

India: As Space for Free Expression Shrinks, What Does the Future of Dissent Look Like?

Thursday 8 February 2024, by [SHAH Rajiv](#) (Date first published: 4 February 2024).

Organisers of a human rights meet in Gujarat said that it's been quite some time since no one, not even private hall owners, not to talk of state-supported halls, are available for those seeking to express dissent.

In yet another confirmation of how space for free expression is shrinking in Gujarat, a human rights conference, attended by some well-known names – Supreme Court advocate Prashant Bhushan, environmentalist Vandana Shiva, People's Union for Civil Liberties leader Kavita Shrivastava, Narmada Bachao Andolan leader Medha Patkar, among others – was held at a private terrace in Ahmedabad instead of a public space.

The reason seemed simple, and several speakers (ironically, not the organisers) stated it openly: It's quite some time that no one, not even private hall owners, not to talk of state-supported halls, are available for those seeking to express dissent.

There was a time when the Mahatma Gandhi-founded Gujarat Vidyapeeth hall used to be available for such events, but following its “takeover” by the Gujarat governor in 2022-end, it is no longer available. Earlier, the Mehdi Nawaz Jung Hall in Ahmedabad was available – but since it is controlled by the Gujarat governor, it became a “no-no” for rights leaders ever since Prime Minister Narendra Modi won the polls in May 2014.

Held under the auspices of a foundation named after perhaps the most well-known person among Gujarat advocates taking up human rights issues, late Girish Patel, the conference was attended mostly by like-minded persons – academics, lawyers, scholars and activists.

Organised by a team led by senior Gujarat high court advocate Anand Yagnik, a worthy Girish Patel disciple, the three day conference that began on January 26, saw about 150 people each day.

Discussions, often focusing on specific areas like sugarcane workers of South Gujarat and salt pan workers of the Little Runn of Kutch, took place around human rights and their national and international perspectives; civil liberties; Adivasi, Dalit, farmer, minority, woman and child rights; environmental impact of infrastructure and development projects; environment and biodiversity; labour rights and minimum wages, and so on.

One of the very few of its kind in recent years, the conference, which ended on January 28, saw participants confront the crucial question: Yes, we have discussed some of the most nagging issues concerning civil and human rights, especially in Gujarat, but what next? Where do we go from here? What do we do next?

Medha Patkar, who spoke at the concluding session, was frank: Admitting a huge gap between what the activists think and their desired action, she said, people still do not know what destruction the Rs 90,000 crore Narmada dam has brought about in Gujarat and the neighbouring states.

While the canals haven't been built and waters haven't reached the Kutch farmers, thousands of cusecs are being wasted away by releasing the waters in the Little Runn of Kutch, destroying the livelihood of saltpan workers operating there, she claimed.

Patkar asked participants to visit Madhya Pradesh to see for themselves how her organisation, Narmada Bachao Andolan, is leading protests against the huge tracts of land, including hundreds of villages, being submerged by Narmada waters, as a result of a dam, considered by dominant sections, as lifeline of Gujarat. She later told *Counterview*, "There is a need to tell people what's happening with Narmada waters, why it's being wasted."

Following the conference, a decision was taken to train activists, making them aware of human rights issues and the legal tools which can be used to fight for the oppressed sections. All agreed, there was a need to hold similar conferences, a rarity now, on a regular basis, in order to discuss and debate the issues confronting broader sections.

However, there appeared to be no answer to how and where - except for the private terrace where the conference took place. Nor was anyone clear as to whether anything beyond training activists by turning them into para-legals - something that the Ahmedabad-based NGO Centre for Social Justice has been doing for decades now, in whatever limited way - could be done.

A senior journalist, who could not attend the conference because of personal reasons, told *Counterview*, "I would have gone there only to keep my contacts alive, to meet them... But it's a fact: the participants' views are well-known, I presume they wouldn't have said anything new."

Indeed, while there was a discussion at the conference on "violence against women in social media/online violence", what seemed missing was ways to adopt the online tools which were not available to valiant but traditional agitators like Medha Patkar till now in order to discuss and propagate human and civil rights.

This issue is particularly significant, as there is an increasing view among civil society groups that the established media - print or electronic - is "not responsive" to the needs and aspirations of the civil society. And how could it be? Their owners and their supporting journalists think that news is nothing but family business.

Few in the civil society seem to understand that times have changed - a factor predicted, ironically, by Nobel laureate Mohammad Yunus, the Grameen Bank man from Bangladesh, in his book titled *Bankers to the Poor*, first published way back in 1998, when information and communication technology (ICT) was in its nascent stage.

Hounded by Bangladesh authorities today, Yunus, now 83, had said then, ICT was going to "change the world in the immediate future far more rapidly and fundamentally than any other technology so far in human history."

In the chapter 'Poverty Free World: How and When', the top economist's words were prophetic: "The most attractive aspect of this spread of ICT is that it is not in anyone's control. Neither government, nor big business, nor anyone of any authority can restrict the flow of information. The next best aspect of it is that it is becoming cheaper every day."

Yunus further said, "ICT is raising the hope that we are approaching the world which is free from power brokers, and knowledge brokers", pointing out, the ICT revolution was going to be "particularly exciting for all disadvantaged groups, voiceless groups, and minority groups."

He insisted, "Any power based on exclusive access to information will disintegrate. Any common

citizen will have almost as much access to information as the head of government. Leadership will have to be based on vision and integrity, rather than on manipulation of information”.

Few appear to understand that this is exactly what is happening, despite the big business efforts to control social media and news.

It may not be fashionable to quote Karl Marx today, as it was in 1970s. But what Yunus said is a reflection of Marx’s views enunciated way back in 1859 in *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*. “No social order is ever destroyed before all the productive forces for which it is sufficient have been developed, and new superior relations of production never replace older ones before the material conditions for their existence have matured within the framework of the old society.”

While established Communists have may not have paid heed to this truth, Yunus’ views on ICT suggest the correctness of Marx’s views. One wonders: Isn’t it time civil society heeds the voice of reason of Yunus and Marx and consider ICT as a means to change amidst Government of India’s latest move to regularise online media?

Rajiv Shah

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