

**Transcription: BV022.29.9**

**Interview with Jagandeep “Jag” Nagra**

**Audio Recording: 2023\_0016\_0009\_002.mp3**

**Interviewer: James Binks (INTVWR)**

**Interviewee: Jagandeep “Jag” Nagra (JN)**

**Date of Interview: June 5, 2023**

1 INTVWR: Okay. This is James Binks. I am a researcher at Burnaby Village Museum. Today is  
2 June 5<sup>th</sup>, 2023. I’m sitting in the new exhibit which just opened last month at the museum called  
3 Truths Not Often Told, Being South Asian in Burnaby. And I have the pleasure to be sitting with...

4 JN: Jag Nagra

5 INTVWR: Turned artist-artist. You’re a visual artist. You focus on your art practice on concepts  
6 that depict a sense of confidence and fearlessness. You unapologetically celebrate darker skin  
7 tones and South Asian garments and motifs in your art. And that art has been acquired by the  
8 Museum of Vancouver. So, congratulations for that. You’ve worked with the Vancouver Canucks,  
9 Tim Hortons, Microsoft, Metropolis at Metrotown (which is the biggest mall in Burnaby), and  
10 many more – which, I can’t list everything. As, as a queer, Punjabi-Canadian artist, you’re also  
11 passionate about community development and helping to revitalize the Punjabi market  
12 neighborhood in Vancouver through arts and culture. **00:01:10** And you’re working towards  
13 helping to end the stigma against LGBTQ+ people, and you’ve recently appeared in an award-  
14 winning documentary titled *Emergence: Out of the Shadows*. Most recently, though, you  
15 completed art for the exhibit here Truths Not Often Told at the Burnaby Village Museum, which  
16 is where we’re sitting. So, before getting into talking about that art and other aspects of that here  
17 in the exhibit, I wanted to first ask sort of where and when you were born, and a bit of what you  
18 childhood was like growing up.

19 JN: Yeah. So, I was born in Surrey in 1984, and I lived there until – I think until I was eight years  
20 old. After that, we moved, my parents moved us to Maple Ridge just to be closer to the warehouse  
21 where they worked because I, I remember winters were especially hard for my brother and I when  
22 we were kids. The traffic with the snowfall, like, we just always assumed they got in a car accident,  
23 and we’d be crying with my, my grandma – my [bebe] **00:02:13**. So, they decided to move us,  
24 relocate us, closer to work. And yeah. So, I, I grew up in Maple Ridge. I live in Pit Meadows now.  
25 So, like, five minutes from my parents, where the house I grew up. Yeah. My, my childhood was,  
26 you know – like, South Asians tend to live in multi-generational homes, and that was very true for  
27 me, as well. I lived with my, my parents. My brother and I lived there. My two grandmothers, my  
28 two uncles. At one point, their wives and their children. So, it was a house full of people.

29 INTVWR: And where in Maple Ridge, roughly, is that?

30 JN: The west side of Maple Ridge. So, yeah, west. And yeah, it was, you know, I have a lot of  
31 fond memories having been surrounded by so many people. **00:03:05** But I think that also took  
32 away from... Like, my parents were working so much because they were, you know, they came to  
33 Canada in the ‘80s, and my dad came in the mid-70s, and they had to work to provide for us. Right?  
34 So, they were often away from home. So, that bond with my parents I didn’t start getting until kind  
35 of recently, I think. So, yeah.

36 INTVWR: And where did they come from in India?

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37 JN: From Punjab. They were both born in Punjab, and I think my dad came in 1972, and my mom  
38 came in 1980. Yeah.

39 INTVWR: Right, and they went right to Maple Ridge or...?

40 JN: No, they were – I think they started out in Burnaby. From Burnaby, they moved to Surrey, and  
41 then from Surrey to Maple Ridge.

42 INTVWR: Do you know where in Burnaby?

43 JN: I’m not – I’m the worst person with directions and, like, locating myself on a map. So, like, I  
44 couldn’t tell you what area but, you know, it’s funny. When we go to like a wedding of someone  
45 from that era of their lives, like, the Burnaby friends... I think my mom regrets moving from here.  
46 There was just such a sense of community. And especially, I think, being new in a country and  
47 having that community is so powerful. So, I think she kind of misses that sense of, you know –  
48 those people, that family. I mean, they, they weren’t related by blood, but they became family. So,  
49 yeah. **00:04:31**

50 INTVWR: Right. Awesome. And when did you first start getting into art, then? What was your  
51 first visual, artistic creation?

52 JN: So, like everybody else, I drew as a kid and then you stop drawing because you just think, “Oh,  
53 I’m not an artist and not interested in that.” It was probably when... So, my brother is two years  
54 older than me, and he studied at SFU in – I can’t even remember what it was called, what his  
55 program was. But he had taken some graphic design courses as part of his, like, diploma or  
56 whatever it was. **00:05:09** And I remember sitting, like, on the chair kind of behind him, watching  
57 him create these posters and all this stuff. And, like, my mind was blown because I didn’t realize  
58 that, like, a Pepsi can is designed or any book cover is designed. It was the first time I realized,  
59 like, art is all around us. And at the time, I was... I must’ve been in grade 12, you know, trying to  
60 figure out what I wanted to do. I did two years at the University College of the Fraser Valley, and  
61 those two years were just... They seemed like an extension of high school. Like, I didn’t  
62 understand how post-secondary worked. I thought you went to school, and then ta-dah, you have  
63 a career. And I was like, “Wait, like, I’m nowhere further along!” So, after those two years, I was  
64 like, “Okay, this graphic design thing seems interesting.” **00:06:02** So, I went to the Art Institute  
65 of Vancouver.

66 INTVWR: When was that?

67 JN: In 2003 to 2006, so it was an 18-month, like, advanced diploma – and that was sort of the  
68 starting part of my artistic career. And then actual, like, visual art came much later. Yeah.

69 INTVWR: Right. Right, and so, while you were studying there – graphic artist, that’s sort of, you  
70 do that on the computer general. Like, what’s the process of creation for not just when you were

71 studying but since then, too, is they give you a lot of digital art, essentially. Like, you’re not  
72 painting. Right? You’re using computers?

73 JN: Yeah, I think it – like, I don’t do much graphic design work anymore, but I think that really  
74 laid the foundation for how I work and, like, looking at composition and stuff. Or, you know, even  
75 if I’m pitching myself to a potential client, like, I know how to put together a well-designed  
76 presentation and stuff. So, I think that foundation is really great to have. **00:07:01** And, like,  
77 thinking about color and stuff, but... So, after I graduated from the art institute, I got a job as, like,  
78 the sole in-house graphic designer for a travel marketing company. Like, looking back, it was  
79 largely, like, soul-sucking. Right? Like, you, you imagine when you’re in art school, like, life is  
80 going to be so amazing. And then you get this office job, and it’s – sure, it’s creative, but you have  
81 to, like, run everything by, like, all of these levels of, like, managers and... It was just like, this  
82 isn’t what I want to do forever. And I was 22 when I started that job, and I remember panicking.  
83 Like, it’s so young to think about this, but I was like, “One day, I am going to die, and all of my  
84 art is, like...” Whatever kind of art I was doing is locked on my computer. No one knows the  
85 password. No one other than my family and best friends are going to know I was an artist. And I  
86 think just having that, like, fear in my head prompted me to, like, take on different types of art  
87 projects that would be... **00:08:05** You know, I do a lot of public art now, and I think that kind of  
88 stemmed from that fear I initially had. Like, I want my art to be seen. And yeah, so that – that’s  
89 kind of how, where my mentality was, I guess. But I wanted to quit that job, and I didn’t want to  
90 just get hired at the next place doing the similar kind of experience I had because that’s not what I  
91 wanted to do. So, in 2012, I started an illustration project basically teaching myself how to draw.  
92 It was a 365-day project, and I – I would post it online, sort of, to have accountability. Like, even  
93 if there’s no audience out there, like, just for myself. Like, I can’t miss a day. And that project  
94 started getting picked up by different blogs and stuff, and that’s how I got this contract with  
95 Microsoft to do, like, their brand illustrations. That was when I realized, like, there’s power in this,  
96 and I can create something. Right? **00:09:05** And then... Yeah. So, that’s kind of...

97 INTVWR: And so this – well, the Art Institute of Vancouver, I know they have or had a campus  
98 in Burnaby. Is that also in Burnaby, where you studied or...?

99 JN: No, I studied, like, right downtown on, like, Thurlow and West Georgia. I think the Burnaby  
100 campus opened up afterwards. I, I don’t even know if it’s called the Art Institute anymore, to be  
101 honest.

102 INTVWR: Yeah, I’m not sure my... My brother went there, actually, in 2009, 2010. He studied  
103 film, so I don’t know if it was a different campus – but anyway. That was an aside. So, the art you  
104 were creating then was more... It wasn’t really your personal creation. Like, it was your personal  
105 creation, but it wasn’t your passion kind of art. Was it like right? Working for Microsoft – or just  
106 what kind of art, your graphic design, was it that you were working on?

107 JN: Yeah, I made illustrations for their, like, brand library. So, you know, they would give me –  
108 and this is kind of where I started drawing in, like, metaphors. **00:10:03** Like, they would give me,  
109 for example, a list of items they want drawn. So, file sharing. How do I depict that in art? Right?

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110 So, for that, for example, I remember creating like a football player but instead of a football in his  
111 hand, he’s throwing a file – like, a Microsoft file icon. So, that started getting me thinking, like,  
112 how, how can I turn a story, for example, into a piece of artwork? Yeah, and my work then – like,  
113 if you looked at my portfolio back then, you would never know a queer woman made it. You would  
114 never know a brown woman made it. It was so, like, to me, like, very generic. You know, just not  
115 showing or depicting my culture at all – and I think that’s because, like, where I grew up in Maple  
116 Ridge, there weren’t a lot of Punjabi families. There weren’t a lot of, like, Indian culture around  
117 me outside of my family. So, I always tried as hard as I could to be white in school. Right? **00:11:02**  
118 Like, my, my full name is Jagandeep, my first name. Never went by that because it was  
119 embarrassing when the teacher would pause during roll call. Right? And I, I didn’t think of myself  
120 as brown. Right? I wanted to fit in with everybody else, and I think that kind of the erasure of my  
121 identity was kind of self-imposed, I think, trying to fit in with everybody. Yeah.

122 INTVWR: Right. Okay. And were you, were you still living in Maple Ridge when you were  
123 working for those companies, or did you move out and renting somewhere, or...?

124 JN: No, I was still – I was still living under my parents’ roof. Yeah.

125 INTVWR: Yeah, with all of the other folks in the family.

126 JN: No, by then, like, everyone had moved on. So, it was at that time, it was just my parents and I  
127 left at the house, and yeah.

128 INTVWR: And can I ask, actually, what your parents’ names are?

129 JN: Yeah, my dad is Avtar Singh Nagra and my mom was Rajwant Kaur Nagra.

130 INTVWR: Okay. Thank you. And were they – going back a little, actually, were they first people  
131 in your family to migrate from Punjab to Canada or to British Columbia, or did they have  
132 somebody else – an uncle or somebody – who had come before them?

133 JN: **00:12:08** No, they weren’t the first. So, directly, like, in my family, it was my mom’s eldest  
134 sister who had come to Surrey, and she was brought over by her cousin. She – yeah. So, he helped  
135 her. She helped my parents, and it continues.

136 INTVWR: And this was kind of in the ‘70s or so? ‘60s?

137 JN: For my mom, it was 1980. My dad, I think it was 1972 that he came – and I don’t know who  
138 brought him over, to be honest. I should ask him that.

139 INTVWR: Right. Okay. That’s all sort of the earliest your family was in that period, though, more  
140 or less. Right? Okay. Okay. Well, going back to art, so, who are some of your influences? Not  
141 talking about back then, but let’s kind of bring it up to today and just in general. So, who influenced  
142 you to create the art that you find yourself making nowadays? **00:13:02**

143 JN: Moreso than a person. So, I would say the Punjabi Market in South Van, that’s the very first,  
144 like, established little India neighborhood in all of North America. Like, this is going to tie in....  
145 It’ll make sense. But so, growing up in Maple Ridge, like, we would kind of – I call it a pilgrimage.  
146 We would make a pilgrimage to Punjabi Market like once a year with my, my, my family – my  
147 aunts – and we would make a whole day of it. Right? We’d go shopping, and we always had lunch  
148 at Himalayan restaurant. Like, back in the ‘80s, it was like the pique of Punjabi Market. You can  
149 get everything everywhere now online. Surrey, the South Asian population is booming there. But  
150 back then, Punjabi Market was where you got everything. And so, over the past, like, 15-20 years,  
151 there hasn’t been a lot of investment in the neighborhood as a lot of businesses have moved out.  
152 **00:14:06** And so, I got involved with the Punjabi Market to help revitalize it, to help beautify it  
153 through art. And I got introduced to Gulzar Nanda, who is our chair of our... We have a registered  
154 non-profit now. He had discovered my art and introduced me to, like, the work they were doing  
155 and asked if I wanted to be involved, and I said yes. And that – that was in 2019, and that’s when  
156 I started connecting with my roots and my culture. And, like, it was the first time I made friends  
157 who were Punjabi, who we bonded over the cultural upbringing. And, like, I just realized, like, I  
158 don’t need to be ashamed of my name. I don’t need to be ashamed of my brown skin. And, like,  
159 now, like, you know, the art I’ve done here at the museum depicts, like, women or men with brown  
160 skin – and I take pride in that. **00:15:07** Right? And I think, like, being able to celebrate our textiles,  
161 our style of embroidery – I think that’s so important, and I don’t need to, like, hide that part of  
162 myself anymore. So, it wasn’t so – my influence isn’t a person. It’s like because of Punjabi Market,  
163 I’ve kind of discovered this whole new world.

164 INTVWR: Right. And so, yeah, it seemed like that – that you’ve sort of, I don’t know, exploded  
165 onto the scene, as it were, but you know, a lot of this amazing art has been, yeah, since 2019 or so.  
166 So, that was really this transformative year for you around then because before that... You  
167 graduated in 2006, I believe, from Art Institute. Until around 2019, you were mainly focused on  
168 working for these companies and doing what you called sort of “generic art” before. Right? So,  
169 2019, you were working with the Punjabi Market Collective. Is that right?

170 JN: Yup, yeah.

171 INTVWR: So, they kind of brought you on as a member of this collective. **00:16:02** Is there any  
172 particular art you’ve created there that you want to mention?

173 JN: Yeah, I got to do a lot of cool stuff. Like, the first year – we became a registered nonprofit in  
174 March of 2020, and that’s when the pandemic came. Right? So, it completely threw us off-course,  
175 and we didn’t know... Like, we had all this momentum building, and we didn’t know – like,  
176 everything shut down. But that year, we partnered with Indian Summer Festival, and I worked  
177 closely with Musqueam artist Deborah Sparrow, and we created street pole banners that depicted,  
178 like, my culture and Deborah’s culture – which is really amazing. Those were up for two years.  
179 There was a lot of opportunities I got through that. Right? I also, last year... I didn’t paint a mural,  
180 but I had created a mural that said, “Welcome to Punjabi Market,” and it was applied – printed and  
181 applied by vinyl on, like, Main & 49<sup>th</sup>. **00:17:01** Yeah, just being able to... We, we’ve done so far  
182 six murals in the market. We’re painting two more with some artists this year. So, being able to

183 provide, like, a platform for other artists is really important to me. I started out as creative director  
184 of the Punjabi Market Collective. I’m now the vice chair. For me, it’s not like, “Oh, my art needs  
185 to be everywhere in Punjabi Market.” Like, I want to give people this opportunity. I want to expose  
186 people to these amazing South Asian artists and, like, help build this community there. Yeah.

187 INTVWR: Right. And you worked on, on a mural at Metrotown as well.

188 JN: I did.

189 INTVWR: That was a different project, though, right? That wasn’t part of this Punjabi Market –  
190 because it’s a different neighborhood, but it was a mural as well. So, what was that mural?

191 JN: Yeah. So, I was commissioned to create a pride mural. I’m trying to remember... I can’t  
192 remember off the top of my head what year that was. I want to say also 2020, but I might be wrong.  
193 0:18:00 It’s this huge, like, 76-foot wide mural. Again, I didn’t paint it. It was, like, applied by  
194 vinyl. It says, “Love is love,” and it’s, like, super vibrant. It has a lot of, like, my current style.  
195 Like, hand-drawn illustration. You know, Indian colors and motifs and stuff. So, I, I take pride in,  
196 like, being able to expose, for example, the South Asian community to LGBTQ+ issues, or just  
197 like the community. Right? And I find that art is a great way to help bridge the divide sometimes  
198 or educate people. And even, you know, a lot of people might not think there’s a huge South Asian  
199 community in the queer community. But you know, we’re here, and we exist – and just helping to  
200 create that exposure for us is really, really important.

201 INTVWR: Yeah. Well, that’s great that Metrotown has, you know, commissioned you to, to do  
202 that. Do you know, what was the process of that? 00:19:02 Who kind of reached out to you, and  
203 were you the only one who...? Like, you were the sole artist of that mural?

204 JN: So, the, the cool thing was there’s this artist named Priscilla Yu in Vancouver, and she was  
205 asked by Gilford Town Center initially to create a pride mural in Gilford Town Center. And she  
206 told them, she’s like, “I’m not queer, but it would be great to be able to collaborate with a queer  
207 artist.” And I, like, I really respect her for saying that. It wasn’t, like, a paycheck to her. It was,  
208 like, you know, more meaningful. So, we started... Priscilla and I started talking. And eventually,  
209 like, the timeline ended up being too tight for her. So, she said, “If I bow out, would you, like, take  
210 over?” And I said, “Sure.” So, it was... I think the marketing company was the same for the two  
211 malls. So, Gilford and Metrotown, and they wanted me to create, you know, one art piece at both  
212 malls. So, yeah. It was, it was such a thrill to be able to do that.

213 INTVWR: Awesome. 00:20:04 All right. Well, I think that sort of brings us to today and the  
214 museum here. So, you’ve created four pieces of art here at the museum for this exhibit, which  
215 opened, as I mentioned, in May. So, May 11<sup>th</sup>, 2023. It’s going to be up for a couple of years. So,  
216 we’ll be able to see this for a while. But yeah, I thought it’d be nice to talk to you about this here.  
217 We’re in the exhibit now. So, well, first, I thought it would be interesting to kind of walk around  
218 the space, since we’re here in Situ. So, we’re going to stand up. I’m going to carry the mic. We’re  
219 first going to look at your first artwork for the exhibit, which is a map of Burnaby.

220 JN: Sure.

221 INTVWR: All right. So, here we are. We’re standing in front of this art. **00:21:00** What’s your  
222 first sort of impression seeing it here on display? It’s close to the entrance. So, you walk in, and  
223 it’s just to your right sort of as you, as you enter the space. So, what’s your first impression seeing  
224 it here in a physical form after working on this for some time on your own?

225 JN: Yeah. Honestly, like, the first time I walked in – I wasn’t expecting it to be here. I didn’t... I  
226 thought it was just going to be part of the posters that went out. So, I kind of gasped when I saw  
227 it. But being able to, you know... I always find it amazing or, like, mind-blowing. Like, this tree I  
228 drew sitting at my desk and now it, like, lives here. And you know, this piece is so vibrant, and  
229 yeah. Just, like, such an immense feeling of pride that I created something for the exhibit. Like  
230 you said, right at the entrance. Right?

231 INTVWR: Yeah, awesome. Yeah, it’s good to hear that. So, to give a little more context of what  
232 we’re looking at. So, you know, you’ve drawn here – there’s an outline of the city of Burnaby.  
233 **0:22:02** And over top of it, there’s a few lines which are kind of roads. It looks like some creeks.  
234 There’s a couple of lakes here. Burnaby Lake, Deer Lake, and there’s trees, as you mentioned,  
235 kind of throughout. Especially know where Burnaby Mountain is, around Burnaby Lake, and along  
236 the Fraser River. And you also have four places of worship which are depicted here. They’re sort  
237 of edifices. Do you want to mention a bit about that? Like, what was the process? Well, before we  
238 get to the place of worship, actually, what was the process, sort of, of getting to know Burnaby as  
239 a whole here? I mean, I know you’ve obviously gone through Burnaby a lot and had different  
240 activities in the city. But you know, for this piece of art, what was your, I don’t know, process of  
241 kind of getting to know the city, the space, the people? Did you have any particular strategy that  
242 you utilized?

243 JN: Yeah. So, Jane [inaudible **0:22:54**], who I worked with, you know, for the project, they were  
244 instrumental in helping kind of guide where the artwork was going. **00:23:04** They gave me a  
245 document, I guess, more so with themes. Like, here are the different themes, and they wanted me  
246 to kind of have creative freedom to do that. One of the things they wanted to show, though, was a  
247 map of Burnaby. And trying to figure out, like, how am I going to depict this? How am I going to  
248 show these different places of worship that they had listed out for me? So, I didn’t want it to feel  
249 like we’re looking at a Google Map. You know, that’s kind of very bland or whatever. So, like you  
250 said, we have the outline of Burnaby, and then I thought, you know, this isn’t a realistic map. You  
251 couldn’t use this to find your way to any of these places, but how do I show that in a visually  
252 interesting way? So, I purposefully made, like, the temples extend out over the map. Right? And  
253 then I placed Guru Ravidass at the bottom, and this other woman who is, you know, kind of  
254 enjoying the outdoors and dressed in Indian garments. **00:24:05** So, you know, they’re not to scale  
255 by any means, but it’s – you can still get a sense that this is a map of Burnaby, and these are, you  
256 know, some historical and, you know, culturally relevant sites. The interesting thing is, when I  
257 posted this image on my Instagram, I got DMs from people especially talking about the Guru  
258 Ravidass Temple. You know, in, in, unfortunately, in India, there’s still such a huge, like, caste  
259 divide, and it becomes such a huge issue – and people were really grateful that I drew not only

260 Guru Ravidass, but also the, the temple there. Someone asked me, “Why did you draw that?” You  
261 know? And, and – not in a negative way, but feeling pride. Like, we’re never depicted. Right? So,  
262 I didn’t realize that at the time. I was just kind of following the brief that I was given here at the  
263 locations that I was suggested to draw, but you know, again, art has power. **00:25:02** And  
264 representing folks who are marginalized is, is huge.

265 INTVWR: Right. Yeah. It is nice to, to see that. So we have, yeah, the Shri Guru Ravidass Sabha  
266 Temple, the Thurkadevi Temple, which is a Tamil Hindu Temple, I believe. And then we have the  
267 Masjid Al-Salaam and the Education Center, and the Ismaili Center. So, for those other ones – or,  
268 well, any of the four, really. So, you – what was your process of...? You know, you’ve created the  
269 architecture of them here. So, did you go to them in person and sort of walk around, or did you  
270 make reference online? Or what was your kind of process for thinking how you would capture it?  
271 Because, you know, this is not a photo, photographic reproduction. So, obviously, you’re going –  
272 you know, I can immediately tell what they are, but they’re not, you know, exactly  
273 depicted/reproduced because that’s not really your style. So, how did you kind of think, “Well,  
274 how should I go about kind of depicting these spaces in a way?”

275 JN: **00:26:04** I didn’t go to them just because – like, I have two young kids, so it’s hard to  
276 spontaneously go and, you know, drive around the city. But I did a lot of research online looking  
277 at, first of all, Google Maps. Like, what is, what is – what angles, for example, would look best.  
278 And just looking up, like, lots of, I guess, source photography for any of the temples. Right? Like,  
279 what, what kind of photographs have other people taken? What angles might be interesting? That  
280 kind of thing. So. And again, like, none of the art I do is, like, photorealistic by any means, but  
281 you can still – like you said, you can still recognize them. Which, yeah, yeah.

282 INTVWR: Definitely because they’re roughly in there, locations as well.

283 JN: Yeah. Something that used to hold me back from, like pursuing visual art was, like, I thought  
284 to be an illustrator or an artist, you know, if I was drawing a picture of you, it had to look exactly  
285 like you. And then I was like, that held me back. **00:27:01** But I was like, “What if I just do it in  
286 this style that becomes my style? It’s not photorealistic. My lines are never perfectly straight. I  
287 don’t use rulers.” But that became my style. Right? So, yeah. Yeah.

288 INTVWR: Yeah, and you have – I mean, these two figures here. The two people on the map –  
289 well, on the art on the map. Yeah, they do have a bit of that distinctive style of yours. Right? Like,  
290 the colorful colors, and the kind of clean lines that give shape to the, to the figures and, you know,  
291 that kind of perspective, too. Like, I feel like – and we’ll talk about it some later, but that kind of  
292 side profile, I feel like, is one of your signatures in a sense. So, yeah, it’s kind of depicted here in  
293 this piece, and it’s about – I don’t know. How tall would you say this is about? Four or five feet?  
294 Probably five feet tall and about three or four feet wide. So, it’s quite big as you come into the,  
295 into the space here.

296 JN: Yeah. Yeah.



297 INTVWR: All right. So, why don't we head outside?

298 JN: Okay.

299 INTVWR: We'll take a look at some of the other art. **00:28:02** (sound of door creaking open and  
300 closed) All right. So, we've exited the exhibit, and now we're just outside of it. So, we're here. It's  
301 a beautiful sunny day. About 20 to 25 degrees. I'm not sure. It's quite warm. And so, on the outside  
302 of the exhibit here – which is on what we call Hill Street here at the museum. So, there's three  
303 window displays, and there are three more pieces of your art. So, there's another one that's quite  
304 large here, and it depicts... Well, it depicts a ballot box and some activism. So, how would you  
305 describe this, this piece?

306 JN: Yeah. So, this was, you know, the, the fight for voting rights – the fight against, like,  
307 colonization, really. **00:29:01** So, we have this ballot box that's placed in a glass – what would  
308 you call that? Like, a glass case. Right? And that was, you know, a metaphor for it being kind of  
309 protected away and, like, kept away from certain groups. So, we have this brown hand holding this  
310 big, like, hammer kind of that says “resistance,” and it's about to smash the glass case open. We  
311 have two people – you know, or a bunch of people, actually. There's an equality sign someone's  
312 holding. One says “voting rights now,” and we have, like, the solidarity fist. And we also have,  
313 like, the British flags that are kind of tattered and torn and, you know, thrown on the ground. So,  
314 I think we take for granted, you know, that I, as a Canadian woman, have the right to vote. But if  
315 you think back not that long ago, like, just having this brown skin and having my roots, I wouldn't  
316 have been able to cast a vote. You know? So, I, I think, like, the more we can appreciate where –  
317 how much our people fought for us. **00:30:05** Right? I think we just take that for granted so often.  
318 But yeah, that was a really powerful piece to, like... And going through the history and news  
319 articles about, like, who fought for what and the, the protests they would have and stuff... I think  
320 it's really powerful to see what, what people can achieve if they come together, you know, for the  
321 same fight.

322 INTVWR: Right. Yeah, and here, you know, this piece kind of alludes to what's on the inside  
323 because there is a section of the exhibit which goes into some detail on, you know, the different  
324 types of activism and fights that different communities made in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century in particular  
325 and later. And the right to vote was, was withheld from about 1907 until about 1948 for South  
326 Asian Canadians. So, this kind of depicts that, that period. And, you know, it's – it's not a  
327 photographic reproduction of anything. **00:31:02** But you know, it kind of, it gets to the heart in a  
328 sense of that through this imagery. Which kind of, you know, a picture says a thousand words. So,  
329 that's what we have here, and then we people can see this, and go inside and learn more about that.  
330 So, yeah, I think it's a – it's a great piece to have here.

331 JN: Thank you.

332 INTVWR: Yeah, no problem. So, our next art here... Well, I'll let you go ahead and, and describe  
333 it again. Because I think that's, that's the best way to go about this.

334 JN: Yeah. I think out of all of them, this one might be my favorite just because I kind of, like,  
335 really resonated with it. So, we have this, like, like, female peacock – a peafowl – standing right  
336 in the center of the piece. And very muted and dark grays and, you know, charcoal grays. And  
337 she’s surrounded by, like, this red suitcase that she has open. There’s a stack of her, like, garments.  
338 There’s earrings, her Punjabi [inaudible 0:31:59], which are her shoes. **00:32:03** Like, the, the  
339 theme with this was women, when they would come, you know, to Burnaby – they would  
340 immigrate to Canada – they would come with all of their belongings that they could bring. Yet,  
341 they had to try to assimilate into Western culture. So, you know, they would often have to wear  
342 Western clothes when they left the home. So, this is showing kind of a somber peacock here, very  
343 mournful of what she has to leave behind. Right? And her home is so colorful, but she can’t really  
344 celebrate that by any means. So, and, and – you know, like, we talked about growing up in Maple  
345 Ridge with very few Indian families around us: I very much resonated with this because I changed  
346 how my name is pronounced to try to fit in, and I, you know, didn’t... Up until, what, four years  
347 ago, didn’t start celebrating my roots. **00:33:00** So, this piece is really, really meaningful to me  
348 and... You know, quite sad that this has been going on for decades before me, and probably will  
349 for decades after me. Right? But it’s kind of each of our, each of us have a journey to, like, find  
350 our identity and figure out who we are.

351 INTVWR: Right. Yeah, so, I mean, the peafowl is kind of looking downwards or downcast. It’s  
352 kind of regal-type posture, in a sense, though.

353 JN: Yeah.

354 INTVWR: But looking downwards, I mean, that’s sort of how peacocks and peafowls look, though.  
355 They have that look to them. Yeah, I mean, in, in the earlier 20<sup>th</sup> century in particular and into the  
356 ‘60s and ‘70s – so, a lot of the people that moved to Canada and other, you know, England and  
357 United States, as well. But from India, they – a lot of them didn’t bring a lot of their clothing. So,  
358 a lot of the husbands would come first, and they would pick up their wives as the, at the port,  
359 usually, because they’d come over by boat. And kind of right away, they would actually go to a  
360 shop and buy, buy their wives, you know, Western-style clothing. **00:34:01** Yeah, this, this gets to  
361 that a little. I think, thankfully, though, the people I’ve spoken to who came here more in the ‘80s,  
362 ‘90s, and a bit after, they – that seemed to kind of stop a little bit. So, you know, it wasn’t as much  
363 like, “Okay, right away you have to buy these clothes.” You know, and now – you know, on the  
364 streets, you do see people, you know, different kinds of dress. So, I definitely think there is some  
365 improvement there. But of course, you know, that sense, though, that you’ve depicted here is  
366 certainly, certainly the case – for anyone, really, who is displaced from one culture to another.  
367 Right? There’s, there’s always going to be that sense of loss sort of, in a way, and just kind of  
368 displacement as you sort of adapt to a new society.

369 JN: Yeah, and it doesn’t need to be this extreme but, you know, you’ll always feel a sense of, like,  
370 confusion, I think, whatever that is. And yeah, yeah.

371 INTVWR: Yeah. So, is there any...? You mentioned before about metaphor and sort of abstraction  
372 playing a role in your art. So, how do you see that playing out in this piece here with the peafowl?

373 JN: Yeah. So, again, like, the, the document I was given about the themes... You know, they didn't  
374 say, “Draw a peafowl and do this,” but they kind of said like, “This is the experience women had  
375 trying to assimilate.” So, I tried to figure out, like... **00:35:15** The reason I work in metaphor is  
376 because anyone can see this and kind of understand what it is. It doesn't need to be so specific to  
377 a certain specific woman who experienced it. Right? It, it just helps you put your self in your shoes.  
378 We're not a peacock, by any means. We're not a peafowl, but I can feel what this peafowl is feeling  
379 by looking at it. Yeah.

380 INTVWR: Yeah, so by abstraction, right, you kind of broaden the message in a way. Yeah.

381 JN: Yeah.

382 INTVWR: All right. So, we have our fourth piece. Which, the third one outside in the third window  
383 here. Do you want to describe what we're looking at?

384 JN: Yeah. So, this is a depiction of three women of different ages. The one in the foreground is  
385 pregnant. So, it's kind of technically four generations of women coming together. And a way that  
386 South Asians found community here was by quilting rajai or [inaudible 0:36:16]. Right? And that  
387 was a way for them to, you know, pass on storytelling, share histories, and just come together to  
388 create a piece. Right? And, and... They're not – it's not to physically make a Rajai, but there's so  
389 much more community involvement that comes with that. And they're, they're coming together.  
390 They're not feeling so isolated and, and I think that's really powerful because, you know, if  
391 you're... Especially if you're moving to a brand-new country, you need other people like you who  
392 are going to help uplift you and help give you a sense of belonging. And I think without being able  
393 to quilt these rajai, I mean, they would've found a another way to do it, and another way to come  
394 together, but I think this was a great way. You're creating something tactile that you physically  
395 need in your home, but you're also.... **00:37:10** Like, I can just imagine the kinds of stories or  
396 laughter that came from, from groups of women like this and being able to pass down these  
397 traditions of, like, making, but also storytelling and, and shared lived experience.

398 INTVWR: All right. So, would a rajai be used for, or would it have a use – a practical use aside  
399 from, obviously, the sense of building community and everything you mentioned? But it's because  
400 a translation would be “quilt.”

401 JN: Like a duvet. Quilt or duvet. Right? Like, my duvet on my bed, I call it a rajai. So, and yeah,  
402 but these are, I guess, quilted ones. Yeah. By hand.

403 INTVWR: Right. So, like – okay. So, like a duvet or a quilt. Have you ever seen a process like this  
404 or been a part of one in your own life, or is it something you heard about from your mother or...?

405 JN: I, honestly, hadn't heard of it until, until this project. **00:38:00** And yeah. I, I – I think, like,  
406 for my family, like, the women like my grandmother, my aunts, my mom, they would go to the  
407 blueberry farms – and that was their sense of community, in a way. Like, they had to, to earn  
408 money, but also, you know, being able to work with other Indian women, Punjabi women. I think

**Transcription: BV022.29.9**

**Interview with Jagandeep “Jag” Nagra**

**Audio Recording: 2023\_0016\_0009\_002.mp3**

**Interviewer: James Binks (INTVWR)**

**Interviewee: Jagandeep “Jag” Nagra (JN)**

**Date of Interview: June 5, 2023**

409 that’s where they found their community. So, there was a little bit removed from, like, crafting  
410 kind of thing. Yeah.

411 INTVWR: Right. Well, it’s interesting. It is interesting, when we look at these, and you talk about  
412 your process of creating these that, you know, you yourself also learned a lot. Right?

413 JN: Yeah. Absolutely.

414 INTVWR: So, you, you learned about, you know, the art itself. You learned about Burnaby. You  
415 learned about, you know, plains of worship. You learned about this rajai. So, it kind of encapsulates  
416 what you said about the creation of the rajai itself because, through doing something, right, you  
417 learn, you learn so much. So, it’s great that you were able to, you know, learn and grow so much  
418 through this project, as well.

419 JN: Totally. Yeah. And I’m still very new to, like, learning about my own culture. **00:39:01** So, I  
420 think through projects like this, like, I grow so much, and I come out like a different person. And  
421 I can now share these histories with other people. Right? Like, I came with my friends here about  
422 two weeks ago, and they made me stand up here where we’re standing, and they were all standing  
423 down here – and they told me, like, “Tell us. Give us an artist tour.” So, artist talk. And being able  
424 to give these stories to them, that’s in their head now, and they’ll tell the next person if they come.  
425 Right? So, yeah. I think it’s really powerful.

426 INTVWR: Right. Yeah, so the process keeps going and going, then. So, yeah. That’s, that’s great.  
427 So, I think we’ll head inside, and we’ll continue in there.

428 JN: Okay.

429 INTVWR: **00:40:00** All right. Thanks for the artist tour. All right. Thanks for the artist tour. We’re  
430 now back inside (sound of door opening and closing). So, yeah, it was great to see all of them out  
431 there and hear you talk about them in particular. So, the last piece that we saw kind of with the  
432 quilt, the rajai and we talked about sense of community and, you know, building community  
433 through this act of creating something physical, and the laughter that would’ve come through that,  
434 you know, through the creation of that. And then even, like you said, through your own work on  
435 this, it’s kind of created, you know, some more connections between you and your friends, even.  
436 And you know, maybe in the community. I know we’ve had lots of positive feedback so far, which  
437 is great, for the exhibit. Like you said, really feeling represented in the space and, obviously,  
438 there’s a lot more work to be done still. **00:41:01** You know, by no means the end, but it’s good  
439 to see some progress happening there. Is there anything you’d like to say about the future of artists  
440 in this space? Like, something for artists that are either Punjabi or South Asian or queer artists –  
441 or anyone, really? Is there any kind of thought you have on, you know, where would you like to  
442 see the art field go with respect to these different communities of representation?

443 JN: Yeah. I think about this a lot and, you know, I... As I discover this, like, community of South  
444 Asian artists and, like, the art scene here, I feel like often artists can be used kind of as a token.

445 You know? Like, we need the token brown artist for this or that, or the token queer artist for this  
446 or that. **00:42:05** So, being able to give artists opportunities outside of just those specific spaces.  
447 Right? Like, the artist, for example, that we had paint murals in Punjabi Market, we – we selected  
448 them for a reason and because, you know, their storytelling or their art resonated, but those artists  
449 should be given opportunities elsewhere throughout the city, as well, or throughout the cities. Right?  
450 And throughout metro Vancouver. And not just keep them confined to, “Here, you all stay over  
451 here. We’ll keep these artists over here...” So, being able to have, like, more opportunities for  
452 South Asian artists – I think we still have a long way to go. You know? It does feel great to be  
453 celebrated within the South Asian community. That’s, like, incredible, and to be able to, like, get  
454 feedback from folks. Actually, speaking of feedback, when I was here for the opening, there was  
455 this woman. I can’t remember her name, but you know, we started talking. And she was like, “Oh,  
456 you’re the artist here.” **00:43:04** And I gave her one of my business cards that has, again, like a  
457 brown skinned warrior on it, and then she saw the art here that has brown skin depicted, and she  
458 started welling up and seeing like – because she, she had darker brown skin. And she was like,  
459 “It’s so uplifting to see my brown skin represented here.” Because it’s often... Even within our  
460 culture, it’s like, you know, seen as such a negative, and there are so many skin-lightening lotions  
461 branded in India and all this stuff. So, I think there is a lot of power in, like, celebrating our  
462 community. But yeah, I just want to see like our, our artists, like, thrive, you know, despite where,  
463 where they are kind of thing. Yeah.

464 INTVWR: And are you optimistic? Do you think that is the direction we’re heading?

465 JN: I hope so. Yeah. I think through education, like, there’s so much dialogue lately about, you  
466 know, different issues that come up. **00:44:05** And I think the more we talk about it, the more we  
467 educate each other, the better it will be over time. It’s not like a quick, you know, snap your fingers  
468 and everything’s better, every brown artist has great opportunities – but hopefully. Hopefully, we  
469 get there. Yeah. Yeah.

470 INTVWR: All right. Is there any last thoughts or anything else you want to mention Jag before we  
471 end the interview? We have lots of time, if you’d like. So, anything you want to mention.

472 JN: I think, you know, something – like, just in general about this exhibit, like, being able to come  
473 here with my kids who are two and five and have them... I hope they have a different experience  
474 than I did growing up because it took me so long to get to a place where I am comfortable with  
475 who I am, and I hope they have that sense of belonging in their culture. I mean, they’re, they’re...  
476 My wife and I have – you know, she’s Polish, I’m Indian. So, they’re mixed race. But coming here,  
477 I hope this just feels normal to them. **00:45:05** Right? And I think it does, but for example, my  
478 kids had so much fun with the suitcase over here where you can put the blocks – you know, what  
479 would you bring if you were coming? And you know, the way they’re depicted are, like, Indian  
480 things: Indian shoes or a sari. Yeah, I just hope that they.... You know, it’s not a novel thing for  
481 them. I hope it just is what it is, and that’s why I think a huge part of why I draw brown skin: so  
482 that they’re exposed to it from so much earlier than I was. Right? Yeah. So, I... I think this kind  
483 of stuff is so great for our elders to be able to see, like, the history and what they went through, but  
484 for the new generation coming up, like, having an understanding earlier and not having to, like,

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**Date of Interview: June 5, 2023**

485 hide away parts of ourselves. I think it’s something to be celebrated. So, it’s – it’s an honor to be  
486 part of the exhibit.

487 INTVWR: Awesome. Well, thank you so much for, for saying that. **00:46:02** Yeah, we’ve been  
488 working on this for a while. So, yeah.

489 JN: Yeah. It’s so well done and, like, people that have messaged me saying, “Oh, I came here...”  
490 because, you know, I’ve been promoting it on my social media, and they’re like... It’s in a  
491 relatively small room, but there’s so much to see, and it doesn’t feel like... You know, it doesn’t  
492 feel... It just feels so well done. You know? Like, so, I have been getting great feedback from  
493 folks saying, like, they’re glad they came, and I need to bring my office here. You know, like an  
494 immigration lawyer was like, “I need to have a field trip here with my office and show them about  
495 the history.” And often, like, Burnaby – like you said, Burnaby’s history of South Asians doesn’t  
496 get talked about a lot. Right? So, I think this is amazing that this done.

497 INTVWR: Yeah, it’s great to highlight some of those stories you don’t hear as much, both in terms  
498 of what you’re saying – the Punjabi or South Asian angle, but also the Burnaby side. They kind of  
499 meet together here in this exhibit because you don’t hear too much about Burnaby as its own place  
500 that much because it gets so overshadowed by Vancouver.

501 JN: **00:47:03** Exactly.

502 INTVWR: And similar, you know, in other ways. So, all right. Well, thanks. Thanks for all the  
503 kind words, and thanks so much, Jag Nagra for doing this interview. It’s been a pleasure. I’m really  
504 happy to have done this.

505 JN: Thank you for having me. This has been so fun.

506 INTVWR: All right. Thank you. **0:047:27**