

'More agitated than ever': India's Cockroach protests defy heavy-handed police

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Delhi

Taru had come to the protest prepared this time. In one hand was an anti-government poster, and in the other was a bicycle helmet. "We need to have protection in case Delhi police beat us up again," said the 25-year-old, who stood among her friends. "We are not scared of them and we won't run away, no matter what they do. We'll stay here till they listen."

Yesterday, the city still thronged with thousands of protesters, in an unprecedented expression of dissent against Narendra Modi's government.

Just 24 hours earlier, more than 50,000 people had taken to the streets, swathes of them in their late teens and early 20s, mobilised by a new youth-led movement that calls itself the Cockroach Janta party (CJP). They are calling for the education minister to resign, and for reform of a corrupt, broken education system.

But what began peacefully on Monday - people fanning each other in the gruelling humidity, sharing snacks and chanting slogans - turned into scenes of brutality by the afternoon. Delhi police denied the protesters the right to march on parliament and kettled the expanding crowd into a restricted area. The internet was shut down and barricades were erected across the capital. Then came the batons and the teargas.

Police said they were responding to agitation, but witnesses claimed officers carried out unprovoked attacks, including against women and children. About 60 people suffered injuries and at least one protester is on a ventilator in intensive care.



▲ Protesters locked up yesterday at sit-in near the PM's Delhi residence

"The day was so wholesome to start with," said Taru. "But after 3pm the police started attacking us. They were bashing us like anything. I saw them come up and hit people on the head as they were sitting down on the pavement doing nothing. And then as we were running, they opened up teargas on us."

Taru described the police response as a mistake, adding: "Now we are more agitated than ever."

The heavy-handed approach did little to keep supporters away from the historic site of Jantar Mantar, which has become a focal point of the CJP protests over the past month. Yesterday's crowds were thick and lively as they shouted slogans against the Modi government with abandon.

Some had travelled hundreds of miles to be there and said they intended to camp out until the government responded to the demands of the country's millions of young people. "The government needs to understand: we are not going anywhere," said Ranjit Verma, 23.

India's main opposition Congress party had also seized upon the mood, calling for Modi to resign "for destroying the future of India's youth" as it held its own protest.

While the CJP movement has primarily focused on accountability for devastating leaks of exam papers and calling for the resignation of the education minister, Dharmendra Pradhan, the overriding feeling after Monday's protest was that this was now much bigger than one issue. For some, this was the moment India's youth, totalling more than 600 million, had found its political voice.

"The solidarity on the streets yesterday filled my heart," said Kuhoo Kaushik, 26, a content creator from Delhi. "How the government responded was really sad, police beating up 14-year-olds is horrible. But personally, I feel like it's really awoken something in me."

Speaking at a press conference yesterday, CJP's founder, Abhijeet Dipke, vowed that the protests would continue, though did not state what the next steps for the movement would be to capitalise on their momentum.

Standing by the stage at the protest site, Ratna Singh, a CJP spokesperson, said the movement was very aware of ways in which the Modi government had cracked down on previous movements and figures of dissent during its 12 years in power.

"Anyone who has tried to speak up against this government has faced terrorism charges or tax raids or jail and there is so much fear," she said. "But I am very proud at how many people have showed up and come out on the streets. The police showed us no mercy - but no matter what barbaric treatment they give us, we will not be silenced."

While a senior government minister met two CJP spokespeople on Monday to discuss their demands, Singh said the government had not responded to them yesterday and the "prime minister has remained silent about what happened".

It was not only young people who came out to protest. Shobha Varma, 80, was attending with her granddaughter. "Our education system has been failing young people for years," she said. "But when I look out at everyone here, I really feel hope."



◀ Indian police detaining supporters of the Cockroach Janta party on Monday. More than 50,000 people rallied in Delhi calling for the education minister to quit

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DIVYAKANT
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