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Governance

The mandate of the people must become
our insurance for change

Nirbhaya in a deaf world

The quintessential protester reflects our crumbling governance system

THE LAST image of 2012 was protesters storming the bastion of Delhi, outraged at the brutal rape of a young girl, named by one media house as Nirbhaya or fearless, and the culture of violence against women. This outburst by the educated middle class, many of them young women, was spontaneous as much as it was leaderless. We need to think about the response of the government to this protest and others. We need to understand if the Indian State has any clue about what is going on under its nose—and feet.

In this case, on the first day people had gathered, peacefully but resolutely, to register their anger. The educated middle class was innocent, and arrogant, enough to believe it should be allowed to march to the grand presidential palace, a symbol of power and compassion in their eyes. But the government reacted with horror. It used water cannons and tear gas shells to quell the protest. The next day, the numbers swelled, social networks got busy calling for a gathering and sadness for the young victim turned into anger against the callous State.

In all this, there was absolute silence from top politicians. Nobody walked into the crowd, held a megaphone and shared the grief of the people. Nobody came out to explain that the government would indeed take the required action to fast track conviction of the vile rapists and beef up security across the city; that it would make its people feel safe. Instead, politicians and bureaucrats hid behind their many-layered security walls. The irony was there for all to see. The disgust grew.

To make amends, the then ruling United Progressive Alliance (UPA) chairperson Sonia Gandhi and her heir Rahul Gandhi decided to meet a few “representatives” to convince them of the government’s intent. But the fact is that this “movement”—for want of another word—has no representatives. It is leaderless. It is just a collection of people brought together by common anger. They needed to talk to all, not some.

This was not the first and last time this has happened. Take the protest

against the Kudankulam nuclear power plant in Tamil Nadu, just before the protests over the gangrape incident. As the plant came close to commissioning, protesters blockaded the plant and held vigils and rallies to say that they believe the plant is a hazard to their life and livelihood as fishers. In this case, unlike the middle-class Delhi protesters, it was fisherfolk who were agitating. They had seen what had happened in Fukushima on their television screens. Whether right or wrong, these ordinary Indians were convinced of the dangers of nuclear power. They needed answers. They needed assurance from their leaders.

Instead, what they got was first disdain—what do the illiterate know about complicated nuclear affairs. Then contempt—scientists chosen to examine safety concerns were top pro-nuclear scientists. Then rejection—the government dismissed the movement as funded by foreign money. When all this did not work, the response was brutal police action. No leader had the credibility to speak to their own people to explain the hazards and the steps taken to safeguard the plant.

But there is much more to these protests. We must fear we are losing the plot. The fact is that each such movement reflects concerns—valid, exaggerated or emotional—that need to be addressed. And the failure in doing so will eat up our insides, corrode the very being of the country.

On the one hand, the establishment of governance is crumbling. It has inadequate ability to research, to enquire and, therefore, to assure that it will protect the interests of the weakest. Our regulatory institutions have been dismembered and disabled so they have no credibility. They cannot prepare independent safety assessments. They cannot drive any change to build confidence that all is well.

On the other hand, our political leadership is losing its ability to face the very people who elect it to power. They cannot stand up and talk. And every time they do not reach out to the people, they get even more cocooned and even more isolated. And every time, people lose faith in the political establishment—urban middle classes embrace fascism and the poor arm against the State. It is a bad portent.

In 2011, *Time* magazine anointed “the protester” as the person of the year. Clearly, this is the image that has captured the world—from dissent against the lack of democracy and repression in large parts of

West Asia to anger against economic policies in vast and disparate parts of the world in 2011, as well as in the years that have passed on since.

People, all over, are saying enough is enough. But what will happen to these voices in the coming years? Will the movements of protesters be enough to change the way the world runs its business? Do these movements even know what they want?

It is important to understand that there are similarities and yet huge differences in protest movements against economic policies in the rich and the getting-rich world. The US-born Occupy Wall Street movement's slogan was "we are the 99 per cent who will no longer tolerate the greed and corruption of the 1 per cent". The movement, which began in New York and then spread across many states, was squelched in many places by aggressive city governments.

The movement was leaderless and people-powered. It had no manifesto and no actionable agenda on how Wall Street must be reformed or how the global economy must be restructured so that it could meet the needs of all. In this way, it is easy to dismiss this movement as just one more protest that will go nowhere.

In Atlanta, the occupy-our-home movement wanted to take over houses of people who would be thrown out by banks because of default in mortgage payments. It argued the assessment of property values was too high and banks had too much power to throw out people, even if they defaulted on one payment. In Washington, the occupy-the-vote-DC movement demanded electoral representation for the federal city. The list goes on.

But there is another possibility. The fact is that this movement—as with many similar movements in the rich-but-economically-troubled world—has struck a chord. Today, the same rich world, which was secure in its consumption and comfort, is finding the going tough. Things it took for granted are no longer easily available—from homes and medical facilities to education and jobs. Ordinary people are being hit by what governments call necessary austerity measures. They are hitting back in every way they can.

These movements represent many uncomfortable and inconvenient issues that are refusing to go away. The rumbling that began in mid-2008

with the bankruptcy of the Lehman Brothers has become a roar as more banks and national economies collapse. This is in spite of governments doing all they can to portray that they have arrested the financial collapse. The problem is that the world's economic managers do not believe there is any real option to restructure economies so that they consume less, pollute less and still grow in wellbeing, if not in wealth.

The problem is that we are wedded to this one ideology of growth. It is for this reason that in spite of all the perturbations and upheavals, the same people who have put us in this place continue to be in charge of fixing the problems of growth. It is no wonder that the protest movements are also on the rise. And even if they do not have the answers to the problems, they know that the current policies are not working. Their anguish reminds us that real change must happen, tomorrow or the day after. ■