Democracy, Protest and the Culture of Corruption in India

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**ABSTRACT:-**

**Purpose** – The civil society is an enduring institution of our democratic culture in India. Perhaps the greatest threat that democracy is facing in India is the scourge of corruption. Despite having a vigilant press, an outspoken civil society and an impartial Judiciary, the most disheartening fact of Indian democracy is corruption. The article would seek to answer questions like - What are the socio-historical roots of this culture of corruption which has assumed such an important place in our democratic political culture? And how has the Indian state engaged with the question of corruption or ‘Bhrashtachar’? And finally how has the civil society reacted to the recent anti-corruption protest movement launched by famous Gandhian Anna Hazare.

**Design/methodology/approach** – This study is probably the first of its kind which is purely exploratory in nature and it tries to analyze this negative yet enduring feature of Indian Democracy in order to provide a better understanding of the dynamics of corruption in India. As far as the methodology is concerned it is purely qualitative and exploratory research.

**Findings** – Globalization has brought about rapid change in the value system and thought process in India. It gradually transformed the Indian cultural and created a neo-liberal dream especially amongst the Indian middle class. But sadly the neo-liberal utopia was shattered by rampant corruption. This in turn has generated a lot of frustration especially among the educated middle class Indians grouped under the umbrella term ‘civil society’ who have challenged the ‘principle of subsidiary’. This in turn has seriously undermined the political gumption of the
political leaders in the policy making process and challenged the legitimacy of the ruling elites in the process of governance in India.

**Research limitations/implications** – Since the research is primarily qualitative and exploratory in nature it is subject to several interpretations and no axiomatic inferences can be made.

**Practical implications** – The results of this study would help understand the subtle changes taking place in our democratic political culture in the post-globalization period in India and help analyze the role of the civil society in shaping it.

**Originality/value** – This study is probably the first to critically discuss how the civil society in 21st century India is emerging as a major force and help shape our democratic culture through new forms of protest movements.

**Keywords- Civil Society, Congress System, Lokpal, Political Culture.**

**Paper type** - Research paper

Democratic culture is one of the most important themes of modern empirical political science. It reflects the collective history of a political system and the life histories of the individuals who make up the political system. The study of India’s democratic culture is possible with reference to several yet contradictory themes like unity and diversity, tradition and modernity, continuity and change, consensus and conflict, religion and secularism. It is said that the democratic culture of India is a peculiar mix of all these conflicting themes. One such contradictory yet enduring theme of India’s democratic culture is ethics versus corruption in public life along which many protest movements have emerged. India the world’s largest democracy is facing the scourge of corruption in public life. Despite having a vigilant press, an outspoken civil society and an impartial Judiciary, the most disheartening fact of Indian society is the rising tide of the culture of corruption in almost all walks of life including, the political system. Therefore the article would seek to address questions like - What are the socio-historical roots of corruption which has assumed such an important place in our democratic culture. What protest movements were launched on the issue of corruption in India? How have the civil society and the political society reacted to the issue of corruption in the context of these protest movements in the pre-globalization period in India? Lastly how have the civil and political society engaged itself with
the discourse on corruption in backdrop of the recent anti-corruption protest movement launched by Anna Hazare.

Both concern for ethics in public life and political corruption have been enduring themes of India’s democratic culture since independence. Political corruption defined as “the improper or selfish exercise of power and influence attached to a public office or to the special position one occupies in public life” has become an important feature of the democratic culture of India. It has in turn given rise to a contradiction between the two most important idioms of Indian political culture of “Nyaayikta” or honesty and “Bhrashtachar” or corruption in public life. However there lies a peculiar ambivalence in the way the civil society perceives the issues of ethics and corruption in public life. On the one hand there is a tendency among the Indians to expect their political leaders to follow the much cherished Gandhian values of honesty, selflessness and integrity in public life. It is expected that the politicians should be committed, public spirited and sacrifice minded individuals who should untiringly work towards establishing a “Ram-Rajya” or “Kingdom of God on Earth”. On the other hand a cynical, contrary view exists about our political system where politics is seen as an amoral, ruthless statecraft where dispassionate pursuit of self-interest is the inevitable fact of political life. In fact these inconsistent values in turn have led to the growth of another feature of our political culture that is a kind of distrust and caution among the ordinary citizens regarding their political leaders. This kind of distrust generated a lot of cynicism among the people which was aptly described by Gunnar Myrdal as the ‘folklore of corruption’. According to Gunnar Myrdal, the high incidence of corruption in India created a ‘folklore of corruption’ which reflects the ‘people’s beliefs and opinion about corruption as reflected through public debates and gossips’.¹ This folklore had a crucial bearing on how people conduct their private lives and how they view their government’s efforts to mitigate the problems of corruption in the period following independence. One important perception created by this folklore within the Indian society was that corruption has become more rampant and widespread in the post- independent India. It generated a feeling that known offenders like administrators, influential businessmen and politicians could continue with their corrupt practices with little risk of punishment by dint of their influence. It generated an ambience in the civil society that corruption could be taken for granted. This folklore of corruption created a lot of skepticism and cynicism among the ordinary people about the anti-
corruption drives of the then Congress Government under Prime Minister Nehru. This folklore created in the words of Pt. Nehru- “a climate of corruption.” Where every Indian says to himself: “well, if everybody seems corrupt, why shouldn’t I be corrupt?” Due to this folklore of corruption the ordinary Indians felt alienated from the public servants who were in charge of the state institutions. They suffer from the illusion that the public servants were not their servants but their master and it is ultimately their responsibility to prevent the public servants from indulging in corruption. The popular perception of the Indian civil society was that politicians and administrators in charge of the state machinery are ultimately the root source of corruption and they exploit the ordinary people by misusing the state powers.

However, the fact is that the civil society cannot absolve itself of all responsibilities by isolating the politico-administrative establishment and putting all the blame of corruption on them. The politicians and administrators are ultimately a part of the Indian society and are legally and morally accountable to them. Therefore we need to analyse the socio-historical roots of this culture of corruption which assumed such an important place in India’s democratic culture after independence.

Corruption is not a one way process only emanating from the political-administrative system. It is generated from the society and its cultural values which in turn put pressure on the administrative machinery to indulge in corruption. Therefore corruption not only is generated from within the administrative system but also from the society and its cultural values at large. Unfortunately, the period following independence, India lack of a strong civil society which could voice a strong opinion against rampant corruption in the political sphere. People generally remain mute spectators which increases the level of corruption in public sphere. Perhaps there were many factors that had made our civil society unresponsive to the issue of corruption. Our social values of tolerance and indifference were the main reason behind the failure of the civil society to channelize a strong public resentment against corrupt politicians and government officials. In this context we can talk about the observations made by A.G.Noorani regarding the term “AZHIMATI”. Azhimati is a Malyalam term that denotes a sort of sensation that is very painful, but the body becomes so used to it that without the pain, the survival of the body does not look possible. Similar is the case with corruption which is like a very painful sensation but at
the same time is very vital for Indian society without which the wheels of the government machinery would not move. Such a type of public attitude makes us more tolerant towards corruption. 3 Coupled with this was the typical middle class attitude of a “MAJBOOR RASHTRA” or “Helpless Nation” which encouraged the growth of corruption in public life. Under it if a politician was corrupt it was due to his compulsion. This public attitude of a helpless nation wrought havoc and confused an average mind into thinking that all such aberrations were unavoidable and there was no way out except excusing these high and mighty politicians as helpless. 4 There was also a common public perception in India that “people get what they deserve”. Thus people should accept corruption as inevitable fact of life. They have no one to blame or nothing to do because they deserve such a corrupt system. This type of a fatalistic and status quoits public attitude in India not only perpetuated but also justified corruption in public life in the period following independence. An important question that needs to be asked is- how did the Indian state engaged itself with the question of corruption or Bhrashtachar in the period following independence?

Most of the leaders of independent India were persons of total personal integrity and had an austere lifestyle. But this high moral standard of the political executives did not continue for long. Why this degeneration in the values of the political system take place did is the important question which needs to be answered. Incidentally, when Pandit Nehru became the first prime minister of independent India he started the process of nation building on the basis of his vision of modern India which rested on two basic pillars of political development through the spread of democratic values and economic development through state controlled centralized economic planning. The first agenda of political development was done through the creation of the “Congress System” – a dominant one party system in which the Congress combined the function of political development with political competition. 5The Congress system was built on the four pillars: the towering personality of Nehru himself who fostered incremental political development and institution building; the Congress organization which provided the “steel frame” for linking the whole country; a liberal progressive ideology of the Congress that tried to co-opt almost all shades of political opinion and lastly access to and distribution of patronage. It was on this last element of the Congress System that Rajani Kothari made the following observations- “Through its extended system of development and planning, the congress
developed an elaborate network of patronage which enabled it to ‘bargain’ political support in return for economic and social benefits with various social strata in rural and urban areas. All this enabled the Congress to be a ‘catch-all party’ and further consolidate its electoral organization on the basis of both the traditional social structure and the emerging structure of economic opportunities.”  

This last element of the Congress System was a key factor that led to the systematic spread of corruption in different walks of life including the political system. The process of diffusion of the culture of corruption in public life got a fillip also due to the adoption of the centralized economic planning process. The hegemonic state constructed an elaborate system of industrial regulations to control the process of economic development through industrialization known as the system of “Licence-Permit Raj”. Licence-Permit Raj was a regulatory system through which the industrial and commercial licenses were distributed by the State. However it led to in words of Dr. GurharpaI Singh—“the emergence of a “grace and favour” state in which politicians, bureaucrats and businessmen pursued predatory and corrupt policies, assured of the fact that no legal sanctions would be taken against them for misuse of public office.”

Thus Nehru’s policy of centralized planning produced opposite consequences by creating powerful lobbies of rent-seekers who could easily evade the scrutiny of formal state institutions. As early as the 1950’s C. Rajagopalachari perceive the great danger in an economic regime controlled by the licence-permit- quota. He felt that the scheme of contact between bureaucrats, businessmen and politicians under the Nehruvian economic system would set in motion a great corrupting movement.

In spite of his dynamism and personal integrity, Nehru failed to stem the rising tides of corruption in public life after independence. Nehru could not catch the bull by its horn and directly confront the corrupt politicians. Instead he was always lukewarm to accept the fact that some of his cabinet colleagues were corrupt. Nehru once said that “Merely shouting from the house tops that everybody is corrupt creates an atmosphere of corruption. People feel that they are in a climate of corruption and they get corrupted themselves.” Under Nehru corruption which was controlled, managed and institutionalized through the Congress System spread its tentacles into every walk of public life. There was more or less pathetic acceptance of this malady in public life.
But when Mrs. Indira Gandhi assumed power corruption moved from the level of folklore and became an integral part of the national political culture. The imposition of National Emergency in 1975 had a huge impact on the spread of corruption in the public life in India. The emergency not only destroyed the last semblance of transparency and accountability in public life, but it also undermined vital institutions’ like the judiciary, the parliament and the press which acted as break waters in the rising tides of corruption in the Indian bureaucracy. Due to lack of transparency and accountability during the Emergency official norms became a matter of convenience and rules and norms were bye-passed in the service of expediency. All these unfortunate developments gave a free hand to the corrupt elements to openly indulge in corruption. In this context SS Gill observed -“It was the lack of a firm anchorage in the ideology and a penchant for realpolitik, which led her to shed her earlier inhibitions about political corruption, exploiting instead its full potential as a tool for gaining and retaining power”.⁹

At this juncture the civil society under the able leadership of social worker Jayaprakash Narayan launched a historic anti-corruption movement to cleanse the system and get rid of corruption. India launched her first anti-corruption movement against the corrupt and inefficient Congress government under the leadership of the renowned freedom fighter and social worker Jayaprakash Narayan who was popularly known as JP. JP gave the clarion call for ‘Total Revolution’ or “a struggle against the very system which has compelled almost everybody to go corrupt.”¹⁰ The objective of this movement was not merely to change the Government, but also to change the society and the individual. In other words this movement aimed at bringing about a revolutionary change in all aspects of the life of the state, society and individual. The movement launched by JP sought to bring about this total revolution through struggle, construction, propaganda, and organization. This movement was not only directed against the corrupt political system but also against the evils prevailing in the civil society at large. JP thus wrote that the movement should be base on the main plank of constructive programme aiming at turning the people’s and the youth’s mind away from evils such as the dowry system, caste-distinctions, untouchability, communalism etc. and to work unitedly for social and cultural integration. He also observed that the most important objective of this anti-corruption movement would be self-change: that is to say, those wanting to change the corrupt system must first change themselves before launching any kind of action. This movement was
perhaps the first all India movement against corruption and mal-administration which received the support of all sections of the society. Though the movement failed to reach its logical conclusion due to lack of organization and leadership after the sudden death of JP, it nonetheless successfully created a nation wide awareness about the evils of corruption and rejuvenated the civil society to fight against the excesses committed by the State machinery during the time of the National Emergency of 1975-77.

The sudden and tragic death of Mrs. Indira Gandhi on 31st October 1984 marked the end of an era in the history of Indian politics. Rajiv Gandhi, who became the new prime minister of India, immediately responded to the challenges confronting the nation at that time. The strongest affirmation of his resolve to cleanse the Congress party came from his famous speech at the Centenary Celebrations at Bombay on 28th December 1985, where he said “…we obey no discipline, no rule, follow no principle of public morality, display no sense of social awareness, show no concern for public weal. Corruption is not only tolerated but considered a hallmark of leadership.”11 But as the coming days would prove all these words of Rajiv Gandhi would backfire on him. But the crowning disgrace of Rajiv Gandhi’s administration was the Bofors scandal in which large commissions had been paid by the Swedish arms manufacturer in connection with a contract for weapons for the Indian army. The Bofors scandal involved a total amount of Rs. 1750 crore and it was alleged that a sum of Rs. 64 crores was paid as kickbacks.12 It is perhaps the only corruption scandal which became the main election issue on which the general elections were fought in 1989. It also resulted in the defeat of the Congress party and the formation of the non-Congress Janata Government in 1989 led by V.P. Singh.

Rajiv Gandhi’s defeat in the general elections of 1989 marked the end of one party rule in India. The post Nehru-Gandhi period of Indian politics brought about radical change in the political, economic and administrative spheres. Since July 1991 India embarked on the path of globalization and liberalization which brought about number of changes in our social, political, economic and even administrative systems all of which had an important bearing on the nature and dynamics of culture of corruption in India. At the social level, globalization brought about rapid change in the value system and thought process in India. It gradually transformed the Indian cultural and created a neo-liberal dream especially amongst the Indian middle class. Globalization created neo-liberal simulacra in India that – India will become another America,
Bombay another New York, IITs and IIMs another MIT and Harvard Business School. India will be like the West and Indians will become winners by working towards one powerful, resurgent India based on a neat marriage between market fundamentalism and nationalism. But sadly the neo-liberal utopia was shattered by the very force that generated it. Globalization threw up in India absolutely newer avenues for corruption, which were unheard of or unconceivable twenty years ago. Globalization and liberalization opened up through privatization and disinvestment new areas of corruption. To Quote Joseph Stiglitz -“Perhaps the most serious concern with privatization, as has so often been practiced is corruption. The rhetoric of market fundamentalism asserts that privatization will reduce what economists call the “rent-seeking” activity of government officials who either skim off the profits of government enterprises or award contracts and jobs to their friends …….In many countries today privatization is jokingly referred as “briberization”. By selling a government enterprise at below market price, they could get a significant chunk of the asset value for themselves rather than leaving it for subsequent officeholders.”

In the process, the entire culture of corruption if we may call it underwent a ‘revolutionary’ change having a tremendous impact on the political life of India. One immediate impact of this change ushered by Globalization was the steep decline in the political culture of India. At the political level, politics has become more competitive in nature in the age of globalization. It has marked the end of one-party dominance and initiated the era of coalition politics and minority governments leading to the creation of a lot of political uncertainty and instability. The compulsion of facing the electorate quite often due to political instability has forced the political parties to indulging in corruption. Money collected through corrupt means are used to fund elections, build patronage based support or to bribe opposition MPs at times of political crisis like the cash-for-votes scandal in which the United Progressive Alliance Government of India led by Sonia Gandhi allegedly bribed the opposition Members of the Parliament in order to survive a confidence vote on 22 July 2008. Rise of regional political parties have also led to the spread of corruption at the regional level. The recent 2G spectrum scandal involving ministers like Mr. A.Raja and Mrs M.K.Kanimozhi belonging to the regional party Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) (an alley of the Congress led UPA Government) illegally undercharging mobile telephony companies for frequency allocation licenses, which they would use to create 2G subscriptions for cell phones. The shortfall between the money
collected and the money which the law mandated to be collected is estimated to be Rupees 176,645 crore (US$33.56 billion) by Comptroller and Auditor General of India based on 3G auction prices. The compulsions of coalition politics have forced the Union government to fulfill the unjustified demands of the regional political parties leading to the systematic looting of government treasuries and the rapid decline in ethical standards of important public offices.

The recent spate of scams like the Commonwealth Games Scam, Adarsh Housing Scam, 2G-Spectrum scandal and contentious appointment of Mr. P.J. Thomas as the Chief Vigilance Commissioner has generated the second wave of anti-corruption movement led by Anna Hazare. The 2011 Indian anti-corruption movement is a series of ongoing demonstrations and protests across India intended to establish strong legislation and enforcement against endemic political corruption. The movement has gained momentum since April 5, 2011, when anti-corruption activist Anna Hazare began his now-famous hunger strike at Jantar Mantar in New Delhi. The chief legislative aim of the movement is to alleviate corruption in the Indian government through the Jan Lokpal Bill. Another important aim, led by protests under Swami Ramdev, is the repatriation of black money from Swiss and other foreign banks.

The movement is primarily one of non-violent civil resistance, featuring demonstrations, marches, hunger strikes, marches and rallies, as well as the use of social media to organize, communicate, and raise awareness. Inspired by Hong Kong's Independent Commission Against Corruption the leaders of the India Against Corruption Initiative have prepared a draft Jan Lokpal Bill. The Jan Lokpal Bill provides for strong, efficient and politically independent institutions, the Lokpal and the Lokayuktas for investigation of corruption charges against public officials and politicians. The bill also provides for time bound grievance redressal and speedy investigation of corruption cases.

The second anti-corruption movement is being branded as the India’s Arab Spring. However the phenomena of Arab Spring are an unreal representation of the anti-corruption movement in India. The peoples’ fury in the Middle East and North Africa was directed against the totalitarian and dictatorial political system that existed in those countries for decades. However the public ire in India is not against the very foundation of the political system but against its retardations. Unlike the first anti-corruption movement of the 1970s, this anti-corruption movement is
essentially a middle-class movement. According to the National Council for Applied Economic Research, India’s middle class is almost 160 million at present and is likely to rise up to 267 million by 2016. Unfortunately, many of the participants in this movement may not have voted even once but have been compelled to come out open in the streets due to voice their collective dissent against corruption. Moreover, the foot soldiers of Anna Hazare Movement are educated, urbane and belonging to the middle class. What is more astounding is the fact that in the age of globalization this movement has been able to fire the idealism of the burgeoning Indian middle class of 21st century India. Unlike the Jayprakash Narayan Movement which used techniques like mass struggle, construction, propaganda, and organization this movement uses the twitter updates, sms campaigns, candle light vigils and media management to garner its support amongst the educated, techno-savvy Indian middle classes.

The earlier anti-corruption movement launched by Jayprakash Narayan never challenged the state system. It was a more inward-looking movement which harped on the need for reforming the individual first and then the society which reflects the collective consciousness of the individual and lastly the state system. However the Anna Hazare movement is more directed at reforming the state only. It does not talk about individual morality or the social ethics. The Anna Hazare anti-corruption movement instead has challenged the ‘principle of subsidiarity’. The principle of subsidiarity demarcates the proper arenas for civil and political society and for local, state and central government within the political society. The principle suggests that the state should undertake those tasks that people cannot undertake for themselves through voluntary associations of civil society. However, the Anna Hazare anti-corruption movement has challenged the ‘principle of subsidiarity’.

The rapacious middle class Indians are on a mission, on a crusade against the non-responsive political class which did not fulfill their neo-liberal dream. The Anna Hazare Movement is harping on the need to stop the democratic game and get rid of all so-called procedural constraints and bottlenecks, constitutional obligations and democratic traditions and fast forward the way to being world class through elimination of corruption by constituting a strong institution of the Lokpal. Thus the second wave of anti-corruption movement is undermining Parliamentary Democracy itself.
Unlike the 1970s when the political society reacted in an undemocratic manner leading to the imposition of the National Emergency, it has reacted to this anti-corruption movement with lot of patience and sapience. The political society has tried to contain this movement by using the principles of democracy. The mantra of the political class therefore is- “no technocratic control but democratic containment”. In other words, there is now a call for rational politics, for following certain conventions and democratic norms and not bulldozing constitutional procedures and not bypassing elected representatives. The political class contends that -You can’t bully an elected parliament using undemocratic ways. Politicians have counter-argued that civil society representatives led by Anna Hazare keep saying that they have the whole nation with them, then why only 20,000 people turn up at the protest site in Raj Ghat? Further more, if they have the huge support they claim why don’t you contest elections and then bring in change through democratic means? In other words the political class is not yet ready to abdicate their powers in favour of the civil society although they have been forced to become more responsive to the demands made by the members of the civil society. In conclusion what really remains unanswered is: Is the civil society gaining predominance over the political society in molding our political culture and is it in a position to build a clean, corruption free political culture in India? Only time has the answer to these questions.

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