

Temporality in tent cities: Pathways to use tents as Environmentally Resilient Tent Zones (ERTZs)

Abstract

This paper provides an interdisciplinary examination of tents as transitional dwellings, focusing on their role in the 2021 Indian farmers' protests and situating them within broader socio-anthropological and architectural contexts. Tracing the evolution of tents from nomadic shelters to tools of urban resistance, the study critiques dominant definitions, emphasizing temporality and adaptability of tents as more than mere symbols of mobility.

Through a literature review that includes global and regional perspectives towards definition of tent(s), and a focused analysis using Tim Ingold's dwelling ontology, the work challenges static understandings and situates tent-living as an active phase of habitation shaped by environmental, social, and material negotiations.

Employing secondary sources and grounded theory, the case study demonstrates how tents mediate protest life—bridging the gap between wayfaring and settlement, enabling collective organization, and transforming environmental adversity into sites of resilience and community.

The concept of Environmentally Resilient Tent Zones (ERTZs) is advanced to articulate the need for sustainable, adaptable shelters in fragile urban and ecological landscapes. Findings highlight tents as active agents in building protest ecologies, contesting regulatory and environmental boundaries, and enabling new rhythms of living through iterative human-environment interaction.

This research redefines tents not only as temporary solutions but as dynamic modes of world-making, calling for a reorientation in how urban transitions and resistance dwellings are theorized in anthropology and architecture.

Introduction

Tents have been an essential part of human life for centuries, serving as portable shelters that adapt to a variety of climates and lifestyles. Their significance spans cultures, geographies, and historical periods, highlighting both practical and symbolic roles in human societies.

Traditional Uses of Tents

Traditionally, tents were primarily used as temporary shelters by nomadic communities, pastoralists, and military forces. In regions such as Central Asia, the Middle East, and parts of Africa, tents provided protection from harsh weather conditions while allowing mobility for seasonal migration. They also played ceremonial and social roles, serving as spaces for gatherings, trade, and cultural rituals. Materials for traditional tents often included animal hides, wool, or woven fabrics, designed to balance durability with portability.

Contemporary Uses

In contemporary society, tents have evolved far beyond their traditional functions. They are widely used for recreational purposes such as camping and festivals, providing leisure and adventure experiences. Modern tents are also employed in humanitarian contexts, offering emergency shelter for disaster-stricken populations. Innovations in materials and design, including lightweight synthetic fabrics and collapsible frames, have expanded their accessibility and versatility. Additionally, tents continue to have cultural and ceremonial significance in events, exhibitions, and temporary marketplaces.

Review of literature

As we commence with analysing the existing literature that attempts to define what a tent is and what it becomes across geographies and temporalities, it becomes clear that the tent is not a mere physical shelter, but a conceptual vessel — an idea of impermanence suspended between movement and rest. From the earliest anthropological records to recent architectural interpretations, the tent has been understood less as an object and more as a moment: a dwelling that gestures towards a city yet refuses to settle into one.

In historical and cultural studies, the tent has often been situated as the most elementary form of human settlement — a point of beginning before the idea of permanence took hold. But as soon as fixed materials such as tin, brick, or mortar enter this provisional landscape, the structure begins to lose its tent-ness. A tent ceases to be one the moment it acquires rudimentary permanence (Ahuja, 2024). This distinction opens the first fissure in the discourse: whether a tent can exist as a tent if it evolves to endure. In other words, how much permanence can a tent withstand before it stops being itself?

Moving from this historical observation to a structural understanding, some scholars reorient the discussion towards the very principle that enables the tent to stand — *tension*. Tracing the etymology of the word to the Latin *tendere*, meaning "to stretch" or "to extend," she identifies tension not merely as a mechanical force but as the essence of the tent's existence. The tent stretches against the world: its skin taut yet light, its ropes responsive to wind, its poles compressing just enough to hold up a sky of fabric (Giller, 2011). This is not simply a shelter but an articulation of balance, of responsiveness. Jennifer's attention to mobility and lightness transforms the tent into a model of adaptability — an architecture that moves when life demands movement, that folds back into itself without leaving ruins behind.

A more contemporary and socio-political understanding is offered by Evans, who writes of the tent encampments in Toronto — makeshift settlements of the unhoused that appear and disappear with seasons and crises. Here, the tent becomes an index of social precarity, a recurring urban condition rather than an anomaly. It is not a remnant of nomadic pasts but an active commentary on the failures of the modern city to house its citizens. Evans' reading pushes the discourse away from the desert and towards the city, where the tent's temporariness is not chosen but imposed.

In architectural discourse, sources such as *ArchDaily* have observed how tents exist simultaneously at the extremes of luxury and scarcity. They appear at both ends of human need: the refugee camp and the glamping resort. The same fabric that once signified survival has been reimagined as a symbol of aesthetic minimalism and wealth. This dual identity of

the tent — as both emergency shelter and curated experience — expands its meaning beyond a technical form into a social metaphor. The tent shelters, but it also performs; it adapts, but it also communicates a way of life.

Arthur Hamelers, from the Faculty of Architecture and the Built Environment at Delft, offers a structural criterion that refines this conceptual ambiguity. He defines the tent as a membrane-based construction in which the fabric itself is both the covering and the load-bearing system. This duality — where the sheltering element and the structural element are one — distinguishes the tent from other lightweight forms (Hamelers, 2023). The tent, in this view, is not supported by structure; it *is* structure. Such an understanding returns the discussion to material ontology, yet it continues to evoke the earlier questions of transience and form, showing how the tent's physical properties sustain its philosophical weight.

Regional and cultural analyses, particularly those emerging from the Gulf and Central Asian contexts, extend this understanding further. *Globalization and Urban Transformation of Nomadic Societies: The Case of the Bedouin Tent in Qatar* (Al-Mansoori & Al-Mansoori, 2023) situates the tent as a living continuity between desert mobility and urban aspiration. The Bedouin tent, once a practical solution to climatic and ecological constraints, now reappears as a symbol of heritage within globalized architectures — from the household courtyard to the monumental Al Bayt Stadium. What remains constant is its temporality, not in the literal sense of being disassembled, but in its consciousness of movement. The tent retains the memory of being transportable even when anchored by concrete. Its identity thus transcends the material, persisting as a cultural rhythm of relocation and return.

In Turkish scholarship, particularly in H. Aksoy's *Overview of the Cosmological Aspect of the Turkish Tent* (2018), the tent is interpreted through a cosmological lens. The dome becomes the sky, the central pole a world axis, and the opening at the top a passage between the earthly and the divine. This interpretation does not merely aestheticize the tent but situates it within a metaphysical framework, where the act of dwelling becomes sacred. The tent mirrors the universe — flexible, cyclical, and impermanent. Its architecture encodes both social hierarchies and cosmological order: the hearth as the spiritual centre, the periphery as a gradation of kinship and gendered space. Aksoy's reading expands the discussion beyond functionality, introducing a temporality that is not only seasonal but cosmic — one that links human mobility with celestial continuity.

Piette's ethnographic work, *From a Tent to a House, from Nomads to Settlers* (2016), reinterprets the tent within the context of Slovenian Roma communities. Here, the tent is not a romantic artifact but a trace of displacement and adaptation. It represents a provisional life, suspended between memory and settlement. Even when replaced by permanent housing, the tent continues to haunt the imagination — a structure that once allowed freedom but now survives as nostalgia. Through this lens, the tent becomes a mnemonic device, carrying the stories of movement into stationary lives. The act of folding and unfolding the tent parallels the ways memory itself is folded — temporary yet recurrent, mobile yet embedded in place.

Architectural theory has long sought to understand the tent's refusal to be fixed, and in this vein, *Nomadology in Architecture* (Cowan, GJ, 2002) becomes a significant intervention. Drawing from Deleuze and Guattari, Wensing approaches the tent as an embodiment of the nomadic condition — ephemeral, fluid, and resistant to the hierarchies that stone-built architecture sustains. The tent is not merely an object of design but a mode of thinking: it represents movement as method, impermanence as principle. Its construction, often collective

and rhythmic, situates architecture within lived temporality rather than monumental permanence. Through this perspective, the tent becomes a critique of the static — a spatial philosophy that privileges motion, adaptation, and relationality over possession and control.

On careful examination, one finds that the literature on tents, despite its range and historical depth, circles repeatedly around a narrow set of ideas. The terms that recur — *temporality*, *mobility*, *ease of assembly and disassembly*, *relation to environment*, and *adaptation through material culture* — appear so frequently that they have hardened into unquestioned keywords rather than analytical tools. Almost every scholar, whether approaching the tent through architectural, anthropological, or sociological frames, remains content with these familiar coordinates. The tent becomes a shorthand for the temporary, the mobile, and the adaptable — ideas that, while not inaccurate, have now begun to constrain the discourse rather than extend it.

The overuse of these terms points to a deeper limitation. Temporality, for instance, has been invoked to describe both seasonal movement and social precarity, yet few works interrogate *what kind of time* a tent actually inhabits — whether cyclical, suspended, or contingent. Similarly, ease of construction and dismantling is cited as evidence of lightness and flexibility, but not as a commentary on how temporality interacts with place, weather, or material decay. Even when relationality to the environment is acknowledged, it is often reduced to a descriptive geography — sand, snow, or grass — without recognizing how such environments actively participate in shaping the very phase of dwelling that the tent represents.

Consequently, the tent remains treated as a static symbol of the transient — a paradox that undermines the complexity of its lived and material temporality. The makeshift dimension is mentioned, but seldom examined as a phase within the continuum of dwelling. The shanty, on the other hand, is dismissed as poverty's residue rather than studied as a bordering condition that tests the limits of tent-ness. Across these writings, temporality operates as a label rather than a relational process; environment is a backdrop rather than a co-actor.

It is this repetition, this uncritical re-inscription of keywords, that necessitates a newer definition — one that does not merely restate mobility and impermanence, but situates the tent as a *phase of dwelling*, not merely a type of shelter.

Thus, for the subsequent parts of this paper, the tent is defined as follows:

A tent is a temporal dwelling — or a makeshift living — that can be easily mounted and dismantled, yet whose structural phase may shift depending on how the environment interacts with it.

Within this definition, there are specific details which are crucial for our analysis. Tents include those for protests, evolving into permanent fixtures, but does not include shanty tents, tents meant for leisure, luxury, tribal/ indigenous living. One might question the exclusion of certain tents. However, the justification is simple: the tents to be studied embody temporality, and tents being a phase of living at the protest site.

This recently discovered empirical finding contradicts what literature has found out or believed previously. However, an empirical finding may be ungrounded if not founded by a supporting theory.

Case study literature review

In the contemporary era marked by wars, refugee crisis, law conflicting with the rights of people, tents have re-emerged in their function. In Jordan and Gaza particularly, there has been a fourfold increase in number of tent settlements/ cities. These tents have been studied in detail with similar situations in the past. Interestingly the people-legal conflicts have led to protests of varied time and space, famously the Iran protests and Indian. The tent context of the Iran protests has been studied, but not Indian protests. Indian protest, here, as we carve a niche would be The, farmers protest on the Delhi-Haryana border 2021. Undoubtedly there have been numerous studies on this, we preach to study the understudied side.

A seminal study analyzed the entire protest, the tent arrangements, facilities like schools, langars. Tents here were not exemplified, but made into symbols of resilience, but in the authors view tools to fight against the 3 controversial agricultural laws. However, it was a study on political discourse on the farmer's organizational skills and romanticization of peaceful protest against laws. However, it fails to give out the context of the protest and social networks surrounding it. The pitfalls of this study get cured in a socio-political theory on Bhartiya Kisan Union (BKU) through the years though initially Congress party but mysteriously non-partisan. The rise and fall of the farmer's union is addressed beyond the political ties (Kumar, 2022). Through the study religious activism, caste-class divides are claimed to be counter forces to liberalization. However, the links are not connected in a plausible fashion. Regarding tents, only one instance of their usage is enumerated, but not all usages of tents besides the 2021 farmer's protest. At this point, the political dimensions of the farmers have been explored but not their, interaction with tents as legitimate living.

Building upon these political readings of the farmers' protest, Ronki Ram (2021) departs from the abstracted frameworks of policy and party politics, and instead situates the movement within a *historical continuum of agrarian resistance*. His work reconstructs the protest through layered temporalities — from colonial Punjab's canal colonies and the 1907 *Pagri Sambhal Jatta* movement to the Delhi border protests of 2020–21. The study thus addresses the missing socio-historical depth absent in earlier accounts, showing that tents and temporary settlements at Singhu, Tikri, and Ghazipur are not spontaneous improvisations but *extensions of an inherited grammar of resistance*.

Ram's narrative reframes the farmers' encampments not merely as shelters or logistical infrastructures but as *performative spaces of collective memory*. The langar tents, community schools, and women-led organizing units at protest sites evoke pre-independence forms of moral community forged during the *Nili Bar Morcha* or *Anti-Bandobast* struggles. By tracing such continuities, the study redefines tented spaces as *mobile institutions* — simultaneously domestic, political, and pedagogical — where the everyday life of dissent is maintained. The earlier readings that romanticized the "peaceful protest" are here replaced by an understanding of *peace as strategy*, derived from Sikh agrarian ethics and a long tradition of disciplined collective action.

Importantly, the analysis goes beyond visual tropes of unity to expose the internal contradictions of agrarian society — caste, gender, and class hierarchies that the protest momentarily reconfigures but cannot entirely dissolve. While women's participation and the openness of langar kitchens symbolize egalitarian ideals, Ram shows how such practices are

also tactical, aimed at constructing legitimacy in the public sphere and countering the state's portrayal of protesters as sectarian or violent. Thus, the tent city becomes a *counter-public*, where social difference is temporarily suspended in favour of moral-political solidarity.

However, the study remains largely descriptive in its treatment of material culture. Tents appear as metaphors for endurance and fraternity, yet their spatial logic — how they structure living, governance, and kinship within the protest — is not fully theorized. Still, by embedding the protest within the *longue durée* of Punjab's agrarian history, Ronki Ram effectively *repairs the missing context* noted in prior political accounts, revealing how the protest's architecture and organization draw legitimacy from inherited repertoires of collective dwelling. In this sense, his work bridges the gap between the *symbolic tent* as resistance and the *social tent* as lived dwelling, where the political, religious, and material converge in a single field of struggle.

However, the three scholarships do not give a socio-anthropology commentary on “tenting as a phase” but give a bird's eye view of the farmer struggles.

In this study, the main challenge was theory sampling and zeroing to one overarching theory. Among the theory sample, three streams emerged – developmental theory, practice theory, assemblage theory, the dwelling perspective, and nomad-ology. While the aforementioned theoretical currents—developmental, practice, assemblage, and nomadological—each illuminate fragments of the tenting phenomenon, they remain limited in accounting for the *ontological texture* of dwelling itself. **Developmental theory**, emerging from ecological psychology, privileges adaptation and perceptual growth but underplays how humans *inhabit meaning* through material continuity (Morgan, 1877; Tylor, 1871). **Practice theory** captures the sedimentation of social life in routine gestures, yet its structuralism obscures the improvisatory, processual quality of temporary inhabitation (Bourdieu, 1977).

Against these partial lenses, the **dwelling perspective**, articulated by Ingold (1995, 2000) through a critical return to Heidegger's *Building Dwelling Thinking* (1951), offers a more integrative ontology. Heidegger's insight that dwelling precedes building—that to build is first to dwell—redirects attention from architecture as object to *being-in-the-world* as an existential condition. Ingold extends this by replacing the static image of constructed form with the *processual line of life*, where the environment and inhabitant co-constitute one another in ongoing movement.

Under this lens, *tenting* emerges not as a derivative or deficient form of housing but as a **phase of dwelling**, where impermanence itself becomes the mode of emplacement. Within the farmers' protest, the tent encapsulates a living anthropology: it is simultaneously a shelter, an assembly, and a moral space where governance, kinship, and resistance intertwine. Each act of pitching, repairing, and sharing the tent materializes what Heidegger termed the “fourfold”—earth, sky, mortals, and divinities—as the ecological, political, and spiritual converge.

Thus, unlike developmental or assemblage accounts that treat the tent as a system or symbol, the dwelling perspective apprehends it as *dwelling-in-time*—a contingent yet profound articulation of being at home in struggle. Adopting this framework allows the present study to move beyond representational or political readings toward a **socio-anthropological theory of tenting as a lived, rhythmic, and relational phase of dwelling**.

Methodology + Rationale

Research Design

This study employs a **qualitative and exploratory research design** grounded in a **socio-anthropological framework**. The focus lies on understanding *tents as a living phase*—a temporary yet socially and materially significant form of habitation—through the lens of **Tim Ingold's dwelling perspective**. The study does not aim to explain *why* the farmers' protests occurred or *why* tents appeared, but rather to explore **how tents functioned as dynamic sites of dwelling, interaction, and survival**.

The exploratory design was chosen as the researcher did not conduct primary fieldwork, interviews, or observations. Instead, the analysis relies on **secondary sources** such as published ethnographies, journalistic documentation, visual records, and academic discussions surrounding the farmers' protest, material culture, and environmental dwelling.

Research Inspiration

The methodological design draws inspiration from **Amita Baviskar's (1997) *In the Belly of the River: Tribal Conflicts over Development in the Narmada Valley***, a socio-anthropological case study that integrates ethnography and historical analysis to understand displacement and resistance. Similar to Baviskar's approach, this study situates the **tent city** as a site where human experience, environmental negotiation, and political structures intersect, forming a distinctive mode of dwelling within collective mobilization.

Analytical Framework

The research applies **Tim Ingold's dwelling perspective** as its theoretical foundation. Ingold's framework enables the interpretation of tents not as static shelters but as **temporal and relational spaces** where living, building, and being are intertwined. This approach illuminates the spatial and social processes through which protestors transformed transient materials—canvas, rope, and bamboo—into spaces of community, governance, and resistance.

The theoretical framework was applied through **grounded theory-inspired coding and interpretation**. Recurring motifs such as temporality, mobility, kinship, and environmental interaction were identified across the data and conceptually mapped to Ingold's notions of dwelling, landscape, and temporality.

Reasoning Approach

The reasoning process was **both inductive and deductive**. It was inductive in identifying emergent patterns within the protest narratives and spatial arrangements, and deductive in aligning these observations with Ingold's dwelling theory. The **case study**—farmers' tent

settlements at the protest sites—was identified first, followed by the **application of theory**, allowing for a dialogic relationship between concept and context.

Rationale

A socio-anthropological and qualitative approach was most suited for this study because it privileges **depth of understanding over quantification**, and examines how **humans relate to their environment through forms of habitation**. Tents are understood here as *phases of transition*—bridging the mobility of the tractor-trolley and the permanence of the concrete house. This approach allows exploration of **how people reconstitute everyday life and ecological connection within temporary spaces of resistance**.

Structure of the Paper

The paper is organized into four major sections:

1. **Introduction** – Enumerates the **traditional uses of tents**, tracing their cultural, historical, and environmental significance across contexts. It situates the tent within broader anthropological understandings of mobility and settlement.
2. **Review of Literature** – Divided into three subsections:
 - (a) Conceptual definitions and evolving meanings of the tent;
 - (b) Theoretical foundations, focusing on Tim Ingold’s dwelling perspective and related works;
 - (c) Discussion of existing case studies relevant to protest spaces, mobility, and habitation.
3. **Analysis and Discussion** – Explores the **advantages and disadvantages of tents** in the context of protest dwelling, and conceptualizes the **tent as an intermediary phase** between the tractor-trolley (as makeshift mobility) and the development of permanent concrete structures. This section operationalizes Ingold’s key theoretical clauses—**interaction with nature, dwelling, and living**—to interpret the empirical material.
4. **Objectives and Implications** – The study pursues two central objectives:
 - To explore **tents as a transitional phase of dwelling** situated between movement and permanence.
 - To offer **recommendations for environmentally resilient tent zones**, particularly applicable to **disaster-prone and environmentally fragile regions**, where temporary yet sustainable forms of habitation may be necessary.

Analysis

(Dis)advantages of tents

One major advantage of tents over conventional glass or solid structures is their ability to span large distances without requiring rigid supports, a feature particularly notable in fabric tents (Kamal, 2020). They can be made ultralight, making them suitable for temporary habitation for any period of time. Additionally, tents are remarkably easy to assemble and dismantle, requiring minimal expertise, which adds to their practicality for emergency or transient settlements (Hoberman, 2006; Zámolyi, 2025). These characteristics make tents highly adaptable for nomadic, temporary, or emergency uses.

However, tents also come with significant disadvantages. Safety concerns are prominent, especially in tent cities established after disasters, where tents are often unsafe for women due to the lack of protective features like doors or walls (Logie, 2016). Tents are also highly susceptible to fire, necessitating certifications for fire resistance to ensure safe habitation (Gomes et al., 2015). Furthermore, tents can exacerbate indoor temperatures depending on the surrounding environment (Karanja et al., 2023). Compared to conventional buildings, tents offer lower security, with soft-tents particularly exposed to theft, damage, and long-term deterioration (Moustafa, 2024). While cost-effective tents may lack essential facilities, more expensive models provide the necessary features for safer and more comfortable living (Davis, 2004).

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With advantages and disadvantages of tents, the ground sets for analysis of our Case study – the 2021 farmer’s protest in Delhi. Even in analysing, streamlining thoughts and theoretical keywords becomes necessary. For this purpose only four keywords are to be used and the case study be examined by the former in three phases of dwelling.

Wayfaring represents a significant departure from the ordinary understanding of travel or movement from one place to another. Rather than denoting a journey with a fixed destination, it implies an ongoing process of engagement with the environment. Tim Ingold (2011) contrasts wayfaring with transport, explaining that while transport presupposes movement between predetermined points, wayfaring is about *being along the way*. It embodies a mode of existence where life unfolds through continual interaction with surroundings, materials, and people.

In the context of the 2021 farmers’ protest in Delhi, wayfaring was not limited to physical relocation toward the capital. It also reflected a social and political trajectory — a form of collective becoming. Farmers who began their journey with tractors and minimal supplies gradually transformed roadsides and border points into lived spaces. This movement, thus, was not just a protest march but an evolving relationship with place, weather, and material conditions. Through this process, wayfaring turned into a prelude to dwelling — where movement gave rise to emplacement, and temporary mobility became the foundation for a new form of settlement.

Interaction with the environment, in the context of human dwelling and protest spaces, is far from passive. It is an ongoing, dynamic relationship between people and the material, climatic, and spatial conditions that surround them. This interaction is not simply about *using* or *adapting to* the environment but about *co-creating* a lived world through continuous negotiation. As Tim Ingold (2000, 2011) suggests, humans are not separate from their surroundings; rather, life is an entanglement of movements, materials, and meanings that evolve together. The 2021 farmers’ protest in Delhi serves as an illuminating example of how such interactions unfold under conditions of both resistance and vulnerability.

When the farmers began their journey toward Delhi, their movement initially symbolized political assertion. Yet, as they halted at the Singhu, Tikri, and Ghazipur borders, the physical environment began to play an equally defining role in shaping their everyday lives. Open highways were transformed into living corridors. What were once concrete stretches of national infrastructure became porous and inhabited landscapes. The protestors engaged with the environment in improvised ways—tying ropes to poles for tent support, layering tarpaulin

sheets against rain, and burning cow dung cakes for warmth during the biting cold. This process revealed a shift from mere occupation of space to active adaptation and construction of place.

Such interactions were deeply reciprocal. The weather and the built environment constantly challenged the protestors' resilience. Delhi's winter, marked by fog and biting winds, was met with collective strategies of endurance—community kitchens, shared blankets, and makeshift heating arrangements. During rainfall, temporary waterlogging tested their resolve, leading to innovations in drainage and reorganization of tent clusters. In this sense, the environment was not a passive backdrop but a participant in the protest — shaping its spatial form, temporal rhythm, and even the social relations within it.

While it is difficult to unearth the origins of human shelter—whether beneath tree canopies, within huts, or under early forms of tents—the present case study allows us to trace the sociocultural conditions that led to tent living as a renewed mode of dwelling.

Even before what came before the tent, it all started with the farmers being locked out at the borders. This could be interpreted as a form of *wayfaring* — not merely a physical journey towards Delhi, but a movement of life trajectories disrupted and reoriented by state intervention. The farmers' travel towards the capital was not a linear displacement but an ongoing engagement with the landscape — a dwelling-in-motion. Their tractors, trolleys, and temporary shelters became extensions of their lived environment, symbolising an *interaction with the environment* where movement and habitation intertwined.

Unlike protests where participants commute daily from nearby areas, these protestors turned the border itself into a site of continuity and adaptation. They used what was available — discarded tarpaulins, bamboo poles, tents, and even vehicles — to craft spaces of endurance. This process was not just an act of resistance but a way of re-inscribing meaning onto an otherwise transitional space. Through everyday acts like cooking, planting, washing, and constructing, the environment ceased to be a passive backdrop and instead became a collaborator in sustaining protest life. In this way, *wayfaring* and *interaction with the environment* merged, producing a lived landscape where political action and environmental improvisation met.

In the protest, the farmers arrived not in cars, cycles, or buses — as protestors in other movements often do — but with their crop vehicles: tractors. These tractors were not the precursors of tents, as might be assumed, but rather contextual spaces of rest and temporary dwelling for the farmers. Technically, tractors exist outside the traditional category of pre-shelter spaces; they are modern agricultural tools, extensions of the farmers' bodies and labour. Yet, they acquire a traditional resonance through their intimate association with cultivation and food production.

An intriguing transformation unfolded at this intersection of the traditional and the modern. During the year-long protest, the tractor — a machine of movement and production — evolved into a structure of habitation and endurance. It symbolised a reconfiguration of living in motion, where machinery became home. This shift represents a kind of *social fossil*: a trace of older relationships between humans, tools, and land, now reframed within a contemporary protest setting. As one account notes, “They first stayed either in or under their tractor trolleys; as the days passed...” — signalling the gradual transformation of mobility into settlement.

The quote — “They first stayed either in or under their tractor trolleys; as the days passed...” — captures a moment of transition that exemplifies *wayfaring* in Ingold’s sense. Wayfaring, unlike transport, involves being *along a path* rather than merely *moving between points*. The farmers’ initial act of staying in or under their tractor trolleys reveals how their journey towards protest sites did not end at arrival; it continued as an unfolding engagement with the environment. The border zone became part of their life’s trajectory — a place simultaneously of movement and pause, where tractors became both vessels and shelters.

From the perspective of *interaction with the environment*, this act of dwelling under tractor trolleys shows how humans continually reconfigure their surroundings in response to necessity. The farmers did not import pre-designed housing but adapted the material world immediately around them — machinery, canvas, and ground — to create conditions of habitation. The tractors thus ceased to be mere tools of labour; they became nodes of relational ecology where humans, machines, and environment coexisted.

Ingold argues that wayfarers are not detached from their surroundings but *grow into them* through practice. Likewise, the farmers’ improvisation marks the early phase of an evolving settlement, where interaction with the environment produced new spatial meanings. As days passed, these improvised shelters matured into tents, kitchens, and community spaces — a gradual metamorphosis from *wayfaring to dwelling*. The quote, therefore, encapsulates not just endurance but an ongoing conversation between people, materiality, and place — where movement itself becomes a form of habitation.

There is another thread whereby, apart from wayfaring, dwelling, and interaction, that is building. In building, there was no future envisioning. Such envisioning however depended on the situation, which was now rudimentary. With rudimentary it meant that there might not have been sufficient arrangements. Arrangements might not have been the usual in the city centre. This is somewhat a synergy, whereby government restrictions shaped tractors to envision a altogether different use. Per se, the protest situation did not reduce to a simple act of coming and going; rather, *wayfaring* gradually led to the emergence of built arrangements during the long winter months. The arrival of winter introduced one of the most tangible facets of the environment — the cold, the wind, and the shifting textures of the ground. These natural conditions posed new demands on the protest space, demanding adaptation not only from the farmers but also from the material entities that constituted their surroundings.

Here, an intriguing layer of *interaction with the environment* unfolds — one that occurs between *non-sentient entities*, outside the realm of direct human agency. The tractors, constituted by metal, rubber, grease, and stored energy, entered into contact with an environment defined by cold air, dew, wind, and sediment. In such proximity, neither remains inert: metal contracts, moisture condenses, dust adheres. These exchanges suggest a *relational ontology* in which material things do not exist as isolated substances but as nodes within a dynamic field of forces.

Ingold’s notion of *materials as active flows* resonates strongly here. For him, materials are not passive matter awaiting form but ever-transforming participants in the making of the world. The tractor in winter — cooling, stiffening, resonating with the texture of air and ground — exemplifies this idea. It is not merely acted upon by the environment; it is co-constituted through ongoing, subtle negotiations with it. This challenges a human-centred

understanding of environment as backdrop, instead situating both the tool and the climate as co-performers in the spatial event of protest.

Such interactions also echo the *vital materialism* of Jane Bennett, who speaks of the vibrancy of matter — its capacity to affect and be affected. Within this framework, condensation on steel or the brittleness of frozen tarpaulin are not just physical phenomena but *moments of relational vitality*, where matter exerts its quiet agency (Bennett, 2010). The farmers' lives unfolded amid these micro-interactions, which configured possibilities for rest, movement, and adaptation, without needing deliberate intervention.

What arises, then, is not a hierarchy of actors but a *meshwork* of relations — to use Ingold's term — where air, iron, and soil interlace with human presence. The space of protest becomes less a human-constructed site and more a living assemblage, continuously shaped by exchanges among sentient and non-sentient participants. In this sense, the tractors' transformation under environmental pressures was not symbolic but material, registering how the environment and technology cohabit in an ongoing conversation of form, endurance, and change.

However the space of protest itself changed after a few days because the tractor trolley arrangements could not protect the protesting farmers from sheer winter cold at the borders. As a reaction to this, tents became an idea to build and dwell at one time. However, it remains unclear as to why the idea of tents became relevant in this phase. One argument may be — the farmers perceived tent as a proven temporary dwelling at this point, provided the protest might get over with protestors assembled at the border. Second, might be due to negotiation with the leaders, it seemed impossible to construct concrete structures in such a short time. Here, the angle of deploying a concrete house versus a tent comes into the picture. Till here, it is clear. One might now concur: how big was the protest congregation.

It might be difficult to ascertain until there is a source which informs us so. Thus,

“Farmers were far away from their villages and homes and in the midst of a severe winter. They first stayed either in or under their tractor trolleys; as the days passed, and with no sign of a settlement in sight, they set up temporary tents and huts covered with polythene and tarpaulin. As the protest progressed, new services began in these temporary encampments. “Kisan Malls” were set up by some non-profit and social service organisations, and from their shelves, many items of daily use, including blankets, quilts, socks, and soap, were handed out free. Soon clusters of tents and *langar* arose; each would be named after the village from where the farmers using them came, with the “village” clearly signposted by name, with “0 kms” written below to indicate that a person had arrived at his or her “village.” Such villages were also identified by numbers on highway lampposts and metro pillars. During the peak agricultural season, for the convenience of participating farmers, some villages from Punjab even had regular bus services to protest sites.”

The passage begins by noting the shift from *tractor trolleys* to *tents*. This moment is not merely about architectural change; it marks a deeper transition in the *mode of being-in-the-world*. Initially, the protestors' relationship to space was *wayfaring* in Ingold's sense — living along a path, not at a fixed destination. The tractors, as extensions of their farms and journeys, embodied this mobile habitus. However, the environment — specifically the winter cold — interrupted this form of existence. The tractors, previously adequate as liminal

shelters, reached the limit of their affordances. This failure of mobility to sustain life forced a recalibration of dwelling practices.

What emerges here is a *critical turning point*: wayfaring gives way to *building*, not as planned construction, but as a spontaneous response to environmental and temporal pressure. This transition is neither linear nor total — the traces of movement persist in the tents themselves, which are designed for portability, yet serve the function of dwelling. The protest site, thus, becomes an *intersection of movement and settlement*.

The argument that tents “became an idea to build and dwell at one time” reveals the conceptual elasticity of the tent. It is not only a physical form but an *epistemic object* — something that embodies knowledge about what it means to live temporarily, together, and visibly. When the author notes that “it remains unclear as to why the idea of tents became relevant,” they gesture to the social construction of necessity: why did the farmers think of tents, and not, other forms of shelter?

The tent appears here as both *an inheritance* (a globally recognised form of temporary dwelling) and *an improvisation* (locally adapted to the protest conditions). It stands between the *impossible permanence* of concrete housing and the *unsustainable mobility* of tractor living. Hence, the choice of the tent is not only practical but conceptual — a negotiation between visibility, mobility, and endurance.

This tension is crucial: the protestors’ tents were neither symbolic spectacles nor mere shelters. They materialised a *collective claim to space* — to dwell, even if conditionally, in a zone meant for transit.

The passage implicitly documents a *conversation among materials*: steel, tarpaulin, air, and temperature. The shift from tractors to tents shows how non-sentient forces — winter cold, condensation, hardness of ground — acted as agents that reorganised the protest environment. These interactions forced an ecological redesign: tractors were too conductive of cold, while fabric and polythene offered insulation and flexibility.

In this sense, the tent does not replace the tractor as a better technology; it emerges as an *adaptive convergence* between human intention and environmental affordance. The material environment participates in decision-making without speaking — its resistance, temperature, and texture shape human response.

Ethnographic detail about *Kisan Malls*, *langars*, and *named villages* shows how the protest transformed from an assemblage of individuals to a *social geography*. Through naming and spatial organisation, the protest reproduced familiar structures of belonging. The inscription of village names and “0 km” signs symbolically transported the homeland to the protest site — a profound act of *re-territorialisation*.

From an anthropological lens, this spatialisation is not a by-product of protest but a mode of *world-making*. The farmers did not merely endure the environment; they domesticated it. The naming of tents, organisation of food, and provision of services marked the emergence of *protest as place*, rather than *protest in place*.

While tents signify impermanence, the year-long duration of the protest complicates the very notion of the temporary. Over time, the tents became infrastructures — layered, serviced,

networked. The longer they lasted, the more they blurred distinctions between camp and settlement. The passage thus reveals a temporal paradox: the temporary became enduring, and endurance itself became a political language.

The tents' gradual expansion — from individual shelters to organised clusters with utilities — redefines temporariness not as fragility, but as a *mode of resilience*. This inversion exposes how protestors reworked environmental temporality: what began as a short-term adaptation solidified into a long-term ecology of cohabitation.

Over time, what began as a short-term protest turned into a long-term way of living together — a kind of *ecology of cohabitation*. When the farmers first arrived, their stay seemed temporary, a stop along a path before they would return home. Yet, as the weeks passed and the cold deepened, the need for comfort, warmth, and community transformed the protest site into something far more stable. The tractors that once carried them to Delhi became storage spaces or makeshift walls. Tents spread out across the highway, stitched together by cloth, bamboo, and shared effort.

This slow change created new forms of social life. People began cooking together, setting up small libraries and health camps, celebrating festivals, and naming their tent clusters after their villages. What held them together was not only their common cause but the daily acts of care and cooperation needed to survive the weather and uncertainty. Food was shared across tents, fires were built for warmth, and new friendships replaced the distance of unfamiliarity. In this sense, the protest site became both home and movement — a place where life continued despite being away from home.

Calling this a *long-term ecology of cohabitation* helps us see that the protest was not just a political event but also an experiment in living. The farmers did not only resist laws; they also built a new rhythm of existence, shaped by the land, the air, and each other. The tents and pathways were living structures that changed with time, weather, and human presence. What began as endurance gradually became belonging — not permanent, but deeply rooted in care and adaptation. This ecology showed how people and their surroundings could grow together, even in a space meant only for passing through.

Then a change took place which implores us to look at disadvantages of tents. These might be susceptibility to theft, loot, or inability to shelter people from extreme climate. In addition, an underexplored reliance, maybe socially constructed, of concrete houses became the concern of a few protestors. However, the tent city and its appendages remain intact till the very end of demonstrations. With demonstrations, some huts were constructed highlighting a mixed state of being. To simplify, the tractor-trolley contraption had gone out of use, but tents and huts co-existed, but not any of the evolution of huts with tents disappearing.

Even as the protest evolved into semi-permanent huts, attempts to construct three to four concrete homes met resistance from both the movement's leadership and government authorities. This moment is particularly revealing from the perspective of *wayfaring* and *dwelling*. Unlike nomadic or transient encampments, the farmers were not simply passing through or occupying space temporarily. Their actions — clustering, building huts, and imagining more permanent structures — demonstrate a deliberate cultivation of place and continuity within the city. In essence, they were *solidarity wayfarers*: moving together toward a political goal while simultaneously creating a stable, lived environment. This oscillation between mobility and settlement shows how dwelling emerges not only through

improvisation but also through repeated, socially meaningful engagement with the environment.

From the standpoint of *interaction with the environment*, the concrete homes signal an intensified negotiation with land, climate, and materials. Unlike huts or tents, concrete structures are rigid, durable, and materially fixed, interacting differently with environmental conditions such as heat, drainage, or soil stability. Yet, the resistance to these structures reflects the complex interface between social practice, political authority, and environmental ethics. The land, though previously vacant or forested, becomes a contested site — a stage where human dwelling, ecological considerations, and state regulations converge. The interaction here is multidimensional: human intentions, material properties, and legal-political frameworks collectively shape what kinds of dwelling can emerge.

Theoretical reflection shows that this phase of the protest is crucial. Unlike most protest encampments, which are dismantled after political engagement and leave little trace, the farmers' constructions hint at the *birth of a city through protest*. Even if informal from the state's perspective, the arrangements embody patterns of permanence, organisation, and care — the hallmarks of urban formation. Concrete, in this context, is not simply a solution for shelter; it is a material statement about the right to inhabit, organise, and negotiate with space. Yet it also raises questions about environmental ethics: is permanence justified if the land was previously forest or vacant?

Ultimately, this moment underscores that dwelling is not solely about structures; it is a process of continuous *wayfaring* and *interaction with the environment*. The farmers' attempts at concrete homes reflect a tension between mobility and permanence, improvisation and planning, social solidarity and regulatory control. It is a reminder that cities, settlements, and meaningful dwellings emerge through relational practices that integrate human intention, material culture, and environmental conditions — even in the context of resistance and protest.

Findings

This research paper highlights two key findings regarding the use of tents as temporary or semi-permanent solutions in contexts of human settlement and mobilization. Chief among these is the observation that tents are not merely utilitarian structures; they occupy a dynamic space between traditional and modern modes of dwelling, their usage deeply shaped by context. Historically, tents have served as both nomadic shelters and organized, semi-permanent dwellings, but their deployment in a given situation is rarely neutral. Context, in this sense, is inseparable from the environment in which the tents are placed. The interaction between humans, materials, and the surrounding landscape determines both the feasibility and efficacy of these temporary settlements.

In practice, tents emerge most prominently in moments of necessity. Whether as emergency shelters in times of natural disaster or as encampments during protests or migrations, tents are mobilized where existing infrastructure is insufficient. Culture, while always present in shaping social organization, often recedes in urgency-driven contexts; tents are used as functional, sometimes disjointed solutions, responding primarily to environmental and logistical constraints rather than cultural preferences. They become especially critical when permanent accommodation cannot be constructed quickly, or when the land itself resists traditional building methods due to temporality, lack of resources, or regulatory limitations.

In such cases, tents mediate human presence in space, allowing continuity of life, social interaction, and organized cohabitation even in conditions of constraint.

Building on this understanding, the second key finding of this study is the conceptualization of Environmentally Resilient Tent Zones (ERTZs). ERTZs extend the logic of temporary shelter into a framework that considers both environmental sensitivity and long-term sustainability. Because tents are inherently defined as temporary and flexible, they are particularly suitable for deployment in environmentally sensitive zones (ESZs), which are vulnerable to natural forces such as floods, high winds, or seismic events. The adaptability of tents allows human activity to occur in these spaces without causing long-lasting disruption to fragile ecosystems, effectively balancing the need for habitation with environmental stewardship.

However, ERTZs are not simply an abstract notion; they require deliberate technical and design interventions. To ensure resilience, tents within such zones must comply with internationally recognized standards, including the UN-Habitat guidelines for temporary and emergency shelters. This entails using materials capable of withstanding wind, rain, and temperature fluctuations, while also designing spatial layouts that facilitate drainage, airflow, and communal organization. Tents must be anchored appropriately, and their distribution within the landscape should reflect an understanding of local topography, microclimates, and ecological constraints. In essence, ERTZs represent a calibrated integration of material culture, human occupation, and environmental interaction.

Importantly, the ERTZ framework reorients how we think about temporality and dwelling. Rather than framing tents as inherently inferior to permanent structures, it recognizes the capacity of temporary forms to mediate human-environment relations effectively. Tents, when strategically deployed within ERTZs, do not simply provide shelter; they generate a relational ecology in which humans, materials, and environment co-exist and shape one another. Daily routines, circulation, and social organization within such tent zones emerge from these interactions, illustrating how material improvisation can evolve into structured patterns of dwelling, even within temporary or fragile landscapes.

In conclusion, these findings underscore the importance of understanding tents as more than provisional shelters. Their utility arises from the ways in which they are embedded in environmental contexts, responding to both natural conditions and social necessities. The introduction of ERTZs offers a framework for scaling this understanding, emphasizing resilience, adaptability, and ecological sensitivity. By integrating technical standards, material durability, and environmental awareness, tent-based solutions can function as effective, socially and ecologically responsive forms of dwelling. This approach highlights the broader theoretical insight that human habitation is not solely determined by permanence, but by the continuous negotiation between people, materials, and their environment — a negotiation that tents, in their flexibility and responsiveness, exemplify.

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