



# What Lanka tells us about the democratic project

**A**t a time when democracy across the globe is in the throes of a crisis of legitimacy, the dramatic images of citizen protests from Sri Lanka are a reminder of the possibilities and potential of the democratic project.

The contemporary global moment has not been democracy's finest. Across the world and, indeed, in Sri Lanka, formal democratic institutions are increasingly in conflict with and consciously undermining democracy's ideals, even lapsing into forms of populist authoritarianism. Yet, Sri Lanka has shown that even in its darkest moment, democracy is resilient and can restore the voice of citizens and a modicum of political agency.

The island's future now hangs in the balance with the formal political process seeking to reinforce the status quo. But the success of the protests lies in what they have taught the world — that the only path out of the current crisis is through citizens actively participating in the project of democracy. For India, this is the lesson that we must heed.

In recent years, India's democratic trajectory has been backsliding. Rather than upholding democratic principles, our democratic institutions are now active participants in undermining democracy, capitulating to a majoritarian, repressive impulse, and actively curbing liberties and individual freedoms. Rather than reinforce democratic values, sites of formal democracy — particularly the electoral arena — are stoking deep communal prejudice and hate. From the incarceration of journalists and activists without due process (journalist Mohammed Zubair being the most recent) and the unleashing of hate in our public discourse by "fringe elements", from the repeated use of money and muscle power and the continued brazen passage of legislation with little debate to India's standing on global indices, India's democracy is on the brink of a crisis.

While this characterisation of backsliding has excited some public outrage and contestation by the ruling dispensation, we are yet to produce any meaningful political debate on the possibilities of democratic renewal. In part, this is because our political imagination has confined itself to the limits set by competitive party politics. But at the present juncture, the political Opposition is not a credible flag-bearer of democracy. It is, after all, equally complicit, albeit far less efficient, in the making of the democratic crisis. The protests in Sri Lanka, particularly their civility and resilience in confronting an insular and authoritarian politics should make us alive to the possibilities of democratic renewal outside of competitive party politics.

India itself has a storied history of popular participation in the democratic project. At the Republic's founding moment, as legal scholar Rohit De notes, it was the remarkable engagement of ordinary people with the Constitution that birthed and cemented modes of democratic engagement. Larger public participation, therefore, requires more engagement and inter-

est in public and constitutional offices, and strengthening the institutions that act either as checks or as feedback loops — not violent or extra-constitutional action.

Viewed through this prism, even in this moment of backsliding, Indian democracy has retained some of its fighting spirit. In recent years, ordinary Indians have repeatedly taken to the streets in peaceful protest. From the anti-Citizenship (Amendment) Act, or CAA, protests to the farmers' movement, our streets have remained alive to repeated demands that the State remain responsive to its citizenry, proving that civic action and engagement are the basic foundations of democracy. It is, in fact, the more disciplined and peaceful protests — rather than the violent and polarising ones — which have had the most success in changing minds, both on the streets and in the corridors of power.

But in asserting its presence on the streets, India's democracy has laid bare the contradictory impulses that coexist within it. Through the act of protest, Indians have expressed a deep disenchantment with competitive politics to credibly represent their social and economic anxieties and aspirations. This is why the CAA and farmer movements actively eschewed alignment with the formal political Opposition. Yet, we have voted enthusiastically and repeatedly for the very regimes we protest. One could argue that India is increasingly comfortable rewarding majoritarian regimes. And this is not just about the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP); some non-BJP state governments, too, have demonstrated scant regard for protecting democratic principles, particularly individual freedoms, and voted back to power. These contradictory impulses are best understood from the perspective of how ordinary Indians shape their identities and engage with democracy. Political scientist Priyadarshini Singh has documented perspectives on nationalism, identity, and party politics in small towns and rural settings. Her work points to the fact that a deeply ethno-majoritarian, largely Hindu, political identity can coexist, often peacefully, with a sense of pride in India's diversity and the emancipatory promise of democracy. The problem our democracy faces stems from the fact that the electoral arena and competitive party politics have failed to mediate and reconcile these contradictions, choosing instead to stoke the majoritarian impulse.

A new democratic contract needs to build on the latent democratic impulse that still exists and makes its presence felt on the streets. This is a long journey that will need to be rebuilt from the grassroots, through new associations, new alliances and a lot of churn. But as Sri Lanka reminds us, even in its darkest moment, democracy reveals its resilience. Our democratic future rests in our collective ability to nurture this promise.

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