

# India: What Yellow Smoke Signals Tell Us About the ‘Mother of Democracy’

Thursday 21 December 2023, by [MAHAPRASHASTA Ajoy Ashirwad](#) (Date first published: 14 December 2023).

**Even small protests in the current regime are being dealt with brute force. The space to register legitimate protests has been shrinking by the day.**

**New Delhi:** The surprising [storming of Lok Sabha](#) with gas canisters by six angry, irreverent young persons on December 13, 2023 has no doubt exposed the security apparatus of Indian democracy's most significant institution. But more significantly, the episode has inadvertently drawn attention towards brooding resentment on the ground, especially amongst the youth.

The videos in circulation show that one of the protesters was shouting slogans against alleged “dictatorship” in the country, even as police personnel held her. Reports which cite the initial police probe indicate that they believed that their attack on the Parliament was a protest against the failure of the political class to discuss issues like [unemployment](#), [price rise](#), [unending violence in Manipur](#), and [agrarian distress](#).

Among the six, four of them have already been held. One of them shot a video of his partners raising slogans against the political class, again, mostly with an intention to circulate it widely, and fled. Of the six of them, two are Sagar Sharma and Manoranjan D, who entered the Parliamentary premises, Neelam Azad and Amol Shinde were those who were held shouting slogans outside the Parliament, and their associates Lalit Jha and Vicky Sharma. As is evident, they belong to different regions of India.

Reports say that the group were followers of a social media group called Bhagat Singh Fan Club, and were attempting to emulate the Indian freedom fighter who, along with his comrades, was hanged in 1931 for his act of symbolic bombing of the Central Legislative Assembly in the then British-run Delhi. Singh's act was a mark of protest against the repressive regime of the Britishers.

It is important to understand that these attackers, however indignant they were, intended to disrupt, register their anger, but not hurt or kill. The Union government has slapped a case under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA) against them, but the slogans they raised clearly signal that they mostly wanted themselves to be heard, even if that meant an audacious attack on the Parliament.

These youngsters are not dyed in the wool activists, who the supporters of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party often term as “professional protesters” or whom Modi has controversially termed *Aandoloanjeevis*. They belong to ordinary families, and were frustrated at not having a job despite multiple attempts.

[An Indian Express report notes](#) that Manoranjan D (33) from Mysuru is an engineering graduate who lost his job in an IT firm and was now helping his father in farming. Sagar Sharma (25), son of a carpenter, drove a rented e-rickshaw after having to discontinue his studies after Class 12 due to financial distress, while Amol Shinde (25) from Maharashtra's Latur had failed to get a job in the

Army despite multiple attempts and is now too old to apply under the Agniveer scheme. Azad (37) from Haryana's Jind has degrees galore – an M.A, M.Ed, M.Phil and has also cleared the National Eligibility Test – but has remained unsuccessful in securing a teaching job. The other two associates, too, have a similar background.

Among the six, only Azad seems to have participated in a few protests. People who are known to her said that she participated in the [farmers' protests](#) of 2020-21 and the recent [wrestlers' agitation](#) against alleged sexual harassment by a BJP MP.

Their ordeal was best narrated by Azad's mother. "We are not a prosperous family, but we still educated her. At home, she used to say, 'I studied too much unnecessarily but did not get a job... It would be better if I die'," Azad's mother Saraswati [told](#) the *Indian Express*.

The big question, therefore, is whether the Union government's response to slap UAPA charges against this motley group of frustrated people really address the problem at hand? Such anger among the youth against what they believe is a failing system that has turned a blind eye towards their real problems is rampant in India. Unemployment is at a [record high](#); so is [corruption](#) at the lower level. That the [issue of "paper leaks"](#) in different recruitment examinations became the most-discussed political issue in the recent assembly polls in Rajasthan, Telangana, and Madhya Pradesh is a solid indicator of the brewing frustration on the ground, waiting to be vented out in one form or another.

But then, [even small protests](#) in the current regime are being dealt with force. The space to register legitimate protests has been shrinking by the day. Only recently, we heard that the prestigious Jawaharlal Nehru University [has decided to penalise](#) protesters with a fine of up to Rs 20,000. Earlier, public meetings organised and discussed by student groups were also banned in hostels, and are increasingly being regulated by university administration. In other campuses, there have been similar efforts to [shut out film screenings](#) that are critical of those in power, the most prominent case in recent times being that of an unofficial ban by universities on the [BBC documentary](#) on Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

In many other regions, [banning student elections](#) has become a common way for administrative bodies to ensure order. Over the last few years, even the designated spaces for protests, like the Jantar Mantar in New Delhi, have become inaccessible for groups which want to register their dissent. Any student group will tell you how the Delhi police has made things so difficult for them to organise a protest march in Jantar Mantar. The organisers are asked to inform the police about their protests well in advance. Even if the student groups do so, the officials sit on the applications before cancelling the permission at the last minute.

Even seminars have not been spared and have come under attack by government authorities, as some of the [recent last minute cancellations](#) of public meetings on unemployment, communalism, or even topics like reading down of Article 370 and the Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA) indicate.

We also know how sites of peaceful protest against the controversial CAA and farmers' protests were violently uprooted by the police across different states. There has barely been a day over the last few years when we do not hear about a student, an activist, or even a celebrity being booked or trolled and even attacked for voicing their independent opinions. Agreed that many of these statements may as well be a result of an emotional rush, but should any democratic state really deem it fit to put them up for punishment; surely not for a country that prides itself on being "the mother of democracy".

Democratic spaces are shrinking, as dissent is being met increasingly by an official iron fist.

Protesters and dissenters are seen by those in power as having criminal intent, as 'anti-nationals'. A free press, too, is [under attack by authorities](#) which have shown their propensity to regulate each and every voice in this inherently democratic country. No doubt that India is now at [rank](#) 161 of 180 countries in the World Press Freedom Index.

Laws are being tweaked regularly to meet the government's expectations from people to be pliant and nothing more. In its pursuit of a superficial order, the governments [have subverted](#) the rule of law (think fake encounters), [misused agencies](#) under them (think targeted probes against opposition leaders), invoked the [most stringent and rarely used laws](#) against dissenters (think sedition and other criminal charges against university students).

When legitimate ways to protest are shut out, illegitimate means emerge. Despite all odds, protests find a way to lurk out from corners. The outlandish attack on the Parliament, India's most hallowed democratic institution, by a group of wayward youngsters is a striking reminder that something is rotten in the state of Denmark.

History tells us that such shrinking of democratic spaces has had dangerous outcomes across the world. One must never mistake smoke for fire, but smoke signals, once revealed must be read and acknowledged.

---

**Ajoy Ashirwad Mahaprashasta**

[Click here](#) to subscribe to ESSF newsletters in English and or French.

---

**P.S.**

The Wire India

<https://thewire.in/government/what-yellow-smoke-signals-tell-us-about-the-mother-of-democracy>