

Living the Constitution

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"It is poetic irony that govt's autocratic steps to quell dissent have produced the biggest awakening in recent history."

The country-wide demonstrations against the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), National Register of Citizens (NRC) and National Population Register (NPR), led by young people from universities are a call for the reinstatement of democratic processes, and a red alert on the deliberate destruction and compromise of democratic structures by the ruling elite. In spite of the merciless attacks on students at Jamia Millia Islamia, Aligarh Muslim University, and Jawaharlal Nehru University, students have stood their ground and fearlessly challenged this brutal onslaught. It is clear that all these actions are silently yet actively encouraged by the Narendra Modi-led government, which has furthered the agenda of the RSS and its various wings, such as the ABVP, to polarise populations and intimidate any opposition through violence and targeted attacks. Tellingly, in whichever state the BJP is in office, the police force has allegedly collaborated or watched the attacks unfold right in front of their eyes, giving cover and impunity to the armed mobs.

The continuing non-violent protests, joined by people from all walks of life, have voiced all this and more. The determined resistance to the threat to constitutional values builds hope. It is poetic irony that the government's autocratic steps to quell dissent has produced the biggest awakening of the Constitution and the protection of values of pluralism and secularism, that we have seen in recent history.

Despite all efforts of anti-social forces to demolish Ambedkar's legacy of uncompromising social equality and deconstruct the Gandhian values of non-violence and civil disobedience, our young have shown energy and resolve in reclaiming justice and constitutional guarantees. The most unfortunate fallout of the last six years has been the promotion of violence and fear to enforce silence on a large majority of Indians. What we are witnessing today is the beginnings of the breakdown of this fear. In a country where every kind of institution is being hollowed out and compromised, these demonstrations are events that have dismantled that fear to herald the possibility of change.

What these protests have done is to break the helplessness and numbness to express opinions, and criticise and oppose the state-sanctioned promotion of divisive rhetoric and policies. The bogey of fear has begun to recede for the millions of others who are watching and applauding the extraordinary courage of these young people. The price of dissent has been costly; resulting in physical harm and even death of innocent people. But even loss of life has not been able to stem the uprisings.

Violence is the act of a coward. Repeated use of it shows that there is no logical argument for the passage of the unconstitutional and unjust CAA, accompanied by the mischievous and potentially devastating mass exercise of the

NRC and NPR. The attempt to discriminate and differentiate between citizens on the basis of religion is not acceptable. Brutality being unleashed on peaceful protests raises many fundamental questions. Most important is the rationale of using violence to quell dissent. The use of state violence as measure to ensure law and order has always been questionable. Violence has its own logic and the chain of action and reaction lead to a breakdown of civil governance. It is only a weak state that resorts to violence to resolve a conflict.

Fear has resulted in the paralysis and inaction of Indians who know that both this law and many such Acts, including the abrogation of Article 370 and bringing Jammu and Kashmir under direct central government control, have all been planned and implemented in a most insensitive, discriminatory manner, polarising the polity, and planting seeds of alienation and hatred. Any dissent has been labelled as anti-national, and people have been incarcerated and silenced with the threat of reprisal. The act of questioning itself is silenced.

In destroying the space for questions and dissent, we are destroying the basis of all growth — political, economic, cultural and social. We are making huge mistakes in our economic and development policies, because no one within the system is allowed to speak out. The universities and academia are the worst hit.

Universities in any society are the centres of learning and creativity. They build the ethical democratic frame of our future; on the basis of the rigour of critical thinking, they encourage the ability to speak truth to power. Are we not destroying the idea of India, as we destroy this critical space of rationality and debate? The constitutional base on which we have built this country, and the peace with which we have tried to cultivate and the harmony of different cultures we have worked so hard to nurture, are all being deliberately trashed. Will there be an India if we continue on this path? If we treat our young with such cruelty, are we not mocking the essence of freedom? We are stifling their dreams and gagging them. Is this the future that we want to leave behind as a heritage for a better India?

The rest of India needs to further this movement for peace and equality. It is another movement of non-cooperation with those who are undermining the Constitution. We refused to cooperate — and sent a massive colonial power home, with brilliant acts of Satyagraha like the non-cooperation — with unjust laws such as the salt tax. All those of us who believe in equality will stand in solidarity, and refuse to fill the forms or produce documents — if we have them — when they come knocking on our doors to undertake an exercise of discrimination. This movement will be remembered in history, and produce a million innovative methods of protest and symbols of solidarity and fraternity.

We will continue to let the government know that their strategies will be faced with non-violent resistance. The protests since December 14 have put on display to the world one very important fact; that “we the people of India” need no numbers, or declaration of religion, or citizenship status to prove our commitment to the idea of India, that we gave ourselves on January 26, 1950.

At the very essence of these protests is a message — that we pledge our solidarity to the values enshrined in the Constitution. As the Republic Day approaches and we celebrate the Constitution, and express our gratitude to the national movement, Ambedkar and the members of the Constituent Assembly, we assert as true “nationalists” that we do not agree, with those who seek to destroy our constitutional values, and that nobody can silence and suppress our voices.

Expected Questions (Prelims Exams)

1. Consider the following statements:

1. Special provision has been made for Assam under Article-6A in the Citizenship Act.
2. Under Citizenship Amendment Bill 2019, only these five illegal refugee communities (Hindu, Buddhist, Parsi, Sikh, Jain) will be granted citizenship.

Which of the above statements are correct?

- (a) Only 1 (b) Only 2
(c) Both 1 and 2 (d) Nither 1 Nor 2

Note: Answer of Prelims Expected Question given on 9 Jan., is 1 (b)

Expected Questions (Mains Exams)

- Q. "The constitution of India is based on the power of the people, but at present people are turning out to be secondary." Do you agree with this statement? Discuss (250 words)

Note: - The question of the main examination given for practice is designed keeping in mind the upcoming UPSC main examination. Therefore, to get an answer to this question, you can take the help of this source as well as other sources related to this topic.

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