

# Trucker Protests Are Another Instance of the Success of Street Politics

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Photo: Jignesh Mistry, CNES

opinion

Politics

The political opposition should take lessons from people's movements.

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Politics

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The truck-drivers' associations called off their nationwide protest against the new penal provisions regarding hit-and-run cases in the Bharatiya Nyay Sanhita (BNS). This came after the Ministry of Home Affairs held discussions with representatives of the All India Motor Transport Congress on January 2, the second day of the strike.

As reported, during the discussion, the Union government clarified that the new laws and provisions regarding hit-and-run cases in the newly-launched BNS has not yet come into force, and the decision to invoke them will be taken only after consultation with the All India Motor Transport Congress.

The word 'consultation' remains the key here. One could only hope that a government drunk on power, exhibiting an insatiable need to project and establish absolutist control sees this, while learning more about the craft of legislation (and its implementation) in India.

After breaking parliamentary procedures and precedent, mass-suspending Opposition MPs, to enable House sessions to be utilised for railroading bills into the Parliament, without deliberation or discussion, the street-agency led engine of protests or 'people's power' is perhaps the only way the Modi government realises time and again how India's legislative exercise – from its design to implementation – cannot avoid a process that embraces consultative, stakeholder-led dialogue with all parties involved.

Ad hoc centralisation of power through reiterated mechanisms of public institutional capture, coercive legislation, while banking on extensive PR-led rhetorical management done in the name of neo-nationalism and 'populising one leader' – irrespective of a party's electoral support – doesn't convince affected groups or communities across India on the viability of laws coming into effect for their own interests.

Street protests in India, when anchored by a cohesive unionised force (from civil society), or in response to an event or pressing social issues, still have a powerful signalling value and cost across India. It's part of a bottom-up organic force that legitimises resistance against any government that fails to take groups into consultation for laws/executive action.

### **Context to India's legislative craft**

As explained earlier, right after CAA-NRC protests had taken the nation by storm, in the *Republic of Beliefs* economist and philosopher Kaushik Basu argued how in context of countries like India, those founded on principles of a constitutional democracy, two elements are most critical in the legislative process for upholding and safeguarding constitutional values: An efficient administration and a dignified process of governance. An inability to ensure one would naturally affect the other. In theory, all this can make sense in a country where governance is aligned with principles of constitutional and civic-institutional morality.

But what if that's not the case in actuality (as we see in the current context). What if a state decides to create laws for implementation that involve the creation of targets and polarise society?

The Modi government's legislative bulldozing has coercively institutionalised a process of non-consultative law-making that doesn't just create targets, or polarised outcomes, but more importantly, reflects a disdain for basic constitutional morals and values.

The CAA-NRC-NPR combination allowed for creating targets in a similar manner, and it went along with a state narrative to allow the "social legitimatisation" of a legalised political project of pitting one group in opposition to another.

Another instance in this regard were the "Kaale Kanoon (Black Farm Laws)" brought by the Modi government a couple of years ago, which divided farmers, and even those advocating for agri-reforms, leading to one of the largest, longest peaceful protest movements in contemporary India (and the world). The Kisan Andolan made the government bend on its knees and take the legislations back, which were also railroaded without any consciously expanded deliberation, or consultative process with farmers unions across India.

### **Satyagraha protest politics: An *andolan* to learn from**

Replugging back to the lessons emerging from the Kisan Andolan remains essential for any political opposition which positions itself against the current government. As explained earlier, the Kisan Andolan wasn't simply an act of social or political mobilisation against a brutish control-raj regime.

The entire genesis of the protest movement was rooted in resistance against a set of laws where the principle of its resistance on the streets, in form of a sustained socio-political movement, was connected to:

- The cultural ethos and solidarity of the Sikh community.
- The collective historiography of peasant protests and agrarian movements of the past connected farmers against class-caste-geographical divides.
- The collective need to put up a fight to dismantle any "perceived weakness in the identity of *Jan Kisan*" (the Lakhimpur incident had triggered this sentiment among farmers from Uttar Pradesh who joined the movement to support other protesting farmers).

An anatomical diagnosis of this civil resistance movement, in our understanding, was shaped by the perseverance of those imbibing the cultural ethos of Sikh tradition, with an undistilled faith in the collective public action, or Satyagraha methods of protest. In other words, the andolan's success renewed one's faith in the patient-perseverant success of Satyagraha politics, even in the 21st century.



Photo: Jignesh Mistry, CNES

The andolan was called a Satyagraha by most protestors and union activists we spoke to. Satyagraha, characterised by a non-violent form of protest, civil disobedience and non-cooperation, has been embedded in the fabric of Indian agrarian movements from much before independence. The Satyagraha method of mass mobilisation during the non-cooperation movement had put tremendous political and economic pressure on the British Raj through the boycott of foreign goods and picketing of shops before independence.

Interestingly, in the *Kisan Andolan*, parallels were drawn between the Raj and Modi government—even during the introduction of codified Labor Laws, without due consultation with unions and worker-groups, the similarities between the Modi Government and an colonial oppressor were clear.

A protestor from Ludhiana, Punjab, who we spoke to during our field work on the Kisan Andolan, said that in villages of Punjab, “people have now started boycotting goods from firms behind commercialisation and privatisation, such as petrol and mobile network services from the Mukesh Ambani-led Reliance Industries Limited”.

One of the other most important features of the Kisan Andolan was the cooperation received from people belonging to different demographics, particularly the youth and women, within the farming and non-farming rural communities.

The youth played an essential role in sustaining and monitoring movement. While they made sure that only those having an identity card entered the site and stood guard outside tents of women, their most important duty was to coordinate social media and communication. They ran social media campaigns and streamed the speeches spoken on stage live through social media handles, such as Facebook and Instagram.



Photo: Jignesh Mistry, CNES

Elderly women were driving tractors, participating in the *langar* kitchens and delivering speeches on stage. If not at the protest sites, women (and also children) tended to fields and managed households back in the villages while the elderly men were mostly present at the protest sites. This way they ensured that there was no compromise in their farm produce while they were protesting to save their future income.

Symbolism also plays an important role in such protests. Similar to the Bardoli peasant satyagraha of 1928 where the women dressed in *khadi*, the farmers' protests too were seen to have a specific dress code (salwar kameez and yellow dupatta). This highlighted unity and their resolve to affect change, especially in a movement where the leaders were overwhelmingly men.

**Creating targets doesn't work: A lesson for the political opposition**

Creating targets through coercive legal action, enabled by brute electoral majority, produce strong emotive effects and have serious follow-on effects on how economies and societies function. If any sovereign passes laws that specifically create targets, or group-based markers, it could make space for a subsequent division in public opinion with one group's views set against another's.

One may only wish the Indian political opposition at this point of time, particularly in an election year, anchored by the INDIA bloc would sooner realise this – and work towards harnessing the potential embedded in the design, social psychology, and political effectiveness of protest movements and street-based agitation across India.

It was disappointing to see how even the decision to mass suspend MPs that caused millions of people to be not even represented in Parliament didn't trigger any major, aggressive protests on the streets of Delhi or otherwise by opposition MPs. Social media rants, virtual protests and op-eds have little meaning in fighting a state that acts with impunity and in a manner consistent with a Hobbesian form of absolutist state .

### **Realising and harnessing 'people's power'**

The politics of opposition may learn from recent protest movements to recognise how sustained people-based mass social movements through bottom-up, grassroots level networks can help mobilising resistance against authoritarian regimes and progressively (re)instate rule *of* law – while fighting rule *by* law.

One can recall how arrests of women social activists Devangna Kalita, Natasha Narwal, Sudha Bharadwaj (to name a few), are instances of a conscious attempt to sanction (arrest) dissent by the Modi government. Authoritarian regimes do so by practicing a rule *by* law where most decentralised social movements are countered vehemently (even by force) through institutional sanctions. Legal institutions – courts, the police do everything in their power to suppress civic freedoms and liberties – including a basic right to peacefully protest against an act, or law.

A conventional focus on building institutions can often leave many citizens feeling disempowered, being expected to wait till “all-important institutions” reform, while they continue to be at the receiving end of oppression from those very institutions.

So, what can one do when such institutions-meant to protect and safeguard liberties and a rule *of* law are so hollowed that they have become the primary tools for its very subversion?

To strengthen rule of law, what we require is a focus on strengthening *people*, not institutions. The INDIA bloc must realise this.

This warrants a difficult, dangerous task of developing grassroots-based community organisation at a very decentralised level, often through informal networks outside established institutions. An action, sustaining resistance to authoritarianism through non-violent protests, marches, boycotts, strikes, as well as through community-based initiatives intervening at a local level to improve people's lives and well-being.

In India, rights-based legislations have often yielded the most transformation socio-political change in strengthening the state-citizen contract, allowing greater agency and accountability mechanisms for the citizen to keep the accumulative power of the state in check. Illustratively, the Right to Information Act (2005) was a culmination of sustained collective action from organisations like Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS) and National Campaign for People's Right to Information (NCPRI).

Similarly, The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act of 2006 helped acknowledge the rights of forest-dwelling communities across India. The making of the act mapped out a dense interplay between different actors in the drafting process. Social activists from the Campaign for Survival and Dignity (CSD) helped raise enough voice to convince the Ministry of Tribal Affairs to consider drafting a new law.

Even NREGA (2006) saw an intense interaction between different state and non-state actors (involving members of the civil society) that helped in actualising a legislation providing an opportunity for even the socially and culturally marginalised to develop new forms of claims to the local state apparatus.

Nandini Nayak's 2012 thesis provides a fascinating account of activism around NREGA in rural Madhya Pradesh that allowed Bhil Adivasis a chance to engage in and secure livelihood opportunities directly from the state.

The Black Lives Matter movement in the US in recent years is another such example, now witnessing a global reckoning. The movement made citizens question the role and acts of police against a minority and raised a collective effort for exploring new, more decentralised solutions primarily through community-driven initiatives to limit a pre-existing, dominant role of police (criminalising all behaviour) for improving the daily lives of all Americans.

History in different times and context has therefore shown how, even in most established democracies, a failure to have formal institutions safeguarding rule of law is best substituted with an active, more aware and better organised citizenry. An engagement like this cannot be legislated for, nor imitated from one city to another. People need to collectively build it bottom up in their own organic way.

People's power can not only help substitute a rule *by* law with the rule *of* law but do so in a more sustained manner while championing democratic processes and conduct.

There are at least three ways this can happen.

*First*, such demonstrated people's-power can help neutralise the "top-down pressure" placed on courts and the police by the executive. Even compromised institutions can be forced into discharging their duties in accordance the spirit of the law- see how the murder charges were levied on cops involved in George Floyd's killing as massive protests gained momentum to make the executive authorities to act swiftly.

*Secondly*, people power based social movements allow an organic creation of alternative spaces that help shape a society where a rule of law can be respected. Any act of civil disobedience of course needs to have a strategic purpose and need some disciplining too for the engaged people to understand that the act of disobedience is done not with the intention to reject the rule of law but rather see it as a means of (re)establishing it, for a more just and progressive purpose.

And *third*, people's power can help bring even the most brutal authoritarian leaderships to be defeated with far-reaching consequences that could not have been possible otherwise. Public discussion, collective deliberation and social processes of participatory engagement opens citizens' minds to a more progressive idea of society that looks at a different way of doing things.

People with similar progressive views and thoughts need to better organise themselves today, learn to connect and engage with one another not on social media alone but in the real world. Over time, as people build mutual trust, gain the confidence and conviction both in themselves and in collective propriety, it allows new coalitions to be formed and ultimately be (cap)able to be more confrontational with the authoritarian regime.

Whether it is the Chipko Movement of 1970s; the Anna Hazare Anti-Corruption Movement in early 2000s; the movement for stringent deterrence and sanctions in crimes against women after the Nirbhaya gang-rape case, all, reflect the might of people's power, which, through social movements and rights-based movements can bring reformative changes in the existing political and social contract.

More than ever, harnessing this power is critical for the Indian political opposition in reinstating a rule of law, demonstrating the resilience of Indian democracy against any given regime which wishes to weaken that. As of now, in what is consequentially going to be a defining national election in 2024, the INDIA opposition bloc looks more lost than aware of these socio-historical realities and their political effectiveness-in resisting and taking on larger/bigger political forces.

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