

GANDHI MARG

VOLUME 44 • NUMBER 3 • OCTOBER–DECEMBER 2022

Gandhi Peace Foundation
New Delhi

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Gandhi Marg: 1957-1976 available in microform from

Oxford University Microfilms, 300 North Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, Michigan, USA;
35 Mobile Drive, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M4A1H6; University Microfilms
Limited, St. John's Road, Tyler's Green, Penn., Buckinghamshire, England.

II ISSN 0016—4437 LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CARD NO. 68-475534

New Subscription Rates (with effect from Volume 34, April-June 2012 onwards)

<i>Period</i>	<i>Individual (Inland)</i>	<i>Institutional</i>	<i>Individual (foreign)</i>	<i>Institutional</i>
Single Copy	Rs. 70	Rs. 100	US \$ 20	US \$ 25
1 year	Rs. 300	Rs. 400	US \$ 60	US \$ 80
2 years	Rs. 550	Rs. 750	US \$ 110	US \$ 150
3 years	Rs. 800	Rs. 1000	US \$ 160	US \$ 220
Life	Rs. 5000	Rs. 6000	US \$ 800	N.A.

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Published by Ashok Kumar for the Gandhi Peace Foundation, 221 & 223 Deen Dayal Upadhyaya Marg, New Delhi-110 002 (Phones: 23237491, 23237493; Fax: +91-11-23236734), Website: www.gandhimargjournal.org, e-mail: gpf18@rediffmail.com, gandhipacefoundation18@yahoo.co.in, and printed by him at Gupta Printing and Stationery Service, 275, Pratap Nagar, Street No. 18, Delhi-110 007

Contents

Articles

- | | |
|---|-----|
| Editorial | 261 |
| <i>John S. Moolakkattu</i> | |
| Can Cuban Society Learn from the
Gandhi-Kumarappa Economic Framework? | 263 |
| <i>Jos Chathukulam</i> | |
| Relief, Reform, and Politics:
Understanding Gandhi's Tour to
Bihar after Earthquake in 1934 | 281 |
| <i>Sudhanshu Kumar Jha</i> | |
| The Role of People's Movements in
Making Parliament 'for the People':
Recent Experiments in India | 297 |
| <i>Prakash S Desai</i>
<i>Alaknanda Shringare</i>
<i>Ravaji Gaunkar</i> | |
| Views of Mahatma Gandhi on Caste,
Untouchability and Hinduism:
Their validation and criticism | 315 |
| <i>Anette Gomes</i> | |
| The Body Politic: M.K. Gandhi and the
Ascetic Ideal | 333 |
| <i>Kishore Kumar Reddy Areevidu</i>
<i>S M Fasiullah</i> | |

Understanding Individuality in Gandhi's Moral Philosophy	347
<i>Kumar Rahul</i> <i>Sanjeev Kumar</i>	
Assessing Sustainable Development Goals through Social Progress Index for Bihar	359
<i>Rashmi Rani Anand</i> <i>Shubham Kumar Sanu</i> <i>Manvi Singh</i> <i>Vishwa Raj Sharma</i>	



Gandhi Marg Quarterly

44(3): 297–314

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<http://gandhimargjournal.org/>

ISSN 0016–4437

The Role of People's Movements in making Parliament 'for the people': Recent Experiments in India

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ABSTRACT

People's movements and social activists associated with them have actively participated in the debates and discussions on the role of representative institutions. The people's movement's opposition to policy measures that are anti-people in nature has paved the way for new thinking on democracy. There has been both, sometimes, convergence and divergence between parliament and people's movements on the question of governance and welfare from the beginning of new economic policy in India. This paper summarises the trajectory of convergence and divergence between parliament and people's movements on certain issues in the last two decades. Also, it looks at why the role of people's movements should be taken into consideration in the process of developmental efforts to be made by the parliament. The prime objective of this paper is to explore the efforts of people's movements in democratising the process of policymaking.

Key words: Democracy, Elections, Governance, Parliament, People's Movements, Protest.

THE ARCHITECTS OF the Indian constitution had deep faith in representative institutions for the country's democratic governance. To a certain extent, faith in these institutions was realised in the early years of nationhood because the people at the helm of affairs were leaders who had participated in the nation's struggle for independence.

October–December 2022

Mention must be made about the role played by leaders like Nehru, Patel, Azad, and others. This kind of leadership started waning within two decades of country's independence. People started losing hope in elected representatives and representative institutions. It has been aptly analysed that the political scenario after the first two decades of independence was characterised by changes such as the waning of the ideology of nationalism and the erosion of the political consensus. The ideology of nationalism waned probably because a new generation came to the fore in the Congress party, and the regionalisation of polity gained momentum because of the leadership at the centre after Nehru. Within two decades of independence, the nation witnessed young people's revolts in the form of the Naxalite movement and resentment among the marginalized. Compulsions of political democracy made the ruling class forget the heritage of nationalism.¹

The opposition that emerged in the 1970s against the ruling establishment made the ruling leadership further autocratic. The decade of the seventies was known for the emergence of both political and non-political organisations which opposed deviant acts regarding the philosophy of representative institutions in which constitutional architects had deep faith. Issues such as development, freedom, and basic rights of common people, especially the marginalised sections of society, made these organisations come to the fore. The non-responsive attitude of parliament regarding some imminent issues continued in the 80s, and when the country was still hopeful of good governance within the prevailing governance model, the Indian government introduced New Economic Policy (NEP) at the beginning of the 1990s for the betterment of the country. By the 1990s, the planned development model 'was being depicted as an unfortunate relic of the past which needed to be replaced by a more market-friendly and growth-oriented approach'². The introduction of the New Economic Policy happened without much debate among the common people, and this new economic regime became some kind of imposition on the common people by the Indian parliament in general and by the ruling parties in particular. Major economic policy changes during this time happened in India with just a narrow support base³.

In the last two decades, the nation witnessed a number of debates and discussions on the question of governance and the role of representative institutions, especially the parliament. As a representative institution, the parliament consists of political representatives who are supposed to articulate the people's aspirations. The trust restored in the initial years of independence in the parliament and political parties is declining as the party interest dominates over peoples' interest. Candidates and political parties compromised their

ideologies, policies, and principles to gain power. It is pointed out that the 'voters feel that parties are essential for the functioning of democracy, but do not seem to trust them to make democracy work'⁴.

The decline in the trust and functioning of representative democracy in the world's largest democracy raises questions over the role of political representatives in a democracy. People's movements and social activists associated with them have actively participated in the debates and discussions on the role of representative institutions in India. The people's movement's opposition to policy measures that are anti-people in nature has paved the way for new thinking on democracy. These 'movements have begun to raise a new discourse on democracy and invent political practices, expanding the arena of politics beyond the representational institutions of elections and political parties'⁵.

There has sometimes been convergence and divergence between parliament and people's movements on the questions of governance and welfare from the beginning of the new economic policy. This paper summarises the trajectory of convergence and divergence between parliament and people's movements on certain issues in the last two decades. Also, it looks at why the role of people's movements should be taken into consideration in the process of developmental effort to be made by the parliament. The prime objective of this paper is to explore the efforts of people's movements in the process of policymaking.

A) Change in the quality of Functioning of the Parliament:

There has been a decline and rise in the quality of functioning of the parliament in India. One cannot observe the functioning of today's parliament the way it functioned in the first two decades of independence. In the 1950s, Congress was in the dominant position in the parliament. But, on the question of debates a faction within the Congress' would join hands with the opposition and prevent the government from stonewalling the Parliament'⁶. This happened due to the fact that many members of that 'period had direct experience with the national movement and they strongly identified with a shared understanding of the nation in spite of their differing visions and perspectives'⁷. Leaders of the Congress 'were committed to the goals of rapid social and economic change and democratization of the society'⁸. Nehru's commitment to these values are well known, and 'in fact, Sardar Patel, Rajendra Prasad and C.Rajagopalachari were equally committed to the values of democracy, civil liberties, secularism, independent economic development, anti-imperialism and social reforms and had a pro-poor orientation'⁹.

In the late 1960s and the middle of 1970s, things started changing in the functioning of the parliament. During this period, Congress

played a hegemonic role in the parliament. Its method and approach had to be protested by socialist leaders like Jayaprakash Narayan. The movement led by Jayaprakash Narayan in the decade of 1970s made a huge contribution as far as the status of democracy in India is concerned. Some of the arguments made by Jayaprakash Narayan regarding the status of Indian democracy are 'the necessity of civic responsibility, responsive citizenship, and representation conducive to peoples' power'¹⁰. The movement led by Jayaprakash Narayan had a major influence on the next government which came into existence following the Emergency. The Janata Party-led coalition in power at the centre gave importance to issues like popular accountability and sovereignty. Issues such as opposition to centralisation, favoured citizen participation, faith in Fundamental Rights and civil responsibility were reflected in the Janata Party's political tendencies following the Emergency¹¹. Janata Party experiment was short-lived and did not make any major impact on the functioning of parliament and governance due to its internal bickering¹².

The 1970s and 80s is also known for the emergence of people's movements which were not satisfied with the way the policies and programmes were implemented for the nation's development. These groups started questioning the establishment regarding developmental activities in the country. This phase did not see any significant change in the parliament's response to the common people's expectations. The people's movements 'took up issues and constituencies abandoned by political parties and trade unions and those ill-served by the bureaucracy. The organisational form they evolved for themselves was not of a political party or a pressure group. It was that of a civil-associational group, leading political struggles on issues articulated to them by the people themselves. The key concept they worked with was democratising development through the empowerment of the people'¹³. People's movements which came to the fore in 1980s 'resisted increasing commodification and monopolisation of natural resources like land, water and forest, their unsustainable use and unequal distribution, exploitative power relations, the centralisation of decision-making and disempowerment of communities caused by the development process. They asserted people's rights over natural resources and decision-making processes'¹⁴.

The new economic policy regime's first decade focused on liberalisation and privatisation. Economic growth became a major discourse within and outside the parliament. This 'discourse of liberalization came to monopolize economic discussion, just as planning had done in the 1950s and 60s'¹⁵. With a few exceptions, most of the political parties represented in the parliament had a consensus on

liberalisation and privatisation of the economy. There were no serious discussions and commitments on the question of the impact of new economic policy measures on the vast number of people in the country. This callous response on the part of the representatives in the parliament made civil society associations or people's movements rise actively. As far as the method and approach in raising the socio-economic issues is concerned, there has been no uniformity among the people's movements which have been working long before the introduction of New Economic Policy and even among those that have come to the fore later on. Some movements like the Naxalite movement use violence to achieve their goals, whereas movements like Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA) employ methods of civil disobedience¹⁶. But, one could find some sort of consensus in thinking among them in the sense that they 'explicitly identify the state as a dominant agent of oppression and oppressive policies'¹⁷. It is true that most of the people's movements 'are not aiming to capture the national parliament in New Delhi or initiate a total revolution'¹⁸ but have become kind of a counterbalancing power to the state's authority¹⁹.

In the last few years, there has been a deterioration in the parliamentary deliberations, which has further widened the gap between the Parliamentarians and people's aspirations. Loss of time due to interruptions, forced adjournments, and lack of healthy discussions, has impacted the functioning of the parliament both in the Lok Sabha and the Rajya Sabha. The PRS report on 'Performance of Parliament during 15th Lok Sabha', brings out the data showing that during the 15th Lok Sabha, the productive time of the Lok Sabha was just 61 percent which is the worst performance of the Lok Sabha compared to the last fifty years²⁰. Between 2000 to 2018, on average, 53 hours were spent discussing the budget, while in the budget session of 2018, just 1 percent of the Lok Sabha time was spent on legislative business²¹. 'In the budget session of 2018-19, 100% of demands were passed without discussion'²². The situation in parliament has been deteriorating year after year. The parties in the opposition a few years back and were responsible for disrupting the Parliamentary proceedings are now in power, while the party in power is in the opposition continuing with the same disruptive behaviour of the past opposition parties.

B) Convergence between the Parliament and Peoples' Movements: The second decade of the new economic regime saw certain changes in the relationship between parliament and people's movements or civil society in the sense that parliament started paying attention to questions raised by them on various issues. This could be

described as a convergence between parliament, people's movements, or civil society. A few issues could be explained as examples of convergence between the civil society and the parliament.

a) Right to Information: The demand for the Right to Information was pressed by a large section of people and concerned organisations representing them²³. The Right to Information (RTI) movement began in 1990. This movement was led by Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS), 'the jan sangathan (the people's organisation) in rural Rajasthan which had, for two decades, fought corruption in village development works'²⁴. The movement led by MKSS used 'jan sunvai or public hearings as a technique to empower villagers to 'speak truth to power', challenging an opaque, oppressive, and corrupt governance system²⁵. This movement further expanded its base to the district and state levels. Its determination in its mission attracted many people to its fold and paved the way for a national campaign for the right to information. The network of the right-to-information campaign 'included not only jan sangathans like the MKSS, but also individual anti-corruption activists like Anna Hazare and Shailesh Gandhi. Notably, the RTI campaign aligned itself with the National Alliance of Peoples Movements, sangathans of the rural and urban poor fighting against dispossession. This organisational base gave the RTI campaign a solid political credibility'²⁶.

Over a decade of consistent struggle by the organisations and activists resulted in the enactment of the Right to Information Act by the parliament in 2005. From the beginning of enactment of the act, it has proved to be a good tool for seeking information on governance²⁷ and holding the government or government officials accountable for their decisions and acts. Many concerned citizens and nongovernmental organisations have effectively utilised this act. To give an example, a high profile and popular nongovernmental organisation, 'Parivartan (or, transformation), effectively deployed the RTI to find substantial leakage in the public-distribution system governing the delivery of subsidised food for the poor in Delhi'²⁸.

b) Right to work: Much criticism and widespread protests against government's economic policies made political parties in power come up with an idea of liberalisation with a humane face²⁹. In this direction, the Government of India, led by United Progressive Alliance (UPA) first came up with a number of corrective measures. One such measure was the enactment of National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) in the parliament. This act was renamed Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) in 2009³⁰. It must be mentioned here that the National Advisory Council (NAC) played a seminal role in passing legislation related to the right

to information and work³¹. The draft of NREGA prepared by the NAC was based on an earlier draft prepared by concerned citizens on the issue of the right to work³². Thus, NAC became an executive forum for social activists to articulate their views which they represent on behalf of common people in the country. It was witnessed that both governments at the centre and states took the assistance of voluntary organisations in policymaking and delivery of services³³. NAC formalised the integration of voluntary organizations within the state process 'a phenomenon promoted by the forces of globalisation and liberalisation'³⁴.

c) **Right to Food:** The National Food Security Act was passed in 2013, and it aims 'to provide for food and nutritional security in human life cycle approach, by ensuring access to adequate quantity of quality food at affordable prices to people to live a life with dignity and for matters connected therewith or incidental thereto'³⁵. This act empowers beneficiaries to get subsidised grains under the Targeted Public Distribution System. Many organizations played an important role in campaigning for the right to food³⁶. They emphasized 'freedom from both hunger and undernutrition as a fundamental human right'³⁷. Their consistent work resulted in the passing of the bill on food security 2013. Eminent economists like Jean Dreze actively popularised the idea of the right to food³⁸ and coordinated with the government on the issue of food security for common people. Dreze considers that providing food security is like a form of investment in human capital and it is sound economics³⁹.

There are some issues on which there is no convergence between the parliament and people's movements or civil society. Corruption is one such issue on which there has not been any unanimity on legislation by most of the Indian political parties. Political parties cleverly used the parliamentary forum to prevent legislation on corruption. There was a great tussle between the parliament and the civil society movement on the question of corruption and its prevention in public life. Anna Hazare, a prominent social activist, and his core group of supporters demanded a strong institutional solution for the prevention of corruption in public life. They employed the strategy of hunger strike to fulfil their demand. This movement got a huge response from the common people. It had almost become like a great upheaval against apathy of the parliament and the concerned government at the centre. Had the elected representatives in the parliament taken interest in passing the law when the issue was raised, the outrage of the public and civil society could have been prevented, and the whole system could have retained faith in it. At the beginning of this civil society movement against corruption, the ruling party and most of

the members of parliament were unanimous in opposing the demands of the civil society, but as time passed and as elected representatives sensed the public mood, they began to respond to some of the demands of the civil society. Elected representatives' efforts in wooing civil society activists to come to terms with certain conditions indirectly showed that people's consistent and committed protest and resistance could make the elected representatives come out of their citadels. Finally, parliament's unanimous adoption of a resolution agreeing in principle with team Anna's position on some points was a victory for the civil society in making parliament listen to the public mood and be responsive to issues of vital concern to the people⁴⁰. However, the opportunity created to pass the anti-corruption bill was not taken further by both the parliament and civil society in a concrete manner. Both the civil society and the parliament did not show any meaningful effort in making the bill to be passed as an act⁴¹. Another critical reason for the failure of this experiment was non-cooperation from the majority of other voluntary organisations and people's movements.

Centralisation of power in the name of representative democracy sometimes does not ensure accountability which is another important component/ challenge of democracy. Such a tendency is reflected in many democracies, especially from the developing world. Ruling establishment and ruling elites have used the centralising legislative method to enact a law or policy without giving substantial importance to common people who have voted them to power. Major policies and legislations have been passed without making common people aware of the intricacies of those laws and policies. Suppose the literacy rate and participation in public discussions are poor on the part of common people. In that case, it could be disastrous in the sense that the ruling establishment might become dictatorial and run the system according to their whims and fancies. The tendency of centralisation can be effectively curbed by the people's movements or civil society associations and their democratic methods of protests and resistance.

The three farm bills passed in the Lok Sabha in the year 2020 without taking into confidence the farmers are an example of the parliamentarians' centralized tendency. The three farm bills were – the Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement of Price Assurance and Farm Services Bill, the Farmers Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Bill, and the Essential Commodities (Amendment) Bill. The President gave assent to these bills. According to the government, the Farm Acts give freedom to the farmer to sell their produce anywhere; they provide for a contract between farmers and corporate investors as per which farmers will produce crops as per the contract as per the mutually agreed

remuneration⁴². While the government applauded the bills being in the interest of farmers, the farmers termed them anti-farmers bills. Farmers of Punjab, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, and later supported by the farmers of other states, protested against these laws and demanded these bills be withdrawn in the larger interest of the farmers. They expressed concern over dismantling the minimum support system available to farmers and in the new system created by these bills the big corporate houses may dictate their terms⁴³. P. Sainath, while pointing at Section 13 of The Farmers Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Act 2020 which prohibits any legal proceedings against central and state governments, mentions that the movement is not just to repeal the three farm laws but about citizens' right to legal recourse, which can, in turn, be seen as a defence of democracy⁴⁴. There were many rounds of discussions between the government and farmers, which exposed the pro-corporate bias of the government while the farmers were firm in their demand to repeal all three laws. The protest received support from society at large, including the urban middle classes⁴⁵. After one year of protest in which some farmers lost their lives and experienced hardship, the Indian parliament decided to repeal the three farm Acts.

The success of the farmer's protest is an example, which shows that effective and impactful participation and a strong means to hold the representatives accountable to the people is possible through strong and vibrant peoples' movements which take up and fight for the cause of people which otherwise may be neglected by peoples' representatives.

People's movements sometimes take to the streets certain burning issues or try to influence public policies from outside and prove to be more powerful. One such movement was the protest movement which followed hours after the nation woke up to the horrifying news of the Nirbhaya rape. This movement aimed to bring stringent laws related to rape. The continued protest by the civil society pressurised the parliament. 'On March 21, 2013, the rape law in the country was amended. The new tougher anti-rape law — Criminal Law (Amendment) Act, 2013- to punish sex crimes redefined rape and made punishments more stringent-including death for repeat rape offenders'⁴⁶.

In December 2019, the Indian government passed the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, which led to protests across the country, some of which turned violent. One of the reasons for the protest was the exclusion of Muslims which was seen as an act against the ethos of the Indian Constitution⁴⁷ as the Act allowed citizenship to the non-Muslim immigrants from Pakistan, Bangladesh and Afghanistan. Secondly, in

the Northeastern states, the protest was due to the fear that if the CAA gets implemented, it 'will cause a rush of immigrants that may alter their demographic and linguistic and cultural uniqueness'⁴⁸. The anti-CAA protest started by the students of Jamia Millia University and by Jawaharlal Nehru University was soon joined by the opposition parties, eminent personalities, and activists. Due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, followed by a nationwide lockdown, the protest did not last long.

With the success of the farmers' movement, the anti-CAA movement once again came to the fore in Assam. While comparing the anti-CAA and farmers' movements, Ajay Gudavarthy⁴⁹ writes that the anti-CAA movement did not receive the social support received by the farmers' movement, for the anti-CAA movement was reduced to the issue of Muslim citizenship and did not evoke sympathy and trust from non-Muslim population. He further writes that the re-ignited anti-CAA protests inspired by the success of the farmers' movement needed to be different and avoid isolation. Thus, the two examples of anti-CAA and farmers' movements indicate that the protests to succeed need to have a discourse that has a larger appeal⁵⁰.

The above instances indicate that protest movements are seen as means to exert influence on the policymakers on different issues when the government is reluctant to involve people in the decision-making process. Although people's movements can influence their representatives' decisions, they require larger support from society.

C) Why should the role of people's movements be considered? The Philosophy and objective behind the establishment of representative institutions are to ensure that the demands and aspirations of each citizen of the country are sufficiently represented, articulated, and met through their elected members. Elected members are mandated to work for the people. If there is any deviation in this philosophy the way out should be very much democratic and would be acceptable to the people. Common people in India have had enough reasons to be cynical about political parties because, for political parties, attaining power by any means has become a priority over the nation and its people. The tendency to attain power at any cost has resulted in 'the culture of corruption, inefficiency, selfishness and unprincipled behaviour'⁵¹. Regarding democratic mobilization, it is stated that 'while it has produced an intense struggle for power, has not delivered millions of citizens from the abject dictates of poverty. Yes, the broad framework within which practices of popular authorization can be carried out remain intact, but politics itself has become an area where norms exist only in their breach'⁵².

Election as one of the core methods of ensuring representation

has been successful to a certain extent in maintaining mere survival of electoral/procedural democracy but has not been able to enhance the quality of substantive democracy. In many developing and developed countries wherein political systems are democratic, elections have not ensured connectivity between common people and political actors such as political parties and politicians. Elections have become tools for many to authenticate their political systems rather than to mirror the political system's mistakes. It is observed that elections in democracies 'are now often less a choice between alternative political programmes and a means of enforcing political accountability on the government. They are increasingly taking on the character of referenda on personalities and slogans with professional fund-raisers and public relations consultants sometimes playing a greater role than citizens in selecting the issues used for mobilising voters'⁵³.

The citizens no longer view elections as the mechanism through which they are able to hold their representatives accountable. A collective tool was felt necessary to pressure the parliamentarians to make them listen to the people's demands. When elections have become a farce in the country, the option left to common people is that of civil resistance and protest by organising around civil society associations. Civil resistance and civic engagement with the ruling establishment by civil society cannot always be understood as a kind of anarchy. Civil resistance cannot be against a system that runs properly according to democratic principles. It would not necessarily be in favour of any sort of chaos and violent activity against the establishment for fulfilment of projected demands or aspirations of people. In any political system, which claims that it is liberal democracy, 'when the governing parties refuse to formulate an effective law, any citizen, any group has a right to mobilise public opinion and try to put its proposal before government'⁵⁴.

In representative democracy, both opposition and ruling parties have got equal importance in ensuring good governance for the people. They have a greater role in the smooth functioning of representative institutions. In recent years, parliament's functioning is marked by disruptions, bills being passed without much discussion, and walk-outs, resulting in the loss of valuable time and peoples' money. Disruption of Parliament due to walk-out by opposition parties was noticed during the UPA government as well as the NDA government. If representative institutions do not function smoothly, there will be severe consequences in the country's governance. If political parties in opposition do not function as effective agencies of making ruling parties work for the people, the option left to common people is organised people's movements. The very mechanism of representative

democracy is 'designed to secure the liberty, well-being and dignity of citizens'⁵⁵ but this mechanism 'is routinely throwing up forces that threaten to undermine it; the very laws that are supposed to enshrine republican aspirations are incapable of commanding minimal respect, and their inaction subjects the entire political process to ridicule. The corruption, mediocrity, indiscipline, venality and lack of moral imagination of the political class, those essential agents of representation in any democracy, makes them incapable of attending to the well-being of citizens. The capture of the political process, by the meanest of interests, intermittently violent, occasionally unleashing uncontrollable passions, the lack of any ideological coherence, all suggest democracy has become a hollow shell'⁵⁶.

Recently there has been a supportive argument among some intellectuals and politicians that parliament is supreme in the legislation process. Parliamentary supremacy can be asserted if parliament or any representative institution has remained up to the expectations of the common people. Institutional credibility depends upon its representatives. Without having quality representatives and representatives without respect towards democracy and its core concern, namely the common people, the assertion of institutional supremacy becomes absurd and baseless. It is rightly stated that the 'blossoming of a democratic structure, particularly in a developing country set-up, is critically dependent upon popular participation not only in electing the government but also in formulating and executing development policies'⁵⁷.

Participation of people beyond the fixed process of elections will sustain democracy. Democracy can be achieved in a real sense when people actively participate not only in elections but holding their representatives answerable to the people's interest and demands and, above all, asserting their right over the decisions pertaining to public policies. Public debates by civil society associations involving common people on any policy legislation should precede the legislative enactments rather than following them. Such debates by the people may strengthen the state's capacity in terms of meaningfully connecting with the people by involving them in the deliberative process. For the policies to be impactful and yield desired results, they needed to be based on the ground realities gained through meaningful public debates and learning from the experiences of citizens of the country connected with local realities. Ultimately, such debates help in moving in the direction of robust deliberative democracy⁵⁸.

D) Conclusion: There is no doubt about the efficacy of representative institutions in larger democratic countries. Representative institutions are meant to represent the aspirations of

the citizens of the country. Representative institutions in India' not only legitimize a government, but they are also the supreme organs for the formulation of policies, overseeing their implementation, and in general acting as 'watchdogs' over the functioning of the government. Unfortunately, over the years, there has been a general downside in its performance, and signs of decay in the institution have set in' ⁵⁹. If representative institutions do not work, concerned citizens have to find creative ways and methods in the form of people's movements or civil society to make representative institutions work for the people. Indian civil society may not be so successful in its record of making parliament work for the people but it has to certain extent created an imprint among the public that unity and common resistance against anti-people actions by the ruling power structure, including parliament, can bring changes that people wish to see in the system. People's movements or civil society associations have been able to mobilize the common mass at grass root level and such mobilization' efforts are led by dedicated activists' ⁶⁰ and they 'are based on a cause, vocation, or identity; and are located in an alternative political space outside the conventional structures of party and government' ⁶¹. To a certain extent the effort of people's movements or activism of civil society associations is facilitating to bring changes in the political system ⁶².

It is desired that social action groups, maybe worker's movements, women's movements, environmental movements, or any movement, have to come together on key issues that would help facilitate governance. It is rightly said that protest movements 'can be complementary in a democracy and, like other forms of popular participation, protest movements may contribute to the legitimacy of democratic governance'⁶³

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The Role of People's Movements in making Parliament • 313

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October–December 2022