

India, the “Team Anna” and the Left. A Great Opportunity, A Serious Danger: A Statement

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A Statement Issued by some individuals and friends in social movements.

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The Anna Hazare situation invites two common reactions: many dismiss it as a middle class driven “urban picnic”; and others, notably the mainstream media, describe it as just short of a revolutionary movement to establish “people’s power.” The same divide exists among progressives and those concerned with social change. Strategies differ on the basis of where one stands on this divide. The problem, however, is that neither of these reactions fully reflects the reality of what is happening.

We note that our position below is focused on what can be done in this situation, and is not meant to excuse or defend the government. We condemn the brutal, corrupt and anti-democratic actions of the UPA; we also, it must be noted, condemn the actions of the BJP and its State governments in trying to portray themselves as crusaders against corruption. The dangerous Lokpal Bill that has been presented must be withdrawn, and, as said below, a process initiated for effective institutions of people’s control that can be used to defeat corruption. We issue this statement precisely to caution against erroneous tactics that are strengthening the very state that we must fight against.

The Opportunity

It is true that the protests so far have been dominated by middle classes, and that they have been exaggerated by the media. But this does not mean that this process becomes meaningless. **Precisely because there is no strong organised movement among the working class at the national level, no alternative media, and no consciously projected alternative to the existing system, a hyped up middle class movement can easily grow into something much larger.** We can already see that happening, as protests are spreading and diversifying in terms of their mass base. People’s anger at this system and at the corrupt nature of the Indian state is hardly a middle class phenomenon alone.

For that reason, we cannot and should not dismiss this situation. The more people are willing to see this system for what it is, and to express their anger and disgust with it, the more there is an opportunity to expose it and fight for something new. A crisis is an opportunity for those who are fighting for change.

Therefore we cannot agree with those who look at these protests and hunger strikes and see in them a “blackmailing” of Parliament. Parliamentary democracy in this country has never been more than a

very limited space. Even this space has been rendered meaningless in recent decades, by precisely the forces who today are shouting about its virtues.

For instance, the SEZ Act was passed after barely a day's debate in Parliament. Economic reforms were introduced through stealth, FDI in retail is on the verge of being approved, and the UID project is going ahead – all without a whisper of Parliamentary approval. It is correct to be cynical of neoliberal pro-corporate leaders when they suddenly discover that Parliament is a sacrosanct institution. **When people feel that the system is rotten to the core, we should not attempt to dilute that reality by saying that Parliament will deal with the problem.**

The danger is not to Parliament; it lies elsewhere.

The Danger

The fact that people are angry is an opportunity. But it is also a risk, because that anger can be channeled in ways that actually strengthen the existing power structure. In this case, consider:

- The message being conveyed about these protests – the tactics of the leadership notwithstanding – is that of support to Anna Hazare and his “Team Anna.” Beyond the concept of “transparency”, the public campaign does not engage at all with the idea of a democratic organisation of the people (as opposed to one “supported” by the people). As such, this raises the question of whether those participating are being asked to fight to build people's power, or whether they are fighting to increase the power of the “good leader.”
- The demand of the campaign too is not about, even in a minimal sense, democratising the Indian state or society. The Jan Lokpal being sought may address some types of corruption, or it may not do so; but it is not intended to give people any greater control over the state. It is projected as effective not because it will be democratic, but because it will be powerful, because it will stand “above” democracy and politics itself. Just as Anna is a good person who deserves support, so the Jan Lokpal will consist of good people who deserve power, and who will use it to “cleanse” the state.
- Most of those joining these protests are doing so on the basis of media coverage. In practically all areas (with one or two exceptions) the mobilisation lacks any core organisation. At most there are ad hoc groups of urban elites; but in large measure, the place of the organisation has been filled by the mainstream media itself. All the ideas sought to be communicated are therefore seen through the lenses that the media applies to them. **As a result, even where elements in the leadership try to talk of popular struggle and democratic principles, they are overridden by an overwhelming focus on attacking the current power holders and replacing them with an even more powerful, more “clean” institution.**

The net result of all this is that “corruption” becomes defined very narrowly, as the taking of benefit in violation of the law. **The ultimate message of this movement is: trust the rules, trust the state, trust the Lokpal; what matters is finding the right leaders and having faith in them. This is the message that is sent by the mobilising instrument, the media, regardless of what the leaders may actually say.**

This is not only not a democratic message, it is an anti-democratic one. At this moment, in India, it is also dangerous. **Brutality, injustice and oppression in this country is not a result of violation of the law alone. Indeed, much of it happens because of the law in the first place. We have a state machinery which has brazenly shown itself to be the servant of predatory private capital.** This is the biggest reason for the current boom in corruption: the enormous money

generated through superprofits that is then used to purchase the state and generate more superprofits. Sometimes this is exposed as violating some law and gets called a “scam”; but at other times, as in most economic reforms, it simply changes the law. The SEZ Act is again a good example. It triggered a wave of land grabbing across the country, which was only slowed by the global economic crisis; but there was nothing “corrupt” in the Lokpal sense about most SEZ-related actions. Our people are being crushed by a cycle of intensifying capitalist exploitation and repression. Can this be stopped by good leaders with the right powers?

Many would answer “Obviously not; a Jan Lokpal cannot address everything.” This may be true, but that is not the message actually being sent out. Rather the message is that Lokpal-style solutions and Anna Hazare-style “good leaders” are the answers to people’s anger at injustice. When the leadership, Ramdev-style, starts adding on a laundry list of additional issues to its demands – as land acquisition has recently been added – it reinforces this dangerous message. **Thus this movement not only does not weaken the state; implicitly, through the message it sends, it builds people’s support for making the state and its leadership more powerful.** This of course the reason that it attracts support from everyone from Jindal Aluminium to the RSS.

What Can Be Done

The mere fact that people are protesting against the government does not mean that they are fighting the state. The Indian state certainly has little to fear – as a state – from a mobilisation whose prime message is that change happens through good leaders. The current power holders are resisting the threat to their position, but the system itself is not under threat. Indeed, the danger is not to the state or its institutions, but to efforts at deeper social change in this society.

The dilemma of the current situation cannot be answered by simply joining wholeheartedly, or by withdrawing in silence.

Some have declared support for the current movement, while seeking to push it to take up other issues. The sympathies of some in the leadership for left and progressive positions is often cited. But the main engines of these protests – the media and urban elite circles – are actively opposed to any such positions. **One has simply to imagine what will happen if this mobilisation does begin to turn towards a more radical stance: the media will instantly change its position from “Anna is India” to “Anna is a power crazed megalomaniac”, confusion, slanders and disinformation will start, and the movement will collapse.** Given this reality, simply joining at this stage will be counterproductive. People will no longer be able to distinguish between forces who fight for social transformation and those who are upholding the current system; and when the latter fail, they will take down the former with them.

But to remain silent is to be irrelevant at an important time. It is also important not to fall into the trap of those who, in their criticism of the anti-democratic tendencies of this movement, start defending the existing state. In our view parliamentary supremacy is not and cannot be the slogan of those who seek social change.

What is required therefore is an approach built on two realities. The first is that the current explosion of scams is a direct result of neoliberal policies that have converted the state into the arm of a particularly predatory, criminal form of big capital. Today the real face of the state is more apparent than ever before, and corruption is one glaring sign of it. **Therefore, to try to fight corruption without fighting for true people’s power over the economy and society is impossible.** Therefore, our demands must at present focus on building such people’s power over the institutions of the state.

The second reality is that the current atmosphere of anger and suspicion of the state offers a chance to raise precisely these issues and to make the link between corruption and the system under which we live. **The more political forces, mass organisations and people's struggles do this, while keeping their identity separate from 'India Against Corruption', the more it will be possible to use this opportunity to build and expand radical struggles.** If people can see the system is rotten, that can be developed that into an awareness that this rottenness goes far deeper than mere corruption and dishonest leaders. That is the challenge of this moment.

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(all signatures are in individual capacity)

P.S.

* From Kafil, AUGUST 24, 2011:

<http://kafila.org/2011/08/24/a-great-opportunity-a-serious-danger-signature-campaign-on-anti-corruption-protest/>