

ENTER THE PASSIVE SUBJECT, EXIT THE ACTIVE CITIZEN

Relevant for: Indian Polity | Topic: Indian Constitution - Features & Significant Provisions related to The Preamble, Union & its Territories and The Citizenship

A different political climate | Photo Credit: Getty Images/iStockphoto

Something new seems to be emerging in India. A decade ago, democracy was thriving. People with scant interest in politics increasingly felt a pressing need to become more vocal in the public domain. Remember the first decade of the 21st century? The Congress-led coalition government was compelled by activists to grant everyone the Right to Information and Education and to launch MNREGA, or the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee. The dastardly rape and murder of Nirbhaya turned thousands of young women and men into political activists. Citizen journalists emerged capturing acts of injustice and sending them to TV channels that routinely put the government in the dock. And who can forget the anti-corruption movement that virtually paralysed the then government, catapulting into power not only the Bharatiya Janata Party but also the newly born Aam Aadmi Party?

In 2013, when we seemed to be on the verge of a democratic revolution, the active citizen appeared to have a bright future. Young men and women left lucrative jobs to join the movement for a new political future for India. They hoped to launch new parties, accountable to the people, committed to providing them what they really need.

Yet, in one fell swoop, the political climate in the country seems to have changed. The active citizen is now viewed as a villain, pejoratively called an '*Andolanjeevi*'. Those who only the other day personified active citizenship, today, in power, appear to shut the door on it. Not only active citizenship, but the very idea of citizenship has plunged into crisis. Rightly or wrongly, some are ready to forego even their rights as passive citizens, prepared to accept or tolerate political subjection. Since subjects are rights-less people who live passively within the jurisdiction of their ruler, I am inclined to see this current moment as marking the birth of a new political subject.

It is important to understand what this means. Bringing out the contrast between three key terms may help us do so. Take active citizenship first. By definition, citizenship here is a matter of doing. An active citizen is able to (a) vote (b) publicly discuss the common good and use legally available means to influence public policy and law and if needed, to criticise, modify, even repeal them (c) run for public office.

This is in sharp contrast to passive citizens who rarely act in the public domain. They are either unable or unwilling to vote. They either cannot or could not be bothered to take a stand on public issues. Standing for public office is the last thing they imagine or want. They are mostly content with receiving things from the state — precisely why they are passive. Citizenship is defined here by what a person gets, not by what she does, regardless of whether this condition is forced upon or chosen by them.

But why still call them citizens? By virtue of two qualities — first, they still belong to a political community. They continue to be card-carrying members of a state that gives them an official identity. Second, they retain some basic rights — the right to protection against violence and those who need it, the right to a minimal package of subsistence goods. Moreover, while they make few demands of their own, they can complain when they fail to get what the state promises. Passive citizens are closer to being but are not political subjects.

At least two features distinguish political subjects from passive citizens. First, passive subjects do not have any rights. They live by the grace of the ruler and get protection and other benefits by being loyal to him. This dedication does not entail that subjects devote themselves to further only the personal interests of rulers. They could easily subordinate themselves to a project of common good, as long as it is defined by the ruler. Second, citizens never equate the state with current rulers. No democratic ruler can call the state his own. However, political subjects identify the state with the ruler, as does he himself. Belonging to the state means becoming a ruler's subjects.

Unlike a democratic body of equal citizens, the relationship between the subject and the ruler then is unabashedly hierarchical. Though the subject's condition is a mixture of subordination and servitude, he gratefully accepts it because of the protection provided by the ruler. He interprets the wishes of the ruler as commands and has no appetite for rebellion. The gratefulness on the part of subjects is matched by the exuberant munificence of the ruler. When a subject receives a small, negligible portion of the state's treasury, he believes it is charity flowing directly from the ruler's personal largess. Overawed by him, the subject cannot but be deferential to the ruler. Disobedience would amount to shameful betrayal.

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I suspect that a substantial part of our political climate now approximates what I have described above. This is why I see the emergence of the new political category of *laabharthi* as the rebirth of the political subject. The *laabharthi* is a passive recipient of meagre resources, a beneficiary of the ruler's generosity. *Laabharthis*, no longer rights-bearers, are the exact opposite of ever-demanding, rights conscious active citizens. In the recently held elections, the Prime Minister rightly went to them with the expectation that they would vote for him. Hardly abnormal in this environment. He instinctively knew that those who had eaten his ' *namak*' (salt) cannot betray him. *Namak halals* do not easily turn into *Namak harams*, do they? Political subjecthood, nowhere on the horizon in 2013, is back now with a vengeance.

I may have given the impression that today's political world is neatly divided between rulers and their passive, loyal subjects. I do not intend this crude portrayal. There exists an extremely large group of people who are neither rulers nor passive subjects. I would classify them as a hybrid called citizen-subject, for they are a mix of passive citizens and active subjects — active because they surrender aspects of citizenship and embrace subjecthood of their own volition.

They are citizens because they see themselves as belonging to a state that in part is independent of the ruler. But what matters most to them is a private life of consumption for which they are not dependent on the state. Even their life and personal property are protected by paid security guards. Since they make few demands on the state, active citizenship is of little value to them. Such people are happy to be passive citizens. They may even be indifferent to who the ruler is. This makes them starkly different from *laabharthis*, ever grateful subjects whose very survival depends on a particular ruler's generosity.

Yet, they depend on this very ruler/state to protect them from external aggressors and perceived internal enemies. For this purpose, they abandon their identity as citizens and choose to become political subjects — willing, unquestioning and loyal supporters of the ruler and his pet common projects. Here, state-dependent *laabharthis* and state-independent consumers converge. Both share a world in which some of their common benefits flow from the largess of the ruler and from the public display of loyalty to him.

Alas, just when the passive subject was beginning to be seen as a relic of the past, it has made a stunning comeback. And upon re-entering our political world, it has severely compromised our

democracy and made citizenship virtually redundant.

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