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The Meaning of Anna Hazare's Movement

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Abstract

Social activist Anna Hazare's 13-day hunger strike demanding a strong anti-corruption authority in India has made him a global name. His movement has been responsible for bringing back corruption to top of the agenda in India, which has seen several scams in recent times. It has also galvanised a large number of people who are not usually known to take to the streets for political causes. However, the tide of positive coverage of the event has glossed over some problematic aspects of the goals and methods of the movement.

With the Indian activist Anna Hazare having retired to his native village in Maharashtra there seems to be a feeling that the denouement of his 13-day fast in New Delhi for a strong anti-corruption agency, or Lokpal, was a win-win situation for Indian democracy: Hazare and his supporters got their way, or at least most of it. The people made their voice heard. Parliament, too, had its say in asserting its right to frame the Lokpal legislation.

Unfortunately in real life, feel-good endings are rare. There were of course several positives to emerge from the movement. One was the mobilisation of people, and this wasn't just the middle classes, who normally would not take to the streets.

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Two, the flexibility of Indian democracy was displayed when despite the initial bungling by the government, the protests not only took place, it even influenced the lawmakers inside Parliament. Three, the protests were a wake-up call for India's elected representatives. Perhaps the only real loser was the Congress Party-led UPA government which initially overreacted by arresting Hazare and then showed a lack of leadership at critical moments. More people came out into the streets to protest than they might have if the hunger strike was allowed to proceed normally. The opposition parties, too, found it a handy stick with which to beat the government.

However, the Hazare-led movement has left more questions than answers in its wake. The most obvious one is regarding the utility of the Lokpal in weeding out corruption. It is now commonly accepted that an extra layer of bureaucracy is unlikely to solve a phenomenon that permeates all levels of society.

Indeed, it is ironical that same middle classes, who are so sceptical of the corrupt state, want to further increase its reach. The implicit faith of the multitudes that rallied behind Hazare, demanding a Lokpal that could strike hard at corruption, says something about the love that middle-class Indians have for quick fix, authoritarian solution. There is also the contradictory impulse of a consumerist middle class fetishising a saint-like figure – or at least someone with the trappings of one – and pinning their hopes of a corruption-free idyll on him.

This is not entirely surprising. In a detailed survey on the state of democracy in South Asia done some years ago, an unexpectedly large number of people in India, approved rule by a strong leader without any democratic restraints.² It follows that Indians, particularly the middle classes, envy China's efficiency so much. But here's a sobering thought. Even in China, where corruption can mean a bullet in the head (incidentally Hazare has advocated death for corruption and severe thrashings for lesser crimes like alcoholism) graft is rampant. The latest instance is China's former Railway Minister Liu Zhijun who is accused of embezzling US\$120 million, besides other misdemeanours. So it's apparent that tough laws and punishment themselves are no deterrent to corruption of the sort where vast numbers of Indians are complicit.

Then there was the antipathy towards politicians and politics that came through so strongly among Hazare's core team as well as his supporters. There are several problems with this. While the reputation of politicians have plummeted in India – and indeed all over the world – tarring the entire political class with one brush is as unfair as it is simplistic.

In that sense, the comparison that some are making between the Tea Party in the United States and Hazare's movement is wrong. The Tea Party is most concerned with reforming the

² *The State of Democracy in South Asia: A Report*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2008, pp.13-14.

Republican Party and contesting elections. But more importantly, the tendency by the Hazare supporters to regard themselves as ‘apolitical’ or ‘non-political’ is absurd.

This results in three things. First, it is becomes easy for Hazare’s flock to stick the ‘corrupt’ label to politicians and bureaucrats absolving themselves of any role in corruption. Second, it breeds impatience with existing institutions like the Parliament or the judiciary which could be dangerous for Indian democracy. Third, it gives Hazare’s movement a purity that is somehow not tainted by politics in the conventional sense of the term, and the belief that theirs is the only solution to corruption.

This self-righteousness has been termed by political commentator Pratap Bhanu Mehta as the ‘tyranny of virtue’.³ This manifested itself in the Ramlila ground where no politicians, irrespective of whether they were honest or not, were allowed on to the stage while several dubious elements had a field day playing to the gallery. The distinction between the ‘political’ and ‘non-political’ is of course fairly common in India. In a recent interview, founder of the IT company Infosys, Narayana Murthy, appealed for a set of ‘non-political’ people, such as retired bureaucrats, retired judges and academicians, to draft an acceptable Lokpal Bill.⁴ By reducing politics merely to party affiliations, Murthy, like Hazare’s followers belittles the idea of the political.

Finally, much has been made of the spontaneity of the Hazare movement. Much less has, however, been said about the carefully choreographed political theatre of Hazare’s 13-day fast. The idea of a fast unto death has obvious Gandhian connotations, but whether it is permissible in a democracy is debatable. Indeed, some core members of the Hazare movement, such as social activist Swami Agnivesh and former Supreme Court judge Santosh Hegde, expressed their reservations about the length of his hunger strike.

The connection to Gandhi was, however, strongly emphasised with a giant picture of Mahatma Gandhi used as a backdrop to the stage in Ramlila ground, where Hazare was fasting. Then there were the made-for-television moments like a Dalit and a Muslim girl giving Hazare coconut water to break his fast. All this was relentlessly covered by the media, which resulted in all the television news channels showing a significant spike in viewership during the period of Hazare’s agitation.⁵

³ Pratap Bhanu Mehta, ‘Time to step back,’ *The Indian Express* (16 August 2011), <http://www.indianexpress.com/news/time-to-step-back/832365>. Accessed on 7 September 2011.

⁴ ‘Let-nonpolitical-citizens-body-give-a-draft-says-narayana-murthy’, *The Indian Express* (2 September, 2011), <http://www.indianexpress.com/news/let-nonpolitical-citizens-body-give-a-draft-says-narayana-murthy/837474>. Accessed on 7 September 2011.

⁵ ‘Anna Hazare drives up news viewership,’ *Mint* (26 August 2011), <http://www.livemint.com/2011/08/25235016/Anna-Hazare-drives-up-news-vie.html>. Accessed on 7 September 2011.

But there were elements that struck a discordant note, too. It is now known that the followers of Sri Sri Ravi Shankar and Baba Ramdev, both of whom are yoga gurus with a considerable following, played a substantial role in mobilising support for Hazare.⁶ The daily slogans of 'Bharat Mata ki Jai' ('Glory to Mother India') and a picture of Mother India on the Ramlila stage, with strong Hindu connotations, rubbed some people the wrong way.⁷ What was even more disturbing was the easy equation between the flag-waving jingoism of Hazare's supporters and civil society activism.

A Lokpal, acceptable to most people, will most likely come into existence soon. As of now, the government version of the Lokpal is before the Indian Parliament and being considered by the standing committee for law and justice. The Parliament has passed a sense of the House resolution on three sticking points raised by Team Hazare: Putting the lower bureaucracy under the Lokpal, establishment of a Lokayukta (state-level anti-corruption bodies) in all states and a citizen's charter. The principal opposition party, the Bharatiya Janata Party, has already given its approval to these clauses. There is, of course, no guarantee that all these points will be in the official Lokpal Bill but it might be difficult for Parliament to wriggle out.

But what of the future of the Hazare movement once it has outlasted the issue of a Lokpal? Hazare has hinted that he will take up issues such as electoral reform and land acquisition in future. It is unlikely that such issues will resonate as strongly as corruption - which affects almost everybody in India - with the urban middle classes who form the backbone of the Hazare movement. This in turn will affect the numbers that can be mobilised as well as the media hype.

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⁶ Amita Baviskar, 'A Tale of Two Movements,' *The Times of India* (6 September 2011), <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/home/opinion/edit-page/A-tale-of-twomovements/articleshow/9875905.cms>. Accessed on 7 September 2011.

⁷ 'I, the people,' *The Economist* (27 August, 2011), <http://www.economist.com/node/21526904>. Accessed on 7 September 2011.