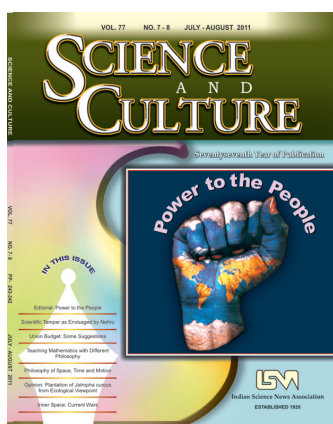


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EDITORIAL

POWER TO THE PEOPLE



Let me start with a passage from Richard Bach's *Illusions*—"Once there lived a village of creatures along the bottom of a great crystal river. The current of the river swept silently over them all. ... Each creature in its own manner clung tightly to the twigs and rocks of the river bottom, for clinging was their own way of life. Some creatures are tired of clinging and wished to be free but could not gather enough courage to do that."

In India there flows a strong current of corruption and we Indians accept it as a part of our life. All of us, young and old, rich and poor are tired of this way of life but did not have enough courage to protest, till the next other day.

Bach continues, "One day one creature seeing another creature, although stranger to him, free and flowing with the water cried 'See a miracle! A creature like ourselves, yet he flies! See the Messiah comes to save us all!'" Anna Hazare appears to be the Messiah who came to relieve us, Indians, from the clutches of corruption. In Bach's words, the one that was free and carried with the water said "I am no more Messiah than you. The river delights to lift us free, if only we dare let go. Our true work is the voyage, the adventure." I do not know what Anna Hazare would tell us but it is clear that it is he who gave the entire nation the strength to come out of a cocoon of fear and helplessness and gave us the courage to stand against corruption. And I am sure that politicians and bureaucrats will be only too delighted to join this force to free our nation of corruption. Our only duty is to be a part of this

voyage until the goal is reached, as Swami Vivekananda had invoked a century ago: "Rise, awake and stop not till the goal is reached."

The support Hazare is receiving in this movement is significant. It has been 105 years since Mahatma Gandhi first resorted to non-violence as a method of public protest in South Africa. Although his movement of non-violence has influenced various leaders in various countries, the general opinion of the younger generation is that Gandhian philosophy of non-violence is an instrument that is good for a movie like '*Lage Raho Munnabhai*', but is too blunt to cut an ice with governance and has no practical utility in real life. One of the reasons for this cynicism is because the modern leaders have rarely practised '*satyagraha*' (literally truth-force, but referring to non-violent resistance). Anna Hazare's latent movement is proving once again that '*satyagraha*', standing on enormous moral strength and conviction, is still strong enough to shake the government. We are aware of the success of non-violence movement practiced by Acharya Vinoba Bhave during the 'bhoodan' or Land Gift Movement which convinced the dacoits of Chambal to surrender. The new movement should be an eye-opener to politicians who very often resort to hunger strikes without any moral conviction and are not able to generate the expected result.

According to a recent report, India stands at 87th position among 180 countries surveyed for least corruption. The only Asian country which ranks within the top 10 positions is Singapore. There can be arguments on the methodology adopted in ranking, which is true in case of any form of indexing. But the fact remains that the results of the same survey show little improvement in corruption control during the year 2002 – 2007, but a steady decline after that. We boast of our current economic growth but our dream that the trend will eventually surpass the fastest

growing economy of China will never come true at this rate of corruption.

Although in conventional wisdom, corruption refers only to the laundering of huge amounts of money, it actually encompasses any kind of undue advantage taken for personal gain. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, 'corruption is widespread moral deterioration'. Truly any kind of action arising out of moral deterioration, be it theft, bribery (small or big), abuse of power for personal gain, and dishonesty in any form may be considered corruption. Although the Jan Lokpal Bill for which Anna Hazare is fighting is meant for the trifecta of politicians, bureaucrats and judiciary, any action taken against these big players will trickle down and provide moral strength to fight against smaller vices committed at the grassroots level that we have grown so accustomed to.

Anna Hazare had the advantage of modern, technology-rich environment to obtain the support of the masses. While mainstream media has traditionally played an important role in spreading news, the widespread use of other electronic media like mobile phones, internet and Facebook also helped converge peoples' force towards his fighting cause. In contrast, a similar outcome was achieved by Gandhi through extensive train travel and marches throughout the country.

In Anna Hazare's own words "We need to start a second freedom movement to get rid of corruption, red tapism, delays in government offices, frequent transfers of honest officials and lack of transparency". Truly, this is our post-independence freedom movement to free this society, this country, from the clutches of corruption. We hope to see, enjoy and live in a transparent, corruption-free society.

What India needs now is a series of 'freedom movements', the first of which should address black money. India has the dubious distinction of being ranked first in the list of foreign money holdings in Swiss banks. Under international pressure, some of these banks have been forced to reveal the names of account-holders to their

respective governments. In spite of having our Right to Information (RTI) act in force, the government is reluctant to reveal these names in public. Instead, the government is setting up a bureaucratic committee to handle the case under the scrutiny of the Supreme Court of India. It is said that the money Indians have in their personal accounts in Swiss Bank is more than that of the rest of the world

combined. According to reports, Indians have a total of 1,500 billion dollars (there is some controversy on the exact figure) in Swiss accounts, which if distributed would be equivalent to Rs 15,00,000 for every senior citizen in the country. The total amount of India's black money is about 70% of the 'white money', which is enough to influence the economy of the country.

There are two distinct ways by which the black money held in India can be eliminated. One is to make money traceable, which will make the economy transparent and be of only one "colour". This would force all transactions to be conducted by cheque, and all purchases (except for mundane items in local market) by cheque or credit card with proper receipt. Payment of fees to doctors, lawyers, and teachers, as well as reimbursements and even items like taxi fares would need to be made against proper documents. One may recall that making PAN number mandatory for opening bank accounts eliminated ghost bank accounts to a large extent. Moreover, computerisation and linking of all bank accounts by PAN numbers significantly reduced income tax evasion. The contrast with western countries will become clear from an interesting incident that I experienced in an Indo-US workshop held in the USA, in which I was the organiser from the Indian side. Air tickets, accommodation etc. were arranged by the organisers but contingent items like taxi fares from the airport to the conference site and back were to be paid on arrival. As per US government policy, these incidental claims were paid by cheque which was not taken very favourably by some Indian participants.

Thinking out of the box, there is another robust means of eliminating black money, which may be logistically difficult to implement. What if the government prints redesigned currencies of all denominations (only bills or

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notes) secretly and declares overnight (without giving any time to prospective black money holders) that all existing currencies in circulation are invalid and currencies held in cash by people must be exchanged for the new one from the banks. This is the most efficient way of eliminating or at least exposing black money. However, the present government machinery may be unable to keep this secret, and leaks to existing black money holders in exchange for kickbacks would generate another scam.

If black money and corruption cannot be eliminated or at least checked, India's dream to become one of the biggest economies within twenty years will never be realised. Russia, for example, at the beginning of this millennium was considered to be one of the emerging economies along with Brazil, India and China and bracketed as BRIC countries expected to be the most dominating economies by 2050. However, because of its rampant corruption, bribery and with other vices, Russia is no longer considered to be a good place for investments by foreign investors. Sweden's IKEA, famous for its stylish furniture and other home accessories, reported that

corruption in Russia is so rampant that they were forced to hire diesel generators to circumvent Russian bureaucrats demanding bribes to provide electric lines to their stores. Money managers and economists are in a mood to oust Russia from the BRIC and are negotiating to include Indonesia in its place (debating on the abbreviation BIIC or BICI). Incidentally, Russia stands second in place in the list of foreign money holdings in Swiss banks. Our politicians, bureaucrats, policymakers, economists and money managers need to take a cue from this and take appropriate steps before another public movement is needed to have it heard by the government.

Anna Hazare has made the voice of the middle class, the silent majority of Indian citizens, to be heard by the government. His movement has empowered citizens to participate in a democratic process beyond just voting rights to elect peoples' representatives. As Amartya Sen once argued, 'a vigorous and vocal use of democratic participation can do much more in India than it has already achieved.' □

S.C. Roy

PS: I was moved to write this article at the beginning of April by Anna Hazare's fast against corruption. By a strange coincidence, my apprehension about a freedom movement from 'black money' expressed in the editorial came true before its publication. I am not a political commentator and will not warrant a guess about the implementation of the Lokpal Bill; however, one thing I do understand is that corruption in any form must be eliminated for our country to truly prosper.