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Anarchism, Mutual Aid, and Self-Organization: From the George Floyd Uprising to India's Farmer Rebellion

Pranav Jeevan P

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India witnessed the rise of two large protest movements in last 2 years which saw millions taking to streets against the oppressive laws passed by the government. These were the Anti-CAA protests against the discriminative Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), and the farmers protests against the 3 pro-corporate farm laws. During the Anti-CAA protests, the loudest voices of dissent have been the women, from housewives to grandmothers, lawyers to students, women across India have been at the forefront of this struggle. This female-driven political awakening has been most jubilantly epitomized by the sit-in protest at Shaheen Bagh, drawing a cross-generational, largely female crowd never seen in India before[1]. Then came the farmer protests, where millions of farmers took to streets to fight the anti-farmer legislation that was passed in the Indian parliament and to highlight the issues of agrarian crisis which has been growing in India for the last few decades. In these protests, there is an unprecedented solidarity being displayed in the daily rallies that draw out thousands of people all over Indian cities. There are no visible leaders calling out to people to protest in one mode or another, yet the country has found a way to speak truth to power[2].

The Shaheen Bagh protest was led mostly by Muslim women, in response to the passage of the discriminative and unconstitutional CAA passed by Parliament of India and the police attack on students of Jamia Millia Islamia University. Protesters agitated not only against the citizenship issues of the CAA, National Register of Citizens (NRC) and National Population Register (NPR), but also against economic crisis, rising inequality, police brutality, unemployment, poverty and for women's safety. The protesters also supported farmer unions, unions opposing the government's anti-labour policies and protested against attacks on academic institutions. The protest started with 10–15 local women, mostly hijab wearing Muslim housewives, but within days drew crowds of up to a hundred thousand, making it one of the longest sit-in protests of this magnitude in modern India. The Shaheen Bagh protest also inspired similar style protests across the country, such as those in Gaya, Kolkata, Prayagraj, Mumbai, Chennai and Bengaluru. The protesters at Shaheen Bagh, since

[1] H. E. Petersen and S. Azizur Rahman, "'Modi is afraid': women take lead in India's citizenship protests," *The Guardian,* 21 January 2020.

[2] N. Badwar, "Speaking truth to power, in Shaheen Bagh and beyond," *Livemint,* 17 January 2020.

What these occupy protests show us is that we can form communities and collectively organize various forms of democratic decision making simultaneously providing everyone their basic needs. There protests show us models of community organizing in large scales comprising hundreds of thousands of people. Even though they are not perfect we can learn the ideas these protests emulate – of solidarity, mutual aid, direct democracy, decentralization of power and try to recreate these in our lives and communities.

Direct democratic decision making, decentralization of power, solidarity, mutual aid and voluntary association are the core principles of anarchist organizing. Anarchists employ direct action, disrupting and protesting against unjust hierarchy, and self-managing their lives through the creation of counter-institutions such as communes and non-hierarchical collectives. Decision-making is handled in an anti-authoritarian way, with everyone having equal say in each decision. They participate in all discussions in order to build a rough consensus among members of the group without the need of a leader or a leading group. Anarchists organize themselves to occupy and reclaim public spaces where art, poetry and music are blended to display the anarchist ideals. Squatting is a way to regain public space from the capitalist market or an authoritarian state and also being an example of direct action. We can find elements of these in all these protests and that is the reason for their robustness and success. It bursts the myth that you need a centralized chain of command with small group of leaders on top who decide the strategies and a very large group of followers who blindly obey those decisions for the sustenance and success of large scale organizing. All these protests were leaderless protests where people themselves decided and came to a consensus on the course of action to be followed in a democratic way. When people decide to take decisions themselves and coordinate with each other in small communities by providing aid to each other, it creates the strongest form of democracy and solidarity.

The fact that these protests happened, with so many people collectively organizing and cooperating, for such a long duration, shows us that we can self-organize and create communities without external institutions and it can be civilized and more democratic than the autocratic bureaucracy and authoritarian governments which concentrate all power and oppress people. These protests were driven by mostly by uneducated women, poor farmers and people from other marginalized communities, who showed that they can create communities which are more moral and egalitarian, than those that exist in hierarchical societies with the affluent and highly educated. They showed that people who are oppressed and underprivileged can organize themselves into communities of mutual aid and direct democracy which eliminates a need for coercive hierarchical systems of governance which exist only to exploit them.

14 December 2019, continued their sit-in protest in New Delhi using non-violent resistance for 101 days until 24 March 2020 when it ended due to COVID-19 pandemic outbreak.

Most of the women who came to Shaheen Bagh protest were first-time protesters, mostly homemakers, who were standing up to the government[3]. This was the first time they came out on a national issue which cut across religious lines. Some came with their newborns and children and some were grandparents. The women were center of protests and men supported them from the sidelines. They were creative and strategic. They governed their worlds quietly from the background and knew when a crisis needed them to cross invisible boundaries and step into the foreground. They emerged into the public space to collectively confront a looming crisis[4]. Armed with thick blankets, warm cups of tea and songs of resistance, these women have braved one of the coldest winters Delhi faced in the last 118 years[5]. These women were drivers of this protest, joining in irrespective of caste and religion, taking turns to sit-in at the site. They broke down the historically prevailing gender binary of patriarchy and took control. They also destroyed the popular imagination claiming Muslim women as powerless and lacking agency.

Shaheen Bagh in many ways typifies the protest movement that erupted across India as it was leaderless. No political party or organization could claim to be leading the protest. Instead, it was fueled primarily by these women who were residents of working-class neighborhoods of Shaheen Bagh. Since it was a leaderless protest, it could not be terminated by a few prominent organizers[6]. When they tried to "called off" the protest citing interference of political parties and security threats, the women of Shaheen Bagh rejected it and decided to continue the protests. The movement had no formal organizers and thrived on a roving group of volunteers and the local women's tenacity alone. The lack of leaders also confused the police who are clueless on whom to approach to make these women vacate the site.

[3] B. Kuchay, "Shaheen Bagh protesters pledge to fight, seek rollback of CAA law," *Al Jazeera,* 15 January 2020.

[4] N. Badwar, "Speaking truth to power, in Shaheen Bagh and beyond," *Livemint,* 17 January 2020.

[5] "Shaheen Bagh: The women occupying Delhi street against citizenship law — 'I don't want to die proving I am Indian'," *BBC,* 4 January 2020.

[6] K. Sarfaraz, "Shaheen Bagh protest organiser calls it off, can't get people to vacate," *The Hindustan Times,* 2 January 2020.

The protesters were supported and coordinated by a diverse group of more than hundred volunteers, including local residents, students and professionals. These volunteers organized themselves around different tasks such as setting up makeshift stages, shelters and bedding; providing food, water, medicine, and access to toilet facilities; installing CCTV cameras, bringing in electric heaters, outside speakers and collecting donations[7]. Donations includes mattresses, an assortment of tables that form the foundation of the stage and endless cups of steaming tea that provide warmth on cold winter days. Local residents formed informal groups which coordinated security, speakers, songs, and cultural programs that happened on these makeshift stages. People distributed tea, snacks, biryani, sweets and other eatables at the protest site. Some donated wood logs to keep the protesters warm. Collection drives for blankets and other essentials were organized through social media. A health camp was also set up beside the camped protesters which provided medicines for them. Doctors and nurses along with medical students from different medical institutes and hospitals voluntarily joined for the purpose[8]. A group of Sikh farmers from Punjab came and set up a langer (free community kitchen) in the area.

The space was decorated with art and installations[9]. Stairways leading to the closed shops in the vicinity of the protest circle were transformed into a public library and art centre by student volunteers from Jamia along with the young children of Shaheen Bagh. Protest art became the voice of resistance and dissent during the event, and the area was covered in murals, graffiti, posters and banners[10]. A reading area called "Read for Revolution" had been set up with hundreds of crowd-sourced books as well as writing materials[11]. A nearby bus stop was converted into the Fatima Sheikh-Savitribai Phule library, which provided material on the country's constitution, revolution,

[7] "The volunteers of Shaheen Bagh," *The Telegraph (Culcutta),* 24 December 2019.

[8] "Behind Shaheen Bagh's Women, An Army of Students, Doctors & Locals," *The Quint,* 14 January 2020.

[9] R. Venkataramakrishnan, "The Art of Resistance: Ringing in the new year with CAA protesters at Delhi's Shaheen Bagh," *Scroll.in,* 6 January 2020.

[10] A. Bakshi, "Portraits of resilience: the new year in Shaheen Bagh," 2 January 2020.

[11] J. Thakur, "Shaheen Bagh Kids and Jamia Students Make Space for Art, Reading and Revolution," *The Citizen,* 11 January 2020.

brutality, others were against religious discrimination and agrarian crisis. The protests were mostly self-organized and without an official leadership. The sites were filled with protest art, paintings, film screenings and musical performances[26]. Just like the mutual aid cooperative in CHAZ, free food, water, snacks and other supplies were provided to everyone. Areas were set up for assemblies and to facilitate discourse[27].

CHAZ was a leaderless zone, where the occupants favored consensus decision-making in the form of a general assembly, with daily meetings and discussion[28]. They slept in tents, cars and surrounding buildings, relying on donations from local store owners and activists. They collected donations for the homeless and created community gardens[29]. Medical stations were established to provide basic health care.

Anarchism tries to create institutions of a new society "within the shell of the old," to expose, subvert, and undermine structures of domination but always, while doing so, proceeding in a democratic fashion, a manner which itself demonstrates those structures are unnecessary[30]. Anarchists observe what people are already doing in their communities, and then tries to tease out the hidden symbolic, moral, or pragmatic logic that underlie their actions and tries to make sense of it in ways that they are not themselves completely aware of. They look at those who are creating viable alternatives, try to figure out what might be the larger implications of what they are already doing, and then offer those ideas back, not as prescriptions, but as contributions[31]. They understand that people are already forming self-organized communities when the state has failed them and we can learn a lot about direct action and mutual aid from these communities.

[26] C. Burns, "The Capitol Hill Autonomous Zone Renames, Expands, and Adds Film Programming," *The Stranger,* 10 June 2020.

[27] H. Allam, "'Remember Who We're Fighting For': The Uneasy Existence Of Seattle's Protest Camp," *NPR,* 18 June 2020.

[28] K. Burns, "Seattle's newly police-free neighborhood, explained," *Vox,* 16 June 2020.

[29] h. Weinberger, "In Seattle's CHAZ, a community garden takes root | Crosscut," *Crosscut,* 15 June 2020.

[30] D. Graeber, Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology, 2004.

[31] D. Graeber, Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology, 2004.

displays biographies of Indian freedom fighter Bhagat Singh, revolutionary Che Guevara, and other books of various genres and newspapers in English, Hindi and Punjabi languages. Dozens of posters with slogans written on them cover every inch of the tarpaulin tents[24]. Farmers also installed CCTV cameras to keep a watch on the protest site and keep a record of what is happening and counter any narrative to discredit their protest. Farmers protest also saw participation of women coming out to protest in large numbers. Women farmers and agricultural workers were riding tractors from their villages and rallying to the protest sites, unfazed by the gruesome winter.

Just like Shaheen Bagh protest, this is a decentralized leaderless protest by hundreds of farmer unions. Even though the negotiations with the government are being attended by representatives of 32 farmer unions, they act as spoke persons who present the collective demand of all farmers. Whenever Government introduces a new proposal, the representatives come back to the unions where they sit together, discuss, debate and decide the future course of action together in a democratic way. Farmers are conducting Kisan Mahapanchayats (public meetings) which are attended by hundreds of thousands of people in villages around Delhi, UP, Punjab, Rajasthan and Haryana to discuss strategies and ways to put pressure on the government. It was this decentralization that made the protest robust and overcome the condemnation around violence during Republic day Truck Rally. Even though many farm union leaders called for ending the protest, the farmers remained steadfast in their decision to not go back till the laws were repelled.

The sites of the two protests mentioned above can be compared to the Capitol Hill Autonomous Zone (CHAZ) that was set up in Capitol Hill neighborhood of Seattle, Washington by Black Lives Matter (BLM) protesters during the aftermath of the murder of George Floyd by Police[25]. CHAZ was a nascent commune, built through mutual aid where no police was allowed and almost everything was free.

CHAZ, Shaheen Bagh and Farmers' protests were occupation protests where the protestors set up a community themselves and created an autonomous zone. If one was against racism and police

[24] B. Kuchay, "A school for the underprivileged at Indian farmers' protest site," *AlJazeera,* 24 January 2021.

[25] D. Silva and M. Moschella, "Seattle protesters set up 'autonomous zone' after police evacuate precinct," *NBC News,* 11 June 2020.

racism, fascism, oppression and various social issues[12]. Public reading spaces were created for the cause of dissent and to amplify the idea of education amongst the protesters of Shaheen Bagh. Since a majority of women of Shaheen Bagh have stepped out of their homes for the first time, this was an attempt to bring these women closer so that they read and facilitate the social change they exemplify. Besides young children, senior citizens, working people, domestic workers and many from Shaheen Bagh and nearby areas were occupying the area, choosing books or picking up colors and chart paper, while some also come to donate their old books and stationery.

□□□□ □□□□□ □□□□ □□, □□□□ □□□□ □□□□□ □□ (Fight To Read, Read To Change)

The children who were present alongside parents also participated in the protest. Most of these children would visit school in the morning before joining their parents at the protest site, which became an art space for many children[13]. They would express their thoughts and join in the protest through storytelling, poetry, puppetry, singing and painting. Student volunteers engaged the local children in reading, painting and singing, and held informal reading lessons.

Speeches, lectures, rap and shayari poetry readings were held every day[14]. Activists, artists and social workers came and gave talks on various issues faced by Muslims, Dalits, Adivasis, the disabled, LGBTQ people, and all those who are oppressed. The stage is democratic and hosts poets and professors, housewives and elders, civil society groups and civic leaders, actors and celebrities and of course students – from Jamia, JNU to the local government schools. A large number of women participate in open-mics to express their thoughts, many speaking in public for the first time. The protestors read the Preamble of the Constitution which reminds them of their rights of Liberty, Equality and Justice. If the Shaheen Bagh stage had a bias, it is towards women and those, from academia and elsewhere, who can educate them not just on CAA-NRC-NPR, but also the freedom struggle, Ambedkar, Gandhi and the ideas that animate the pream-

[12] F. Ameen, "The Library at Shaheen Bagh," *The Telegraph (Culcutta),* 20 January 2020.

[13] A. Purkait, "In Shaheen Bagh, Children Paint Their Protest while Mothers Hold Dharna," *Makers India,* 22 January 2020.

[14] S. Chakrabarti, "Shaheen Bagh Heralds a New Year With Songs of Azaadi," *The Wire,* 31 December 2019.

ble to the constitution[15]. The chants of "inquilab zindabad (long live the revolution!)"and "save the Constitution" filled the site. At night people would watch films and documentaries which were screened on the site, about refugee crisis, anti-fascist struggles and revolution. Musical and cultural events were also conducted in solidarity with anti-CAA protests. This occupy protest provided an example of how to create a community without government support by voluntary association and mutual aid, make decisions in a democratic way where everyone takes part and decentralize power by having no organizers or leaders who control everything. These elements of anarchist organizing is also visible in the farmers' protest.

Small and marginal farmers with less than two hectares of land account for 86.2% of all farmers in India, but own just 47.3% of the crop area. A total of 2,96,438 farmers have committed suicide in India from 1995–2015[16]. 28 people dependent on farming die by suicide in India every day[17]. India is already facing a huge agrarian crisis and the 3 new laws have opened up door for corporatization of agriculture by dismantling the Minimum Support Price (MSP) leaving the farmers at the mercy of the big capitalist businesses.

The farmers protest began with farmers unions holding local protests against the farmer bills mostly in Punjab. After two months of protests, farmers from Punjab and Haryana began a movement named Dilli Chalo (Go to Delhi), in which tens of thousands of farmers marched towards the nation's capital[18]. The Indian government used police to attack the protesters using water cannons, batons, and tear gas to stop them from entering Delhi. On 26 November 2020, the largest general strike in the world with over 250 million people, took place in support of the farmers[19]. A crowd of 200,000 to 300,000 farmers converged at various border points on the way to Delhi. As protest, farmers blocked the highways surrounding Delhi

[15] S. Chakrabarti, "Shaheen Bagh Heralds a New Year With Songs of Azaadi," *The Wire,* 31 December 2019.

[16] P. Sainath, "Maharashtra crosses 60,000 farm suicides," *People's Archive of Rural India (PARI),* 21 July 2014.

[17] R. Sengupta, "Every day, 28 people dependent on farming die by suicide in India," *Down to Earth,* 3 September 2020.

[18] "Dilli Chalo | Farmers' protest enters fifth day," *The Hindu,* 30 November 2020.

[19] S. Joy, "At least 25 crore workers participated in general strike; some states saw complete shutdown: Trade unions," *Deccan Herald,* 26 November 2020.

by sitting on the roads[20]. Transport unions representing 14 million truck drivers also came out in support of the farmers. The farmers have told the Supreme court of India that they won't listen to courts if asked to back off. They organized a tractor rally with over 200,000 tractors on the Republic day and stormed the historic Red Fort[21]. The government barricaded the capital roads with cemented nails and trenches to stop farmers and electricity, Internet, and water supply were cut off from the protest sites.

Scores of langars, i.e. free community kitchens have been set up by farmer's organizations and NGOs to meet the food needs of the hundreds of thousands of farmers in the farmers-camps that have sprung up on the borders of Delhi[22]. The farmers came fully equipped to prepare mass meals in these community kitchens with supplies coming from their villages daily. Tractors and trucks with sacks of vegetables and flour as well as cans of oil and milk arrive daily from villages and towns where pooling resources for community meals is a way of life. These langars work round the clock and provide free food without distinction of caste, class, or religion. Supporters of the farm protest often bring almonds, apples, sweets, and packaged water. They even supplied a machine that rolls out a thousand "rotis" every hour. Social media is used to collect blankets and other essentials for these protests who are braving the harsh winter. Many protestors camp on the roadside in the cold Delhi winter and spending nights curled up in tractor trailers. Volunteers have set up solar-powered mobile charging points, laundry stalls with washing machines, medical stalls for medicines, arranged doctors and nurses, dental camps and brought foot massage chairs for elderly protesters[23].

A makeshift school has been set up at the camp, called "Sanjhi Sathh" (a common place) to recreate a village tradition of holding discussions on important issues. Children from underprivileged families who are unable to attend school due to financial issues and the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic come to this tent. It has library, which

[20] "Farmers' Protest Highlights: Protesting farmers refuse to budge, say 'demands are non-negotiable," *The Indian Express,* 1 December 2020.

[21] G. Bhatia, "Tractors to Delhi," *Reuters,* 29 January 2021.

[22] "Langar Tradition Plays Out in Farmers Protest, Students Use Social Media To Organise Essentials," *India Today,* 2 December 2020.

[23] J. Sinha, "Protest site draws 'Sewa' – medicine stalls, laundry service, temple & library come up," *Indian Express,* 11 December 2020.