

A Case of Humiliation in Indian Politics

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Interestingly while most of the eyes are turned towards the Arab Spring, something happened in the Indian capital in the wee hours of 5 June 2011 that put many Indian citizens to shame and goaded them to reflect whether Indian democracy is a real democracy or is it, what was characterized decades ago by J. K. Galbraith, functional anarchy, where the rule might is right reigns supreme.

Any follower of Indian politics will tell how India in recent months has undergone churning with civil society organizations raising their voices against rampant corruption in the higher echelons of government. Whether it is 2G spectrum, Adarsh society, Commonwealth Games, mining, land transfer, or numerous other scams, the Indian people unlike in earlier times have expressed interests in these affairs and raised voices against corruption. While the people raise their voices, the cunning political class uses manoeuvre, plays politics of religion and caste or the politics of appeasement, and when these methods fail, it shows its true nature by using brutal force to quail the voices of innocent people.

In the first week of April 2011, one of the Gandhian leaders, Anna Hazare, appealed to the people of India to rally behind him in his hunger strike (one of the methods of peaceful protests against injustice, frequently used by Mahatma Gandhi during Indian freedom struggle). The Anna movement had its consequences across India – people throughout the country rallied behind him in his call for the establishment of Lok Pal (a kind of watchdog to checkmate corruption, with the power to take action against high functionaries of government).

The Indian government bowed to the pressure of the civil society, appealed Anna to call off his fast, and hurriedly formed a joint committee comprising members of civil society and members from the cabinet of ministers to draft the bill, languishing since 1968. The decision was taken to pass the bill in the forthcoming monsoon session of Indian parliament. The government as the mass protests withered away played all its cards to divert the public attention from the bill. Though I disagree with some of the demands of Anna like the inclusion of prime minister in the ambit of Lok Pal, the diversionary tactics crafted by the government led people to doubt the intentions of the government. Pessimism weighed high in the mind of the people that the bill as expected will not see light of the day, or if the Lok Pal bill is enacted it will be a crippled version, providing enough room for manoeuvre.

Baba Ramdev too used the Gandhian tactic of hunger strike to put forth before the government his demands. The government in this case applied carrot and stick policy. Ramdev, a Yoga guru in India and abroad, was depicted by some political leaders a ‘communal,’ ‘thug,’ who is playing popular sentiments for his advantage. They used vile language to discredit him and his movement. In fact Ramdev since last few years has been launching a vigorous campaign against corruption. The main demand of Ramdev is to bring back black money from India stashed away in Swiss banks or in other foreign banks. It is

estimated that billions of dollars of Indian black money have been stashed away, and India, which is a developing country, cannot afford such a luxury when hundreds of its people die in starvation or farmer committing suicide. Developed countries like the US pressurized these banks to disclose the accounts of their citizens having black money and succeeded. Then why not India? A bank in Germany has already given the Indian government the list of names of the people having black money in it, but the government has not taken any action to bring back that money or taking actions against them. It is plausible to believe that the government is afraid of the powerful corrupt people as taking any actions against them will likely destabilize the government.

Ramdev appealed to popular consciousness in his own typical way by portraying a picture how bringing back black money will change the face of India, and how the poverty will be greatly reduced. He cited documents, while teaching Yoga and Asanas across the breadth and width of the country. To cite a case of his popularity, when few years back he founded his Patanjali Yogpeeth in the beautiful Himalayan town of Haridwar, through which the Ganga passes, politicians across divides joined the inauguration ceremony perhaps to partake the Yoga guru's glory and seek his blessings.

Ramdev declared few months back that he is going on fast since the 4th of June in the famous Ramlila Maidan in New Delhi. The Indian government was worried; the whole government apparatus swung into action. They sent feelers to Ramdev to cancel his idea of fast as the government is initiating a slew of measures towards bringing back the black money. But Ramdev did not relent. The prime minister of India appealed to him to cancel his fast. When on 1st of June Ramdev arrived in New Delhi from Ujjain, a city in central India, four ministers, not one or two, including the most senior minister in the cabinet rushed to the airport to confer with the Yoga teacher. Everybody was expecting some positive result. And media was abuzz that an agreement has been struck between the government and the Yoga teacher in a five star hotel in New Delhi. Ramdev declared that he going with plan of fast unto death, and it is his basic right. And while giving sermons on 4th of June to thousands of his followers assembled in the Ramlila ground, live telecast, Ramdev said that there has been threat to him that if he continues with his fast he will be victimised.

In the morning Ramdev taught Yoga classes to thousands of people, then delivered speech, while in fast. Then came the night. People, including Ramdev, were sleeping after the daylong fast. Around 1.10AM in the morning the Delhi Police swung into action. Hundreds of policemen with tear gas and lathis charged the innocent, defenceless, sleeping mass. As displayed in TV channels in the morning, the policemen fired tear gas, beat people, and dragged them from the venue unmindful of their age and gender. The Yoga teacher was perhaps unaware of this stick policy (as the carrot did not work), and jumped from the stage and mingled with the crowd, while the police were chasing after him. The police announced the prohibitive order of Article 144 (that deals with unlawful assembly), Ramdev was arrested and then 'evicted' to the town of Dehradun (about 200km from Delhi) by a chopper. The Indian people, not present in the scene, watched the brutality in the TV in the morning and were shocked and angry.

India is a democratic country. Let us assume, for a moment, that Ramdev did all the wrong things and violated law– but was it the way to treat him? There are more questions that the government needs to answer. Why did the government went all the way to Delhi airport

to give Ramdev hero's reception, and what happened just within three days that Ramdev was behaved so badly which any person will protest. Even if the government negotiated with him and failed, and Ramdev went ahead with his plan of hunger strike – he exercised his democratic right well protected by the constitution of India. The right to freedom is a fundamental right enshrined in Article 19 of the constitution of India, which can be curtailed under exceptional circumstances. Any sane person with regard for values of democracy and human rights will be ashamed at the use of force against a peaceful gathering. Ramdev was treated kindly and then treated as a thug. Such a scenario in fact reduces Indian people's trust in democracy and makes them suspicious whether the government is there to protect democratic rights of common people or to violate them. Old women, old Sadhus being dragged by police without any fault of them, and the people beaten by the police, again without any fault of them. The police action injured more than 70 people; some of them are in serious conditions.

The police made an appalling official statement that, among other things, there was threat to the life of Ramdev, hence they had to take such an action! Does this argument hold an iota of civility? It is like to tear a person apart from his dignity in the full media glare so that his life can be protected?

That was a sad day for Indian democracy. It is like giving the message if you do not toe our line, if we do not listen to us, then we have hegemony over coercive state apparatus which we will use to suppress you and your voice. If that is the case, then what is the difference between democracy and dictatorship? What kind of order is that order (even in this particular case there was no violation of law by the peaceful people gathering on the ground) that quails people's basic right to protest, to deliver speeches, and to sit hungry! It is height of brutality, when the defenceless, fasting, sleeping, innocent people were dragged, beaten and shooed away by the police force, as if these people were illegal violent intruders attacking sovereignty and integrity of the Indian nation! And what explains, that the same government which was courting Ramdev suddenly turned violent and treated him a rogue?

Every Indian citizen will agree that there are huge amounts of black money, stashed away in foreign banks, which can play an effective role for uplifting the poor, besides improving India's abysmal health and education systems. And honestly, it is not an issue of politics and political parties, but the citizens' basic right to dignity, to freedom, and to democratic ways to vent anger and frustration at bad governance, corruption and other maladies created by the corrupt system and its beneficiaries.

About the Author

Debidatta Aurobinda Mahapatra is a Ph.D. from Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. He is author of *India Russia Partnership: Kashmir, Chechnya and Issues of Convergence* (2006) and *Central Eurasia: Geopolitics, Compulsions and Connections* (2008) and co-author of *Conflict in Kashmir and Chechnya: Political and Humanitarian Dimensions* (2007) and *Kashmir Across LOC* (2008). He has also co-edited *Afro-Asian Conflicts: Changing Contours, Costs and Consequences* (2008). His other published works include *Mapping Transitional Justice in Kashmir: Drivers, Initiatives and Challenges* (2010, OTJR, University of Oxford, UK), *Contested Border and Division of Families in Kashmir: Contextualizing the Ordeal of the Kargil Women* (2009, Co-author) and *Kargil Displaced of Akhnoor in Jammu and Kashmir: Enduring Ordeal and Bleak Future* (2006, Co-author) funded by Internal Displacement and Monitoring Centre, Geneva. He is on the Editorial Board of *Journal of Eurasian Studies* and *Journal of Alternative Perspectives in Social Sciences*. Aurobinda is member of many international networks including Human Dignity and Humiliation Studies Network, Action Asia, International Mediating and Negotiating Operational Agency and Transcend International. Aurobinda visited Moscow University in 2003-2004. From 2005 to 2007, he was Fellow at the University of Jammu and the editor of quarterly *Across LOC*. He was a Visiting Fellow at Institute for Conflict Research, Belfast in November 2008. In 2010 Aurobinda was Charles Wallace Fellow at Queen's University, Belfast. He is currently associated with the Centre for Central Eurasian Studies, University of Mumbai, India.