

## **New Protest movements in India: an Appraisal of Democracy, Civil Society and Media in India: With special reference to Anti-Corruption Agitation, 2011**

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**Abstract:** The world in recent years has witnessed protest movements of various kinds and centering around various issues. Some instances that come to mind will be those of Occupy Movement, the famous Arab Spring and the Anti-Corruption agitation in India. Occupy movement represents planned action against corporate power, political corruption, and economic inequality. Arab Spring or variously called as revolution, revolt, intifada and so on, which began in Tunisia in December 2010 and then spread to other Arab nations, is a genuine expression of a long-standing desire for freedom and economic justice denied by the autocratic regimes in the region. The Anti-corruption agitation in India on the other hand, emerged amidst the revelation of many corruption scams in India in 2010. Thereby the movement leaders spearheaded by Kisan Baburao Hazare who proposed for a Jan Lokpal Bill, proposes to create institutions called Jan Lokpal and Jan Lokayukta at the levels of the central and state governments respectively, which can facilitate immediate punishment of government officials accused of financial fraud. These three movements though differ from each other as in the latter case the political context was different but largely they showed great resonance and reflect the mood of the present time. These movements emerged as a result of the callousness on the part of their respective authorities, a kind of the anti-politics or anti-politicians' tendency, emergence of city space as an important site of protest, street politics with large participation of otherwise indifferent middle class, excessive use of media (specially social media) and a certain drift from representative to an inclination to embrace principles of participatory democracy. But over and above they didn't want to do away with the state but want it to respond to them and cater to their grievances. The present study tries to analyse the Anti-Corruption Agitation as an attempt to understand protest movements of the present time by looking at concepts such as civil society, democracy and media, which played an important role in this movement as well.

**Keywords:** Protest Movements, Anna Hazare Agitation, Media, Civil Society, Democracy

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### **Introduction**

In 2010, following major corruption scandals, the Indian government drafted a version of a *Lokpal* bill. Officials convened the Group of Ministers to consider this government measure for tackling corruption. Many citizens and social activists considered the proposed measure weak, as it did not cover the prime minister, members of Parliament, and cabinet ministers. Dissatisfaction gave rise to a national protest movement in 2011. The face of this movement was Anna Hazare, a Gandhian who has led anticorruption protests for two decades. The 2011 anti corruption movement, organized under the name India against Corruption, has by far been the largest he has led. This movement is chosen for the present purpose because of tremendous involvement of media in it. Media's involvement in the Anna Hazare Movement will be studied in three phases – first phase will include Hazare's hunger strike on April 5, 2011 to demand a stronger bill. Large protests erupted in support of Hazare. This protest sparked discussions across news

and social media about whether the bill should include the entire government. It also brought many people to the streets in support of Hazare's movement. After four days of Hazare fasting, the government agreed to form the Joint Drafting Committee, and Hazare ended his fast. The second phase will include Hazare's second hunger strike from 16<sup>th</sup> August till its end on 28<sup>th</sup> August. The third phase will start from December 27, 2011, when the *Lok Sabha*, Parliament's lower house, approved the government's latest version of the bill, which Hazare thought was still too weak. He began another hunger strike in Mumbai to protest the government moving forward with the weaker *Lokpal* bill, and Hazare ended his third hunger strike, claiming health concerns, shortly after the *Lok Sabha* passed a weaker version of the *Lokpal* bill.

This agitation has led to a new kind of trend in Indian scenario – of 'unruly politics', 'politics of chaos' and 'using urban space and street politics' and these has become important ways of venting people's anger

exacerbated by emotional narration done especially by visual and social media[1]. It had long term impact both on the front of the govt. and the civil society as it compelled the former to acknowledge corruption as one of the menaces haunting the country (as the issue of corruption got mention in the 12<sup>th</sup> plan) and brought the latter on the centre stage as never before[2]. In a nutshell, it can be said that this movement has somehow changed our perceptions about democracy and civil society which needs to be pondered upon.

### **Civil Society and Democracy: Reflection from the Anna Hazare Agitation -**

The phrase 'civil society' has become most used word in India's media and public discourse. Ever since Anna Hazare broke his fast in response to central government's agreement to form a joint panel on the drafting of Lokpal (Ombudsman) Bill, it was hailed as a victory of the civil society in the country. It is often said that for an effective democracy, a strong and active civil society is of utmost importance as it tries to curb abusive state power [3]. Thereby, it becomes very necessary to establish a connection between these two concepts. The general perception of civil society is that of a site of associational life: the 'space' of organised activity, and as arenas for public deliberation and the exercise of active citizenship in pursuit of common interests. Civil society in India primarily rose due to the process of de-institutionalisation experienced during Indira Gandhi's period but civil society in India has its own limit, hence needs to be completely relied upon and state needs to intervene[4]. But the question to be asked is whether civil society can be regarded as a genuine or reliable site for social transformation and a site which is all inclusive[5]. At this point one can mention the analysis of Partha Chatterjee who came up with the concept of 'political society' to explain the situation in post-colonial democracies[6]. Civil society according to Chatterjee, refers to modern elite groups who are provided with civic freedom and rational law. Political society refers to that section of the population groups, which are either left out or remain mere target groups in the techniques pursued to achieve the large-scale developmental goals of the modern state[7]. If one tries to place the instance of the Anna Hazare movement to answer the questions about civil society one could say that civil society in this movement definitely came up as a trusted site for social transformation. But it mightn't always be an inclusive site as the movement reflected. And thereby, this movement can be distinguished from the politics of the 'political society' (same can also be said of the use of social media by 'civil society' while majority of common people don't enjoy the same privilege[8] as characterized by Partha Chatterjee.

Anna Hazare's Agitation can be regarded as a rupture in the history of civil society movements as it raised a political issue with tremendous social value and

resorting to a-political methods[9]. It is often said that, whenever common people have tried to question the very structure through their collective action, they had faced 'uncivil' means of repression from the state apparatus[10]. Same was seen in the initial days of the movement which got reflected in the arrests of both Anna Hazare and Baba Ramdev. But surprisingly the govt. had somehow changed its stance towards the later part of the movement and became more open to negotiations. Nevertheless, it can be said that through the active participation civil society groups in this agitation, it (civil society) emerged as a relevant player. Also it can be said that this movement has changed the ways of 'doing' social action and activism, and perhaps the very conception of democracy.

### **Media in India: Its role in the Anna Hazare Agitation-**

As far as Indian media is concerned it also has changed tremendously in the post 1991 phase with privatization of Indian media. One important trend witnessed in this phase was that certain newspapers which hitherto allowed professionals to man their editorial offices gradually bid adieu to them and owners or managers took over the editorship. Indian media less concerned about the newsroom values and accountability and showed irresponsible trend of commercializing news and trivializing it.

Despite this one should take into account the positive role played by media in bringing the accused to book specially in the Jessica Lall, Priyadarshini Mattoo and Nitish Katara murder cases. These incidents are very important as the accused in these cases belong to very influential family and media intervened in the scenario after the accused was acquitted by the court. Media's intervention in the Anna Hazare agitation might also signify a new pattern of politics – a certain kind of apprehension towards representative democracy which more or less concentrated with elections and doesn't go beyond it. The push here is to make the public sphere (including media/cyber space and as anticipated by Habermas) the site of deliberations[11] and a forum to engage in a negotiation with the govt. directly.

When a line of parallel is drawn between the JP movement and Anna Hazare agitation against corruption, among other things one important difference crops up and this is regarding the lack of media coverage in the JP movement which became one of the defining features in the latter case. The anti-corruption movement has often been described as media-fuelled. One of the main differences between the movements of the 1980s and 90s is that the anti-corruption upsurge received the advantage of time. The movement has gathered strength because of the dramatic boom in both electronic and print media. Furthermore, the urban nature of the movement has helped in attracting the

attention of the media. Contrarily, during the 1980s and 1990s the only available media was the print media. Moreover, the movements of that period revolved around issues which were more or less rural and local in nature; hence, it was more the local and vernacular media that used to reflect upon and showcase those movements. However, the mainstream, national media remained largely uninfluenced by the movements of that time.

In contrast to that, the anti-corruption agitation is probably the first movement driven and amplified by the media with '24 x 7' coverage by the electronic news channels. As Ashutosh reiterates this event represents a 'defining moment' for Indian media[12]. He very ably defined the scenario of that time, where there is euphoria amongst the journalists and they followed Anna wherever he went[13]. When Jayaprakash Narayan launched his movement in the mid seventies, India had only one television channel. Only seven Indian cities had access to the terrestrial channel, Doordarshan. Approximately 15 to 20 per cent of the country's population owned television sets which beamed just this government controlled channel, and only for limited hours. In 2011 there are over 600 channels available on TV sets in India and more than 135 million households own a TV set [14]. The popularity of Anna's campaign owes a lot to the media which has kept the people all over the world aware of the progress in a consistent manner. The issues that have been raised by the media, against the various predominant corrupt practices and the indifference exhibited by the ruling government to punish those associated with it (from politicians to government officials), could successfully capture the imagination of the masses throughout the country, who in spite of not being direct participants, felt connected to the root of the upsurge. As far as media involvement is concerned there was media in other events also (like the Ram Janmabhoomi movement) but this time it was more pervasive and it is because of the growth of satellite channels and its tremendous popularity in the nook and corner of the country[15]. Also Anna's agitation is different in the sense, that in this movement both English and vernacular media came together to cover the movement, while in the other case Hindi media was more active[16]. English media specially Times group took the mantle this time, whereas the Hindi media was more popular in Ram Janmabhoomi agitation. It very much reflects the changes in the post liberalisation phase which sees expansion of vernacular newspaper as compared to English newspapers but the role of agenda setting is still done by the latter [17]. Infact scholars talks of two theories of mass communication – agenda setting theory and diffusion of innovation theory[18]. Anna's movement adheres to both of these. Agenda Setting Theory is a famous Mass Communication theory that Prof. Maxwell McCombs & Prof. Donald Shaw arrived at, in the 1972 U.S. presidential elections.

According to the theory, it is the media that sets the agenda for what people should think about. This finding was based on the research that 'public give a lot of importance to the issues which are given big coverage by the mass media'. This is exactly what happened in the recent Anna Hazare movement. Diffusion of Innovations Theory first appeared as a 2-step flow model which said that an individual receives information and passes it along to others both horizontally and vertically. In India itself, the Anna Hazare movement spread vertically and horizontally to all sections of the society from the elite to the lower rungs of the society. Apart from it, the crusade succeeded in getting the attention of the outside world too.

A comparative study of three forms of media in covering Anti-Corruption Agitation reveals that electronic media (television) and more importantly social media played a more active role as compared to print media but the latter was more balanced and insightful, reflecting various points of view and critically addressing the core issues [19]. The newspapers were also credited for giving a serious interest in the content of the Lokpal Bill and the tried to understand corruption in its broader terms unlike the other forms of the media which narrowed down the issue to fasting and a contest between Jan Lokpal and the government Lokpal bill[20].

#### **Conclusion:**

The above discussion on civil society, democracy and media vis-a-vis the Anna Hazare agitation helps to analyse these concepts in new light. The term 'civil society' as ambiguous it is, the question to ask at this point is how inclusive it is or as Partha Chatterjee reiterates we need to take into account the concept of 'political society' when talking about protest movements featuring in the present time. Do the problems facing the so-called 'political society' even feature in the present day democracy? Are the civil society and the ever growing middle class of India always active in all the protest movements? Such questions need to be pondered upon.

As far as Anna's agitation there are certain other pertaining questions that need to be answered. Issue of corruption was raised earlier also but why Anna's attempt got so much attention? In this context, one can evaluate the role played by media. Most probably, media couldn't miss this there hasn't been a movement as vast in numbers and in geographical spread as this one. It is however like an egg and chicken controversy as to whether media showed interest in this incident because of increasing involvement of people or people came to support this movement because of increasing media coverage of this movement. Another query to probe in this connection is that whether this movement is entirely media driven or the civil society

intervention also had an important role to play. To this one can say that like most other movements both acted in a complementary fashion (with common interest and almost same social base as majority belonged to middle class) with media houses often acting as a handmaid in the hands of a few section of the civil society.

Media's role in Anna Hazare movement needs to be credited. It has also been active in revealing further cases of corruption but this is again strictly limited to that of the political class. We hardly see media reporting corruption charges of corporate which limits its role. In this scenario, how far will the media go for the battle against the corruption? The issue of corruption is still not solved and it will take a long to mitigate this menace from our society. Though Anna Hazare movement ended but common people are still worried about this issue[21]. And how far is media interested in it now is still questionable.

To conclude one can say that, the danger with the kind of sustained media attention that is seen over this agitation is that it tends to give precedence to a sense of direct democracy, which undermines the fundamental principle of liberal democracy. The media is supposed to be the watchdog of democracy thereby they should inculcate a critical insight amongst themselves rather than nurturing any presumption regarding any particular class.

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