

Understanding India's Mass Movements

India has literally been through a churning process in recent times, with so many incidents testing systemic capacities for survival. We have seen the rise of an increasingly assertive and demanding civil society in recent times, which reflects the 'revolution of rising aspirations'. The same seems to be quite in sync with the trends world over, what with the 'Occupy Wall Street Movement' in the US, the Spring and Jasmine Revolution in the Middle East, and similar uprisings elsewhere. The 'demonstration effect', unleashed by Alvin Toffler's Third Wave as represented by the means of mass communication including print and electronic media and, of course, the World Wide Web, has been spurring the hoi polloi to rise against the perceived ills of their society everywhere. People, led by the self-appointed do-gooder guardians, have taken up the cudgel to cleanse the system wherever and whenever they have got an opportunity.

Our countrymen were up in arms lately when a movement led by Anna Hazare gave them an opportunity to ventilate their ire against the quotidian venality faced by them. The media had a field day covering and demonising the usual suspects. The Lok Pal Bill was championed, *inter alia*, by the ilks of Anna Hazare, Baba Ramdev, Swami Agnivesh, Kiran Bedi and Arvind Kejriwal as a panacea for all the ills afflicting our society. But is a Lok Pal Bill really the answer to all our woes? Observers are suspect as to whether another institution will work where so many others have seemingly not delivered as per our expectations or whether another legislation will come good when plethora of rules and laws has come to naught.

One does get a hunch that the insistence and confidence placed on the effectiveness and fungibility of the proposed Ombudsman called Lok Pal has been overdone. And it has been done without properly grasping and appreciating the real problems of the system. The Lok Pal, as proposed by a section of the civil society, is an over-simplification of the perceived ills, to say the least. In fact, many found the thrashing of a Lok Pal votary by an anti-social to be quite a poetic justice because it were the same people, who once supported slapping a politician for his/her misdeeds. Yet others similarly had ink bespattered on their faces by some ruffians. It was a deserved comeuppance for someone who advocated Kangaroo courts,

many felt. After all, you can't say that my violence is better than yours or my cause is better and nobler than yours. Civil society members advocating violence as a means to a goal were paid back in their own coin and very soon, many felt. Advocating unjust means even for just causes is never advisable. It is like nurturing a Frankenstein who shall sooner than later devour its mentor for sure.

Just think of another remedy by some civil society members where they advocated flogging a drunkard to make him/her mend his/her ways, a system reportedly followed in a village Ralegaon Siddhi in Maharashtra. If we were to follow such recommendations, we shall end up beating up almost one-third of our countrymen. And God only knows where that shall eventuate. The Kangaroo justice they champion has no place in any civilised society, more so in a democracy. So, when some argued that people are above the Parliament, they were conveniently talking only about the demonstrating masses, supporting their movement.

Over 1.2 billion people who voted our lawmakers to that august institution, called the Parliament, are definitely much above than a few thousand people pressing for a cause, howsoever justified. What is reprehensible is the arrogance of some civil society organizations in dictating a particular type of the Lok Pal Bill against the collective wisdom of the parliament. The Government and the Parliament have both appreciated the need for such an institution but chutzpah of these self-appointed people's champions to not accept anything less than what they have been proposing is nothing short of heaping contempt on the institution of parliament, and thereby on our democratic traditions.

If the civil society organizations are really convinced about the popular support to their cause, they should either contest elections or should convince the parliament through dialogue and not by intimidation and bullying. They should remember that when you resort to a hunger strike or build a movement to blackmail or browbeat the parliament thereby holding the entire system to ransom, you are actually subverting the system. Just think of the implications thereof. Today, we had a crusade against corruption. Tomorrow, anyone with some following anywhere shall resort to similar tactics to press for his/her demands across the country and there shall literally be created a shambolic situation of chaos and commotion. Subversion of democratic institutions is an open invitation to anarchy and anomie. So, if these people champion slapping a politician or any wrong-doer, they ought not to complain if one of their team members is attacked and beaten up, observers feel. One does feel that that the goals that these gentlemen are pursuing are definitely noble, but their means are deeply flawed.

And there are examples galore to prove that we as a society have a long way to go to build a wider consensus on positive societal values. Notwithstanding this, Indian society has sundry shining examples to give us hope for the future. We have all the potential to be a great society and such mass movements are reflective of its desire to come to terms with its realities. However, the methods and modalities of such movements have to be more positive and constructive than they have been so far. The media and the civil society should come together in a constructive partnership to take on the coalition of vested and entrenched interests to build an India, which is really shining, really incredible.

Those who have been ill-mouthing our system conveniently forget that it is because of the opportunity afforded by the same system that they have been freely speaking and doing what they have been speaking or doing. An authoritarian or fascistic system would have crushed such protests right away. Just remember what happened in China way back in 1989 at the Tiananmen Square. Had the Indian system not been resilient and inherently strong, it would have given way long back. But Indian democracy, belying all the prophets of doom, has been marching from strength to strength.

After all, for all its weaknesses, our country has never seen a violent and bloody change of the government. All such changes have been through the ballot and as per the mandate of the mighty electorate of our great country. Government, here, has fallen even by a single vote, which further underlines the strength of our democracy. So, all those naysayers and cynics have got their basics wrong as they seem not to have tried to fathom the basic nuances and workings of our parliamentary democracy before pouring scorn on the same.

That is why one feels that resolution of any such problem should always be done through a societal consensus and without subverting our institutions. And in a democracy, no institution reflects this consensus better than the parliament. Notwithstanding the fact that our parliamentary democracy has been panned by some prominent members of the civil society for its myriad flaws and foibles, the fact remains that we continue to remain one of the most shining examples of a functioning democracy.

Salient Points

- We have seen the rise of an increasingly assertive and demanding civil society reflecting the 'revolution of rising aspirations'.
- The Lok Pal, as proposed by a section of the civil society, is an over-simplification of the perceived ills.
- After all, you can't say that my violence is better than yours or my cause is better and nobler than yours.
- Advocating unjust means even for just causes is never advisable.
- The Kangaroo justice has no place in any civilized society, more so in a democracy.
- What is reprehensible is the arrogance of some civil society organizations in dictating a particular type of the Lok Pal Bill against the collective wisdom of the parliament.
- Subversion of democratic institutions is an open invitation to anarchy and anomie.
- We as a society have a long way to go to build a wider consensus on positive societal values.
- Resolution of any socio political problem should alw.

Glossary

Quotidian venality:

Hunch: to push

Bespatter: splash with water

Comeuppance: deserved reward usually unpleasant

Chutzpah: audacity

Commotion: Sedition Anomie: condition of individuals absence of social norms and values

Browbeat: to bully

Galore: In abundance