

India and the anti-corruption Anna campaign: Are We Talking to the People Who Are Out on the Streets?

Monday 29 August 2011, by [KRISHNAN Kavita](#) (Date first published: 27 August 2011).

The people saying ‘I am Anna’ or ‘Vande Mataram’ are not all RSS or pro-corporate elites. They’re open to listening to what we have to say to them about corporate corruption or liberalization policies. The question is - are we too lofty and superior (and prejudiced) to speak to them?

Throughout the summer, student activists of All India Students’ Association (AISA) and Revolutionary Youth Association (RYA) engaged in this painstaking exercise for months. They campaigned all over the country, in mohallas, villages, markets where there is no visible Left presence. No, these were not areas of ‘elite’ concentration - mostly middle, lower middle or working class clusters, or students’ residential areas near campuses. In most places, people would begin by assuming they were campaigners of Anna Hazare. When students introduced their call for the 9 August Barricade at Parliament, they would be asked, ‘What’s the need for a separate campaign when Anna’s already leading one?’ They would then explain that they supported the movement for an effective anti-corruption law to ensure that the corrupt don’t enjoy impunity. But passing such a law could not end corruption, which was being bred by the policies that were encouraging corporate plunder of land, water, forests, minerals, spectrum, seeds... They learnt to communicate without jargon, to use examples from the state where the campaign was taking place. They would tell people about the Radia tapes, and the role of the corporates, the ruling Congress, the opposition BJP, and the media in such corruption.

Without exception, they never met with hostility from people. It was also obvious that the Anna campaign had generated great interest in the issue of corruption and great support for street actions against the Government. It was easy to initiate debate and discussion on the need for an anti-corruption campaign to link itself with the struggles against corporate grab of land and resources, against privatization of water, health and education, against unemployment and price rise, and draconian policies like AFSPA and Green Hunt.

Yes, in campuses and other areas, ABVP/RSS activists have donned Anna caps, masqueraded as ‘apolitical’ anti-corruption supporters, and tried to prevent AISA and our other mass organizations from using their own banner and slogans or having independent anti-corruption protests. We have responded by demanding that they speak up on Bellary and Yeddyurappa, or on the BIADA land scam of the Nitish Government in Bihar that led to the Forbesganj firing. This quickly blows their cover and separates the wheat from the chaff. For the non-RSS participants, our slogan of ‘*Congress-BJP dono yaar, desh bechne ko taiyyar*’ becomes the rallying cry, isolating the RSS elements.

So, what do all of us do, who’re worried about the RSS riding piggyback on Anna and attempting to give a fascist direction to this movement? Do we have the luxury to play it safe, retreat to the library,

analyze the movement from a high pedestal and making dark doomsday predictions so that we can say 'I told you so' later? Do we wait for it all to blow over and go away? Do we leave the field free and uncontested for the RSS? Or do we get into the fray, get our hands dirty, make common cause with the ordinary women and men who're out on streets against corruption, and drum some politics into the anti-corruption discourse, with all our strength?

Baba Ramdev has been cut to size, and that is a setback for the RSS. RSS is seeking to capitalize on the Anna-led movement in clandestine ways, because they know full well that coming forward with their own identity will elicit questions about the BJP's own corruption - in Karnataka, in Gujarat, in the cash-for-questions scam and so on. All the more reason for progressive forces to heighten our own outreach among the people, reminding them about Bellary and Bastar. AISA's experience in Modi's bastion, Gujarat, is instructive. Modi has been talking big against the UPA Government's corruption and repression and claiming to support Anna. AISA-RYA held a march at Bhavnagar in which 700 students raised slogans not only against the central government, but against corruption, corporate loot and cover-up of communal violence and fake encounters in Gujarat. Exploding Modi's "we-are-with-anti-corruption-protests" claim, police lathicharged the march and the leading activists - Yunus Zakaria, Jignaba Rana, Sonal Chauhan and Farida Zakaria - were jailed. The very next day, against the arrests, many Bhavnagar colleges including engineering and medical colleges observed a bandh called by AISA-RYA. 5000 students protested against the local administration, forcing them to free the jailed activists. Left student-youth organisations - on their own banner - took the anti-corruption initiative in their hands, and as a result, turned anti-corruption anger against the Modi Government too.

It was the Congress which first accused the Anna-led movement of using fasts to 'blackmail' Parliament, being RSS-backed, fascist, anti-Constitution, a threat to democracy. Now, that cry has found an echo, not just among apologists for the Congress, but in some rather unlikely quarters too. Two serious commentators who have elaborated on this theme recently are Prabhat Patnaik (a member of the CPI(M)), and Arundhati Roy.

Prabhat Patnaik accuses Anna's fast of 'holding a gun to Parliament.' When does a fast stop being democratic? Is Irom Sharmila's fast 'blackmail'? Or fasts used on various occasions by workers' or students' movements? Haven't workers' strikes been called 'blackmail' on countless occasions? Are fasts 'blackmail' only when they get popular support or when the Government is forced to feel the pressure?

Prabhat Patnaik says that people have a right to protest, to "convey their mood to the elected representatives." But in a democracy, he says, there is freedom of expression, but no single mood can prevail, and all is decided through debate. Really? Wasn't the SEZ Act (a blueprint for land grab) passed without a word of debate or demur in Parliament? The Radia tapes gave us an insight into how laws are made and policy issues decided in Parliament - with Ministers, MPs, Opposition leaders acting to ensure the interests of Mukesh Ambani or Ratan Tata. Decisions taken through debate? Don't make me laugh.

Should peasants, workers and adivasis also bow to 'parliamentary supremacy' when parliament makes laws that rob them of their rights? Have they not defied such laws on many occasions? Do people's struggles only have the right to 'convey their mood' to parliament - not to create sufficient effective pressure to ensure that parliament respects that mood on a matter that is to affect their lives? In a situation where there is a deeply unequal relationship between the elected representatives and the people who elect them, can we brand the methods of fasts or strikes as 'anti-democratic'?

Prabhat Patnaik says people are reduced to mere supporters or cheerleaders for Anna. Arundhati

Roy, similarly, argues that people are reduced to 'spectators' with an old man 'threatening to starve himself to death' as the spectacle. Many of us joined Medha at Jantar Mantar when she was fasting. Were we too spectators? Is it not arrogant of us to say, 'Oh we know what we're doing, we're enlightened, but these people on the streets now are simply like a World Cup cheering crowd, a media-propelled herd that is being manipulated to serve a hidden agenda.' Let's be wary of ourselves doing to this movement what the media does to most other movements: brand the huge crowds in Left rallies as 'brainwashed herds' or 'hired mobs,' accuse Maoists of 'manipulating' innocent adivasis and peasants, and so on. Let's respect one fact that's staring us in the face: that a huge number of ordinary people are feeling a new confidence to confront and challenge a corrupt and repressive Government! It's not a mindless faith in Anna that is the driving force in this mobilization - it is a conviction that the Government is corrupt and authoritarian, that the Government's Lokpal draft is a farce. Much of the media may be projecting the people as 'cheerleaders.' Let's take people at their own evaluation instead; let's respect their initiative in distributing leaflets, organizing fasts or marches, confronting the police or MPs, courting arrest. For many of the younger people in this movement, this is their first experience of any public action. Let's engage with them.

Prabhat Patnaik contends that Anna's 'messianism' is fundamentally anti-democratic. Weren't there strong elements of messianism in the tactics adopted by Gandhi? Undoubtedly, the very idea of a leader as 'Mahatma' is messianic in character. Did that make the freedom struggle in which Gandhi played a leading role, 'anti-democratic'? It is one thing to have a critique of such tactics, to argue that movements must be more democratic, that no one leader can be a sacred cow or object of worship. But to say the movement is a threat to democracy is going too far.

Moreover, one seems to recall that Prabhat Patnaik accused Kolkata intellectuals who protested after Nandigram, of 'messianic moralism.' Those intellectuals, many of them erstwhile staunch supporters of the CPI(M), had protested in solidarity with poor peasantry resisting land grab and police firing. There was no Anna in West Bengal. Who was the 'messiah' then - the peasants of Nandigram or Singur?

CPIM Politburo member Sitaram Yechury has said that Anna's arguments are "akin to that used by the Sangh Parivar and the BJP, which had asserted that the 80 per cent people of India [the Hindus] want to build a Ram temple at the disputed Babri Masjid site...Should Parliament have caved in to that demand?" Can this comparison hold water? Does fascism lie in the political content of a demand, or do we call any movement that creates pressure on Parliament, to be fascist? Look at it this way - what if the BJP got a full majority in Parliament and sought to make the mandir at Ayodhya? Would that be 'constitutional' or 'democratic' just because Parliament decreed it so? Clearly, the demolition of the masjid and the campaign for a mandir were unconstitutional - not because they constituted an extra-parliamentary pressure on parliament, but because they sought to establish majoritarian supremacy and suppress the rights and liberties of minorities. There is nothing in the draft Janlokal Bill that in any way threatens the rights of minorities or challenges the Constitution.

What people on the streets are demanding is a law that has been on the books of Parliament for the past 42 years. They're demanding that parliament respect people's rejection of the sarkari Lokpal draft, and pass a law that reflects the aspirations of people for an effective anti-corruption institution.

Prabhat Patnaik assumes that people protesting today have no idea of the nuances of difference between the sarkari Bill and the Janlokal (JLP) Bill. The movement has relied on a messiah, it hasn't educated people about the facts, he says. I think the facts are otherwise. In fact, for the first time in a long time, ordinary people are debating a piece of legislation with a passion for details. Movement

leaders have, in fact, taken pains to convey the nuances of the differences between the Government Bill and the JLP Bill – both at interactive question-and-answer sessions at the Ramlila as well as countless other sessions, and in much-viewed videos on the internet. Questions posed to the drafters of the JLP Bill have been answered with patience, some criticisms taken on board. We may not agree with every provision of the JLP Bill, or with any exaggerated or hyped-up claims being made for it. But it would be great if every other Bill in Parliament could be put through the process of public scrutiny and debate that this one has – not just by PLU in the NAC, but by people at large!

Much is being said about the undemocratic character of the deadlines being imposed on Parliament by Anna. Well, most of our parliamentarians had no problems in obeying ‘deadlines’ as long as it was the US doing the dictation – for instance on the Nuke Deal!

Arundhati Roy compares the JLP movement with the Maoist one, saying its aim is the ‘overthrow of the Indian State’. Strangely, that’s a comparison the Government too has been making. The difference is that Arundhati says the Government is ‘participating in its own overthrow.’

If the Government is really in on the game, if it is participating in its own overthrow, if the JLP really ties in with its own agenda of pro-corporate, World-Bank-dictated ‘reform’, then why did it not accept the JLP draft at the start? Why embarrass itself by abusing Anna Hazare in public and then arresting him? Why has the BJP itself been reluctant to support the JLP draft? Is the JLP campaign an attempt to overthrow the state – or is it in fact an attempt to stem the erosion of trust in the state? There was a time when the judiciary was projected as the institution that would redeem the battered credibility of the state – today it the Lokpal.

Most critics of Anna agree that the Government Lokpal draft is toothless and weak. Would any Bill that provided for an effective and independent Lokpal be draconian? Does the JLP as conceived by ‘Team Anna’ amount to an ‘oligarchy,’ a ‘supercop,’ as it has been variously called? It seems to me that its powers of investigation, surveillance, and prosecution in corruption cases of everyone from patwari and peon to the PM, are already enjoyed by the CBI. The big difference is that its selection and functioning would be relatively more independent of Government and would even have some scope for people’s participation/intervention in the selection process. It is one thing to argue for modification or deletion of any specific clauses, or for inclusion of more checks and balances, in the JLP. But it’s quite another to paint the JLP draft as draconian.

Of course we ought and should demand that the corporates, media, big funded NGOs, big funded political parties – all be brought under the ambit of anti-corruption laws. Would a Janlokal alone be enough to tackle corruption? Most corruption today is of the ‘PPP’ (public private partnership) variety. So measures that address the ‘public’ part can only be partially effective. As Prashant Bhushan is in the habit of observing, such a law could address the supply side of corruption – but the demand side would still remain as long as policies of privatization of natural resources and services are in place. A law that seeks to address corruption by public functionaries may only be a partial solution, not the panacea it’s made out to be, but does that make it draconian and beneficial to corporate interests? I think not. After all, the ‘private’ plunderers do need the ‘public’ ones – Tata and Ambani need A Raja, Jindal, Essar, Rio Tinto need the likes of Madhu Koda, the Bellary brothers need Yeddyurappa. A law to deal with the Rajas, Kodas and Yeddyurappas is no panacea for corruption, but it would be a much-needed measure.

Some newspapers are certainly prescribing a greater dose of liberalization as the cure for corruption, as are various voices from the corporate sector. Does it follow that the people in the anti-corruption movement, in turn, are all going to demand more liberalization with the fervour that they seek a JLP now? Till recently the media portrayed ‘Gen-X’ as enthusiastic votaries of liberalization. Doesn’t the participation of young people in this movement indicate a spreading disillusionment with

the promises of liberalization – in the wake of expensive education and insecure employment? Isn't there ample evidence that the people on the streets are angry, not just about corruption, but about price rise and joblessness? If the neoliberal ideologues and corporate media are busy peddling the disease as the cure, surely it ought to be all the more reason for the more radical political forces to take this moment to engage with the people in this movement, to connect the dots between corruption and the privatization (and ensuing corporate exploitation) of land, water, electricity, minerals, spectrum, gas, education, roads, highways, airports? Between neoliberal policies and price rise, corruption, joblessness?

TV channels, for the most part, have been hyping the movement, and dumbing down the issues involved. But before we leap to 'conspiracy' conclusions, let's also remember that most newspapers have taken an editorial stand upholding 'parliamentary supremacy' in decision-making rather than endorsing the movement. The media's role and coverage is, with few exceptions, selective and problematic. It has allowed little debate or discussion over corporate corruption to surface. But to put the large-scale people's mobilization down to media hype alone is misplaced. In April, many predicted, 'Wait till the prospect of police crackdown and arrests is imminent; this crowd will vanish in seconds.' Instead, in August, they courted arrest in droves. Now, some cynics are saying, 'Take away the TV cameras and watch how people disappear.' Somehow, I don't think they will.

There are, necessarily, many issues with Anna's political philosophy, his social vision. Consistency on political and democratic issues – caste, communalism, state repression, economic policies – will be demanded of all movements. Anna's 15 August speech touched upon some concerns, such as corporate land grab and police firing. But his silence on Yeddyurappa and Bellary has been rather conspicuous. An anti-corruption movement should, surely, be expected to hail the ouster of a CM thanks to a report prepared by one of the drafters of the JLP, Justice Hedge? There is political opportunism involved in remaining silent on Yeddyurappa and the Bellary brothers while talking about Raja, Sibal and Kalmadi in speech after speech.

The Anna-led group's attitude towards political forces, too, is contradictory. Way back in March 2011, they invited all political parties to seek support for the movement. But political activists have been heckled away from their dais – not based on their stand or record on corruption, but just because of their political identity. Activists of one party of socialist ideology were apparently prevented by India Against Corruption activists at the Ramlila grounds from distributing a booklet analyzing corruption (which, ironically, had been released by Prashant Bhushan!). Meanwhile, a variety of right-wing formations do freely distribute their literature and even find a space on the stage – under various 'non-political' guises. Anna does not have a monopoly on the apolitical 'rajneeti dhokha hai' ideology; there are many other formations too which define 'people's movements' as those that are not 'political.' We cannot accept that definition – but we cannot challenge it without contending with it on the streets, among the people.

For those of us with a political analysis of corruption, or an organised political movement, the Anna movement is not one with which easy, comfortable, unqualified solidarity or support is possible. Unity and struggle, and contentions with other political forces within it, are called for. But aren't most big movements usually rocky and turbulent, with forces contending within? The one at Tahrir Square must have been. The JP movement certainly was. The anti-corruption movement may not be as momentous as Tahrir Square or the JP movement, with their central focus on democracy. But for people in the movement for 'Lokpal,' the question of 'Loktantra' (including the right to protest, the right to ensure that Parliament makes laws that people want) has begun to assert itself. Rather than creating bogeys, we need to get in there and contend with the real challenges and dangers; we need to expand the definitions of 'corruption' and 'democracy.'

Could this moment of crisis and turbulence for the Indian state take a fascist turn? Of course it

could. But do left and progressive forces accept a fascist resolution as the only fate of this crisis and berate protesting people as 'pre-modern'? Do we preach 'parliamentary supremacy' to the protesting people and ally ourselves thereby with the ruling class? Should we not rather warmly welcome the people's mood and determination to fight corruption? And doing so, show the way forward – beyond the limitations of a purely legalistic struggle that is silent on the policy roots of corruption? Instead of lowering our political banners and succumbing to the pressure to appear 'apolitical,' this is the time to be seen boldly on the streets, building a dialogue with protesting people on the basis of our own political understanding of corruption.

It has become quite the thing to contrast Anna's fast with Irom's. The news is that Irom herself, in response to an invitation from Anna's colleague Akhil Gogoi, has expressed warm support for Anna's "amazing crusade"; pointed out that while Anna has the freedom to protest non-violently, she herself has been denied that freedom; asked Anna to work for her release and invited him to visit Manipur! Maybe we could learn from the grace, nuance and maturity of Irom's response.

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P.S.

* From Kafil, AUGUST 27, 2011:

<http://kafila.org/2011/08/27/are-we-talking-to-the-people-who-are-out-on-the-streets-kavita-krishnan/>