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469A Bukit Timah Road
#07-01, Tower Block, Singapore 259770
Tel: 6516 6179 / 6516 4239
Fax: 6776 7505 / 6314 5447
Email: isassec@nus.edu.sg
Website: www.isas.nus.edu.sg



The Delhi Rape Protests: Observations on Middle Class Activism in India

Ronojoy Sen¹

The year 2012 was indelibly tainted in India by the horrific gang rape in New Delhi and the death of the 23-year-old victim in a Singapore hospital. The images that remain with us in the early days of the New Year, however, are of the protests that shook Delhi and other metropolitan cities in end-December 2012. Even as the perpetrators of the rape are tried, it is perhaps an appropriate time to assess the nature of the protests and the ones similar to them over the past two years, and what they say about India's civil society.

What can be said with some degree of certainty is that the recent protests, primarily in the heart of Lutyens' Delhi and scattered across parts of urban India, were mostly spontaneous and voluntary. The women and men — many of them college students — who gathered in various parts of India were mobilised by a sense of outrage, social media tools and word of mouth. What did however play a role was round-the-clock television coverage which enabled the number of protesters to multiply during the two weeks leading up to the New Year. If we leave aside some fringe elements of political outfits who attempted to hijack the protests, there were no political parties orchestrating the demonstrations. Indeed, politicians were conspicuously absent from the protests.

¹ Dr Ronojoy Sen is Visiting Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore. He can be contacted at isasrs@nus.edu.sg. The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of ISAS.

Comparison with the Anti-Corruption Protests

Plenty has been said by both the government and commentators about the intemperate demands — castration for rapists and executing them summarily being just two of them — raised by the protesters. It would be hasty, however, to dismiss the protests as either anarchic or media-driven. At the same time it would be wrongheaded to view them as a serious challenge to the government and the established political order. It makes much more sense to see them as part of a continuum with the anti-corruption protests led by Anna Hazare. A striking similarity between the crowds milling around the Ramlila grounds during Hazare's 13-day fast in 2011 and the protesters in Raisina Hill was the number of middle class people who had turned up. As was the constant presence of television cameras.

Of course, there were significant differences too between the protests. The first, and obvious, one was the lack of a focal organisation or figure in the protests over the rape. The men and women who flocked to Raisina Hill or took part in candlelit vigils across the country did so out of a sense of outrage at the heinous nature of the crime and the apathy of the state. In sharp contrast, Hazare and his now-disbanded team had a well-oiled and well-funded campaign which pulled out all stops to attract crowds and to put pressure on the government. Second, the issue that animated Hazare's agitation — corruption — was possibly more amenable to a long-term political mobilisation. So much so that a section of Hazare's team has now formed a political party under the leadership of Arvind Kejriwal, who was incidentally present during the protests over the rape but kept a low profile.

Composition of the Protesters

What do the recent protests then say about Indian democracy? Is the “new politics”, to borrow a term from John Harriss and others, of people voluntarily taking to the streets to protest wrongs or government inaction restricted to the middle classes? It would certainly seem so going by the composition of the protesters who gathered in Delhi and other cities. One of the participants in the protests wrote in an article, “While the awakening of the students and the educated youth has been rightly applauded, one has to ponder over the class dimension of the phenomenon and about the chasm that lies between India Gate and the slum habitat.”²

² Prachee Sinha, ‘Run with Gender, Hunt with Class’, *Economic and Political Weekly* (26 January 2013).

These are also the same people who seem to have little faith in government institutions and the political class. This is in contrast to the poor – or the members of “political society”³ as Partha Chatterjee calls them – who still seem to have much more faith in the political system and political parties to solve its problems. As opposed to scholars like Pradeep Chhibber who believe “associational life”⁴ is weak in India, Harriss finds it to be vibrant in an urban setting. Harriss, however, says that many civil society organisations keep their distance from the concerns of the poor. As he points out, “There is strong evidence showing that while middle class people in India have withdrawn increasingly from electoral politics, poorer people are remarkably active participants...”⁵ This isn’t a recent trend either. Historically in India voting has been lowest in rich, urban constituencies as opposed to a much higher turnout during election in poorer, rural areas.

What we have seen over the past year and half is greater participation in protests by the middle class. These have usually sprung up around certain figures or moments and have been transient. But despite the shortcomings they have been able, considerably aided by the media, to exert significant pressure on the government to respond to some of their demands. In the case of the anti-corruption agitation, the government agreed to the formation of a Lokpal (anti-corruption ombudsman) incorporating many of the suggestions made by Hazare’s team. Over a year later, however, the Lokpal Bill has still to be legislated.

In the instance of the rape case the government has promised to make laws more stringent and speed up the judicial process. The Delhi rape case trial has been moved to a fast-track court. A commission headed by former Chief Justice of India, J S Verma, has submitted its report on changes to existing law. It is of course too early to say if and to what extent the law will be amended and to what effect.

Barrington Moore in a seminal work had once argued that without a middle class there would be no democracy.⁶ India has bucked this theory with the middle class traditionally playing a marginal role in electoral politics. That is why political parties have usually ignored the middle class and its concerns. Rahul Gandhi’s call at the recent Congress party’s session in Jaipur to address the needs of an “impatient India” is an exception, prompted by the recent protests. But if India’s substantial and growing middle class is to now play a greater role it must go beyond street protests. To effect real change, it must shed its suspicion of politics and engage meaningfully with it.

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³ Partha Chatterjee, *The Politics of the Governed: Reflections on Popular Politics in Most of the World* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2004).

⁴ Pradeep K. Chhibber, *Democracy without Associations: Transformation of the Party System and Social Changes in India* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1999).

⁵ John Harriss, ‘Antinomies of Empowerment: Observations on Civil Society, Politics and Urban Governance in India’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 30 June 2006.

⁶ Barrington Moore, *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966).