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Not a day passes in Bangalore without a section of working people, led by its union, staging a demonstration in front of the Mahatma Gandhi statue or at some other prominent landmark. Whether agricultural workers, pourakarmikas, government employees or anganwadi workers, they come from across the State, and often with entire families. They raise both sector specific and general labour demands. From lax implementation of labour laws in formal and informal sectors, to the increasing contractualisation of labour across work floors, and non-payment of wages to government contract workers; the protests are getting louder, and the strikes more frequent. Where are the promised fruits of economic liberalisation?

How does the public respond to these demonstrations? Is there just apathy, or is there hostility too? This, trade unionists lament, is mirrored in citizens not being as receptive as they used to be.

The Hindu asked a cross-section of persons to reflect on what gives rise to this disconnect, if any, and whether strikes have a role to play in a democracy. Excerpts:



S.K. Kanta, labour leader and ex-Minister: The non-involvement of unorganised sector workers in mass struggles has been one of the major reasons for the dangerous trend of growing public apathy towards strikes. Participation of formal sector workers in strikes is shrinking due to globalisation, privatisation and liberalisation policies. Confidence-building measures have to be initiated among workers in the unorganised sectors and they should be involved in struggles.

People's struggle to protect their rights and undo the injustice done to them is the very essence of the democracy. People's resistance against injustices and exploitation by the mighty sow the seeds of any democratic movement.

Strikes do result in inconvenience to people and are used sparingly to bring pressure on the government. Trade unions can adopt many other forms of protests to force the government and the managements to fall in line. For example, the pourakarmikas of Gulbarga City Corporation refused to accept the low salary paid to them a few years back, forcing the government to accept the demand for equal wages for equal work through a sustained struggle. They continued to work, but refused to take a salary despite all their problems. There are other ways, but they require patience.



Subroto Bagchi, chairperson, MindTree: For the average citizen, life is difficult enough and then come the strikes, the political rallies and sometimes the activist-led protests. There is a limit to which a citizen can allocate mental bandwidth and commitment to every one of these. Frankly, for the average citizen, a strike is a cross between a forced holiday and a nuisance. Speaking of the 'higher purpose' behind the current strike, it is naive to believe that anywhere in the world, prices have been arrested in any sustainable way by people going on strike; jobs have never ever gotten created by strikes. Governments can be sometimes be brought down by strikes; jobs and prices impacted? No.

Strikes are critical to imperfect democracies because they give a section of people the individual right to dislocate. It is a brand of morbid opposition; when I am in opposition, my principal job is to protest, oppose, dislocate, demonstrate power outside the government so that you the electorate know I am in the reckoning for the next time. Give the protester the government to run, the same person would do the same things they may be protesting. Political parties trivialise issues and strike is a form of protest in which the protester does not have to bear the intellectual, rational burden.



G. Rajashekar, literary critic and rights activist: I do not think there is public apathy to strikes. The public sympathises with the people on strikes as there are genuine reasons for them. I would, in fact, say that there is public enthusiasm for them.

Strikes play an important role in democracy. They reveal the real problems of people. In Karnataka, there is an effort to project Hindutva ideology as the aspiration of the people. Now, by going on strike, people have shown what their real problems are... I do not agree that strikes cause inconvenience to people. It is unemployment, inflation, unequal opportunities in education and health and every other sector that cause inconvenience to people. Strikes draw the attention of people to the real issues. The striking employees, we should remember, are also part of the 'public' we presume are being inconvenienced.



Muzaffar H. Asadi, professor, Department of Political Science, University of Mysore: First, I welcome the nationwide strike. But, at the same time, the strike should not have continued for the second day as it affects the country's economy and the life of common people, especially daily wage earners. I feel that the trade unions have re-emerged as big force as a large chunk of working class, primarily those from the banking sector, belong to middle class. The presence of middle class is now felt as it has become more conscious.

There are other ways of expressing dissent besides holding nationwide bandhs.

One alternative is to confine the strikes in the work area, holding demonstrations or dharnas, to avoid spillover effects of all-India strikes on the economy. I feel such protests will have less impact on the people. And, one of the premises of democracy is dissent and I believe that the democracy will survive any challenge. Dissent is the last resort in a democracy when its other premises — dialogue and discussion — fail. I perhaps feel that the first two premises must have failed and therefore the people have resorted to strike (dissent).



Supriya RoyChowdhury, professor, Centre for Political Institutions, Governance and Development: Mass agitations over issues such as price rise and labour rights had a lot more appeal even until a few decades ago. The public indifference to this agitation could be a result of the overt political opportunism displayed by its proponents. How else does one explain the participation of a party like the BJP, which has never associated with working class issues? How are left-wing unions able to share common cause with those on the extreme right?

Despite what leaders of national labour unions might say about this strike being historic because of the across-the-board support it has received, the fact is that this agitation can be described as amorphous at best. It lacks sharp polemic and ideological clarity. On the part of the left-wing unions, there has been a rollback of political ideology to form this seemingly broad-based coalition.

These agitations find very little resonance inside parliament. The left parties have not exerted necessary pressure on the government to ensure a policy shift. Unless this happens, we will not be able to gain much. This is surely not a revolution.

(As told to T.V. Sivanandan, Deepa Kurup, Raviprasad Kamila, Shankar Bannur and Sudipto Mondal)