

THE AGE OF AGITATIONS

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Last year saw mass agitations across continents, causing 2019 to be referred to as “the year of the street protester”. There were protests on issues ranging from political freedom, to economic inequality and corruption, in Hong Kong, Chile, Catalonia, West Asia and other parts of the world. Most of these agitations continue this year in some form.

The triggers for the protests varied. In Hong Kong, they grew out of opposition to an Extradition Bill that would have allowed the city’s residents to be prosecuted in mainland China. After getting the Bill withdrawn, the protesters began seeking an inquiry into police violence and broader democratic reforms. In Chile, the protests that were initially against a hike in Santiago’s metro fares grew into a wider campaign against inequality. The protests in Barcelona were triggered by the conviction of Catalan activists for sedition. Lebanon, Egypt and Iraq also saw mass protests on issues related to corruption and overall mistrust in government.

While the causes driving these protests are different, there are some commonalities in their character, composition and methods. The agitations are mostly leaderless, just like those in India against the Citizenship (Amendment) Act and the National Register of Citizens; they are not driven by Opposition parties; and they operate through decentralised networks. Also, they have been mostly non-violent and used novel agitational techniques. They are also characterised by the important role played by the youth, especially students.

The state’s response to these protests has ranged from acceptance of certain demands to brutal violence. Ironically, while India is the only long-standing constitutional democracy among these countries, it has arguably been the most brutal in repressing this entirely democratic form of expression. The Indian state has used various strategies: shutting down the Internet; imposing Section 144 across cities; denying permission; detaining protesters; and ruthlessly using police power. Action by the Delhi police against students in Jamia Millia Islamia and inaction by the same personnel when it came to protecting students at the Jawaharlal Nehru University; and the disproportionate use of force in Uttar Pradesh particularly raise alarming questions.

The ongoing agitations bring to memory the protests of 2011, a year that saw the Arab Spring, the Occupy Movement and India’s anti-corruption agitation. However, a more apt parallel would be the movements of 1968. What characterised those, especially in Paris, was the solidarity between the students and the working class. The French philosopher Henri Lefebvre’s *The Right to the City (Le Droit à la ville)* had just come out and it provided a clarion call to challenge the structures of capitalism and articulate an alternative “contract of citizenship” whereby all inhabitants (not just formal “citizens”) collectively re-appropriate urban space.

The current protests have mostly not yet taken such a radical form. However, there have been strategic alliances, with Catalonia adopting the “#BeWater” methods used in Hong Kong. Inspired by Bruce Lee’s quote “Be water, my friend”, protesters there employed a fluid agitational tactic. If the Indian state becomes more repressive, the agitators in India may consider this approach.

Further, while the protests in Hong Kong and Chile have resulted in their governments rolling back their proposed measures, it is unclear what the Indian government will decide. However, irrespective of their future, the CAA-NRC protests have enabled the youth to articulate a new

form of resistance, build cross-group solidarities and puncture the myth of an invincible monolithic regime.

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