

The Anti-Corruption Movement and Its False Divides

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The “authoritarianism vs democracy” divide in the ongoing anti-corruption movement is a false one. It conceals the real unity of interests between the authoritarian upper middle class elitist agenda and the political class supposedly defending Indian democracy today. Where do the poor figure here?

Today the anti-corruption campaign has become something of an empty signifier as “corruption” has suddenly become the source of all grievances and social problems. Symptom is nicely substituted for the actual cause: people are poor since “so much money” is stacked away as black money. Diverse social sections from the middle classes to the poor seem to have faith in the virtues of the anti-corruption movement – come the Rs 400 lakh crore of black money, the poor will no longer remain poor! Also visible here is the widening mass participation from the Hazare phase to the Ramdev phase. And yet the present anti-corruption movement is essentially (“anti-political”) upper middle class in its character, with mass populism evident in the Ramdev phase. Attacking Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh-Bharatiya Janata Party (RSS-BJP) involvement and Ramdev’s own socially conservative agenda leads self-happy left-liberals to make light of the entire issue – and display their attachment to “Indian democracy”, as though it is the most radical thing to do. Instead, taking the issue seriously might show that Indian democracy too is implicated in this circus, that this apparent conflict and so-called authoritarian attack reveals deeper continuities and convergences. So can we extend our radical attitude to Indian democracy itself?

Before we rush to defend Indian democracy from the supposed authoritarian tendencies of the upper middle classes, we might do well to recall a simple fact: is it not precisely these classes that successive post-1991 governments have held as the showpiece, as the major achievement of India in the recent past? This supposedly burgeoning, prosperous middle class was touted as proof of the economic policies of the political regime – free market policies, privatisation and growth-oriented development. Thus the government and the big

bourgeoisie justified the economic policies, restructuring and neoliberal policies in the name of this middle class.

So how come the political regime feels that this showpiece middle class, apparently India’s single biggest achievement over the past decade, is now out to undermine the democratic institution and established procedures in the country? It seems that this class has, in the name of fighting corruption, turned back and bitten the hand that feeds it! The divide, mature pundits tell us, is between authoritarianism and democracy. If the Hindu-Muslim divide is a false one, what about this liberal divide between “authoritarianism” and “democracy”? It here helps to point out an important fact: the vast sections of the poor are so meticulously kept out of the debate and out of the field of vision. This is the first indication that this present conflict is an elite conflict. But why are the elites fighting over the issue over corruption?

A slight analytical examination shows that corruption in today’s discourse is something which comes in the way of the neo-liberal utopia, slowly undermining it – hence akin to “distortions in the market”. Subsidies to the poor are distortions – policies like National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) are supposed to lead to huge amounts of corruption. Rights for the poor are a sign of corruption – public distribution system leakages, vote banks, patronage, vested interests and so on. The authoritarian middle classes would demand an end to NREGA in its present form and its replacement by direct cash transfers. The “democratic sections” want its continuation as a rights-based policy. Hence the elite conflict is about how to handle the poor, how to contain them. Technocratic control of the poor or their democratic containment: this seems to be the “conflict” among the elite today, played out as one between authoritarianism versus democracy. So far a fine balance of both democratic and technocratic containment is maintained by most governments but the present right wing technocratic assertion might weaken the famous capacity of Indian democracy to absorb mass discontent.

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To start with, when India launched itself along the path of market reforms and high growth, the middle classes were not the primary movers – it was big capital and the political class who pushed for this path. But the middle classes bought into the story peddled out – that we will soon be like the west, or if not that, at least like South Korea, China, etc. We as well as everything around us will soon be “world-class” and India will be a “big power”, nuclearised and out to take on the world. The middle classes believed in this neo-liberal utopia – India will become another Singapore, Gurgaon another Dubai, IITs and IIMS another MIT and Harvard Business School. Even the NRIs would want to leave their plush lives in the United States and contribute to making India a world power, as did Shah Rukh Khan in *Swadesh*. Further no more divides in the country, let us forget caste and religious divides – a level playing field is assumed for everyone, so that it is only the market which will objectively decide the losers and winners. But we are all winners since it is all part of working towards one powerful, resurgent India – a neat marriage of market fundamentalism and nationalism. Partition is a thing of the past and does not concern the forward-looking growth-driven younger generation, declares Chetan Bhagat. Babri Masjid issue? Neither temple nor mosque, open a KFC there!

But sadly the neo-liberal utopia is not happening.

The lesson learnt from this “failure” is not that maybe India is a different kind of a country, or that maybe being world class is not even a dream worth chasing. Instead it is felt that we are destined to be world class – only problem is there is some cheating, some spoilers, some distortions and contingent obstacles along an otherwise sure path laid out. Vested interests, politicians, netas, vote banks, and hence corruption – these are the only hurdles on the path of eminent progress, hurdles that can be overcome without any major social transformation. With hurdles like these, quick technocratic solutions are available, if only we are willing to see them. And now is the time, the wait cannot be prolonged. So now this class is infuriated and apparently has a cause to take up. It is on a mission, on a crusade since the political class did not deliver.

Privileged though it is, it works up a crusading zeal around it and shows itself in honest, sincere struggle. More than that, it presents itself as the victim now leading a “movement” with a progressive twist – it is against caste and religious divides, global-minded and bold. How does it fight caste oppression? Simple: by claiming that caste oppression is a story invented by those out to justify market distortions like reservations. Similarly, discrimination against Muslim is a story to justify “minority appeasement”. Opposing reservations and minority appeasement is part of this middle class’ struggle for a resurgent and strong India, an India without divides. The “fight against corruption” nicely packs all these many struggles in an impeccably tight right wing technocratic logic.

Specifically this “fight against corruption is thoroughly laced with and besotted by the dream of a technocratic solution. Every speech by Baba Ramdev against corruption is laced with the desire to make India strong and powerful – all of India like a big mall that the middle classes can die for. And here we come to the elite conflict again: what the mature Indian political class, used to the rigours and constraints of ruling a diverse country with divergent interests and deep inequalities want to do slowly but surely, the middle classes want to do it overnight, high on the neo-liberal

utopia and without the responsibility of having to rule and govern.

Techno-Fascism?

Thus, what is essentially an elitist, right-wing big power dream is getting peddled in a way that even the poor and the underprivileged are getting mobilised. Here cleanliness (corruption-free), a saintly, almost Gandhian abstinence, gets easily married with Narendra Modi’s supposed technocratic, or rather techno-fascist efficiency. There really is no point for the Left to bemoan or condemn Anna Hazare’s appreciation of Modi; what is to be seriously taken is that by that statement he lost no credibility among the “people” but gained many. This is techno-fascism with a difference, with a mass component. The technocratic utopia or perhaps dystopia is here getting articulated in benign terms, as part of the fight against corruption, and for clean governance, which evokes saintly figures and so on.

Clearly, it has fascist/communal elements of purifying the body polity, treating corruption as an external corrupting influence vitiating the organic body and its onward growth-centric march. So Ramdev or for that matter even Hazare seems to place corruption as a problem in itself, not as a symptom but as the disease with the result that wider socio-economic relations are removed from the field of vision. Social



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inequalities, internal contradictions and so on are wiped off so that the image of an organic whole (the clean and pure nation, India Shining, big power, etc) needing purification is retained. "Corruption" here can be placed in the series of thorns in the flesh of the Indian nation: "bad Muslim", "anti-national", "Bangladeshi immigrant", "Maoist" and so on. The death penalty for Afzal Guru and Kasab, and so also for anyone corrupt, for the rapist and so on. It is like plucking out the "alien" thorn off the flesh of this organic and pure, happy and harmonious family. Thus it is not just the RSS-BJP taking over the anti-corruption movement. Rather the very character of the movement so far lends itself easily to the right wing. Emphasising Hazare's views or Ramdev's formal association with the RSS-BJP should not lead us to overlook the right wing logic at the very core of the movement.

Democratic Containment

And is there a path from here, from the techno-fascist elitist standpoint back to good old Indian democracy and its inclusive institutions, rights for the poor and so on? Should we be strengthening Indian democracy and its progressive policies against the authoritarian and irrational politics of anti-corruption? Clearly this is not an option since the two positions are two sides of the same coin. More to the point, this elitist standpoint is, paradoxically enough, actually speaking the truth about this democracy. Any left wing position today must listen to this upper middle class elitist critique of the progressive, political class. This rapacious middle class knows, without saying it in as many words, that the political class, Indian democracy itself, has no real mass base today and is sold out to precisely the neo-liberal utopia – the entire paraphernalia of Parliament, the government, army, judiciary and so on today are at the beck and call of big capital and the upper middle class dream. Apart from the small rational, secular urban middle class elite, Indian democracy today has no real proponents – no popular section of society. Muslims, for example, might want secularism to stay in the country but they are under no illusion that the political class is really sincere about it. Homosexuals might be given certain rights but do we not know that the major impulse behind it is to show that India is a modern country, all part

of big power ambitions. So now the techno-fascists are saying, let us stop this democratic game and get rid of all so-called constraints and bottlenecks, constitutional obligations and democratic traditions and fast forward our way to being world class – after all, we never meant to really take care of the poor and, in any case, there is enough corporate clout and hegemony today for the poor to quietly fall in line and lap up the leadership of the acquisitive, rapacious middle classes. Democracy or rather democratic containment has lost its rationale. Indeed, liminal illegality and the militant subaltern agency of Partha Chatterji's political society has given way to corporate hegemony as his recent writings make clear.

The Poor

This approach of hyping the symptoms is becoming the common sense and hardened belief of ordinary men and women, thanks to the anti-corruption movement. Now this is great news for the political class, for the stability of Indian democracy. After all, this will help divert attention from the real policies of the government, from the deepening socio-economic disparities and inequalities in the country. And here again we see the essential unity of interests between the political class, with its supposed democratic institutions, and the rapacious upper middle class, with its authoritarian tendencies.

It is however precisely the reality of this unity of interests, which necessitates the public façade of democracy as allowing for competition between different interest groups and diverse classes without the dominant classes appearing dominant! The fear of the democracy-loving political class

is that this façade will be now exposed. The wanton and almost reckless middle classes are on the verge of exposing the true character of the government – the son of the family threatening to spill the beans in public. Hence the political class is doing its best to distance itself from its own children who do not realise what is in their best interests. For the fast-forward technocratic route to the neo-liberal utopia exposes the entire system to widespread popular resentment.

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 things and not bypassing elected representatives. But is it not the same middle class whose support the government counts on when it bulldozes policies of corporate land grab on the poor? Or the same elected representatives and legislatures that turn the other way when real estate developers forcibly evict slum-dwellers violating every law of the land?

Let us finally note that the anti-corruption wave has opened a gap, a chink in the general consciousness, raising a question mark about those in power. The poor have come to believe that they need not remain poor and that there is some problem in the present dispensation. The poor's sympathy for Ramdev, unlike that of the middle classes, is not right wing. The question is: Can the poor and their organisations capitalise on the ongoing elite conflict and take things in a different direction, away from the rotting "Indian democracy" and the techno-fascist solutions of a clean, corruption-free big power India?

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