

The cockroach metaphor: Why digital parody fails India's marginalised

Rural joblessness, massive class, caste, gender, urban-rural divides can't be addressed by a sub-culture movement made possible by an Internet revolution.



Protest meet by Cockroach Janta Party

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With the rise of the Cockroach Janta Party (CJP), a satirical social media handle that turned into a movement, a certain unmissable protest is being registered: a protest against the way the bureaucratic and political elites view ordinary, jobless citizens. The mock party in question appears to be an outcry against a condescending attitude as the elite view them as cockroaches — vulgar, scornful and ugly creatures cropping up everywhere.

Theatre of the Absurd, a well-known theatre movement, which emerged after the Second World War, offers some insights. In Eugene Ionesco's play, *Rhinoceros*, everyone turns into a Rhinoceros except a drunkard and social misfit: Berenger. Though initially tempted by the possibility of turning into one especially after the transformation of his best friend, Jean, a conformist, Berenger resists this transformation and remains to be the last living human representative. In a world where everyone is swept away by powerful and violent ideologies, Berenger remains who he is, warts and all, a human being. Ionesco's play is often seen as one man's resistance of fascist ideologies inculcated and normalised in stunning speed and scale.

In another work, Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, a travelling salesman, Gregor Samsa, turns into a bug in his bed with the mind of a salesman intact. The world around the four walls of his room remains unchanged and that is exactly the reason for his struggles. Cockroaches or Rhinos are what they are: uncommon, viewed as ugly and treated with scorn. Nevertheless, if all we are asked to do is to turn into them, that may very well be the gravest of threats that we would ever face. This could mean one should become what appears to be 'logical' for the crowd even at the cost of shedding a life one lived from birth till the moment the transformation is enforced.

While in *Rhinoceros*, if it is a protest against massified ideologies by one man who refuses to conform, in *Metamorphosis*, the protest is against a long-held ideology that offers no space for being different. In the former, everyone except one person transforms into a Rhinoceros, in the latter, one person turns into a bug and everyone else remains to be who they were. Both texts, the former a play and the latter a novelette, approach the same problem from two very different settings. In the first, a pandemic of 'Rhinoceritis' is spreading and in the second, a Kafkaesque lonely battle is waged against brutal normalcy. The birth of the

CJP as a parody of contemporary politics reflects both the themes in varying proportions. The CJP moment and the active suppression of this satirical cyber movement by a near autocratic regime are profound.

First of all, the movement, while reflecting how helpless people respond to discrimination and oppression in an actively brutal and authoritarian rule, is telling. Second, the movement itself is hollow bordering silliness. This is, at the moment, more of a social media reel campaign than something 'real', solid and deep-rooted.

Rural joblessness, massive class, caste, gender and urban-rural divides can't be addressed by a sub-culture movement made possible by an internet revolution. The netizens might shift interest and the powerful government can nip it in the bud anytime. More importantly, its linguistic, social and cultural noises are far removed from the rural, suburban and marginalized millions who are the original target of the tongue-in-cheek reference — 'cockroaches' — by the Chief Justice of India (CJI), Surya Kanth.

Cockroaches, in this sense, can also be the dwellers of urban slums and the numerous shanties in the factory towns, the migrant labourers and their families, in and around the fast-rising skyscrapers, highspeed rail tracks, urban facilities and the homes of the rich. The rich and powerful have house helps, drivers, gardeners, servants and gig workers delivering food at their homes too. These are the people they worry would invade their elite, gatekept spaces of privilege. Hence, they are termed 'cockroaches' and 'parasites'.

This is not the personal view of one official alone; it is the general view of the ruling powerful elite in government, bureaucracy and private monopolies regarding the millions of hapless Indians who are, in their view, not sophisticated enough — the 'uncouth' millions. Strangely, the colonising British too thought of the

ordinary Indians in the same way. Thus, this is not simply a clash of sentiments between the CJI and the CJP.

A majority of the followers of the CJP movement, which began as a hilarious online trend, is urban and middleclass. A few of them could very well be from diverse, even marginalised, backgrounds including, probably, its founder, a Boston university-educated middleclass youngster, Abhijeet Dipke. Nevertheless, the movement as a whole, its language, its complex online spaces and a majority of its cyber followers, don't represent the myriad communities of 'cockroaches' and 'parasites' – the shanty-dwelling, the suburban and the rural, faceless and oppressed millions. They are the city-dwelling middleclass living a middleclass life though discomfited by a near-autocratic government and its bureaucratic minions – a universal discomfort shared by every section of society in varying degrees. As argued, it is, of course, a complex picture, with many of the city-dwelling middle-class crowd themselves coming from oppressed backgrounds. They, unfortunately, do not represent the faceless millions whose voice – online or offline – is perpetually muted.

The urban class's belief in 'rule of law' and meritocracy are more badly broken under an openly feudal government today than ever before, hence they are angry and rightfully so. The rural/suburban poor's life is so crushed that they may not even follow platforms like X and do not have the cultural and social capital to create cyber protests. Nevertheless, these two classes occupy an entirely different universe of realities. While the rural classes silently suffer, the urban class protest in hollow, symbolic and funnier fashion. Both the groups are deeply disillusioned but the rural ones are crushed more horrifically, and they are less articulate about it. The urban meme protest is a bitter-sweet experience but a shallow one.

In order to assess this phenomenon well, we need to go back to the texts mentioned earlier in the context of the CJP. In the contexts of both Rhinoceros and Metamorphosis, the ugliness of cockroaches/Rhinos is located precisely in their out-of-place existence and not in their 'properness' as an 'acceptable' group and not even in their collective bargaining – that is what the Kafkaesque stands for. If every powerful figure turns into a cockroach, will they still be ugly? Maybe not.

In such a scenario, as in Rhinoceros, probably a Berenger would be the ugliest one as a cockroach or a Rhino is merely metaphors and ugliness is something constantly evolving and not a 'permanent' body. The most profound problem here is the fact that in our society today, revolution and protest look like turning into a bug.

It is clear, nevertheless, that the cyburban (cyber-urban) generation is disturbed by the feudal mores of the rulers. Nevertheless, that disturbance, and the thought that there must be more cockroaches coming together as a revolutionary movement, hides something deeper: we have always been this way. We have been a deeply-divided, toxic and ghettoised people in history and that is even more disturbing. We don't need someone to call us cockroaches to know this. A cockroach-themed 'cyburban' meme-party can't solve this problem.

India has never been an equal society, and it is determined by untouchability for millennia. The urban youth believed that their society is based on some 'meritocracy' which, in itself, is deeply problematic. As a cockroach is untouchable, so are the humans in the lower rungs of the society imagined by the caste elite for millennia. The top layer, called itself, 'clean and touchable' and deemed the others 'impure and untouchable'. The cockroach that the CJI scornfully mentioned refers to this systemic oppression in our society. Addressing this millennia-old problem of oppression,

nevertheless, is not something a mock party can do. Nor can this problem be resolved by the disillusioned middle class urban youth even when they are within their rights to express their frustration and disillusionment with an oppressive regime.

As Indians, if we are to create an equal society, we must strike at the roots of this caste-based division. As Ambedkar pointed out, political equality without social equality is empty. This is why in a society that practices caste-based division, people surprised by a powerful figure's 'cockroach remark' is disturbingly ironic. Turn and look around: don't we see this everywhere?

This is not about someone accepting somebody else. It is about a society not creating a level playing field for all its people from the beginning. It is, thus, about false promises. The ideal society can emerge only if all of its citizens are treated equally in the societal, cultural, economic and political fields irrespective of their caste and creed. A cockroach does not have to be a national obsession. The 'cockroachification' of people must be stopped and for that, we need to resist becoming cockroaches as Berenger does.

Probably our leaders, our judges, lawyers, business tycoons and our children need to know that it is important to value other people's self-respect and to know that others are people like us too only far less privileged and that they are not cockroaches. They are as human as our Prime Minister or our Chief Justice. In order to create such a brotherhood in a historically fractured society, we must inculcate a sense of radical empathy and universality of humanity amongst our citizens. Socio-political and economic equality must be seen as core values. This primarily requires a radical, democratic awakening to remove the elite autocrats from power and establish a government that represents the marginalised.

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Views expressed are the author's own.