



art at the protest site- became an important instrument of communication and narrative

RURAL ROOTS, URBAN EDGES

Performing Panjabiyat at the Delhi Borders

Arpita Dayal

These pictures offer a glimpse into the transformed energy of the Singhu Border, bordering Delhi and the Haryana state, which was one of the protest sites where farmers camped during the Farmers Protest. The protest that lasted for over a year between 2020 and 2021, against the three farm laws passed by the Parliament of India, became one of the most popular protests in recent history.

When the protesting farmers, on thousands of tractor trolleys were walled out of the national capital at the borders, through massive barricading and heavy armoury, they chose to camp on the highways itself, to mark this denial of access.

The protest became particularly characteristic of its unique spatiality, distinct from that of usual protest spaces. Not only did they engage in sustainable building activities using available resources and materials, but they also developed a strong narrative of seva at the protest sites, synonymous with the practices of Sikhism. In the absence of any support from the state, or any pre-existing manuals, the farmers promoted their narrative of a peaceful protest embroiled in strong social and cultural facets of the Punjabi culture. Their sustenance as a result, reflected in the robust spatialities that they assumed through the temporary makeshift structures of Langars – serving food throughout the day to anyone who came, Saths – discussion spaces similar to their villages and through practices of seva – as an integral part of Sikhi.

Clockwise order

barricades – the multiple layers of barricades along the Delhi-Haryana highway diverting traffic along the interior of the villages and cordoning off the protest area. Barricading was among the many armaments used by the state to ensure the protestors denial of access.
new scale to the vehicular road opportunities for neighboring villages – the existing settlements near the protest sites started small businesses selling everyday items, indicating a co-existence of sorts
sangath – a massive stage was set up to disseminate information to all protestors across the site, and also as a platform to voice opinions of supporters and leaders



The unique spatiality can be seen as a question to the formidable dominant narrative of the authority. It exemplifies how peaceful narratives of community solidarities and cultural representations emerge out of the cracks of the system, despite all odds. The cruciality of such an existence point to the lasting impacts that these have on memory and associations of those involved, despite being temporary in time and space.

sanjhi sath – similar to their Punjab village settlement ideologies, the protestors set up Sanjhi sath at the Singhu Border protest site, as a place for discussion, study and getting together.

tent city – tents remain a constant element of a protest, as the tent city here was set up using prefabricated tents along an empty plot near the highway

inside a tent – the small makeshift tents were fully equipped with necessities, as basic comfort would ensure long haul. These spaces were also evidence of the resourcefulness of the protestors in the use of material and space



langar- where no one leaves hungry – the practice of seva through multiple langars feeding hundreds of visitors everyday, was an unexpected occurrence at the protest site

sevadaars at langar – selfless servers at the langar serving food as way of protest

inside the kitchen of langar – the makeshift yet efficient kitchens that were set up along the highway turning out massive quantities of dal, sabzi and kheer every day.



Clockwise
medical facilities – Despite the ongoing Covid 19 scare, large scale medical facilities were set up in service
inside the shelter – the Khalsa Aid organized formal tents with mattresses for protestors
beauty and the brutal – an array of potted plants, banners of peaceful messages and other aesthetic elements were added to facades as an extension of the peaceful narrative of their long haul
seva - free milk tankers – another form of seva were the milk, almond, blankets, slippers langar, services that were free of charge and sponsored by supporters as a way of showing solidarity

Arpita Dayal is an Assistant Professor at the Department of Architecture, School of Planning and Architecture (SPA), New Delhi. She is a double gold medalist and holds a Master's degree in Urban Design from SPA, and is currently pursuing doctoral studies from the department. With a teaching experience of more than 16 years, she has coordinated research and design based courses at the school, and her focus has been on innovative pedagogical advances for effective learning and teaching. She has also published papers in prestigious international and national journals including the International Journal of Urban Design and Tekton, and presented her work at the University of Warwick, UK, the IJAS Conference, Rome, Panjab University and at JNU. She has been a working professional in Delhi and Mumbai, and has been involved in many research projects in the city related to redevelopment, urban spaces and sustainable form. Some of her prominent projects include a joint research project with the National Institute of Urban Affairs and Oxford Brookes University on Sustainable Urban Form for Indian Cities, and various architectural projects with the Delhi Urban Art Commission and ABLA, New Delhi. Her areas of interest include liminality, urban spaces, spatial resistance and protests.