THE INDIA FORUM
A JOURNAL-MAGAZINE ON CONTEMPORARY ISSUES

October 29, 2026

India's Young Protesters are Reclaiming the Republic

By: Asim Ali

A wave of grassroots republicanism is unsettling the exclusion and majoritarianism of the Hindu republic. Can it build a political public that connects the aspirations of young people to a broader coalition of the urban poor, farmers, workers, marginalised castes, and religious minorities?

On 22 January 2024, standing before the Ram Temple in Ayodhya, which he had just inaugurated, Prime Minister Narendra Modi issued the following proclamation: "Ram is the faith of India, Ram is the foundation of India. Ram is the idea of India, Ram is the law of India ... Ram is the prestige of India, Ram is the glory of India ... Ram is the leader and Ram is the policy. Ram is eternal."

> The recent protests have built on earlier popular upsurges, such as the anti-CAA protests of 2019-20 and the farmers' movement of 2020-21, suggesting a revival of the anti-establishment tradition of republican assertion.

The implication was that India had transitioned from a secular republic to a Hindu republic because the source of the collective identity, shared values, and common purpose that bind together the Indian political community had now been fixed to a Hindu essence. The content of this Hindu essence (that is, the meaning of Lord Ram) would of course be defined by the ruling elites.

In some ways, the 2024 general election had been a referendum on whether the Indian people trusted the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its Hindu nationalism with the power to ride roughshod over the institutional checks and group-based protections (such as reservations) mandated by the Constitution. Instead of the 400-plus seats it had appealed for, the voters returned it with 240 seats, well-short of a majority. The project of a Hindu republic had thus received a major setback, even after the consecration of the Ram temple.

Now, the one-two punch of the Cockroach Janata Party (CJP) and then Special Intensive Revision (SIR) protests have further rattled the Hindu republic project through their popular, youth-led uprising. Drawing on the legacy of the Quit India movement and the protest movements of the mid-1970s, these protests have enacted the sort of collective struggle through which a republic is first established and then defended.

Like their predecessors, the protests have worked through the reclamation of public spaces, from city streets to squares, and confronted state authority with their bodies. Gathering together men and women across caste, class, and religion, they have sought to forge a coherent political community, or public, that asserts its right to exercise control over those democratic institutions (such as the Election Commission of India) that have come to seem increasingly unaccountable.

The recent protests have, certainly, built on earlier popular upsurges, such as the anti- Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), protests of 2019-20, and the farmers' movement of 2020-21, suggesting a revival of the anti-establishment tradition of republican assertion. In the CAA / National Register of Citizens (NRC) movement, Muslim communities mobilised on a scale not seen since Independence, turning their mohallas and public streets into sites of non-violent resistance against an institutional order that appeared to renege on the constitutional promise of equal citizenship. Similarly, the farmers' protest, which effectively encircled Delhi for more than a year, demonstrated the power of collective action to challenge state authority and compel its retreat.

While the earlier rounds of protest functioned more as counter-publics, the protests of the past five months are more significant as an attempt to constitute a broader political public-one that cuts across social divisions and can plausibly claim to represent the citizenry as a whole. Taken together, these movements have challenged, in different ways, the prevailing terms of membership in the republic, the distribution of its economic benefits, and the conditions under which citizens can participate in its political life.

Two Paradigms of Indian Republicanism

Both republic and democracy mean a form of rule based on popular self-governance. But whereas demos can mean a mixed multitude, the public generally refers to a community united by certain shared values and driven towards a common purpose ("common good"). Even the most ardent early theorists of democracy, like Jean-Jacques Rousseau, believed that a pure democracy would tend towards the abyss of self-interested conflict. Thus, for Rousseau, democracy required certain civic institutions to guide the formation of the popular

will towards the pursuit of "common good" because the people "often does not know what it wants, because it seldom knows what is good for it".

But who gets to define the "common good" that serves as the normative touchstone for the institutions of the republic? And through what processes does the political community articulate and realise this common good? Every republic finds its own way of resolving these questions, a product of their particular histories.

The nature of the Indian republic has been shaped by an oscillating struggle between two competing traditions of republican legitimacy- the republic as a state-led project of national transformation from above, and the republic as a project of popular sovereignty from below. The former locates the authority to define the republic's common purpose in a modernising national state, while the latter locates it in the collective agency of a politically mobilised people.

> Above all, the legacies of colonial subjugation & Partition had structured …[the republic's] space of experience, generating an overarching imperative to forge national unity, consolidate economic sovereignty, & overcome entrenched social divisions.

The legitimacy of statist republicanism has partly rested on its promise to protect the citizenship rights of marginalised groups such as Dalits and Adivasis, and religious and linguistic minorities against the domination of entrenched caste and community interests.[1]

In contrast, popular sovereignty-based republicanism regards the central bureaucracy itself as the fountainhead of corruption through elite capture. It regards popular mobilisation and collective struggle as the only means of realising the promises of citizenship. We can perhaps quote Ram Manohar Lohia, a socialist who lay much store by the idea of popular sovereignty. Lohia described the Nehruvian bureaucracy-the inherited "steel frame"-as "the most inefficient, corrupt and at the same time the most arrogant and authoritarian in the world."

This popular form of republican legitimacy rests on the conviction that the people themselves ought to be the authors of the republic, constituting themselves as a politically active public through struggles for political representation and socio-economic justice. It draws on the Gandhian legacy of satyagraha and mass civil disobedience, which brought ordinary people together in a united front against arbitrary state power. The Quit India movement of 1942 remains a defining expression of this popular sovereignty, as institutional compromises gave way to a mass assertion of the people's right to determine their own political future.

Of course, these are not mutually exclusive traditions. Indeed, the Indian republic arguably works best when there is a productive interaction between the two streams, with grassroots pressure holding the bureaucracy to account while state leadership provides the direction to consolidate popular aspirations into a shared national project.

Both these traditions of republican legitimacy emerged from India's particular historical trajectory. One way to understand this relationship is through Reinhart Koselleck's concept of *Erfahrungsraum*, or the "space of experience" (See Koselleck 2004) This refers to the accumulated memories and experiences of the past through which a society interprets its present.

From 1947 to 1977, the Indian republic was heavily imbued with the tradition of state-led national transformation. Above all, the legacies of colonial subjugation and Partition had structured its space of experience, generating an overarching imperative to forge national unity, consolidate economic sovereignty, and overcome entrenched social divisions. The Nehruvian state was thus conceived as the principal agent of modernisation, capable of forging a unified political community out of the cauldron of India's extraordinary heterogeneity.

The modernising framework of secularism and national integration was meant to smoothen out the multiple conflicts that could potentially threaten the republic, while state-led industrialisation and scientific temperament were the institutional tools for transformation of the republic. There was a certain ambivalence towards representative democracy in this modernising project, seen in the hesitation to devolve the functioning of the Republic to strong provincial units. For instance, Jawaharlal Nehru hesitated to implement the linguistic reorganisation of states and only accepted it in late 1955 under the irresistible weight of popular pressures.

> Indira Gandhi sought to overcome this crisis not so much by abandoning the Nehruvian tradition, but by radicalising its statist ambitions and appropriating the idiom of popular sovereignty through a populist style of leadership.

By the mid-1960s, the legacies of colonialism and Partition had begun to recede in popular consciousness, bringing the failures of the Nehruvian model into sharper relief-persistent poverty and inequality, food shortages, economic stagnation, and the failure of state-led development to deliver its promised social transformation.

The republican project of state-led national transformation thus slowly lost legitimacy as growing popular disillusionment undermined the state's claim to embody the common good. Indira Gandhi sought to overcome this crisis not so much by abandoning the Nehruvian tradition, but by radicalising its statist ambitions and appropriating the idiom of popular sovereignty through a populist style of leadership.

Her "Garibi Hatao" campaign exemplified this dual strategy-it presented the centralised state as an instrument of redistributive justice while cultivating a direct political bond between the leader and the poor, bypassing established party structures and intermediaries. Yet this synthesis proved unsustainable. The demands articulated by opposition groups and grassroots movements soon outstripped the limits of Gandhi's populist model of state-led transformation, and the government responded with increasing coercion, culminating in the Emergency of 1975-1977.

The democratic upsurge that followed marked a turning point in the republic's history, as popular sovereignty reasserted itself against the state's claim to monopolise the definition of the common good.

Also read: Fraternity: The Missing Link of India's Democracy *by Harsh Mander*

This republican tradition has underpinned a range of popular movements in independent India, from linguistic reorganisation and anti-caste struggles to the JP movement of the 1970s. Led by Jayaprakash Narayan, the latter revived the Gandhian repertoire of non-violent resistance to challenge the concentration of power under Indira Gandhi. Through its call for Sampoorna Kranti, or Total Revolution, the movement sought to extend the struggle beyond a mere change of government. It sought a fundamental transformation of the structures of power that constrained popular self-rule, including political parties and the bureaucracy.

Yet the popular democratic upsurges of the 1970s did not coalesce in a durable alternative project of state-led national transformation to the one provided by the Congress under Nehru and Indira Gandhi. The Janata Party experiment soon unravelled. From the late 1970s onwards, the Nehruvian consensus dissipated under pressure from popular movements representing the backward castes, Dalits, and regional elites who felt excluded from the structures of power established by the Congress establishment. The decades that followed saw no coherent successor emerge.

The Hindu republic represents the first serious attempt since 1977 to re-establish the dominance of a state-led project of national transformation, albeit on an ideological foundation very different from that of the Nehruvian republic. Whereas Nehru sought to forge a unified political community through planned industrialisation, secularism, and national integration, the Hindu nationalist project locates the republic's common purpose in a civilisational Hindu identity. Under Narendra Modi, this vision has provided the BJP with an overarching political narrative through which to unite diverse caste and linguistic constituencies under the Hindu umbrella.

> The Hindu republic represents the first serious attempt since 1977 to re-establish the dominance of a state-led project of national transformation, albeit on an ideological foundation very different from that of the Nehruvian republic.

By the 1990s, the rise of neoliberalism shifted the emphasis from collective transformation towards individual aspiration and market choice, while electoral politics increasingly revolved around the aggregation of social groups through caste-based patronage networks, followed by transactional bargaining among parties to form political coalitions. Together, these developments weakened the idea of politics as a collective endeavour directed towards a common good, narrowing the ideological horizons of the republic.

The neoliberal period in India has corroded the very possibility of any liberatory republican creed, instituting in its place a "social Darwinism" which has only entrenched India's 'Republic of Caste', as Anand Teltumbde argued in 2018 in his book of the same name. The expansion of the Indian economy in the 1990s and 2000s came at the cost of surging inequality, particularly in urban India, while the value accorded to public spaces, from schools and universities to parks and public transport, steadily receded.

At the height of the UPA boom, a perceptive visitor to Delhi, Mumbai or Bengaluru might well have agreed with Teltumbde that India's republican ethos if any was a caste and class-based social Darwinism, the animating spirit of which seemed to seep through the built-up landscape. This was a world where affluent residents had retreated into secure gated enclaves, flanked by glitzy shopping complexes and posh schools on one side, and a smattering of tarpaulin-roofed slums on the other. The former catered to the consumption needs of the top decile of the Indian "consuming class", the latter to its service needs, from cooking and cleaning to driving and guarding. Then there was an intermediate class stuck in decayed old neighbourhoods with broken roads, clogged traffic, littered garbage and overflowing sewage.

This barren political landscape inevitably bred alienation and it was into this breach of the republican ethos that the BJP stepped in, and subsequently established its statist republican project as the only game in town. The Hindu republic is a carefully conceived project for the top-down transformation of society. Among other things, the Modi regime has employed a range of administrative devices (CAA, NRC, SIR) to reconstitute the terms of belonging within the political community. Its state-led programme for pursuing the common good entails the glorification of Hindu civilisational heritage as the symbolic foundation of the republic. It also uses state power to cultivate a "Hindu consciousness", or ethnic majoritarianism vis-à-vis minorities. It considers this necessary for a strong and united nation.

As Priya Chacko suggests, the Hindu nationalist regime of the BJP rearticulates Congress-era neoliberalism within the shell of this majoritarian 'civilizational' republic. It embraces the "market citizenship" of neoliberalism, recasting the "middle and neo-middle classes" as "virtuous market citizens" whose entrepreneurial success is celebrated "as driven by a desire to strengthen the Hindu nation" (Chacko 2019). Meanwhile, the role of the state is reconceptualized as a paternal actor which upholds the civilization, protecting the community from internal and external threats, upholding the social order of hierarchy and duties, and dispensing patronage to favoured businesses and the poor (Chacko 2023).

While neither the Nehruvian faith in secular-socialist nationalism nor the Hindutva faith in civilisational nationalism succeeded in cultivating the Montesquieuan virtues of equality and self-sacrifice or the Hegelian ideal of collective self-liberation, both nonetheless provided a degree of coherence to the republic's political purpose and a shared mythology through which to imagine the national community. That cannot be said of any other competing republican project, whether bottom-up (popular sovereign) or top down (state republicanism). In the decades following the Emergency, the Mandal and regional parties made their peace with the private interests of neoliberal accumulation and the sectional demands of vote-bank politics, without offering an overarching creed capable of binding the wider political community together.

> Among other things, the Modi regime has employed a range of administrative devices (CAA, NRC, SIR) to reconstitute the terms of belonging within the political community…

The last time we had a viable alternative republic project was probably the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) in the 1980s and the 1990s, where party cadres fanned to villages across Uttar Pradesh to make them conscious of a Dalit-Bahujan identity, which was to be the socio-cultural base to contest upper-caste political hegemony. This was a republican project because it sought to fuse myriad historically marginalised communities into an organised political community, united by a shared experience of social oppression and a common commitment to the goal of establishing equality, dignity, and self-rule in all spheres of social relations.

By contrast, much of the Mandal stream of politics shed its republican pretensions and devolved into fragmented caste politics. This led to "an erosion of the idea of social justice", as Yogendra Yadav argued in 2009, "because the politics of various social groups and communities such as Dalits, Adivasis, OBCs [other backward classes] and Muslims is articulated in isolation, if not in opposition, to one another."

As the social solidarities among marginalised communities have grown increasingly thin, it has become difficult to build an alternative political project capable of articulating the particular interests of diverse social groups within a broader vision of collective emancipation. Even Akhilesh Yadav's Pichhda, Dalit, Alpsankhyak (PDA) platform is intended more as an electoral coalition than as a republican vehicle for forging a deeper social solidarity based on a shared emancipatory vision.

Second Republican Upsurge

We can call the youth-led protests of the past five months the second republican upsurge in independent India, echoing the tradition of a popular-sovereignty struggle against an authoritarian leader seen in the first republican upsurge of the 1970s.

The youth unrest of the 1970s offers an illuminating parallel because of the nature of its evolution, particularly the escalation of demands. After all, the JP movement did not emerge fully formed from the Gujarat Navnirman agitation in late December 1973. Rather, the agitation was merely the prelude to a wider national movement. It was an explosive burst of energy that set off a chain of protests with escalating demands. Student unrest over inflation, unemployment, and corruption eventually expanded into a broader challenge to Indira Gandhi's authority.

A similar escalation is evident today. The protests may have begun over a corrupt and malfunctioning education system, but the same protest leadership has since expanded the scope of the struggle to challenge the legitimacy of elections around the issue of "vote chori". In both cases, the root of the political crisis faced by the incumbent was its demonstrable failure to fulfil the aspirations of upward social mobility of the young. Much like the 1973-74 period, anger over the lack of accountability of governing institutions has been transmuting into a challenge to the legitimacy of the ruling order itself.

The JP movement, in some respects, was a product of the exhaustion of the Nehruvian developmental model, which had created a large new strata of the educated young without adequately making space for them in the existing economic and political institutions. That again reverberates with the youth unrest seen today. It is a product of a neoliberal cocktail of expensive private education and lack of jobs, owing to relative underinvestment in technology and manufacturing.

These parallels perhaps reflect a recurring pattern in the history of the Indian republic-when a state-led project of national transformation loses its legitimacy, popular sovereignty reasserts itself from below.

> The promise of civilisational renewal risks becoming jaded if it is not accompanied by improvements in the material conditions of ordinary people.

In the 1970s, the failures of the Nehruvian developmental model weakened the state's claim to embody the common good and opened the way for a popular challenge to its authority. Today, a similar crisis is emerging around the Hindu republic. The promise of civilisational renewal risks becoming jaded if it is not accompanied by improvements in the material conditions of ordinary people. Meanwhile, the concentration of power at the top, both within the ruling party and the government, has weakened the institutions through which citizens can hold the state accountable.

From the anti-CAA protests to the farmers' movement and today's youth mobilisations, popular struggles have been relatively effective in challenging the lack of accountability of governing institutions. They have also been grand exhibitions of the traditional republican virtues of love for equality, the pursuit of collective liberation, and readiness to self-sacrifice. We have seen so many elderly Sikh farmers sacrifice their lives to sickness and cold so that their future generations might benefit from a better agrarian social contract, just as elderly Muslim women braved many chilly December and January nights on the roads in Delhi and elsewhere in order to secure the citizenship rights of their children and grandchildren.

In much the same way, the Cockroach protests would be remembered for their stirring display of collective solidarity, in which people sent food from across the country, set about cleaning protest spaces with brooms, and handed bottles of water to strangers. It was a rare public space where women felt comfortable expressing themselves as they pleased, without fear of verbal or physical sexual harassment. And it was a space where privilege and social hierarchy mattered far less than creative performances of humour and revelry. The crowd was unruly and transgressive in the best sense, directing its colourful profanities at the powerful, particularly the Prime Minister.

This was a portrait of bottom-up republicanism that has managed to corrode the values of exclusion and majoritarianism at the heart of the Hindu republic. It was a reminder of the shared joys to be found in public spaces and the possibilities they offer for a meaningful civic life.

The big question going forward is whether these movements can build a political public that connects the aspirations of young people to a broader coalition of the urban poor, farmers, workers, marginalised castes, and religious minorities.

The BJP's claim to embody national renewal, already challenged by the 2024 general election, faces further pressure from protests that challenge the legitimacy of its rule.

Asim Ali is an independent political analyst and a columnist for 'The Telegraph', a newspaper based in Kolkata.

Footnotes:

1 As B.R. Ambedkar asked in the Times of India on 23 April 1953, while offering qualified support to linguistic states: "In a linguistic state what would remain for the smaller communities to look to? Can they hope to be elected to the legislature? Can they hope to maintain a place in the state service? ... This does not mean that there is no case for linguistic provinces. What it means is that there must be definite checks and balances to see that a communal majority does not abuse its power under the garb (sic.) of a linguistic state" ("Nehru and Linguistic States", A.G. Noorani, Frontline, 3 Aug 2002).

References:

Chacko, P. (2019). *Marketizing Hindutva: The state, society, and markets in Hindu nationalism*. Modern Asian Studies, 53(2), 377-410

-- (2023). *Disciplining India: paternalism, neo-liberalism and Hindutva civilizationalism*. International Affairs.

Koselleck, Reinhart. (2004) "'Space of Experience' and 'Horizon of Expectation': Two Historical Categories." In *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, translated by Keith Tribe, 255-275. New York: Columbia University Press, 2004.

Teltumbde, Anand (2018). *Republic of Caste: Thinking Equality in the Time of Neoliberal Hindutva*. New Delhi: Navayana, 2018.