

What 'Movement' Is This Anyway?

Jantar Mantar showed up the limitations of a popular movement that lacks a political perspective.

Now that the dust has settled on the Lokpal Bill agitation, it is time to dispassionately analyse the nature of Anna Hazare's campaign and the potential of civil society groups to challenge the hegemony of those institutions of the Indian state that are rapidly losing credibility. The groundswell of public support for Anna Hazare's demand for a joint committee of government and non-state representatives to draft a stringent Lokpal legislation and the victory of the campaign in forcing an arrogant State to accommodate its demands should certainly be welcomed. But the euphoria should not blind us to the limitations of the Jantar Mantar agitation – its narrow range of demands, the political naiveté of its leader, and an elitist and religious bias that flawed it from the beginning. This bias is now antagonising social activists, human rights organisations and many others who had supported the movement. It is necessary to examine the agenda and the character of the leadership and the agitators who gathered at Jantar Mantar, Mumbai, Kolkata and many other cities.

The one-point agenda of Hazare's campaign was the issue of corruption. Sections of the urban middle class no doubt suffer from a simmering discontent with what they consider a moral humiliation in their daily need to bribe government functionaries or meet extortionate demands by local political dons. The Anna Hazare-led protest provided them with a space for giving voice to their long pent-up anger and frustration. Besides, the recent exposures of scams by the media, involving senior ministers, corporate house head honchos, apex court judges, and army top brass further emboldened them to join the agitation. They have already lost faith in the State's willingness to punish the guilty from these upper echelons, irrespective of the party that is in power at the centre. The first Lokpal Bill was approved by the fourth Lok Sabha in 1968 but rejected by the Rajya Sabha and the eight versions of the Bill that followed thereafter were not passed by Parliament.

The agenda of the agitation was confined primarily to a demand for legislation that would facilitate quick and strong punishment of government functionaries found guilty of financial fraud. The campaign was, however, blind to the fact that such frauds are a manifestation of a much wider and multifaceted trend of corruption, which as a moral vice is polluting our institutions in various forms. Institutional incentives have been perverted to reward the rich and punish the poor; government

officials have become agents of the corporate sector; the judiciary stands discredited as a forum for delivery of justice; and the police have been brutalised to become perpetrators of extrajudicial killings of dissidents whether in Kashmir or Chhattisgarh.

Anna Hazare and his followers do not see the connections between these larger issues and "corruption". As for the participants of his agitation, they were a set of individuals who ranged from middle class citizens to Bollywood stars and urban socialites. Opposition party leaders from both the Bharatiya Janata Party and the Communist Party of India (Marxist), as well as corporate leading lights, came out with statements supporting Hazare. Yet, the ruling politicians of these same parties (B S Yeddyurappa of the BJP in Karnataka and Pinarayi Vijayan of the CPI-M in Kerala) are facing charges of corruption. The same corporate houses and Bollywood industry are implicated in cases of income tax evasion and other acts of perfidy. In his pursuit of followers for his anti-corruption campaign, Anna Hazare, instead of publicly dissociating himself from such disreputable elite figures, allowed them to ride on his back. He also permitted controversial characters like Kiran Bedi and Baba Ramdev to take over the dais at Jantar Mantar. Hazare further damaged his credibility by giving a clean chit to the architect of the 2002 massacre of Muslims, Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi – who has refused until now to appoint a lokayukta in his state! Although Hazare has now come up with a weak plea of "opposition to any form of communal disharmony", all along during the demonstration at Jantar Mantar he allowed Baba Ramdev to play a prominent role, welcomed the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh leader Ram Madhav, and permitted the performance of havans – disturbing signs of a pro-Hindutva bias that is likely to estrange secular-minded people who oppose corruption.

The Jantar Mantar experiment, while boosting people's power, reveals the limitations of the leadership of a popular movement that lacks a political perspective. Gramsci saw civil society as the soft underbelly of the capitalist system which could be developed by the oppressed as an arena to challenge the hegemony of the ruling classes in their struggle for the ultimate transformation of capitalist property relations and the State. But in India today, if civil society movements are left to the guidance of populist leaders who may be well meaning but devoid of any progressive political ideology, they can be taken over by religious charlatans, political careerists

