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BOOK REVIEW

Review: Storming the World Stage



^[1]Storming the World Stage: The Story of Lashkar-e-Taiba
Stephen Tankel
hachette india
Rs 550 pp 385

A few months after the 9/11 attacks, a French convert to Islam named Willie Brigitte attended a terrorist training camp in the mountains of Pakistan. His fellow recruits were Pakistanis and Afghans, as well as men from Somalia, Britain and the Gulf states. The camp was run by the terrorist organisation Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), but some of the instructors were Pakistani soldiers on detachment, and military material was dropped from army helicopters.

Several times, officials came to the camp to check that no foreign jihadis were present. When this happened, Brigitte and the other itinerant foreigners would be tipped off in advance and hide out in the woods surrounding the camp.

When LeT was finally banned in 2002 under American pressure, it had already shifted its financial assets into a charitable trust at the instigation of the ISI, the Pakistani intelligence. Its military wing would only be used for operations against India in Kashmir — which was permitted. Yet before long they were organising other terror attacks, including the 2008 massacre in Mumbai that killed 166 people.

In *Storming the World Stage*, Stephen Tankel provides the most detailed and impressive account yet of the development of this organisation,

created initially under Pakistan's aegis but now increasingly a thorn in its side. It began as an outfit in the anti-Soviet campaign in Afghanistan in the early 1980s and, after many splits, became a significant force in Pakistan. Because it followed the Ahl-e-Hadith (a comparatively small school or sect which wants a pristine version of Islam) the ISI thought it would be a more pliant proxy than some other more mainstream militant groups. As part of this arrangement, LeT had to swear never to turn its guns on the Pakistani state.

Although it remains a semi-detached creature of the ISI, LeT has grown into something unlike its terrorist competitors. It has a talent for running safe houses and getting people out of fixes. According to its leader Hafiz Saeed: "Since our life revolves around Islam, therefore both dawa and jihad are essential, we cannot prefer one over the other." By 'dawa', he means social service, charity and religious proselytising. And this is at least as large a part of his organisation's purpose as fighting against what he calls, "the evil trio, America, Israel and India."

The result is an empire consisting of a large vegetable farm near Lahore with shops, mosques, science and language schools (including a girls' school), student hostels, a computer lab and a teaching hospital. Then it has an internet radio station — Radio al-Jihad — and a well-developed mobile medical service which has been invaluable at times like the 2005 earthquake, or when reams of refugees fled from Swat. Wrestling, swimming, martial arts and mountain climbing are part of the curriculum, and the muscular culture extends into the classroom. In one textbook, 'c' is for cat becomes 'c' is for cannon, and 'g' is for goat becomes 'g' is for gun.

What should Pakistan's leaders do about this scenario, where a terror group that wishes to fight unbelievers "until Islam emerges victorious" operates in plain sight? Using Kashmir as a bridgehead, it hopes to restore Muslim rule in the subcontinent. Saeed is dead serious in his ambitions. In May, he led a rally to condemn the US for the killing of

the al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden. Another LeT luminary argues (on the basis of slim textual authority) that the Prophet Muhammad singled out India as a special target for jihad, since Hindus are “the worst of the polytheists.”

The substantial power of the LeT stems from the strategy pursued by the Pakistani military over several decades. It has three prongs. The first is, in its way, logical: that Pakistan should acquire and maintain nuclear weapons to offset India’s conventional advantage on the battlefield. The second is ‘strategic depth’ — namely that Islamabad should, as far as possible, run ‘assets’ in Afghanistan so as to ensure Pakistan is never encircled by India. Perhaps this interventionist strategy made sense once upon a time, but increasingly it has promoted regional instability. The third is to encourage insurgency in Kashmir so as to ‘bleed’ India. LeT — and the accompanying carnage — has been a central aspect of this strategy.

Pakistan is a large country, with many different interest groups. The army’s violent and blundering foreign policy has not been endorsed by Pakistani voters, although it has become an article of faith and is quickly impressed upon whichever civilian politician happens to be in government. As an ISI officer told Tankel, “Who benefits if we go after the Lashkar? India. And who pays? Pakistan.” So the threat remains.

Patrick French is the author of India: A Portrait. A version of this review first appeared in London’s Sunday Times

CIVIL SOCIETY

How 'civil' is civil society

Civil society groups rise from the ashes of the failures of the government and the state.

Shyamal Datta

THE recent parleys between the Government of India and the Civil Society Group led by Anna Hazare, on the formulation of the Lokpal Bill, brought to the fore three developments of interest.

One was the overbearing attitude of an NGO to try and dictate to the government what should be the contours of a Bill to be passed by Parliament. Second was a larger than life image acquired by some of the civil society groups, which smarted under a self belief that they could



force the government to toe their line. The third development was the spontaneity with which public outrage was triggered, during the protracted debate against the surge of corruption in public life.

The cumulative effect of the three was that the government looked a bit distraught under tremendous pressure but, justifiably, continued negotiations in a bid to try and accommodate their view points and sentiment to the extent it considered feasible and appropriate.

In this backdrop, it will be in order to present an overview of the activities of the civil society groups since its emergence from the late seventies, for the people to know, understand and appreciate the ramifications of the growing phenomenon.

Traditionally, sections of civil society formed part of the symbiotic relationships between the state and communities without much stress and strain. Today, in the absence of any legal definition, the organisation comprises a wide range of civil society and interest groups which are also called Non Governmental Organisation (NGO) and non-profit associations. The people associated with them are generally human rights/social activists, academics, intellectuals, celebrities, high profile journalists, think tank hirelings, retired bureaucrats, jurists, lawyers, environmentalists and so on. They espouse the cause of the members and others, based on ethical, social, cultural, political, economic, security and philanthropic considerations.

The origin

It was in the tribal belt of Bihar, Orissa and Madhya Pradesh that the activities of an outfit called the Social Action Group(SAG),came to notice in the seventies, focusing attention on the sufferings of the tribal people. Slowly and gradually,the SAGs started making their presence felt under the leadership of people known for their radical thinking and selfless service to society, mostly from outside the region. The thrust of their objective was to emerge as an alternative to the administration, taking full advantage of poor infrastructures of road connectivity and transportation which made the presence of the govt. representatives in the region conspicuous by their absence. Of concern was the subtle ways with which the leaders carried out political indoctrination of the indigenous people, exploiting their pent up feelings of distrust and disaffection towards the government and the state.

A close scrutiny revealed linkages of some of these outfits with the organisation known as the Christian Action Group (CAG).The activities of the CAG were mostly religious and philanthropic, involving the local Christian community. Education, health, water, sanitation and doles of different types formed the bulk of their social responsibility. Soon the people of the region started looking up to the SAGs and the CAG as the

provider of help and relief of all sorts with the Church acting as the pivot, and some international donors as the conduit of funding under the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA).

A lacunae that remained in the government monitoring was with regard to the actual use of funds received through both overt and covert channels. Another serious shortcoming was the inadequacies on the part of the administration to redress the grievances of the people even by forging some kind of partnership with the SAGs and others and try to reach the fruits of several affirmative actions of the government for the people.

A study revealed that the NGOs really mushroomed with the end of the cold war and the onset of globalisation of economy. Overnight, Human Rights Groups appeared on the scene with an aggressive propaganda, characterising the actions of the Security Forces dealing with terrorism and insurgency in conflict-prone regions as violative of human rights. The prompt support extended by their international counterparts imparted a measure of legitimacy to the campaign. The latter also lined up other support and assistance in money and kind to raise the tempo of the publicity.

The immediate fall out was that the Security Forces in J&K and the North East felt restrained and the terrorist groups were encouraged to step up militancy. The uproar and publicity made it very clear that the atrocities and brutalities by the terrorist and insurgent groups, causing untold human casualties and sufferings, did not matter since these did not amount to the so called violation of human rights. What really mattered to the Human Rights Groups was the life and safety of the terrorists and insurgents and not of the innocent civilians.

Challenge to the state

Over the years, the clout and influence of the civil society groups grew manifold, posing a challenge to the state. Some of the NGOs tried to set

international standards and script new rules of business and conduct, overriding the claims of national or regional singularity, territorial borders etc. They tried to force compliance with these by the states where they operated. The objective was to compel the national or state governments to share powers so that the NGOs could bring to bear on them sufficient pressure to follow a particular course of action dictated by them.

In terms of resources and expertise, some of these NGOs are sometimes as strong, if not stronger, than some of the small sovereign states and international bodies. Their range of activities is multi-dimensional and goes beyond all proportions. They have the capacity and capability to breed new ideas, advocate protests, mobilise support, both within and across the borders, provide goods and services, shape, implement and enforce national and international commitments. The vast networking within and outside the territorial boundaries, offers the civil society groups an unprecedented channel, reach, and extent of influence. Some of the NGO leaders who have developed a high profile, acclaim, and popularity, have managed to influence the decision making process of the government from within by being part of government delegations.

The revolution in Information Technology has broken all physical barriers, connecting the people across the borders with growing ease to separate them from natural and historical associations within nations. This has brought in place a powerful globalising force with capacity and prospects of amplifying social and political fragmentation by enabling more and more identities and interests catered around the globe, to coalesce and thrive. It has potential of creating new forces of stress, strain and unrest in regions or areas otherwise peaceful and stable. This has helped the NGOs draw world-wide media attention to issues or causes that may not be very desirable in the interests of a polity.

The NGOs must see to it that their track record improves, showing greater loyalty and better orientation towards programmes and measures

meant to resolve people's problems with speed and commitment. They try to outperform the government agencies in the delivery of public services and goods, and project the latter in poor light. They anticipate and respond to new demands and challenges much better and much before the state does. All these help rally the people around and fuel disaffection towards the state.

Ever since security has become a concern with life and dignity and the credibility of the government is being judged by the measure of freedom available to the people from fear and want, the field of activities and interference of NGOs have increased exponentially, and become more frequent.

Information technology

The democratisation of technology and violence has vested the civil society groups with the capacity to undermine the state's monopoly on the legitimate use of force. It was the lack of equation of power between the state and the citizen that helped the state, in the past, to keep a semblance of order and stability. It also provided the glue required to keep modern civilization together. Now, Information Technology has seriously weakened the state's monopoly on the generation, collection, collation, and dissemination of information. It has made central control on the storage and flow of information difficult. It has connected everyone but left none in command and control.

The satellite communication has opened highways and super-highways providing access to information with the same speed to both the government and the civil society groups. Earlier, it was very difficult for the latter to obtain but now, with the press of a key, the whole world of information is available on the screen of the computer. Depending on the requirements of the NGOs and others, the information is collected, collated, coordinated and refined for commission of acts which may or may not be prejudicial to the interests of the state and the government.

The important question that confronts us is how do we deal with the NGOs and transform multi-dimensional challenges they pose into opportunities to strengthen the state and the government. It is time that the government accepts that in today's complex world, it is not possible for it and its agencies to keep track of happenings around the world and round the clock. The dynamic situation demands that the frameworks of the NGOs and the government dovetail at different levels as an institutionalised arrangement and, as and when considered necessary, for better understanding and appreciation of problems, issues and situation before policies are framed and programmes of action formulated and implemented.

There is a need for structured consultations between the two for meeting the gaps and inadequacies in information/ knowledge while reviewing the politics, policies and administration for correction and improvement. A two way traffic under a proper mechanism can go a long way to impart the sweep and speed necessary for an effective handling of any developing situation. The only areas of exception should be matters of national security and external relations.

A well set drill is in place to deal with the NGOs and civil society groups when they come to adverse notice for either keeping bad company or working to the detriment of national interests. This requires a constant review and updating to plug the loop holes, if any, and revamp the system. With regard to the civil society groups which are prone to cause hurdles and difficulties in proper tackling and management of any emerging situation, the government should brook no delay in firmly dealing with the ulterior designs, if any, to make the state vulnerable. On their part, the civil society groups must refrain from arrogating to themselves the role of dictating terms to the government. They should come to terms with the reality that they lack the stomach or the stamina to take on the government or the state which are too big and strong to be coerced to act and sign on the lines dictated by them. The wisdom would lie in conforming to well established rules of prudence.

Failures

On the other hand, the government has to bear in mind that the lack of strategic thinking, dysfunctional administration, delay in putting its acts together, self destructive streaks, talking in different voices, moving in different directions and inability to combine power with principle in a dispassionate manner, provide space and fodder for the growth and irresponsible behaviour of civil society groups.

The latter rise from the ashes of the failures of the government and the state. The strategic thinking underscores the imperative need for consultations with the civil society groups to get integrated into the systems and institutions of the government at different levels so that a strong bridge of relationship is built with boundaries of propriety, legal, constitutional and moral, properly delineated and clearly understood by the concerned players and the people.

On the operational side, these challenges would require proper and regular upgrading of four distinct elements of intelligence and warning, prevention and deterrence, crisis and consequence management and coordinated acquisition of equipment and technology for application. Without these, the state will often be found remiss in its approach and action. The formulation of the National Security Doctrine, for which a Task Force was set up recently by the government under the chairmanship of former Cabinet Secretary Naresh Chandra, would require an in-depth study of all these issues for the nation to have in place an institutionalised response mechanism, after 64 years of independence.

(The writer is former Director, Intelligence Bureau and Governor of Nagaland)

CORRUPTION

TIMES OF INDIA 20.8.11 CORRUPTION

REBOOTING INDIA

Which democracy do we want?

KANTI BAJPAI

The [Lokpal](#) agitation led by 'Team Anna' is all the news. One of the emerging but rather neglected facets of it is the debate it is raising about the nature of democracy. In the long run, this may be more consequential than the Lokpal Bill.

Whether the Lokpal Bill we get will be some version of the government's draft or of the Team Anna draft is unclear. In all likelihood, it will not matter greatly, since the scale of big and small corruption in India has always threatened to overwhelm any Lokpal and will almost certainly paralyse the institution.

Of greater significance is the question of democracy. What do we mean by it in India? The Lokpal agitation has brought to the surface a number of viewpoints on democracy. One fairly popular view, voiced mostly by the crowds gathered in support of [Anna Hazare](#), is that [democracy](#) is respecting "the will of the people". Since the people are heterogeneous, the will of the people usually means what the majority (or biggest faction) wants, regardless of any other consideration. This is majoritarian democracy that everyone from the classical Greeks to Mahatma Gandhi feared because the majority might well choose to trample on the rights of a minority. Opposed to this is what is usually called liberal democracy, which in simple terms is the will of the majority tempered by the rights of the minority; rights which are

protected by constitutional, judicial, and other constraints.

The Lokpal agitation has brought to the fore two other notions of democracy. The first is an idea that is beginning to be aired, as it was on a leading television channel by some activists this past Thursday evening - namely, the idea of a plebiscite in India to determine which Lokpal Bill should become law. In a plebiscite, everyone, not just MPs, would get to vote on the issue. Here is the notion of a plebiscitary democracy in which, from time to time, on matters of enormous significance, the entire electorate should be asked to cast its vote.

Yet another idea of democracy is protest democracy. In the debate over the correctness of using large-scale demonstrations and fasts, the defence of Team Anna's approach is that there are critical times when extraordinary measures must be taken, even at the risk of defying the rule of law and the supremacy of representative institutions. Corruption having crossed all bounds and the perversion of law and representative institutions having become unbearable, there is no option but to protest more or less continuously; to shock, to compel, and to speed up reform.

Critics of these forms of 'procedural democracy' say that democracy is more than a set of procedures and rules. Democracy must have substance. Some commentators have noted that below the surface, there is a strong current of substantive democracy that is driving the Lokpal agitation. There are those who insist that the real issue is ridding the country of corruption, that to say democracy is in essence to say clean government for all. This is democracy as public honesty.

Leftists and other progressives perhaps see in the agitation signs of anger over the economic and social inequalities rampant in India. There are those who see the issue of corruption as a lightning rod that has attracted all those who feel that economic change over the past 15 years or so has made a small segment of India extremely wealthy without benefiting the vast mass of the middle class and working people. Neo-liberal economic

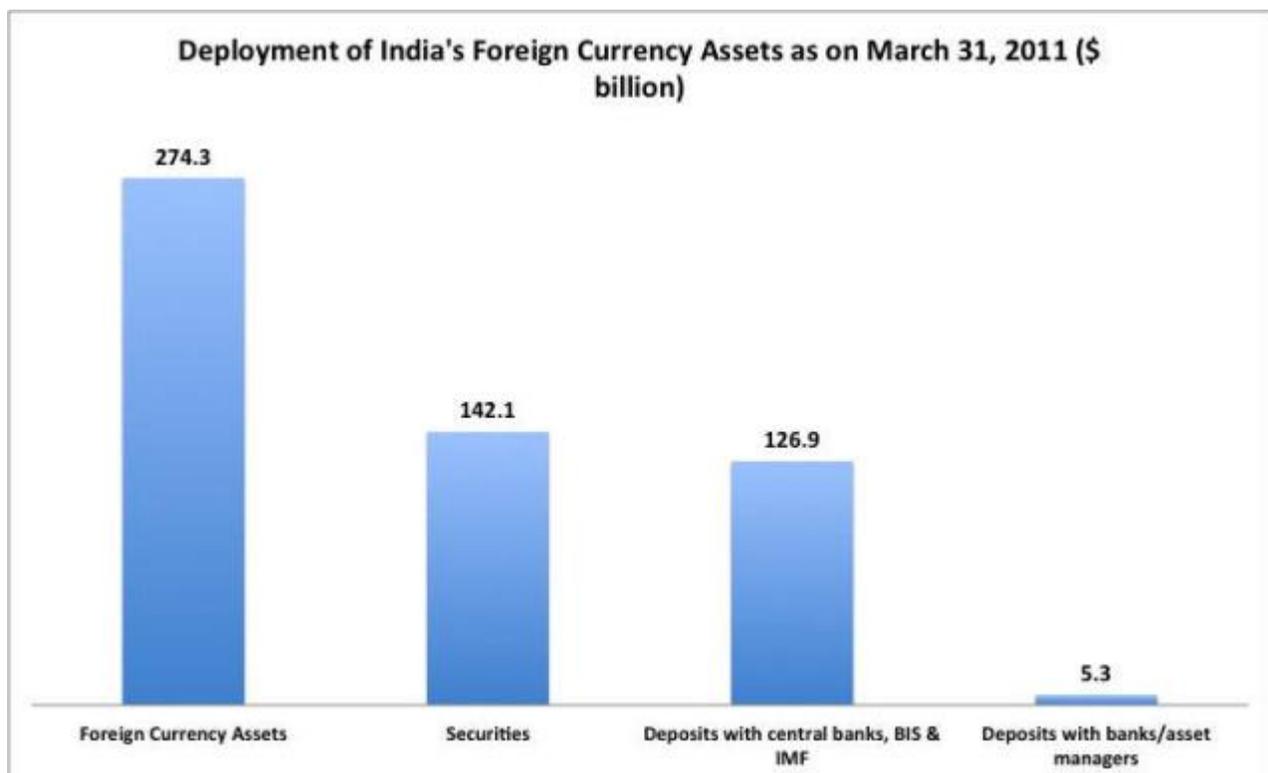
policies have increased inequality and therefore increased corruption. Other critics focus on continuing inequalities of opportunity and entitlement which are both long-standing, almost historical in nature, and which have deepened as a result of liberalisation and corruption. True democracy in this view is economic and social rather than procedural in nature. It is socialist democracy aimed at bringing about greater equality.

The Lokpal agitation has set in motion a churning. Part of this churning is over the meaning of democracy - is it primarily procedural or substantive? The question facing us is: what is the balance we want between these various conceptions?

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

The fall-out of financial volatility

C. P. Chandrasekhar



Deployment of India's Foreign Assets on March 21, 2011 (\$ billion)

Few would deny that the uncertainty that currently grips the global financial system is exceptional. Defining that exceptionalism is an unprecedented “backlash” on the part of Big Finance against developed country public debt that ballooned after 2007. Sovereign debt was earlier suspect only in the poorer developing countries, whereas the debts of developed country governments were considered riskless and subject to a zero per cent or negligible weight when regulatory capital requirements were computed under Basel norms. But that has changed

substantially if the current attitude to U.S. and European public debt is any indication.

Government borrowing in the developed countries rose sharply after 2007 to finance emergency public expenditures aimed at stalling the recession triggered by the financial crisis and restoring the solvency of banks that had speculated their way to crisis. While the financial system benefited from such borrowing, it is now increasingly intolerant of the resulting accumulation of debt. As a result, the sovereign debts of developed-country governments are either subject to downgrade (as in the Greece and even the US) or have been put on watch for a potential downgrade (as in the case of Spain, Italy and France). The earlier idea that governments that can tax to mobilise resources to meet their commitments are unlikely to default on their debt is under challenge, even if for reasons that are not clearly spelt out.

This change in perception is based on the presumption that taxes cannot (or should not) be raised, so that expenditures need to be cut to release money to meet debt service commitments. Since that would slow growth and adversely affect tax revenues (as has happened in Greece), governments are seen as being caught in a debt trap of sorts. In the event, public debt in most developed countries is seen as excessive, and what was earlier considered a riskless asset has now been deemed risky. Right or wrong, this tends to discount the value of public debt.

Is India likely to be adversely affected by this new source of uncertainty in global financial markets? It is true that India's exposure in the form of holdings of portfolio investments in international markets by private players is small.

Reserve Bank of India's data on India's gross international asset position (as on March 31, 2011) indicates that outstanding portfolio investments abroad account for an almost negligible \$1.5 billion. International credit and other assets are more important at \$20 billion, but as a stock that is by no means large. The two important forms that India's international

asset holdings take are direct investment (\$98.2 billion) and accumulated reserve assets (\$304.8 billion). Since private players largely hold direct investment assets, the squeeze in global demand would affect the overseas revenues of these firms, but possibly not do too much damage to the Indian economy.

What is more of an issue is the fate of the \$274 billion of foreign currency assets (out of a total of \$305 billion of reserve assets) held by India. While \$127 billion of these are held as deposits with central banks, the Bank of International Settlements (BIS) and the IMF, as much as \$142.1 billion is invested in securities, consisting largely of government securities. With the uncertainty surrounding the value and soundness of public debt, the danger of the erosion of the value of those assets is now significant. For example, India holds \$41 billion of U.S. Treasury securities that have been downgraded recently by S&P. The balance is likely to be in the public debt of European governments.

It is this debt that is prone to a loss in value as a result of the new tendency to discount sovereign debt on grounds that seem whimsical. While the sums involved may be small (relative to the \$1.2 trillion held by China in US Treasury bonds, for example) they are of significance because of the nature of India's reserves. Unlike in the case of China, the reserves that insure India against adverse global responses are not earned through current account surpluses, but are drawn from what foreign investors have delivered in the past. They represent liabilities that are being held as assets that on average yielded returns as low as 2.09 per cent over the year ended June 201 (down from 4.16 during 2008-09). If the value of those assets is eroded, other things constant, India's ability to cover its liabilities is eroded as well.

In addition to this, banks in India reporting to the BIS have disclosed holdings of claims amounting to \$31.3 billion abroad. Of these, \$14.9 billion are the external positions of banks in foreign currencies vis-à-vis the non-bank sector abroad. These exposures too are vulnerable given

the volatility in financial markets in the OECD countries. Besides this there is the fact that because of the presence of legacy capital in the country (consisting, as of March 2011, of \$204 billion of direct investment, \$174 billion of portfolio investment and \$265 billion of debt and other investments) India is vulnerable to global investor sentiment. Since that sentiment rules low and financial firms are registering losses in global markets, the flight of some of that capital is a real possibility.

Put all of this together and India does seem to be vulnerable to the uncertainty that pervades global markets. Finding ways to fortify its economic borders before a crisis hits is, therefore, a priority. Accelerating financial sector reform, as the Planning Commission seems to have decided is not.

Keywords: [U.S. debt crisis](#), [S&P downgrading](#), [treasury bonds](#), [Indian economy](#)

POLITICS AND GOVERNMENT

State as the savior

Sitaram Yechury

It is universally recognised that the current protests against corruption in high places is a reflection of the deep popular disgust against the various scams that are unfolding. While an effective lokpal is essential to be institutionalised, it is important also to try and understand why such mega corruption is surfacing like it is.

Corruption has ancient roots. Hence the fight against it has to be both tenacious and continuous. Recollect a short story of our primary school days. A king, once testing the morals of his subjects, asked everybody to bring a mug of milk to be poured into a cauldron at the palace.

Alas, at the end of the day, he found the cauldron full of water as every subject presumed that his mug of water will go unnoticed in the milk that others will pour!

However, the corruption that we are witnessing today is of an entirely different character. While all manifestations of corruption need to be fought, the current scams are directly linked with the liberalisation process that has opened up hitherto unknown avenues for large-scale loot.

This has elevated the corrupt businessmen-bureaucrat-politician nexus to a qualitatively higher level. The reform process has unleashed a murky morass of crony capitalism in India. Crony capitalism is nothing but the theft of people's property.

Capital, in its urge to maximise profits, invariably seeks to bend, if not violate, all rules and regulations. Nepotism in awarding contracts,

sweetheart deals in disposing off public properties and creating illegal and new avenues for money laundering and looting public resources are some of the forms that crony capitalism takes.

The capitalist State puts in place certain rules and institutionalises regulators to ensure adherence to these rules in order to provide a level playing field for the capitalists. However, given the fundamental nature of capitalism, where the big fish eat the small ones, these rules and regulations are pushed to the limits of violation.

Capitalism inherently breeds cronyism.

In countries like India, late entrants into the global capitalist system, (particularly when it embraces the neo-liberal economic trajectory of globalisation) such cronyism becomes all pervasive, trapping in its web governmental institutions and, indeed, the entire government itself. Every single scam that has come to light reflects this.

In a comment that stunned the practitioners of neo-liberalism and international finance capital, former editor of the Daily Telegraph, the biographer of Margaret Thatcher, Charles Moore said: “I am starting to think that the Left must actually be right.”

Moore went on to suggest that the ‘free market’ actually accords freedom only to a super rich mobile elite able to shift its resources at will and influence policy to maximise its interests. It is this latter aspect that enlarges the scope for large-scale corruption and loot.

The last two decades of globalisation led by international finance capital saw the leveraging of the global economy leading to the current recession and financial turbulence.

Such was — and is — its dominance that unbridled avenues for crony capitalism are being opened up particularly in developing countries like

ours. We can protect ourselves from such loot only by a disciplined regulation.

The cries, therefore, for greater reforms such as the deregulation of the financial sector will only spell further disaster and will exponentially enlarge the avenues for loot.

In the larger context, such a shift in the direction of policy trajectory must be brought about in order to check corruption in high places. Simultaneously, new laws and institutions must be created if such corruption has to be tackled in right earnest.

First, of course, is the institutionalisation of an effective lokpal. The second is to establish by law a mechanism to tackle corruption in the judiciary, like the National Judicial Commission. Thirdly, radical electoral reforms that will minimise, if not eliminate, the growing dominance of money and muscle power are most essential.

To begin with, the country must seriously consider the banning of corporate funding for political parties. Finally, effective laws must be put in place to tackle the menace of black money and to bring back the monies illegally stashed in tax havens abroad.

To tackle crony capitalism, the fountainhead of such corruption, we need to go further. Since this thrives on the theft of people's property, the first measure that needs to be taken is to protect people's properties from being privatised.

Crony capitalism is also leading to the loot of our national resources, like seen in the instances of large-scale illegal mining. This must be prevented by the nationalisation of all exhaustible resources and the operation of all mines must be the State's responsibility. Likewise, strict regulation to break the land and real estate speculation through proper legislation is essential.

All these may sound contradictory. On the one hand, the struggle is against crony capitalism and its attendant corruption and, on the other, we are talking of regulations and controls to be implemented by that very State machinery which is promoting crony capitalism in the first place.

This apparent contradiction can be resolved only when we simultaneously implement the package of measures that we are talking about, including legislation against corruption. Clearly, therefore, in this situation, the focus on creating an effective lokpal, however necessary, alone will not be sufficient to tackle this menace of corruption.

Needless to add, this package needs to be implemented in its entirety, within the constitutional framework of our Republic. The Constitution is the social contract upon which the modern Indian State is founded and it can't be overturned by the wishes of any section, however mighty and strident they may be.

We need to, therefore, fight to eliminate such mega corruption continuously fed by crony capitalism through such a package of measures.

(Sitaram Yechury is CPI(M) Politburo member and Rajya Sabha MP.
The views expressed by the author are personal)

**A governance deficit
India trailing behind many other nations**

B.G. Verghese

WHENEVER there is a little economic wobble, the RBI informs us that the country's "fundamentals are good, but..." The same must be said of the current state of governance, a term that is wider than just government per se. The democratic ethos is well rooted despite flaws and distortions; the country is more united and stable than before; poverty and disparities remain but we are a somewhat better off and less inegalitarian society than before. We are trailing many other nations that took the road to development and modernisation after us. True, but exclude China, and India is at 1220 million and with its myriad diversities, larger than and as or more complex than all of Asia, Africa or Europe or the Americas.

However, the "but" remains and, like a virus, must be eliminated from the system before it consumes the body-politic. A random listing of negative reports over the past fortnight illustrates the point.

False encounter killings have been declared cold-blooded murder by the courts which would punish these with death as "rarest of rare cases". Rajiv Gandhi's killers' mercy pleas have been rejected by the President, 20 years after his assassination and a decade after death sentences were confirmed by the Supreme Court. The Home Ministry has now advised the President to reject the mercy petition of Afzal Guru, involved in the 2002 attack on Parliament House. Why mercy petitions should take many long years to decide and allowed to become a political football defies understanding.

The so-called queueing system for the disposal of mercy petitions seems very bureaucratic and the notion that it is for the government to dispose of petitions and for the President only to announce that verdict appears

perverse. The government may advise, but surely the final decision should rest with the President in her discretion. Disposal should not take more than a few months at most.

The agitations and appeals to courts to stay the screening of Prakash Jha's film "Aarakshan" (Reservations), after clearance by the Film Certification Board, is another case of agitators threatening mob violence and muzzling freedom of expression - films, books, art, anything. Protest is one thing, violence quite another. Should the State cow down to thugs and bullies? The film is not anti-reservation, and arguments that there are no Dalit actors and actresses in Bollywood are no defence to extra-constitutional behaviour even by avowedly disadvantaged and oppressed communities. The SC Commission, which raised some objections (that Jha has said he will address), is a pretty supine body that successive governments have been content to keep that way. The Dalits have a strong case and deserve every sympathy and public support, but censoring films does nobody any good.

Members of the Sachar panel on the Muslim condition in India are fast losing heart that their salient recommendations — an Equal Opportunity Commission and the compilation of a Diversity Index, to target all backward communities with educational and other official promotional efforts — will be implemented any time soon. It appears to have got lost in crude vote-bank politics.

The lingering burden of vicarious "guilt" for the victimhood Hindutva groups still feel as a result of Mohammad Ghouri's invasion, and Partition continues to weigh heavily on Muslim Indians in many parts of the country. The prime victims of the Gujarat pogrom of 2002 were Muslims who continue to be denied justice. The investigations and prosecution of post-Godhra cases were so biased that the National Human Rights Commission and the Supreme Court had repeatedly to intervene to secure a semblance of the due process. But now that exposures are cutting too close to the bone, the Gujarat government has

begun a blatant administrative vendetta against honest officials who stood their ground, spoke the truth before the Nanavati Commission and SIT's, and turned whistle-blowers.

Sanjay Bhatt, Rahul Sharma and other upright IPS officers are now being hounded on frivolous grounds to shield Narendra Modi, around whom the net appears to be closing. The Home Minister has said that should these officers approach the Centre, the Union has the power to intervene, as it is the cadre-controlling authority of all-India service personnel who are also against any undermining of states' rights and federalism. This is an unsustainable argument. One only needs to recall Modi's infamous official broadcast statement over Prasar Bharati days after the holocaust that those who seek peace should not ask for justice. What a Faustian bargain!

Meanwhile, the Surat police is reportedly conducting a census of masjids and madaras in the city, including information on maulvis, students and their denominations, affiliations, visitors and family connections. Hotels, restaurants and cyber cafes are being similarly surveyed. The city's police commissioner says this data bank will enable the authorities swiftly to contact the appropriate person as and when required. This appears a sinister, community-selective survey. A similar survey of Christians was conducted by the BJP government in parts of Madhya Pradesh some time ago. None of these activities appear entirely innocent to the communities concerned.

In Uttar Pradesh, Mayawati's spending spree on refurbishing her residence matches her scandalous extravagance at state expense on memorials and mausoleums to Dalit heroes. She is now busy registering and withdrawing cases to wound or woe MLAs and others and ensure "loyalty".

The BJP continues to pursue various scams - as it should - but is again back to disrupting Parliament and not allowing the two Houses to proceed with the business before them despite being promised time to air

their particular grievances. This is gross abuse of privilege and an assault on parliamentary democracy no less than Afzal Guru's. Worse, on an appeal by UPA floor leaders for cooperation, the BJP's lofty response is that they will decide this issue by issue, day by day.

Having criticised all and sundry in turn, Congress MPs have joined the rest in demanding the restoration of red beacon lights atop their cars to gain the right of way in Delhi in keeping with their exalted status and the urgency of their errands. The poet's comment was that "If everybody got their deserts, then who should escape whipping" !

The molycoddling and ruination of Air India is a sad finale to the story of the once-proud Maharaja. Officials and staff have batted on the airline and brought it to its knees. Air India is best wound up and started afresh under private auspices as a commercial carrier.

The tale of bungling, delays and infructuous expenditure on the Katra-Qazigund Rail Project in J&K now coming out appears to be another case of lack of proper surveys and technical studies , coordination and oversight. Lalu Prasad and Mamta Bannerjee were too busy to notice or care.

As Anna Hazare readies to tilt with windmills in "India's second war of independence", India has got its comeuppance in cricket. Commerce, endorsements, hunts for Bharat Ratnas and individual records and the BCCI's greed overwhelmed every other consideration. Media hype ensured disaster.

This is the time to cure those "buts".

Silent invasion of India

Joginder Singh

Illegal immigration from Pakistan and Bangladesh poses a serious threat to our internal security. Thanks to vote-bank politics, our politicians are indifferent.

Our international border is around 15,318 km long, of which our boundary with Bangladesh is 4,000 km long, running along West Bengal, Assam, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Tripura. It is the Government of India's responsibility to guard the country's international border and prevent foreigners from entering our territory illegally as well as control the entry of those travelling with valid documents. This is a responsibility that the Government has clearly failed to fulfil as was evident from a statement by the Minister of State in the Ministry of Home Affairs: "As per information available, 1,283 Pakistani nationals (who presumably entered India legally) remain untraced/missing as of June 30, 2011."

A month earlier, while replying to a query under the RTI Act in July, the Government had said: "It is not possible to estimate the total number of such foreign nationals, including Pakistani and Bangladeshi nationals, who have entered into the country without valid travel documents and are staying in the country since entry of such foreign nationals into the country is clandestine and surreptitious." The response also added that over 73,000 people from various countries have stayed on even after their visas expired; nearly 50 per cent of these people were from Bangladesh and about 10 per cent were from Pakistan, according to data available as of December 31, 2009. In 1996, the then Union Minister for Home Affairs, Indrajit Gupta, had informed Parliament that over 25 million Bangladeshis were illegally living in India.

The fact remains that despite the threat of cross-border terrorism faced by the country from illegal immigrants, the Ministry of Affairs does not maintain a centralised source of information on people crossing the border to enter India from Pakistan and Bangladesh without valid documents. Except where it suits its own concerns, the Union Government refuses to act even in the face of judicial pronouncement. The Supreme Court held in 2005 that provisions of the Illegal Migrants (Determination by Tribunals) Act of 1983 were *ultra vires* to the Constitution and were accordingly struck down. The Illegal Migrants (Determination by Tribunals) Rules, 1984, were also determined to be *ultra vires* and hence were struck down.

The issue of illegal immigration has and continues to figure in high-level meetings related to internal security. It has figured prominently at the Chief Ministers' Conference on Internal Security and Law and Order held in New Delhi . At this conference serious differences emerged among the north-eastern States on the issue of illegal immigration — some States openly accused Assam of contributing to the mounting problem of illegal immigration in the region.

The then Chief Minister of Nagaland virtually charged Assam with not taking any steps to check illegal immigration from Bangladesh. He said, “Assam has almost become a breeding ground for illegal immigrants as they are procuring documents like ration cards in that State and then coming to the hills. This is very dangerous.” He also claimed that such immigrants were being settled in areas that were under dispute between Assam and several other States. He even urged Assam to settle its decades-long boundary disputes with Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland and Manipur in an accommodative spirit as it was the largest State in the region.

According to a former Governor of Assam, “57 of Assam's 126 constituencies were found to have more than a 20 per cent increase in

the number of voters between 1994 and 1997, whereas the all-India average was just 7.4 per cent.” This dramatic increase indicated the addition of a large number of voters who were really illegal immigrants from Bangladesh. He added that a revision of electoral rolls in Mongoldoi parliamentary constituency in Assam in 1979 detected the names of thousands of Bangladeshi nationals and the entire population of Assam revolted against this development.

The former Governor also felt that without knowing the long-term effects of the issue, Indian Muslims by and large were sympathetic to Bangladeshi immigrants. Thus, the illegal immigrants now have a much larger say in the political affairs of the country. For instance, when the Government of Maharashtra tried to deport a few hundred illegal Bangladeshi immigrants, several parties started a chorus of protests that were politically motivated.

There is a direct relationship between the voting patterns of illegal immigrants and the freebies given by political parties to win their votes in elections. This unholy nexus creates roadblocks at different levels, especially when it comes to checking the continued problem of illegal immigration which also gives rise to the possibility that such elements could possibly become sleeper cells of terrorist organisations and help them launch terror attacks within India.

The truth is that even though all politicians realise the enormity of this problem, their craving for electoral gains and desperation to secure the votes of illegal immigrants make them ignore the imminent dangers of the problem. Politics in our country has become hostage to political expediency which is often disguised as ‘principles’. These ‘principles’ are frequently tailored to suit the occasion.

The trouble is that politicians world over are essentially the same. Most will say anything to get themselves elected to office. Later, they hope that they can escape scrutiny on account of the fact that the people have

a short memory and tend to forget pre-election promises. Thus, all of us who participate in the electoral process (as well as those who don't come out to vote on polling day) are responsible for the rise of bad politicians to power. The time has come to tell people who don't vote that they can't complain about the quality of politicians who are elected to office.

A senior politician who has served as the Speaker of the Lok Sabha once pleaded for identity cards to be given to all people in the North-East, including illegal immigrants from Bangladesh living in Assam. A former Governor of Arunachal Pradesh and West Bengal holds that at least five million Bangladeshis who entered India illegally have settled in Assam. They constitute a fourth of the State's population of 22 million people. According to estimates prepared by the Ministry of Home Affairs and the Intelligence Bureau, Assam's alien population from Bangladesh stands at about four million.

These statistical details not only indicate the magnitude of the problem of illegal immigration but also reflect the enormity of the security threat that the country is facing on account of this. This is apart from the fact that illegal immigration deprives Indian citizens of employment opportunities. All countries, including Western nations, especially the US, ensure and protect their citizens' job opportunities and, unlike our Government, are not apologetic about doing so .

Machiavelli, Hobbes and others have defined man as a lump of matter whose most politically relevant attribute is a form of energy called "self-interestedness." In this context, it means that the issue is simply not one of changing religious demographics or illegal immigration; it is not about being remorseful or repentant for taking a stand wherein we do not protect our own self-interests. As the former Australian Prime Minister, Mr Gough Whitlam, once said: "The punters know that the horse named Morality rarely gets past the winning post, whereas the horse named Self-Interest always runs a good race." The Government should know one horse from another!

India's road to redemption

Gautam Mukherjee

The dissonance being experienced today springs from a society and nation in the throes of growing up. Our elected representatives have to be more responsive.

In corporate life, it is a taboo to make public forward-looking statements with regard to the affairs of the company. The fear is that it will cause sharp-hearing punters and investors to trade on the listed stock of the company based on such pronouncements, provide a straws-in-the-wind reckoning on which way it is likely to lean in the future and what profits could be made by speculating on such inclination. If the company is not listed yet, such statements might be seen as manipulation of investor interest for the future.

In the West, ravaged as their financial markets are by pirate-like excesses, and in India, buffeted by destabilising foreign winds, the procedure, admired once for the Gordon Gekko-style derring-do it showed, is now anathema. 'Insider trading' attracts criminal prosecution. If convicted, it tends to get the guilty fairly long jail sentences too.

Plus, there are hierarchical niceties which specify who is or isn't an 'authorised spokesperson', and just what he or she is authorised to speak or issue written statements on. Even the top brass is not immune to such restrictions on the principle a person always has to serve somebody. Of course, a person can feign ignorance of lowly operational matters when it suits him or her, but that is quite another matter.

Then again, all the information and persuasive pitching amount to an attempt at opinion-formation, which is also the objective of the media and their not so distant cousins, the politicians. The well-reasoned messaging seeks to influence, via the medium of the written or spoken word, timed well and accompanied wherever possible by the good picture.

Otherwise, it is just so much reportage, and though it is eminently possible to slant reports to suit a person's worldview, editorials in newspapers and talking heads on television channels provide a rather freer format. For long has it been known that fancy oratory can certainly give birth to the occasional good idea.

Politics, with its proximity to power via the electronic voting machine, has the inside track on this declamatory process in theory, necessary for that all-important gathering of votes, along with a liberal use of monetary and other inducements. But it is seen that a lot of the political messaging in India of late has been about feint and parry, essentially defensive manoeuvre, minimalist in scope and very little by way of the expected thrust of true leadership and the grand sweep of vision.

Our Prime Minister, for example, seems reluctant to voice his opinions altogether, as if expecting to be ridiculed in the midst of his chaotic governance. When he comes out to speak to the public or the media, he gives the clear impression that he is doing so under pressure from the Congress. In this prevailing climate of drift, most committed commentators sound like apologists of either the UPA or the Opposition as the case may be, or indeed the Left, which uniquely manages to appear opposed to whatever is going on, irrespective of whether it is formally supporting the Government or not.

All this caginess as the prevailing order makes for a dreary narrative that rarely takes the India story or plot-line forward for the hopeful. That we are going through tough economic times both at home and globally does

not help either. Civil society comes across, alas, as mostly naïve, with a great deal of fury and thunder that still isn't tantamount to effective intervention, though Anna Hazare, with his simple and short sound bytes, may prove this perception wrong yet. At least he, along with his supporters, growing more numerous by the day, is trying to do something to clean up the mess. For that intention and effort Anna Hazare and his supporters deserve appreciation from those who do far less.

To carry the corporate analogy further, politics does not actually destabilise the polity with its manifestoes, however radical, even though most are rarely implemented. Election promises too are largely forgotten once a party is in power. But the fact remains that a great deal of governance is about policy-making and its implementation and has to be both continuous and viewed from a long-term perspective.

In a democracy, to find a Government that seems to say nothing at all about its future direction is both disappointing and distressing. Nothing that is, apart from occasional probing comments pronounced by the more quixotic among its spokespersons, aimed at shoring up its perceived vote-banks and trashing the Opposition. There is also the tactical ploy of taking recourse to routine and boring denials in stoic counterpoint to the criticism of the populace, the media, the judiciary and, of course, the Opposition.

Combined with a dysfunctional parliamentary session or two, even as it will be interesting to see how the political classes handle the current monsoon session in the end, the picture of rudderless drift and insouciant unresponsiveness is more or less complete. Not to mention the huge legislative backlog suffering from unforgivable neglect. Juxtaposed with a politician's natural urge to be economical with the truth, it makes the case for disinformation in place of transparency that much stronger.

Which brings us to the central point of the diminished quality of our

democratic discourse. We have parliamentarians and State legislators who, like so many loutish schoolboys, do not uphold the grand traditions of parliamentary democracy, but instead trash them in full public gaze and media spotlight. We have institutions, set up by our founding fathers to be vigilant against subversion of the workings of Government, ruthlessly compromised by political interference — to the extent that they are more or less beholden to the Government of the day. A bureaucracy that is disconnected and suffering from the same malaise as the institutions. A judiciary, corrupt in parts and overburdened to the extent that it can barely dispense justice.

So where do we go from here? Is it the abyss of failure to implement the grand vision of the founding fathers of our republic, or are we on the verge of a renewal and modernisation in our functioning that will give us new hope and determination to succeed in the future?

It could go either way of course, but the balance of power seems in favour of an electorate growing more sophisticated in its needs and wants. Much of the dissonance being experienced today springs from a society and nation in the throes of growing up. Therefore, the elected representatives in our young republic will have to respond to this new and more demanding reality or be replaced by others who are more attuned to the times we live in and willing to do so.

Yesterday's PM

Sudheendra Kulkarni

What a sorry figure the Prime Minister and his government cut last week! This newspaper's front-page headline on Wednesday—'Anna arrests govt'—said it all. Never before in independent India, had any central government suffered the humiliation of being brought to its knees on account of its own arrogant and unbelievably stupid action. India Gate in New Delhi, with all the mighty symbols of state power in its vicinity, has witnessed many mammoth political rallies in the past. But never before, was there such a spontaneous outpouring of non-political protesters as was seen on Wednesday evening, agitating against the high-handed and patently undemocratic arrest of Anna Hazare. Similar protests erupted all over the country. Chastened by the shock treatment administered by the aam aadmi, the government quickly retraced its steps and allowed Anna to begin his indefinite fast against corruption. Had it not done so, Dr Manmohan Singh's government would have been gasping for breath by now.

There is a basic lesson that many politicians in power simply refuse to learn. Indian people have a lot of tolerance for corruption, but they have zero-tolerance for arrogance. Dr Singh and his advisors thought that obstinate Anna needed to be taught a lesson. Now, they have been taught a lesson by the angry Indian Street. They should know that India of 2011 is not India of 1975, when people's democratic rights were suppressed and tens of thousands of anti-government activists, including venerable leaders like Jayaprakash Narayan, were sent to jail, many of them for 19 long months.

UPA II's crisis is entirely of its own making. In the course of the prolonged national debate on the Lokpal Bill, Dr Singh could have

persuasively explained to the people of India that bringing the Prime Minister and, more importantly, the higher judiciary within the purview of the Lokpal was neither desirable nor crucially necessary to combat corruption. He could have taken the Opposition into confidence by saying that the authority of the Prime Minister and the independence of the higher judiciary must be safeguarded. He could have easily won this argument against Anna and his team by telling them, and also the nation at large, that the proposed anti-corruption ombudsman can be made strong and effective without disturbing the sanctity of the Constitutional architecture. Sincerely acknowledging the several good points in the Jan Lokpal Bill (such as operational independence of the CBI), Dr Singh could have assured Team Anna that these points would be incorporated in the government's own bill. On a parallel track, he could have reached out to both political and civil society establishments to solicit their suggestions on a more comprehensive set of anti-corruption reforms, including the funding of elections, which is the main source of political corruption in India. If, after all these exertions by the Prime Minister, Anna had still chosen to press for the adoption of his own Jan Lokpal Bill, and resorted to an indefinite fast, his unreasonableness would have isolated him from the common people. Today, the PM stands isolated, also weak, wounded and defeated.

Why didn't Dr Singh follow this most non-controversial and self-evidently beneficial path? The answer is simple. He is a Prime Minister without the authority of a Prime Minister. And those who wield effective power in the UPA government, have neither the maturity nor genuine commitment to the principles and ethos of democracy to engage the nation in a sincere dialogue leading to consensual action.

The Prime Minister finds himself shackled by yet another internal constraint. He is simply in no position either to prevent corruption in his own government and party, or to take timely action against those whose scandals have hit the headlines with hurtful regularity. At least one

major reason for the handicap he suffers from is that he himself was a direct beneficiary of the shameful ‘cash-for-votes’ scandal in July 2008, in which Opposition MPs were paid huge bribes in order to ensure the survival of UPA I. Because of his inaction and also the enlarging taint of scam on his own hands, Dr Singh’s sanctimonious Independence Day peroration about the government’s resolve to fight corruption convinced nobody. By sending a widely respected anti-corruption crusader like Anna Hazare to Tihar Jail the very next day, his morally disabled government only managed to convert cynicism into outrage.

It is difficult to see how Dr Singh can heal his self-inflicted wounds. He already looks yesterday’s Prime Minister. He will have to pay the price for his government’s collusive protection of corruption, made worse by its blunder of first arresting, without any provocation, the leader of a peaceful agitation and then sending him to the same jail where several high-profile scamsters have been lodged. The fact that neither he, nor any of his colleagues, showed any remorse for their bungle in the debate in Parliament—rather they justified it—has only compounded their collective guilt. If they have any capacity for introspection left, they should ask themselves why lakhs of common Indians, all united under only one flag, the tricolour, have jumped into what is turning out to be the biggest nonviolent mass movement India has seen in a long time.

The ongoing developments also show that even Opposition parties, BJP in particular, do not have their finger on the pulse of the people. What prevented the BJP from removing its corrupt chief minister in Karnataka before Santosh Hegde’s report forced its hands? This, clearly, is time for the entire political establishment to do some real soul-searching.

The Other Half - Another India, another protest

Kalpana Sharma

Lone battle: Irom Sharmila, force-fed and kept alive by the State. Photo: The Hindu Photo Library

While the farcical drama around Anna Hazare's protest and arrest has hogged the limelight, Irom Sharmila's indefinite fast since 2000 to get the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) repealed continues to be ignored by the nation and the media...

A day after Indians 'celebrated' Independence Day by following the annual ritual of hoisting the flag, singing the national anthem and patriotic songs and listening to politicians, including the Prime Minister, talk about the strengths of Indian democracy, the police cracked down on a much-celebrated campaigner against corruption, Anna Hazare and his team.

The drama that followed his arrest and that of others in his team, the growing protests, the late night release and then Anna's refusal to be released was not just farcical; it was a pitiful display of a government with no respect for people's right to protest and no strategy to deal with those who demand that right. In one day, the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government managed to unite the opposition. Even those who do not subscribe to every aspect of Hazare's campaign, such as his demand that only his team's formulation of the Lok Pal Bill be accepted, strongly condemned the government's actions. On August 16, Anna Hazare successfully "arrested" the UPA government.

Ignored

Yet even as Hazare's anti-corruption crusade gained momentum with hundreds courting voluntary arrest, in another part of India, a protestor who has used a similar tactic, of going on an indefinite fast, continues to be ignored by the rest of the country and by the political leadership.

Given the issue — rooting out corruption — and the mobilisation of groups in big cities across India, as well as the concerted media attention, some might consider it irrelevant to talk about a corner of the country where a lone woman continues her fight against the truly undemocratic Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) imposed on Manipur that has made life a living hell for the ordinary people of that State.

Indeed, when the rest of India — barring, of course, the Kashmir Valley — celebrated Independence Day, the scene in Manipur was strikingly different. Pradip Phanjoubam, Editor of the Imphal Free Press, wrote this moving opening paragraph in his editorial on August 15 titled, “State of Independence”:

“On the eve of the India's Independence Day, Imphal is acquiring the look of a war front. The scenario is not too different in other townships in Manipur as indeed in much of the Northeast. It has almost become a ritual every year. Various militant organisations would call for a boycott of the celebration of what is arguably the biggest and most important day in the country's history and in response the provincial governments would virtually stage flag marches to demonstrate the power of the establishment and push its way without being deterred by any threat whatsoever. Uniformed gun totting security personnel are on every corner of the streets frisking people, stopping motorists, checking their vehicles, questioning them etc. As expected, even a week before the big day approached, Imphal already began wearing a deserted look, especially after sunset. People return home early so as not to be accosted by security men and go through the humiliation of being made to stand on the side of the roads to be frisked and questioned like potential

trouble makers. The ordinary people are supposed to be mere bystanders in this war game, but every time tensions escalate in moments like this, they have no choice than to be prepared to be the undeserved casualties, and sometimes become statistics of 'collateral damage', the well known sugar-coating aimed at making civilian killing and harassment seem like necessary and pardonable fallout of a conflict.”

Yes, Imphal is a long way from our relatively comfortable lives in cities in the rest of India, even if our lives are disrupted by the occasional power outage, by water shortage, by pot-holes on our roads, by inflation, and by the government deciding to deny those so inclined the right to protest. But Manipur is also India. Yet, here people live without electricity for most of the day, even in the capital city. Here, the areas with a sufficient water supply would probably be only those where the government and the army reside. Here, people are afraid to go out after dark and markets close as soon as the sun sets. Here, men with arms, the security forces and the various groups of militants, run the show. Here, 'democracy' seems a theoretical construct, certainly not a lived reality.

Beacon of hope

And here, since November 2000, a 38-year-old woman, Irom Sharmila, has been on an indefinite fast demanding withdrawal of AFSPA. She is under arrest and is being force-fed by the government in a public hospital in Imphal. Every year she is released, and then re-arrested. Yet, this woman of unimaginable courage will simply not give up. And by holding on to her resolve, she holds up a small candle of hope for the people of her state. A hope that people will notice, that her determination will be recognised, that the current government, which in its earlier term had promised to look again at AFSPA, will not break one more promise.

We have forgotten that a year after the UPA government first took office in 2004, it set up a five-member committee headed by retired Supreme Court judge B. P. Jeevan Reddy. The committee recommended, amongst

other things, a withdrawal of AFSPA. So Sharmila's demand is not unreasonable; a government-appointed committee has endorsed it. But the recommendation was given more than six years ago. Yet today, the security forces continue to enjoy the right to act with impunity, while the citizens of Manipur, who are also citizens of India, live without many fundamental rights guaranteed to them under our Constitution.

Anna Hazare's campaign, in the national capital and in full media glare, is premised on scepticism about the government's intent on the matter of dealing with corruption. But Sharmila has even a greater reason for scepticism given the absence of any movement on a recommendation that has been before the government for so many years.

If we are concerned about freedom, about democratic rights, about the right to protest, let us also remember other protests, other parts of India where democratic rights are being denied. Let us remember Sharmila.

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