

Continuing Debate

Whither Anna Movement?

Biswajit Roy

It is confusing that the radical left-wing critic of Indian nation-state like Arundhati Roy (The Hindu) and its Nehruvian defender like Ramchandra Guha (The Telegraph) criticized the Anna movement, albeit from different premises. Arundhati felt both the Maoists and team Anna's Jan Lokpal bill had sought to overthrow the Indian state. But she considered team Anna's moves as cosmetic and bereft of any threat to structural inequality and violence as it was silent over corporate-state joint plunder of people's resources and livelihood while demonizing the government, political class and bureaucracy. Despite their Gandhian garb, the votaries of the Jan Lokpal are actually trying to institutionalize an oligarchic and bureaucratic system outside the prevailing polity at the behest of multinationals, western donors and their Indian clients including NGOs who want to depoliticize and deradicalize people's resistance, her arguments entailed. For Guha, Anna represents pre-modern, essentially anti-plural, authoritarian world-view while appropriating the popular anger against the vulgarities of India's political class and its corruption. He warned against the former army truck-driver turned self-styled village reformer's ambition to do the backseat-driving for the huge and complex nation as it runs the risk of running over the achievements of Indian democracy on his way. On the other hand, Partha Chatterjee (Kafila.org) and Prabhat Patnaik (The Hindu) opposed it as anti-political, populist mobilization aimed at imposing the moral authority of a messianic leader and his blessed coterie, a la Ayatollahs of post-revolutionary Iran, above the elected parliament, government, and political parties- in short, the representative democracy. Many others dismissed pro-Anna congregation at Ramlila and rest of the country as a middle class mela with tacit support from RSS, assorted babas as well as anti-reservation upper caste, urban elite groups and corporate lobbies. They rapped up the TRP-hungry electronic media for fanning a mass hysteria against the political class and parliamentary institutions. Waving of national tricolor and chanting of Vande Mataram, Bharatmata-ki-jai along with "I-am-Anna, Anna-is-India" slogans were seen as a systematically choreographed move to manufacture popular consent for a Hinduized version of Fascist rule. The BJP's moves to piggyback on Anna and regain power at the Centre deterred many to come out in support of the movement.

If one is to believe a post-fast opinion poll carried by The Telegraph BJP has gained much in Hindi heartland in terms of vote share, though, public approval of Anna's movement resonated across the nation. Post-fast vibes of Kiran Bedi and others indicated that despite their initial anti-political class rhetoric, team Anna would now bank on BJP and other opposition parties to get their desired bill passed. In view of what had happened with many potentially genuine mass movements earlier, there is a risk of partisan appropriation by the Hindutva forces.

Some suspected that Anna, a backwater Gandhian is actually a puppet, gullible to string-pulling by foreign-aided Kejriwals & Co who propped up him as second Mahatma with the help of professional brand makers and sellers. It was suspected that the hidden agenda of the IAC and other NGOs involved in the movement was directed by World Bank etc which wanted further

erosion of government's role in economy and lesser control of legislature over market forces, both foreign and domestic.

For one thing the apprehensions and misgivings aired by the critics and skeptics, about content of Jan Lokpal bill and the dynamics of the movement as well as its supportive media cannot be dismissed lightly. The bill's understanding of corruption is myopic and oversimplified as it focused narrowly on government, elected politicians and bureaucracy as the sources of all kinds of corruption while ignoring their complicity in corporate plunders and increasing tyranny of market forces. It cannot be condoned as unintended omissions in the backdrop of growing non-middle class unrests against state-corporate joint attacks on people's livelihood and rights.

Also, this writer did not find any provision enabling public monitoring and vigilance over bureaucracy and people's representatives at different levels despite team Anna's talks of participatory democracy including pre-legislation public consultations down to the Gram Sabha. Similarly, team Anna's claim to represent the entire civil society while dismissing their onetime fellow-travelers and their initial efforts to dominate the entire oppositional space were quite alarming and clearly anti-democratic. As some commentators have pointed out, unlike other localized people's movements with large-scale participation of affected population, team Anna's demand to pass its version of Lokpal bill as the nation's wish was a case of dangerous misrepresentation despite huge public support that the anti-corruption campaign had garnered.

Promotion of Anna as the symbol of public anger and righteous virtues and use of the hunger-striker's popularity to put pressure on the government may be acceptable as a tactical move for popular mobilization. But the deliberate design, if any, to turn him into a new Mahatma, a supreme moral-political authority and a messianic deliverer would be equally dangerous for a genuine broad-based mass movement. Swati Bhattacharjee (Anandabazar Patrika) in a recent study of Anna's style of functioning has quoted his former colleagues to highlight some undemocratic traits in Anna's personality and organizational approach that stems from his holier-than-thou self-righteousness and a 'saintly' image cultivated both by himself and his charmed circle. Not much has been written about the organizational structure of the anti-corruption movement and its back-stage decision-making process during Anna's fast. Who called the shots-the core committee of a few leading lights or a larger group of activists including those who had assembled there to support? What is the nature of hierarchy in these organizations? Were these core committee members elected within their organizations? Was there any internal democracy in formulating policy matters and how did it function? What was the role of Anna in the decision-making? What was the role of the groups of people gathered there for days, except being the cheerleaders and passive approvers of the decisions announced from the pulpit? TV channels as well as team Anna only harped on homogeneity and consensus between the leaders and the led. But was there any effort to take non-core activists and heterogeneous regulars in confidence? These questions are important as often it has been found that non-party people's movements and NGOs are often run by some charismatic individuals along with his/her charmed circle with little or no internal democracy. With team Anna now planning to take up electoral reforms including the right to recall, what will be organizational process of future movement? Will it be the prerogative of the same small coterie around Anna to decide on behalf of the masses to articulate issues or other civil society groups and individuals as well as political parties would be consulted? In a TV interview to Rajdeep Sardesai, Anna said his core committee would be expanded and representatives of Muslims and Dalits would be included.

One could not overlook the parallels between the reservations expressed by many in the left politics, both mainstream and independent left, and the pillars of political class, both ruling and opposition. In their criticism, what are the points of departure between the upholders of parliament's supremacy in legislative affairs—from Manmohon Singh, Pranab Mukherjee, Arun Jaitley, Sharad Yadav, Laloo Yadav et al to Sitaram Yechuri and Gurudas Dasgupta, Prabhat Patnaik and Partha Chatterjee? In varying degrees, most on India's political class admitted all-pervasive public anger against staggering corruption at highest level of the nation-state—executive, legislature and judiciary as well as its growing institutionalization at all levels of the society. While mainstream parties including the assorted left are blaming their rivals in the governments as the source or protectors of high corruption, they have failed to fathom the growing gulf between the people and their elected representatives, governments and bureaucracy, the sheer lack of public accountability of the so-called representatives and others in the power hierarchy.

The CPM's claims to be a party with difference, vis-a-vis Congress and BJP hardly have any taker after the experiences in Bengal and Kerala. Their indifference to cancerous growth of corruption all over the body politic and resultant failures of government's delivery mechanisms at grass-roots levels have already cost them dearly.

It's not difficult to understand the panic reaction of mainstream political class, most of whose members have vested interests in the rotten system that thrives on corruption of all hues. But what about Arundhati who considers Anna movement a similar threat to Indian state like Maoists but still derides it as a conspiracy of overseas and home-grown flame-dousers? Both can't be true at the same time! Otherwise, she should have conceded that the flame, despite its saffron tinge, had triggered some galvanizing heat and the tricolor, despite its contested symbolism in the heartland and nation-state's periphery and xenophobic abuses; still possesses some subversive potential against who had monopolized its meaning and legacy. No doubt people have seen the exhibition of aggressive nationalism during nuclear blasts, wars and Cricket wars with Pakistan that had often led to communal tension. Did the Ramlila crowd and their counterparts elsewhere provoke such situations? Did the Anna movement to subsume all the people's resistance movements, from Niyamgiri to Manipur, or claimed sole agency for million mutinies across the land and prioritized anti-corruption agenda over other pressing issues like land acquisition? So far, no. Not many had expected that Anna campaign, aimed at revitalizing the purported rules of engagement between the rulers and ruled in a parliamentary democracy thus stretching its limits, will gradually assimilate more radical and fundamental demands challenging the nation-state and morph into a revolutionary movement. Neither, the team Anna had claimed so. However, the mutual support between Team Anna and Irom Sharmila Chanu in Manipur (who has been fasting for more than a decade demanding the abrogation of draconian Armed Forces Special Power Act) raises some hope for expanding the horizon of the popular protest in the heartland. Nevertheless, Arundhati went on spinning her conspiracy theory, not confronting the core issues raised by the movement but by questioning the motives and credentials of team Anna, much in the manner of her detractors who had accused her of being part of an international conspiracy to balkanize India after her Kashmirspeak. Does she consider any effort to make the government, legislature, bureaucracy and judiciary more accountable to the people counter-revolutionary?

Surely, a leviathanic Lokpal won't be a panacea for corruption and most of social activists on the left will not be interested in 'moral cleansing of capitalism' as some commentators have put it.

But, should one ignore the prevailing anti-corruption popular anger across the classes and wait till India becomes a corruption-free socialist El Dorado, even after the Soviet and Chinese experiences? Should not one consider the fact that the corruption sets subalterns against each other? Arundhati apparently ruled out any democratic change without Maoist means. Partha Chatterjee on the other hand, trivialized the movement as the collective hypocrisy of opportunist middle class and an exhibition of mass self-denial. True, middle class babudom is the beneficiary, if not the biggest one, of corruption in the government. Also, non-babu, upwardly mobile professional middle class with private sector jobs don't mind to grease palms if their things are done out of turn and cost-benefit ratio favors coughing up some surplus as speed money.

If it forfeits middle class's right to oppose corruption, then same would be with the toiling masses. Most members of the working class and peasantry, as individuals or groups, entertain corruption, though mostly out of compulsion. It doesn't mean to rationalize corruption as some 'independent left' commentators apparently did by virtually condoning low-waged babu's or policemen's demand for bribes since these petty tyrants play havoc with the lives of millions who are at the lowest rung of socio-economic hierarchy. The split personality of any lesser mortal that combines both the sinner and the sinned (or its opportunist middle class avatars as per Chatterjee) may have haunted playwrights and novelists for centuries. But social-political movements with whatsoever transformative potentials have always offered challenges as well as opportunities for self-redemption, both moral and political, for individuals as well as communities, may be for the time being. If Anna movement offered the same to a section of middle class, it should not be considered a mean achievement. Corruption, like competition, divides people. It's a relief, if the anti-corruption agitation created a temporary space for social bondage in a deeply fractured nation. This writer would rather agree with Anush Kapadia (kafila.org) who has put its historical context "we are all ensnared by capitalism, yet we construct our critiques of capitalism by distinguishing its structure from our agency: we participate in a social formation that is not of our own making, our critique is a prelude to a politics of transformation". Chatterjee conceded that 'the ordinary people who had supported the movement are indeed driven by a democratic urge for greater say in public decision making'.

But he did not find any 'radicalized imagination of constitutional formulae, as a prelude to politics of transformation' in the movement. While admitting that constitution of Lokpal would be 'a big achievement in at least tempering the present climate of virtual impunity of people in power', he, nonetheless, apprehended that the 'success of Anna Hazare movement will immensely strengthen this counter-democratic tendency' as there would be 'demands for more and more government services to be placed under such independent regulatory authorities operated by people of social standing and unquestioned integrity'. Firstly, some commentators have already pointed out that the idea of an independent ombudsman or Lokpal has been evolved from within the political class and articulated in the parliament itself and not outside politics. Secondly, Chatterjee seemed to have identified with the political-structural status quo out of the fear of anti-politics. Does he deny role of the middle class, if not its upper echelon, in the politics of governed? Did not it register to him that the members of both civil society and political society mingled together at Ramlila and elsewhere?

But in his self-professed 'prejudice' against religion-tinged or morality-based politics and support for 'practical and pragmatic polities', he seems to have preferred to ignore the

increasing gulf between the all sections of people and their representatives including non- elite, non-English-speaking backward leaders like Laloo Yadav. As Aditya Nigam put it, 'with Anna Hazare, clearly his (Chatterjee) definition of politics has been abridged to excise everything but political parties and elections'.

Gyan Prakash (kafila.org) further clarified it that Partha did not 'regard Anna Hazare's populism as anti-political but as anti-party politics and anti-government'. If team Anna tries in future to impose the 'political logic of populism', as Gyan apprehended, by perpetrating a totalizing process that 'involves a part claiming to be the whole, a particular demand representing itself as universal', they will fail to achieve what Gandhi-led Congress could not.

But the question still remains, as Chatterjee correctly described the Anna movement as a 'political mobilization,' who decides the ambits of democratic politics and legitimacy of 'current configuration of politically mobilized demands'? It is the political parties, government, legislature and judiciary which should have the sole agency for representing and articulating people's will and interests as well as methods of their protests? Or, non-party peoples' organizations and groups as well as unorganized people too have some legitimate space? Question follows, after Spivak's famously coined question-'can subaltern speak'—Can people speak for themselves? Can civil society speak for political society (one often witnesses such intervention of the middle class activists and celebrities in support of urban and rural marginal communities against government agencies and police)?

True, there is nothing to dispute with Chatterjee's observations on post-Nandigram Bengal scenario where 'domination of a rotten party machinery ruled by a fossilized collective leadership' is being replaced by 'another party swearing loyalty to a single leader' and that the 'independent left is split down the middle'. The post-Nandigram popular mood was not anti-political but against the tyranny of one party rule and violence of its development model. Later, the pro-Paribartan (change) political movement became blatantly partisan despite some initial hopes of its larger transformative possibilities. The blame should not be on its popular character but on the pro-Mamata civil society leaders who refused to go beyond anti-CPM electoral politics, ruined the possibility of a non-partisan civil space that would have nurtured political and cultural pluralities. Who knows, disillusioned with this Paribartan, one day Bengal may witness emergence of its version of Anna, promoted by an avowedly 'apolitical' section of its civil society?

Patnaik, modernist of homegrown Marxist variety, in fact criticized Anna movement (The Hindu) as messianic and therefore anti-democratic since 'messianism substitutes the collective subject, the people, by an individual subject, the messiah'. He derided Anna as 'Mr India', the potboiler hero against all villains, his fast as a 'spectacle', pointed out to the 'meaningless hyperbole' instead of informative and enlightening speeches on contesting bills from the podium and expressed concerns over the 'dumbing down' of the people. It's another matter that Patnaik, the CPM's leading ideologue, had described the civil society protesters of state-party joint terror in Singur and Nandigram as messianic. His subsequent writings have made it that clear that any social-political movement outside the control of the CPM in particular and political class in general would be dismissed as messianic, anti-modernity hence anti-democratic.

But it is the first time Indians are facing such phenomenon? From Gandhi to JP at the national level and their numerous localized variations have been part of Indian politics and dominated it at varied degrees for quite a long period since the days of Independence movement. Ashis Nandi, T S Madan and others as well as scholars of subaltern studies have tried to explain the chemistry of the mixture of pre-modern and modern-religious morality and secular ethos, feudal loyalties and bourgeois individuality, belief in messiahs, godmen and democratic impulses in Indian mass psychology in colonial time. The study on postcolonial middle class psyche, particularly that of it's globalized and consumerist generation today, is yet to be done.

But one thing can be said without much research in the context of advent of Anna. Whether left should have been there or not, it is clear that left's failure to provide alternative politics and catch the imagination of today's middle class youth has also made room for the reemergence of 'messianic politics'. Patnaik's modernist alternative limited to his reference to public speeches of Jyoti Basu and his followers which he called 'quintessentially democratic' political initiative for educating and preparing masses for a subject role. What a pity! Have not the people witnessed the stagnation of left politics that gradually denied subject role to the masses as the party became their master by manipulating and controlling every institutions and organizations for three decades? All political-organizational exercises were aimed at ensuring the electoral victories and continuance of the party hegemony at every level of the society. The LF governments, after initiating limited land reforms and panchayat raj in the first decade, failed to evoke popular imagination and unleash mass social-political initiative. Even the gram sansads at the lowest level of panchayat system was kept under partisan control. So much so that villagers could not be goaded to attend the ritual meetings since they knew about the outcome of the facile democratic exercise.

No popular initiative was allowed to flourish without the party's approval. Even left mass organizations were denied the autonomy which the party had theoretically acknowledged. Patnaik himself has written about the lack of democracy in the name of democratic centralism within the CPM. The constitutional space to the mainstream opposition was denied at every opportunity while a large section of the civil society was turned into a docile clientele. No efforts were taken to make bureaucracy accountable to the people and curb corruption in the government and local bodies except ensuring the all-pervasive party control. The widespread corruption in every form that had permeated the left rank and file over the decades could not be weeded out despite much-hyped internal rectification campaign, simply because party and state became synonymous. If the CPM had really wanted to prepare the people for a 'subject role', the contemporary peasant and tribal resistance against SEZs and other forcible land grabs would have seen them in different roles. But they lost their credibility after Singur and Nandigram. Inside the parliament, they were party to the smooth passage of SEZ act and draconian UAPA. The more shocking fact is that the LF government passed its own SEZ act in the state assembly before the parliament did it. The left regime had little warmth for RTI movement and the Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee government was among the last ones to implement the act. If team Anna's messianic politics tried to objectify masses and valorized anti-political sentiments of a section of middle class youth, mainstream left can't evade its share of responsibility.