Anna Hazare, Civil Society and the State

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The Jan Lokpal Bill epitomises the ultimate faith of the ordinary citizens, born out of utter despair, in an omnipotent authority – the Lokpal. But mere legislation cannot bring about reforms, without accompanying mass struggles to get them implemented by the executive agencies and grass roots movements to change social habits. The forces of corruption which are deeply embedded in our society will not give up easily, and are powerful enough to frustrate and resist the provisions of any Lokpal Bill. At the end, the fight against corruption has to be situated in the wider strategy of changing both the economic model of development and the social culture, which carry the seeds of corruption.

With the compromise worked out between Anna Hazare and the government, the anti-corruption movement led by him is likely to go into a state of suspended animation for a while. But from amidst the plethora of news and views that poured forth from hysterically sounding newspaper and TV reporters, commentaries and interviews and Twitter and Facebook exchanges during his hunger strike, one can make a fairly objective assessment of the public mood and come to certain conclusions about the nature and future of the movement.

Significantly enough, the politically organised sections of the Other Backward Classes (OBCs), dalits and Muslims, came out openly against the movement. But the Anna Hazare group’s success in mobilising other sections of the urban and rural population – ranging from the upper and middle classes of Delhi to the dabba-wallahs of Mumbai, and farmers of Haryana and Punjab – as well as its ability to harness the powerful media behind its cause, indicates a new configuration of classes under the aegis of a leader whose ideology and practice combine populism with authoritarianism. Let us remember how Indira Gandhi followed the announcement of her populist 20-point programme with the declaration of Emergency. This is not to suggest that Anna Hazare is aspiring to become a prime minister and implement all over India the kangaroo-court style punishments that he is fond of imposing in his fiefdom in Ralegan Siddhi. But he and his disciples are encouraging a popular faith in a single powerful personality to deliver the goods. The slogan shouted at Ramila Maidan – “Anna is India, India is Anna” – harks back to the cry of “Indira is India, India is Indira” that was coined by one of her sycophants.

The twin trends of a popular demand for an end to corruption and the belief that one honest individual – the Lokpal – can solve all problems are being encapsulated by Anna Hazare and his followers in the framework of Gandhism.

The Public Mood

A scam-riddled United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government, driven to the wall but swollen with arrogance, underestimated the public mood whipped up by the Anna Hazare-led campaign. The mood, articulated by a vociferous middle class, is one of impotent rage at the daily experience of having to pay bribes to petty officials and functionaries to secure timely delivery of any service (e.g., obtaining a ration card, installation or restoration of a telephone line in cities, and water from canals, credit from banks and other inputs needed by farmers in villages), which is a basic right of every citizen. Added to this accumulated anger at being cheated in their quotidian living was their discovery of the loot in the upper echelons of governance, by top politicians, senior bureaucrats, and the judges in the higher courts, which came cascading in a series of scams exposed by the media.

The mood had reached the exact boiling point to respond to the call given by Anna Hazare, who chose that moment to rally them around his Jan Lokpal Bill. The measures of redress suggested in his bill reflected the spirit of impatience of these ordinary citizens with bureaucratic red tape, addressed their demand for immediate relief and justice, met their desire for maximum punishment for the corrupt politicians and officials, and satisfied their sense of schadenfreude at the penalisation of the latter. The bill epitomised their ultimate faith, born out of utter despair, in an omnipotent authority – the Lokpal.

These various segments of the urban and rural middle classes did not challenge the basic socio-economic structure and reject the administrative institutions that hold up that structure. In fact, their leader Anna Hazare approached the same Parliament – which according to him was filled with corrupt legislators – for the enactment of his bill. He wanted the establishment of yet another institution – a supra-agency of the Lokpal that was expected to control the
behaviour of the other three institutions: the legislature, executive and judiciary. His followers were led to believe that a powerful individual with a reputation of honesty and heading an ombudsman body of equally honest individuals would eradicate corruption, without the need for changing the prevailing system.

Leaving aside the legal wrangles over the fear of extra-constitutional usurpation of powers, and misgivings about the dictatorial nature of the Jan Lokpal Bill, let us look at the other possibility. Suppose, tomorrow Team Anna’s demands are incorporated in a new Lokpal Bill that is turned into an Act, can anyone believe that their spirit will be implemented in practice? What has been the fate of past altruistic legal acts like the rural employment scheme or the public distribution system (where funds and food meant for the beneficiaries are siphoned off by local functionaries appointed by political parties, and subordinate officials)? A Jan Lokpal Act, with all its pompous promises of punishing corrupt government officials, can always be subverted by the more powerful politician-bureaucrat-mafia nexus that rules over our daily life. It is this nexus that kills the social habit of the other three institutions.

Besides, to stop corruption at the various levels of the bureaucracy – which the Jan Lokpal Bill mainly addresses – there are enough provisions in Chapter IX of the Indian Penal Code, which deal exclusively with “offences by or relating to public servants”, to punish the offenders for taking gratification. It is the lack of political will among the ruling powers to implement those provisions that has led to the flourishing of corrupt practices among the functionaries in government departments.

This does not mean that we should give up campaigning for laws to make the system more accountable. But mere legislation cannot bring about reforms, without accompanying mass struggles to get them implemented by the executive agencies, and without grass roots movements to change social habits. The forces of corruption which are deeply embedded in our society will not give up easily and are powerful enough to frustrate and resist the provisions of any Lokpal Bill.

Social Base of Corruption

These forces are not confined to the upper echelons of society like bureaucrats and politicians, or only among government officers at the lower level – as often made out to be by social activists in their well-meaning efforts to fight corruption. A symbiotic relationship between collective bribe giving (by common citizens seeking civic facilities, or in urgent need of immediate relief) and individual bribe taking (by petty government functionaries, private school management, property dealers, routs thronging in front of railway ticket counters or hospitals among others) has developed at the bottom level in India, involving small cash transactions. According to one survey, 77% of all reported bribe demands in India are related to securing timely delivery of a service (like a telephone connection or a passport). The amount charged for such work to get done normally hovers around Rs 1,300 or less. (“India Corruption and Bribery Report”, available at www.worthview.com/india-corruption-bribery report).

But bribery in India moves beyond the sphere of such public transactions with the government departments. It takes insidious forms in our daily engagements with functionaries in the private sector. When the local shopkeeper charges me more than the MRP (notified by the government) for the groceries that I buy, however much I may argue with him, he knows that jolly well I will have to return to him after my futile search for another honest shopkeeper who will adhere to the officially fixed rates. When I am forced to buy the commodities from him, and when he sells them at a profit margin which is illegal, are we not both indulging in corruption? To give another example from our quotidian experience – whenever I arrive at New Delhi railway station, and approach drivers of three-wheelers to take me to my destination, they invariably refuse to follow the official rates indicated in the meter and charge me extra – even double if it is late night. Failing to get any driver willing to follow the official rates, I finally have to agree to the norms laid down by the three-wheeler driver whom I have to hire in my desperate urge to reach my destination as early as possible. By paying him more than his legitimate right, am I not indulging in a sort of bribery?

It is quite obvious that bribery (in the sense of receiving unauthorised sums of money or substitutes) cuts across all classes in India – from the top to the bottom. As for the government departments which are expected to provide public services, their employees at one time used to come up with the grievance that they were underpaid and therefore had to make good by extorting bribes – an unethical explanation in any case! But the old assumptions about the relationship between salary levels and corruption have been disproved by recent experiences. In West Bengal for instance, the erstwhile Left Front government increased the salaries of its employees to an enormous extent (inviting the criticism of financial profligacy). Yet, the well-heeled babus in Kolkata’s Writers’ Building (the centre of the state administration) and district offices, as also the well-paid policemen in the cities and villages, continue on their spree of extorting bribes from the common citizens who seek assistance from them.

It is important to note that at this bottom level of corruption, both those taking and giving bribes come from the same segment – the urban middle and lower middle classes and the rural farming community. It is these people who flocked to Anna Hazare’s demonstration. They are a divided lot, torn by self-conflict as bribe takers and bribe givers. The same electrician or telephone linesman who demands bribe from his neighbour to restore the service, or the three-wheeler driver who cheats his passenger, has to pay a bribe to the local petty official to gain a no-objection certificate to get his house registered! The same grocer who is cheating his customer has to pay a regular hafta or protection money to the beat constable. There is thus a tacit mental collaboration between individual bribe-taking and collective bribe-giving.

Corporate Sector

There is a tendency among some circles to blame these elements at the bottom level for generating the black money which is supposed to travel upwards. But such an argument ignores the role of the corporate sector in accumulating profits, turning
them into black money, and creating a model of upward mobility for the aspirants at the lower rungs of the ladder. The institutionalisation of corruption begins from the top, with the norms of bribery and nepotism percolating down. The recent revelations about the involvement of certain major business houses in scams show how the corporate sector had been greasing up the gravy train of both the earlier National Democratic Alliance and the present UPA governments.

Anna Hazare as a Mini-Gandhi

It is significant that Anna Hazare has left out this major source of corruption – the corporate sector – from his ambit of campaign. This is not surprising. In this respect he is following the political strategy of his guru, Gandhi. While leading satyagrahas, Gandhi had no scruples in enjoying the hospitality of the Birla business house, in spite of being tainted with charges of profiteering through corruption. Anna Hazare’s silence on allegations of corruption against corporate houses may be attracting the latter to lend their voice in support of his campaign against corruption in only the administration.

Although some critics of Anna Hazare are at pains to prove that he is not a true Gandhian and is using satyagraha as a duragagraha, his mode of behaviour indicates that he is quite faithfully following Gandhi’s twin strategy of using collective satyagraha and the individual hunger strike as tools to test the waters and push the administration to the edge – and then strike a deal. Like Gandhi again, he is publicity conscious, timing his actions and statements to ensure that the media keep his performance at the top of the daily news. Like Anna Hazare’s demonstration in Ramilmaidgan, Gandhi’s spectacular Dandi March in March 1930 attracted the mass media, including Indian and foreign correspondents from Indian, European and American newspapers, together with at least three film companies. Through regular announcements from his prayer meetings, Gandhi created a general atmosphere of suspense (by repeatedly warning his followers that he could be arrested any moment) and an impending fight through rhetorical statements like: “This is a battle to the finish. The Divine Hand is guiding it…” Hazare succeeded in staging his performance through the same canny combination of keeping his audience in suspense while assuring them at the same time that the battle will be fought to the finish.

Like Gandhi’s public demonstrations of austerity, Hazare’s performance at the Ramilmaidgan was also indirectly subsidised to a large extent by the government. Let me recall in this connection the snide remark reportedly made by Gandhi’s own disciple, Sarojini Naidu, regarding his much publicised style of travelling in third class in railway trains, and the protection that the authorities had to provide him: “No one knows how much is being paid to keep Bapuji poor!” A similar façade was re-enacted in Ramilmaidgan. How much was spent by the Delhi administration and the municipality to keep the venue clean for Anna Hazare’s hunger strike, and provide daily medical care for him?

The Absent Left

In this scenario of the anti-corruption movement, like the other parliamentary parties, the Left also was caught unaware by the demonstrations of support for Anna Hazare. It belatedly jumped into the scene, divided between the need to echo the public anger against corruption and the fear that the Jan Lokpal would encroach on the rights of its parliamentarians. The repeated assertion by its leaders that the Constitution is above everything and that the rights of Parliament are non-negotiable, reflects a mindset that ignores the people’s supreme right to make decisions even to change the Constitution and reform parliamentary rules in the direction of a more morally accountable and participatory politics.

The Parliament-centric approach of the Left parties results from their long absence from civil society where ordinary citizens face daily problems, and distance from extra-parliamentary mass struggles. While they surely take up economic issues like price rise and unemployment among other things in their demonstrations, corruption had not been a top priority in their list of concerns. Yet, the fight against a social evil like corruption is part and parcel of the struggle to change the political and economic system. From the 1940s till the 1960s, activists of the United Communist Party of India, although numerically small, made their presence felt in civil society through organised attempts to fight social evils like casteism, communalism, gender discrimination, and corruption in the daily existence of peasants, workers, and middle class urban citizens among whom they worked. They recognised the importance of civil society as a soft underbelly of the capitalist system (in the Gramscian sense) which offered them an opportunity to change social attitudes in the realm of ideas, values and culture, as a basis for the ultimate goal of transformation of the capitalist property relations and the state.

It is necessary to revive this Leftist intervention in civil society to mould the social environment which influences – among other collective propensities – the willingness of people to take or give bribes. The environment can act as either an encouragement to bribery, or as a coercive milieu to prevent it. The propagation of a strong ethical culture to change the environment, along with a robust governance with stiff punitive measures against the offenders, can deter corruption. But at the end, the fight against corruption has to be situated in the wider strategy of changing both the economic model of development and the social culture, which carry the seeds of corruption.