

## Wrestlers' protest and the shrinking space for dissent

**P**ublic protests have long served as a catalyst for social and policy change in India, allowing individuals, classes and communities to voice their grievances and advocate for their rights. Over the past few years, protests have risen with bewildering rapidity. Protests had opened up space for a new era of social activism in the decade that the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government was in power. The Bharatiya Janata Party-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government too has faced considerable opposition from a range of groups but has treated it very differently from previous governments.

### From Nirbhaya to the present

In December 2012, people around the world watched as thousands took to the streets in the Central Vista of New Delhi following the brutal gang rape of a 23-year-old physiotherapy student (Nirbhaya). The protests became so intense and the public outrage was so great that the UPA government was compelled to address issues of sexual violence at the policy level, through the introduction of the new Criminal Law (Amendment) Act 2013 to bring stricter punishments and broaden the scope of offences. Fast forward to May 2023. Medal-winning wrestlers, who have brought honour to the country, have been on the streets for nearly four months to demand the arrest of the Wrestling Federation of India (WFI) chief and Kaiserganj Member of Parliament (MP), Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh, of the BJP, who they have accused of sexually harassing women wrestlers and a minor. But the authorities did not respond for weeks. It took the Supreme Court of India's intervention for Delhi Police to file two first information reports (FIRs).

The wrestlers have held negotiations with the Home Minister and Sports Minister, but no agreement was reached on the key demand of arresting him. That the ruling party MP faces no political censure in the face of serious allegations recorded in FIRs, clearly indicates that the institutional system has failed these remarkably brave wrestlers fighting for justice in the face of tremendous state pressure.

But what about civil society and the public at large? The protest has found some support from civil society, especially organisations representing workers, farmers, women, students, and youth, but it is very small when compared to the public support for other protests under this regime or previous ones. There have been no rallies, no demonstrations or marches that defined protests against sexual violence in the UPA era. People have not been stirred by the images of wrestlers



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being dragged by the police. Despite the potential for mass mobilisation, these protests have failed to garner significant support from the middle classes and women's groups, which were in the forefront of the Nirbhaya protests in 2012.

Protests under the current regime are, no doubt, difficult as they are immediately branded as 'anti-national'. Also, activists might feel the futility of protests against a government that does not listen; but the fact is that this regime has been forced to respond to some protests even if it has done so for reasons of political expediency. The withdrawal of the controversial farm laws and the back-tracking over the contentious National Register of Citizens (NRC) and the Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA) are two recent examples where the government had to back down.

### The context of class politics

The Indian women's movement has had a long history of organising around sexual violence against women. They have in the past organised direct action on the streets. But this time, except for Left groups and the All India Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA), women's groups have been largely missing in action, even though it is an issue of gender justice. But it is not just about gender justice; it is about the wider issues of dissent, dignity and social justice. Moreover, in the Nirbhaya case, it was not only women who were mobilising but also a broader swathe of civil society that included men. The massive public mobilisation had virtually blocked the India Gate area for weeks, but this time, nothing of the kind has happened.

Wrestling is deeply ingrained in Indian culture and has a long history, particularly in the rural areas. However, traditional wrestling has not received the same level of attention and support as other sport in India, such as cricket. The protesting wrestlers mostly come from modest economic backgrounds; sports has helped them to achieve a measure of social and economic mobility. The lack of interest in this agitation must be seen in the broader context of class politics.

The active participation of the middle classes in the Anna Hazare Andolan (2011) and Nirbhaya protests presents a contrasting picture that highlights the importance given to social activism by this class. Their participation in the two movements catapulted them to the centre stage of the political discourse. The anti-corruption campaign was not averse to Hindutva politics; in fact, adopting its symbols and slogans added to its widening support. The urban middle class is also very well disposed to neo-liberalism; it has benefited from the opportunities available to it

from the neo-liberal economy in the past three decades. Indeed, middle-class expansion has occurred since economic reforms through the private sector boom powered by economic liberalisation. This is the class that was enamoured by 'India Shining', and then shifted support to the then Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh, before turning against him, as the UPA went on to introduce rights-based legislations and other broad-based social policies. Their shifting political loyalties, however, reflect an ideological consistency that characterises the middle class in its combined devotion to neo-liberalism and Hindutva. The middle-class opposition to the UPA played a crucial role in discrediting it; now, these very classes strongly back the current dispensation and see no reason to go against it, even on issues of sexual violence.

### A form of polarisation

The support extended by *khap* panchayats underlines the complexities and challenges facing this protest. Their support highlights the social identity of the wrestlers but the identity issue could have been superseded had the wrestlers received greater support from civil society. Even so, this is not about caste politics but majoritarian politics that has encouraged a ready acceptance of 'law will take its own course' rhetoric, even when it is abundantly clear that the law does not take its own course when dealing with the powerful, unless they cannot and will not interfere with due process. Nonetheless, this rhetorical device facilitates an approval of the government's narrative, including police mistreatment of grapplers. This is yet another indication of polarisation being reinforced by majoritarian politics in the country today.

Middle-class activism tends to prioritise the issues and concerns that directly impact them, often overlooking the needs and struggles of the disadvantaged classes and communities. This self-focus can perpetuate inequalities and hinders efforts to address broader social issues. Failing to consider the intersections of class, caste, gender, and other factors can result in a narrow understanding of social reality and marginalised voices. In the event, there is a sense of suspicion towards mass politics and egalitarian ideas and movements.

This tendency contributes to an unprecedented quiescence among the middle classes and even among the oppressed classes. Above all, it means inadequate public pressure is exerted on the government to penalise an infamous history-sheeter. It is emblematic of society's normalisation of patriarchy and sexual harassment.

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## E-education platforms, their Generative AI chapter

Salman Khan flourished even at the peak of the world economic crisis of 2008. The Khan Academy's online education videos attracted thousands of learners that year. It has gone from strength to strength since then. Khan's not-for-profit enterprise is funded by the likes of the Gates Foundation, Google and Elon Musk. Today, the academy has 130 million learners from across the world, ranging from school-goers to graduate-level learners. Such is the enduring popularity of online education.

### Scaling up

As the world recovered from its economic setback by 2011, a new genre of online courses titled 'Massive Open Online Courses' (MOOCs) made their entry, driven by reputed institutions of learning. Though MOOCs have been around since 2008, their institutional origins can be traced to three free online courses offered by Stanford University in 2011. Peter Norvig, Sebastian Thrun, Jennifer Widom and Andrew Ng conducted these courses. Buoyed by the large turnout of learners for these 'pilot' courses, Thrun launched his online education outfit, 'Udacity', in late 2011 as a for-profit company. A year later, Andrew Ng and Daphne Koller followed suit with their venture 'Coursera', which was also registered as a 'for-profit' company.

Not to be left behind, MIT and Harvard joined forces to create 'edX' in May 2012, as a non-profit MOOCs Company. Anant Agarwal, the visionary founder of edX, is widely credited with open sourcing and internationalising the company's 'open edX tech stack'. Although edX was acquired by the for-profit EdTech company, '2U', in November 2021, the company continues to follow 'non-profit' considerations when it comes to servicing its open-source stack.

All the three outfits succeeded in launching MOOCs on a global scale, in partnership with the world's leading universities and institutions. As far as India is concerned, the Indian Institute of



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Global online education brands do not seem to be shying away from experimenting with regenerative AI tools

Technology Bombay and the Indian Institute of Management Bangalore have been the early movers. Both institutions offer a variety of MOOCs courses through the edX platform.

As of 2021, there existed nearly 35 MOOCs Learning Management Systems (LMS) spread across North America, Asia and Europe. The list of large LMS platforms from the developing world includes India's 'Study Webs of Active-Learning for Young Aspiring Minds' (SWAYAM) launched in 2017 by the Ministry of Education, Government of India. It is one of the world's largest learning e-portals. According to 'Class Central', the number of MOOCs learners in the world (excluding China) was 220 million in 2021. Coursera accounted for 97 million learners, while edX and India's SWAYAM had enrolments of 42 million and 22 million, respectively.

### Why Generative AI?

Despite their seemingly high enrolment numbers, the financials of MOOCs platforms are fragile. The operating expenses of a MOOCs platform are high, partly due to maintenance expenses associated with the LMS tech stack, and partly due to steep marketing costs incurred for enlarging the learner base. On the revenue side, the practice of offering entry-level courses *gratis* (or at low fees) aggravated the financial crunch faced by these platforms. Although MOOCs platforms, by and large, rely on degree-earning courses to earn revenue, such courses have few takers. A key metric that determines learner enrolments for MOOCs is the probability of potential learners discovering LMS platforms through web-based search engines. Even when a learner stumbles on a platform of her choice, she would still struggle to locate courses that suit her needs from the crowded portfolios of Coursera, edX and Udacity. What compounds the problem is the high rate of dropouts by entry-level learners. In turn, drop-outs reduce the catchment of learners for degree granting programmes.

These factors perhaps explain why Coursera, edX and Khan Academy have gone in for regenerative AI. edX's Chat GPT plug-in helps aspiring learners to successfully locate platforms and courses that suit their requirements. The Khan Academy's chat box 'Khanmigo' challenges learners with thought-provoking questions, while edX's 'edX Xpert' and Coursera's 'AI Course Coach' function as virtual assistants that answer queries, provide feedback on assignments, generate quick summaries of voluminous content, and swiftly turn out exam scores. As learning gets interesting and engaging, drop-outs are bound to come down, resulting in more learners progressing to degree granting programmes.

### In India

India's SWAYAM has yet to spell out its approach to AI. However, the platform is in for interesting times. The SWAYAM-user community will drastically scale up by 2025, when India's active Internet users become 900 million strong. This rapid scale up will necessitate the utilisation of AI-based learning and teaching services by institutes affiliated to the platform. Unlike the United States and Europe-based platforms, SWAYAM is publicly funded and is driven by the National Education Policy's tenets of inclusivity and cross-disciplinary learning. Indeed, in the coming years, the drift of SWAYAM courses is more likely in the direction of cross-disciplinary course offerings that utilise unstructured data. SWAYAM is thus ideally positioned to derive benefits from the evolving semantic web.

Time will tell whether regenerative AI tools will really shore up the economic fortunes of online education platforms. What is clear at the moment is that global online education brands will not shy away from experimenting with regenerative AI tools.

*The views expressed are personal*

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