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With the Modi Aura Dispelled, Hope for a Revival of Democratic Voices

By: Apoorvanand

The student demand for accountability could not be suppressed by police brutality; it instead grew stronger and spread across the country. It speaks of a revival of a democratic voice against the state's indifference to citizens' concerns and the government's belief that it was accountable to none.

It was all gloom and pessimism before June. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) had just wrested West Bengal from the Trinamool Congress and retained Assam. The Election Commission of India (ECI) had unleashed the menace of the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls across states. The Supreme Court appeared to approve everything the ECI did and seemed willing to play along with the government. Opposition parties were being broken. By drawing legislators from other parties into its fold, there was a growing fear that the party would somehow conjure up a two-thirds majority in Parliament and push through the Delimitation Bill.

The BJP appeared to have taken control of both the political and civic life of the country. The mandate of 2024 was meant to make the state accountable to the people. Instead, with the connivance of constitutional bodies, the BJP had begun dismantling democracy itself. An all-pervasive feeling had taken hold that the BJP had fatally tightened its grip over every institution of the state. The people looked utterly vulnerable, stripped of every resource with which to defend themselves.

NEET and the CJP Campaign

Just when it seemed certain that democracy had been lost, a casual remark by the Chief Justice of India unexpectedly set in motion a process no one could have anticipated. The chief justice described young lawyers who filed public interest litigations as worthless, unemployed parasites who were good for nothing. They were like cockroaches, he remarked contemptuously. Abhijit Dipke, a young Maharashtrian living in the United States, turned this insult on its head with a simple retort: 'We are all cockroaches'. He launched a satirical social media platform called the Cockroach Janata Party. What initially sounded like a witty response to the arrogance of the Indian state struck an extraordinary chord with the youth. Millions identified with it.

Meanwhile, yet another leak of the question paper for the National Eligibility cum Entrance Test (NEET) for medical education had become a national issue. It was only one among the innumerable leaks that competitive examinations had witnessed during the years of the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government. These leaks devastated millions of families that had invested their land and savings into years of coaching in the hope of securing one of the few narrow openings into a world of opportunity. The betrayal ran deep. The government was seen to have failed in its most basic responsibility-as the custodian of a system that was expected to guarantee fairness. Through its negligence, it appeared to have denied an entire generation its future. At least a dozen candidates took their lives after the NEET leak.

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The CJP emerged at precisely this moment. The Congress party had attempted to make the NEET leaks a national issue and had launched a massive campaign against the government. But the media almost entirely blacked it out. It was dismissed as merely another party programme, disconnected from the concerns of ordinary people.

The CJP adopted the issue as its sole agenda. It demanded the resignation of union education minister Dharmendra Pradhan for failing to protect the sanctity of the NEET examination. The government ignored the demand just as it had ignored the Congress's protests. It remained confident that, as during demonetisation, the implementation of the Goods and Services Tax, and the Covid-19 pandemic-when millions endured immense suffering while the state remained unmoved-it would weather this crisis as well.

It seems that the government-or Prime Minister Narendra Modi himself-failed to sense the resentment steadily gathering in people's hearts. Occupied with capturing state institutions and manipulating every process through which democracy functions, it had convinced itself that, having already programmed the minds of the majority of the Hindu electorate, all that remained was to tighten its grip over the formal machinery of democracy. Its confidence also rested on the unquestioning approval-or active collaboration-of the media, the

bureaucracy and the corporate world.

It was at this moment that the CJP was born. One still does not know why its originator, Dipke, decided to return to India and launch a movement around the paper leak issue; how he chose his associates; or how he came to be connected with Sonam Wangchuk, who had just been released after spending six months in prison under the draconian provisions of the National Security Act (NSA) for leading a campaign demanding special status for Ladakh. Then, suddenly, the NSA charges were dropped, and he was released. Wangchuk's involvement immediately raised questions.

Jantar Mantar: The First Phase

The manner in which the first protest at Jantar Mantar was allowed to proceed also gave rise to conspiracy theories. Many wondered how a government that routinely placed insurmountable obstacles before opposition protests had permitted this one to take place. The turnout at the protest at Jantar Mantar was initially disappointing. Strangely, the police allowed the protest to continue, even while repeatedly insisting that it was being held without permission.

Several left student organisations seized the opportunity to put up their own tents at Jantar Mantar—something they would almost certainly never have been allowed to do if they had protested on their own. The protest continued, but the public response remained lukewarm. The protesters, however, refused to give up. As the days passed, it seemed increasingly likely that the movement would simply fade away.

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What the intelligence agencies did not tell the government was that even if Jantar Mantar looked empty, there was a lot that was happening in the world of reels and stories. And that did not look good for Modi.

Then Wangchuk announced that he would fast until Pradhan resigned. Student leaders Neha Bora, Danish, Manish, Ameen and others also declared that they would join him in a fast in solidarity. Days passed, and the government remained unmoved. The images of Wangchuk's frail body began to circulate more widely. The government's refusal to respond increasingly came to be seen not merely as political obstinacy but as a sign of inhumanity. The issue had ceased to be simply political. Leaders of opposition parties visited the fast site, expressed their solidarity with Wangchuk, and pleaded with him to end his fast, arguing that he was confronting a government incapable of compassion.



The government's insensitivity soon became the principal subject of public discussion. Memories of the environmentalist G. D. Agrawal's fast in 2018 for the Ganga resurfaced. People recalled how he had been allowed to die by the very government that never tires of proclaiming the sacredness of the river.

Wangchuk and his colleagues in the CJP then called for a march to Parliament on 20 July, the day the Monsoon Session was to begin. As news of the sharp deterioration in Wangchuk's health spread across the country, people began to arrive in increasing numbers. The protest site acquired a new energy as young and old alike poured into Jantar Mantar.

Then, suddenly, on 18 July, the Delhi Police swooped down on the protest site. They surrounded Wangchuk from all sides, covered him with white sheets, lifted him from Jantar Mantar and took him to Safdarjung Hospital, ostensibly to save his life. Curiously, however, the other students who were also on a fast were left untouched. The protest site itself was not cleared.

This proved to be the gravest miscalculation the Delhi Police-controlled by Union Home Minister Amit Shah, who is often credited with possessing a mythical Chanakya-like strategic acumen-could have made. The forcible removal of a frail and helpless Wangchuk shocked the public conscience.

People resolved to fill the void created by his removal with their own bodies.

Jantar Mantar: 20 July

By the morning of 20 July, it had become evident that the crowds gathering at Jantar Mantar would far exceed all expectations. Every road leading to the protest site was filled with people determined to march to Parliament. It was equally clear that the CJP itself had not anticipated such a response. The movement had grown beyond its organisers. The people began to lead themselves.

The Delhi Police responded with extraordinary brutality. Protesters were lathi-charged, beaten mercilessly, and, as the police have now accepted-after initially denying so - pellet guns were also used.

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Unlike earlier movements, however, this generation recorded everything. The young protesters themselves filmed the assault as it unfolded. The police attempted to deny the violence, but the videos rendered denial impossible. Images of police brutality spread across the country within hours. Instead of intimidating the young, the violence provoked defiance. They refused to retreat and openly challenged the police to attack them again.

The INDIA alliance, led by Rahul Gandhi, staged a flash sit-in outside the prime minister's residence in protest against the police action. The move took everyone by surprise. The image of Gandhi being dragged away by the police travelled rapidly across social media, becoming one of the defining images of the day. The youth who themselves were bloodied by the police identified with the bruised body of Gandhi and the blood on his face.

Everything about the moment suggested the beginnings of an uprising that could no longer be suppressed by force alone. Videos of young protesters inviting the police to use tear gas and water cannons against them circulated from phone to phone across the country.

Modi's Response

The prime minister appears to have concluded that the problem lay in his messaging. Perhaps, he thought, he had failed to establish a connection with the generation now known as Gen Z. Such was his faith in his own communicative prowess that he seems to have believed all that remained was to speak to them in their own idiom. Late one night, Modi uploaded a reel addressing the youth as his "friends."

The response was immediate and devastating.

"We are not your friends," came the reply.

The official narrative celebrated the reel as having broken all records of viewership. What it tried to conceal but miserably failed, given the nature of the domain, was that it was being watched largely to be mocked. It was as if Modi was dragged into a field he was unfamiliar with, and the youth relished his entry, only to pounce on him from all sides. The internet exploded with parodies, memes and sarcastic commentaries. The carefully manufactured image of Modi was subjected to unprecedented public ridicule. The young dismantled it piece by piece.

Those who visited Jantar Mantar during those days were struck by one unmistakable fact: the object of the protesters' anger was no longer Pradhan. It was Modi himself. The aura that had surrounded him for more than a decade was shattered with remarkable ease. The man who had long inspired fear was suddenly transformed into the object of ridicule.

The celebrated 'master communicator' appeared strangely helpless before the spontaneous jeering of the young.

Pradhan's Resignation

Meanwhile, the opposition intensified its campaign. Gandhi and other opposition leaders continued their protests.. There was every indication that the agitation would spill over into Parliament as the monsoon session commenced.

Nor was this merely a Delhi phenomenon. Patna, Jaipur, Allahabad, Varanasi, Kolkata, Bengaluru, Mumbai, Guwahati and scores of other cities continued to witness demonstrations. The movement had acquired a distinctly national character. There was every possibility that what had begun at Jantar Mantar would grow into a nationwide democratic uprising.

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The opposition, weakened for years by manipulated elections, defections and the erosion of constitutional institutions, suddenly found its voice again. The streets restored to it the courage and confidence it had long seemed to have lost. It was now the government that looked vulnerable.

It was at this moment that Pradhan announced his resignation-not, he insisted, because he accepted responsibility for the collapse of the examination system, but to save the country from chaos and from what he described as foreign conspiracies.

Pradhan's resignation was widely seen as Modi's first major political defeat. During the first term of the Modi government, the then union home minister, Rajnath Singh, had famously declared that, unlike the governments of the United Progressive Alliance governments, ministers in this government would not resign. The statement reflected a larger political philosophy: accountability itself had become indispensable. The government had placed itself above public scrutiny. It had assumed an almost monarchical character.

Shattering of the Spell

The significance of the Jantar Mantar uprising, however, does not lie simply in compelling the government to yield. The farmers had earlier forced Modi to repeal the three farm laws after a year-long struggle. Before that, the anti-CAA movement had succeeded in pushing back the implementation of the National Register of Citizens, which has now returned in another form through the SIR. Even during the early years of the Modi government, the proposed amendments to the land acquisition law had eventually to be withdrawn.

This, therefore, is not the first defeat of the Modi government.

It is unique for another reason. For the first time, it is Modi himself who has been rejected.

His greatest political strength lay not merely in electoral victories or organisational power, but in the carefully cultivated image that surrounded him. It is that image which has suffered what may well prove to be a fatal blow.

It was also widely believed that Modi was a master communicator. Yet his foray into the world of Instagram was met not with admiration but with derision. It was as though the young had been waiting for a figure like him to appear before them. They turned him into a plaything. The man who had long dictated the terms of political communication found himself reduced to an object of endless parody.

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The young did not find him formidable. They found him ungainly, and profoundly uncool. They did not fear him; they recoiled from him. The man who had inspired awe now evoked scorn. That, more than the resignation of a minister, was Modi's real loss.

The blow was not merely political; it was psychological. It struck at the very foundation on which the Modi phenomenon had rested for over a decade. It also wounded those whose task had been to manufacture and sustain that image. Perhaps that explains the sudden appearance of billboards across Delhi proclaiming, 'Gen Z for Modi'. The campaign betrays an anxiety it sought to conceal. The young remain unimpressed.

The greatest achievement of the youth uprising was the disappearance of the halo that had surrounded Modi. A political image that had carefully cultivated an aura of invincibility was suddenly stripped of its sanctity. The spell was broken. Equally significant was the disappearance of the defeatism that had begun to paralyse democratic life in India. In its place emerged a new confidence, a willingness to fight, and the conviction that resistance was still possible.

Revival of Democratic Voices

It would be a mistake to dismiss the Jantar Mantar uprising as merely an agitation of urban youth. Anyone who visited the protest site could see that its social composition was far more diverse. Daily-wage workers, middle-aged men and women, people who had travelled from distant states, many of them sacrificing a day's earnings simply to be present, stood shoulder to shoulder with students. The young, the generation we loosely describe as Gen Z, became the visible face of the movement. Behind them stood a much wider social coalition.

This perhaps explains the extraordinary moral force that the protest acquired. The issue had begun with the leak of examination papers. It had gradually become a question of governmental accountability. It was a rejection of a style of governance that had come to believe itself answerable to no one. It turned into a protest against the State's indifference to human suffering.

For years, the people had appeared to be fighting isolated battles. Farmers had struggled on their own. Students had protested alone. Those opposing the CAA had been left to fend for themselves. Different sections of society confronted the state separately, and each struggle seemed destined to remain confined within its own limits. At Jantar Mantar, something changed. These scattered anxieties found a common language. The protest ceased to belong to any one organisation or constituency. It became the expression of a larger

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The revival of the democratic voice is the biggest achievement of the uprising. Each poster, each slogan, each meme was individual, not given and approved by a central organising authority. Individuals were speaking in their own words, lines, and they enjoyed being in a space they could only create in isolation on their phones. Suddenly, the private became the public.

For years, the Modi government benefited from the widespread conviction that resistance was futile, that no challenge could unsettle its authority. Now, that debilitating sense of inevitability is gone. Struggle is possible.

The parliamentary opposition, long weakened by manipulated elections, defections and the steady erosion of constitutional institutions, has suddenly found an ally outside Parliament. The streets restored to it a confidence that parliamentary numbers alone could never have provided. Democratic politics seems to have again discovered its source in the people.

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