

Citizens and parliamentarians dialogue on the way forward

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From 16 to 21st Aug, a Janta Sansad (People's Parliament) was organised by several dozen networks and organisations, to highlight the fact that the Indian Parliament has not met when it should have (online, as many are around the world), and that this is a loss of opportunity for people to highlight serious issues. Noting also that the current govt in India is particularly callous with regard to marginalised peoples' interests/rights, and the environment, that it is further destroying an already weakened democratic foundation, and that accountability of the state is a limited part of democracy: the event gave a chance to people from across the country to share their experience regarding the full range of social, economic, political, ecological, cultural problems they are facing in the COVID lockdown period, as also instances of resilience, and proposals for pathways out of the crises they face. This was an occasion to both raise issues in the public domain, exercising especially our right to dissent and voice our opinion, as also for movements across the country to be on a common collaborative platform. As a follow-up, an interaction was held with Members of Parliament (the official one!) on 26th Aug, to present the Resolutions adopted at the Janta Parliament. Highlights:

Pledge unequivocal support to resolutions passed by Janta Parliament - D.Raja, CPI

Recommend a Common Minimum Programme to be developed to forge broader unity - Sitaram Yechury, CPM

Common Minimum Programme must bring opposition together - K. Raju, Congress

Convergence of the National and People's Parliament must be pursued - Manoj Jha, RJD

Sanctity of the Parliament and due processes must be safeguarded - Sanjay Singh, AAP

The week-long Janta Parliament, concluded with a three hour working session between the Janta Parliament and representatives of political parties. Letters of invitation had been sent to all political parties. After a summary by the anchors of each of the eleven sessions to the political leaders on all the issues that were discussed during the first phase of the Janta Parliament held from 16th to 21st August, various political party representatives who attended shared their views. D. Raja, National Secretary of the Communist Party of India (CPI), said that Ambedkar had envisioned the Parliament as an expression of the sovereignty of the nation and that it should not be undermined. He added that the Parliament has been bypassed by the present government. He also raised the issue of electoral reforms and specifically touched upon the issues of proportional representation and electoral bonds. Lastly, he assured the gathering that his party supported most of the resolutions of the Janta Parliament and the need of the times was for parties and social movements to work together inside and outside Parliament. Further, he said that apart from just his party, he would also work to mobilise support among other parties for the issues raised in the Janta Parliament. Sitaram Yechury, General Secretary of the Communist Party of India (Marxist), congratulated the Janta Parliament for being meaningful and productive. He said that it has been a very useful exercise since the Parliament has not been convened since the lockdown. Lamenting that the pillars of our democracy and republic are being replaced, he decried the intense attack on rights, such as the right to food and RTI, and civil liberties that is taking place to make them defunct. He strongly asserted that any attempt to impose uniformity in the country will dilute the idea of India. While he acknowledged that his party was in agreement with most of the proposals, he also considered the possible way forward. He suggested that a Common Minimum Programme (CMP) like draft be prepared based on which unity should be forged between political parties and peoples movements. He made it clear that this cannot be a battle fought by one party or one movement. He also offered that the CPI(M) will cooperate fully with all such efforts.

K. Raju, who came as one of the representatives of the Indian National Congress, acknowledged that his party was in agreement with most of the proposals arising from the Janta Parliament. He said this platform of dialogue that began during the Jan Sarokar process of 2019, which was attended by the Congress President Mrs. Sonia Gandhi and leaders from other political parties, must be strengthened and the Janta Parliament was a big step in that direction. He said that the resolutions cover a wide range of vital peoples issues and deserve extensive media attention. He felt that this will also help make sure that they are raised in the Parliament as well when the Monsoon Session is convened, adding that civil society must also meet individual MPs to advocate for these issues. Agreeing with Sitaram Yechury, he also said that a Common Minimum Programme (CMP) must be made in order to bring the opposition together. Remembering that the UPA had pushed for rights based legislations like the National Food Security Act, RTI and the MGNREGA, some specific suggestions that he said the Congress would be working towards in the future include a basic income to put money immediately in the hands of the poor, a legislation for the right to health and universal PDS without Aadhar linkage. He added that the Congress opposed recent developments on Environment Impact Assessment (EIA) and ordinances in agriculture. He looked forward to the issues in the Janta Parliament being raised in the Parliament as well.

Kodikunnil Suresh, chief whip of the Congress in the Lok Sabha and a member of the Lok Sabha Speaker's panel, said that the discussions of the Janta Parliament must be taken into consideration by all the central and state governments. He acknowledged that many things about the problems facing the nation currently were discussed in the Janta Parliament and that he learned a lot from the summary presented. He was concerned about the number of ordinances issued by the government.

Manoj Jha of the Rashtriya Janta Dal said that the Janta Parliament has done a very good job and that his party would take the people's concerns forward. He said that the Janta Parliament had shown how Parliamentary deliberations could be constructive and productive. He was worried about the Monsoon Session being truncated with very limited time. He was also anxious about the legislative business that the government might have in mind given the past track record of suddenly introducing new bills in the morning of the same day that they have to be considered by the Parliament. He was also apprehensive if Parliamentary fora would be available to MPs to bring issues to the attention of the public. He said that a strategy should be made to create a convergence between Parliament building and the people's Parliament. He said a common agenda would also be useful for his party in the upcoming elections in Bihar.

Sanjay Singh of the Aam Aadmi Party said that the central government is looking to convert the on-going pandemic into an opportunity to disinvest in various national assets such as SAIL, COAL and the railways. He added that the centre is looking to escape questioning and is therefore not convening Parliament. He said that the NDA had neither given adequate relief to people during such extraordinary times nor had the BJP state governments handled the pandemic effectively, citing the example of Uttar Pradesh where he said two cabinet Ministers had passed away due to COVID-19. He ended by saying that the Aam Aadmi Party would also raise these issues in the Parliament.

Shimla's former deputy mayor, Tikender Singh Panwar of the CPI-M, added that in addition to all the issues raised, there should also be a focus on sustainability of cities and possible alternatives as solutions to current problems.

As closing remarks, Medha Patkar urged MPs to take up these issues in the Parliament and said that civil society will rally around them in solidarity. She stressed

the need to move from “virtual” to “actual” on issues such as education, food, and on deliberations like the EIA and the criminal law amendment which she strongly opposed. She said civil society would work on a common minimum programme but also search for a “Common Maximum Agenda”. She also expressed concern about developments around democracy and independent institutions like the judiciary while citing Prashant Bhushan’s on-going contempt case. Aruna Roy, who had welcomed the political party leaders concluded the session with the reading of the preamble to the Indian Constitution in Hindi and English. This session of the online Janta Parliament was adjourned after 43 hours of discussions with around 250 speakers, over a hundred resolutions, over a thousand voting participants and engaging with over one lakh people on social media. The specific plans for further advocacy around the issues in the upcoming Monsoon Session of Parliament will be announced after the Jan Sarokar organising group meeting which is likely to be held at the end of this month. Brief statistics, information and highlights from the Janta Parliament may be accessed here: <https://jantaparliament.wordpress.com/2020/08/25/>

[wordpress.com/2020/08/25/](https://jantaparliament.wordpress.com/2020/08/25/)

[invite-concluding-session-of-](#)

[janta-parliament/](#)

Videos, press releases and resolutions from each session have been archived here: <https://jantaparliament.wordpress.com/schedule/>

A comprehensive ‘People’s Policy for Post COVID-19 Times’ as well as a collation of all resolutions from the Janta Parliament is available here:

<https://jantaparliament.wordpress.com/policy-proposals/>

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[Environment session of Janta Parliament](#)

Press

release: <http://vikalpsangam.org/article/press-release-by-janta-parliament-%E0%A4%9C%E0%A4%A8%E0%A4%A4-%E0%A4%B8%E0%A4%B8%E0%A4%A6-18>

and here <https://countercurrents.org/2020/08/janta-parliament-calls-on-urgent-action-for-ecological-security/> Resolutions:

http://vikalpsangam.org/article/janta-parliament-resolutions-passed-in-session-on-environment-18-august-2020#.Xz6kvzVS_wo

Proceedings of full session:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=38&v=iRuzHuH-o_k&feature=emb_logo Short video presenting the session’s key

resolutions: <https://youtu.be/PM3zwVsMwDQ>

Analytical article on importance of Environment session: <https://kafila.online/2020/08/27/the-ecopolitical-imperative-and-the-janta-parliament/>