

Freedom is in Peril. Defend it with all your might Jawaharlal Nehru

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To Be Young Was Very Heaven

Those who govern would do well to read Indian history. Ours has always been a movement polity, writes **Sanjay Hegde**

At Jantar Mantar in Delhi, young India has pitched camp. Students roll up their bedding at dawn. They sing, they argue, they nurse their bruises. They call themselves, with mocking self-deprecation, the ‘Cockroach Janta Party’. A judicial remark had likened the struggling youth to cockroaches. They wore the insult as a badge. Satire became a movement. The movement now unsettles the national capital.

The immediate provocation is NEET, the single examination that decides who may become a doctor. Question papers leaked. Lakhs of students were made to sit the test again. Years of preparation, family savings and young hope dissolved in official incompetence. The students ask a simple question: if they must play by the rules, why doesn’t the State? They demand accountability from those who set the examination. The State has answered with prohibitory orders, tear gas and the lathi.

Those who govern would do well to read Indian history. Ours has always been a movement polity. The freedom struggle was not won in committee rooms alone. It was won on the streets, in the villages, in the salt pans of Dandi. Every generation since has produced its movement, and every movement has ended in a rebalancing of political power. The JP movement of the 1970s broke the Congress monopoly. The Mandal agitation redrew the map of social power. The anti-corruption stir of 2011 birthed a new party and buried an old government. Movements are how India renegotiates the terms between rulers and ruled.

Consider the greatest renegotiation of them all. Until 1920, Indian politics was a polite conversation. The Congress petitioned, memorialised and waited. Its leaders sought gradual reform within the Empire, a seat at the table, dominion in the fullness of time. Then Gandhi arrived from South Africa and changed the grammar of the argument. Non-cooperation asked ordinary Indians to withdraw their consent. Civil disobedience asked them to break unjust laws openly and take the punishment cheerfully.

Within a decade, the demand had travelled from gradualism to Poorna Swaraj. The subjects had become claimants. The Raj never recovered the initiative. Movements do that. They do not merely press a demand. They change what a people believe themselves entitled to ask.

The young at Jantar Mantar stand in that tradition, whether they know it or not. And they ask for less than revolution. A decade ago, a young student leader named Kanhaiya Kumar faced sedition charges for slogans he did not raise. He answered with a distinction that deserves to outlive him. We want azadi in India, he said, not azadi from India. Freedom within Bharat, not freedom from Bharat. Freedom from hunger, from corruption, from rigged examinations and stolen futures. That is precisely what this generation demands. They wave the tricolour. They quote the Constitution. They ask the republic to be worthy of its own promises. No State should fear such patriots. Only a State that has stopped listening does.

Yet the response has been depressingly colonial. Batons fell on unarmed students marching towards their own Parliament. Scores were carried to hospital. The internet

Photo: Getty Images



The protesters ask a simple question: if they must play by the rules, why doesn’t the State?

was switched off, as if darkness could hide what daylight had witnessed. A camp of sleeping protesters was demolished. An ageing Gandhian sits on hunger strike while ministers look away. This is the reflex of the Raj, not of a republic. It carries the odour of General Dyer, who believed at Jallianwala Bagh that a whiff of force would teach the natives their place. Dyer’s bullets killed hundreds. They also killed something larger: the British claim to fair play. After Amritsar, no Indian could believe the

Empire was benevolent. Tagore returned his knighthood. Gandhi returned his medals. The moral licence of British rule bled out on that ground, though the flag flew for twenty-eight more years. Governments that answer questions with force do not end questions. They end their own legitimacy.

The wise course is the old constitutional one. Talk to the young. Fix the examinations. Punish the leakers, not the leaked-upon. Power rebalanced through persuasion survives. Power defended by the lathi does not.

I watched the footage from Jantar Mantar again last night. Bandaged heads, borrowed megaphones, the anthem sung off-key and wholeheartedly. I thought of Wordsworth, watching another generation storm another old order: ‘Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive, but to be young was very heaven.’ The dawn is theirs. The rest of us should have the grace not to stand in its light. ■

SANJAY HEGDE is a Senior Advocate in the Supreme Court of India

Would He consider walking into the protest site?

Shah Rukh Alam reflects on this and other imponderables of the Jantar Mantar protest

Lutyens’ Delhi is replete with hoardings that carry the Prime Minister’s beaming face, being congratulated for one thing or another. That grin is particularly incongruous in the aftermath of the brutal police attack on protesting students: injured youth flailing below and a concealed smile overhead. He might cry too in due course, moved belatedly by the treatment of students, who were assaulted by police under the command of his trusty home minister. But he’ll more likely focus on how the moment was politicised by the Opposition and other ‘anti-nationals’. In any case, in that moment, the visual discordance of that smiling face amidst the chilling reminders of the day was too evident. I wondered why he wouldn’t just stroll into the protest site. A man with that degree of residual popular support, he could own the space. The dynamic of power would be such that he could even talk down to protesters and they might still listen. Demands for resignation would likely dissolve. Nehru, the apparent constant challenger, is known to have walked into agitated crowds and addressed them directly. So, it wouldn’t be a climbdown.

Why then does the leadership not engage directly with the people? Do they seriously fear personal risk in crowds?

I feel that even more than the slippery-slope argument—if the government concedes one demand, it will look weak and will have to cede more space—it is the shift in popular expectations that is significant. In a democracy, common sense dictates deference to the will of the people. The ‘will of the people’ can be manipulated but still requires engagement. However, present-day discourse begins by first questioning the legitimacy of people. ‘Do you represent the majority view? No?

Does that not make you anti-national, not-legitimate people?’ The burden of proof is on the people to first establish that they are worthy citizens before asking for an audience with the leadership.

Astonishingly, constitutional courts have also made oral remarks questioning petitioners’ ‘people-hood’ and consequently their locus to invoke rights. This movement began by reappropriating one such slur and turning it on its head. It is important then to also address the

question of the legitimacy of people, all people—something the movement is struggling with at this moment. It requires a broader vision of politics and a place for all people in it.

On the same day that the Supreme Court of India refused to hear a plea relating to the disproportionate use of force at the protest, and described the petition as a ‘waste of time’, I saw a reporter grilling a young protestor, asking him if he thought anti-nationals like

Photo: Getty Images



The (l)lawful threat of violence from the State hangs thick in the air

Nehru, the apparent constant challenger, is known to have walked into irate crowds to address them directly

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The revolt of the Cockroaches

Dwaipayan Banerjee

I don't remember exactly when the viral phenomenon of the Cockroach Janta Party first caught my attention. Of course, I had been following the NEET paper leak crisis, like so many others. By then, we had already grown wearily accustomed to the recurring spectacle of paper leaks under the present regime. From 2014 onwards, India had witnessed dozens, perhaps over a hundred, reported incidents of exam paper leaks. According to an analysis published in *The Wire*, there were 148 documented cases of exam fraud between 2015 and 2026, nearly double the rate seen before 2015. A *Newslandry* analysis of suspected leaks, where FIRs were filed or examinations cancelled, estimated that these scandals had affected the lives of at least 6.5 crore candidates. But that particular wound came later.

What truly drew me in, almost at once, was something deeper. On their satirical website, founded after the Chief Justice of India had called activists 'cockroaches' and 'parasites'—an accusation he later denied—CJP founder Abhijeet Dipke had framed the movement as the 'Voice of the Lazy & Unemployed' and set out five demands. I liked the irreverent cheek of throwing the insults right back at the powerful. These demands reached beyond exam scandals into something larger: the slow, almost imperceptible erosion of India's liberal democratic order. They pointed to the leanings of certain judges, the Election Commission's conduct through the SIR process, the open trafficking of political turncoats by the ruling dispensation, the brazen partisanship of large sections of the media, and the sinister act of pushing for delimitation disguised as a 50 per cent women's reservation in legislatures. In essence, they addressed the quiet unravelling of the country's democratic institutions, a decay evident to anyone still possessed of honest judgment.

I was heartened, in a quiet way, to see so many young people converge, even if only virtually, around these concerns. When millions began following the Cockroach Janta Party on Instagram, a platform that belongs above all to the country's youth, it felt significant. I found myself returning to their page from time to time, watching the numbers climb. Still, like many others, I resisted reading too much into it. Such waves of online indignation, I told myself, tend to flare up brightly and then vanish, swallowed by the internet's ceaseless tide.

When Abhijeet finally returned to India on 6 June 2026, many of us feared for his safety. We had seen how activists linked to past protests had been targeted, detained, or silenced under one pretext or another. I remember watching him arrive at the airport, holding a copy of Ambedkar's book in his hands—a Dalit student who had done well in his studies, deliberately invoking Ambedkar. The messaging was not very subtle, and I quite liked it for that very reason.

When he and a small band of his colleagues began their campaign from Delhi's Jantar Mantar, surrounded among others by left-wing student activists, and demanded the resignation of education minister Dharmendra Pradhan over the NEET scam, I felt cautiously optimistic, but cautious nonetheless. Ours is a generation that has seen how meteoric rises of civil society protests can sometimes be co-opted by right-wing forces.

Many of my friends began comparing it to the Anna Hazare movement, viewing it as little more than a buffer. They had reason to be sceptical. Many had watched their hopes dashed after that earlier agitation, which in no small measure helped pave the way for the current dispensation. But there was a marked distinction they seemed to overlook. The Anna Hazare movement could only benefit the BJP, as it was the principal opposition at the time. How could a movement directed against the BJP itself serve right-

wing forces? There was another crucial difference. I remember the Anna protests clearly. There was an element of stage management, the hand of RSS mobilisation plainly visible, the media pushing the narrative without pause. Here, however, the pliant mediascape was largely critical, even hostile, towards the CJP-led movement. Yet I remained sceptical, as anyone would be of a movement that seemed to emerge almost instantaneously, drawing widespread support while its principal players had been largely unknown only months earlier.

The growth was modest at first. Abhijeet drew decent crowds in the rallies and gathering he joined across India, but nothing suggested the scale that would follow. From 20 June, he began an indefinite sit-in at Jantar Mantar with a small group of friends, comrades, and a motley gathering of people that steadily grew. By then, the protest was beginning to catch national attention, drawing a steady stream of visitors from opposition parties, civil society groups and ordinary citizens from around the country. On 28 June, activist and educationist Sonam Wangchuk joined and began a hunger strike alongside left student leaders, which brought significantly larger crowds and made the movement increasingly difficult to ignore. They had somehow touched a nerve.

But what happened after roughly one month changed everything. Thousands of students and youth joined the march towards Parliament on 20 July. School and college students had virtually laid siege to the capital. Videos emerging from across India revealed a movement of far greater scope and scale than the Anna Hazare agitation, persisting even amid a media blackout and systematic crackdown. Its quiet spread into small towns was unlike anything I had witnessed in a very long time.

The way protesters have remained camped in Delhi, even after brutal police crackdowns involving lathi charges, water

Photos: Getty Images



Their concerns go far beyond paper leaks and whether the education minister's head rolls or not; (left) 'We are all cockroaches', proclaims this masked protester



Even amidst a big media blackout, social media videos revealed how the movement was echoing across India

cannons, tear gas and pellet guns, has led many to compare it with the youth-led protests in neighbouring countries like Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka. If spontaneity, scope and breadth are markers, the comparison is not far-fetched. Yet in a vast country like India, it is unlikely that anything on the scale of our neighbours is possible. Although Abhijeet and others have consistently denied any intention of toppling the government through extra-parliamentary means, the comparison persists.

It is too early to predict the outcome of the protest or to draw exact parallels. But it is important to understand that the reason for its rise goes beyond its immediate demands. The protesters can perhaps see through the dichotomy of absolute right-wing dominance and the making of a demagogue out of Modi, even as the reality of their own lives sharply contradicts that

image. Here is a generation that has grown up with the internet and artificial intelligence, juggling precarity with a far broader knowledge of the world than any before it. And the erosion of liberal democratic institutions meant street protest opens up the only possible route out of the precarity of the situation.

Would I now allow myself to be optimistically hopeful about the protest? Would it end in a damp squib, be crushed by the might of the State, or fizzle out once its immediate demand is met? Yet it surprises us in ways we cannot yet foresee? I do not think anyone has a clear answer. But one thing cannot be denied, even by the greatest naysayers: we are witnessing something historic. ■

DWAIPAYAN BANERJEE is a documentary filmmaker, film festival organiser and educator

A victory that may still fall short

Aakar Patel

The editor of this paper has asked me to reflect in this piece on three questions about the current protests. Did this movement give me hope? Do I worry these protests might fizzle out? What do I wish comes out of this moment?

To take the first, the answer is yes. All protests and all dissent give activists hope because the assumption is that the State is imperfect. And correction can only come through demands for accountability. Corruption in its deep sense means erosion of the State apparatus and this happens only because the State, in this instance represented by the BJP government, does not behave as public servants but masters.

This masterful protest is inspiring because the youngsters began with so little and made so much of it. Their commitment and courage and determination, even when they were sneered at initially, is the reason why their cause is today the dominant story in our vast nation.

To the second question, my view is that the protests will succeed. That there is no option but for the education minister to go. This might happen soon after the protests end for some reason, or it might happen through the subterfuge of transferring him or some other ruse. Insisting that he will stay on after admitting that NEET was compromised is untenable. The protest has made this impossible and the government knows this.

Its response—first ignoring the movement, then insulting its leaders, then the usual police violence and then slandering the youngsters—has not worked because it could not have worked.

I also think that the minister's resignation will be only a small part of the larger victory the young protestors will have won. A democracy is one where public pressure forces government change. The students are following the farmers in this journey.

The third question on what I wish comes out of this moment has a two-part answer. Of course I want the students to receive justice and for the government to accept accountability.



This protest is inspiring because the youngsters began with so little and made so much of it

Photo: Vipin

But I also wish that the crisis in education helps all of us and particularly the government focus on the important question of what lies ahead.

There are clear signals that employment and poverty will be the two main problems India will have to confront. The old route of nations transitioning its agriculture labour to manufacturing and then into services is closed and closed permanently.

Even China, which followed this route with greater success than any other nation, has hundreds of millions of people with either no work or insufficient work. Any strategy for India to deal with this crisis must begin with an honest acknowledgement of where we stand and the issues we face.

This seems like a banal thing to say and it is. But it must be said because this is a government and a prime minister that does not accept that there is a problem. 'Sab changa si' (all's well) is the pose.

That is a lie, of course, and it's no secret either. The frustration and

anger of students stem as much from the corruption and incompetence that led to the NEET fiasco as their fear that the future is bleak.

They have spoken clearly about how they feel. Now it is for the government to accept their demands and begin a process that ensures we do not come back to this place again.

The real worry is that the government will not act. Even if it loses this round, which in my opinion it already has, it will treat it as an isolated incident unrelated to anything larger. Perhaps it even believes its own lies about external forces and motivated agendas. Whatever its outlook, the last dozen years have shown that this is a government built around unfounded certainties and arrogance. That attitude will inevitably bring us back to where we are. Our farmers knew this. They realised that taking to the streets was their only option. Our students now feel the same. ■

Views are personal

Would He walk to the protest site?

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At the centre are those model citizens who never ask questions of the government and instead berate those who do. Then there are those who must protest but come from 'good backgrounds' and are able to show a track of support for the government i.e., they are not ideologically, inherently opposed to it. They can come back to the fold if their 'single-point issue' is amicably resolved. Then there are those who are perennially suspect: the Muslim, the Kashmiri, the anti-CAA protester, the 'urban Naxal', the farmer, the Adivasi, the Dalit. Those are outlying circles, which must not be allowed to pollute protests on middle-ground issues like paper leaks.

Strategically, the CJP seems to have aligned with this logic, even rationing out permissible slogans, but organically, emotionally, the movement has gone beyond momentary strategic thinking. The slogans have not been contained. It remains to be seen whether the government will double down on this and create a wedge between what is permissible at a stretch and what is absolutely not.

The importance of peaceful protest is paramount. Yet it must be reiterated that the promise of peace is always only made by the protesters. The lawful threat of violence from the State, which is always discretionary, hangs thick in the air all the time. We must demand a promise of peaceful response from the State too. It is not an impossible thing. The

police are expected to be trained to act in a particular way in the face of public anger, heckling, and even mild pushing and shoving. Much like teachers in primary schools when engaging with their most undisciplined pupils. Instead, police action becomes retributive, often reflecting anger at the audacity of people questioning the State. The easy, unquestioned insertion of private, ideologically aligned militia into this melee is a slide into the dark abyss.

And what must the Muslim do?

There is some debate on social media about whether Muslim youth should participate in the movement or stay away? Some are urging them to join in while others advise caution, mindful that the Muslim is as vulnerable on the streets as in the courts.

I don't think Muslims necessarily take advice from the ulama, or from any secular leadership. They are not a political monolith. Likewise, Muslim youth do as they please—they will go to the protests if they wish, because they belong here. Some might stay away because of the disproportionate costs they might have to bear.

But in all of this, I thought of a slogan. Apropos the concentric circles of public-space behaviour, the rioting self-proclaimed sanatanis can, of course, do no wrong, but we must consider the question: *Koi karey toh democracy, koi aur karey toh conspiracy?* ■

SHAH RUKH ALAM is a constitutional lawyer and human rights activist

The full worth of citizens as custodians

Ali Khan Mahmudabad urges our young protestors to see what binds them with the grievances of other Indians, to find a shared moral code

Protests are awakenings. Whether for those who acknowledge the folly of their previous actions or those who think they are apolitical or even those who always thought that the state only targets troublesome people on the margins of society. There are many protests happening across India, but the one that has caught the imagination of millions of young people still in their teens or early 20s is the ongoing protest against the NEET exam paper leaks.

With the farmers moving in on Delhi and the prime minister admitting paper leaks are a ‘grave sin’ while also suggesting that protestors are on ‘the wrong path’, the ingredients for a larger movement exist: a widespread grievance (paper leak), no redress (demand for accountability), a common goal (resignation of the minister concerned), a catalyst (Wangchuk’s fast and his forced eviction from the protest site), mobilisation (thousands of supporters from across the social and political spectrum) and a spark to reignite a wider protest (the State’s crackdown).

It is crucial to understand that the NEET paper leaks or the CBSE evaluation scandal are not isolated problems but manifestations of a broken system. Even if education minister Dharmendra Pradhan resigns, the families of those who committed suicide are compensated and politicians address these issues in Parliament, it will at best be cathartic; it won’t fix the system. What the youth—they are not ‘children’, by the way—must realise is that they can ride this moment to ask for more, they can act as interlocutors of other protests happening across the country.

- Farmers in Punjab, Haryana, Rajasthan, Himachal...
- The still simmering labour unrest in the NCR
- ASHA workers and labour unions in Haryana
- Tribal women (and men) in Madhya Pradesh resisting the Ken-Betwa river linking project
- Chipko 2.0 against the proposed felling of 4,000 trees in Uttarakhand
- Students trying to save large parts of the Jauhar University campus in Uttar Pradesh
- Farmers protesting acquisition of their land to build an AI township in Karnataka
- Villagers protesting the demolition of 70 homes to build flats for MLAs in Chhattisgarh
- Employees of a cooperative bank



The reality is that the entire system of governance is corrupt and even citizens benefit from this.

Rather than searching for incremental solutions or ad hoc changes in policy, the young people who are dreaming of a better India must grapple with the challenge of finding a shared moral vocabulary. How does one combine Savitri Bai Phule’s idea of education as care, Ambedkar’s idea of dignity, Lohia’s idea of the vigilant citizen, Gandhi’s idea of swaraj, Begum Rokeya’s idea of political awakening, Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan’s idea of service and trusteeship, Ram Dayal Munda’s idea of coexistence with both people and nature and the Constitution’s promise of equal citizenship when we have all become so insular that we are concerned with only those issues that directly affect us.

Perhaps one answer lies in imagining all citizens as custodians of a trust. This trust is the plural idea of India that we have inherited, with its diverse peoples, traditions, religions, rivers and mountains, forests and deserts, animals and plants. This trust is the Preamble of our Constitution. Custodianship (*sanrakshita*) links us to the past but also fosters responsibility towards the future. It refuses to see everything including relations between people through the lens of a State. It focuses on covenants not contracts; homes not markets; the future as much as the present. If citizenship bestows the individual with rights, custodianship encourages responsibility not just for ourselves but for everyone.

This past week ‘the future’ of India has been protesting in Delhi. They have also learned the costs of raising their voice. India does not belong to the government nor a community nor a party, but is a shared trust where *maryada*, ethical restraint, should determine the State’s relationship with the people. A good society is one in which all those who wield power—government, corporations, religious institutions, the bureaucracy and indeed citizens—act as custodians of a trust, bound by *maryada*. Lord Ram is known as ‘Maryada Purushottam’, one of supreme ethical restraint. The ideal ruler limits themselves. The ideal ruler is not necessarily the strongest but one with great ethical restraint. When *maryada* is violated, what is held in trust comes under threat. It must be protected. ■

ALI KHAN MAHMUDABAD is a writer, wayfarer and self-professed scoundrel

protesting for better wages in Tamil Nadu

- Aspirants to the state’s public service commission protesting in Maharashtra
- Women vendors sitting on an indefinite strike against the arrests of village volunteers in Manipur
- The Bahujan community protesting the murder of a young girl in Uttar Pradesh

For the most part, people will view all these protests as disparate. But even though the lifeworlds of these people might be wildly different, it is evident that they are all reacting to an overly centralised and unaccountable state that relies on technocratic solutions provided and upheld by corrupted institutions. This, in turn, concentrates power and money at the cost of federalism, the environment, civil liberties, fundamental rights and even basic human dignity. Citizens are losing agency over their lives. Indeed, the very idea of citizenship has become fraught with ambiguity. The question that

follows is not what ideologies these groups might share but how they view each other and talk to each other. The first step is to stitch and mend our social fabric and not to think in terms of political alliances. The challenge is first social, and only then political.

Today, the distance between these communities is not just geographic but emotional. Social media has inured us to the suffering of others. It has also created echo chambers that reinforce our own victimhood. We no longer know how to talk to one another, let alone imagine what we may have in common. On the face of it, a Muslim facing a bulldozer might have nothing in common with a Hindu agitated about the embezzlement of Ram Mandir donations. Maharashtra public service commission aspirants may see tribals in Madhya Pradesh as anti-progress. Farmers in Gujarat might see farmers in Punjab as anti-national. Kashmiris might feel that everyone had it coming.

What is needed is a politics of translation, not simply shared

ideology nor even passive solidarity. No decisions without the equal participation of all stake-holders—this would resonate with the Kashmiri desiring statehood and the Karnataka farmer who refuses to give up her land despite being offered crores. The grievances are different; the principle remains the same. The protests today are partly the result of having always viewed the problems of others as unrelated to ours.

Historically the JP movement and the India Against Corruption movement were important in that they were umbrella movements. The failure of the JP movement was that while it used a moral vocabulary (‘Sampoorna Kranti’) to bring together diverse people who shared common grievances about the excesses of unbridled power, it did not articulate a shared philosophy to govern. It was oppositional by its very nature. The IAC also brought together groups that had little in common because it identified a shared problem: corruption. The failure was that it only held politicians accountable.

A famous protest and the search for a moral centre

Aparna Vaidik

On 20 July, Raisina Hill—the sleeping Goliath—was awakened by thousands of ‘cockroaches’ thumping the monster’s chest, demanding a hearing. This extraordinary upsurge of civil protest in Delhi has a lineage of Gen Z uprisings in Hong Kong (2019), Sri Lanka (2022), Kenya and Bangladesh (2024), Nepal, Madagascar and Morocco (2025). A mix of rage at failing economies, joblessness, institutional betrayal, administrative corruption, the helplessness of being mute spectators of a live-

streamed genocide and much more is feeding into the disillusionment of the youth. Social/digital media is mobilising them at a speed unprecedented in human history. Witnessing their outpouring makes one want to uphold their resistance as proof of human resilience.

While some commentators see the CJP, which initiated the protests at Jantar Mantar, as a ragtag bunch of political newbies without an ideological core, as amateurs still figuring their way and some others find their early moves self-serving, the sheer energy of the mobilisation on the day was jaw-dropping. The

demographic could hardly be more diverse: college and school students, professionals, the unemployed, the low employed, parents, teachers, artists, activists, social media influencers, celebrities, political leaders—they were all there. Many turned up to simply express solidarity with the young protestors who had dared to take on an arrogant establishment. This motley crowd had people from the Left and Right and all stripes of the political Centre, it had disillusioned BJP votaries and Islamophobes, a fair mix of Ambedkarites, liberals and students who are either members of or align

closely with the left student unions AISA, SFI, AISF.

Irrespective of their belief systems, party affiliations, political ideologies or the lack of it, they share a common life experience and psychological make-up. They are what the British labour economist Guy Standing calls the ‘precariat’—a noun made up of the words ‘precarious’ and ‘proletariat’. They are a new social class that leads, or at least imagines that it does, a precarious life filled with chronic uncertainty in terms of employment, social stability, affording their lifestyle and future well-being. Although the material conditions of their life should make them lean towards leftist ideas (of social equity, redistribution, collective responsibility etc.), they don’t always. Their alienating life experience can also make the precariat vulnerable to right-wing

ideology and to populist demagogues who offer psychological opiates such as the promise of a secure future, a sense of control over their life, a sense of belonging and the promise of social mobility. So, the precariat can lean both ways, which possibly explains the ideological agnosticism of this movement.

There are several historical precedents for large and successful student movements that did not have an ideological core holding them together. One such instance was the student upsurge of 1968 that cut across Europe and North America. It started in France where a group of students began protesting for education reforms at the Nanterre campus of University of Paris. It soon spread to Sorbonne University and from there spilled out on the streets. The police response was quintessential—clubbing protestors, teargassing them and arrests. Hereon, the student movement engulfed the entire country. The workers joined the protests in droves—striking work, pouring out into the streets and seizing factories. The protests paralysed the government and forced it to negotiate. The changes were slow and incremental but substantial. The Parisian student protests inspired and became part of a larger transatlantic mobilisation in Berlin, Prague, Warsaw, New York and Mexico City. Television was the media tool that rapidly broadcast the information and galvanised the protests. Seeing people of a similar demographic protest in another part of the world emboldened and energised the students globally. It enabled a serendipitous exchange of political tactics, ideas and language.

What is worth noting is that all the 1968 student movements ‘lacked’ a unified ideological core. They rejected both post-industrial capitalism and Soviet-style communism. These movements demonstrated that protests didn’t have to be led by trade unions or formal

political parties with a clear ideological stance. These protests could be described as pop-up mass movements of the precariat, which in the absence of access to the levers of power, tended to erupt on the streets. The Arab Spring (2010) and Occupy Wall Street protest (2011) are also examples of horizontal social mobilisation, a decentralised network without top-down leadership and one built through digital networking. They had a consensus-based political agenda instead of one that was ideologically driven. In all the instances there was a demand for accountability—from institutions, from the people in power and from the gerontocracy.

However, while these movements had very powerful groundswell, they were short-lived. They made significant gains but lost their momentum along the way. This movement too is prone to the same risk. So, what will ensure that it sustains its momentum? The ground has already begun shifting in terms of supporters. The people who joined the protest are stretching the CJP’s initial demands in the direction of an anti-Modi wave. Seeing this, even more people are joining the protests across India. To sustain the momentum, it needs to ask some hard questions. Is seeking solutions to isolated problems (preventing question paper leaks) and fixing them individually (demanding resignations) enough? Will educational reforms enable epistemic justice and ensure equitable access for minorities? Defeating Goliath is certainly important but will it erase the inequity of a caste-ridden society and the excesses of majoritarianism? The romance of resistance is indeed heady, but the need of the hour is to interrogate the moral imperative of the movement. ■



Jaw-dropping energy Those who dared to take on a brutal police force and an arrogant government

The romance of resistance is indeed heady, but the need of the hour is to interrogate the moral imperative of the movement

Jantar Mantar The invisible faces of the student movement



Left we forget Memorialising the footwear protesters lost when they were being brutalised by the police in Delhi on 20 July; (right) a group of nihangs make almond ragda for gurdwara protesters at Jantar Mantar



Photo: Vipin

Nandlal Sharma

Solidarity is the soul of any mass mobilisation. Add diversity to the mix and it springs to life. On 20 July 2026, those who gathered at Jantar Mantar to demand accountability from the central government over the paper leak issue made it clear: the young people of this country are angry and unafraid. Even as the Delhi Police, under orders to crush the movement in its infancy, rained blows and fired tear gas shells, the protesters stood their ground.

If anything, the police brutalities solidified their resolve, as more and more young people flowed in and out of the site at all hours, standing patiently in long queues, braving bad weather, internet shutdowns and closed metro stations to get there and stay there.

The circle of protest expanded to a circle of care and community. Unable to get sleep, Mohammad Ahmed Saifi, a resident of Old Delhi, decided to tend to those sleeping by the road, exhausted by the oppressive heat and humidity. A video of him fanning them as tenderly as a mother went viral. Soon that became a common scene at Jantar Mantar. Anyone holding a hand fan would catch themselves and anyone around.

This instinctive caring is also a protest against the politics of hate that, since 2014, has divided friend from friend, strained family ties,

and split neighbourhoods down communal faultlines. The shoes and slippers that lay scattered in the aftermath of the police lathi-charge have been gathered into something like a site-specific installation by JNU research scholar and former NSUI Uttar Pradesh president Akhilesh Yadav. “We want both Modi and Amit Shah to resign,” says Yadav. “These shoes are the symbol of our struggle.”

*

In the enormous crowd of youngsters on 20 July, I noticed a large number of women, who had travelled to Jantar Mantar not only from different parts of Delhi, but also from Shimla, Chandigarh, Gurugram... Quietly and with remarkable composure, they expressed their anger. Not all of them were willing to do so on camera, but their very presence lent dignity and seriousness.

Anjali Vajpayee, six months pregnant and a law student, was there with her husband. “My father is a BJP supporter,” she said, “and even he admits that accountability is beyond Modi. If they could indulge in corruption over something as sacred to them as the Ram Mandir, why would they care about students or ordinary citizens?”

When the police removed Sonam Wangchen from the protest site (on 18 July), thousands more poured in. There was hardly any room to

stand, and it was unbearably hot. Tavisha from Shimla had the foresight to bring a large crate of bottled water with her.

“People may have woken up late,” she said, “but they *have* awakened. If the education system isn’t reformed, students aren’t going to shut up and go away.”

Raj, a tenth-grade student from Prayagraj, ran away from home a week earlier to reach Jantar Mantar in time. “I didn’t tell my family!” he said. “They would never have allowed me to come.”

Carrying only a single change of clothes, he spent his days distributing food and water to protesters, living on whatever he got. As people began to feel the urge to participate in the protest, if only by helping in some small way, supplies started pouring in.

Sandeep, who sells ‘Ram laddus’ near Jantar Mantar Lane, handed over his entire stock (for the token sum of Rs 500) to Asad Ahmed and his companions to give the students a pop of energy. A young man from Sambhal, Uttar Pradesh, bought golgappas wholesale in Old Delhi with the same idea. When an *Indian Express* reporter approached him, he declined to give his name, saying: “I’m not here to become famous.”

Those who couldn’t come in person sent TLC through Zomato and Swiggy. Anuj Rawat from Mumbai reportedly instructed his delivery partner: “Whoever’s

hungry there, just give them the food.” The delivery address simply read: Jantar Mantar. In fact, so much food arrived that organisers eventually appealed to people to stop ordering more.

Visually impaired young people were active participants, alongside countless young volunteers like Nikita, Danish, Ashu and Arya who were distributing meals for free of charge: a fitting response to those

making snide remarks about ‘foreign funding’.

While the protest from the get-go, it grew with the numbers. Gurdwaras located around Jantar Mantar, Sikh organisations and the Congress Seva Dal pitched in visibly from 21 July onwards. Others worked silently, off camera, cleaning the site every evening. All it took was one person to begin picking up the trash for impromptu teams to collect the garbage and deposit it at designated spots. No one considered this beneath their dignity, all were equally responsible.

What captured the public eye were the posters and banners that reached millions online. Almost every young person at Jantar Mantar carried a handmade placard bristling with satire directed at Dharmendra Pradhan, Narendra Modi, the government. ‘When will the paper leaks stop? *Melody khao, khud jaan jao!*’; ‘*Burey din hi achhe thhey!*’ (The bad days were better!!); ‘*Bollywood kidhar hai? Asli Durandhar idhar hai!*’ (Where’s Bollywood? The real heroes are here!); ‘56 ईंच का छोटा बंदर, भाग नरेन्द्र भाग नरेन्द्र’ (A little monkey with a 56-inch chest, run Narendra run). Some unprintable ones (which the infamous IT Cell have loved to expunge) quickly flooded social media feeds.

Many protesters who said they didn’t have any political affiliation could be heard chanting

The caring spirit, visible from Day 1, kept growing as gurdwaras and others opened their doors

Nobody believes in dialogue, except screenplay writers

Chandril Bhattacharya

Democracy and dialogue are married by definition and divorced by intention. Any ruling party at first ignores dissent, as if that does not and should not exist in this best of all possible regimes. Then, as the number of dissenters swells, as the marches get bigger and the protesters louder, when it becomes impossible to ignore nationwide support for a movement, the regime has a Eureka-moment: “Let’s beat them to a pulp!” The police are supplied with ample tear gas and water cannons, and a heavily one-sided lathi-charged fight unfolds on the streets—and on screens.

When scenes of a government torturing its own people ripple across mobiles and media the regime hasn’t been able to gag, when a collective horror ripples through the nation seeing the bloodied heads and scarred skin of peaceful protesters, the eminences in the ruling party realise: “Oops, this doesn’t bode well for future votes!” Only then does it consider having a dialogue with people, a civilised conversation about grievances and policies. What should have been the first step in a civilised society comes last, and that too only when pushed into a corner.

Most of us have a faulty idea of democracy. Ruling parties throughout India seem to think that democracy is just autocracy decided

by votes. They think of themselves as kings, entitled to absolute power. Kings dictate, dominate, decree—why should they listen? And a party that gets to rule for a long period starts believing it has been appointed dictator-for-life, that it has the right not to listen, not to consider, not to learn, not to introspect—ever. It begins to run on infinite arrogance, muscle power, IT-cell generated memes, and a never-ending supply of

bulldozers.

What happens when it encounters young, honest, fearless faces demanding answers to important questions? It barks through megaphones that the entire movement is sponsored by another country or even another planet. It pushes the idea that the government is synonymous with the nation, that anybody who rises against the

government is therefore anti-national. But Gen Z is sharp, articulate, reflective and prepared. Patiently, logically it makes its case. Slowly but surely people begin to distinguish between propaganda and common sense. Because the callousness of the government towards students driven to suicide by paper leaks has not gone unobserved.

Gen Z toppled the government in Nepal. Street protests in Ukraine forced Zelenskyy to fire his top general Syrskyi. Will our Indian cockroaches—nourished by the sympathy and support of common people coming forward with food, water, medication—win this match? Will the government realise that in a democracy it is not a favour to grant dissenters an audience—it is

Photo: Getty Images



Ruling parties are wont to forget that people may give up the vigil, but they hold on to the fury and the pain

the ever-popular ‘*Hum leke rahenge azaadi*’ (We’ll take our freedom, come what may)’. Some of them might well have gone home wearing AISA or SFI badges, picked up at the numerous stalls set up by left-wing student organisations.

Just to demand accountability has meant being labelled an ‘urban naxal’, an andolanjevi, part of the notorious ‘Khan Market Gang’. A few days into the protest, a new label found these young students: ‘terrorists’, courtesy the education minister. Colonel R.K. Sharma, a military veteran with 38 years of service, openly scoffed: “These are the children we took bullets for. If paper leaks are still happening and students are killing themselves, it’s only fitting that we come to Jantar Mantar and raise our voices for them, with them. If so many are anti-national, then everyone sitting at the highest levels of power should resign.” He wasn’t the only such ally. Unable to make it to Delhi, Param Vir Chakra awardee Captain Bana Singh and Captain Yogendra Singh Yadav spoke out in their support.

Radha Joshi (name changed), an officer in the Delhi Police Special Branch deployed at Jantar Mantar, came back to support the youth, out of uniform and off-duty. Her rationale: “My own children are already settled. I’m here for the sake of the generations to come.” This familial feeling was echoed by 58-year-old Gurkirat Singh from Delhi: “Every child affected by a paper leak is my child. We shouldn’t wait to protest until we are personally affected.”

Perhaps it is this sentiment that has drawn hundreds of thousands to Jantar Mantar over the past month. Leaving the comfort of their homes and taking to the streets are individuals of all ages, affiliations and backgrounds. As one placard read: ‘It is so bad even the privileged are here.’

And yes, apart from the mothers with babies in their arms, the grandmothers, the veterans, the secret senders of food and the unnamed do-gooders, there was the comradely spirit of Gandhi, Bhagat Singh and Ambedkar. Carrying portraits of Bhagat Singh, chanting ‘Jai Bhim’, choosing the hunger strike as the Gandhian way of resistance—all paths seemed to converge at Jantar Mantar. What was extraordinary was that even after the police brutalities of 20 July, the massive crowd did not abandon the path of non-violence. No matter how many nail-studded batons were raised, they did not raise their hands in retaliation. ‘Bring it on,’ they seemed to say. ‘We’re ready’.

What began with a remark about cockroaches is burgeoning into a movement that’s bringing people together, in courage and kindness. What can be more frightening for those who thrive on fear and hate? ■

a responsibility? Will this protest kindle others against this government—against its communal rhetoric, its habit of leaving dissidents to rot in jail on the whim of a suspicion?

We do not know and we cannot say. Yet.

In India, there is a tendency to fizzle out. A movement that is led and backed not by a political party but by ordinary people has a high probability of not producing extraordinary results, however passionate and vigorous it might be. Time waits for no one. But for the powers-that-be, time can be made to slow down. Rulers can sit on a decision for months, but people cannot protest for months on end. They have colleges to attend, offices to report to, homes to run, families to feed. The intensity that burns in the short run starts flickering in the long run, and that’s the opportunity governments ignore for.

But what they tend to play are the seeds that scatter and invariably bloom. In West Bengal, the movement against the rape and murder of a lady doctor in R.G. Kar Hospital spread like wildfire but lost its steam after a few months. The government thought it was over, until the election results two years later, where the anger exploded. People gave up the vigil, but held on to the fury and the pain.

Each movement has its visible footprint, which in this digital age manifests through millions of photos, comments, shares, likes, reels. These come back to haunt the rulers. Equally, each movement has its abstract footprint, one that unmasks authority’s apathetic attitudes and undemocratic beliefs and sets in motion a chain of unstoppable questions.

The answers usually blow in the wind, and are not hard to catch. ■

CHANDRIL BHATTACHARYA is a lyricist, poet, essayist and filmmaker from Kolkata

THE CM'S PET PROJECT: INSIDE D.K. SHIVAKUMAR'S BID TO REINVENT GRIEVANCE REDRESSAL

The complaint box gets a cabinet seat: Karnataka's governance overhaul

How the Praja Seva Ministry is reshaping citizen grievance redressal across the state

A new chapter in citizen-centric public administration

For decades, governance in India's villages and small towns has followed a familiar script. A farmer whose land record needs correction, a widow waiting on a pension file, a family seeking a water connection — their only recourse has often been a long, expensive journey to a district office, or further still, to Vidhana Soudha in Bengaluru, hoping someone in power might finally hear them. Karnataka's Cabinet has now moved to rewrite that script.

In a significant governance reform, the state government has approved the creation of a new Praja Seva Ministry — a "Ministry of Service to the People" — dedicated to citizen grievances. The decision, taken by the Cabinet under Chief Minister D.K. Shivakumar, is widely seen as his personal brainchild, a pet project he has driven at every stage. Officials describe it as one of the most ambitious administrative restructurings the state has attempted, built on a premise Shivakumar has repeatedly articulated: that responsiveness to citizens should be governance's central purpose, not a footnote.

Why a dedicated ministry, and why now

Grievance redressal has traditionally been a secondary function, scattered across dozens of departments with no single authority accountable for outcomes. A broken road complaint might sit with public works; a delayed pension might languish in social welfare; a disputed land record might get lost between revenue and a taluk office. Each department has had its own pace and priorities.

The Praja Seva Ministry inverts this arrangement, elevating grievance redressal into an independent ministry with a clear chain of command, designed as a centralized platform that monitors and resolves grievances across every department. According to the government, the new department's mandate covers grievance management, process simplification, time-bound resolution, and the institutionalisation of best practices. In effect, it is meant to be both a citizen's advocate and an internal watchdog that keeps departments accountable.

Who will run it

The Chief Minister has been clear that this cannot be a paper reform. A dedicated Cabinet Minister will take full political charge of the department, giving grievance redressal a permanent seat at the highest table of government. Alongside the minister will be a senior IAS officer, tasked with administrative oversight, ensuring departments comply with directives and that delays are tracked to their source rather than lost in the system.

Importantly, petitions submitted directly to the Chief Minister and other ministers will also be folded into this new system. Rather than VIP petitions receiving separate, informal attention while ordinary complaints wait in queue, everything is meant to flow through one integrated, trackable mechanism — closing the gap between how the politically connected are heard and how everyone else is heard.

Taking governance to the taluk

Perhaps the most politically significant element of the reform is its insistence on physical presence at the grassroots. Rather than centralising decision-making further in Bengaluru, the initiative pushes ministers and legislators outward, into the taluks and villages where problems originate.

Under the plan, ministers in charge of districts will hold regular public meetings with local MLAs in their constituencies, reviewing how programmes are being implemented, assessing local issues in real time, and ensuring grievances are addressed at the grassroots level rather than escalated endlessly upward.

Speaking separately at a felicitation programme organised by the Karnataka Rajya Sarkari Naukara Sangha, the state employees' association, Chief Minister Shivakumar sketched out the human dimension of this commitment. He said people walk into government offices carrying the same hope they carry into a temple, and that it is the administration's duty to respond with compassion, resolving problems within the law rather than turning citizens away. Ministers are expected to visit a taluk office on the first



Photo: Gettyimages

and third Saturdays of every month specifically to hear grievances directly.

This marks a departure from ad-hoc, verbal assurances. Grievances raised in these sessions are meant to be mapped against statutory turnaround times, tracked against a legal framework with a defined resolution period. If local officers fail to act within that window, the matter escalates automatically to higher administrative tiers — removing the need for a citizen to keep returning to ask about the status of their own complaint.

The technology backbone: iPGRS 2.0

None of this would be sustainable at scale without a robust digital architecture, and this is where the Department of e-Governance enters. Home Minister Priyank Kharge, describing the initiative as a major step toward people-centric governance, said the department would provide the technological backbone through an upgraded Integrated Public Grievance Redressal System, or iPGRS 2.0.

The new system allows multi-channel access, letting citizens lodge complaints through a web portal, mobile application, dedicated helpline, or local service kiosks such as Bapuji Seva Kendras. This matters in a state where digital access varies widely between urban centres and rural districts — no citizen should

be locked out simply for lacking a smartphone or reliable internet.

Beyond access, iPGRS 2.0 is built around accountability features largely absent from earlier mechanisms. Citizens can upload photographs of the problem — a pothole, a leaking pipe, a malfunctioning streetlight — complete with automatic geo-tagging, letting officials pinpoint the exact location. Every complaint generates a unique grievance ID along with automated SMS confirmations, so citizens can track progress much as they would a courier package.

Crucially, the system carries an in-built escalation matrix. An unresolved complaint does not simply sit in a queue — it automatically moves up to a higher administrative tier. This single feature addresses one of the most common failures of grievance systems worldwide: complaints formally registered but practically forgotten.

Taken together, officials say the technology-driven framework should improve transparency, enable real-time tracking, and strengthen coordination between departments that have historically operated as silos.

An institutional design built for accountability

Structurally, the reform creates a clear and deliberate hierarchy of responsibility. At the top

sits the Cabinet Minister in charge, providing political ownership and accountability to the legislature and to voters. Directly beneath is the senior IAS officer responsible for administrative oversight, ensuring inter-departmental compliance and identifying where delays are occurring. From there, the structure branches into three functional arms: district-in-charge ministers and MLAs handling grassroots outreach; a centralized intake mechanism absorbing petitions filed with the Chief Minister and Cabinet Ministers; and the iPGRS 2.0 technology hub run by the Department of e-Governance.

This design is intended to solve a very specific administrative problem. In the old model, a complaint's fate often depended heavily on which department it happened to land in, how motivated that department's local staff were, and whether the complainant had any political connections to escalate the matter. By centralising intake and creating a single point of political and bureaucratic accountability, the government hopes to standardise outcomes — so that resolution depends on the merits of the grievance and the clock ticking against it, not on the identity or influence of the person filing it.

The human argument behind the reform

Behind the administrative architecture lies a more fundamental argument about the nature of public service itself — one that Shivakumar has made central to his own political identity through this initiative. At the employees' felicitation event, the Chief Minister described government employees as the "ambassadors of Karnataka" and the backbone of the administrative machinery, while also making clear that positions of authority do not, by themselves, command respect — integrity and genuine service do. He urged officials to ensure that poor and vulnerable citizens in particular receive timely assistance, while staying within the bounds of legal provisions.

This framing matters because it positions the Praja Seva Ministry not merely as a bureaucratic restructuring exercise, but as an attempt to reset the ethical culture of public administration as a whole — one where empathy toward citizens is treated as a professional obligation rather than an optional courtesy.

The road ahead

Reforms of this scale call for sustained commitment on the ground, and the government has built that commitment directly into the design. Weekly ministerial visits to taluk offices, an escalation matrix that automatically flags unresolved complaints, and the integration of VIP petitions into a single tracked system together reflect a clear resolve to carry

Why this reform could matter

The stakes of getting this right are not abstract. For rural and economically marginalised citizens, the old system's demand that grievances be pursued in person, often over long distances and at real financial cost, has functioned as a quiet but powerful barrier to justice. Decentralising redressal down to the taluk level, and backing it with a legally defined resolution timeline, is aimed squarely at removing that barrier. There is also a systemic dividend the government hopes to capture from this reform. By aggregating grievance data through iPGRS 2.0, officials expect to spot recurring patterns — a water supply complaint concentrated in one district, or repeated revenue-department delays in another. Rather than responding to each complaint in isolation, this data-driven view could allow policymakers to address systemic issues through structural, lasting fixes rather than one-off band-aid solutions.

The initiative also arrives against a backdrop of Karnataka positioning itself as a state at the cutting edge of governance innovation, having been separately ranked among the world's leading startup ecosystems in a recent Global Startup Ecosystem Report. Whether that same spirit of innovation can be successfully redirected toward the far more mundane, but equally important and consequential, work of grievance redressal will be one of the more closely watched governance experiments in the country today.

governance to every corner of the state. Extending this reach across all thirty-one districts, including those farthest from Bengaluru, is central to the reform's ambition — and it is precisely this commitment to grassroots delivery that the government is positioning as the Praja Seva Ministry's defining strength.

The intent behind the initiative is unambiguous. By combining ministerial accountability, administrative oversight, grassroots outreach, and a digital backbone under one institutional roof, Karnataka is working to bring governance closer to citizens — not as a slogan, but as a functioning, trackable, time-bound system. It is an initiative that carries Shivakumar's own personal commitment behind it; few reforms in his tenure bear his personal stamp as visibly as this one. As the Chief Minister himself put it, citizens walk into government offices carrying the same hope they carry into a temple. The Praja Seva Ministry, his own brainchild, is his effort to ensure that hope is met with the response it deserves.

Photo: GettyImages



The clamour for change echoes far and wide



Photo: Getty Images

The police in BJP-ruled Maharashtra was no less intolerant of protesters. A scene from Mumbai on 20 July

Herjinder

On Monday, 20 July, the national capital became the epicentre of a student uprising that rang out across the country and even abroad in cities like NYC, San Jose and London, where the Indian diaspora has a sizeable presence. The police deployment in Delhi was heavy on the day. Several arterial roads leading in and out of central Delhi were barricaded and closed to traffic. Around 4 p.m., as the heaving crowds of peaceful protesters finally breached police defences at Jantar Mantar and began their march towards Parliament Street, defying barricades and prohibitory orders, the

police went on a rampage—with batons, water cannons, tear gas, pellet guns et al. Delhi's fortissimo note may have drowned out the chorus of protests in the country, but they had begun even before things came to a head in Delhi on Monday. On Sunday, 19 July, the morning after Sonam Wangchuk was forcibly whisked away from Jantar Mantar, there was a protest at Mumbai's Shivaji Park where hundreds gathered in solidarity with the agitation. Former Maharashtra chief minister Uddhav Thackeray joined the demonstrators and called for a larger agitation against the Union government. In Bengaluru, Freedom Park overflowed with students and young professionals.

Their message went beyond a single examination (NEET) and a solitary minister (Dharmendra Pradhan). As postgraduate student Apoorva R. put it: "It's not about one person or one exam. If students remain silent today, tomorrow every institution will lose credibility." Jadavpur University in Kolkata organised its first big march since the change of government in West Bengal. Students, teachers and research scholars marched together, condemning what they described as police brutality against peaceful protesters. Presidency University students joined the chorus in Delhi for Pradhan's resignation, while nearly fifty students at Medical College Kolkata

observed a twelve-hour hunger strike in solidarity with Wangchuk, then on the twenty-first day of his fast. Beyond these metros, the same simmering resentment was palpable in the NSUI (National Students' Union of India) gherao outside the education minister's residence in Bhubaneswar, in prayer meetings in Leh and Kargil, torch marches in Purnea, Sikar, Jaipur and Ranchi, demonstrations in Lucknow, Chandigarh, Indore, Sirsa, Jaunpur, Aligarh, Bhiwani and Yamunanagar. Even in Manipur, already dealing with a hellish ethnic conflict, students and citizens made common cause with the protestors in Delhi. Perhaps the most revealing geography was Himachal Pradesh. In Shimla, students marched several miles in pouring rain. Simultaneous protests surfaced in Hamirpur, Nadaun and Barsar—places that rarely occupy national headlines. The movement had travelled far beyond the national capital and state capitals into smaller towns and districts, where competitive examinations have become the only gateway to social mobility. Two cities deserve special attention: Kota and Dehradun. Kota, India's coaching capital, hosted Rahul Gandhi's 'Chhatron Ki Goonj' programme, which drew an unexpectedly

large audience. Students returned to the streets in significant numbers after the Delhi crackdown. In Dehradun too, student organisations demanded accountability for the repeated paper leaks that have wrecked confidence in the country's education system. Beyond the scale or spread of this protest, what makes it truly remarkable is its social texture. This was never a protest confined to one student organisation or one political party's calendar. Across the country, students stood alongside teachers, parents, retired government employees, farmer unions, labour organisations and women's groups. In Indore, freedom fighter and former Parliamentarian Pandit Ramkrishna Sharma, who is now 101, walked to a protest site to express solidarity with students demanding educational reforms. Posters displayed the names of students who had died by suicide after repeated paper leaks or other exam failures. Here, the candle-light vigils and silent marches gave the impression that grief had perhaps overwhelmed rage. This was communal mourning; what had brought them together was shared grief. The large footprint of this protest suggests that these movements no longer require a headquarters. Delhi did not export this protest. No doubt social media was both carrier and catalyst, but technology alone cannot manufacture outrage. Digital platforms may spread information faster than wildfire, but it was shared experience, shared pain that made it possible for people living so far from each other to make common cause. That the confrontation between the police and the protesters in Delhi made the headlines is not surprising but this quiet convergence of aspirations and anxieties is also telling us something. India's youth is lashing out against a system that has failed them. Even merit is not a passport to opportunity and the discovery of merit has itself become a lottery. Years of disciplined preparation can be rendered meaningless by systemic failures. History reminds us that student uprisings are early warning systems for democracies. Long before economic statistics or electoral verdicts reveal public dissatisfaction, campuses begin to register shifts in the national mood. The message of 20 July is devastatingly simple: India's youth is serving this government notice. They have waited too long to be heard—and can wait no longer for change. ■

The large footprint of this protest is a sign that the movement no longer requires a nerve centre. Delhi did not export this protest

'We are destitutes in our own country'

The police crackdown on the Ken-Betwa protest in Madhya Pradesh has left Bundelkhand's people high and dry and bereft

Rashme Sehgal

In another country, or in ours at another time, the leaders might have died of shame. To see poverty-stricken villagers enacting their own death along the banks of the Barana river, a tributary of the Ken. Women lying on wooden funeral pyres. Men and women, faces smeared with ash, arms tied to wooden crosses. Young men standing in the water with nooses around their necks, holding placards that read, 'Nyaya de ya mrityu (Give us justice or give us death)'. All to drive home the agony of having lost their homes to the Daudhan dam being built as part of the Rs 45,000 crore Ken-Betwa Link Project, the first of a proposed series of 37 ILR (Interlinking of Rivers) projects from Bihar and Karnataka to Kerala and Sikkim. One of the protestors, 23-year-old Raj Kumar, summed it up: "We have lost not only our land, our livelihoods, our forests, but also our cultural identity. We have become destitutes in our own country." Social activist Amit Bhatnagar, the Sonam Wangchuk of Bundelkhand, has been organising protests here for the last four years. Starting 5 July 2026, he went on hunger strike near Kupi village. On Sunday 19 July, around 5 a.m., the police moved in to put an end to the agitation. Bhatnagar was taken to the Chhatarpur District Hospital in Madhya Pradesh, where he was in the ICU for his deteriorating health and plunging BP. On 23 July, Bhatnagar announced in a video statement that he was suspending his hunger strike (after 18 days), while continuing a 'nyay upvas' to ensure every affected villager gets justice. As many as 400 concerned citizens, actors, activists, social workers had urged him to end his fast, but what convinced him was his mother's plea. Given his poor health, he would stay under the care of the doctors in his hometown Bijawar, until he was well enough to be on the road again. The *andolan* is on, he said, and it will be a long haul. He should know. Over the past three months, 42 cases have been filed against him, and he has been jailed several times during this agitation. His colleague Divya Ahirwar, an activist studying to be a lawyer, pointed out, "If even talking about rights, democracy and the Constitution is a crime, not only Amit Bhatnagar but every youth, every affected person will repeat these 'crimes' over and over again." Speaking to this reporter before his hunger strike, Bhatnagar questioned the modus operandi of the government, which went ahead without having held a single gram sabha meeting to seek the consent of

the communities affected. "Tribal areas fall under Schedule 6 of the Constitution where consent of the gram sabha is mandatory for the transfer of tribal land. No consent was sought; in fact, signatures of consent were forged. Worse, no details of the Environment Impact Assessment or the consequences of cutting down 45 lakh trees were placed in the public domain. The two cities of Banda and Khajuraho, both in Bundelkhand, are listed among the hottest cities in India. The Panna Tiger Reserve is the lung of Bundelkhand. What will happen once entire forests are submerged or chopped down? [The Daudhan dam will not only bifurcate the Panna Tiger Reserve but also submerge 5,578 hectares of some of the oldest forests in the country.] Temperatures will rise further. We have been forewarned by scientists that when this happens, rains in our region will decline by another 20 per cent," said Bhatnagar. He also tabled his shock at the lack of details about the hydrological flow of the Ken and Betwa rivers. "Engineers associated with the project confess that the last hydrological study ... was conducted in 2001. The situation on the ground has altered dramatically since. The Ken is located lower than the Betwa which is double its size. In the last few years, the Ken has been completely dry in summer. Where will they get water for such a gigantic project?" This is the question uppermost in the minds of the villagers who have lost their homes. "Why was there no 'jan sunvai' before

Photos: IANS



Might against right The jal, chita, mitti andolan against the Ken-Betwa river linking project was brought to a rude end on 19 July

we were forcibly evicted?" asked 45-year-old Purshottam, who was among the protestors who stood in the Barana river for five straight days. "We have a symbiotic relationship with the forest. What will our fate be once we are pushed out? We will be forced to become migrant labourers without a roof over our heads." The tribals in Bundelkhand, primarily from the Gond and Kol communities, suspended a similar protest in the first two weeks of April 2026 after the district administration promised to revise its grossly inadequate rehabilitation package. The fresh package of Rs 450 crore does not make clear who the recipients are. Activists say that 40 per cent of villagers are yet to receive any compensation. They are convinced there's massive corruption at play.

Middle-aged Munna Bai says, "I am a widow. They have taken my house. I have received no compensation. Where has it gone?" Bhuda Devi's problem is different: "Why is compensation not being given to families headed by women? My largely absentee husband received over Rs 50,000 but spent most of it on drinking. What will my three children and I do now? Live on the road?" she asks. Other villagers baulk at the callousness of both the UP and MP state governments. One young villager observed, "UP Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath visited Bundelkhand on 8 July and promised to invest Rs 70 crore on ghat beautification, better tourism facilities, more industries. He didn't say a word about water scarcity, migration, unemployment or the illnesses

we suffer from due to the severe heat." Activist Priya Aheer is equally incensed. "The Daudhan dam is set to displace 6,000 families in Chhatarpur and around 1,500 families in the Panna district. We will lose our forests, our prime agricultural land, our homes for a dam being constructed on a river that has no water for over three months of the year! Sand mining in the Ken river has degraded the river bed, depleted water supplies and caused severe erosion. But instead of putting a stop to it, mining debris is being scattered all over our agricultural land. The state government is blind to what is happening, it only wants to cause further devastation," Aheer added. With so little access to clean drinking water or reliable electricity, what sense does it make to provide water and irrigation to 13 other districts while ignoring the needs of locals? The Supreme Court-appointed central empowered committee had, as far back as 2019, given a negative report on the viability of the project and suggested that the government explore more cost-effective ways of dealing with water scarcity in Bundelkhand. The case against the Ken-Betwa project is already pending in the Supreme Court. Why then the haste to push it through? ■

"We will lose our forests, our farms, our homes for a dam on a river that has no water for over three months of the year!"

Can America restrain its own President?



Photo: Getty Images

US President Donald Trump and his secretary of war Pete Hegseth (*far right*) may put a brave face on setbacks, but apart from now losing men in the war with Iran, the formidable US war machine is also losing firepower and depleted stocks of missiles and interceptors will takes years to rebuild

Ashok Swain

Donald Trump has restarted America’s war against Iran without answering the question that should have been answered before the first bomb fell: what political result can the US military campaign realistically aim for? The current phase of this war is not merely a return to a dead end. It begins from a worse position, against a more defiant adversary, with fewer military options, lower diplomatic credibility and greater danger to American troops and allies.

The earlier phase was supposed to demonstrate overwhelming power. Instead, Tehran learnt how to survive it and retaliate successfully. Iran has seen Washington’s weapons and the pressures shaping Trump’s decisions. Its leaders know that to thwart the US, all they need is to keep Hormuz unsafe, threaten US bases in the Gulf, raise energy costs and credibly threaten their allies in the region. Unlike the US, Iran has a clear strategy.

For the US and Trump, renewed bombing is a military exercise at great cost

but no clear strategic outcome. The war began around claims about Iran’s nuclear programme and the danger it allegedly posed to Israel. It has now become a battle over who controls shipping through the Strait of Hormuz. Trump says the US must keep the strait open, but it was open before he chose war. So, the US is losing lives, weapons and diplomatic capital trying to recover a position its own intervention destroyed.

Iran is injured no doubt, but it is still prepared to take risks. Its attacks have widened—from military facilities earlier to vital infrastructure now—in Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait, Oman and Jordan. Damage to Kuwaiti power and desalination plants shows how quickly the war can derail daily civilian life across the Gulf. A few successful strikes can disrupt shipping, frighten insurers and force a strategic reckoning by America’s Gulf partners—is hosting the US worth it?

The funeral of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei was revealing. The enormous crowds across several cities was proof that a majority of Iranians support national

America does have mechanisms to stop its president. What it lacks is the political courage to go down that route

resistance to the US. They have rallied under the flag when their country is under attack. The war has strengthened national unity and redirected public anger towards Washington. The funeral would have given the new leadership confidence that a resolutely defiant Iran has popular support. It also created a powerful demand for revenge, narrowing room for diplomacy and strengthening the hand of hardliners who argue that compromise only invites greater US pressure.

Washington is reinforcing that argument by expanding attacks beyond military sites. Bombing roads, bridges, hospitals, power systems and water facilities cannot be presented as precision pressure. Civilians experience it as collective punishment. Trump’s threat to destroy power plants and bridges unless Iran negotiates makes the coercive purpose plain to the world. Not only is it unlawful and morally indefensible, it is also strategically foolish. Broken water systems, destroyed transport links and dead civilians only deepen rage and legitimise Iran’s retaliatory tactics.

Air power can destroy infrastructure, but it cannot compel this large and proud country to surrender. Iran has more than ninety million people, difficult terrain and dispersed capabilities. If bombing cannot force capitulation, Washington has to either contemplate a suicidal ground invasion and occupation or make a strategic retreat.

America’s military advantage is also degrading. The 40-day war from late February to mid-April consumed large quantities of Tomahawk and JASSM missiles as well as Patriot, THAAD and naval interceptors. It will take years to rebuild those stocks. Every expensive interceptor used against an Iranian drone is unavailable for another strike. On the other hand, its ‘client’ state Ukraine is desperate for air defence systems, while American planners identify China as the central long-term challenge. A pursuit that drains scarce weapons in a war without a defined endpoint is ill-advised, to say the least.

Trump’s economic calculus is no better. Iran was already imposing costs by choking Hormuz and now the danger is spreading to the Red Sea shipping corridor. The Red Sea connects the Mediterranean Sea to the Indian Ocean via the Suez Canal and the Bab al-Mandab Strait. This corridor handles 12-15 per cent of global maritime trade and nearly 30 per cent of global container traffic. Iran’s allies the Houthis have threatened to blockade Saudi Arabia and shipping through Bab al-Mandab and the oil export hub of Yanbu, a port city on the Red Sea coast of western Saudi Arabia.

Hormuz and Bab al-Mandab are two vital arteries of global trade, and simultaneous blockades have potentially catastrophic consequences—not just for Gulf oil exports but also food imports for the entire Gulf region. Americans are not insulated from its inflationary after-effects. Restarting the war has only redoubled the domestic pressure that drove Trump to accept a ceasefire, and now mutual mistrust is at its all-time high.

Is there a way out? A temporary ceasefire proposed by mediators could stop the immediate cycle, but a durable settlement requires Washington to abandon the fantasy that negotiations are a ceremony of Iranian surrender. The US could pursue a limited bargain featuring secure navigation through Hormuz, protection of civilian shipping and verifiable restraints on Iran’s nuclear activities for reciprocal restraints on attacks and phased sanctions relief for Iran. The Gulf states of Oman and Qatar, European governments and the United Nations should have roles in monitoring and guaranteeing such an outcome. Diplomacy will look untidy because real diplomacy requires both sides to receive something they can defend at home.

A harder question is whether US can restrain its own president. Constitutionally, it can. Congress holds the powers to declare war, authorise the use of force and sanction funds for war efforts. But if the president is determined to follow his own whims, he can exploit legal ambiguities, describe offensive action as self-defence and claim that each pause resets the sixty-day clock.

The US Congress must then do more than express disapproval. It can pass binding legislation prohibiting funds for offensive operations against Iran, except to protect US forces from imminent attack. It can attach that restriction to essential defence appropriations, demand public legal justification, subpoena officials and hold continuous hearings on targets, casualties, costs and objectives. Impeachment remains the ultimate remedy for grave abuse, but it is politically improbable unless members of his own party break from him. The public also has a role. Elections can change Congress, and sustained opposition can raise the cost of disobedience.

America does have mechanisms to stop this president. What it lacks is not constitutional authority but the political courage to stop Trump from taking his country down a road on which every additional mile makes turning back more costly. ■

ASHOK SWAIN is a professor of peace and conflict research at Uppsala University, Sweden

Legal atmanirbharta? Perish the thought!

The last thing we need is swadeshi jurisprudence divorced from global principles, argues **Avay Shukla**

It was indeed a wise man who said judges should shun the spotlight and let their judgments do the talking. But that was before the era of the sound bite, YouTube and 24x7 breaking news. And, of course, post-retirement re-employment, or the need to demonstrate loyalty.

In India’s legal firmament today, judgements no longer make news, mainly, I suspect, because they have become one-sided and therefore predictable. It is the obiter dicta that make news nowadays, delivered from the lofty perch of finality, if not infallibility.

The Chief Justice of India Surya Kant is currently not only the master of the roster, he is also the master of the obiter dicta. How can we forget, if not treasure, his denunciation of the three distinguished academicians who wrote the chapter on the judiciary for an NCERT textbook, and his decision to bar them from any government engagement? The later ‘cockroach’ comment is now part of legal folklore. And just last month, in an address at Oxford University, he remarked that India should develop its own ‘swadeshi jurisprudence’, something even our freedom fighters had not thought of.

I am not sure what the CJI meant by this call for legal *atmanirbharta*, or whether this self-inflicted ghettoisation is the right course to follow. For, in civilised democracies at least, jurisprudence and laws are aligned with global principles, concepts, conventions, declarations, rights and charters, and until recently we more or less conformed to these universal principles. Over the last decade or so, however, we have started ploughing our own legal furrow, and the remark of the CJI has only served to draw attention to this unhealthy development.

For, it must be lamented, swadeshi jurisprudence has unfortunately already arrived in India, which is why, according to the World Justice Project’s Rule of Law

Index 2025, we rank 86th out of 143 countries, firmly in the bottom half. We have been consistently slipping down this index—in 2014, we ranked 66th.

Frankly, I am not surprised, because the evidence is strewn all along the road to swadeshi jurisprudence like roadkill. It is the price we have paid for the gradual loss of the judiciary’s independence, integrity and quality, and its growing eagerness to accommodate the executive.

Today, jurisprudence in India appears to be governed by four made-in-India, or swadeshi, doctrines that should be a blot on any justice system: the doctrines of the fait accompli, the sealed cover, ignore the science and reward the criminal.

Important, even constitutional, challenges to executive actions are kept on the backburner for so long—Article 370, the

CAA, the SIR and the Shiv Sena split are examples—that by the time they are decided, it is impossible to turn back the clock and undo what the government has already implemented on the ground. The sealed cover has become the standard fallback option for denying full disclosure to civil society petitioners or withholding rebuttable reasons for a particular judgment, as in the Rafale, Pegasus, Vantara and Hindenburg cases.

Increasingly, our swadeshi jurisprudence, much like the executive itself, appears to show disdain for science. Whether it is cases relating to stray dogs, the Aravalli mountains, the Char Dham highway or the Great Nicobar project, greater faith is placed in government-appointed committees and partisan ministries than in scientists, domain

experts and specialised organisations working in the relevant fields.

Finally, this hybrid form of justice also ensures that criminals are allowed to retain the proceeds of their crimes even as their actions themselves are declared irregular, as in the Ram Mandir and electoral bonds cases. A judicial parapsydokian, if ever there was one.

Perhaps the biggest blot on our swadeshi system of justice is the default denial of bail to three out of four accused persons who are otherwise entitled to bail under the law. Undertrials account for 74 per cent (39 lakh) of India’s prison population, and the situation keeps getting worse as more and more draconian laws are enacted.

Eminent scholars, academicians, students, social activists and journalists are denied bail for as long as five years even though they have not been convicted and, in many cases, their trials have not even begun.

A university professor with 90 per cent disability is deemed a national security threat, kept in jail for years without trial, finally acquitted and released by a high court, only to be pushed back into prison within 24 hours at an urgent Saturday hearing before the apex court. And here lies the supreme irony: while those who have not been convicted remain in prison, convicted persons are routinely granted parole whenever they seek a breath of fresh air.

Lakhs of voters are denied their

franchise by a capricious chief election commissioner and his untested algorithms, their appeals remain pending, and the swadeshi response to their entreaties is a callous: “Never mind, you can vote in the next election.” An exercise based on mysterious algorithms, which has disenfranchised hundreds of thousands of citizens, has been given the highest court’s imprimatur. Thanks to this endorsement, their citizenship, welfare benefits and even their social identity is now under threat.

Judicial orders are routinely flouted by the executive—on Aadhaar, demolitions, bulldozers, hate speech, voter rolls and citizenship, to mention just a few examples—yet there is very little meaningful pushback or punitive action from the courts.

The swadeshi jurisprudence model has ensured that our judicial system is broken and on the verge of collapse. There is a backlog of 540 lakh cases that will take an estimated 323 years to clear. Of these, 180,000 have been pending for more than 30 years. India has only 15 judges per 10 lakh (one million) people, compared with 150-200 in most developed countries; China’s figure is 300.

It gets worse. The judiciary has carved out so many privileges for itself that it is accountable to virtually no one. The collegium system ensures that only judges appoint judges, and that too in the opaque manner. Judicial corruption cannot be investigated unless the judiciary itself permits it. Even though all government appointees are expected to declare their assets, it is reported that only 12 per cent of judges have done so.

It has also been reported that appointments to the Supreme Court have historically been confined to members of just 250 families across the country. This is a swadeshi blueprint for judicial anarchy and ochlocracy, not jurisprudence.

No, sir, the last thing we need is a swadeshi version of what a justice system should be. The swadeshi model ensures that democracy, and justice, have become privileges available only to those with influence. Your constitutional rights depend on who you are. Leave swadeshi to the politicians. The jurisprudence of rights, justice and equity needs a more solid and time-tested foundation. We need to adopt the best global practices and principles and dig ourselves out of this swadeshi hole.

And yes—let judgments do the talking, not obiter dicta. ■

AVAY SHUKLA is a retired IAS officer and author



The backlog of 540 lakh cases will take an estimated 323 years to clear

Undertrials account for 74% of India’s prison population, and it keeps getting worse as more and more draconian laws are enacted



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STILL I RISE

SOLD DOWN THE RIVER
The Ken-Betwa river linking project has left the tribals of Bundelkhand bereft

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HOME & ABROAD

CAN AMERICA RESTRAIN ITS OWN PRESIDENT?
What the US polity lacks is not constitutional authority but political courage

► P7



HOME & ABROAD

LEGAL ATMANIRBHARTA? PERISH THE THOUGHT!
Why the idea of swadeshi jurisprudence divorced from global principles is laughable

► P7



To Be Young Was Very Heaven

Those who govern would do well to read Indian history. Ours has always been a movement polity, writes **Sanjay Hegde**

At Jantar Mantar in Delhi, young India has pitched camp. Students roll up their bedding at dawn. They sing, they argue, they nurse their bruises. They call themselves, with mocking self-deprecation, the ‘Cockroach Janta Party’. A judicial remark had likened the struggling youth to cockroaches. They wore the insult as a badge. Satire became a movement. The movement now unsettles the national capital.

The immediate provocation is NEET, the single examination that decides who may become a doctor. Question papers leaked. Lakhs of students were made to sit the test again. Years of preparation, family savings and young hope dissolved in official incompetence. The students ask a simple question: if they must play by the rules, why doesn’t the State? They demand accountability from those who set the examination. The State has answered with prohibitory orders, tear gas and the lathi.

Those who govern would do well to read Indian history. Ours has always been a movement polity. The freedom struggle was not won in committee rooms alone. It was won on the streets, in the villages, in the salt pans of Dandi. Every generation since has produced its movement, and every movement has ended in a rebalancing of political power. The JP movement of the 1970s broke the Congress monopoly. The Mandal agitation redrew the map of social power. The anti-corruption stir of 2011 birthed a new party and buried an old government. Movements are how India renegotiates the terms between rulers and ruled.

Consider the greatest renegotiation of them all. Until 1920, Indian politics was a polite conversation. The Congress petitioned, memorialised and waited. Its leaders sought gradual reform within the Empire, a seat at the table, dominion in the fullness of time. Then Gandhi arrived from South Africa and changed the grammar of the argument. Non-cooperation asked ordinary Indians to withdraw their consent. Civil disobedience asked them to break unjust laws openly and take the punishment cheerfully.

Within a decade, the demand had travelled from gradualism to Poorna Swaraj. The subjects had become claimants. The Raj never recovered the initiative. Movements do that. They do not merely press a demand. They change what a people believe themselves entitled to ask.

The young at Jantar Mantar stand in that tradition, whether they know it or not. And they ask for less than revolution. A decade ago, a young student leader named Kanhaiya Kumar faced sedition charges for slogans he did not raise. He answered with a distinction that deserves to outlive him. We want azadi in India, he said, not azadi from India. Freedom within Bharat, not freedom from Bharat. Freedom from hunger, from corruption, from rigged examinations and stolen futures. That is precisely what this generation demands. They wave the tricolour. They quote the Constitution. They ask the republic to be worthy of its own promises. No State should fear such patriots. Only a State that has stopped listening does.

Yet the response has been depressingly colonial. Batons fell on unarmed students marching towards their own Parliament. Scores were carried to hospital. The internet

Power rebalanced through persuasion survives. Power defended by the lathi does not. That’s what history teaches us

Photo: Getty Images



The protesters ask a simple question: if they must play by the rules, why doesn’t the State?

was switched off, as if darkness could hide what daylight had witnessed. A camp of sleeping protesters was demolished. An ageing Gandhian sits on hunger strike while ministers look away. This is the reflex of the Raj, not of a republic. It carries the odour of General Dyer, who believed at Jallianwala Bagh that a whiff of force would teach the natives their place. Dyer’s bullets killed hundreds. They also killed something larger: the British claim to fair play. After Amritsar, no Indian could believe the

Empire was benevolent. Tagore returned his knighthood. Gandhi returned his medals. The moral licence of British rule bled out on that ground, though the flag flew for twenty-eight more years. Governments that answer questions with force do not end questions. They end their own legitimacy.

The wise course is the old constitutional one. Talk to the young. Fix the examinations. Punish the leakers, not the leaked-upon. Power rebalanced through persuasion survives. Power defended by the lathi does not.

I watched the footage from Jantar Mantar again last night. Bandaged heads, borrowed megaphones, the anthem sung off-key and wholeheartedly. I thought of Wordsworth, watching another generation storm another old order: ‘Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive, but to be young was very heaven.’ The dawn is theirs. The rest of us should have the grace not to stand in its light. ■

SANJAY HEGDE is a Senior Advocate in the Supreme Court of India

Would He consider walking into the protest site?

Shah Rukh Alam reflects on this and other imponderables of the Jantar Mantar protest

Lutyens’ Delhi is replete with hoardings that carry the Prime Minister’s beaming face, being congratulated for one thing or another. That grin is particularly incongruous in the aftermath of the brutal police attack on protesting students: injured youth flailing below and a concealed smile overhead. He might cry too in due course, moved belatedly by the treatment of students, who were assaulted by police under the command of his trusty home minister. But he’ll more likely focus on how the moment was politicised by the Opposition and other ‘anti-nationals’. In any case, in that moment, the visual discordance of that smiling face amidst the chilling reminders of the day was too evident. I wondered why he wouldn’t just stroll into the protest site. A man with that degree of residual popular support, he could own the space. The dynamic of power would be such that he could even talk down to protesters and they might still listen. Demands for resignation would likely dissolve. Nehru, the apparent constant challenger, is known to have walked into agitated crowds and addressed them directly. So, it wouldn’t be a climbdown.

Why then does the leadership not engage directly with the people? Do they seriously fear personal risk in crowds?

I feel that even more than the slippery-slope argument—if the government concedes one demand, it will look weak and will have to cede more space—it is the shift in popular expectations that is significant. In a democracy, common sense dictates deference to the will of the people. The ‘will of the people’ can be manipulated but still requires engagement. However, present-day discourse begins by first questioning the legitimacy of people. ‘Do you represent the majority view? No?

Does that not make you anti-national, not-legitimate people?’ The burden of proof is on the people to first establish that they are worthy citizens before asking for an audience with the leadership.

Astonishingly, constitutional courts have also made oral remarks questioning petitioners’ ‘people-hood’ and consequently their locus to invoke rights. This movement began by reappropriating one such slur and turning it on its head. It is important then to also address the

question of the legitimacy of people, all people—something the movement is struggling with at this moment. It requires a broader vision of politics and a place for all people in it.

On the same day that the Supreme Court of India refused to hear a plea relating to the disproportionate use of force at the protest, and described the petition as a ‘waste of time’, I saw a reporter grilling a young protestor, asking him if he thought anti-nationals like

Photo: Getty Images



The (l)awful threat of violence from the State hangs thick in the air

Nehru, the apparent constant challenger, is known to have walked into irate crowds to address them directly

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STILL I RISE



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The revolt of the Cockroaches

Dwaipayan Banerjee

I don't remember exactly when the viral phenomenon of the Cockroach Janta Party first caught my attention. Of course, I had been following the NEET paper leak crisis, like so many others. By then, we had already grown wearily accustomed to the recurring spectacle of paper leaks under the present regime. From 2014 onwards, India had witnessed dozens, perhaps over a hundred, reported incidents of exam paper leaks. According to an analysis published in *The Wire*, there were 148 documented cases of exam fraud between 2015 and 2026, nearly double the rate seen before 2015. A *Newslandry* analysis of suspected leaks, where FIRs were filed or examinations cancelled, estimated that these scandals had affected the lives of at least 6.5 crore candidates. But that particular wound came later.

What truly drew me in, almost at once, was something deeper. On their satirical website, founded after the Chief Justice of India had called activists 'cockroaches' and 'parasites'—an accusation he later denied—CJP founder Abhijeet Dipke had framed the movement as the 'Voice of the Lazy & Unemployed' and set out five demands. I liked the irreverent cheek of throwing the insults right back at the powerful. These demands reached beyond exam scandals into something larger: the slow, almost imperceptible erosion of India's liberal democratic order. They pointed to the leanings of certain judges, the Election Commission's conduct through the SIR process, the open trafficking of political turncoats by the ruling dispensation, the brazen partisanship of large sections of the media, and the sinister act of pushing for delimitation disguised as a 50 per cent women's reservation in legislatures. In essence, they addressed the quiet unravelling of the country's democratic institutions, a decay evident to anyone still possessed of honest judgment.

I was heartened, in a quiet way, to see so many young people converge, even if only virtually, around these concerns. When millions began following the Cockroach Janta Party on Instagram, a platform that belongs above all to the country's youth, it felt significant. I found myself returning to their page from time to time, watching the numbers climb. Still, like many others, I resisted reading too much into it. Such waves of online indignation, I told myself, tend to flare up brightly and then vanish, swallowed by the internet's ceaseless tide.

When Abhijeet finally returned to India on 6 June 2026, many of us feared for his safety. We had seen how activists linked to past protests had been targeted, detained, or silenced under one pretext or another. I remember watching him arrive at the airport, holding a copy of Ambedkar's book in his hands—a Dalit student who had done well in his studies, deliberately invoking Ambedkar. The messaging was not very subtle, and I quite liked it for that very reason.

When he and a small band of his colleagues began their campaign from Delhi's Jantar Mantar, surrounded among others by left-wing student activists, and demanded the resignation of education minister Dharmendra Pradhan over the NEET scam, I felt cautiously optimistic, but cautious nonetheless. Ours is a generation that has seen how meteoric rises of civil society protests can sometimes be co-opted by right-wing forces.

Many of my friends began comparing it to the Anna Hazare movement, viewing it as little more than a buffer. They had reason to be sceptical. Many had watched their hopes dashed after that earlier agitation, which in no small measure helped pave the way for the current dispensation. But there was a marked distinction they seemed to overlook. The Anna Hazare movement could only benefit the BJP, as it was the principal opposition at the time. How could a movement directed against the BJP itself serve right-

wing forces? There was another crucial difference. I remember the Anna protests clearly. There was an element of stage management, the hand of RSS mobilisation plainly visible, the media pushing the narrative without pause. Here, however, the pliant mediascape was largely critical, even hostile, towards the CJP-led movement. Yet I remained sceptical, as anyone would be of a movement that seemed to emerge almost instantaneously, drawing widespread support while its principal players had been largely unknown only months earlier.

The growth was modest at first. Abhijeet drew decent crowds in the rallies and gatherings he joined across India, but nothing suggested the scale that would follow. From 20 June, he began an indefinite sit-in at Jantar Mantar with a small group of friends, comrades, and a motley gathering of people that steadily grew. By then, the protest was beginning to catch national attention, drawing a steady stream of visitors from opposition parties, civil society groups and ordinary citizens from around the country. On 28 June, activist and educationist Sonam Wangchuk joined and began a hunger strike alongside left student leaders, which brought significantly larger crowds and made the movement increasingly difficult to ignore. They had somehow touched a nerve.

But what happened after roughly one month changed everything. Thousands of students and youth joined the march towards Parliament on 20 July. School and college students had virtually laid siege to the capital. Videos emerging from across India revealed a movement of far greater scope and scale than the Anna Hazare agitation, persisting even amid a media blackout and systematic crackdown. Its quiet spread into small towns was unlike anything I had witnessed in a very long time.

The way protesters have remained camped in Delhi, even after brutal police crackdowns involving lathi charges, water

Photos: Getty Images



Their concerns go far beyond paper leaks and whether the education minister's head rolls or not; (left) 'We are all cockroaches', proclaims this masked protester



Even amidst a big media blackout, social media videos revealed how the movement was echoing across India

cannons, tear gas and pellet guns, has led many to compare it with the youth-led protests in neighbouring countries like Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka. If spontaneity, scope and breadth are markers, the comparison is not far-fetched. Yet in a vast country like India, it is unlikely that anything on the scale of our neighbours is possible. Although Abhijeet and others have consistently denied any intention of toppling the government through extra-parliamentary means, the comparison persists.

It is too early to predict the outcome of the protest or to draw exact parallels. But it is important to understand that the reason for its rise goes beyond its immediate demands. The protesters can perhaps see through the dichotomy of absolute right-wing dominance and the making of a demagogue out of Modi, even as the reality of their own lives sharply contradicts that

image. Here is a generation that has grown up with the internet and artificial intelligence, juggling precarity with a far broader knowledge of the world than any before it. And the erosion of liberal democratic institutions meant street protest opens up the only possible route out of the precarity of the situation.

Would I now allow myself to be optimistically hopeful about the protest? Would it end in a damp squib, be crushed by the might of the State, or fizzle out once its immediate demand is met? Yet it surprise us in ways we cannot yet foresee? I do not think anyone has a clear answer. But one thing cannot be denied, even by the greatest naysayers: we are witnessing something historic. ■

DWAIPAYAN BANERJEE is a documentary filmmaker, film festival organiser and educator

A victory that may still fall short

Aakar Patel

The editor of this paper has asked me to reflect in this piece on three questions about the current protests. Did this movement give me hope? Do I worry these protests might fizzle out? What do I wish comes out of this moment?

To take the first, the answer is yes. All protests and all dissent give activists hope because the assumption is that the State is imperfect. And correction can only come through demands for accountability. Corruption in its deep sense means erosion of the State apparatus and this happens only because the State, in this instance represented by the BJP government, does not behave as public servants but masters.

This masterful protest is inspiring because the youngsters began with so little and made so much of it. Their commitment and courage and determination, even when they were sneered at initially, is the reason why their cause is today the dominant story in our vast nation.

To the second question, my view is that the protests will succeed. That there is no option but for the education minister to go. This might happen soon after the protests end for some reason, or it might happen through the subterfuge of transferring him or some other ruse. Insisting that he will stay on after admitting that NEET was compromised is untenable. The protest has made this impossible and the government knows this.

Its response—first ignoring the movement, then insulting its leaders, then the usual police violence and then slandering the youngsters—has not worked because it could not have worked.

I also think that the minister's resignation will be only a small part of the larger victory the young protestors will have won. A democracy is one where public pressure forces government change. The students are following the farmers in this journey.

The third question on what I wish comes out of this moment has a two-part answer. Of course I want the students to receive justice and for the government to accept accountability.



This protest is inspiring because the youngsters began with so little and made so much of it

Photo: Vipin

The worry is that the government will not act. Even though it has lost this round, it will likely treat it as an isolated incident

But I also wish that the crisis in education helps all of us and particularly the government focus on the important question of what lies ahead.

There are clear signals that employment and poverty will be the two main problems India will have to confront. The old route of nations transitioning its agriculture labour to manufacturing and then into services is closed and closed permanently.

Even China, which followed this route with greater success than any other nation, has hundreds of millions of people with either no work or insufficient work. Any strategy for India to deal with this crisis must begin with an honest acknowledgement of where we stand and the issues we face.

This seems like a banal thing to say and it is. But it must be said because this is a government and a prime minister that does not accept that there is a problem. 'Sab changa si' (all's well) is the pose.

That is a lie, of course, and it's no secret either. The frustration and

anger of students stem as much from the corruption and incompetence that led to the NEET fiasco as their fear that the future is bleak.

They have spoken clearly about how they feel. Now it is for the government to accept their demands and begin a process that ensures we do not come back to this place again.

The real worry is that the government will not act. Even if it loses this round, which in my opinion it already has, it will treat it as an isolated incident unrelated to anything larger. Perhaps it even believes its own lies about external forces and motivated agendas. Whatever its outlook, the last dozen years have shown that this is a government built around unfounded certainties and arrogance. That attitude will inevitably bring us back to where we are. Our farmers knew this. They realised that taking to the streets was their only option. Our students now feel the same. ■

Views are personal

Would He walk to the protest site?

► Continued from page 1

At the centre are those model citizens who never ask questions of the government and instead berate those who do. Then there are those who must protest but come from 'good backgrounds' and are able to show a track of support for the government i.e., they are not ideologically, inherently opposed to it. They can come back to the fold if their 'single-point issue' is amicably resolved. Then there are those who are perennially suspect: the Muslim, the Kashmiri, the anti-CAA protester, the 'urban Naxal', the farmer, the Adivasi, the Dalit. Those are outlying circles, which must not be allowed to pollute protests on middle-ground issues like paper leaks.

Strategically, the CJP seems to have aligned with this logic, even rationing out permissible slogans, but organically, emotionally, the movement has gone beyond momentary strategic thinking. The slogans have not been contained. It remains to be seen whether the government will double down on this and create a wedge between what is permissible at a stretch and what is absolutely not.

The importance of peaceful protest is paramount. Yet it must be reiterated that the promise of peace is always only made by the protesters. The lawful threat of violence from the State, which is always discretionary, hangs thick in the air all the time. We must demand a promise of peaceful response from the State too. It is not an impossible thing. The

police are expected to be trained to act in a particular way in the face of public anger, heckling, and even mild pushing and shoving. Much like teachers in primary schools when engaging with their most undisciplined pupils. Instead, police action becomes retributive, often reflecting anger at the audacity of people questioning the State. The easy, unquestioned insertion of private, ideologically aligned militia into this melee is a slide into the dark abyss.

And what must the Muslim do?

There is some debate on social media about whether Muslim youth should participate in the movement or stay away? Some are urging them to join in while others advise caution, mindful that the Muslim is as vulnerable on the streets as in the courts.

I don't think Muslims necessarily take advice from the ulama, or from any secular leadership. They are not a political monolith. Likewise, Muslim youth do as they please—they will go to the protests if they wish, because they belong here. Some might stay away because of the disproportionate costs they might have to bear.

But in all of this, I thought of a slogan. Apropos the concentric circles of public-space behaviour, the rioting self-proclaimed sanatanis can, of course, do no wrong, but we must consider the question: *Koi karey toh democracy, koi aur karey toh conspiracy?* ■

SHAH RUKH ALAM is a constitutional lawyer and human rights activist

The full worth of citizens as custodians

Ali Khan Mahmudabad urges our young protestors to see what binds them with the grievances of other Indians, to find a shared moral code

Protests are awakenings. Whether for those who acknowledge the folly of their previous actions or those who think they are apolitical or even those who always thought that the state only targets troublesome people on the margins of society. There are many protests happening across India, but the one that has caught the imagination of millions of young people still in their teens or early 20s is the ongoing protest against the NEET exam paper leaks.

With the farmers moving in on Delhi and the prime minister admitting paper leaks are a ‘grave sin’ while also suggesting that protestors are on ‘the wrong path’, the ingredients for a larger movement exist: a widespread grievance (paper leak), no redress (demand for accountability), a common goal (resignation of the minister concerned), a catalyst (Wangchuk’s fast and his forced eviction from the protest site), mobilisation (thousands of supporters from across the social and political spectrum) and a spark to reignite a wider protest (the State’s crackdown).

It is crucial to understand that the NEET paper leaks or the CBSE evaluation scandal are not isolated problems but manifestations of a broken system. Even if education minister Dharmendra Pradhan resigns, the families of those who committed suicide are compensated and politicians address these issues in Parliament, it will at best be cathartic; it won’t fix the system. What the youth—they are not ‘children’, by the way—must realise is that they can ride this moment to ask for more, they can act as interlocutors of other protests happening across the country.

- Farmers in Punjab, Haryana, Rajasthan, Himachal...
- The still simmering labour unrest in the NCR
- ASHA workers and labour unions in Haryana
- Tribal women (and men) in Madhya Pradesh resisting the Ken-Betwa river linking project
- Chipko 2.0 against the proposed felling of 4,000 trees in Uttarakhand
- Students trying to save large parts of the Jauhar University campus in Uttar Pradesh
- Farmers protesting acquisition of their land to build an AI township in Karnataka
- Villagers protesting the demolition of 70 homes to build flats for MLAs in Chhattisgarh
- Employees of a cooperative bank



The reality is that the entire system of governance is corrupt and even citizens benefit from this.

Rather than searching for incremental solutions or ad hoc changes in policy, the young people who are dreaming of a better India must grapple with the challenge of finding a shared moral vocabulary. How does one combine Savitri Bai Phule’s idea of education as care, Ambedkar’s idea of dignity, Lohia’s idea of the vigilant citizen, Gandhi’s idea of swaraj, Begum Rokeya’s idea of political awakening, Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan’s idea of service and trusteeship, Ram Dayal Munda’s idea of coexistence with both people and nature and the Constitution’s promise of equal citizenship when we have all become so insular that we are concerned with only those issues that directly affect us.

Perhaps one answer lies in imagining all citizens as custodians of a trust. This trust is the plural idea of India that we have inherited, with its diverse peoples, traditions, religions, rivers and mountains, forests and deserts, animals and plants. This trust is the Preamble of our Constitution. Custodianship (*sanrakshita*) links us to the past but also fosters responsibility towards the future. It refuses to see everything including relations between people through the lens of a State. It focuses on covenants not contracts; homes not markets; the future as much as the present. If citizenship bestows the individual with rights, custodianship encourages responsibility not just for ourselves but for everyone.

This past week ‘the future’ of India has been protesting in Delhi. They have also learned the costs of raising their voice. India does not belong to the government nor a community nor a party, but is a shared trust where *maryada*, ethical restraint, should determine the State’s relationship with the people. A good society is one in which all those who wield power—government, corporations, religious institutions, the bureaucracy and indeed citizens—act as custodians of a trust, bound by *maryada*. Lord Ram is known as ‘Maryada Purushottam’, one of supreme ethical restraint. The ideal ruler limits themselves. The ideal ruler is not necessarily the strongest but one with great ethical restraint. When *maryada* is violated, what is held in trust comes under threat. It must be protected. ■

ALI KHAN MAHMUDABAD is a writer, wayfarer and self-professed scoundrel

This protest is not unrelated to others across the country; it is partly the result of viewing the problems of others as unrelated to ours

protesting for better wages in Tamil Nadu

- Aspirants to the state’s public service commission protesting in Maharashtra
- Women vendors sitting on an indefinite strike against the arrests of village volunteers in Manipur
- The Bahujan community protesting the murder of a young girl in Uttar Pradesh

For the most part, people will view all these protests as disparate. But even though the lifeworlds of these people might be wildly different, it is evident that they are all reacting to an overly centralised and unaccountable state that relies on technocratic solutions provided and upheld by corrupted institutions. This, in turn, concentrates power and money at the cost of federalism, the environment, civil liberties, fundamental rights and even basic human dignity. Citizens are losing agency over their lives. Indeed, the very idea of citizenship has become fraught with ambiguity. The question that

follows is not what ideologies these groups might share but how they view each other and talk to each other. The first step is to stitch and mend our social fabric and not to think in terms of political alliances. The challenge is first social, and only then political.

Today, the distance between these communities is not just geographic but emotional. Social media has inured us to the suffering of others. It has also created echo chambers that reinforce our own victimhood. We no longer know how to talk to one another, let alone imagine what we may have in common. On the face of it, a Muslim facing a bulldozer might have nothing in common with a Hindu agitated about the embezzlement of Ram Mandir donations. Maharashtra public service commission aspirants may see tribals in Madhya Pradesh as anti-progress. Farmers in Gujarat might see farmers in Punjab as anti-national. Kashmiris might feel that everyone had it coming.

What is needed is a politics of translation, not simply shared

ideology nor even passive solidarity. No decisions without the equal participation of all stake-holders—this would resonate with the Kashmiri desiring statehood and the Karnataka farmer who refuses to give up her land despite being offered crores. The grievances are different; the principle remains the same. The protests today are partly the result of having always viewed the problems of others as unrelated to ours.

Historically the JP movement and the India Against Corruption movement were important in that they were umbrella movements. The failure of the JP movement was that while it used a moral vocabulary (‘Sampoorna Kranti’) to bring together diverse people who shared common grievances about the excesses of unbridled power, it did not articulate a shared philosophy to govern. It was oppositional by its very nature. The IAC also brought together groups that had little in common because it identified a shared problem: corruption. The failure was that it only held politicians accountable.

A famous protest and the search for a moral centre

Aparna Vaidik

On 20 July, Raisina Hill—the sleeping Goliath—was awakened by thousands of ‘cockroaches’ thumping the monster’s chest, demanding a hearing. This extraordinary upsurge of civil protest in Delhi has a lineage of Gen Z uprisings in Hong Kong (2019), Sri Lanka (2022), Kenya and Bangladesh (2024), Nepal, Madagascar and Morocco (2025). A mix of rage at failing economies, joblessness, institutional betrayal, administrative corruption, the helplessness of being mute spectators of a live-

streamed genocide and much more is feeding into the disillusionment of the youth. Social/digital media is mobilising them at a speed unprecedented in human history. Witnessing their outpouring makes one want to uphold their resistance as proof of human resilience.

While some commentators see the CJP, which initiated the protests at Jantar Mantar, as a ragtag bunch of political newbies without an ideological core, as amateurs still figuring their way and some others find their early moves self-serving, the sheer energy of the mobilisation on the day was jaw-dropping. The

demographic could hardly be more diverse: college and school students, professionals, the unemployed, the low employed, parents, teachers, artists, activists, social media influencers, celebrities, political leaders—they were all there. Many turned up to simply express solidarity with the young protestors who had dared to take on an arrogant establishment. This motley crowd had people from the Left and Right and all stripes of the political Centre, it had disillusioned BJP votaries and Islamophobes, a fair mix of Ambedkarites, liberals and students who are either members of or align

closely with the left student unions AISA, SFI, AISF.

Irrespective of their belief systems, party affiliations, political ideologies or the lack of it, they share a common life experience and psychological make-up. They are what the British labour economist Guy Standing calls the ‘precarariat’—a noun made up of the words ‘precarious’ and ‘proletariat’. They are a new social class that leads, or at least imagines that it does, a precarious life filled with chronic uncertainty in terms of employment, social stability, affording their lifestyle and future well-being. Although the material conditions of their life should make them lean towards leftist ideas (of social equity, redistribution, collective responsibility etc.), they don’t always. Their alienating life experience can also make the precariat vulnerable to right-wing

ideology and to populist demagogues who offer psychological opiates such as the promise of a secure future, a sense of control over their life, a sense of belonging and the promise of social mobility. So, the precariat can lean both ways, which possibly explains the ideological agnosticism of this movement.

There are several historical precedents for large and successful student movements that did not have an ideological core holding them together. One such instance was the student upsurge of 1968 that cut across Europe and North America. It started in France where a group of students began protesting for education reforms at the Nanterre campus of University of Paris. It soon spread to Sorbonne University and from there spilled out on the streets. The police response was quintessential—clubbing protestors, teargassing them and arrests. Hereon, the student movement engulfed the entire country. The workers joined the protests in droves—striking work, pouring out into the streets and seizing factories. The protests paralysed the government and forced it to negotiate. The changes were slow and incremental but substantial. The Parisian student protests inspired and became part of a larger transatlantic mobilisation in Berlin, Prague, Warsaw, New York and Mexico City. Television was the media tool that rapidly broadcast the information and galvanised the protests. Seeing people of a similar demographic protest in another part of the world emboldened and energised the students globally. It enabled a serendipitous exchange of political tactics, ideas and language.

What is worth noting is that all the 1968 student movements ‘lacked’ a unified ideological core. They rejected both post-industrial capitalism and Soviet-style communism. These movements demonstrated that protests didn’t have to be led by trade unions or formal

political parties with a clear ideological stance. These protests could be described as pop-up mass movements of the precariat, which in the absence of access to the levers of power, tended to erupt on the streets. The Arab Spring (2010) and Occupy Wall Street protest (2011) are also examples of horizontal social mobilisation, a decentralised network without top-down leadership and one built through digital networking. They had a consensus-based political agenda instead of one that was ideologically driven. In all the instances there was a demand for accountability—from institutions, from the people in power and from the gerontocracy.

However, while these movements had very powerful groundswell, they were short-lived. They made significant gains but lost their momentum along the way. This movement too is prone to the same risk. So, what will ensure that it sustains its momentum? The ground has already begun shifting in terms of supporters. The people who joined the protest are stretching the CJP’s initial demands in the direction of an anti-Modi wave. Seeing this, even more people are joining the protests across India. To sustain the momentum, it needs to ask some hard questions. Is seeking solutions to isolated problems (preventing question paper leaks) and fixing them individually (demanding resignations) enough? Will educational reforms enable epistemic justice and ensure equitable access for minorities? Defeating Goliath is certainly important but will it erase the inequity of a caste-ridden society and the excesses of majoritarianism? The romance of resistance is indeed heady, but the need of the hour is to interrogate the moral imperative of the movement. ■



Jaw-dropping energy Those who dared to take on a brutal police force and an arrogant government

The romance of resistance is indeed heady, but the need of the hour is to interrogate the moral imperative of the movement

APARNA VAIDIK is a historian, author and educator

Jantar Mantar The invisible faces of the student movement



Left we forget Memorialising the footwear protesters lost when they were being brutalised by the police in Delhi on 20 July; (right) a group of nihangs make almond ragda for gurdwara protesters at Jantar Mantar



Photo: Vipin

Nandlal Sharma

Solidarity is the soul of any mass mobilisation. Add diversity to the mix and it springs to life. On 20 July 2026, those who gathered at Jantar Mantar to demand accountability from the central government over the paper leak issue made it clear: the young people of this country are angry and unafraid. Even as the Delhi Movement, under orders to rained blows and fired tear gas shells, the protesters stood their ground.

If anything, the police brutalities solidified their resolve, as more and more young people flowed in and out of the site at all hours, standing patiently in long queues, braving bad weather, internet shutdowns and closed metro stations to get there and stay there.

The circle of protest expanded to a circle of care and community. Unable to get sleep, Mohammad Ahmed Saifi, a resident of Old Delhi, decided to tend to those sleeping by the road, exhausted by the oppressive heat and humidity. A video of him fanning them as tenderly as a mother went viral. Soon that became a common scene at Jantar Mantar. Anyone holding a hand fan would care themselves and anyone around.

This instinctive caring is also a protest against the politics of hate that, since 2014, has divided friend from friend, strained family ties,

and split neighbourhoods down communal faultlines. The shoes and slippers that lay scattered in the aftermath of the police lathi-charge have been gathered into something like a site-specific installation by JNU research scholar and former NSUI Uttar Pradesh president Akhilesh Yadav. “We want both Modi and Amit Shah to resign,” says Yadav. “These shoes are the symbol of our struggle.”

*

In the enormous crowd of youngsters on 20 July, I noticed a large number of women, who had travelled to Jantar Mantar not only from different parts of Delhi, but also from Shimla, Chandigarh, Gurugram... Quietly and with remarkable composure, they expressed their anger. Not all of them were willing to do so on camera, but their very presence lent dignity and seriousness.

Anjali Vajpayee, six months pregnant and a law student, was there with her husband. “My father is a BJP supporter,” she said, “and even he admits that accountability is beyond Modi. If they could indulge in corruption over something as sacred to them as the Ram Mandir, why would they care about students or ordinary citizens?”

When the police removed Sonam Wangchen from the protest site (on 18 July), thousands more poured in. There was hardly any room to

stand, and it was unbearably hot. Tavisha from Shimla had the foresight to bring a large crate of bottled water with her.

“People may have woken up late,” she said, “but they *have* awakened. If the education system isn’t reformed, students aren’t going to shut up and go away.”

Raj, a tenth-grade student from Prayagraj, ran away from home a week earlier to reach Jantar Mantar in time. “I didn’t tell my family!” he said. “They would never have allowed me to come.”

Carrying only a single change of clothes, he spent his days distributing food and water to protesters, living on whatever he got. As people began to feel the urge to participate in the protest, if only by helping in some small way, supplies started pouring in.

Sandeep, who sells ‘Ram laddus’ near Jantar Mantar Lane, handed over his entire stock (for the token sum of Rs 500) to Asad Ahmed and his companions to give the students a pop of energy. A young man from Sambhal, Uttar Pradesh, bought golgappas wholesale in Old Delhi with the same idea. When an *Indian Express* reporter approached him, he declined to give his name, saying: “I’m not here to become famous.”

Those who couldn’t come in person sent TLC through Zomato and Swiggy. Anuj Rawat from Mumbai reportedly instructed his delivery partner: “Whoever’s

hungry there, just give them the food.” The delivery address simply read: Jantar Mantar. In fact, so much food arrived that organisers eventually appealed to people to stop ordering more.

Visually impaired young people were active participants, alongside countless young volunteers like Nikita, Danish, Ashu and Arya who were distributing meals for free charge: a fitting response to those

making snide remarks about ‘foreign funding’.

While the protest from the get-go, it grew with the numbers. Gurdwaras located around Jantar Mantar, Sikh organisations and the Congress Seva Dal pitched in visibly from 21 July onwards. Others worked silently, off camera, cleaning the site every evening. All it took was one person to begin picking up the trash for impromptu teams to collect the garbage and deposit it at designated spots. No one considered this beneath their dignity, all were equally responsible.

What captured the public eye were the posters and banners that reached millions online. Almost every young person at Jantar Mantar carried a handmade placard bristling with satire directed at Dharmendra Pradhan, Narendra Modi, the government. ‘When will the paper leaks stop? *Melody khao, khud jaan jao!*’, ‘*Burey din hi achhe thhey!*’ (The bad days were better!!); ‘*Bollywood kidhar hai? Asli Durandhar idhar hai!*’ (Where’s Bollywood? The real heroes are here!); ‘56 ईंच का छोटा बंदर, भाग नरेन्द्र भाग नरेन्द्र’ (A little monkey with a 56-inch chest, run Narendra run). Some unprintable ones (which the infamous IT Cell would have loved to expunge) quickly flooded social media feeds.

Many protesters who said they didn’t have any political affiliation could be heard chanting

The caring spirit, visible from Day 1, kept growing as gurdwaras and others opened their doors

Nobody believes in dialogue, except screenplay writers

Chandril Bhattacharya

Democracy and dialogue are married by definition and divorced by intention. Any ruling party at first ignores dissent, as if that does not and should not exist in this best of all possible regimes. Then, as the number of dissenters swells, as the marches get bigger and the protesters louder, when it becomes impossible to ignore nationwide support for a movement, the regime has a Eureka-moment: “Let’s beat them to a pulp!” The police are supplied with ample tear gas and water cannons, and a heavily one-sided lathi-charged fight unfolds on the streets—and on screens.

When scenes of a government torturing its own people ripple across mobiles and media the regime hasn’t been able to gag, when a collective horror ripples through the nation seeing the bloodied heads and scarred skin of peaceful protesters, the eminences in the ruling party realise: “Oops, this doesn’t bode well for future votes!” Only then does it consider having a dialogue with people, a civilised conversation about grievances and policies. What should have been the first step in a civilised society comes last, and that too only when pushed into a corner.

Most of us have a faulty idea of democracy. Ruling parties throughout India seem to think that democracy is just autocracy decided

by votes. They think of themselves as kings, entitled to absolute power. Kings dictate, dominate, decree—why should they listen? And a party that gets to rule for a long period starts believing it has been appointed dictator-for-life, that it has the right not to listen, not to consider, not to learn, not to introspect—ever. It begins to run on infinite arrogance, muscle power, IT-cell generated memes, and a never-ending supply of

bulldozers.

What happens when it encounters young, honest, fearless faces demanding answers to important questions? It barks through megaphones that the entire movement is sponsored by another country or even another planet. It pushes the idea that the government is synonymous with the nation, that anybody who rises against the

government is therefore anti-national. But Gen Z is sharp, articulate, reflective and prepared. Patiently, logically it makes its case. Slowly but surely people begin to distinguish between propaganda and common sense. Because the callousness of the government towards students driven to suicide by paper leaks has not gone unobserved.

Gen Z toppled the government in Nepal. Street protests in Ukraine forced Zelenskyy to fire his top general Syrskyi. Will our Indian cockroaches—nourished by the sympathy and support of common people coming forward with food, water, medication—win this match? Will the government realise that in a democracy it is not a favour to grant dissenters an audience—it is

Photo: Getty Images



Ruling parties are wont to forget that people may give up the vigil, but they hold on to the fury and the pain

the ever-popular ‘*Hum leke rahenge azaadi*’ (We’ll take our freedom, come what may)’. Some of them might well have gone home wearing AISA or SFI badges, picked up at the numerous stalls set up by left-wing student organisations.

Just to demand accountability has meant being labelled an ‘urban naxal’, an andolanjevi, part of the notorious ‘Khan Market Gang’. A few days into the protest, a new label found these young students: ‘terrorists’, courtesy the education minister. Colonel R.K. Sharma, a military veteran with 38 years of service, openly scoffed: “These are the children we took bullets for. If paper leaks are still happening and students are killing themselves, it’s only fitting that we come to Jantar Mantar and raise our voices for them, with them. If so many are anti-national, then everyone sitting at the highest levels of power should resign.” He wasn’t the only such ally. Unable to make it to Delhi, Param Vir Chakra awardee Captain Bana Singh and Captain Yogendra Singh Yadav spoke out in their support.

Radha Joshi (name changed), an officer in the Delhi Police Special Branch deployed at Jantar Mantar, came back to support the youth, out of uniform and off-duty. Her rationale: “My own children are already settled. I’m here for the sake of the generations to come.” This familial feeling was echoed by 58-year-old Gurkirat Singh from Delhi: “Every child affected by a paper leak is my child. We shouldn’t wait to protest until we are personally affected.”

Perhaps it is this sentiment that has drawn hundreds of thousands to Jantar Mantar over the past month. Leaving the comfort of their homes and taking to the streets are individuals of all ages, affiliations and backgrounds. As one placard read: ‘It is so bad even the privileged are here.’

And yes, apart from the mothers with babies in their arms, the grandmothers, the veterans, the secret senders of food and the unnamed do-gooders, there was the comradely spirit of Gandhi, Bhagat Singh and Ambedkar. Carrying portraits of Bhagat Singh, chanting ‘Jai Bhim’, choosing the hunger strike as the Gandhian way of resistance—all paths seemed to converge at Jantar Mantar. What was extraordinary was that even after the police brutalities of 20 July, the massive crowd did not abandon the path of non-violence. No matter how many nail-studded batons were raised, they did not raise their hands in retaliation. ‘Bring it on,’ they seemed to say. ‘We’re ready’.

What began with a remark about cockroaches is burgeoning into a movement that’s bringing people together, in courage and kindness. What can be more frightening for those who thrive on fear and hate? ■

a responsibility? Will this protest kindle others against this government—against its communal rhetoric, its habit of leaving dissidents to rot in jail on the whim of a suspicion?

We do not know and we cannot say. Yet.

In India, there is a tendency to fizzle out. A movement that is led and backed not by a political party but by ordinary people has a high probability of not producing extraordinary results, however passionate and vigorous it might be. Time waits for no one. But for the powers-that-be, time can be made to slow down. Rulers can sit on a decision for months, but people cannot protest for months on end. They have colleges to attend, offices to report to, homes to run, families to feed. The intensity that burns in the short run starts flickering in the long run, and that’s the opportunity governments ignore for.

But what they tend to play are the seeds that scatter and invariably bloom. In West Bengal, the movement against the rape and murder of a lady doctor in R.G. Kar Hospital spread like wildfire but lost its steam after a few months. The government thought it was over, until the election results two years later, where the anger exploded. People gave up the vigil, but held on to the fury and the pain.

Each movement has its visible footprint, which in this digital age manifests through millions of photos, comments, shares, likes, reels. These come back to haunt the rulers. Equally, each movement has its abstract footprint, one that unmasks authority’s apathetic attitudes and undemocratic beliefs and sets in motion a chain of unstoppable questions.

The answers usually blow in the wind, and are not hard to catch. ■

CHANDRIL BHATTACHARYA is a lyricist, poet, essayist and filmmaker from Kolkata

THE CM'S PET PROJECT: INSIDE D.K. SHIVAKUMAR'S BID TO REINVENT GRIEVANCE REDRESSAL

The complaint box gets a cabinet seat: Karnataka's governance overhaul

How the Praja Seva Ministry is reshaping citizen grievance redressal across the state

A new chapter in citizen-centric public administration

For decades, governance in India's villages and small towns has followed a familiar script. A farmer whose land record needs correction, a widow waiting on a pension file, a family seeking a water connection — their only recourse has often been a long, expensive journey to a district office, or further still, to Vidhana Soudha in Bengaluru, hoping someone in power might finally hear them. Karnataka's Cabinet has now moved to rewrite that script.

In a significant governance reform, the state government has approved the creation of a new Praja Seva Ministry — a "Ministry of Service to the People" — dedicated to citizen grievances. The decision, taken by the Cabinet under Chief Minister D.K. Shivakumar, is widely seen as his personal brainchild, a pet project he has driven at every stage. Officials describe it as one of the most ambitious administrative restructurings the state has attempted, built on a premise Shivakumar has repeatedly articulated: that responsiveness to citizens should be governance's central purpose, not a footnote.

Why a dedicated ministry, and why now

Grievance redressal has traditionally been a secondary function, scattered across dozens of departments with no single authority accountable for outcomes. A broken road complaint might sit with public works; a delayed pension might languish in social welfare; a disputed land record might get lost between revenue and a taluk office. Each department has had its own pace and priorities.

The Praja Seva Ministry inverts this arrangement, elevating grievance redressal into an independent ministry with a clear chain of command, designed as a centralized platform that monitors and resolves grievances across every department. According to the government, the new department's mandate covers grievance management, process simplification, time-bound resolution, and the institutionalisation of best practices. In effect, it is meant to be both a citizen's advocate and an internal watchdog that keeps departments accountable.

Who will run it

The Chief Minister has been clear that this cannot be a paper reform. A dedicated Cabinet Minister will take full political charge of the department, giving grievance redressal a permanent seat at the highest table of government. Alongside the minister will be a senior IAS officer, tasked with administrative oversight, ensuring departments comply with directives and that delays are tracked to their source rather than lost in the system.

Importantly, petitions submitted directly to the Chief Minister and other ministers will also be folded into this new system. Rather than VIP petitions receiving separate, informal attention while ordinary complaints wait in queue, everything is meant to flow through one integrated, trackable mechanism — closing the gap between how the politically connected are heard and how everyone else is heard.

Taking governance to the taluk

Perhaps the most politically significant element of the reform is its insistence on physical presence at the grassroots. Rather than centralising decision-making further in Bengaluru, the initiative pushes ministers and legislators outward, into the taluks and villages where problems originate.

Under the plan, ministers in charge of districts will hold regular public meetings with local MLAs in their constituencies, reviewing how programmes are being implemented, assessing local issues in real time, and ensuring grievances are addressed at the grassroots level rather than escalated endlessly upward.

Speaking separately at a felicitation programme organised by the Karnataka Rajya Sarkari Naukara Sangha, the state employees' association, Chief Minister Shivakumar sketched out the human dimension of this commitment. He said people walk into government offices carrying the same hope they carry into a temple, and that it is the administration's duty to respond with compassion, resolving problems within the law rather than turning citizens away. Ministers are expected to visit a taluk office on the first



Photo: Gettyimages

and third Saturdays of every month specifically to hear grievances directly.

This marks a departure from ad-hoc, verbal assurances. Grievances raised in these sessions are meant to be mapped against statutory turnaround times, tracked against a legal framework with a defined resolution period. If local officers fail to act within that window, the matter escalates automatically to higher administrative tiers — removing the need for a citizen to keep returning to ask about the status of their own complaint.

The technology backbone: iPGRS 2.0

None of this would be sustainable at scale without a robust digital architecture, and this is where the Department of e-Governance enters. Home Minister Priyank Kharge, describing the initiative as a major step toward people-centric governance, said the department would provide the technological backbone through an upgraded Integrated Public Grievance Redressal System, or iPGRS 2.0.

The new system allows multi-channel access, letting citizens lodge complaints through a web portal, mobile application, dedicated helpline, or local service kiosks such as Bapuji Seva Kendras. This matters in a state where digital access varies widely between urban centres and rural districts — no citizen should

be locked out simply for lacking a smartphone or reliable internet.

Beyond access, iPGRS 2.0 is built around accountability features largely absent from earlier mechanisms. Citizens can upload photographs of the problem — a pothole, a leaking pipe, a malfunctioning streetlight — complete with automatic geo-tagging, letting officials pinpoint the exact location. Every complaint generates a unique grievance ID along with automated SMS confirmations, so citizens can track progress much as they would a courier package.

Crucially, the system carries an in-built escalation matrix. An unresolved complaint does not simply sit in a queue — it automatically moves up to a higher administrative tier. This single feature addresses one of the most common failures of grievance systems worldwide: complaints formally registered but practically forgotten.

Taken together, officials say the technology-driven framework should improve transparency, enable real-time tracking, and strengthen coordination between departments that have historically operated as silos.

An institutional design built for accountability

Structurally, the reform creates a clear and deliberate hierarchy of responsibility. At the top

sits the Cabinet Minister in charge, providing political ownership and accountability to the legislature and to voters. Directly beneath is the senior IAS officer responsible for administrative oversight, ensuring inter-departmental compliance and identifying where delays are occurring. From there, the structure branches into three functional arms: district-in-charge ministers and MLAs handling grassroots outreach; a centralized intake mechanism absorbing petitions filed with the Chief Minister and Cabinet Ministers; and the iPGRS 2.0 technology hub run by the Department of e-Governance.

This design is intended to solve a very specific administrative problem. In the old model, a complaint's fate often depended heavily on which department it happened to land in, how motivated that department's local staff were, and whether the complainant had any political connections to escalate the matter. By centralising intake and creating a single point of political and bureaucratic accountability, the government hopes to standardise outcomes — so that resolution depends on the merits of the grievance and the clock ticking against it, not on the identity or influence of the person filing it.

The human argument behind the reform

Behind the administrative architecture lies a more fundamental argument about the nature of public service itself — one that Shivakumar has made central to his own political identity through this initiative. At the employees' felicitation event, the Chief Minister described government employees as the "ambassadors of Karnataka" and the backbone of the administrative machinery, while also making clear that positions of authority do not, by themselves, command respect — integrity and genuine service do. He urged officials to ensure that poor and vulnerable citizens in particular receive timely assistance, while staying within the bounds of legal provisions.

This framing matters because it positions the Praja Seva Ministry not merely as a bureaucratic restructuring exercise, but as an attempt to reset the ethical culture of public administration as a whole — one where empathy toward citizens is treated as a professional obligation rather than an optional courtesy.

The road ahead

Reforms of this scale call for sustained commitment on the ground, and the government has built that commitment directly into the design. Weekly ministerial visits to taluk offices, an escalation matrix that automatically flags unresolved complaints, and the integration of VIP petitions into a single tracked system together reflect a clear resolve to carry

Why this reform could matter

The stakes of getting this right are not abstract. For rural and economically marginalised citizens, the old system's demand that grievances be pursued in person, often over long distances and at real financial cost, has functioned as a quiet but powerful barrier to justice. Decentralising redressal down to the taluk level, and backing it with a legally defined resolution timeline, is aimed squarely at removing that barrier. There is also a systemic dividend the government hopes to capture from this reform. By aggregating grievance data through iPGRS 2.0, officials expect to spot recurring patterns — a water supply complaint concentrated in one district, or repeated revenue-department delays in another. Rather than responding to each complaint in isolation, this data-driven view could allow policymakers to address systemic issues through structural, lasting fixes rather than one-off band-aid solutions.

The initiative also arrives against a backdrop of Karnataka positioning itself as a state at the cutting edge of governance innovation, having been separately ranked among the world's leading startup ecosystems in a recent Global Startup Ecosystem Report. Whether that same spirit of innovation can be successfully redirected toward the far more mundane, but equally important and consequential, work of grievance redressal will be one of the more closely watched governance experiments in the country today.

governance to every corner of the state. Extending this reach across all thirty-one districts, including those farthest from Bengaluru, is central to the reform's ambition — and it is precisely this commitment to grassroots delivery that the government is positioning as the Praja Seva Ministry's defining strength.

The intent behind the initiative is unambiguous. By combining ministerial accountability, administrative oversight, grassroots outreach, and a digital backbone under one institutional roof, Karnataka is working to bring governance closer to citizens — not as a slogan, but as a functioning, trackable, time-bound system. It is an initiative that carries Shivakumar's own personal commitment behind it; few reforms in his tenure bear his personal stamp as visibly as this one. As the Chief Minister himself put it, citizens walk into government offices carrying the same hope they carry into a temple. The Praja Seva Ministry, his own brainchild, is his effort to ensure that hope is met with the response it deserves.

Photo: GettyImages



The clamour for change echoes far and wide



Photo: Getty Images

The police in BJP-ruled Maharashtra was no less intolerant of protesters. A scene from Mumbai on 20 July

Herjinder

On Monday, 20 July, the national capital became the epicentre of a student uprising that rang out across the country and even abroad in cities like NYC, San Jose and London, where the Indian diaspora has a sizeable presence. The police deployment in Delhi was heavy on the day. Several arterial roads leading in and out of central Delhi were barricaded and closed to traffic. Around 4 p.m., as the heaving crowds of peaceful protesters finally breached police defences at Jantar Mantar and began their march towards Parliament Street, defying barricades and prohibitory orders, the

police went on a rampage—with batons, water cannons, tear gas, pellet guns et al. Delhi's fortissimo note may have drowned out the chorus of protests in the country, but they had begun even before things came to a head in Delhi on Monday. On Sunday, 19 July, the morning after Sonam Wangchuk was forcibly whisked away from Jantar Mantar, there was a protest at Mumbai's Shivaji Park where hundreds gathered in solidarity with the agitation. Former Maharashtra chief minister Uddhav Thackeray joined the demonstrators and called for a larger agitation against the Union government. In Bengaluru, Freedom Park overflowed with students and young professionals.

Their message went beyond a single examination (NEET) and a solitary minister (Dharmendra Pradhan). As postgraduate student Apoorva R. put it: "It's not about one person or one exam. If students remain silent today, tomorrow every institution will lose credibility." Jadavpur University in Kolkata organised its first big march since the change of government in West Bengal. Students, teachers and research scholars marched together, condemning what they described as police brutality against peaceful protesters. Presidency University students joined the chorus in Delhi for Pradhan's resignation, while nearly fifty students at Medical College Kolkata

observed a twelve-hour hunger strike in solidarity with Wangchuk, then on the twenty-first day of his fast. Beyond these metros, the same simmering resentment was palpable in the NSUI (National Students' Union of India) gherao outside the education minister's residence in Bhubaneswar, in prayer meetings in Leh and Kargil, torch marches in Purnea, Sikar, Jaipur and Ranchi, demonstrations in Lucknow, Chandigarh, Indore, Sirsa, Jaunpur, Aligarh, Bhiwani and Yamunanagar. Even in Manipur, already dealing with a hellish ethnic conflict, students and citizens made common cause with the protestors in Delhi. Perhaps the most revealing geography was Himachal Pradesh. In Shimla, students marched several miles in pouring rain. Simultaneous protests surfaced in Hamirpur, Nadaun and Barsar—places that rarely occupy national headlines. The movement had travelled far beyond the national capital and state capitals into smaller towns and districts, where competitive examinations have become the only gateway to social mobility. Two cities deserve special attention: Kota and Dehradun. Kota, India's coaching capital, hosted Rahul Gandhi's 'Chhatron Ki Goonj' programme, which drew an unexpectedly

large audience. Students returned to the streets in significant numbers after the Delhi crackdown. In Dehradun too, student organisations demanded accountability for the repeated paper leaks that have wrecked confidence in the country's education system. Beyond the scale or spread of this protest, what makes it truly remarkable is its social texture. This was never a protest confined to one student organisation or one political party's calendar. Across the country, students stood alongside teachers, parents, retired government employees, farmer unions, labour organisations and women's groups. In Indore, freedom fighter and former parliamentarian Pandit Ramkrishna Sharma, who is now 101, walked to a protest site to express solidarity with students demanding educational reforms. Posters displayed the names of students who had died by suicide after repeated paper leaks or other exam failures. Here, the candle-light vigils and silent marches gave the impression that grief had perhaps overwhelmed rage. This was communal mourning; what had brought them together was shared grief. The large footprint of this protest suggests that these movements no longer require a headquarters. Delhi did not export this protest. No doubt social media was both carrier and catalyst, but technology alone cannot manufacture outrage. Digital platforms may spread information faster than wildfire, but it was shared experience, shared pain that made it possible for people living so far from each other to make common cause. That the confrontation between the police and the protesters in Delhi made the headlines is not surprising but this quiet convergence of aspirations and anxieties is also telling us something. India's youth is lashing out against a system that has failed them. Even merit is not a passport to opportunity and the discovery of merit has itself become a lottery. Years of disciplined preparation can be rendered meaningless by systemic failures. History reminds us that student uprisings are early warning systems for democracies. Long before economic statistics or electoral verdicts reveal public dissatisfaction, campuses begin to register shifts in the national mood. The message of 20 July is devastatingly simple: India's youth is serving this government notice. They have waited too long to be heard—and can wait no longer for change. ■

The large footprint of this protest is a sign that the movement no longer requires a nerve centre. Delhi did not export this protest

'We are destitutes in our own country'

The police crackdown on the Ken-Betwa protest in Madhya Pradesh has left Bundelkhand's people high and dry and bereft

Rashme Sehgal

In another country, or in ours at another time, the leaders might have died of shame. To see poverty-stricken villagers enacting their own death along the banks of the Barana river, a tributary of the Ken. Women lying on wooden funeral pyres. Men and women, faces smeared with ash, arms tied to wooden crosses. Young men standing in the water with nooses around their necks, holding placards that read, 'Nyaya de ya mrityu (Give us justice or give us death)'. All to drive home the agony of having lost their homes to the Daudhan dam being built as part of the Rs 45,000 crore Ken-Betwa Link Project, the first of a proposed series of 37 ILR (Interlinking of Rivers) projects from Bihar and Karnataka to Kerala and Sikkim. One of the protestors, 23-year-old Raj Kumar, summed it up: "We have lost not only our land, our livelihoods, our forests, but also our cultural identity. We have become destitutes in our own country." Social activist Amit Bhatnagar, the Sonam Wangchuk of Bundelkhand, has been organising protests here for the last four years. Starting 5 July 2026, he went on hunger strike near Kupi village. On Sunday 19 July, around 5 a.m., the police moved in to put an end to the agitation. Bhatnagar was taken to the Chhatarpur District Hospital in Madhya Pradesh, where he was in the ICU for his deteriorating health and plunging BP. On 23 July, Bhatnagar announced in a video statement that he was suspending his hunger strike (after 18 days), while continuing a 'nyay upvas' to ensure every affected villager gets justice. As many as 400 concerned citizens, actors, activists, social workers had urged him to end his fast, but what convinced him was his mother's plea. Given his poor health, he would stay under the care of the doctors in his hometown Bijawar, until he was well enough to be on the road again. The *andolan* is on, he said, and it will be a long haul. He should know. Over the past three months, 42 cases have been filed against him, and he has been jailed several times during this agitation. His colleague Divya Ahirwar, an activist studying to be a lawyer, pointed out, "If even talking about rights, democracy and the Constitution is a crime, not only Amit Bhatnagar but every youth, every affected person will repeat these 'crimes' over and over again." Speaking to this reporter before his hunger strike, Bhatnagar questioned the modus operandi of the government, which went ahead without having held a single gram sabha meeting to seek the consent of

the communities affected. "Tribal areas fall under Schedule 6 of the Constitution where consent of the gram sabha is mandatory for the transfer of tribal land. No consent was sought; in fact, signatures of consent were forged. Worse, no details of the Environment Impact Assessment or the consequences of cutting down 45 lakh trees were placed in the public domain. The two cities of Banda and Khajuraho, both in Bundelkhand, are listed among the hottest cities in India. The Panna Tiger Reserve is the lung of Bundelkhand. What will happen once entire forests are submerged or chopped down? [The Daudhan dam will not only bifurcate the Panna Tiger Reserve but also submerge 5,578 hectares of some of the oldest forests in the country.] Temperatures will rise further. We have been forewarned by scientists that when this happens, rains in our region will decline by another 20 per cent," said Bhatnagar. He also tabled his shock at the lack of details about the hydrological flow of the Ken and Betwa rivers. "Engineers associated with the project confess that the last hydrological study ... was conducted in 2001. The situation on the ground has altered dramatically since. The Ken is located lower than the Betwa which is double its size. In the last few years, the Ken has been completely dry in summer. Where will they get water for such a gigantic project?" This is the question uppermost in the minds of the villagers who have lost their homes. "Why was there no 'jan sunvai' before

Photos: IANS



Might against right The jal, chita, mitti andolan against the Ken-Betwa river linking project was brought to a rude end on 19 July

we were forcibly evicted?" asked 45-year-old Purshottam, who was among the protestors who stood in the Barana river for five straight days. "We have a symbiotic relationship with the forest. What will our fate be once we are pushed out? We will be forced to become migrant labourers without a roof over our heads." The tribals in Bundelkhand, primarily from the Gond and Kol communities, suspended a similar protest in the first two weeks of April 2026 after the district administration promised to revise its grossly inadequate rehabilitation package. The fresh package of Rs 450 crore does not make clear who the recipients are. Activists say that 40 per cent of villagers are yet to receive any compensation. They are convinced there's massive corruption at play.

Middle-aged Munna Bai says, "I am a widow. They have taken my house. I have received no compensation. Where has it gone?" Bhuda Devi's problem is different: "Why is compensation not being given to families headed by women? My largely absentee husband received over Rs 50,000 but spent most of it on drinking. What will my three children and I do now? Live on the road?" she asks. Other villagers baulk at the callousness of both the UP and MP state governments. One young villager observed, "UP Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath visited Bundelkhand on 8 July and promised to invest Rs 70 crore on ghat beautification, better tourism facilities, more industries. He didn't say a word about water scarcity, migration, unemployment or the illnesses

"We will lose our forests, our farms, our homes for a dam on a river that has no water for over three months of the year!"

Can America restrain its own President?



Photo: Getty Images

US President Donald Trump and his secretary of war Pete Hegseth (*far right*) may put a brave face on setbacks, but apart from now losing men in the war with Iran, the formidable US war machine is also losing firepower and depleted stocks of missiles and interceptors will takes years to rebuild

Ashok Swain

Donald Trump has restarted America’s war against Iran without answering the question that should have been answered before the first bomb fell: what political result can the US military campaign realistically aim for? The current phase of this war is not merely a return to a dead end. It begins from a worse position, against a more defiant adversary, with fewer military options, lower diplomatic credibility and greater danger to American troops and allies.

The earlier phase was supposed to demonstrate overwhelming power. Instead, Tehran learnt how to survive it and retaliate successfully. Iran has seen Washington’s weapons and the pressures shaping Trump’s decisions. Its leaders know that to thwart the US, all they need is to keep Hormuz unsafe, threaten US bases in the Gulf, raise energy costs and credibly threaten their allies in the region. Unlike the US, Iran has a clear strategy.

For the US and Trump, renewed bombing is a military exercise at great cost

but no clear strategic outcome. The war began around claims about Iran’s nuclear programme and the danger it allegedly posed to Israel. It has now become a battle over who controls shipping through the Strait of Hormuz. Trump says the US must keep the strait open, but it was open before he chose war. So, the US is losing lives, weapons and diplomatic capital trying to recover a position its own intervention destroyed.

Iran is injured no doubt, but it is still prepared to take risks. Its attacks have widened—from military facilities earlier to vital infrastructure now—in Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait, Oman and Jordan. Damage to Kuwaiti power and desalination plants shows how quickly the war can derail daily civilian life across the Gulf. A few successful strikes can disrupt shipping, frighten insurers and force a strategic reckoning by America’s Gulf partners—is hosting the US worth it?

The funeral of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei was revealing. The enormous crowds across several cities was proof that a majority of Iranians support national

America does have mechanisms to stop its president. What it lacks is the political courage to go down that route

resistance to the US. They have rallied under the flag when their country is under attack. The war has strengthened national unity and redirected public anger towards Washington. The funeral would have given the new leadership confidence that a resolutely defiant Iran has popular support. It also created a powerful demand for revenge, narrowing room for diplomacy and strengthening the hand of hardliners who argue that compromise only invites greater US pressure.

Washington is reinforcing that argument by expanding attacks beyond military sites. Bombing roads, bridges, hospitals, power systems and water facilities cannot be presented as precision pressure. Civilians experience it as collective punishment. Trump’s threat to destroy power plants and bridges unless Iran negotiates makes the coercive purpose plain to the world. Not only is it unlawful and morally indefensible, it is also strategically foolish. Broken water systems, destroyed transport links and dead civilians only deepen rage and legitimise Iran’s retaliatory tactics.

Air power can destroy infrastructure, but it cannot compel this large and proud country to surrender. Iran has more than ninety million people, difficult terrain and dispersed capabilities. If bombing cannot force capitulation, Washington has to either contemplate a suicidal ground invasion and occupation or make a strategic retreat.

America’s military advantage is also degrading. The 40-day war from late February to mid-April consumed large quantities of Tomahawk and JASSM missiles as well as Patriot, THAAD and naval interceptors. It will take years to rebuild those stocks. Every expensive interceptor used against an Iranian drone is unavailable for another strike. On the other hand, its ‘client’ state Ukraine is desperate for air defence systems, while American planners identify China as the central long-term challenge. A pursuit that drains scarce weapons in a war without a defined endpoint is ill-advised, to say the least.

Trump’s economic calculus is no better. Iran was already imposing costs by choking Hormuz and now the danger is spreading to the Red Sea shipping corridor. The Red Sea connects the Mediterranean Sea to the Indian Ocean via the Suez Canal and the Bab al-Mandab Strait. This corridor handles 12-15 per cent of global maritime trade and nearly 30 per cent of global container traffic. Iran’s allies the Houthis have threatened to blockade Saudi Arabia and shipping through Bab al-Mandab and the oil export hub of Yanbu, a port city on the Red Sea coast of western Saudi Arabia.

Hormuz and Bab al-Mandab are two vital arteries of global trade, and simultaneous blockades have potentially catastrophic consequences—not just for Gulf oil exports but also food imports for the entire Gulf region. Americans are not insulated from its inflationary after-effects. Restarting the war has only redoubled the domestic pressure that drove Trump to accept a ceasefire, and now mutual mistrust is at its all-time high.

Is there a way out? A temporary ceasefire proposed by mediators could stop the immediate cycle, but a durable settlement requires Washington to abandon the fantasy that negotiations are a ceremony of Iranian surrender. The US could pursue a limited bargain featuring secure navigation through Hormuz, protection of civilian shipping and verifiable restraints on Iran’s nuclear activities for reciprocal restraints on attacks and phased sanctions relief for Iran. The Gulf states of Oman and Qatar, European governments and the United Nations should have roles in monitoring and guaranteeing such an outcome. Diplomacy will look untidy because real diplomacy requires both sides to receive something they can defend at home.

A harder question is whether US can restrain its own president. Constitutionally, it can. Congress holds the powers to declare war, authorise the use of force and sanction funds for war efforts. But if the president is determined to follow his own whims, he can exploit legal ambiguities, describe offensive action as self-defence and claim that each pause resets the sixty-day clock.

The US Congress must then do more than express disapproval. It can pass binding legislation prohibiting funds for offensive operations against Iran, except to protect US forces from imminent attack. It can attach that restriction to essential defence appropriations, demand public legal justification, subpoena officials and hold continuous hearings on targets, casualties, costs and objectives. Impeachment remains the ultimate remedy for grave abuse, but it is politically improbable unless members of his own party break from him. The public also has a role. Elections can change Congress, and sustained opposition can raise the cost of disobedience.

America does have mechanisms to stop this president. What it lacks is not constitutional authority but the political courage to stop Trump from taking his country down a road on which every additional mile makes turning back more costly. ■

ASHOK SWAIN is a professor of peace and conflict research at Uppsala University, Sweden

Legal atmanirbharta? Perish the thought!

The last thing we need is swadeshi jurisprudence divorced from global principles, argues **Avay Shukla**

It was indeed a wise man who said judges should shun the spotlight and let their judgments do the talking. But that was before the era of the sound bite, YouTube and 24x7 breaking news. And, of course, post-retirement re-employment, or the need to demonstrate loyalty.

In India’s legal firmament today, judgements no longer make news, mainly, I suspect, because they have become one-sided and therefore predictable. It is the obiter dicta that make news nowadays, delivered from the lofty perch of finality, if not infallibility.

The Chief Justice of India Surya Kant is currently not only the master of the roster, he is also the master of the obiter dicta. How can we forget, if not treasure, his denunciation of the three distinguished academicians who wrote the chapter on the judiciary for an NCERT textbook, and his decision to bar them from any government engagement? The later ‘cockroach’ comment is now part of legal folklore. And just last month, in an address at Oxford University, he remarked that India should develop its own ‘swadeshi jurisprudence’, something even our freedom fighters had not thought of.

I am not sure what the CJI meant by this call for legal *atmanirbharta*, or whether this self-inflicted ghettoisation is the right course to follow. For, in civilised democracies at least, jurisprudence and laws are aligned with global principles, concepts, conventions, declarations, rights and charters, and until recently we more or less conformed to these universal principles. Over the last decade or so, however, we have started ploughing our own legal furrow, and the remark of the CJI has only served to draw attention to this unhealthy development.

For, it must be lamented, swadeshi jurisprudence has unfortunately already arrived in India, which is why, according to the World Justice Project’s Rule of Law

Index 2025, we rank 86th out of 143 countries, firmly in the bottom half. We have been consistently slipping down this index—in 2014, we ranked 66th.

Frankly, I am not surprised, because the evidence is strewn all along the road to swadeshi jurisprudence like roadkill. It is the price we have paid for the gradual loss of the judiciary’s independence, integrity and quality, and its growing eagerness to accommodate the executive.

Today, jurisprudence in India appears to be governed by four made-in-India, or swadeshi, doctrines that should be a blot on any justice system: the doctrines of the fait accompli, the sealed cover, ignore the science and reward the criminal.

Important, even constitutional, challenges to executive actions are kept on the backburner for so long—Article 370, the

CAA, the SIR and the Shiv Sena split are examples—that by the time they are decided, it is impossible to turn back the clock and undo what the government has already implemented on the ground. The sealed cover has become the standard fallback option for denying full disclosure to civil society petitioners or withholding rebuttable reasons for a particular judgment, as in the Rafale, Pegasus, Vantara and Hindenburg cases.

Increasingly, our swadeshi jurisprudence, much like the executive itself, appears to show disdain for science. Whether it is cases relating to stray dogs, the Aravalli mountains, the Char Dham highway or the Great Nicobar project, greater faith is placed in government-appointed committees and partisan ministries than in scientists, domain

experts and specialised organisations working in the relevant fields.

Finally, this hybrid form of justice also ensures that criminals are allowed to retain the proceeds of their crimes even as their actions themselves are declared irregular, as in the Ram Mandir and electoral bonds cases. A judicial parapsydokian, if ever there was one.

Perhaps the biggest blot on our swadeshi system of justice is the default denial of bail to three out of four accused persons who are otherwise entitled to bail under the law. Undertrials account for 74 per cent (39 lakh) of India’s prison population, and the situation keeps getting worse as more and more draconian laws are enacted.

Eminent scholars, academicians, students, social activists and journalists are denied bail for as long as five years even though they have not been convicted and, in many cases, their trials have not even begun.

A university professor with 90 per cent disability is deemed a national security threat, kept in jail for years without trial, finally acquitted and released by a high court, only to be pushed back into prison within 24 hours at an urgent Saturday hearing before the apex court. And here lies the supreme irony: while those who have not been convicted remain in prison, convicted persons are routinely granted parole whenever they seek a breath of fresh air.

Lakhs of voters are denied their



The backlog of 540 lakh cases will take an estimated 323 years to clear

Undertrials account for 74% of India’s prison population, and it keeps getting worse as more and more draconian laws are enacted

franchise by a capricious chief election commissioner and his untested algorithms, their appeals remain pending, and the swadeshi response to their entreaties is a callous: “Never mind, you can vote in the next election.” An exercise based on mysterious algorithms, which has disenfranchised hundreds of thousands of citizens, has been given the highest court’s imprimatur. Thanks to this endorsement, their citizenship, welfare benefits and even their social identity is now under threat.

Judicial orders are routinely flouted by the executive—on Aadhaar, demolitions, bulldozers, hate speech, voter rolls and citizenship, to mention just a few examples—yet there is very little meaningful pushback or punitive action from the courts.

The swadeshi jurisprudence model has ensured that our judicial system is broken and on the verge of collapse. There is a backlog of 540 lakh cases that will take an estimated 323 years to clear. Of these, 180,000 have been pending for more than 30 years. India has only 15 judges per 10 lakh (one million) people, compared with 150-200 in most developed countries; China’s figure is 300.

It gets worse. The judiciary has carved out so many privileges for itself that it is accountable to virtually no one. The collegium system ensures that only judges appoint judges, and that too in the opaque manner. Judicial corruption cannot be investigated unless the judiciary itself permits it. Even though all government appointees are expected to declare their assets, it is reported that only 12 per cent of judges have done so.

It has also been reported that appointments to the Supreme Court have historically been confined to members of just 250 families across the country. This is a swadeshi blueprint for judicial anarchy and ochlocracy, not jurisprudence.

No, sir, the last thing we need is a swadeshi version of what a justice system should be. The swadeshi model ensures that democracy, and justice, have become privileges available only to those with influence. Your constitutional rights depend on who you are. Leave swadeshi to the politicians. The jurisprudence of rights, justice and equity needs a more solid and time-tested foundation. We need to adopt the best global practices and principles and dig ourselves out of this swadeshi hole.

And yes—let judgments do the talking, not obiter dicta. ■

AVAY SHUKLA is a retired IAS officer and author



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