

## **Democracy and Protest – an interlinked phenomenon**

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**Abstract:** *Protest has been instrumental in forcing the introduction of most of the freedoms that now exist in liberal democracies. Direct action, mostly nonviolent, played a major role in the ending of slavery, extension of the franchise, curtailing ruthless aspects of the exploitation of labour and extending rights to women and minorities.*

*But we cannot ignore this fact that even in complete democratic state or society like India, protest is allowed so long as it doesn't have much impact due to rising corruption and inefficiency of ruling government. Once protest on a massive scale develops in way that threatens powerful and dominant interest groups, police or military force is brought to bear against it.*

*The article reviews the current democratic system, the success & failure of protests and importance of peaceful protests. As Mahatma Gandhi held that: 'Democracy is the art and science of mobilizing the entire physical, economic and spiritual resources of various sections of the people in the service of common good of all.' It is discussed that now the time has come when we, as the citizens of a democratic state, should stand in solidarity without fear and demand for our democratic right to protest against wrong and corrupt practices and participate in the governing system.*

*Mahatma Gandhi and his non-violent movement for independence had a great impact on Indian society and history; his ideas inspired the entire world. So, we should try to follow him and his philosophy and demand for our rights in a peaceful way, then only India will be termed as a democratic state in real terms.*

*To conclude, we can say that in the world that we live in today, fanatics resort to guns and bombs to make their point but if protests are non-violent—as rare as that is—we should appreciate them and embrace them for the betterment of our future. No matter what part of the world we live in, we should live by the ideas of democracy, peace and justice.*

**Keywords** – *Democracy, Non-Violence, Protest with peace, People's participation*

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### **I. Introduction -**

A **protest** is an expression of objection, by words or by actions, to particular events, policies or situations. Protests can take many different forms, from individual statements to mass demonstrations. Protesters may organize a protest as a way of publicly making their opinions heard in an attempt to influence public opinion or government policy, or they may undertake direct action in an attempt to directly enact desired changes themselves.

#### **Protest in democracy or a democratic society–**

As Mahatma Gandhi held that: 'Democracy is the art and science of mobilizing the entire physical, economic and spiritual resources of various sections of the people in the service of common good of all.'

Thus, in a democratic state like India, protests play an effective and essential role. We know that India's robust record of democracy in a diverse and fractious nation of 1.2 billion people commands global respect but dozens of protesters interviewed in recent days said they want to create a new form of participatory democracy that goes beyond merely casting votes in elections and this participation, sometimes demands pressure, persuasion or protest.

Protest has been instrumental in forcing the introduction of most of the freedoms that now exist in liberal democracies. Direct action, mostly nonviolent, played a major role in the ending of slavery, extension of the franchise, curtailing ruthless aspects of the exploitation of labour and extending rights to women and minorities. (Carter, 1973).

When talking about democracy, it's usually understood to be basically just about the vote we have every year / every four or five years, in which we select our politicians to run our cities and our country, and the lucky few actually get the politician of their choice representing them. But actually, democracy is about more than just voting in elections. It is about participating fully (or at least to the best of one's ability and interest) in civic life. Thus, the important pillar of a fully democratic society is the right to protest. **Simon. (November 26, 2010)**

In a democratic society, the Government is not the master of the People; it's the servant of the People. And – the Law is also not the master, but the servant. Where the Government and the Law are out of step with the will of the People, the People have a duty to make their views known through the medium of protest.

Thus, we can say that in a democratic set-up, protests are part of a systematic and peaceful campaign to achieve a particular objective, and involve the use of pressure as well as persuasion but in a non-violent manner. Actually, a democratic state provides its citizens a right to protest, so that they can enjoy their fundamental rights and give their opinion in case if they find anything against the system.

**Right to protest** – The Constitution declares India to be a sovereign, socialist, secular, republic, assuring its citizens of justice, liberty, and complete democracy. It also emphasizes that the constitution is made by and for the Indian people. Thus, in a democratic India, every citizen has certain basic rights to participate, interfere and protest in the government actions.

The **right to protest** is a perceived human right arising out of a number of recognized human rights. The rights to free speech and protest, along with the right to form and join associations or groups, are found in Articles 10 and 11 of the Human Rights Act. **From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia.**

While no human rights instrument or national constitution grants the absolute right to protest, such a right to protest may be a manifestation of the right to freedom of assembly, the right to freedom of association, and the right to freedom of speech. Over the last 25 years, there have been a number of laws – and amendments to laws – introduced which have further and further curtailed the right to protest; in fact, those laws in their letter are actually so restricting that the Public Order Act 1986 technically makes it a criminal offence for a group of more than six people to walk down the street together.

Such restrictions result into the fear and insecurity amongst the protestors and discourage those with jobs and reputations to lose and only those who are students, unemployed, and others who have less to lose by being identified as protestors take public stands.

**Martin, Brian. (1994)** The negative image of many protests results from the ingrained fear of protesting felt by many people, which leaves the field to those few who are willing to take the risks of protesting and who are perceived as 'fringe' elements of the population.

**Singh, Gyanant. (August 16, 2011)** It is ironic that the capital of the largest democracy in the world has no place for public protest. One might not agree with Anna Hazare or like his mode of protest but the manner in which he was virtually denied a right to sit for an indefinite fast protest against corruption cannot be justified in a democratic country like India.

The policy makers need to understand that the protest is not a great threat to the power of the state rather it is crucial in a democracy as information and ideas help to inform political debate and are essential to public accountability and transparency in Government and thus, protests should not be discouraged or restricted. The need of the time is to redefine and redesign the right to protest and related acts, so that the voice and views of a common man can be national issues.

## II. Discussion

### “Unnoticed or suppressed Protests: Failure of Democracy or inefficiency of protestors?”

We observe that in present times, number of movements start and are suppressed or end unnoticed without any proper result, even though they have a very noble cause attached to them. On the other hand, useless words of economically and politically strong people are highlighted and emphasized. Such is the height of corruption, anarchy and helplessness of our law-makers. The examples are like Anna Hazare's campaign or unnoticed fast unto death by unsung hero, Swami Nigamananda for preservation of the environmental health of the sacred river Ganga or Irom Sharmila's indefinite fast since 2000 to get the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) repealed.

In the last couple of years there has been a much uglier undercurrent around protests developed where police and mindless anarchists alike have each upped the ante, with the result being that reasonable protests are emasculated at birth by the appearance of the riot squad, and what should have been a reasonable protest has been needlessly turned into a riot because that's the only way the protestors have been left as the way to get their voices heard.

**Laurie Penny (November 25, 2010)** in her article '[Inside the Whitehall Kettle](#)' says – “when the same policing techniques that are used against a bunch of anarchist and rioters are used against a bunch of schoolchildren, you know there's something gone badly wrong. And something needs to be done”.

There are a number of instances across the country of muzzling democratic expression of dissent using brute force. Here a pertinent question arises: Is muzzling peaceful and democratic protests becoming a new trend

in gagging voices of dissent, a democratic right of every citizen? Is it correct to curb the freedom of expression of those protesting while exercising their fundamental right under the Constitution? Is there no other way of tackling just protests, addressing legitimate concerns? Should restrictions be imposed on people who do not need restrictions? Should the government abrogate its responsibility of not causing inconvenience to others by banning or severely constraining public protests? “Is this world’s largest democracy, curbing our right to protest?” **Arun, B S. (Jan 6, 2013)**

Do these unnoticed, unattended and suppressed protests are lacking a right direction or the very essence of a democratic protest?

Going by these curbed protests across the country, the demonstrators or protestors need to re-consider the way the protest is taking place because their might be some deficiency from the point of view of a democratic protest. These protests grab attention, but only for a short while.

Also, we need to understand the Gandhian way of protest at the time of Indian freedom struggle and his strategy of non-violence because a slight act of violence or indiscipline can ruin the entire effect and seriousness of the campaign and can convert it from a meaningful protest of national interest into a disturbing violent act against national security, law and order.

We need to have the protests which are systematic, well-planned, non-violent, patient and peaceful. At the same time, we need some reformers, like Gandhi, who can re-think over the democratic structure and redesign the system, so that democratic protests regain their importance and will again become a strong pillar of democracy and a tool of common man to check the system and control the governance.

Also, the government is not always sensitive enough to the existing democratic methods of expressing popular grievances, innovative ways will have to be discovered by the growing number of civil society activists to make their presence felt.

### **Suggestions**

- **“Creative ways to Protest peacefully”**

It is observed that dharnas, anshans and rallies are a bit slow ways to protest and thus, they need time and patience in order to get noticed. Also we can say that at times, they become less effective now-a-days in front of strong and powerful corrupt people. So, there is a need to come up with some innovative yet peaceful ideas to protest which can immediately attract the attention of media, and thus, people at large and then concerned authorities.

**Magnier, Mark. (2012)** There has never been a shortage of creative ways to protest in India, the world's largest democracy to spotlight corruption, inflation, education policy and military crackdowns.

In recent days, demonstrators have opened a new front: water. The move started in late August in the central state of Madhya Pradesh when villagers opposed to a dam stood in a reservoir for 17 days because no one was paying attention to their conventional protests.

Following their lead, demonstrators opposed to a nuclear power plant in southern Tamil Nadu state headed into the sea for two days last week, forming a human chain as they bounced around in fairly sizeable waves. Perhaps affected by motion sickness, they subsequently switched to sand, burying themselves in rows on the beach with only their heads showing. Then in other protest, fishermen in Tamil Nadu angry over rising diesel prices submerged themselves in a stretch of ocean wearing black headbands and waving black flags.

There are several other innovative ways of protesting peacefully without affecting work, poor as well as economy of the state.

1. Blacking out the websites i.e. to switch the websites from colour to black and white.
2. Web site owners are encouraged to place images related to cause on their sites.
3. Social media campaigns. Like we have recently seen related to Janlokal campaign on Twitter and Facebook.
4. Online petitions in order to aware large number of people about the cause and get their support and then finally make the authorities realize that such large number of people support or demand for this and thus, it is a meaningful protest. like [avaaz.org](http://avaaz.org), [change.org](http://change.org) etc.
5. By switching off your lights for one hour – fix a time and switch off light. like Earth Hour
6. Create your own website and add social plugins to it.
7. Organizing Marches (Candle), rallies (bike, car, bicycle) with handing out flyers
8. Wear black ribbons on hands or cloths as a symbol of protest of an issue
9. Protest an issue by simply wearing a button or a pin stating your cause!
10. Flag & Banner on the roof/vehicle with slogan or symbol of cause
11. Organize gatherings at MPs' or concerned officials' offices.
12. Social boycott: the protesters may resort to social boycott. Don't attend rallies, functions, parties, social gatherings, even weddings of a corrupt officials, political leaders etc.

13. Hunger Strike, which was the tool of Mahatma Gandhi at the time of freedom struggle and now it is being used by Anna Hazare.

• **Need of hour - “Protest with Peace and non-violence”–**

It is true that in a democracy, it is the person's democratic right to protest but protesting with peaceful means is extremely opposite to the rioting with violence. Today, despite of the large support of common man and noble cause, many campaigns get fail or are suppressed due to the use of violence and impatience. The recent example is Delhi Rape case, which was suppressed by the administration and authorities. The Delhi police tried to curb the people's anger or dissatisfaction with water canons, tear gas and lathi-charge. We all know that people's rage is not wrong, their demand is not unreasonable but still the violence is ruining the entire effect and seriousness of the issue, otherwise such unified protest by the entire nation can bring tremendous change in the law and governance.

In a democratic system like India, protests are very much effective and essential too. But at the same time, protests should be attached with peace; patience; commitment; and ahimsa (non-violence), otherwise, protests leave behind their importance and effect.

We have the tradition of ahimsa and non-violent protests or resistance. In ancient India, saints like Mahaveer, Buddha, Kabir, Pipa, and many others propagated the non-violent means in day-today living as well as in order to check and control the governing bodies and socio-political system.

In modern times, Mahatma Gandhi's satyagraha and civil disobedience movement, Indian freedom struggle and protest against British rule (in which thousands of common people participated and supported the father of nation) are such examples which influenced the entire world. Even today, Anna Hazare's hunger strike against corrupt practices is an appropriate example of non-violent protest in a present democratic state. Thus, we can see that Indians are reliving their principles of non-violence taught by Mahatma Gandhi and other ancient saints and gurus.

According to Mohandas Gandhi “Non-violence is the greatest force at the disposal of mankind. It is mightier than the mightiest weapon of destruction devised by the ingenuity of man.” **The Power Nonviolence (1935)**

We have seen Syrians, Egyptians, Libyans and millions of Arabs rebelling on streets, challenging their dictatorship in whatever ways they can. Unfortunately, these struggles have resulted in the loss of thousands of innocent lives. Amongst the riots occurred around the world, the Indian freedom struggle led by Gandhi caught the world's attention because of its peaceful and non-violent protest. So, It is a necessary reminder to us that the principles of peace, self-restraint, and non-aggression were effective in the past. They still work today and will work in the future, too. **Seghal, Siddharth. (August 23, 2011)**

“People have the right to express opposition and give suggestions”. This was the philosophy of our father of Nation - Mahatma Gandhi and his tool was non-violence and Satyagrah. With the help of these two tools, he fought Indian freedom struggle and with his great ideas, he inspired the entire world. Martin Luther King, an American activist, and prominent leader in the African-American Civil Rights Movement, Nelson Mandela, a South Indian anti-apartheid activist and Nobel peace prize winner to name a few.

In the world that we live in today, fanatics resort to guns and bombs to make their point. When protests are non-violent—as rare as that is—we should appreciate them and embrace them for the betterment of our future. No matter what part of the world we live in, we should live by the ideas of democracy, peace and justice.

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