

Seeds of Revolution - Cultivating the Spirit of Resilience

The danger does not lie in a 'revolt of the masses'; rather, the danger lies in their 'cynical indifference' and 'complete despair'. (Drucker 1942)

The historic Indian farmers' protests against the three farm acts passed by the Parliament, publicized as reforms, began in August'20, and persisted for more than a year, until the three acts were repealed by the same Parliament in November'21. During this satyagraha (civil resistance), over 750 farmers perished through suicides, harsh winter conditions, and clashes with the state machinery. Touted as one of the largest protests in human history, this victory proved to be a testament to the indomitable resilience of the masses and inspired many others around the world who are fighting for justice, solidarity, and democracy. (Arnau Quinquilla 2022)

As per the movement leaders, the acts were an ostensible reaction to the endemic agrarian crisis (5,000+ annual farmer suicides, avg. debt of 60% of annual income in agricultural households) in India and were hastily passed without the requisite stakeholder consultations by the government, with an apparent objective of liberalizing the Indian agriculture markets. However, most of the farmers felt that these acts will erode the minimum price support structures, and pave the way for severe exploitation of farmers, esp. small holding farmers (<2 hectares area), accounting for 85% of all farms in India.

Had Drucker witnessed the farmer protests of 2020-21, he definitely would have identified a concerning pattern – 'A nod and wink from a man who rode into the nation's highest office by playing on "the despair of the masses" (150 Mil. + Indian farmers); by promising them "a miracle which belies the evidence of one's reason" (increasing their households' income and ending vicious cycles of debt traps); and by creating "demonic enemies" for them to rail against (the middlemen in the existing Agri marketplaces). Each of these quotations is from his book – 'The End of the Economic Man'. (Wartzman 2017)

A significant aspect of the resistance was the active participation across age groups, genders, castes, and religions. I often found myself wondering what gave 70–80-year-olds, as well as young children the strength and the will to persevere day after day, night after night in the bitterly cold months of Northern India with temperatures dipping near-zero degree Celsius (50,000 + farmers protested 24 X 7 for more than a year at the Delhi-Punjab border while rallying for their causes and engaging with the government across multiple forums). The protesting farmers held their ground in the face of threats, intimidation, mockery & severe material discomforts. To me, this is one of the most telling paradigms of resilience.

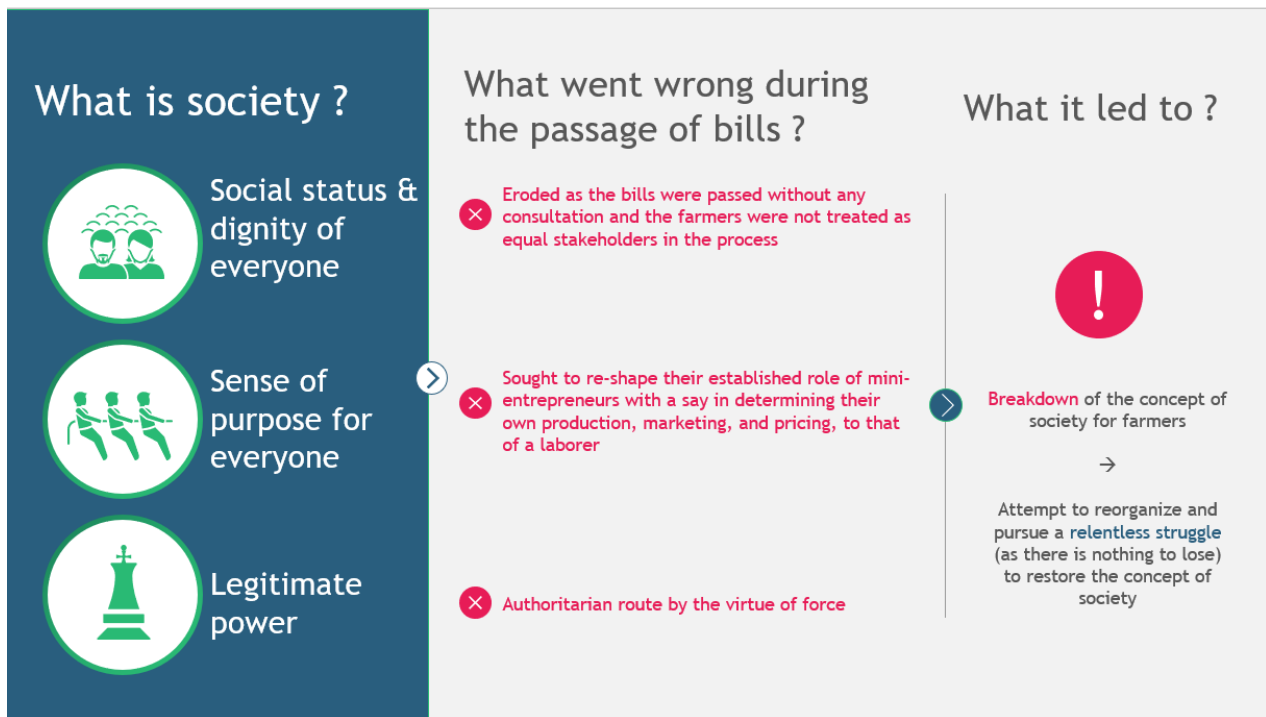
In this essay, I have attempted to examine this 'resilience' using the lens of Drucker's teachings and my personal experience of participating in the movement as a volunteer to teach at the make-shift schools organized for the protestors' children.

In the 1930s, a young Drucker had written two monographs – one on the conservative Jewish-born political philosopher named Friedrich Julius Stahl, and the other called 'The Jewish Question in Germany'. Both were banned and burned by the Nazis. To me, this forms an important backdrop and a genesis of his subsequent body of work. His two early works - 'The End of Economic Man: The Origins of Totalitarianism' (1939), and 'The Future of Industrial Man' (1942) revolve around his (very sound) social theory and provide a logical groundwork for his later seminal works such as the 'Concept of the Corporation'.

In the book – 'The Future of Industrial Man', Drucker outlines three essential conditions for a functioning society – each individual member of the society must have:

- (a) social status & dignity
- (b) function, and
- (c) a legitimate decisive social power governing the individuals

The passage of the three farm laws was an attack on all three of these fundamental frontiers. When the bills were passed in isolation by the Parliament without any consultation (leave alone a common agreement/consensus) with the farmer bodies, it symbolized an erosion of the collective dignity of farmers. The content of the bills – primarily providing an easier framework for contract farming and withdrawing price guarantees, attempted to belittle their agency and role as an independent participant in the agriculture market (transforming to that of a worker on a contract farm run by a large corporate). Finally, enactment of these bills was done by the absolute authority of the legislature, and not deriving its claim from the basic beliefs of the individuals (i.e., these acts are actually in their best interest). This led to an absolute breakdown of the concept of society for the farmers, and it became ‘A demoniac, irrational, incomprehensible threat’ (Drucker 1942) for them. As ‘social outcasts’, these masses had ‘nothing to lose – not even their chains’. This construct of society very aptly begins to explain the success and persistence of the farmers’ movement. In the absence of these core aspects of society, the masses (farmers) had a relatively straightforward decision to make – attempt to reintegrate into society through a relentless struggle of ensuring dignity and purpose or remain a social outcast with nothing to lose. In fact, Drucker goes on to say that such amorphous masses must be organized unless they can be reintegrated into a functioning society. Surely enough, the farmers organized themselves into a targeted resistance effort until the acts were repealed (and consequently the concept of society was restored). This can also be understood in terms of three simple questions – what is society, what went wrong (during the passage of the three bills), and what it led to?



Hence, to me, one of the most defining elements of resilience is the sense of a shared purpose in the organisation. This has held across generations, and contexts – from freedom struggles against colonial powers to environmental movements in more recent times.

The sense of purpose and status felt by the protestors is akin to the fuel which is required to sustain the resilience efforts. However, the key enablers of efficiency are vital to achieving the success of the efforts.

As per a Boston Consulting Group study, a successful resilience approach has five key defining traits which separates it from traditional risk management.

Resilience approach differs from traditional risk management in five key ways

Elements of traditional risk management...

- 1 **Fixed mindset:** Assumes that disruptions are temporary and can be fully resolved in linear timeline
- 2 **Focused on causes:** Siloed treatment of existing evidence base to understand likelihood/ impact of discrete scenarios
- 3 **Planned in advance:** Quarterly review cycles to assess changing landscape, crisis mgmt. activated upon event
- 4 **Centralized decision making:** Top-down governance with internal feedback loops to manage identified risks
- 5 **Tension with core business:** Investments to mitigate risk perceived to be high cost, with intangible benefits that can only be measured if disaster strikes

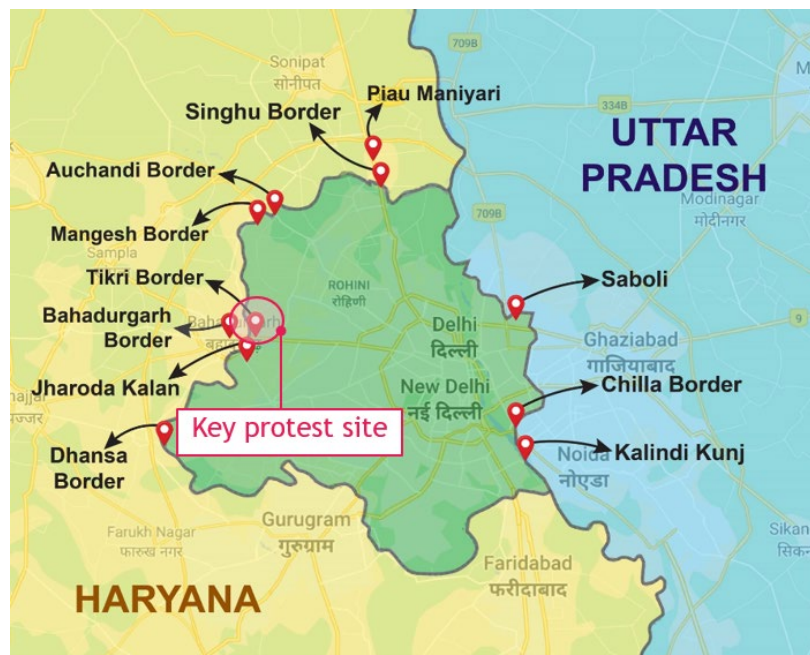
...differ in a resilience building approach

- **"Always on" crisis mindset:** Disruptions are a learning opportunity to adapt to the new reality
- **Focused on effects:** Holistic assessment of "what ifs" related to disruptions in ability to make and deliver given products, regardless of cause
- **Continuous detection:** Early disruption warning systems, incl. decision support, to take rapid and proactive actions
- **Distributed autonomy:** Simplified decision-making guidance in broadly applicable contingency plans
- **Growth enabler:** Investment in resilience seen as a competitive advantage that unlocks both top-line and bottom-line performance

Source: (Mai-Brett Poulsen 2023)

What really strikes me is that the farmers' protests imbibed and internalized all five of these traits despite having no formal training and largely working on their farms.

The main protest site was the Tikri border on the outskirts of Delhi. Every day there was news of a certain new inventiveness from the protestors to sustain the momentum. Many of the protesting farmers arrived in tractor trolleys which doubled up as night shelters. These trolleys were equipped with inverters, ACs, beds, mattresses & charging points. 'It's like they wanted the administration to know that they are in for the long haul.' (Sharma 2020). Some tractors even doubled as screens for film screening.



Tikri Border on the Delhi-Haryana map (Times 2021)

Additionally, there were large provisional kitchens to feed everyone at the protesting sites (including the police force, a gesture which drew global appreciation). There were adequate arrangements done for the provision of free sanitary pads for the protesting women. There were make-shift schools to minimize disruption in the lives of the protestors' children. Hence, the protests became an enduring symbol of inclusivity & sensitivity.

These endeavours were an outcome of an 'always on' crisis mindset. The farmers were facing a new reality away from their fields, engaging with a variety of stakeholders from the media to the police force to the government. They ensured that they were prepared for all challenges and often pre-empted many of these, thereby exhibiting an exceptional level of adaptability to this new reality.

The movement was always laser sharp in its objective – a reversal of the tabled farm laws and minimum price guarantees. This clarity and resolve were evident in their engagements with the government stakeholders and their comprehensive assessment of various proposed alternatives. For every alternative suggested by the government, the PR team of the protestors returned to the public forums (with exceptional nimbleness) with a very nuanced and holistic assessment of any option, covering the entire spectrum of the stakeholders and the impact on them – from labourers to small-scale farmers, to large-scale farmers to even fertilizer distributors! Hence, the movement clearly focused on effects and not causes, which reflected in their engagements with everyone.

Beyond a point, it's impossible to plan a resistance effort of this scale. Every day, different factions of society came forward to join the movement. This proved to be both a source of strength and an avenue of concern for the protests. The latter was because the farmers had to ensure that the protests are not hijacked by any particular agenda or motive (opposition political parties, social groups with a political agenda, Khalistan extremists & separatists, etc.) while also ensuring the inclusive fabric of the protests. This involved taking a lot of impromptu and proactive decisions to ensure the sanctity of the movement and the safety of the protestors. Hence, the farmers ran the protests on a 'continuous detection' mode while upholding their guiding principles.

'A decentralized, leader-full movement is resilient against an authoritarian regime', says Johnson Yeung, a human rights activist from Hong Kong, who participated in the 2019 protests to mark the fifth anniversary of the Umbrella Movement. The Indian farmers adopted this leaderless (or leader-full) style as well to make it impossible for the authorities to go after any single persona and destabilise the resistance efforts. The leaders of the 31 protesting unions avoided the formation of a monolithic power entity and instead took turns engaging with the government, irrespective of the size of the union. This ensured the survival of the movement despite some arrests, as everyone had ownership of the same. This aspect of the protests perfectly aligns with the fourth trait of a resilient approach of distributed autonomy vs. having centralised decision-making. (Sharma 2020)

The protestors had no doubts about participating in the movement. This is evident from the large numbers the movement was able to mobilize and the persistence of the protestors. As discussed earlier, a key driver of this was the erosion of a shared purpose and disintegration from society. Fundamentally, the farmers were convinced of this 'investment' in the protests to secure a better future for themselves even if it came at the cost of lost earnings from the missed harvest seasons. This belief closely mirrors the 'growth enabler' mindset of a resilient approach, as opposed to traditional risk management, under which such an endeavour would have been perceived as a colossal waste of time and effort.

Upon dissecting the farmers' movement along the above-mentioned five traits, I find that the protests exhibited all the characteristics of a resilient approach along with an innate sense of purpose. While there is overwhelming research-based evidence to further fortify all the things which the farmers got right, I would like to share my personal experience with the movement. Getting personally involved with this cause enabled me to appreciate some of the above-mentioned aspects at a much deeper level and witness the spirit of farmers' resilience much more closely.

As time passed, the protest strengthened and the Tikri border witnessed the emergence of hundreds of tents along the highway, despite the freezing cold. It was in one of those tents that a

makeshift school was started for underprivileged children, not only for the protestors' children but also for the kids from the nearby slums. (Kuchay 2021)

This 'makeshift school' started by setting up a library which was shelved with biographies of Indian freedom fighters, Che Guevara, and other literature in English, Hindi & Urdu. Eventually, this evolved into a space called '*Sanjhi Sathh*' (meaning – a commonplace), functioning as a school offering classes in English, Hindi, mathematics, & even painting. I had the privilege to be a teacher in this school during the protest period. I was responsible for a group of 20 students (few from nearby slums but mostly wards of the protestors). At the end of each day throughout this duration, I felt a great deal of combined angst, humility, and self-satisfaction. My days began with ensuring that all the 20 kids under my 'tutelage' were reporting to the centre and coordinating with their parents in case of any absenteeism.

While looking at the movement of this scale, it is often usual to lose sight and empathy for each of the individual participants of the protest. While the movement was making news around the world and was becoming an unstoppable force, the protestors on an individual level were undergoing an arduous phase filled with hardships. It was not uncommon to see many farmers experience absolute despair from time to time. They had left parts of their families & farms behind to hustle on the streets. This often manifested in many ways, including an unwillingness to send their kids to makeshift schools and questioning the meaning and existence of everything – from the resistance efforts to the utility of formal education for their kids.

We have talked about the resilience of the movement in general, from a collective lens; however, each family and each 'soldier' on the ground displayed an unfathomable spirit of resilience concerning their circumstance and hardships. Talking to the parents of these children gave me extraordinary insights into their lives. Many were dealing with a situation of dire poverty. Most elders had never enjoyed any access to formal education, primarily due to a lack of proper education facilities, but also because there were much bigger things to worry about, like preventing starvation. It was imperative to keep emphasizing the need for proper education for their children. In a way, the anti-farmer laws and the protests became an important and effective backdrop for a better articulation of my argument. I was able to appeal to these protestor parents about how critical it is to be well-read and well-informed to ensure that we are not exploited by anyone.

As discussed above, one of the key traits of a resilient approach is an 'always-on' mindset with the capability to adapt to a new reality. Due to a tumultuous childhood amidst conditions of abject poverty, these parents, who had never appreciated the importance of formal education, chose to listen, be receptive, understand and adapt to a very contrarian viewpoint. This showed a very high level of maturity and resilience. Eventually, they became the biggest cheerleaders of *Sanjhi Sathh* and proactively started sending their wards to school and started taking an interest in their course and 'homework'. I felt too overjoyed and humble as I witnessed this transformation.

I had never taught schoolchildren, and this was a very new experience for me. I remember crying on my first day after returning from the protest side – for I feared how badly I would fail everyone after convincing them of the merits of education. However, I drew inspiration from the movement itself and determined to be resolute. I extensively researched teaching techniques for younger children and started employing them – e.g., taking time to know each pupil separately and linking the class lessons to their points of interest as much as possible, positive reinforcement, liberal use of media from large banners to film screenings, etc. Eventually, I started seeing results – both in terms of students' enthusiasm in attending classes, their happiness levels, and even on learning-based tangible outcome metrics such as 'test' performances (I used to conduct small tests with no pass/fail or marking scheme but solely for my assessment of their learning grasp). It wasn't easy and I had numerous moments of self-doubt. On many occasions, I had a very strong urge to quit and resume my normal job (from which I had taken a long leave to pursue these efforts at the protest site). On such occasions, the movement became my source of strength, as I used to reflect on Douglas MacArthur's famous words – 'People grow old only by deserting their ideals. Years may wrinkle the skin, but to give up interest wrinkles the soul'.

Eventually, the number grew to ~170 students! We had a higher number of volunteers joining us, higher attendance rates, and a higher number of classes. I recall the mother of one of the wards coming up to me once and expressing her gratitude. Back in the village, she always wanted her daughter to study and become a doctor but faced an uphill battle against established dogmas in

the family. However, at the protest site, this was an unintended welcome change, and now even the child's father was overjoyed at seeing his daughter in a 'school'. I was fortunate enough to witness umpteen such incidents. Towards the end of the movement, I remember one of the union leaders coming up to me and saying – 'While we have achieved what we set to achieve, you have accomplished something no less. Thank you for taking care of our kids and taking a step towards building a future cadre of leaders to stand up to any oppression'. I have never felt more accomplished in life than I did at that moment.

The success of the farmers' protests was not by chance, it was a matter of choice; it wasn't waited for, it was achieved (based on a quote by William Jennings).

The movement had an unshakeable foundation of a rock-solid sense of purpose. It had the right elements of a resilient approach – from an 'always on mindset', to an outcome-based focus, to a distributed leadership style. Last, but not the least, it had the insurmountable collective zeal to continue persevering while possessing an inordinate amount of empathy and love. This was apparent during my interaction with the protestors and their families as well as in many other instances – such as setting up lunch tents for the police force stationed to restrain them. The movement thus became an enduring symbol of human strength, resilience, and love, all at once, and maybe this was one of its biggest successes!

Words: 2,995 words (Excluding references & title)

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