

## **Citizens Protests in India and Japan: The Commons Are Rising to Defend and Expand Democratic Spaces**

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In the recent years, India and Japan have seen massive protests by their citizens. Far from being disruptive or violent, these protests remain peaceful and democratic, and have reflected a deep churning for reinvigorating democratic values. This actually presents an opportunity for the two countries to learn from each other, expand our democracies and usher Asia into a new age with an enhanced role for the commons.

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India and Japan are amongst the earliest democracies in Asia. In the middle of the past century, the Indian people unshackled themselves from the oppressive colonialism, and adopted constitutional democracy as the minimum shared promise for their common future. Not only did they resolve to take their destinies in their hands and have a sovereign independent state to govern themselves, they also held equality before law for every citizen as a founding principle for the post-colonial nation-state. In principle, India took a giant leap to end discriminations and inequalities based on caste, gender, religion, language and other such stratifications and diversities.

Around the same time, the Japanese people collectively moved towards a democratic and pacifist nation-building, making a decisive break from the war years in which especially students, workers and women in Japan had to undergo immense structural violence while the same militarist machinery victimized people in other neighboring countries as well. In Japan, the postwar pacifism reflected the decades-long lived experiences of the common people and that is why it has so much support from below. Contrary to the mainstream experts and commentators, fed upon some or other variant of neo-realist theory of states and their international behavior, postwar Japanese pacifism has stronger domestic roots and support. In the postwar Japan, “Peace” actually became a rallying point of a variety of aspirations—freedom and individual liberty, worker rights, women’s empowerment, social security which became possible due to saved resources and energies. Under the umbrella of peace, not only a vast middle class emerged—the largest among the developed countries, it even gave Japan a new self-identity in the world and suited even the elite interests to a great degree.

If the postwar Japan was an experiment in constitutional pacifism, the post-independence India is a large-scale human experiment in democracy: to bring such diversity of traditions, languages and religions together was not a small feat for the founders of Indian democracy. In the recent years, voting percentage in India has gone up drastically, especially among the hitherto marginalized groups. In the liberalized economy, the elite can survive on

their own but the democratic safeguards become more essential to the sections who have not benefited from globalization.

### **Democratic Uprisings in India and Japan**

More than 200,000 people hit the streets of Tokyo in 2012, one year after the disaster in Fukushima. Subsequently, Japan has witnessed massive demonstrations comparable only to the tumultuous protests of the 1960s against the Japan-America Security Treaty when large number of people hit the streets. This popular out-pouring has been seen as a major political fallout of the nuclear accident, comparable metaphorically to the radioactive release from the accident itself. The popular ire has been directed primarily at the Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO) and the political establishment, for something more than just the lack of transparency and accountability in handling the situation. People were outraged at the systemic complicity well-crafted to suit the interests of the nuclear industry while the common citizens were fed on the myth of nuclear safety and were lulled into consent by the nuclear village through various means. Mistrust for the government and corporations has led to mobilization of tens of thousands of common citizens, who began to protest in front of the parliament every Friday evening and this form of protest continues till date. In fact, the peaceful protests turned Kantei-mae, or the space in front of the Prime Minister's official residence, into a new site of democratic articulation. Strikingly, when the agitation against the new security bills started in September 2015, the same spot almost naturally attracted gatherings on the issue. In a society like Japan, which has an image of being rather politically apathetic, this almost intuitive moving of people towards the Diet building is reflective of the expectations from the democratic system and a deep-seated reckoning as citizens of modern nation-states. Scholars have underlined the significance of this new wave of protests being led by spontaneous masses, comprising mostly of "unsettled" workers of the new informal and unorganized sectors of the economy, in place of the traditional trade unions which used to be the main shapers of the protests until now. These protests have seen active participation by the students and women, but what is remarkable is that it is not a fight for their typical roles as women and youth. It is actually more about women and students becoming the central forces in social movements with larger transformative agendas. The success or failure of these movements cannot be judged merely on the status of issues raised, but the very capacity of these moments to evoke and inspire "normal people" into collective political action and transform citizens into active agents of change should be reckoned as crucial.

The protest last year in Tokyo and other parts of Japan, against the security bills introduced by the present government, have been an instructive case. Spearheaded by the Students Emergency Action for Liberal Democracy (SEALDs), this agitation saw massive and spontaneous participation by the students. Defying the notion that the new generation in Japan is not concerned about peace issues, and is politically apathetic, this movement

decisively put citizens voices for freedom, constitutionalism and liberty back into the political landscape of the country. Using social media platforms like LINE, mostly under-graduate students organized themselves in large numbers without an old-style organizing committee. The SEALDs upsurge also brought other activist groups under its banner, but strictly on the issue of the security bills. The group disbanded itself after the protests, but the SEALDs experience has helped in overcoming the political inertia of students since the 1970s and also the apprehensions of violent protests that were attached to students and cults since then.

India has been in the middle of a similar churning in the recent years. Given its sheer size, population and diversities, India has experienced multiple protests of various intensities and characters. In the recent years, India has seen massive mobilizations around issues of gender, social justice, corruption and livelihoods. Rights to food, land, water, education and information have become major rallying points for hundreds of big and small mutinies. It is 25th year of the opening of India's economy, and these movements essentially are reflective of the widening wealth gap as well as anxieties about the political decision making predominantly being dictated by the market's priorities. As the government prioritizes economic growth and attracting foreign investment, laws and norms for protecting workers, farmers and the environment have to give way to a more investor-friendly economic climate. This has led to massive protests in recent years by the sections who feel increasingly disenfranchised. Also, the new economy has created new lifestyles where women increasingly emerge as having more equal roles than in the past whereas the stereotypes and expectations in the larger society have been difficult to change at the same pace. This has led to assertion of young educated women at various levels on one hand and a corresponding backlash by the conservative sections on the other which has often become violent a lot of times. Students are yet another section of the society who have risen up repeatedly in the recent years—for better opportunities as well as against curb on freedom of expression.

The protest against rape of “Nirbhaya” that shook Delhi and almost every corner of India after the brutal rape of a medical student in New Delhi in December 2012, was a moment of reckoning for an entire generation in India that has very limited experience of collective social protests and had deliberately kept itself isolated from political issues. In this protest too, social media was a significant factor and students from various campuses, as well as working women and youth, assembled and raised their voice strongly against the rampant sexual violence and the impunity that it generally enjoys in India. The protests forced the then government to institute a committee under Justice J S Verma, which came up with wide-ranging recommendations on women's safety and equality. It is hard to say that India has become safer for women after the incident and the ensuing protests. However, women's safety and gender equality have become a concern that every political party, cultural organization, employers and corporate sector have to address. The gender question in India

has dramatically been mainstreamed after the Nirbhaya protest and no political or social actor can afford to entirely overlook this concern.<sup>1</sup>

What is common in the citizens protests in both these countries is that they are peaceful and democratic, and have non-traditional forms of mobilization made possible by the advent of new technologies and the social media. Use of twitter, facebook and other social networking sites, perhaps learned from the international democratic upsurges like those at the Tahrir Square in Egypt and the Occupy Wall Street movement in the United States, has been central to these mobilizations which do not have a membership-based core group. These horizontal mobilizations have been made possible by the very disruption of vertical mechanisms of collective bargaining by the neoliberal economic policies both in India and Japan. The questions of political efficacy of these new forms of mobilizations, as well as the responsiveness of the governments and the media, have assumed increasingly greater relevance and the results have been quite uneven. Better environment for women at the workplace, ending discrimination in academic campuses, equal career opportunities, and stopping gender-related violence have become central demands of women's and students movements across the country. Also, Indian campuses have seen arrival of more students from Dalit, tribal and other disadvantaged groups which have remained out of the mainstream for centuries owing to the caste system. This has also led to contestations for reconfiguration of the public discourses on democracy, culture, language and society. The widespread outrage<sup>2</sup> that suicide of a Dalit, or the so-called lower caste, research scholar in the University of Hyderabad, received in entire India, was an instructive case in this regard.

### **Shrinking Democratic Spaces**

One major and recurrent theme articulated by citizens protests have been a disappointment with the democratic institutions in reflecting and responding to public sentiment. This pertains to an increasing subversion of democratic institutions and norms from within—by the ruling elites. In India, there have been a spurt of incidences where the state denies basic freedom of expression to the members of civil society. Especially in cases where the movements question the violation of labor laws or environmental laws for corporate projects, dissent is routinely criminalized and legal bars are directly or indirectly lowered to arrest, incarceration and silencing dissident voices. State bestows upon itself the mantle of the sole protector of national interest and further it has also included corporate growth as a pre-decided common good. For instance, earlier the state would acquire land only for public projects like school or hospital or railways, but in the recent decade, laws have been tweaked to include even private

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<sup>1</sup> Report of Justice Verma Committee, <http://www.prindia.org/parliamenttrack/report-summaries/justice-verma-committee-report-summary-2628/>

<sup>2</sup> “‘This Is Not A Suicide but Murder’: Protests in India over Lower-Caste Scholar's Death,” *The Guardian*, January 19, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jan/19/this-is-not-a-suicide-but-protests-in-india-over-lower-caste-scholars-death>

enterprises as public good and the might of the government is used to displace thousands of people to make way for them.<sup>3</sup>

There is an increasing tendency to discourage political group in academic institutions or manufacturing units. Past two decades have seen massive setback to the institutions of collective bargains by workers, students, women or various tribes and communities. The fundamental freedom of expression and assembly enshrined in the Indian constitution has been undermined by numerous ways in which forming NGOs or unions has been made difficult and mobilizing funding for them has been subjected to overwhelming bureaucratic oversight. The watch-dog roles of international NGOs like Greenpeace and Amnesty have been severely limited by curtailment of their ability to receive foreign funding as the government has cancelled their license to do so under the Foreign Contributions Regulation Act (FCRA). Almost a generic allegation levelled against these NGOs is that they use foreign money to influence public policy. This is ironic, as during the same decades the government has gone out of way to ease Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) and the international corporations routinely engage in lobbying as well as mobilizing public opinion through advertisements and campaigns in their favor.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, in essence, the corporations are welcome to influence public opinion but the people cannot exchange their experiences and perspectives about the massive transformations and challenges they are faced with. Soon after coming to power, the current government came up with an intelligence report, deliberately leaked to intimidate and malign, naming half a dozen NGOs and about 40 individuals with a claim that they are bringing down India's national economic security by 2%. This allegation was levelled because the groups and actors named have been highlighting the violations of environmental laws, labor and community rights and land acquisition norms for neoliberal development projects. Criminalization of democratic dissent has been taken to an unforeseen and absurd level in recent years. Community activists, civil society actors and human rights defenders are routinely arrested and incarcerated especially in the regions like Chhattisgarh and Odisha where Adivasi or Scheduled Tribe communities form the majority of population. Universities and other academic spaces have also been experiencing similar curtailment of freedom. Dissident intellectuals are intimidated,<sup>5</sup> arrested and even murdered. While as a general thrust, education is largely seen by the state now as a factory to create workers for the corporate sector and an industry in itself, academic freedom is considered an irritant for the national growth project.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Land Acquisition: An overview of proposed amendments to the law, <http://www.prsindia.org/theprsblog/?p=3515>

<sup>4</sup> "If A Company Can Get FDI, An NGO Too Can Get Foreign Funds," *rediff news*, June 17, 2016, <http://www.rediff.com/news/interview/if-a-company-can-get-fdi-an-ngo-too-can-get-foreign-funds/20160617.htm>

<sup>5</sup> Rising intolerance is destroying India: full text of statement by 350+ artists, [www.indiaresists.com/indias-legitimacy-democracy-is-threatened-statement-by-350-artists/](http://www.indiaresists.com/indias-legitimacy-democracy-is-threatened-statement-by-350-artists/)

<sup>6</sup> Higher Education in India: From Socialism to Capitalism, <http://www.legalserviceindia.com/articles/he.htm>

Similarly in Japan, the secrecy bills aiming at providing the government a legal insulation from public scrutiny has led to wider anxiety about shrinking space for democratic opinions and oversight. Denial of information to public on crucial matters of state would only lead to further alienation and distrust for the system among the common people. Fukushima accident, the escalating issues of Okinawa islands, the secrecy bills and the security legislations—all have stoked one recurrent and common anxiety regarding lack of wider consultation with the citizens.

### **India, Japan and Asia: Expanding Democratic Countries**

In 2011, the *Time* magazine named “The Protester” as its “Person of the Year.” Peaceful civil disobedience movements have taken place in almost all corners of the world, signalling the need to go beyond the formal parliamentary democracies and neoliberal capitalism. The protests currently underway in India and Japan, seek to actualize and expand the promises that as national societies the two countries made to themselves. Far from being disruptive, the civil society movements have sought to strengthen and deepen the democracy. While the government of the day, or a section of the ruling elite can have an interest in continuing with the status quo or can afford to live in denial of these voices from below, it is in the mid-term and longer-term interest of our societies to come up with proper redressal mechanisms and in fact evolve and expand democratic institutions and practices to be responsive to the sentiments of the public. Rapid flow of information and social media has made cross-cultural sharing and connections between the civil society groups much easier than before, and a corresponding collaboration between countries to upgrade their respective democratic institutions should be an important and urgent imperative. By bringing together civil societies and sharing their democratic experiences, India and Japan could not only deal with democratic deficits in a more prudent way and avoid precipitation of the various issues into some serious civil crisis, they can also help other Asian countries by multilateralizing such initiatives. Democracies in Asia are a rather new phenomena and most of the countries are still struggling to have stable political systems. Only courageous attempts to provide platforms to even strongly dissident voices will create a new Asia in which the commons will have a bright common future.

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