sectoral Studies. Washington, D.C: World Bank, 2004.

Rogoff, Kenneth S. *The Curse of Cash*. Princeton University Press, 2016.

Ryall, Emily, Wendy Russell, and Malcolm MacLean. *The Philosophy of Play*. Routledge, 2013.

Sabhaney, Vidyun. 'Debt and Distress: The Women of Punjab Wage a Lonely, Determined Battle'. *The Scroll*, 15 February 2025. https://scroll.in/article/1078488/punjab-sketchbook-the-lonely-determined-battle-of-rural-women-as-farm-debt-pushes-men-to-the-edge.

———. '"My Story Springs from Nature": Orijit Sen on Creating First Indian Graphic Novel "River of Stories"'. *Scroll.In*, 28 January 2023. https://scroll.in/article/1042587/my-story-springs-from-nature-orijit-sen-on-creating-first-indian-graphic-novel-river-of-stories.

Saikia, Pallav. 'Engulfing Silence in the Midst of a Roaring River: Pallov Saikia'. हाकारा | *hākārā*, 22 December 2024. https://hakara.in/author/pallav-saikia/.

Sainath, P. *Everybody Loves a Good Drought*. New Delhi, India: India Penguin, 1996.

———. 'Farmers' Suicide Rates Soar above the Rest'. *P. Sainath* (blog), 18 May 2013. https://www.psainath.com/farmers-suicide-rates-soar-above-the-rest/.

———. 'Maharashtra Crosses 60,000 Farm Suicides | P. Sainath', 15 July 2014. https://www.psainath.com/maharashtra-crosses-60000-farm-suicides/.

———. 'Over 2,000 Fewer Farmers Every Day | P. Sainath', 2 May 2013. https://www.psainath.com/over-2000-fewer-farmers-every-day/.

———. 'The Slaughter of Suicide Data | P. Sainath', 5 August 2015. https://www.psainath.com/the-slaughter-of-suicide-data/.

Saltz, Jerry. 'AMAR KANWAR'. *The Village Voice (New York)*, 2004. https://www.proquest.com/docview/232310786?pq-origsite=primo&parentSessionId=tdpqK0BoL65%2FsnKNloe5QS2fNYxfGjqswoGieY13XiA%3D&sourcetype=Newspapers.

Sandhu, Amandeep. 'Amandeep Sandhu » About Me'. Accessed 9 May 2024. https://www.amandeepsandhu.com/?page_id=2.

———. 'Bangkok Post - India Farmer Protests Gain Momentum', 16 October 2021. https://www.bangkokpost.com/opinion/opinion/2198723/india-farmer-protests-gain-momentum.

———. ‘Dispatches from the Farmer Protests’. *The Caravan*, 25 January 2021. https://caravanmagazine.in/agriculture/dispatches-farmer-protests-delhi-border.

———. ‘How India’s Farmers Launched a Movement Against Modi’s Farm Bills—and Won’. *YES! Magazine*, 19 January 2022. https://www.yesmagazine.org/social-justice/2022/01/19/india-farmers-movement.

———. ‘How Punjabi Refugee Dispersed into Many Corners of India, Shaping National Culture, and Being Embraced by Friendship’. *The Indian Express*, 26 January 2020. https://indianexpress.com/article/express-sunday-eye/this-land-is-my-land-partition-of-india-punjab-bengal-sikhs-6233223/.

———. ‘Left, Khaps, Gender, Caste: The Solidarities Propping up the Farmers’ Protest’. *The Caravan*, 13 January 2021. https://caravanmagazine.in/agriculture/left-punjab-haryana-caste-gender-solidarities-farmers-protest.

———. ‘Middlemen or Service-Providers: Who Are the “Arthiyas” Who Are a Key Part of Farming in Punjab?’ *Scroll.In*, 8 December 2020. https://scroll.in/article/980537/middlemen-or-service-providers-who-are-the-arthiyas-who-are-a-key-part-of-farming-in-punjab.

———. *Panjab: Journeys Through Fault Lines*. Revised edition. Gurugram, Haryana, India: Penguin Random House India Pvt. Ltd, 2023.

———. ‘Punjab Government’s Ban on Display of Firearms, Songs Extolling Gun Culture, Shows Lack of Application of Mind | The Indian Express’. *The Indian Express*, 15 November 2022. https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/punjab-govt-ban-display-gun-culture-lack-of-application-of-mind-8270168/.

———. ‘Why the Rollback of Farm Laws May Not Pay Off for BJP in Punjab Elections’. *The Wire*, 20 November 2021. https://thewire.in/politics/why-the-rollback-of-farm-laws-may-not-pay-off-for-bjp-in-punjab-elections.

Saraswati, Bhumika. ‘An Unequal Heat: In Photos’. *Outlook India*, 10 July 2024. https://www.outlookindia.com/national/an-unequal-heat-in-photos.

Sarkar, Surajit. ‘Arts, Activism, Ethnography: Catapult Arts Caravan, 2004-2010’. *Museum Anthropology Review* 7, no. 1–2 (2013): 155–65.

Sarkar, Tanika. *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation: Community, Religion, and Cultural Nationalism*. C. Hurst & Co. Publishers, 2001.

Sarkowicz, Dominika. ‘The application of modern analytical techniques to the examination of the Henryk Siemiradzki’s large-size painting “Nero’s Torches”’. *Museum Pamphlets* 23 (2015), volume 23 s. 83-99 (3 June 2016). https://doi.org/10.4467/20843852.OM.15.008.5386.

Satyanarayanan, Joel Lee & K. 'Why Some Indian Language Dalit Writers Have to Hide Their Caste in Their Works'. *Scroll.In*, 8 February 2024. https://scroll.in/article/1060667/why-some-indian-language-dalit-writers-have-to-hide-their-caste-in-their-works.

Satyanarayanan, Kusuma, and Joel Lee. *Concealing Caste: Narratives of Passing and Personhood in Dalit Literature*. Oxford University Press, 2023.

Scheffler, Samuel. 'Equality as the Virtue of Sovereigns: A Reply to Ronald Dworkin'. *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 31, no. 2 (2003): 199–206. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1088-4963.2003.00199.x.

Schnaiberg, Allan, and Kenneth Gould. 'Environment and Society: The Enduring Conflict'. *Contemporary Sociology* 23 (1 July 1994). https://doi.org/10.2307/2076357.

Schwarz, Bill. 'Subaltern Histories'. *History Workshop Journal* 89, no. 1 (2020): 90–107.

Science Hub. '"The Organic Seed," a Documentary on Farming, Is a Touching Tribute. - Neo Science Hub', 11 March 2022. https://neosciencehub.com/the-organic-seed-a-documentary-on-farming-is-a-touching-tribute/.

Sebastian, Shilpa. 'Kota Neelima's Latest Expo Explores the Lives of Widows of Vidarbha Farmers'. *The Hindu*, 17 May 2018, sec. Art. https://www.thehindu.com/entertainment/art/many-shades-of-moon/article23912021.ece.

Sen, Amartya. *Argumentative Indian : Writings On India: Writings on Indian History, Culture and Identity*. Penguin UK, 2006.

Sen, Amartya K. *On Ethics and Economics*. Wiley-Blackwell, 2010.

Sen, Jahnavi. '"With Every Change in Geography, Destinies Change": Abraham Verghese'. *The Wire*, 28 January 2025, sec. Books. https://thewire.in/books/abraham-verghese-the-covenant-of-water-interview.

Sen, Orijit, Vidyun Sabhaney, and Harsho Mohan Chattoraj. *Food and Farming: A Journey Through India in Comics*. New Delhi: Lefword Books, 2024.

Sequeira, David. 'Can You Hear My Voice? Margaret Lawrence Gallery 18 March—1 May 2021 Melbourne Australia', 2021.

Service, Tribune News. 'Women in Rural Chhindwara Giving Green Hues to Diwali'. *Tribuneindia News Service*, 2021. https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/schools/women-in-rural-chhindwara-giving-green-hues-to-diwali-333356.

Shah, Parthiv, and Sana Das. *Art as Witness*. New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2010.

Shah, Zaral, and Huzan Tata. 'Meet 6 Boundary-Pushing Contemporary Artists', 24 July 2015. https://www.vervemagazine.in/people/contemporary-indian-artists-diverse-mediums.

Shandilya, Krupa. 'The Many Bismils of Today: Ram Prasad "Bismil", "Bismil" Azimabadi and Recovering the Legacy of a Muslim Intellectual'. *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 47, no. 3 (3 May 2024): 534–57. https://doi.org/10.1080/00856401.2024.2350888.

Shankar, Karin. 'Amar Kanwar: Neoliberalism on Trial'. *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 45, no. 3 (135) (1 September 2023): 1–13. https://doi.org/10.1162/pajj_a_00677.

'Sharjah Biennial 11: "Re:Emerge –Towards a New Cultural Cartography" | Asia Society'. Accessed 7 January 2025. https://asiasociety.org/india/events/sharjah-biennial-11-reemerge-%E2%80%93towards-new-cultural-cartography.

Sharma, Mukul. *Dalit Ecologies: Caste and Environment Justice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2025. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009453424.

———. ''Dalits Are Not Afraid of Climate Change, They Have Been Leading a Disastrous Life Forever''. *The Wire*, 2 August 2024, sec. Environment. https://thewire.in/environment/dalits-are-not-afraid-of-climate-change-they-have-been-leading-a-disastrous-life-forever.

Sharma, Sonali. 'Collaboratively Reimagining Spaces Through Socially-Engaged Creative Practices'. *Interactive Film & Media Journal* 3, no. 2 (17 June 2023). https://doi.org/10.32920/ifmj.v3i2.1776.

Sharp, John. *Works of Game: On the Aesthetics of Games and Art*. Playful Thinking Series. Cambridge, Mass. : London : MIT Press, 2015.

Shiva, Dr Vandana, and Kunwar Jalees. 'Farmers Suicides in India'. *Research Foundation for Science, Technology and Ecology*, n.d.

Shiva, Vandana. *Biopiracy: The Plunder of Nature and Knowledge*. Berkeley, California: North Atlantic Books, 2016.

———. 'North‐South Conflicts in Intellectual Property Rights'. *Peace Review* 12, no. 4 (1 December 2000): 501–8. https://doi.org/10.1080/10402650020014573.

———, ed. *Seed Sovereignty, Food Security: Women in the Vanguard of the Fight against GMOs and Corporate Agriculture*. North Atlantic Books, 2016.

_____. *Soil Not Oil: Environmental Justice in an Age of Climate Crisis*. North Atlantic Books, 2015.

———. *The corporate control of life: Documenta (13), [9. 6. 2012 - 16. 9. 2012] = Die Kontrolle von Konzernen über das Leben*. 100 notes - 100 thoughts. Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2011.

———. *The Violence of the Green Revolution: Third World Agriculture, Ecology and Politics*. Zed Books, 1991.

Shroff, Vaishali. *Submerged Worlds*. India: Penguin, 2025.

Shukla, Vandana. 'Thukral and Tagra's New Exhibition Presents Sharp Comment on Punjab's Farmer Distress, NRI Culture'. *Firstpost*, 27 February 2019, sec. living. https://www.firstpost.com/living/thukral-and-tagras-new-exhibition-presents-sharp-comment-on-punjabs-farmer-distress-nri-culture-6148811.html.

Shweta Bhattad Taiwan Beach Performance, 2014. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AOosYkKFr-0.

Shweta Bhattad Talks about Biennale Global Initiative - "I Have a Dream" Art + Farming Project for Students on Vimeo. Accessed 4 May 2024. https://vimeo.com/116940288.

Singh, Devika. 'The Compass That Keeps Spinning: Amar Kanwar'. *Art and AsiaPacific*, 2008.

Singh, Pritam, and Shruti Bhogal. 'Interrogating the MSP Regime, Farm Laws and Agrarian Future in India'. *Millennial Asia* 12, no. 3 (1 December 2021): 332–49. https://doi.org/10.1177/09763996211056996.

Singh, Sukhpal. *Regulating Agricultural Markets in India*. Orient Blackswan, 2023.

Smith, Gavin. *Livelihood and Resistance: Peasants and the Politics of Land in Peru*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989. https://publishing.cdlib.org/ucpressebooks/view?docId=ft529005zz&chunk.id=d0e76&toc.id=&brand=ucpress.

South Asia Times. 'Pro-Farmer Newsletter Launched as 95,000 Trolleys Line up Delhi Border', 24 December 2020. https://www.southasiatimes.com.au/breaking-news/pro-farmer-newsletter-launched-as-95000-trolleys-line-up-delhi-border/.

Specter, Michael. 'Seeds of Doubt'. *The New Yorker*, 18 August 2014. https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/08/25/seeds-of-doubt.

Sreedhar, Nitin. 'Art Special 2024: Thukral and Tagra's Green Mission'. *Mintlounge*, 27 January 2024, sec. Smart Living. https://lifestyle.livemint.com//smart-living/environment/india-art-thukral-and-tagra-climate-change-sustainability-111706272059406.html.

———. 'Art Special 2024: Thukral and Tagra's Green Mission'. *Mint*, 27 January 2024, sec. Lounge. https://www.livemint.com/mint-lounge/business-of-life/india-art-thukral-and-tagra-climate-change-sustainability-111706272059406.html.

Stahel, Urs, Daniela Janser, and Amar Kanwar. *Amar Kanwar: Evidence*. Göttingen Winterthur: Göttingen : Steidl : Winterthur : Fotomuseum Winterthur, 2012.

Standard, Business. 'What Is Swaminathan Report? - Farmers' Issues and Recommendations'. Accessed 27 December 2024. https://www.business-standard.com/about/what-is-swaminathan-report.

STPI – Creative Workshop & Gallery. 'Thukral & Tagra · STPI – Creative Workshop & Gallery', 12 April 2017. https://www.stpi.com.sg/artists/thukral-tagra/.

Stürzl, Winfried. 'Thukral & Tagra Exhibit Lullament2 in Ludwigsburg, Germany'. *Stir World*, 2019. https://www.stirworld.com/see-features-thukral-and-tagra-exhibit-lullament2-in-ludwigsburg-germany.

Subramanyan, K G. *Moving Focus : Essays On Indian Art*. Lalit Kala Akademi, 1978.

Sudeep, Theres. 'Shouting It through Art', 3 May 2018. https://www.newindianexpress.com/kochi/2018/May/02/shouting-it-through-art-1809339.html.

Sukant, Deepak. 'In Full Bloom: Artists Jiten Thukral and Sumir Tagra, Prepping for a Solo Show in Yorkshire This October, Have Been Working with Botanical Theme'. *India Today. North American Edition*, 2018.

Swami, Kamayani. 'Aruna Roy: A Collective Journey, Showing the Way Forward'. *The Wire*, 5 August 2024, sec. Books. https://thewire.in/books/aruna-roy-a-collective-journey-showing-the-way-forward.

Swaminathan, Madhura, and Sandipan Baksi. *How Do Small Farmers Fare?: Evidence from Village Studies in India*. Tulika Books, 2017.

Tanabe, Akio. *Caste and Equality in India: : A Historical Anthropology of Diverse Society and Vernacular Democracy*. 1st ed. Routledge New Horizons in South Asian Studies. London, England ; New York, NY: Taylor & Francis, 2022.

Tansey, Geoff. *The Future Control of Food: 'A Guide to International Negotiations and Rules on Intellectual Property, Biodiversity and Food Security'*. Routledge, 2012.

Taylor, Diana. *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*. Second Printing edition. Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2003.

Teeple, Gary, and Philip McMichael. 'Development and Social Change, a Global Perspective', 1998. https://doi.org/10.2307/25144264.

Terracciano, Emilia. 'Amar Kanwar's Latest Installation Captures Life and Its Extinction, in Rural Odisha and Elsewhere'. *Caravan Magazine*, 1 February 2014. https://caravanmagazine.in/reviews-and-essays/disappearing-worlds.

———. 'Of Doubt and Disturbances'. *Modern Painters*, 2013.

The Art Gallery at New York University Abu Dhabi (The NYUAD Art Gallery). 'Amar Kanwar'. Accessed 12 August 2024. https://www.nyuad-artgallery.org/en_US/our-exhibitions/main-gallery/amar-kanwar/.

'The Copy Book › Nero's Torches'. Accessed 5 November 2024. https://claylane.uk/copybook/?title=neros-torches.

The Foundation for Indian Contemporary Art. 'Are You Nero's Guests? Aditi Bhattad Performance'. Accessed 30 October 2024. https://ficart.org/aditi-bhattad-performance.

The Foundation for Indian Contemporary Art. 'Shweta Bhattad - FICA'. Accessed 4 May 2024. https://ficart.org/shweta-bhattad.

The Hindu. 'When Leelabai Runs the Farm'. 16 July 2013, sec. Sainath. https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/columns/sainath/when-leelabai-runs-the-farm/article4921390.ece.

'The History of Bowling'. Accessed 12 February 2025. https://sparetimesbowling.com/2021/06/the-history-of-bowling/.

Thompson, Nato. *Living as Form: Socially Engaged Art from 1991-2011*. The MIT Press, 2017.

THUKRAL & TAGRA | INDIA. 'Farmer Is a Wrestler', 1 May 2019. https://www.thukralandtagra.com/farmer-is-a-wrestler/.

THUKRAL & TAGRA | INDIA. 'Homepage: Thukral & Tagra'. Accessed 2 May 2024. https://www.thukralandtagra.com/.

'Thukral & Tagra Biography, Artworks & Exhibitions', 5 February 2024. https://ocula.com/artists/thukral-and-tagra/.

'THUKRAL AND TAGRA | Christie's'. Accessed 2 May 2024. https://www.christies.com/en/lot/lot-5446098.

Thukral and Tagra: Bread, Circuses & TBD, 2019. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=75QP9S8mXtk.

Thukral, Jiten, and Sumir Tagra. *Weeping Farm*, 2022.

'Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary - The Scene of Crime', 2013. http://www.tba21.org/.

'Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary -Publications', 2014. http://www.tba21.org/.

TNN. 'Isro's High-Resolution Satellite Images Show 86,000 Sqm of Land Slipped Away in Wayanad Disaster'. *The Times of India*, 2 August 2024. https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/kochi/kerala-landslides-satellite-imagery-reveals-landslide-damage-as-86k-sqm-land-slips/articleshow/112205807.cms.

Todhunter, Colin. *Food, Dependency and Dispossession: Resisting the New World Order*. Centre for Research on Globalization (CRG), Montreal, Canada, 2022.

Tokar, Brian, and Fred Magdof. 'Monthly Review | An Overview of the Food and Agriculture Crisis'. *Monthly Review*, 1 July 2009. https://monthlyreview.org/2009/07/01/an-overview-of-the-food-and-agriculture-crisis/.

Tomi, Reiko. *Radicalism in the Wilderness: International Contemporaneity and 1960s Art in Japan*. MIT Press, 2016.

Torsen, Ingvild. '"The Origin of the Work of Art" and Its Legacy'. *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics, 2nd Ed., Oxford U. P.*, 1 August 2014. https://doi.org/10.1520/STP162820190169.

Tripathi, Shailaja. 'Art for the Basics'. *The Hindu*, 12 February 2015. https://www.thehindu.com/features/friday-review/interview-with-artist-shweta-bhattad/article6886525.ece.

———. 'Documentary "The Organic Seed" Is a Poignant Ode to Farming'. *The Hindu*, 11 June 2020, sec. Entertainment. https://www.thehindu.com/entertainment/documentary-the-organic-seed-is-a-poignant-ode-to-farming/article31807112.ece.

Tripathi, Shankar. 'Is Blue Simply the Warmest Colour? - The Karachi Collective', 26 October 2023. https://thekarachicollective.com/is-blue-simply-the-warmest-colour/.

Tufnell, Ben. *Land Art*. London: Harry N. Abrams, 2006.

Turner, E. *Communitas: The Anthropology of Collective Joy*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.

UCLA. 'Rising Number of Farmer Suicides in Rural India', 2014. https://www.international.ucla.edu/institute/article/145702.

Umar, Khalid Bin. 'Sarfaroshi Ki Tamanna – Bismil Azimabadi – TAWARIKHKHWANI'. Accessed 6 November 2024. https://tawarikhkhwani.com/sarfaroshi-ki-tamanna-bismil-azimabadi/.

Unnithan, Sandeep. 'Jiten Thukral and Sumir Tagra: Two of a Kind'. *India Today. North American Edition*, 2010.

Urbanaut. 'A Meal with Edible Archives'. Accessed 9 February 2025. https://urbanaut.app/spot/chefs-table-edible-archives.

'Utarand III – Kadist'. Accessed 12 February 2025. https://kadist.org/work/utarand-iii/.

Varga, Tunde. 'The Power of Imagination? Aesthetic Autonomy and Critique in Contemporary Art', December 2019. https://www.um.edu.mt/library/oar/handle/123456789/49730.

Vatsyayan, Kapila. 'The Role of the Arts in Social Transformation'. *India International Centre Quarterly* 38, no. 3/4 (2011): 106–25.

Videos - Panel Discussion- Punjab Lalit Kala Akademi, State Academy of Art, 2014. https://punjablalitkalaakademi.com/videos/.

Waikar, Namita. *Farmers Protest! A Movement for Our Times*. New Delhi: Yoda Press, 2025.

———. *The Long March*. Speaking Tiger Publishing Pvt Ltd, 2018.

Web Desk, Express. ‘Farmers End Year-Long Protest: A Timeline of How It Unfolded’. *The Indian Express*, 16 September 2021. https://indianexpress.com/article/india/one-year-of-farm-laws-timeline-7511961/.

White, Barbara Harriss. ‘The Politics of Waste Management’. *The Hindu*, 6 October 2015, sec. Lead. https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/the-politics-of-waste-management/article7731264.ece.

‘Who Was Nero? | British Museum’. Accessed 30 October 2024. https://www.britishmuseum.org/blog/who-was-nero.

Wire, The. ‘“India’s Child Stunting Rates Higher Than Sub-Saharan Africa Due to Caste Disparities”: Study’. *The Wire*, 29 October 2024, sec. Caste. https://thewire.in/caste/indias-child-stunting-rates-higher-than-sub-saharan-africa-due-to-caste-disparities-study.

www.naturemorte.com. ‘Nature Morte – Thukral & Tagra’. Accessed 2 May 2024. http://www.naturemorte.com.

Yiu, Alex. ‘AMAR KANWAR’. *Art and AsiaPacific*, New York, 2024.

Yorkshire Sculpture Park. ‘Amar Kanwar: The Sovereign Forest + Other Stories’, 11 October 2013. https://ysp.org.uk/whats-on/exhibitions/past-exhibitions/amar-kanwar-the-sovereign-forest-other-stories.

Yusoff, Kathryn. *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*. Minneapolis, MN: Univ Of Minnesota Press, 2018.

Zimna, Katarzyna. *Time to Play: Action and Interaction in Contemporary Art*. London [u.a.: London u.a. : Tauris, 2015.

‘हो गई है पीर पर्वत-सी पिघलनी चाहिए - दुष्यन्त कुमार| Ho Gayi Hai Peer Parvat See - Dushyant Kumar. काव्यालय| Kaavyaalaya: House of Hindi Poetry’. Accessed 4 November 2024. https://kaavyaalaya.org/dush1.

Appendices

1A. Artist Database

ARTIST NAME	PROVENANCE	MEDIA	ARTWORK(S)	DISPLAY INFO	GALLERY/ CURATOR	YEAR	WEBSITES/ CONTACT
Orijit Sen	Goa	Graphic Novel	River of Stories	Blaft Publications	https://www.blaft.com/products/river-of-stories-25th-anniversary-edition	1994	https://www.peopletreestudio.com/collections/orijit-sens-artwork
Anand Patwardhan	b. 1950, Mumbai	Film	A Narmada Diary, A Time to Rise	Documentary		1995	https://patwardhan.com/
Jagjit Singh (singer)		Song - Ghazal	Ab Main Rashan Ki Qataron (Now I Wander the Ration Lines)	Album: Cry for Cry	lyrics: Khaleel Dhantejvi	1995	https://docmitasha.wordpress.com/category/music/indian-music/jagjit-singh/
Ranu Ghosh	Kolkata	Filmmaker	Quarter no.4/11		Manifesta 7, Italy	2008	
Sanjay Kak	b.1958, Pune	Mixed Media Installation	A Shrine to the Future: Memory of a Hill		Manifesta 7, Italy	2008	
Dharmendra Prasad	Assam	Installation	Harvest / Home Not alone -Swiss Residency	Anga Art Collective, 2010, Assam		2010	@angaartcollective

Amar Kanwar	b. 1964, Delhi	Film	The Sovereign Forest, Many Faces of Madness, A Night of Prophecy	Multimedia	protest music & poetry by regional artists in 11 language s.	2011	www.amarkanwar.com
Shamika Mone		Illustrator -turned Farmer	Book -A Source Book on India's Organic Seeds			2011	https://ea-agroecologyconference.org/speaker/shakima-mone/
Srividya Natarajan &Aparajita Ninan		Graphic Novel	A Gardener in The Wasteland			2011	https://navayana.org/products/a-gardener-in-the-wasteland/?v=7d0db380a5b9
Shweta Bhattad	b.1984, Nagpur Maharashtra	Gram Art Project	KHOJ/ Climatical or Political/ Dear PM/		Paradsinga, Madhya Pradesh	2013	https://gramartproject.org/
Amshu Chukki	Hyderabad		excerpts from "Ooru Keri"	India: Maximum City - Group Show	Curated by Birgid Uccia	2014	https://amshuchukki.net/News,
Aditi Bhattad	Nagpur	Performance	Are you Nero's Guest	Vadehra Art Gallery, Delhi	FICA, Delhi, Curator: Vidya Shivdas	2017	https://ficart.org/aditi-bhattad-performance
Nila Madhab Panda	Orissa	Film	Kadwi Hawa/ Bitter Air, Kalira Atita	99 minutes, art-house aesthetics		2017	@n_madhabpanda https://thewire.in/film/kadvi-hawa-review
Prabhakar Pachpute		Drawing/ Mural	Sea of Fists, Suppressive	Existential - Exhibition, Curated by Sumesh Sharma	Clark House, Mumbai	2017	https://www.theshowroom.org/relationships/prabhakar-kamble

Akshay Ghauri		Documentary Film	Taapar	30 mins, Haryanvi		2018	
Arunkumar HG	b. 1968	Installations	CON-struction			2018	https://arunkumarhg.com/press-reviews-writeups/
Mayur & Tushar Vayeda	b.1992& 1987 Ganjad, Maharashtra	Warli - Folk Art	Agros Project		Aomori Museum of Art, Japan	2018	http://www.vayeda.in/2018-agros-project--japan.html
Randeep Maddoke		Film	Landless			2018	
Kota Neelima		Painting, Photography, Books	The Nature of Things: Death and Dualism in Indian Villages	Solo show	Visual Arts Gallery, India Habitat Centre, Delhi	2019	http://www.kotaneelima.com/
Sarat Roy		Sculptor - Wood	Hanging Lives' / 'Rest Time'		Kalakriti Art Gallery, Telangana	2019	https://artcloud.market/artist/sarat-roy#overview
Sarnath Banerjee		graphic novel	Doab Dil - Graphic Novel			2019	https://www.deccanherald.com/features/book-review-doab-dil-by-sarnath-banerjee-
Adithya Sadashiv	Bengaluru	Film	Organic Seed	86 minutes, Documentary	Best Feature Length Documentary - Eurasia Internati	2020	https://www.adithyaasadashiv.com

					onal Film Festival, Russia;		
Jyoti Nisha		Film - Documentary	Dr. B R Ambedkar - Then and Now			2020	@jyotinisha
Siddhesh Gautam		Graphic Art	I Resist Therefore I Exist			2020	@ bakeryprasad
Pushpamala N	b. 1956, Bengaluru	Etching Plates	Nara (Slogan) - Set of 50, etchings on copper sheet	Group Exhi: Archaeology of the Self: Archives, Anarchives & the Artist	Art Heritage Gallery, Delhi	2020	http://www.pushpamala.com/biography/
Gauri Gill	b.1970, lives in Delhi	Photographs	A Village on the Highway	Also shown in London, 2024	Vadehra, FICA	2021	https://www.vadehraart.com/exhibitions/247/works/images5625/
Rahul Jain		Film - Documentary	Invisible Demons			2021	https://www.imdb.com/title/tt14927320/
Shobhit Jain		documentary	Hailstorm	61 minutes - Hindi, Nemadi	Farmers in Narmada Valley, Central India	2021	https://mubi.com/en/at/films/hailstorm
Srishti Lakhera		Film - Documentary	Ek Tha Gaon (Once Upon a Village)		2022-Screening: Vadehra Art Gallery, Delhi	2021	https://www.imdb.com/title/tt18335494/
Vidyun Sabhaney		Reportage/Newsletter	'Drawing Resistance'	Two Editions, Hindi/English zine		2021	@vidyunsabhaney

Gulab Kapadiya	Baroda	Painting -(watercolour on rice paper on canvas)		People of the Homeland - Exhibition	Stainless Gallery, New Delhi	2022	@gulab_kapadiya
Gurvinder Singh		Documentary Film	Crescent Night /Adh Chanani Raat	109 minutes; Punjabi		2022	https://mubi.com/en/at/films/crescent-night
Pagdandi Films	Naveen Macro, Sanskriti Talwar	Film	Bandhua	story of Murti Kaur - Dalit Farm Widows		2022	@pagdandifilms
Ranjeet Singh		Painting, Photography	Shadow Lands			2022	
Rithika Merchant	b. 1986, Mumbai	Painting	Harvest, A Land of Plenty		Ojas Gallery, Delhi	2022	http://www.rithikamerchant.com/projects-and-commissions.html
Shishir Jha	b.1988, Bihar	Film	Dharti Latar Re Horo (Tortoise Under the Earth)	Santhali language film on Displacement		2022	
Swati Janu	Delhi	Architect, Founder: Social Design Collective	5 Bhiga Zameen	Threading the Horizon - Exhibition	Khoj, Delhi	2022	https://au.linkedin.com/posts/social-design-collaborative
Vikrant Bhise		Ink Pen on Paper	Labour/Farmer Protests I, II, III	Sense & Sensibilities: A Reflective Realisation, Exhi	Anant Art Gallery, Noida Curator: Dr. Y S Alone	2022	https://www.anantart.com/exhibitions/

Nagsh Ghodke		Painting	Exhi: Villagescapes		Jehangir Art Gallery, Mumbai	2022	ghodke.ng@gmail.com @nageshghodke_studio
Dhrubajit		Film/Animation	'Black Soil'			2022	dhrubajitsarma56@gmail.com @Bamboobloss oms
Kulpreet Singh	Patiala, Punjab	Printmaker	Indelible Black Marks , Fossils of Force		Gallery Mirchandani, Mumbai	2022	
Birender Kumar Yadav	b. Dhanbad , Delhi-based		Project: 'Unjustified' , Durga Portraits - series	12th Berlin Biennale	India Foundation for the Arts	2023	https://indiaifa.org/events/birender-kumar-yadav-january2023.html
Film: Jawaan		Film - Bollywood	Director: Atlee Kumar	Script: S. Ramana Girivasan & Atlee Kumar		2023	
Girjesh Kumar Singh	b. 1981, Uttar Pradesh	Brick and mortar from demolished construction	Haal Mukam' Current address 2		IAF, 2023	2023	https://galleryrosenfeld.com/artists/35-girjesh-kumar-singh/
Prabhakar Kamble	Maharashtra	Performance, Installation	Protected Ignorance (YS Alone), Utarand (Downward)	IAF 2023, 12th Berlin Biennial	NSIC Grounds, Delhi, Germany	2023	https://indiaartfair.in/programme/protected-ignorance-prabhakar-kamble
Prateek Shekhar		Documentary Film	Chardi Kala - an Ode to Resilience	Farmer Protests- 95 min/ Hindi and Punjabi		2023	https://www.uni-goettingen.de/de/681329.html

Shashwati Talukdar, PARI		Documentary Film	Between the Forest and the Road	11 minutes, Uttarakhand - Gujjar Community		2023	https://ruralindiaonline.org/article/between-the-forest-and-the-road
Madhu Venugopalan	b.1976, Kochi, Kerala	Painting - Series	An Antique Piece of Love		Kalakriti Art Gallery, Hyderabad, Telangana	2023	https://kalakritiartgallery.com/
Bedabrata Pain	b.1963, West Bengal	Film - documentary	Deja Vu			2024	
Buddhadev Mukherjee	b.1976, West Bengal	Chinese watercolour, ink and gold dust on Chinese rice paper	Soft Targets (series)	IAF 2024	NSIC Grounds, Delhi	2024	https://www.galeriems.com/artists/buddhadev-mukherjee @buddh.mukherjee
Climate Recipes	Goa, (Sunaparanta Goa)	Srinivas Aditya Mopidevi & Srinivas Mangipudi		Sustaina India, IAF 2024 - Srinivas Mopidevi,T&T	Bikaner House, Delhi	2024	https://climate.recipes
Debasmita Ghosh	West Bengal	Eco-Architect: mud, plaster..	Living with the Land	Sustaina India, IAF 2024 - Srinivas Mopidevi,T&T	Bikaner House, Delhi	2024	https://in.linkedin.com/in/debasmita-ghosh-b49ab8260
Edible Archives	Goa	Restaurant	Shalini Krishan & Anumitra Ghosh Dastidar	Sustaina India, IAF 2024, Kochi Biennial		2024	https://www.imdb.com/news/ni64060505/

Gyanwant Yadav		Performance	A Tale of Seven Villages - Project		KNMA, Delhi	2024	https://www.knma.in/seven-villages-tale-untold
Jyothidas KV	Kerala	Performance	Laterite Moorings		IAF 2024	2024	
Kinshuk Surjan	Bhopal	Filmmaker	Marching in the Dark	105 minutes	World Premiere : Copenhagen	2024	
Manjot Kaur	Chandigarh, Vancouver	3-channel video	The Parliament of Forests	Sustaina India, IAF 2024 - Srinivas Mopidevi,T&T	Bikaner House, Delhi	2024	
Nischay Thakur		paddy husk, paddy straw, cow dong , mud,	I am Farmer Breed'		Bhubaneshwar, Lalit Kala Akademi	2024	@Nischay_Thakur0
Nishtha Jain		Film - Documentary	Farming the Revolution			2024	https://www.nishthajain.com/about
Pallov Saikia	Assam	photography, bamboo	Rahmaria Archives	Sustaina India, IAF 2024 - Srinivas Mopidevi,T&T	Bikaner House, Delhi	2024	https://dhiart.com/pallov-saikia/
Paula Sengupta	b.1967, Kolkata	Paint on Textile	a river of unrest … a delta of dreams		Gallery Espace, Delhi	2024	https://www.galleryespace.com/artwork/a-river-of-unrest-a-delta-of-dreams/
Probir Gupta	Delhi NCR	Installation	Coronation of the Dysfunctional	IAF 2024		2024	@probir.gupta.718
Shriti Pandey		Civil Engineer -		Sustaina India Exhibition	Bikaner House, New Delhi	2024	@sp3598 Founder: Strawcture Eco

		Sustainability					
Sri Vamsi Matta		Performance	Come Eat With Me	Museum of Goa, Bengaluru		2024	https://thelocavore.in/2022/08/11/sri-vamsi-mattas-come-eat-with-me-or-to-be
Subodh Kerkar	b.1959, Goa		Kitchen Slavery			2024	
Bhikhari Pradhan	Orissa	Installation	Interdependency	Mumkin Zameen/Possible Lands, Exhi - Residency	NIV Arts Center, Delhi	2024	
Sitikanta Samantasinghar	Orissa	Installation and Photography	Hidden Areas III	Mumkin Zameen/Possible Lands, Exhi - Residency	NIV Arts Center, Delhi	2024	
Gopa Roy	Tripura	Mix Media	Metamorphosis of land and mankind	Mumkin Zameen/Possible Lands, Exhi - Residency	NIV Arts Center, Delhi	2024	@goparoy
Preksha Golchha	Tripura	Mix Media Jute and sound	Neb Sarai	Mumkin Zameen/Possible Lands, Exhi - Residency	NIV Arts Center, Delhi	2024	
Sapna Kuniyal	Dehradun, Uttarakhand	Mix Media on Jute	Pungad I & II	Mumkin Zameen/Possible Lands, Exhi - Residency	NIV Arts Center, Delhi	2024	
Bhumika Saraswati		Journalist, Filmmaker, Photographer Activist	Unequal Heat (Photographs)		Lalit Kala Akademi, Chennai	2024	@equalitylabs @heat.southasia

Abhijit Patil	Muradpur, Ratnagiri	Photo-journalist, farmer, curator	Curator: Seed Stories		Monalisa Kalagram Gallery, Goethe Institute, Pune	2025	Founder of Sadakchhap art
Kirrt Collective	Gurdeep Dhaliwal, Jasdeep Singh, Gurpreet Singh Tanny, Sukhan Saar & Jaskaran Singh	Documentary Films	Cotton Crop Failure in Punjab	15 minutes	Of Land and Growers' - Screenings	2025	@_kirrt_
Rajita Schade	Pune		Seed Stories'	Group show +Shweta Bhattad	Monalisa Kalagram Gallery, Goethe Institute, Pune	2025	
Rajyashri Goody	b.1990, Pune		Seed Stories'		Monalisa Kalagram Gallery, Goethe Institute, Pune	2025	Resident at the Rijksakademie van Beeldende Kunsten, Amsterdam in 2021-2023
Rupali Patil		Print-making, drawing and installations	Seed Stories'		Monalisa Kalagram Gallery, Goethe	2025	3rd Industrial art biennial, Croatia, 2020

					Institute, Pune		
Sachin Mali		Poet, Performer	Seed Stories'		Monalisa Kalagram Gallery, Goethe Institute, Pune	2025	
Sayli Kulkarni	Pune	Performance, Theatre	Seed Stories'	Group show +Shweta Bhattad	Monalisa Kalagram Gallery, Goethe Institute, Pune	2025	
Vaishali Oak	b.1970, Pune	Fiber Artist	Seed Stories'	Group show +Shweta Bhattad	Monalisa Kalagram Gallery, Goethe Institute, Pune	2025	https://www.goethe.de/ins/in/en/sta/pun/current-projects-/seed-stories/
Abhipsa Pradhan	b. 1979	Acrylic on canvas	“Journey" - series		IAF, 2023		@thecurators.art
Akhil Mohan	b.1989, Kerala	Charcoal on Paper	Rice Series	IAF 2024	Dhi Artspace		https://dhiart.com/akhil-mohan/
Film: Well Done Abba		Film - Bollywood	Director: Shyam Benegal				
Jigyasa Mishra - PARI		Photo-Journalist					https://ruralindiaonline.org/en/authors/jigyasa-mishra/
Kaghazi Pairahan	Devadeep Gupta &		Publishing and Resistance in South Asia	A traveling library of artists’ publications			https://www.printedmatter.org/kaghazi-pairahan

	Akshay Mahajan						
Kamal Koria	b.coastal village :Chorwad, Gujarat	Painting			moved to Leicester, UK in 1976		https://kamalkoria.com/
Kapil Anant	b. 1998, based in Delhi	Painting, Print	India shining - set of 30		IAF 2023		https://www.saatchiart.com/en-at/account/profile/1772275?
Keg de Souza	b.1978, Perth Australia	Food Politics					@fakinandkeggs http://www.kegdesouza.com
Poorvesh Patel	Baroda, Gujarat	Painted Copper wire, rust on canvas	Not Afraid (sprouting seeds)	IAF 2024	Dhi ArtSpace		https://dhiart.com/poorvesh-patel/
Prasanta Sahu		Acrylic / Oil on paper	Blueprint Of A City III,				https://kalakritiartgallery.com/artworks/890-prasanta-sahu-blueprint-of-a-city-iii-na/
Priyanka Paul		Illustration	Kalamb's last poem Book: Black Earth				Instagram: @artwhoring
Rahee Punyashloka	Delhi and Bhubaneswar	Writer, Researcher, Filmmaker, Artist			ARKIPEL Jakarta, Tribeca Film Fest.NYC, IFF Rotterdam, Ishara Art		@artedkar

					Foundation Dubai, Khoj		
Rohan Chakravarty		Comics, caricature	Green Humour				https://climatechangesunderbans.wordpress.com/
Sagnik Samanta	b.1994	Woodcut Prints	Farmland to La La Land	Group Show			
Sahana Ghosh	Singapore	Social Anthropologist					https://ap5.fas.nus.edu.sg/cgi-bin/FAS_STFPRFL/stfprfl.pl?id=sahanag&opt=P
Sangita Maity	Kolkata	Printmaker	Living with Memories', 'Industrial Acquisitions'	India Art Fair 2022-24			
Shrujana N Shridhar	Mumbai based	illustrator	Dalit Kitchens of Marathwada/ Kinkri Devi		Harper Collins Publ.		@srujangatha
Thukral & Tagra	Delhi, Ludhiyana (Punjab)	Multimedia	The Sundry Effect/Farmer is a Wrestler/Bread Circuses & I/Weeping Farm/Trolley Times				https://www.thukralandtagra.com/

Chapter 2

2A. Poetry: Bismil Azimabadi

Original in Hindi	English Translation
सरफ़रोशी की तमन्ना, अब हमारे दिल में है। देखना है ज़ोर कितना, बाज़ु-ए-कातिल में है? वक़्त आने पर बता देंगे तुझे, ए आसमान, हम अभी से क्या बताएँ क्या हमारे दिल में है - बिस्मिल अज़ीमाबादी	*The desire for revolution is in our hearts* *Let us see how much strength the enemy has* *When the time comes we'll prove it to the sky* *Why should we tell you now itself, as to what's there in our hearts* - *Bismil Azimabadi* (1901 – 1978)

2B. Poetry: Dushyant Kumar

Original in Hindi	English Translation
हो गई है पीर पर्वत-सी पिघलनी चाहिए हो गई है पीर पर्वत-सी पिघलनी चाहिए, इस हिमालय से कोई गंगा निकलनी चाहिए। आज यह दीवार, परदों की तरह हिलने लगी,	Insurmountable like the Himalayas is our sorrow, Let it melt like the Ganges, and through these mountains burrow. These walls have, like curtains, finally started shaking, But remember, “shake must the foundations”, was our original undertaking.

शर्त लेकिन थी कि ये बुनियाद हिलनी चाहिए। हर सड़क पर, हर गली में, हर नगर, हर गाँव में, हाथ लहराते हुए हर लाश चलनी चाहिए। सिर्फ हंगामा खड़ा करना मेरा मकसद नहीं, सारी कोशिश है कि ये सूरत बदलनी चाहिए। मेरे सीने में नहीं तो तेरे सीने में सही, हो कहीं भी आग, लेकिन आग जलनी चाहिए।	On every street and boulevard, across every town and farmland, It's high time even the corpses march hand-in-hand. I am not your everyday agitator, needless violence is not my aim, I am here for the long haul, to change the very rules of the game. If not in mine, so be it in your heart, It really doesn't matter where, but a fire needs to start.

2C. Poetry: Gram Art Collective (2016)

Original Poem in Hindi	English Translation
इस धरती की लाजन कौन रखियों, जब बीज ही बोए हम परदेसी। मेरी माँ की लाजन कौन रखियों, जब बीज ही बोए हम परदेसी। खेत में जब देसी बीज लगाते, एक-दूजे के संग खाते-खिलाते। पर सत्ता के पीछे वो हुए बदनाम, तब खोया हमने बीज, सम्मान। कपट से जब हरित क्रांती लाई,	Who can save the honor of this land, When we are sowing foreign seeds. Who can save the honor of my mother, When we are sowing foreign seeds. When we used to sow local seeds in the fields, We used to eat and feed each other. But they became infamous for power, Then we lost the seeds and respect.

पूरे देश में यूं अशांती फैलाई। किसी कुटिया के दीप फिर बुझ से गए, किसी की अखिया रात सोई नहीं। अब यह भी सुनो धरती माँ क्या कहती, कई बार वो बुझती कई बार वो जलती। आखिर जो बोते है, वही है पाते, सीखे जंगल कैसे सब को दे जाते। अब ठाना है ऐसे बीज लगाए, हम बोए और सब जन पाए। क्यों की “दाता”-“पाता”, भेद है मनका, चलो, मिलकर खोजे सच का यह तिनका।	When they brought the green revolution by deceit, They spread unrest in the whole country. The lamp of some hut went off again, Someone's eyes did not sleep at night. Now listen to what Mother Earth says, Sometimes she extinguishes and sometimes she lights up. After all, what you sow, you reap, We learned how the forests give to everyone. Now we have decided to sow such seeds, We sowed and everyone got to know. Because there is a difference between "giver" and "receiver", Come, let's find this straw of truth together.

2D. Poetry: Balli Singh Cheema

ले मशाले चल पडे है

ले मशाले चल पडे है लोग मेरे गांव के,
अब अंधेरा जीत लेंगे लोग मेरे गांव के .....।।धृ।।

पूछती है झोपडी और पूछते है खेत भी,
कब तब लूटते रहेंगे लोग मेरे गांव के.....।।१।।

बिन लडे कुछ भी यहाँ मिलता नहीं ये जानकर
अब लढाई लड रहे है लोग मेरे गांव के.....।।2।।

चीखती हे हर रुकावट ठोकरोके मार से
बेडियाँ खनका रहे है लोग मेरे गांव के.....।।३।।

देखो यारो जो सुबह लगती थी फीकी आजकल
आज रंग उसमें भरेंगे लोग मेरे गांव के.....।।४।।

The torches have started moving

The people of my village have started moving with
torches, now the people of my village will defeat the darkness...।।Dhri।।

The hut asks and the fields also ask, how
long will the people of my village keep on plundering them...॥1॥

Knowing that nothing can be achieved here without
fighting, the people of my village are now fighting...।।2।।

Every obstacle screams, the people of my
village are shaking the chains by hitting them...3.

Look friends, the morning which used to look dull
these days, today the people of my village will add colours to it.

2E. Interview: Aditi Bhattad (September 2023)

(Telephonic and Email Conversation and personal meeting at her Residence-cum-studio)

1. **What inspired you to respond to the agrarian situation?**

I am a daughter of a farmer. I remember in our childhood, aur grandfather used to make all my cousins work in the field with all women laborers to understand how we get what we get, in our meal. My parents used to be very careful about the leftover food, we were not allowed to leave food in plates. They used to say take little and you can ask for more, but you must not leave a single grain. Now, when I look back, it makes sense, what my parents used to say..

Before I was born, my parents migrated from the village to Nagpur, Maharashtra looking for a good income source, better health and education facility. My father started his own business. Although my father had quite a big piece of our ancestral land it was still difficult to manage only on farming. He was able to do so because of his savings, but this is not so easy for small landholders or farm laborers. Most of my friends come from the family of small land holders or farm laborers. Whenever I went to the village during vacation me and my neighboring friends shared with each other toys, food, clothes etc.

Many times, my sister and I ate at their home. My grandmother told us not to eat at their house every day as they have limited resources but being a kid, it was difficult to understand what she wanted us to understand. As I grew up I had so many questions. Why did I have more resources? Why my friends who now had grown up had themselves started working at farm as laborers and not by choice. They worked more in farms but still had less in their plates. why? Why on the other hand my plate was full with different varieties of food? How can we afford private convent school but why did my friends have to go to government school in a village which did not even have a toilet. On one hand I went to tuition after school but my friends went to farm after school to work and support their family. With all these memories in the backdrop, even after living in a city for a long period of time, the village and farm was something very close to my heart.

2. **Please elaborate upon your reason to make this performance piece and do you think it was a success?**

Due to higher studies, I slowly stopped going to the village. I hardly went twice a year for a day or two but the connection to the farm was still there due to my father and grandfather. Cattle, farm equipment, loss of traditional and local knowledge, increasing reliance of farmers on hybrid seeds, large-scale shift of farmers towards mono cropping, no one interested in sowing oil seeds were just some of the topics they talked upon every once in a while... They also talked about how we don't find any traditional local industries now like cold pressed oils, spinning and yarn making, broom making etc.

As I was about to complete my studies in art, which also helped me in widening my perspective, my father, at the age of 60, closed down his shop/business of 22 years to pursue his dream of full-time farming again. It was a tough job because it was not only physically demanding but also mentally challenging as the whole farming landscape had changed. All his childhood friends in the village who were farmers had switched to mono cropping of GMO Cotton seeds, backed by chemical fertilizers, pesticides, weedicides and what not. He wanted to farm against the flow, he along with my sister attended many workshops, seed festivals and discussed with other people who are still practicing sustainable agricultural practices on how to adopt these practices again. He started farming with a dream of a green farm with birds, insects, and animals together in harmony with nature.

At this time, I finished my Bachelors in Fine Arts from Khamgaon and returned back home to Nagpur. My father who now had started farming was hardly home as he was in Paradsinga village, where our farm is, for most of the time. Whenever we were together our dinner table conversations had now mostly changed about our farm, how difficult it is to keep practicing farming for us and even more so for marginalized and landless farmers in our village and around the whole of India. These talks encouraged me to question and act on the issue of farmer suicide, reasons behind it, whether government recognises it as suicide, is any compensation provided to family, recognisation of only male deaths as farmer suicide and not female and so forth. This acted as a primary reason for us to come together with all local villagers, followed by starting a voluntary group known as Gram Art Project, which

was further followed by conducting Gram Dhara Chitra Utsav and which finally culminated into this performance.

This performance was so close to me and the reality that I am living in that I cannot attribute any tags of success and failure to it. For me it was a small start about speaking about what was happening around all of us. A start, for not waiting for someone else to come forward but instead coming forward yourself. It can be by you or me, or by anyone. It is on us to not be so blinded as to the injustice happening right in front of our eyes, It is on us to not be Nero's guests..

3. **What was the duration of the performance that took place at Vadehra Art Gallery New Delhi?**

The performance "ARE YOU NERO'S GUEST?" was an almost 2-hour performance done in Vadehra Art Gallery which was open for the general public to see.

This performance however started for me in Paradsinga village, Madhya Pradesh almost a month back. I wore a sticker on my back which was actually a number: 3,22,028. That number represented the number of farmer suicides that happened in Vidarbha region from the year of the great "green revolution" to the date of performance, as available in "official" government records. A number this big, that one cannot even believe, which I could not believe! And this list excluded so many suicide deaths which went unreported/underreported?

Every day with this sticker on my back and a *lugda* (traditional saree) borrowed from a farmer friend of mine from a village on my body, I worked in the sun. I also started noting down the names, age, village and date of death of those farmers who committed suicide in a *bahikhata* (account book).

On the day of performance, I removed the sticker just before the performance started. Due to the sun and heat in the past month it had become a sunburnt tattoo….

4. **Foundation for Indian Contemporary Art (FICA) and Vadehra Art Gallery were the host for this show?**

Yes, FICA and Vadehra Art Gallery were the hosts for the show. We, the team of Gram Art Project, at Paradsinga village, collectively applied for a public art grant which involved me

as a small part of the bigger collective which included artists, social workers working on agrarian issues, local village youth, women and farmers coming together for creating and celebrating a whole new festival which went beyond various social identities and barriers like religion, caste and gender – *Gram Dhara Chitra Utsav* (Land Art Festival). All of us came together and talked about our understanding and politics around seeds, pesticides and fertilizers, Minimum Support Price (MSP) etc. These discussions were facilitated by experts and social workers working closely on these issues. It was followed by artists and villagers using these understandings coupled with their own personal experiences and bringing those into a form of drawing. And finally, all of us are growing these drawings in the form of a series of land arts across various farms of Paradsinga village. All people from Paradsinga and nearby villages, students from schools and colleges were together invited to attend this festival and start a conversation on these very issues which directly and indirectly affected our daily lives.

The show in Vadehra Art Gallery, Delhi involved many of us from the village, which included not just artists, but village youth, women and farmers coming together to share our own experience with everyone who had come there. We displayed some artworks, photographs and a couple of performances, one of it being what I performed which reflected upon our collective understanding…

5. **What was the immediate response of the viewers just after the performance got over?**

During the performance I was reading from my *bahikhata*, the name, age, village and date of suicide of each farmer who committed suicide and writing it on a post card. I kept it aside for takeaway. I was motherland, who in turn was watching her children, the farmer who are committing suicide.

Some of the team members from Paradsinga, who were themselves young farmers or were either sons or daughters of farmers, assisted me as they slowly started reading those postcards for viewers one by one. They resembled the farmer who committed suicide and started to read out to visitors their name, age, village and date of committing suicide. The whole gallery atmosphere became very emotional and intense and I think it also forced the viewers to think about it. We too never practiced the performance before and so did not

know it would start becoming so intense for all of us too. At least for the remainder of our time in Delhi each of us, from the Gram Art Project team, were very conscious about the food that we were having. I really think it would have been like that for the viewers too.

Just before we did the *Gram Dhara Chitra Utsav* (Land Art Festival) in Paradsinga, there was compulsory acquisition of land done for creating a Special Economic Zone in Satnoor village, which is our neighboring village. Because of this, the number of farmers in this village reduced from over 100 to less than 10. As practiced in Indian society after a death in the family, hair is offered as a tribute.. In the same way, I ended the performance by cutting down my hair as a tribute to each and every farmer who lost their land, and with it, any little hope that was left that things can ever work out..
It is a reality we all know about but somehow all of us have learned to live alongside this reality without questioning it. The bigger problem is not the existence of this reality but the death of our collective conscience as a society to knowingly ignore it. History is perhaps so important because if not anything it reminds us not to make the same mistakes which happened at some point years ago. In a talk by journalist Sainath who covers stories relating to rural landscape, marginalised communities and farmer suicides he spoke about a similar instance in history. A mad king by the name of Nero who threw a big lavish party where many high profile guests, kings, and warriors attended the party. As the night grew cold and their inventory started running out of wood he asked his guards to burn the prisoners they had one by one to provide the warmth for the party to continue.. Many people watched this happening but chose to stay silent and rather enjoy the party. Was Nero at fault here? Yes. But what was more deafening was the silence of all the guests who attended the party. This is the reason why the performance was titled “Are you Nero’s guests?”

2F. Transcription: Chat with Tanmay SJ, Member, Gram Art Collective (October - November 2024)

Preeti Kathuria (PRK): Hello Tanmay,
Hope you and the Gram Art Team are doing well.. I have a quick question.. regarding the Eaten Cotton Book. Is the book made by a team of women only like the Cotton Stainers group? This is an important fact for me to know. Thanks

Tanmay SJ (TN): Yes

PRK: Please convey my sincere regards to Shweta, Aditi, and the Gram family..

TN: Hi preeti. Aap kaise ho? (How are you?) We all are good. Any plans to visit again? We've shifted to farm now. Also artist residency happening here from 11 to 17 Nov.

PRK: Hi Tanmay, I am okay thanks..I would love to visit again soon. I have such fond memories from last time..One of my research papers is about to get published.. will share the details soon.. And one of my papers is published in the University of Toronto Arts Journal: https://utaj.library.utoronto.ca/index.php/utaj/index

TN: Wah! Will have a look at it together with Shweta. Congratulations!! :)

PRK: Hi Tanmay, I have another question.. Who are the singers (group) who sang and played during Aditi's Performance 'Are You Nero's Guests?' - I will also need their contact info and some more context, if possible.. please. Thanks a lot.

TN: Parvindar Singh (from Nagpur) on Cajon, Adarsh Dhoke (from Paradasinga) vocals. These two are part of our collective

PRK: Can I also please ask the names of persons who distributed the postcards in the space at Vadehra...

this girl wearing a yellow shirt, for example

TN: This is Nutan Dwivedi (in response to screen-shots shared by PRK from the video recording)

TN: This is Suman Humane (in response to screen-shots from the video recording)

TN: Ganesh Dhoke (in response to screen-shots from the video recording)

TN: Adarsh Dhoke, he is also one of the musicians. (in response to screen-shots from the video recording)

PRK: So all these people are associated with the Collective and have a farming ancestry/background? Can I please ask for all four names here: Guitarist? and the person sitting between Adarsh and the guitarist.

TN: Yes, except Parvindar not directly though. I mean he's part of the collective but not a farming background directly. He's an artist and his Punjabi ancestors and relatives are farmers but his parents moved to Nagpur before his birth. Musicians: From Left to Right: Adarsh Dhoke (vocals), Kunal Humane (vocals), Abhiveer Shivaraj (guitar), Parvindar Singh (Cajon & Handpan).

PRK: One more thing: The song.. Meri Maan ki Lajhan Kaun Rakhiyo .. is it a local song or was it written for the performance?

TN: This was written & composed collectively in/around April 2016 when "Dear PM please grow in india" land art was being created.

PRK: Can I please have the transcript/lyrics of this song. If available, if not, I will listen to it and write it myself - no problem at all.

TN: Also, one important person who has been an integral part of the collective since its conception and also for this show "are you Nero's guest?" And who might not be very visible in the photo documentations is artist Lalit Vikamshi. He, Lalit Vikamshi, is a senior artist and maker. He is a co-founder of Alang Angle Community Art Centre, Nagpur and Makers' Adda (first Makers' space in Nagpur). He has been part of the team and instrumental in designing the show and all the performances, artwork and background processes.

TN: The song is: इस धरती की लाजन - by the Gram Art Project Collective (Page 38, Eaten Cotton... a love story... a cookbook...)

PRK: Tanmay I am indebted for your help.. Thanks a lot

TN: Thank you for documenting all this. It is quite difficult for us to properly document and communicate our works and what lies in-between and behind it...

PRK: I have gratitude that I could be a part of this journey...

TN: Also, whatever has gotten published and gets published, can we share it through our social media by tagging you and others involved? If yes , then please do share links and relevant images and all... Thanks.

PRK: sure I will

TN: इस धरती की लाजन कौन रखियों,
जब बीज ही बोए हम परदेसी।
मेरी माँ की लाजन कौन रखियों,
जब बीज ही बोए हम परदेसी।

खेत में जब देसी बीज लगाते,
एक-दूजे के संग खाते-खिलाते।
पर सत्ता के पीछे वो हुए बदनाम,

तब खोया हमने बीज, सम्मान।

कपट से जब हरित क्रांती लाई,
पूरे देश में यूं अशांती फैलाई।
किसी कुटिया के दीप फिर बुझ से गए,
किसी की अखिया रात सोई नहीं।

अब यह भी सुनो धरती माँ क्या कहती,
कई बार वो बुझती कई बार वो जलती।
आखिर जो बोते है, वही है पाते,
सीखे जंगल कैसे सब को दे जाते।

अब ठाना है ऐसे बीज लगाए,
हम बोए और सब जन पाए।
क्यों की "दाता"-"पाता", भेद है मनका,
चलो, मिलकर खोजे सच का यह तिनका।

TN: This will be easier for you to use in your research.

PRK: So thoughtful of you, thanks so much!

Chapter 3

3A. Field Notes: Gram Art Collective Studio, Paradsinga, Madhya Pradesh, (February 2024)

Preeti Kathuria in Conversation with Shweta Bhattad and Tanmay SJ:

- Performance 'Nehar': We clothed the river.. A River to cross in the performance space.
- Collaboration with a Chef in Nagpur, we created half-biscuit and half wood sculpture.
- Cotton production is common here, selling price goes till 6500 per quintal.
- Cotton Stainers: About seed conservation, wild varieties of seeds. The Team: Roshni from Anganwadi, Sapta Tai - a farmer and a decision-maker, a School teacher - who does terrace gardening, a lady screen-printer.. We all met and shared our personal lives. In the performance we wore masks for comfort, we felt vulnerable. The sharings were our lived experiences. The gun was symbolic of sexual violence. The lady wearing a jumpuit/Dangree

held object related to violence and abuse. It was her memories of an abusive life. In the sharings we often talked about the partner's role in paternity, in feeding the children.

- 'Shoot to heal' - Kaaj - Project - State Irrigation Department, Madhya Pradesh
- 'We Beyond Us' - Seed bands theme for 2023. - about sustainability. We started in 2018, this was our 4th year and it has slowly picked up pace and response.
- Another Theme was 'Kamzor nahin hum' (meaning 'We are not Week') - an attempt to counter taboos based on gender. We wanted to voice the role and strength of women in the agrarian rural sector.
- We have a small piece of land which is our 'No tillage farm' - we want to naturally regenerate and replenish the soil. We want to see what the soil wants to say to us. We have studies about soil intelligence and seeds in hibernation.
- Nagpur Beej Utsav - a Land Art Festival was organised - Tanmay played an active role.
- I have a Dream was a special project for us as it was an artist-farmer residency - it was unique.
- Artists collaborate with us too - Manjot from Canada uses our Seed paper for her creative projects - more recently her work was shown in Delhi.
- We work closely with Maker's Adda, by AlagAngle at Hajaripahad, near, Saroj Nagar, Nagpur. It is a space for creatives to come, collaborate and work.
- We do projects with the local school here in order to work with children and talk to them about the importance of ecology.
- We are also experimenting with different types of fibre to create paper and thread - such as banana peel hemp. We are in a constant process of learning and finding ways to communicate.

3B. Interview: Shweta Bhattad (July 2023)

(Telephonic and Email Conversation and personal meeting at her Residence-cum-studio)

Preeti Kathuria (PRK): Elaborate upon how the idea of Gram Art Project came about and evolved over the years?

Shweta Bhattad (SB): I was born and brought up in Nagpur and Paradsinga is my village. My father was born here, he studied here. For many years he farmed here but before my birth my parents shifted to Nagpur for a better life for their children - a very natural concern of all parents. But during all the holidays, celebrations, festivals, we would visit our village. My grandfather was there, all my childhood friends were in the village - who were also involved in farming. I used to wonder as a

child we were told when you go to another house, be careful, don't ask for food, they might not have enough, so I wondered that they are farmers - who grow food, so why are they starving? Every harvest meant something - and we celebrated - millets, peanuts; but it slowly vanished. Even in Nagpur I was working with Old Age Homes, with young girls rescued from Red Light areas - we were trying to work with them to make them self-sufficient - by learning some crafts such as envelope-making. Then I went on to study in Baroda and in the final year exhibition many gallerists visited the university for campus placement. There were many options to settle in Bengaluru, Mumbai etc, but none of the students was thinking about going back home to work. I was thinking, why? I was questioning what is the purpose of art? Would I work with a gallery? My friends were all getting married, some were facing abuse and lots of other things were running in my mind. So I decided to return home and not let an art gallery control my practice of making and being visible in a certain way.

I did some performance based art in Baroda, where I did a studio-performance, recorded it and then installed it in sculpture. I was not doing any public performances at that time. We got to know about Khoj Food Residency and felt that our practice might get realized and projected as Public art and performance. Slowly I got selected for a few art residencies which helped me understand my practice further. *Barbil Art Residency* was very important, it was sponsored by a mining company. We met the workers and went into mines with helmets and masks; we saw miners covered in red dust. Then we made a performance on this but the organizers had to face a lot of problems because of it. Then I did *Sowing Seeds Residency*, Jodhpur, Rajasthan where girls cannot study after class 8 because they have to travel outside the village. The emphasis was to raise boys and send them for higher studies, not girls. We made a performance there to promote girls' education. In Paradasinga we were doing small collaborations with artists, and women of the village. In 2013, we did our first residence in Pradasinga and the my childhood friend became one of the main reasons for initiating this work. She was married to an alcoholic, was abused and an attempt was made to murder her. All of this was witnessed by her young girl child. My friend was not willing to file a police complaint and it shook me. In our first residency we connected with women, farmers, children to ask questions, discuss, debate and find solutions collectively. We organized the Toilet Residence and received a scholarship from KHOJ - 'Ecologies and Byways' and soon a deeper involvement began. We were inclined towards farming, seed saving initiatives; Nagpur Seed Festival, soil, local seeds, farm labor and how it all works. Why is the harvest celebrated? And why did we move away ? Why do we do mono-seeding? Why do we buy seeds from corporate companies? About the cotton harvest. Why are the farmers so dependent on the market?We went into special economic zones and looked at the politics around land, gender inequality, women having no say in the farm etc. So we started to think

about how to address all these issues and how to disseminate this knowledge. A large number of farmers grow Bt Kapas (Bt Cotton), we wanted to talk in the farmers' language of land, soil, seeds, which is not alien to them, to which they can easily relate.

We then organized Land Art, Seed Art Festivals, promoting local seeds instead of Bt and GMO, which was supported by The Foundation for Indian Contemporary Art, Delhi (FICA).
We started thread making using natural colors, we created seed bands. The idea was to propagate seed independence, land rights. We wanted our seed bands to become carriers of meaning, the seed should touch the skin when it is worn. In one month we managed to create 10,000 seedbands but could only sell 8 bands. It generated knowledge and livelihood and it also touched hearts. Now we make seedbands every year - they carry our process, our problems. They are theme-based. We also make seed paper, which is crop-residue paper. It is not just an artwork for a wall, it is much more. Nearly 200 women from 10 villages work on making seed bands, seed crackers, seed calendar etc. We have a Cotton Stainers Studio where we make cotton cloth. It is a live process of self-realization, a mobilized, activated space. We don't want to preach a specific material or process for example, Banana Hemp can be an alternate material to make fiber and threads. We experiment continuously and discuss and develop the idea.

As an artist I am not alone. I have no defined roles and there is no specific expected outcome. It is a live-process, new questions, new ideas, new realizations. Sometimes the soil decides, weeds grow, the land decides too. I am a farmer and I learn everyday.
We want to make a tillage-tree-land and check how much we really need to interfere with the land, soil and the ecosystem. We all are a part of the ecosystem, a 'polycrisis'.
Women are not independent but when we work with them, it gives hope. Through our performances, many women got a chance to step out of the village for the very first time. They got an opportunity to speak and feel safe, to gain collective strength, to empower and to live. It is not about glorifying anything, we are just trying to express.

'Kapaas se Kapda' - is another campaign we are planning, which will get built through stories, narratives of a diverse society, abusive life and land rights. The KHOJ scholarship grant helped us to talk about gender, injustice, abuse, and pregnancy. We worked with women for over two years, a shared space for the local women.. We worked closely with the *Anganwadi* workers. The 'Cotton Stainers' performance was a platform for all of us to step out and work together, we got strength; we performed in the Gram Panchayat in Nagpur; Art Studio, Delhi - we took the performance in

different paces and everywhere we got a chance to perform, we did. It gives us strength to keep our dialogue in the public realm alive - we also learn as a team. We all perform our lives, it is real, it is collective.

PRK: Do you see yourself as an Activist?
SB: One can't live with a badge all the time. The role keeps changing - activist, mother, artist, farmer and so on. I am a farmer and an artist.

Chapter 4

4A. Conversation: Jiten Thukral and Sumir Tagra (7 July 2023)

(Telephonic, Email Conversation, Zoom meeting, and personal meeting at Bikaner House, New Delhi)

Preeti Kathuria (PRK): I would like to know how the activist tendency in Thukral and Tagra came about? An insight into your journey so far interests me.

Sumer Tagra (ST): I have memories of the Mandal Commission - I think it was in 1989 or 1990. I was studying in school in Delhi and our mid-term got canceled. I was too young to understand it much. My elders would talk about it but I could not gather much or even understand how this could impact us. The second mass social movement was the Narmada Bachao Aandolan in 1985. Sitting with mom and dad and looking into the news, I was witnessing all this activism but did not know how it matters to me. I was busy in my own life, studying, doing my own thing. The difference comes when you start understanding these news. The third such mass movement that impacted me was the Jan Lokpal Bill in 2011. It was during the reign of Congress and I have a much clearer memory of it. I could relate with the news because by then I was already paying taxes, living in Delhi. I remember talking to a bank manager who was anti-congress and we were talking about how much money one can actually get. I never got into any arguments, I used to think it was good only and let it happen for everyone's betterment. Then in 2016, when we were mounting an exhibition in Michigan and suddenly there was this news that Prime Minister Mr. Modi is demonetizing a certain denomination of the Indian currency. So we started to get hysterical phone calls from family and friends asking if we had any currency that could be a problem. We had some but not something that we could not manage. This was the very first time we both felt that we are a part of the system and it affects us, our lifestyle and one needs to resist or create an engagement with the larger force. In some

way, we have always been privileged. It has been over twenty years now and you can understand what it really means to be privileged.

Our project with the farmers began in 2012. We wanted to look back into our families and relatives in Punjab. Just to give you a background, our families came from Lahore. My father was in Samundri, a small town in Faisalabad and the family migrated due to the partition. He landed in Khanna, Ludhiyana in Punjab and did his graduation there, then moved to make a life in Delhi. My mother is from Ludhiyana and so I learnt Punjabi from my mother. For Jiten, his dad is originally from Lahore, moved to Jalandhar and started participating in the activities of the *Akhada (wrestling ring)* which was later given to him to manage. *Akhada* is a very important central pivot point in our practice because through that we started to talk about many important things. We started doing research around it; sponsoring the annual wrestling matches became an interesting site for us - just like an exhibition space - to understand the larger issues, as if we were meant to go there and excavate more information, family history - all through the *akhada.*

Before that we were looking at issues of migration - people from Punjab migrating to the cities, for a better life. So the Akhada was an interesting point to change the narrative and understand a step further. All the *akhada* boys and staff were from farming and low class families. Now here we understood the connections with the Mandal Commission, how class 4 is being seen, theri dreams to leave the country, to work abroad - their cultural practice about farming - where does it stand today. In 2015 we did a show titled 'Q a fairytale for our times' at Mumbai's Famous studios. The film 'Q' set in a Jalalndhar akhada was about women - who are not supposed to enter the *akhada* or stand in the middle of it. We filmed women standing in the *akhada* and so her presence made the place impure and it needed to be washed with milk after she left - was the central theme of the film. It has never happened that a woman has walked into the *akhada* - simply because there are almost naked men all around.

Then we went further and started meeting various families, knowing about the low water levels, which opened up to the larger agrarian crisis. We used to meet communities through a Sikh organization called 'Badu Sahib'

Jiten Thukral (JT): The Badu Sahib is an NGO which has 129 schools in Punjab and they take care of the families of the deceased farmers. They have hired paid volunteers whom they send out to fetch data on farmer deaths. These volunteers make a *kachha (*temporary) affidavit or *Punchanama* which

they take to the Gram Panchayat, get an FIR done etc. so that the families of the deceased can get some money from the government and the children can go to school. In the last five years the NGO started another project where their volunteers would figure out who are the farmers who are prone to committing suicide 0 the aim was to save lives of those who are suffering. So every village has a designated volunteer. In Sangrur area, the water level is very low; in Bhatinda - which is the onion growing belt of the country, due to excessive use of pesticides there are too many cancer patients. So this NGO gets funds from the Gurudwara and they take care of these families.
We have been associated with them for about nine years now and we try to work with them, solve their problems to whatever extent we can.

PRK: The ground material of your artistic practice comes primarily from the village but has a larger echo in the cities example your shows at Nature Morte, New Delhi or at Lalit Kala Akademi, Chandigarh. How does the village relate - do they know about your work?

JT: No, I don't think they know. They see us media people. So first we have to explain to them that we are not from any newspaper or television channel. We try to tell them that we will address the issue in the best possible way but surely not like the press media. For example we went to a house and the woman pointed at the fan and said her husband hung himself there - will you not take any pictures? And we said, we don't need any pictures/photographs. We could not click any photos, it just did not feel right. We went to six-seven villages and we did not take any photographs at all.

Our very first person who gave us factual data was this volunteer from the NGO - 'Surjeet Singh' who alone documented about 2000 suicides. He was telling us the real problems. At a time when the government was talking about digitization and digital mode of payment pan-India, the poor farmers could not even open a bank account, simply because they didn't know how. They have to approach the local MLA to open a bank account.
The mandi where the farmers sell their produce is about 20 kms from the farm and there will be at least three middle men involved in this transaction, once the crop is ready. So the farmers had to fight for the basic selling price.

We went to the village of Sonipat, Panipat, the Haryana region - their problems are entirely different. They said they do not want any electricity to come to their village, simply because they cannot afford to pay the bills. Every region, city, state has its own unique set of problems. Punjab is said to be the richest state but the real setbacks nobody knows.

So yes, coming back to your question, I don't think they know or even understand what we do. Though we try to connect with them by making our own unique tools. During the farmer protests in Delhi we worked collaboratively on bringing out a bi-weekly newspaper called - Trolley Times. That newspaper - we ran 22 Editions of it - was our voice. Since the farmers sat in trolleys and commuted long distances for the 2018 protests, the trailer of the tractor that farmers repurposed into mobile homes for the duration of the protest, Trolley times was the most appropriate name for our paper. The idea came from a writer and we printed it in *Gurmukhi*, English and Hindi initially. Later we were approached by numerous people from different parts of the country to publish the newspaper in all the regional languages - so then the trolley times were published in Bengali, Oriya, Tamil etc. It had many stakeholders such as - Punjabi documentary photographer Gurdeep Dhaliwal. It was crowdfunded by 500,000 farmers, each of whom donated two rupees. It was an organic, voluntary thing that operated directly in the public domain, as against a gallery space. We were echoing the voice of the farmers with the farmers, directly situated in the context. But there were a lot of problems we faced.

"We hope the *Trolley Times* becomes a case study for an alternative type of media", Thukral says. "Compared to corporate owned platforms like Instagram and others where fake news is rife, one wonders how you can develop faith in anything true these days."
https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2021/01/25/how-an-artist-led-newspaper-in-delhi-is-helping-to-organise-the-worlds-biggest-protest

Also have a look at the 2018 documentary film *Kisan Ekta Morcha* - it is on youtube. (1976 Hindi language film *Manthan* was a major influence).

PRK: Are Institutions supportive or manipulative? Please tell me more about your show at the Lalit Kala Akademi Punjab.

JT: That exhibition was made possible by the support of then Director, Deewan Manna. Also it was a different government then. Manna believed in our project and was very confident that this work must be first shown in Punjab and then anywhere else. We showed the problems in an iconographical format. There was strategy and planning even when we did not face any direct opposition. Also refer to Sitara's text in the book Weeping Farm - where we speak about the importance of the

Akhara. You must also see our film 'Games People play' - it is available online.
https://www.thukralandtagra.com/games-people-play/
https://vimeo.com/140911704

PRK: Do you see the exhibition space as an *akhara* - a contested space - a space for action and negotiation?
ST: Yes, absolutely.

PRK: The group show at Bikaner House - you showcased the Surjeet Singh Installation in a room separately tucked away from the rest of the exhibition? It was curated by Meena Vari - I am curious to know if this segregation from the rest of the show was strategic? The space had a Mark Rothko chapel kind of a feeling to it and was a very different experience from the rest of the show.

ST: Yes, the narrative did not fit well into the context of the group show. We wanted full and absolute control of the space - a separate room was needed. We did not have to negotiate much as we had asked Meena much in advance. She gave us this room and said hope this will work! We had to design the space in a way that it synced with the purpose of the artwork. Spaces like Bikaner House do not have one clean wall and you have to work with the lighting. We made a central piece - the Surjeet Singh video which confronts the viewers as one enters and then some smaller works around it where one can navigate to understand the context in its entirety.

PRK: Please tell us more about iterations of the Surjeet Singh art project. All iterations were not the same - some of them had the pesticide spray example the one at Nature Morte Delhi and Kochi biennale. But the one at Bikaner House did not.

ST: Yes, many iterations were done and these iterations become like the different lives of the work. Yes, certain spaces simply do not allow the use of certain materials. Bikaner House for example - they won't allow us to use pesticide spray in that building. So the work changes according to the spatiality.

PRK: How do you calculate the timeline for iterations? Is it planned or is it simply dependent on availability of time and space.

ST: The iterations have always happened through somebody like Helena for the Yorkshire project, Peter Nagy for Nature Morte and Deewan Manna for LKA. Our work is an ongoing process. Like now we are working on the fact that there were a total of 760 deaths during the farmer protest. This is a big number and we are trying to work on it - it will take time but it won't ever be erased from public memory. It need not always be politically charged, but it still remains relevant. For example, during the Mandal Commission, a guy burnt himself during one of the protests and that image was the cover news of all the media. It became an important iconic image which is hard to erase from public memory. These images haunt you. So personally I don't think that time is running out and I have to rush to show my project soon. It should happen but its relevance cannot be lost.

PRK: Please elaborate upon the Iteration with Khoj. It was a very different take on this issue.

JT: Yes, the forms constantly evolve and change but we keep the issue firmly at the center. The issue is the pivot and we can go around it in different ways to express.
Zulekha created a courtroom for this iteration which was done with Khoj Studios. It was strategically planned in Chandigarh and not in Delhi. She spoke about Air pollution and we were talking from the Farmer's point of view. So it was a blame game as to who is the culprit and who is the victim. A replica of the High Court, Chandigard was created and contained layers of hidden meaning.

We are not writers, nor are we researchers, we are just artists. The book Weeping Farm is just 400 pages of the actual 2500 pages that we wanted to say. We have been digging out information from the NGO; Surjeet singh was not a victim, rather he was the evidence - a living proof of what he was witnessing on a daily basis. We were not allowed to release the complete data in our publication, we can't but we found ways to put everything together either through charts, diagrams or graphically.

The book Weeping Farm - we approached a big publishing house to release the book but they said we don't do artist books. If you give us twelve lakh rupees and promise to buy 200 copies of the book upfront, we can consider it. The reason they said was simply because no one reads artist books. We said okay, thanks and never went back. We decided to self-publish.
There have been numerous instances when we have been sidelined or our narrative has been suppressed. There was negative publicity at play in Yorkshire, the Nature Morte showing was a regimented closed-door opening with zero programming and publicity.

PRK: How was the reception and response in Kochi?

JT: It was very good. We purposely put only Gurumukhi newspapers of the Trolley Times in the exhibition. But since the Book and the Game was in english, it was not hard to understand.

A lot of our work is not clearly understood. We try to stay away from playing the 'Poverty Porn' - the victim game. So we do not put any grieving, sad photographs of what we have seen in the villages. It is easy for us to do that but we want to project our practice meaningfully and ethically. We are not looking for sympathy here and we don't wish to project farmers as victims. Till today we do voluntary service for the NGO, and our aim is not to make money by playing the victim card for an urban audience. We see it as a 'hukum' like a calling - It was an Order - and we simply had to follow it. There was no plan, intention, strategy - everything unfolded as we moved along.

PRK: You have been showing your work in the local, national and global contexts - over the years. Is this a planned/strategized showing or it just happened on its own?

JT: It just happened - organically - no plans. Things came to us and we moved along.
For example the Yorkshire sculpture park was originally a farm land and we were asked to respond to the situation. It just naturally connected to our practice. At YSP, in 2018 we invited visitors to attempt wrestling manoeuvres to understand how the farming families wrestle for their lives, which highlighted the multitude of issues plaguing India's farmers. These include agrarian policy failure, corporate strong arming, soil degradation from the overuse of pesticides and insufficient government intervention.

……..

4B. Swaminathan Commission Report

Chaired by Professor M S Swaminathan, the National Commission on Farmers (NCF) was formed in 2004 and submitted five reports between the years 2004 and 2006, suggesting ways to enhance productivity, profitability, and sustainability of the major farming systems in India. In common terms, the reports are known as the Swaminathan report.

The commission made suggestions on issues such as:

1. Strategy for food and nutrition security in the country.
2. Improve productivity and sustainability of the farming systems.

3. Reforms to increase the flow of rural credit to farmers.
4. Programmes for dryland farming for farmers in the arid as well as in hilly and coastal areas.
5. Improve the quality and cost competitiveness of farm commodities.
6. Protecting farmers from imports when global prices fall.
7. Empowering local bodies to effectively conserve the ecological foundations for better agriculture.

Causes for farmers' distress and recommendations by NCF:

1. Land Reforms

According to the report, landholdings inequality is reflected in ownership and is necessary to address the basic access of land for crops and livestock. The report recommended distributing ceiling surplus and wastelands, preventing the corporate sector from acquiring land for non-agricultural purposes and ensuring access of forests to tribals and pastoralists. The commission also suggested establishing National Land Use Advisory Service to link land-use decisions with ecological meteorological and marketing factors and set up a mechanism for selling agricultural land based on usage and buyer.

2. Irrigation

The report stated that out of 192 million hectares area, rain-fed agriculture constitutes 60 per cent of gross cropped area and 45 per cent of total output. The commission recommended setting up reforms for equal distribution of water to the farmers and increasing rainwater harvesting.

3. Productivity

The productivity in agriculture determines farmers' income. The report found the per unit area productivity in India is much lower than its global counterparts. The NCF suggested an increase in public investment in agrarian infrastructure, and set up of a network of soil testing laboratories to find deficiencies. It also suggested promotion of conservation farming to improve soil health and biodiversity among farmers.

4. Credit

An adequate supply of capital and insurance is required to run agricultural productivity and sustain small farm families. The report recommended expanding the formal credit system to really poor and needy families and reduce the interest rate for crop loans to 4 per cent. It also suggested putting up a moratorium on debt recovery and waiving off interests in distressed areas till production levels restored. The commission recommended issuing Kisan Credit Cards to women farmers and develop a credit-cum-crop-livestock-human health insurance.

5. Food Security

The report stated that India is lagging behind in achieving the Millennium Development Goals of halving hunger by 2015, meaning grain unavailability and unequal distribution have serious implications for food security. NCF suggested implementing a universal public distribution system and reorganising nutrition programmes.

6. Farmers' Suicides

The report found increasing cases of suicides reported from states such as Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Maharashtra, Kerala, Punjab, Rajasthan, Odisha and Madhya Pradesh and asked to address the issue on a priority basis. The commission suggested providing health insurance for all ages and extending the National Rural Health Mission in hotspot locations. It also recommended forming a farmers' commission for ensuring government response to farmers' problems and low-cost technologies which can help to provide maximum income to farmers.

7. Competitiveness

The report stated it is important to raise the agricultural competitiveness among farmers to increase surplus and opportunities. The commission suggested promoting commodity-based organisations to centralise production and services and implement Minimum Support Price

8. Employment

According to the report, the percentage of the workforce in agriculture decreased to 59.9 per cent in 1999-2000, yet it provided a bulk of employment. NCF recommended emphasising labour-intensive sectors as well as improving the functioning of the labour markets. The report stated that the "net take-home income" of farmers should be comparable to those of civil servants.

9. Bio-resources

The report found that rural India is highly dependent on bio-resources for their livelihood and recommended preserving rights to access forests and conserve crops, farm animals, fish stocks through breeding.

SOURCE:

Standard, Business. ‘What Is Swaminathan Report? - Farmers’ Issues and Recommendations’. Accessed 27 December 2024. https://www.business-standard.com/about/what-is-swaminathan-report.

Chapter 5

5A. Transcription: Video - Amar Kanwar with Clare Lilley, Director Programmes, YSL, UK (2014)

'The Sovereign Forest + Other Stories', Yorkshire Sculpture Park, UK, 12 October 2013--2 February 2014. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0SchgxoejKc

Introduction
The appropriation of natural resources of lands of agricultural lands or forest lands is actually a very very old story it's happened all over the world and corporations and governments have been largely responsible whether it is in africa or south america even in europe and in india certainly in the last 20 years what we have seen within india is a i think the best way that i can describe it is the severity of this appropriation yeah there's a kind of brutality to this taking over there's a speed of this taking over that is very hard to to deal with the sovereign forest is essentially about the state of orissa in eastern india it is looking at a range of issues in terms of ownership of land ownership of forests right to natural resources of local communities issues of livelihood and issues of food sovereignty and so on

Lightning Testimonies
The subjects that he deals with are really difficult painful subjects he's made an extraordinary film called the lightning testimonies which is about rape films about violence of men to women men. To men he shines a light on on a situation and for me creates something which is a kind of a visual poetry and i know not just for me i know it's for hundreds and hundreds and other people

The Prediction
This is one of three big handmade books in the exhibition and it's called the prediction. I suppose you made the physical object a couple of years ago within the last couple of years but the film which you see being played out on the right hand page is actually a film made in the early 90s. The book, the story is about the assassination of a trade union leader in a village in the State of Chhattisgarh which was part of Madhya Pradesh earlier and I was supposed to be there I think maybe a few weeks a few months earlier before he got assassinated and so I actually started to film the morning after he was killed and the reason it's called the Prediction is because he had predicted. Yes he had predicted his own assassination and he had also left behind a tape recorded message to his organization to his friends to people to everybody about who he thought would be responsible for killing him and also why he would be assassinated.

Listening Benches
The soldiers were walking very very slowly in two rows on either side of the road, each soldier about two arms length away from the other. This is one of the six listening benches that Amar's made for Yorkshire Sculpture Park these are the first objects you've ever made for outdoors one of the reasons he made the benches was that we talked for a long time about how you get the sovereign forest out into the landscape how you get voices into the landscape their guns were up fully up near their chests or faces he knew he wanted to make benches of some sort which had speakers within them so you could hear the stories which you also hear within the galleries and you see within the books and then at the beginning of the summer we were dismantling the organ in the chapel the organ had to go

unfortunately nobody could use it and we said what about the wood from the organ and it was just such a beautiful response really because a wood which has had a voice for over 100 years has sort of continues to have a voice out in the landscape.

Six Mourners
And then we have another work which is called six mourners and the one alone and they're made out of seven of the organ pipes and here uh without work he's taken text from another of the works inside and taken the written word outside so you have both a spoken voice in this landscape and you have a you have a written voice because it's somebody's story these are the six sisters the counting sisters women who go to the place where people have been killed and they count the dead and they mourn for them and then the one who stands alone is the woman who remembers the living and this is a real these are all real women they have extraordinary memories

Rice
These are 272 varieties of rice that have been developed and grown by a farmer in orissa by the name of Nutbur Saranvi he's an old man now but for the last 10-20 years he's been working in his fields growing them every year conserving them preserving them archiving them and sharing it with farmers around him and within the state of orissa in many ways this is also the enormous variety that you can find from the scene of crime from the same territory in which the film has been shot each rice has a purpose some is good for excessive rain some is good for less rain some is aromatic some you can cook with meat some you can cook with sweets some you can have dry essentially when you lose a piece of land you don't lose just dimensions if you are compensated for the loss of a piece of land the law of the land says that you calculate you know what's the area what's the real estate value going at that point in time and that's the value of the land but when you look at these 272 varieties of rice then I think perhaps it may open a little window you know in our minds as to what does it really mean to lose land?

Yorkshire Sculpture Park is part of the Bretton estate. It's an estate that's been in private ownership for a thousand years in fact which is in itself quite interesting in terms of the sovereign forest and there are certain connections a more direct connection perhaps is that this 500 acres is on top of the south yorkshire coal field and the land has been shaped by mining by and by the people who owned this landscape who became wealthy through mining um and i suppose it's true to say although we don't know very much about these histories of people who were workers here but clearly their lives have been shaped by the activities of the people living on this estate and inevitably people will have been moved from this area their lives will have been disrupted and changed there are some connections between orissa in eastern india all those thousands of miles away and the lives of ordinary people and of a land here i think there's a history here of understanding what it means to mine yeah and uh and what it means to take over the earth in a certain way and then what it means to shut down and displace as well yeah so i also have a feeling that there is um i mean we are also i think in the middle of a fairly rural community in some senses i get the sense that there is a there is a certain relationship with the land here of a different kind while on one hand you may be saying that you know economic boom growth india the so-called great indian story but actually there's under that there is a process of destruction there is this process of loss that has been taking place which has its own story the crime is something that we have seen now in the last 20 years 15 years we are

seeing it exaggerating it's getting larger and vaster and in some sense the sovereign forces about trying to understand the meaning of this crime.

5B. Transcription: Amar Kanwar: ‘Louder than Words: Global Leaders on the Frontline of Culture’ (2017)

At the Compagnietheater on 7 December 2017
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O7P95sPBki0

As a Prince Claus Laureate, Amar Kanwar took the stage to tell his stories and discuss today's crucial questions: How can the arts contribute to more inclusive societies? What is culture's role in tackling environmental issues? This event was made possible through a collaboration between the Prince Claus Fund and Compagnietheater and with support from the Amsterdam Fund for the Arts.

Good evening everybody! Thank you for coming.
I just like to start by thanking you as it's really special to get this Award from such a rich and diverse and experienced organization. It feels really special to also be amongst the other laureates and this recognition, I mean it's sinking in how valuable it is even as we have spent the last few days together. I will try and respond in some sense and speak in a way while trying to address thematically what we're trying to talk about in terms of inclusion and in terms of art and society. And inclusive societies as well as in a way try to go through my own journey of work.

If I look back, most of my work has been about violence and responding to violence. I think initially it was almost like like a series of murders that one was responding to assassinations deaths murders and finding different ways to react respond to to confront to fight and I remember that almost after few years maybe pretty early on almost every time I would come back from filming or at the end of a film when I was presenting a film but usually when I would come back from filming it was not I was not really excited or relating to what I had got I just had a sense that there was a lot that I did not get and over and over again I would keep getting a feeling that I mean I knew what was happening and I could understand that there was something there but I did not know how to bring it back. How to articulate it, how to speak about it and in many ways this was it seemed like as I was making work

I was also getting aware of an accumulation of what was unsaid, unspeakable, untellable and not necessarily in a painful way. It's just in any way that I did not know how to access it. Thinking further about it you know that it became quite clear that this unsaid that was there amongst the people that I would be filming or the areas that I went to there was not one type of unsaid there was not one type of silence, there were many types of silences and sometimes there was the silence that was 30 years old and sometimes there was a silent that was right on the edge it, felt like it was about to burst open at any point and sometimes there was a silence that felt like you could hear everything else every single sound was audible louder sometimes you would run into a silence which was willful it was it was the self-imposed silence again you would run into another kind of silence which would seem to have been silent for so long that it actually had lost itself and was confused and one you know asked that did this all disappear did very did it all go in a certain way and and it became

clear that it didn't disappear and that all of these silences actually were archived and not archived in the way that I was familiar with archiving not on paper not on text not on not in a computer but they were archived in multiple ways they were archived in a stone and when you know in a tree in a mark in a weave in a song in a design they were submerged and hidden but not disappeared and so in a way I learned that the silences existed the silences were embedded were archived in multiple ways and quite obviously if they were archived multiple ways they were also recalled in multiple ways and there was no one way to recall it so for instance if if this was where this was the window from where we saw them take an down the street paraded her naked and took her away then the window was the archive the window was the method for recalling the only way you will if you if you needed to recall that particular event you recall it through the window or if you wanted to recall it you you recall by varying the sarong a sarong where for instance the attack the struggle for justice was woven in the design of the sarong so every time you needed to recall it you needed to wear it sometimes a silence was so difficult that it became like a secret and then it became camouflaged it was completely hidden renamed and buried deep for almost forever and then after a while it seemed to become too heavy to contain and to remain and then the silence would be handed over and you would run into a silence that actually got camouflaged and re camouflaged and re camouflaged as it kept getting handed over and it would keep traveling so it would travel maybe a thousand miles and change its name its its appearance its clothes with geographical identity even though it was the original silence but it would just be something totally different at another point in time as a filmmaker as a storyteller as somebody responded how do you how do you respond to this kind of silence which is traveled and camouflaged and reincarnated itself so many different types so many different ways protecting itself as well and the original person one way to relate to this kind of silence is actually to relate to your own silence the diverse if it was possible to relate to the many kinds of silences that are within me or within ourselves then perhaps, I would be able to understand this kind of silence.

Another way perhaps to relate to this or even to comprehend this was to look at what for the purpose of briefly illustrating within these few minutes I would say that another way of navigating this terrain was to look, maybe relook, at the question of crime evidence violence and also perhaps to relook at us what I call “us good people”. I felt the need to look at all four of these things all over again and it seemed that if a crime was continuing repeatedly then either we are not we don't see it or we're not being able to comprehend it so it felt that it was necessary relating to the silence it felt it was necessary to not accept any fixed definition of the crime it felt necessary to not accept any fixed methodology to evaluate the crime, it felt necessary to not accept any fixed definition of evidence. So what is permissible evidence? what was impermissible evidence? It felt that in order to understand the meaning of the crime the scale of the crime, the sister of the impact of the crime perhaps we needed another set of tools and other set of methodologies and perhaps in some way poetry could be presented as evidence formally, not aesthetically, not metaphorically, not just simply philosophically, but really presented as evidence to comprehend crime.

I'd like to just conclude on this whole question of us good people, all along the way also it became bit by bit maybe a little bit clearer there just like with violence, you see pain, you see trauma but there's another web that exists around violence which is a fear of guilt, of unshakable absolutely unshakable prejudice of distortion. You push it a little bit further you see another spectrum which is -

you see and that's what I say that okay you see another spectrum of what I would say is is the lie of the half truth of the desire to cause violence to cause pain of selectively conscious selective indifference to certain kinds of pain and suffering and we are often used to seeing all of this in outside in them people and I felt it was necessary at some point to actually embrace this doubt to embrace this desire to cause pain, to embrace this doubt, to embrace this inadequacy, to embrace the fear of shame, as part of ourselves as well and perhaps if we were to be able to do that then we may have a language which would be terribly fragile, possibly quite beautiful and possibly quite potent as well.
Thank you.

…….
2017 Prince Claus Awards at the Royal Palace Amsterdam,
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ilUbXettES8

On 6 December 2017, Amar Kanwar received the Prince Claus Award from HRH Prince Constantijn of the Netherlands, Honorary Chairman of the Prince Claus Fund.

From the Prince Claus Awards Committee Report: "Amar Kanwar is awarded for his profoundly disturbing, beautiful and moving works that operate at the interface between art, documentation and activism; for his critical and contemplative investigation of the nature of oppression and people's courageous resistance against it; for giving voice to the victims of social injustice, looking deeply into the multi-layered causes and effects of problems, and recording evidence of our times; for his innovative use of hybrid art forms in a unique method of storytelling that gives viewers a potent personal experience and overcomes educational and cultural boundaries; for combining poetic sensibility and political consciousness to increase the reach and impact of documentary filmmaking; and for expanding the possibilities of art as a means of obtaining social justice and inspiring new generations of artists to think deeply about the social impact of their work."
www.princeclausfund.org

Amar Kanwar:
How to remember what remains and what gets submerged.
Hoor Al-Qasimi (Awards Committee):
Amar Kanwar is a well-known artist who's exhibited in many international festivals and exhibitions. He works with minorities, farmers, women and looking at parts of society that don't have a voice and giving them this kind of voice through art and the medium of film.
Amar Kanwar:
Looking back at several films over several years I think I have perhaps been responding to violence in many different ways. Initially it was about specific incidents of violence that were taking place around me maybe even trying to find a kind of method of response to violence. I think over the years more and more questions emerged quite often a question would lead to a film.
Hoor Al-Qasimi (Awards Committee):
One of his major works 'The Sovereign Forest' which was exhibited in Documenta and then many other international festivals really looks at land rights and the protests of farmers in the east coast of

India and brings to the forefront the voices of these farmers and how they're losing their rights of their lands

Solange Farkas (Awards Committee):

He has a special way to deal with video. He deals with many many many layers of language and he balances in a very good way the poetical language with a strong political subject.

Hoor Al-Qasimi (Awards Committee):

You are within an atmosphere that really brings you almost to a point of being immersed in the situation being able to feel not only hear the voices of the people but really to feel their suffering in their pain.

Amar Kanwar:

Sometimes even the act of making is an act of healing, sometimes sharing is an act of comprehension or just the experience of being together meant that we were able to deal with this or understand this much better.

2017 Prince Claus Laureate Amar Kanwar (India), 2017.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ilUbXettES8.

……