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## Protests very essence of democracy <sup>11/2/21</sup>

Protest is a bad word in the dictionary of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, while it should be the life breath of the body politic of a functioning democracy. It is life breath because it is derived from the right to free speech and expression, the right to make choices, and the right to disagree with the government or any authority, organisation or even individual. Protest comes out of disagreement, which sustains democracy, and a person who vilifies and mocks protests and protesters is not a democrat by conviction, by words, and in practice. Modi's denigration of protesters as 'andolan jeevi' and parasites in a speech in Parliament was a nasty cut. He was talking about the farmers' protest and he offered to resolve the issue through dialogue. But at the same time, he pejoratively described



the protesters as 'andolan jeevi', an expression which as much insults as it hurts.

### A PM who delegitimises protests delegitimises himself

It is not just the farmers but everyone, from any walk of life, who protests for a cause that is called out and slighted by the word that Modi used. It is not a word that just has a meaning but a tone, too, combining criticism, ridicule, intolerance and even contempt. It is ironic that a democratically elected Prime Minister calls critics and protesters by such names in Parliament. He himself came to power when the people

voted in protest against another government and other parties, and this is how democracy works and societies move forward. He and his party have staged protests, and when he denies that right to others and calls them names, his own adherence to democracy sounds sham and dishonest. When a Prime Minister delegitimises protests, he delegitimises himself, and when he laughs at critics and dissenters, he laughs at democracy itself.

Modi has reviled protesters in the past, too. When there were widespread protests against the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), he made the snide remark that the protesters could be identified by their clothes. Protests are not to be judged by the clothes, turbans or the creed of those who stage them. They don't challenge democracy but strengthen it; it is the attack on them that weakens democracy. What the Prime Minister says the stormtroopers do with sticks and the police turn into nails and barricades. It becomes the sea of malice and abuse rippling through the social media. Modi said India is the "mother of democracies" with great democratic traditions, culture and heritage. But these traditions have never denounced protests as wrong and harmful, but have encouraged argumentation, opposition and criticism, and thrived on them. When there is no respect for protests, there is no dialogue with protesters, and a democracy without dialogue is a dead letter.