What Anna Hazare’s Movement and India’s New Middle Classes Say about Each Other

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Anna Hazare’s hunger strike against corruption in April 2011 attracted disparate intellectual strands from within the Indian middle class. These strands brought complementary skills to the table. The neo-Gandhians conferred legitimacy; India Shining provided energy and finances; and Legal Activists helped navigate the legislative path. The movement also attracted the opprobrium of the Independent Left. Understanding these intellectual strands helps explain the Anna Hazare movement. Equally, the movement sheds light on India’s new middle classes and their forms of political engagement.

On 5 April 2011, a 73-year-old man in central Delhi stopped eating. The man in question was Kisan Baburao Hazare, and he was protesting the Congress-led central government’s lackadaisical attempts to punish those guilty of large-scale corruption.1 His specific demand was that “civil society” should have a say in drafting a stringent anti-corruption law, the Lokpal Bill. The government draft was an eyewash, he claimed; outside participation was the only way to ensure an anti-corruption law with any teeth. Hazare, “Anna” to his followers, was by no means the only man on a hunger strike there. But he was onto something. While the government was drowning in a flood of corruption scandals – most prominently, the 2G spectrum allocation controversy and the Commonwealth Games fiasco – Anna Hazare’s perfectly timed protest managed to ride the wave. A throng of civic activists, movie stars, and well-heeled supporters from the urban middle classes took his side.2 Though estimates of its popularity are hard to gauge, it is fair to say that the Anna Hazare movement spread beyond Delhi and to the rest of urban India, which is why the Congress Party soon capitulated. On 8 April the government agreed that five members, chosen by Anna Hazare, would be part of the Lokpal Bill drafting committee.

Neither Anna Hazare’s methods nor the cause were particularly original. Yoga guru Baba Ramdev had previously fasted on the corruption issue; he fasted again soon after Anna Hazare’s fast ended. The move to enact an effective anti-corruption bill also has an old genesis. In the 1960s itself, the idea of the Lokpal was suggested by the first Administrative Reforms Commission. Even before Anna Hazare’s fast, Aruna Roy and other civil society members had been involved in drafting an anti-corruption law. Besides, as of this essay’s writing, the gains from Anna Hazare’s fast are in peril, with sharp disagreements between government and “civil society” representatives on the drafting committee threatening to imperil consensus over a Bill. Yet, the fact that the movement got even this far needs explaining.

Who did the Anna Hazare movement consist of? The five civil society members on the drafting committee are lawyers Prashant Bhusan and Shanti Bhushan (the latter a former union law minister), (retired) Supreme Court judge and current Lokayukta of Karnataka Santosh Hegde, Right to Information (rti) activist Arvind Kejriwal, along with Gandhian Anna Hazare himself. All are middle class icons. Other civic activists include former police officer Kiran Bedi, and religious and spiritual leaders Swami Agnivesh, Sri Sri Ravi Shankar and Baba Ramdev. The foot-soldiers of the Anna Hazare movement were educated and urbane. The methods used – Twitter updates, sms campaigns, candlelight vigils and media management – also suggest that Hazare was able to fire the idealism of 21st century India’s burgeoning middle class.

The Indian middle class is hardly monolithic; its economic interests hardly homogeneous. A much cited study put the middle class at 50 million people, roughly 5% of the population.3 More expansive definitions show that 62% of all Indian households are middle class. If income is a fickle way of measuring the middle class, focusing on middle class “values” can also be treacherous territory. An estimate using higher education as a yardstick made by the political scientist, Devesh Kapur, was that 30 million households, one-eighth of the total population, were middle class in 2010 (Kapur 2010: 147). Another “value”-based definition, by sociologist Andre Beteille, focuses on occupation status and non-manual work (Beteille 2002: 76). From the many studies on the subject, it is possible to tentatively conclude that the Indian middle class comes from varied economic backgrounds, constitutes a relatively small percentage of the population, and is slightly easier to define in terms of “values”.

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This heterogeneity in income and values results in a variety of intellectual strands within the middle class. Differing middle class activism thus come with their own visions, constituencies, and methods. The Narmada Bachao Andolan, Justice for Jessica campaign, and micro activism are all middle class-driven. Yet they differ radically from each other. What was unique about the Anna Hazare movement was that diverse middle class activism were able to craft a campaign that appealed to all their interests.

This essay presents a typology of India’s four middle class intellectual strands of political activism (Figure 1). Three of them – what I call Gandhigiri, India Shining, and Legal Activism – broadly endorsed the Anna Hazare movement, even if some quibbled over details in the draft law (Table 1). A fourth middle class strand – the Independent Left – decried Hazare; they were not dissenters within the middle classes. This by no means suggests that theirs was the only critique; but other criticisms of the bill were by lone intellectuals, not representative of a middle class strand.

A few caveats: first, this is less a story about class, more an intellectual history. For those unsure of the middle class origins of these strands, the essay still stands – delineating four intellectual strands of civil society engagement in politics. Second, this essay employs what German social theorist Max Weber called an “Ideal Type”. The point is not that every category is hermetically sealed and all-explaining, but that it is analytically useful. This essay is also limited to political activism of the middle class variety, making no claim to the other mobilisations – dalit movements, for example – as delineating four intellectual strands of civil society engagement in politics. That movement, which begun in the early 1980s has now expanded to a point where almost all political questions – the Ayodhya dispute, the 2G spectrum scam, or the appointment of the central vigilance commissioner (cvc) – find their way to the Supreme Court.

The Emergency is crucial to understanding Legal Activism and the personalities of the three lawyers on the Lokpal Bill drafting committee. The run-up to the Emergency was a prolonged tussle between the judiciary and Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. The prime minister responded to unfavourable court verdicts by superseding
judges she did not like. The first supersession occurred a day after a politically unfavourable judgment on land reform and judicial review.\(^5\) Indira Gandhi superseded the three judges who decided against the State, to appoint a judge who had decided in her favour.\(^6\) One of the judges superseded was Justice K S Hegde, father of Santosh Hegde. On 25 June 1975, Indira Gandhi declared an Emergency and suspended constitutional liberties. From the excesses that followed, some within India’s Independent Left (described later on) learnt that the Indian state must be whittled down.

India’s Legal Activists drew the opposite lesson: that a powerful Supreme Court and an elaborate rights infrastructure was the best guarantor against state excess. No one exemplifies this more than Shanti Bhushan. In 1975, Indira Gandhi’s election was struck down by the Allahabad High Court. In his book *The Case That Shook India*, Lokpal drafting committee member Prashant Bhushan makes the now un-controversial point that this was the casus belli for her declaring the Emergency (Bhushan 1978). The lawyer who argued the case against Indira Gandhi was father Shanti Bhushan. Soon after the Janata government took power in 1977, it was determined to undo the effects of Indira Gandhi's judicial squelching. They chose Shanti Bhushan as their law minister, and it was in this capacity that he shepherded the annulment of the 42nd amendment and passed the 44th amendment, providing protection to the judiciary and the bedrock for the activism that was to follow (Rudolph and Rudolph 1981: 3).

Soon after the Janata Party’s reversal of Indira Gandhi’s attempt to squelch judicial activism came two legal innovations. The first was the creation of public interest litigation (PIL) as a procedural tool. Any person could now file a writ petition on behalf of a disadvantaged group, alleging the violation of fundamental rights by the State. This expanded the power of activists, often prodded by a sympathetic judiciary. The second way was substantive: an expansive interpretation of fundamental rights created a host of “socio-economic” rights that are not explicitly stated in the Constitution. For a sense of how detailed they were: the innovations included the right of pavement dwellers to shelter, the right to clean air, and more recently the right to education – rights that are not explicitly stated as fundamental.

To this arsenal that Legal Activists used to expand their power, the 2000s has given them another. The *RTI* Act, 2005 provides citizens with the ability to demand information from the State. Arvind Kejriwal, one of the members of the Lokpal drafting committee, is a prominent RTI activist. In just one year, 2008, the NGO that he runs, Parivartan, analysed 52,000 queries sent under the *RTI* Act.\(^7\)

Middle class judicial activism extends beyond class interests. The socio-economic rights of the 1980s and 1990s were aimed at the marginalised. Besides, an array of left activists have built on Legal Activism. One such was the lawyer and former president of the People’s Union for Civil Liberties, K G Kannabiran. He often defended the legal rights of individuals charged with crimes associated with Naxalism. When he met this author in 2005, he narrated an incident in the Andhra Pradesh High Court. He was defending two charged Naxalites in court, and the judge asked him: “Mr Kannabiran, you cite these constitutional provisions in your client’s defence. Yet your clients themselves don’t believe in the Constitution. Is that not hypocrisy?” “Your Honour”, Kannabiran replied, “the Constitution is a testament to our values, not theirs; the Constitution does not limit its majesty to only believers. It applies to all.”

Legal Activists bring a unique skill to the Lokpal Bill drafting process: they have done it before. To give just one example, in 1993, after sustained activist litigation, the Supreme Court expanded the phrase “right to life” in Article 21 to include free and compulsory education for all children below 14.\(^8\) The financial cost was estimated at between Rs 54,000 crore and 73,000 crore per year for six years (Sitapati 2009). Yet, in 2010, the central government went ahead with The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2010, claiming that it was to further the Supreme Court’s directive.\(^9\)

Legal Activists are broadly in favour of the Anna Hazare movement, even if they critique the substance of the movement’s version of the Bill and the hysteria of the candlelighters. Legal Activists have little sympathy for elected representatives, seeing the Supreme Court as their way to pass legislation on the sly. In this, they share contempt for elected institutions with India Shining (and even the Independent Left). What many Legal Activists like about the Jan Lokpal Bill is that it converts a popular crusade against corruption into legislation with clauses and sub-clauses which they can debate over. This is also the origin of the biggest criticism that Legal Activists have against the Bill – shoddy drafting, the poor display of legal skill.\(^10\) It is a criticism mirrored by *The Hindu*, whose editorials valued the movement but criticised the “angularities of the civil society version” of the Bill.\(^11\) Yet these specific criticisms in no way take away from their broad support for a legal solution to the malaise of corruption. The success of the Lokpal Bill is critically contingent on the Legal Activists involved.

**India Shining**

The Bharatiya Janata Party’s catchphrase may have misfired in the 2004 general elections (Pati 2004: 2082-83), but “India Shining” captures a mood and a class that is undeniably true. The birth of India Shining as a middle class movement is closely linked to the opening of the Indian economy, first in the early 1980s when curbs on internal capital were reduced and then in 1991 when foreign capital was allowed to enter India.\(^12\) I term this new Indian-middle class, the most prominent foot soldiers of the Anna Hazare movement, “India Shining”. Unlike the BJP’s all-encompassing phrase, India Shining – as used here – believes that corporate India is shining and some of that shine can rub off on India’s decaying state.

The corporate and privately-employed members of India Shining are better understood by contrasting it with its predecessor, the Nehruvian middle class. The Nehruvian middle class grew around the Indian state, placed a high premium on education, and was conspicuously austere in lifestyle. India Shining has thrived outside of the State, in the private enclaves of India Inc. A 2005-06 study found that of India’s current middle class, 56-62% is privately employed (Sridharan 2008: 2). Unlike its frugal predecessor, India Shining is conspicuously consumptive (Fernandes and Heller 2006: 3), celebrating material wealth and success. Paradoxically for a group so suspicious of
the State, India Shining wears its national identity on its sleeve. If the icon for the Nehruvian middle class was the IAS officer, India Shining icons are Indian companies (Tata, Infosys, Wipro), manned by Indian-educated professionals, that have thrived post-1990. Their simple argument is that if Indians can succeed in building top quality companies, why cannot they rebuild India’s moribund state?

India Shining virulently dislikes the political class. This dislike has three causes. The first is governance. India Shining values clean roads, regular electricity, and law and order – something that is not the forte of the world’s largest democracy. The second cause is that ever since the silent revolution in which subaltern castes captured state power in the 1960s in south India and the 1980s in north India (Jaffrelot 2002), India Shining has felt disenfranchised from the State. Third, given the widespread inequality in the distribution of economic benefits post-liberalisation, political entrepreneurs have made it a point to play up urban India vs rural Bharat. The result is that “India” looks outside politics to succeed.

Much is written about the middle class capture of Indian institutions, whether the media (Fernandes and Heller 2006: 3), Bollywood or even foreign policy (Jaffrelot 2009). There is some truth to this. A good place to gauge what India Shining is thinking at any given point is through the pages of The Times of India. Since the world’s largest English-language daily prides itself in its commercial acumen, it is nimbly in sync with the aspirations of India Shining. The Times of India is also the mirror to the way mainsteam English-language newspapers are headed. Whether it is the campaign to bring “Justice for Jessica” or “India against Corruption” exemplified by the Anna Hazare movement, India’s media and film industry increasingly mirror the anxieties of India Shining.

The attraction of the Jan Lokpal Bill to India Shining is obvious. India Shining prizes efficiency. Not for them is the abstraction of a politics of dignity. The State is about the delivery of goods, something which corruption eats at. Since all of India Shining pays income tax, they see corruption as contractual violation, the theft of their money. India Shining is also deaf to the two biggest criticisms of the Bill. Since they do not see politicians as legitimate to begin with, the unrepresentative nature of the Anna Hazare movement does not trouble them. They are also not worried by an all-powerful Lokpal. Critics see in this a troubling acquiescence in authoritarianism that harks back to middle class support for the Emergency (Vanaik 2002).

India Shining is the least self-reflective of all middle class strands. The other three are aware of their privileged origins and claim to speak for a larger group. But India Shining simply assumes that its interests are shared by all Indians. What they lack in subtlety, India Shining makes up with energy. Many corporate executives have devoted considerable time to the movement. A telecom company volunteered to set up a service in which if a mobile user called a toll-free number, she would then receive free alerts on the movement. From mustering up the energy to gather around India Gate to organising money and Facebook pages, the flaws and flamboyance of the Anna Hazare movement presents a psycho-portrait of India’s new middle class: India Shining.

Gandhigiri

The public face of the movement, Anna Hazare, describes himself as a Gandhian. His social movement, centred in Ralegaon Siddhi in rural Maharashtra, harks back to Gandhi’s Phoenix farm and Sabarmati ashram. Many of his campaigns, against alcoholism or untouchability, make the Gandhian connect between social reform and political emancipation. He preaches non-violence, is comfortable with religious idioms (a portrait of Bharat Mata hung behind him while he fasted for the Jan Lokpal Bill), and makes personal probity the centrepiece of the campaign. Yet, while the movement claims Gandhi’s morals and employs his methods, its political vision is as far as can be from Gandhi himself. Ironically, this is what makes it so successful in 21st century India. Understanding this neo-Gandhian activism, “Gandhigiri” is key to understanding the Anna Hazare movement.

Two makers of modern India were quick to distance themselves from Gandhi’s idea of a state. As has been well chronicled, Jawaharlal Nehru’s vision of a modern, centralised, powerful Indian state that could bring about both economic prosperity as well as social justice was anathema to Gandhi’s union of village republics. Gandhi, an early critic of modernity, was disillusioned with the violence and illegitimacy of the State. Independent India is a testament to exactly the reverse impulse: of a centralised state driving large development projects in the name of the greater common good.
The other maker of modern India deeply critical of Gandhi was B R Ambedkar, and his criticism was on substance as well as on methods. Ambedkar saw the village as a “cesspool, a den of ignorance, narrow-mindedness, and communalism”, viewing modernity with individual rights as the sole guarantee of social justice in India. In this, he agreed with Nehru. Ambedkar was also critical of Gandhian methods, arguing in his famous “Grammar of Anarchy” speech before the Constituent Assembly in 1949 that: “...we must abandon the method of civil disobedience, non-cooperation and satyagraha... where constitutional methods are open, there can be no justification for these unconstitutional methods. These methods are nothing but the Grammar of Anarchy...”. (Ambedkar 1949).

Yet, Gandhian activism survives at a tangent to mainstream politics in India. To give but the most prominent examples, Vinoba Bhave's bhoodan movement in the early 1950s, in which owners donated their property to the landless, employed Gandhian methods for land reform. Narmada Bachao Andolan founder Medha Patkar self-identifies as a Gandhian, and both her vision against development and methods of non-violent protest evoke Gandhian satyagraha. If these movements are any indication, middle class Gandhigiri sees reform as being less about changing structure, more about changing hearts and minds. As historian Ramachandra Guha (2001) put it: “Inside every thinking Indian, there is a Marxist and Gandhian struggling for supremacy”. Since Gandhigiri is motivated by a moral vision, it focuses on the social space rather than the political. Gandhigiri is also attuned to rural transformation. As the social psychologist Ashis Nandy (2001) argues, the need to re-engage with his mythic rural roots constitutes the Indian’s unsure journey to urban modernity.

This ideal type précis argues that Gandhian activism works outside the State, is less interested in corruption, and sees little in common with India’s rising new middle class. Yet, the Anna Hazare movement does precisely the opposite. I argue that this represents a new kind of Gandhian movement, in which Gandhian techniques (though not ideology) are used to represent urban interests. This is best captured in the “Gandhigiri” made popular by the film Lage Raho Munnaabhai. It combines Gandhi's moral certitude with his public tactics, leaving out his larger political vision. To the extent the Anna Hazare and his movement are Gandhian, this is how they must be understood. What makes Gandhigiri so powerful in 21st century India is its compatibility with the agendas of India Shining. In return for the legitimacy and articulation India Shining gets, it provides the foot soldiers and the finances that Gandhians have lacked. It also enables an urban middle class anxiety to gain rural sympathy, in much the same way Mohandas Gandhi converted the elitist Indian National Congress into a peasant-supported mass movement in the 1920s (Chatterjee 1986: 85-131).

**Independent Left**

To these three middle class intellectual strands that support the Anna Hazare movement, a dissenting strand must be mentioned. This is the Independent Left – unaffiliated with any party – which arose from party Marxism but is now critical of both its theory and practice. Unlike the Communist Party of India (Marxist), which has given qualified support to Anna Hazare, categorising the Independent Left is difficult because there is considerable heterogeneity with the strand. At considerable risk of simplification, two variants can be identified, each resting uneasily with the other.

The primary one is academic, found in humanities departments in India and the United States. The other variant are the civil libertarians on the left: the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (mKss), for instance. As widely as they differ on the role of violence and democracy, both variants unite in their suspicion of the State, sympathy for a variety of “consciousness” other than class, and sharp criticism of party Marxism.

The growth of the Independent Left is linked to the crisis with the Indian Left, culminating in the Emergency. The Emergency destroyed any remnants, in the middle class mind, of the Nehruvian utopia of a modern developmental state – a moment so wonderfully captured by the film Hazaaaron Khwaish Hein Aisi. As the political scientist Rajni Kothari (1984: 216-24) writes, the early 1980s thus saw a period of sustained disillusionment with Indian democracy. If the gaps in classical Marxism were exposed in the 1970s by the horrors of the Emergency, changing strands in electoral politics also played a role. This period saw the emergence of Other Backward Classes (obc) and dalit political movements (Heller 2000: 484-519), in addition to the movement of Muslims away from the Congress. Marxist thought found it hard to account for why the marginalised chose to mobilise around identities other than class. Another reason for the growing popularity of the Independent Left in the middle class imagination is the emergence of post-structuralist thought within south Asian studies in the us. Sociologist Vivek Chibber (2006: 378-83) argues that this in turn influenced the Indian academy.

The Independent Left, in both their original European as well as Indian avatar, are exclusively of the urban, educated, middle classes. In the 1970s, a sizeable middle class attitude in India was Marxist. Today, few in the middle class preach or practise orthodox Marxism. The Independent Left, untainted by the compromises of electoral politics and catering more directly to contemporary middle class anxieties, is more attractive.

Amidst a middle class that vocally supports the Anna Hazare movement, the Independent Left is a lone voice of dissent. Their first criticism of Anna Hazare's version of the Bill is that it is so much police power in the Lokpal risks misuse. Second, some within the Independent Left are suspicious of any activism against corruption as an attempt to correct state inefficiencies instead of looking beyond it. Third, the Independent Left hates India Shining as the selfish ill-informed utterances of a ruthless bourgeoisie. Lighting candles at India Gate is the very picture of glib middle class activism that repels them.

**Conclusions**

This essay tells us why the Anna Hazare movement was so potent. It was able to employ Gandhian motifs to popularise an urban middle class worry that has had, until now, less currency in the rest of India. The strong legal tinge to the movement – and the legal credentials of the activists in the movement – ensures that it is able to suggest tangible legislative changes in terms of clauses and sections. The energy and acumen of India Shining gave the movement its media-savviness and heft.
This has some parallels with the Indian national movement where lawyers were able to navigate the tricky path to constitutional democracy, the professional middle class provided organisational skills, and Gandhi was able to spread the liberalism of the hitherto urban, elite Indian National Congress to the peasantry. The uniqueness of the movement can also be judged by the public reception to a subsequent fast by the yoga guru, Baba Ramdev. Neither backed by legal expertise nor by India Shining’s expertise and media savvy, his movement fizzled out as quickly as it began.

Intellectual Strands

The essay also tells us about middle class intellectual strands in 21st century India. First, it demonstrates the growing potency of Legal Activism. The tendency for democracies to convert political problems into legal troubles has been chronicled elsewhere (Hirsch 2004). The 2G spectrum allocation and Commonwealth Games were not plagued by the absence of laws, but by the absence of political will. Yet, the Anna Hazare movement was able to use the groundswell of public outrage these scams generated to present a legal solution. Perhaps, the middle class is most comfortable with the “rule of law” solutions because it circumscribes political discretion—much as the Supreme Court has demonstrated this tension between the rule of law and politics.

Second, the Anna Hazare movement tells us that India Shining is the most potent, most effective kind of middle class strand that exists in India, supplanting the values of the traditional Nehruvian middle class. With the growing economy, it is this middle class that will expand. The challenge for those put off by their self-interest is to convert their enthusiasm into something larger. Third, the movement shows us that for those put off by their self-interest is to give us pause. None of them have any problem with the unrepresentative nature of the movement or the draconian powers given to the Lokpal. No matter how earnest, India’s middle class has yet to view the political class as legitimate, the party system as the main way to achieve programmatic changes. Until that happens, middle class activism will be consciously set up in opposition to electoral politics, rather than as a potent force within it.

REFERENCES


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2. For a representative sample of gushing news reports at the time, see Anurag Kotoky and Henry Foy, “Government Under Pressure over Anna Hazare’s Fast”, Reuters, 2011. 


6. The superseded judges were justices J M Shelat, K S Hegde and A N Grover. In the Keshavananda case, all three judges had held that there were basic features of the Constitution which were not amendable by Parliament. Prime Minister Indira Gandhi appointed Justice A N Ray in their place, a judge who had taken Parliament’s side in the judgment.


15. This attitude was nurtured amidst the ruins of western Europe in the aftermath of second world war. This disillusionment grew starker after the horrors of the Stalinist state, long seen as the global villain of Marxist thought, were exposed. This intellectual crisis within the Old Left grew to a full blown theoretical reaction in the gay cafés of Paris with the writings of deconstructionist Michel Foucault. By the time of the student uprisings of 1968, the intellectual Left was moving away from orthodox Marxism to a post-modern, post-structuralist attitude. Two ideas of the this New Left, constructed in opposition to the Old Left, had crystallised: a deep suspicion of the modern state, and a move away from Marx’s unscrupulous focus on just class to the legitimisation of all kinds of marginalised/subaltern identities.

16. The Independent Left is by no means the only intellectual critique against the Jan Lokpal Bill. The political theorist Pratap Mehta is critical of the movement’s open scorn for electoral democracy (Mehta 2011). This liberal-constitutional position, best articulated by B R Ambedkar’s Grammar of Anarchy speech referred to in this essay, also holds, fasting to be coercive and anti-democratic. Amongst English-language papers, The Indian Express’ editorials were in line with this view (disclosure: I was previously employed there). Yet this argument runs against the middle class grain; it will be representative only when the Indian middle class grows comfortable with the foundational legitimacy of democratic politics. Until then, the Independent Left will remain the Indian middle class’ loudest and most articulate critique of itself.