

THE ANNA MOMENT

'India Against Corruption'

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TO CALL ANNA HAZARE'S crusade against corruption a 'second freedom movement' may be hyperbole but in recent times there has been no mass upsurge for a purely public cause, that has captured the imagination of so many.

For an Indian public long tolerant of the misdeeds of its political servants turned quasi-mafia bosses this show of strength was a much-needed one. In any democracy while elected governments, the executive and the judiciary are supposed to balance each other's powers, ultimately it is the people who are the real masters and it is time the so-called 'rulers' understand this clearly.

Politicians, who constantly hide behind their stolen or manipulated electoral victories, should beware the wrath of a vocal citizenry that is not going to be fooled forever and demands transparent, accountable and participatory governance. The legitimacy conferred upon elected politicians is valid only as long as they play by the rules of the Indian Constitution, the laws of the land and established democratic norms.

If these rules are violated the legitimacy of being 'elected' should be taken away just as a bad driver loses his driving license or a football player is shown the red card for repeated fouls. The problem people face in India is clearly that there are no honest 'umpires' left to hand out these red cards anymore and this is not just the problem of a corrupt government or bureaucracy but of the falling values of Indian society itself.

That is why it is not clear at all whether the passing of the Jan Lokpal Bill with its draconian powers of oversight over government functioning will work as an effective measure against financial or political corruption.

The other larger obstacle to actually bringing meaningful change in the way India works lies only in the lack of clarity on what the term 'corruption' itself really means. The sources of this multi-headed evil run deep in the society and must be identified, debated and finally uprooted in all its forms.

The policeman or government official taking a bribe, the politician acting as a middleman for a corporation and so on are common examples of corruption in India. However going beyond the obvious meaning of corruption as just financial fraud or bribery there is a need to look at the many other ways in which established rules and universal principles are constantly bent to suit one vested interest or the other.

TEN POINTS

Caste: This is the oldest form of corruption in the Indian sub-continent and one that continues to this day- the bending of rules in favour of the 'upper' castes over the 'lower' ones. In traditional India laws were always discriminatory in content, prescribing as they did different kinds of

punishment to people from different rungs of the caste ladder for the same crime. Even today in many parts of India a *savarna* can go scot-free after murdering a Dalit while the latter can be lynched for even skinning a dead cow. People of the same caste favour each other over members of other castes all the time in different sectors of Indian life from government and business to sports and even crime. Even in Bollywood the hero of every movie is a Singh, Sharma or a Verma and almost never an Ahir, Topno, Pramanik or Sutar. For that matter, there are very few in the English and Hindi language media too with such surnames. Next round Anna can target this form of corruption and kick some ass (in his inimitable Gandhian way, of course) to set things right.

Class: Money power has become the biggest bender of established rules in India as the wealthy get away with almost anything and everything from evading taxes and stealing common resources to changing national policies to suit their business interests. Across political parties today members of parliament have become puppets of different big Indian and even foreign corporations and act against the interests of the ordinary Indian people. Even more than the politicians, who are mostly middlemen, it is the Tatas, Ambanis, Ruia and Mittals who wield real power in India. That many of these corporate bosses have today joined the chorus of voices against corruption is as dubious and laughable as Pappu Yadav going on fast in solidarity with Anna's movement.

Race: Racism of skin color and looks is deeply rooted in a lot of Indian society and is a constant source of discrimination in not just public behavior but also national policy and politics. What else, if not racism, could be the reason that much of India and the national media has not paid any attention to the heroic ten-year-long fast unto death of Irom Sharmila from Manipur for repealing the dreaded Armed Forces Special Powers Act while a four-day-long fast by Anna Hazare has the urban middle classes all emotionally charged up? And why else should every depiction of Mother India be of a fair skinned Aryan looking lady with pink lips and not one with dark skin or curly hair or north-eastern looks? Racism is surely one of the most abhorrent forms of corruption possible in any society and Anna can help change social attitudes next time by having a nice Santhal, Munda or Oraon woman play Bharat Mata in the portrait behind him while he fasts on stage.

Gender: The ratio of women to men in the Indian population has been steadily falling in many parts of the country as a silent genocide takes place every hour with parents willfully killing off their girl children. According to the UNICEF foetal sex determination and sex selective abortion by unethical medical professionals has today grown into a Rs 1,000 crore industry. Women get routinely discriminated against in job selection, the wages they get and the public and domestic violence they are subjected to. Denying women their equal rights as Indian citizens is a form of corruption that not only violates the Indian Constitution but also basic human principles. One does not expect Anna's movement to take on every issue in Indian society but at least they can rebuff the public support that has been expressed for their cause by the *khap* panchayats of Haryana!

Nepotism: This is the most widespread form of corruption in the Indian context with not just politicians but film stars and cricketers promoting their kids over other more competent candidates all the time. Power, wealth, beauty, talent almost everything it seems can be 'inherited' without any effort and leads to the accumulation of undue influence in the same few families. The most glaring form of nepotism is practiced by family run business houses of India

where, irrespective of their competence or ability, the reins of control keep passing on from father to son or daughter. If Indians want the country to be run solely on merit and transparent rules then they should insist that the CEOs of Indian companies be selected on the basis of an all India examination where everyone can participate. A severe taxation on inherited property as practiced in the UK and other countries will also go a long way in promoting a truly merit-based society.

Urban Bias: Whether it be in terms of remuneration for their work and produce, investment in infrastructure, job opportunities, healthcare or education the rural Indian is far worse off than the urban one. Every national policy and rule is bent in favour of the cities and this must end if India is to remain a united country for long. The city is always prioritized over the countryside and it is ironic in some ways that almost all the support for Anna's Gandhian movement is coming from the big cities and towns and virtually nothing from the villages.

Language: Forget about the imposition of Hindi on the people of southern India, it turns out that the most oppressive use of the 'national language' is in fact in the so-called Hindi speaking states. Over a dozen languages like Bhojpuri, Awadhi, Maithili, Rajasthani, Bundelkhandi, Sadri, Chhattisgarhi are given short shrift by the champions of the elite Sanskritised Hindi over the local languages of the northern Indian states. The lack of educational materials in their mother tongue has resulted in low literacy rates for both children and adults in these parts of India for decades, keeping them at a perpetual disadvantage. In states where the local languages are properly supported and promoted like in Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, West Bengal and Gujarat there is much greater literacy and also empowerment of the people. Favouring Hindi or any language for that matter over another is a violation of the principle of equal access to opportunities and a form of corruption that has not been properly addressed as yet in the country.

Education: The open economic and cultural discrimination practiced against the 'uneducated' people of India is a form of corruption that most 'educated' people don't want to recognize because this obviously works in their own favour. As a result of this bias those with degrees-real and fake- get paid many, many times more than those who never went through school and confined to manual work of different kinds. Many well meaning people think that the solution is to provide 'education' the masses of India obfuscating the fact that the 'uneducated' need food, clothing, shelter and dignified jobs before anything else. The worst aspect of this phenomenon is that the poverty of the poor is blamed on their 'lack of education' and not on the unjust economic structures of Indian society.

Religion: The biggest religious discrimination in India is not really against Muslims, who are at least organized and vocal about their problems, but against the Adivasi populations of the country. Subsumed under the category 'Hindu' there is no recognition as yet of their spiritual and religious traditions that are distinct from Hinduism in many, many ways. Several Adivasi groups in recent years have been demanding that the Indian government categorize their faiths as a separate religion called 'Adi-dharm' or 'Sarna', a call that has repeatedly fallen on deaf ears. Forcing indigenous people, who form over 10 percent of the Indian population, into a religious identity not of their choice is to deny them their Constitutional right to freedom of religion. Instead of imposing Hindu gods on them and seeking to 'convert' them to Hinduism with trishuls and Shiva lingas they should be allowed to practice whatever religion they want, derived from their own historical roots.

Nationality: India, for all its ancient glory and history, is really a new nation forged together by first the Mughals and then the British empire. The latter in particular forced dozens of smaller nationalities to become part of the 'Raj', whose territory was inherited by the current Indian Republic. Gandhi, more than anyone else in the Indian freedom movement was sensitive to this and had in fact declared his support for the demand for independence of the Naga people. Other Indian leaders like Nehru and Patel looked upon themselves as the managers of colonial property that the British had handed over to them. The reduction of the entire idea of Indian nationalism to control over territory and domination over smaller nationalities has been the biggest blot on the record of modern India in the last six decades. It has led to countless killings of innocent people and even crimes against humanity in the name of protecting the 'integrity' of the nation and is a corruption of every principle of nonviolence and humanism that Gandhi espoused.

Anna Hazare could perhaps take on the Indian administration to recognize the rights to autonomy or even self-determination of all nationalities within Indian borders that don't feel or want to be Indian. Doing that will truly make Anna a true inheritor of the Gandhian tradition, which is after all about the fight for justice for every human being and much more than merely sitting on a fast for a public cause or wearing khadi or leading a simple life. When that happens, the sub-continent will surely say 'We are all Anna Hazare' to the last man, woman and child. □□□

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