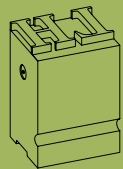


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## The Village on the Highway

GAURI GILL



Gauri Gill, Untitled, (1) from the series 'The Village on the Highway', 2021. Copyright Gauri Gill.

In September of 2020 the Indian Parliament, led by Narendra Modi's far-right Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), passed three discrete "anti-farmer laws," which sought to roll back the hard-won insulation of small farmers and dispossessed farm laborers from direct competition with larger corporate landholders. Beginning in August, when the proposed laws were announced, farmers' unions began protests that roiled into a nationwide strike, first concentrated in the agricultural heartlands of Punjab, Haryana, and Western Uttar Pradesh, before spreading across the country as farmers called for a *Bharat Bandh*, or nationwide general shutdown.



Gauri Gill, Untitled, (28) from the series 'The Village on the Highway', 2021. Copyright Gauri Gill.



Gauri Gill, Untitled, (44) from the series 'The Village on the Highway', 2021. Copyright Gauri Gill.



Gauri Gill, Untitled, (9) from the series 'The Village on the Highway', 2021. Copyright Gauri Gill.



Gauri Gill, Untitled, (88) from the series 'The Village on the Highway', 2021. Copyright Gauri Gill.



Starting with a *rail roko* campaign – a demand to shut down the trains in Punjab – workplace actions leapt across sectors and culminated in the largest general strike in history by November. In the midst of the strike, farmers looked to escalate further and marched south to assemble massive protest camps along the key highway arteries into Delhi. Rebuffing water cannons, tear gas, and successive raids on their camps, they succeeded in grinding the capital city to a halt for 54 weeks – a year and two days. The movement proved true their slogan, “What Parliament Can Do, the Streets Can Undo!” and in January of 2021, the Indian courts filed a stay, which blocked the implementation of the bills.

Though the movement began as a major strike, it was a sterling demonstration of how workers on the move can deploy a diverse repertoire of tactics to win. Grafted onto work stoppages were a series of other actions, from *arthee phooko* (effigy burning) to *siyapa* (collective cursing) to *jago* (wake up), a traditional wedding ritual that keeps the bride and groom up all night, rearticulated into a viral practice that smaller villages took up and circulated online. But the most effective tactical practice was the highway blockade.



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Gauri Gill, Untitled, (78) from the series 'The Village on the Highway', 2021. Copyright Gauri Gill.

pp. 48–49: Gauri Gill, Untitled, (8) from the series 'The Village on the Highway', 2021. Copyright Gauri Gill.





This whole sequence of struggle scrambles more traditional ideas around what movements can adopt which tactics. Here, the farmers organized a strike *and* a blockade, a work stoppage *and* a “circulation struggle,” all within the course of a single cycle of contestation.

To sustain this blockade in the face of state violence, as well as a severe rainy season, the acute North Indian summer heat, and the ravages of the COVID pandemic, a lattice-like network of protest camps were erected on the highway. As Navsharan Kaur has described it, “Communities in the camps sometimes represented entire villages, men, women and children,” demonstrating the wide cross section of farmers drawn into the movement, despite the government’s efforts to slander it as a Punjabi separatist struggle or a tribune of Jat landowners.<sup>1</sup> As P. Sainath writes, “they set up shelters with their own hands and tools. More often they simply converted their tractors, vans and other vehicles into makeshift refuges. Both the architecture and the ambience of their defiant ‘townships’ was helped by artists, mechanics, masons and small merchants who joined in” to support the movement, a reflection of self-initiative and solidarity cast in brick and mortar, canvas and rope.<sup>2</sup> LH

—Ben Mabie

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1 Kaur, Navsharan. “We were making history: women in the farmers’ movement,” *V&A* 07/06/2023. <https://www.vam.ac.uk/blog/projects/we-were-making-history-women-in-the-farmers-movement>

2 Sainath, P. “The farm protests at Delhi’s gates,” *V&A* 06/16/2023. <https://www.vam.ac.uk/blog/projects/the-farm-protests-at-delhis-gates>





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Gauri Gill, Untitled, (2) from the series 'The Village on the Highway', 2021. Copyright Gauri Gill.