

A Symphony of Defiance: How Music Spearheads Sikh and Punjabi Articulations of Political Resistance

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Bury [music] so deep under the earth that no sound or echo of it may rise again.

—Attributed to the Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb¹

Over 10,000 farmers in India committed suicide in 2019, with indebtedness cited as the predominant factor leading to the deaths. In certain states, a farmer is over 80% more likely to take their own life compared with other members of the population.² And now, this agrarian crisis has been acutely pressured by the hurried enacting of three new farm laws in September 2020, opening up agricultural trade to private corporations and destroying what little price protection the country's small and marginal farmers—who constitute 85% of the farmer populace—rely heavily upon to survive market vagaries.³

The government's decisions have been deemed 'undemocratic' by those in India's opposition party. Yet in the face of a seemingly bleak prognosis, the response, especially from the Sikh-majority state of Punjab, has been a remarkable exhibition of solidarity in civil resistance. The six months from August 2020 to February 2021 have seen an estimated 300,000 farmers march from Punjab to Delhi and erect settlements at its borders, besieging the city in demonstration against the laws.⁴ What is striking about the images

from the borders of Singhu, Tikri, and others, is that the protest sites are more resemblant of makeshift towns than rallies. Overhead shots display a tessellation of tractor trollies scattered with marquees offering 24-hour free hot meals, exercise facilities, and even a school for underprivileged children led by volunteer protesters. It is abundantly clear that the farmers are sat in for the long haul. And amongst the array of media, one theme consistently pervades: music.

From the sound of Sikh devotional hymns, or *keertan*, ringing through the tents, to the iconic figures of the Punjabi pop universe singing to gatherings of thousands, music has served to not only amplify the voice of the masses but also to let their spirits endure during the harsh winter months spent sleeping out in the cold. And it is no coincidence that musical expression has been a prominent medium for harnessing this sentiment, as it is fundamentally inseparable from both Sikh tradition and Punjabi culture.

The centrality of music to Sikh praxis

It is difficult to overstate the centrality of music to Sikh devotional practice. The vast majority of its canonical scripture, the Guru Granth Sahib, has been arranged in *rāg*. A melodic framework designed for musical improvisation, *rāg* is akin, but not equivalent, to the melodic modes found in Western music theory. Each composition within the Granth Sahib is written in poetic measure and assigned a *rāg* to which it should be sung. The founder of the faith, Guru Nanak, goes so far as to identify himself as a minstrel,

1 Katherine Butler Brown, 'Did Aurangzeb Ban Music? Questions for the Historiography of his Reign' (2007) 41(1) *Modern Asian Studies* 77, 77.

2 Dominic Merriott, 'Factors associated with the farmer suicide crisis in India' (2016) 6(4) *Journal of Epidemiology and Global Health* 217, 218.

3 Department of Agriculture, *Cooperation & Farmers Welfare, All India Report on Agriculture Census 2015-16* (New Delhi: Ministry of Agriculture & Farmers Welfare, 2021) 28 <http://agcensus.nic.in/document/agcen1516/ac_1516_report_final-220221.pdf> accessed 20 March 2021.

4 Hannah Ellis-Petersen, 'Indian farmers march on Delhi in protest

against agriculture laws' *Guardian* (30 November 2020) <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/nov/30/indian-farmers-march-on-delhi-in-protest-against-agriculture-laws>> accessed 24 March 2021.

whose message is to be sung, not simply preached.⁵ In a sense, Sikhi embodies a sonic theology.

Importantly however, the place of music within the tradition extends beyond mellifluous melody. One of the distinguishing features of Sikh religious observation is a confluence of the meditative and the heroic, with music acting as a thread to bind them together. Its significance is as much temporal as it is spiritual, and nowhere is this epitomised greater than in the flourishing of the *dhādi* tradition during the early seventeenth century. The *dhādis*, literally 'bards', were originally thought of as local amateur musicians who weren't skilled enough to warrant a place in the Mughal courts. Under the sixth Guru of the Sikhs, Hargobind, a deliberate use of the same term was employed as a resignification of the vocabulary. The *dhādi* was not only celebrated in the Sikh tradition, but brought into courts and patronized by the Guru, being referred to as his 'beloved'.⁶ Although a little crude in its periodisation, this time period is also argued to have been an iconoclastic moment in Sikh history, transforming the psyche of the population from one of sainthood to one of warriorhood, and alongside it a more formal establishment of Sikh political authority.

The *vārs* (ballads) the *dhādis* sing consist of tales of valour and heroism, intended to evoke a martial spirit and, as Joyce Pettigrew succinctly puts it, 'overwhelm the conditions of injustice and oppression'.⁷ Sikh hagiography places the arising of the *dhādi* along with a materialisation of militancy in the community. The theme of sacrifice for greater good is all but ubiquitous in their renditions:

It is not given to everyone to be a martyr.
This position is the highest anyone can attain.
The names of those will never remain
Who fear death.
Great are those fighters who give their life for the nation,
Who give their life for the nation.⁸

The strength of the narrative was that it tugged at strings of sovereignty. Martyrdom in the name of justice was to be valorised, not feared, and by being expressed within melody was to increase its efficacy.

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Fast forward a hundred years, and the place of music is reified again during the milieu of Mughal India under the reign of the emperor Aurangzeb. Italian writer Niccolao Manucci, who spent almost his entire adulthood detailing the lives of the Mughal rulers first-hand, recounts in his famous *Storia do Mogor*:

Not resting content with the above orders [prohibiting alcohol, drugs, long bears, etc], Aurangzeb ... ordered the same official to stop music. If in any house or elsewhere he heard the sound of singing and instruments, he should forthwith hasten there and arrest as many as he could, breaking the instruments.⁹

5 Guru Nanak, *Guru Granth Sahib* (first published 1604; Sant Singh Khalsa tr) 151 <<http://srigranth.org/servlet/gurbani.gurbani?Action=Page&Param=468&g=1&h=0&r=0&t=1&p=1&k=0>> accessed 27 March 2021.
6 Michael Nijhawan, 'From Divine Bliss to Ardent Passion: Exploring Sikh Religious Aesthetics through the Dhādi Genre' (2003) 42(4) *History Of Religions* 359, 375.
7 Joyce Pettigrew, 'Songs of the Sikh Resistance Movement' (1991) 23(1) *Asian Music* 85, 86.
8 *ibid* 101.
9 Niccolao Manucci, *Storia del Mogol di Nicolò Manuzzi veneziano* (first

published 1708, Franco Maria Ricci 1986) 8.

10 Pawanjot Kaur, 'YouTube Removes 2 Songs on Farmers' Protest, Producer Says HQ Cited "Govt Intervention"' (*The Wire*, 8 February 2021) <<https://thewire.in/agriculture/youtube-removes-farmers-protest-song-himmat-sandhu>> accessed 24 March 2021.
11 Vari Rai, 'Ailaan' (*Rubai Music*, 2020, song recorded by Kawar Grewal) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O1t91auJVnM>> accessed 27 March 2021.
12 Express News Service, 'Patiala police arrests singer, lyricist Shree Brar for "glorifying" lawlessness' *The Indian Express* (6 January 2021) <<https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/chandigarh/shree-brar-arrested-punjab-7134659/>> accessed 24 March 2021.

The Punjabi music industry

A genre that in recent times has been largely typified by a glorification of violence, the Punjabi music industry now resonates with an entirely new flavour of rebellion. Since the start of the protests, dozens of songs have been released by both native Punjabi and diaspora artists in support of the demonstrations, characterised not only by their messages of solidarity but their damning critiques of the Indian polity. The same vibrations of the *dhādi* epics echo through the lyrics that have been fuelled by, and given renewed determination to, the movement.

Kanwar Grewal, a Sufi singer whose work has gained large popularity within the commercial space, is a regular feature on stages throughout the protest site. Crowds have gathered in their tens of thousands to listen to his acapella performances, and he has become something of a talisman for the effort. But his artistry has not been without rebuttal.

Grewal, who hails from a farming family in rural Punjab, has recently had one of his songs removed by Youtube in India. 'Ailaan' ('Proclamation') was confirmed to have been taken down by Youtube's headquarters in California after the Indian government filed a complaint. None of the lyrics appear to breach the site's content guidelines themselves. Instead they violate 'certain rules and policies laid down by the Indian government', noted the song's producer, Harjinder Laddi.¹⁰

Oh Delhi, you are going to be troubled by this gathering,
But only a farmer will have the final word about his
crops.¹¹
—Kanwar Grewal, 'Ailaan'

This is not the only instance of government retaliation. Singer and lyricist Pawandeep Singh Mohali, more commonly known by his alias Shree Brar, was arrested on 6 January 2021 under the Police Incitement to Disaffection Act for his lyrics encouraging gun culture and exalting lawlessness. The Senior Superintendent of Police, Vikram Jeet Duggal, claimed that '[t]he lyrics of the song very much encourage the youth to commit crimes and antisocial acts'.¹² The song in question, 'Jaan', was released just a week before the equally provocative 'Kisaan Anthem' ('Farmer Anthem') which features Brar and nine other Punjabi artists.

'Kisaan Anthem' utilises an evocation of the Sikh Gurus to facilitate an emotion of virtue and righteousness. Brar sings of Guru Nanak blessing the Sikhs with a farming heritage, and implying that their rights have been divinely bestowed. Music, religion, and political resistance are deeply intertwined in these works. It is apparent in Brar's lyrics, as it is in those of numerous others, that these songs are not designed to generate album sales or bolster fame. Instead, they are saturated by a tangible essence of challenging the hegemony, the source of which is a long lineage of musical defiance.

O master of the hawk [the tenth Sikh Guru] place your
hand on our head and protect us,
As we walk alone and our enemy is the government.¹³
—Shree Brar, 'Kisaan Anthem'

For the thousands of farmers who remain steadfast in their struggle, these musicians and their artistic expression serve as much more than entertainment. There is a deep-rooted sense of heritage and dynasty that vibrates with every note. The lyrics, melody, and rhythm that rang 500 years ago, whose resonance permeates the protests today, are not simply just a chorus of sacred sound. Nor are they merely demonstrations of political recalcitrance. These songs, hymns, and ballads are articulations of a sovereignty, and have become the anthems of a movement. And the orchestra that played to defy injustice over half a millennium ago, appears to be just as loud today.

¹³ Shree Brar, 'Kisaan Anthem' (*PB Studios*, 2020, song recorded by Shree Brar et al) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oNjiVuPmh9A>> accessed 27 March 2021.