

# Anna Hazare and the Idea of Gandhi<sup>1</sup>

MITU SENGUPTA

IN AUGUST 2011, INDIA was in the headlines due to an anti-corruption hunger strike that played upon Gandhi's legacy of civil disobedience and mass protest. The strike was initiated by a short, bespectacled, 74-year-old man called Anna Hazare to protest the government's new anticorruption legislation, which Hazare said was too weak. Hazare's call for a strong anticorruption Lokpal (ombudsman) had slowly gained momentum in the first half of 2011, when the self-styled Gandhian had collected a sizeable following. But it was Hazare's unexpected arrest on the eve of the August hunger strike that pushed him into the limelight, sparking candlelit marches across the country. A shaken government ordered his release in less than twelve hours, but in stunning turn-around, Hazare refused to leave and began his "fast unto death" in Delhi's notorious Tihar Jail, South Asia's largest high-security prison.

Hazare walked out of Tihar four days later, a national hero. He lodged himself on the expansive grounds of Delhi's Ramlila Maidan, surrounded by thousands of supporters, a sea of national flags, and a mammoth portrait of Gandhi. He refused to eat for eight more days, ending his fast only when the Indian parliament had passed an unprecedented "sense of the house" resolution that relented to some of his key demands.

Tens of thousands of people poured into the streets of Delhi, celebrating what they deemed a "people's victory." The national media covered his triumph breathlessly, claiming that Hazare, like Gandhi, had spoken for the "common man." (Hazare was subsequently named "man of the year" by the influential NDTV.) The international press was also duly impressed. *Time Magazine* listed the Ramlila protests as among the top ten events of 2011, while *Foreign Policy* counted Hazare among the year's "top 100 global thinkers."<sup>2</sup> The U.S.-based *The Atlantic* ran an overwhelmingly positive two-part feature on Hazare,<sup>3</sup> applauding

Mitu Sengupta (msengupta@gmail.com) is Associate Professor in the Department of Politics and Public Administration at Ryerson University.

<sup>1</sup>This article has been developed from my "Anna Hazare and the Gandhian Ideal," *Dissent Magazine*, August 23, 2011.

<sup>2</sup>"The FP Top 100 Global Thinkers," *Foreign Policy*, December 2011, [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/11/28/the\\_fp\\_top\\_100\\_global\\_thinkers?page=0,30](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/11/28/the_fp_top_100_global_thinkers?page=0,30) (accessed March 28, 2012).

<sup>3</sup>Jon Sawyer and Kem Knapp Sawyer, "Bigger Than Protest: Anna Hazare's Transformative Plan for India," *The Atlantic*, December 7, 2011, <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2011/12/bigger-than-protest-anna-hazares-transformative-plan-for-india/249572> (accessed March 28, 2012).

his humble origins, numerous citations and awards, and selfless, environmentally conscious development work in Ralegan Siddhi, his family's ancestral village. (Hazare took up residence in Ralegan Siddhi in 1975, upon being discharged from the army, where he had served as an ordinary soldier and truck driver.)

But despite his subaltern profile and generally credible record as an activist, it was evident that Hazare had acquired many detractors, especially within progressive circles, where one would expect the idea of a "new Gandhi," arisen from the masses, to be well received. Hazare's critics pointed to his authoritarian past, one where he had advocated the death penalty for corruption, public flogging for alcoholism, and forced vasectomies for checking population growth. Concerns emerged about Hazare's dependence on a slick team of (decidedly un-Gandhian) advisers, such as the former warden of Tihar Jail, Kiran Bedi, and about his praise for Gujarat's controversial Chief Minister Narendra Modi, a prominent leader of the Hindu Nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

Hazare's open admiration for Modi, who is said to have abetted the anti-Muslim riots in Gujarat in 2002, alienated him from religious minorities, with some leaders, such as the imam of Delhi's Jama Masjid, Syed Ahmed Bukhari, calling for a boycott of the movement. Due to his criticism of state-sponsored, caste-based affirmative action policies, furthermore, lower castes regarded Hazare with suspicion, if not contempt. India's lively world of social movements and trade unions also remained unmoved. Indeed, left-wing intellectuals, such as Arundhati Roy and Prabhat Patnaik, wrote a string of scathing articles about Hazare, summing up his movement as a middle-class, upper-caste phenomenon dangerously tinged with Hindu nationalism.

Admirers of Gandhi are understandably troubled by the comparisons of Hazare with Gandhi, relentlessly propagated by the media, Hazare's supporters, and Hazare himself. In a country where the idea of Mahatma ("Great Soul") Gandhi remains sacrosanct, such comparisons are provocative, designed to command attention and stir debate, and it is tempting to dismiss the exercise as no more than a clever political ploy. As I suggest in this essay, however, this is not simply a matter of style over substance. The repeated references to Gandhi speak to what the Hazare movement wanted to be, and to the transformative potential of what transpired in those turbulent months of August 2011. But if the idea of Gandhi is an end as much as it is a political means, has Hazare succeeded in approaching the vision of the one and only?

#### HAZARE, ON CORRUPTION

It is evident, from his interviews and speeches, that Hazare views corruption as the result of unchecked human greed. There is no further analysis. Gandhi too stressed the importance of personal ethics: "Be the change you want to see in the world" is one of his best-remembered axioms. But Gandhi's understanding of

why humans err was more profound, his diagnosis more structural. For Gandhi, personal greed had a wider social context, and was also rooted in the unethical choices and practices of the state. Gandhi would surely condemn India's bitter scourge of corruption, were he alive today. Unlike Hazare, however, he would demand a more systemic answer to a more preliminary question: How did this come to pass?

The character of corruption in India has not changed over time, though its magnitude certainly has. Conventional wisdom might suggest that the corruption that afflicts India today is a vestige of the widespread corruption of the state-centered economy, which preceded the liberalizing reforms of 1991. Yet many of the worst cases of corruption in recent years are born out of deregulation, privatization, and the fostering of public-private partnerships—the very processes that were meant to reduce the discretionary powers of public officials. An example is the notorious “2G spectrum scam,” in which cell phone licenses were sold for a fraction of their value, resulting in the loss of a staggering \$39 billion to the national exchequer.

From a Gandhian perspective, such continuity is not surprising. Liberalization did not transform the core objectives of the state, only its methods and instruments. India still follows what Gandhi fundamentally opposed: a master-narrative of growth-at-all-cost that is at odds with the goal of a more equitable and ecologically conscious society. India remains wedded to a high modernist development paradigm that traps it, as always, in a race to “catch up” with the West and, more recently, with China. There are repercussions to competing in this heady game of global one-upmanship: eagerness to jump the proverbial queue by any means possible, great impatience with those who choose not to participate (such as environmentalists and indigenous peoples), and intolerance of dissent and “messy politics” more generally. The newly affluent middle classes galvanized by Hazare—the business and corporate leaders who financed his campaign—are particularly guilty of such insensitivity and display an alarming readiness to engage in corruption.

One might ask how serious Hazare's core supporters are about fighting corruption when their primary instinct is to ignore or quash protest, especially when it bubbles up around the dream of “catching up.” A recent example will illustrate this point. In early August 2011, India's state auditor released its final report on the 2010 Commonwealth Games. The 744-page document revealed that the games, held in Delhi, were not only unjustifiably expensive (with a price tag of \$4.1 billion), but also immensely corrupt (some \$1.6 billion is said to have gone missing). But in many ways, the auditor's review was unsurprising. In the years leading up to the games, hundreds of human rights advocates, student groups, and independent activists expressed concern about the “mega-event.” Slum dwellers were being evicted. Environmental norms were being violated. There were many signs of fraud. Hazare's middle-class supporters, who later expressed shock and outrage at the auditor's report, heeded none of these signs. Rather, as the games drew closer, the event was touted as one that would finally affirm India's “world class” status, and critics were dismissed as unpatriotic killjoys.

This is not to say that the Indian middle classes, estimated to be 300 million strong, have no material basis for their complaints, or that they do not recognize that corruption is rampant in both the public and private sectors of the economy. School principals will ask for a “donation” before they admit your child. Passport officials will direct you to fee-charging “agents” in return for clearing your file. If you would like a copy of your birth certificate, you will have to give *baksheesh* (tips). If you would like a company to award you a contract for changing the light bulbs in its office, you had better be prepared to offer a “cut” to a lower administrator, or he will make sure his boss never hears of your bid. The middle class is by no means an insignificant victim of corruption. Its suffering cannot compare, however, to the miseries endured by the poor: the loss of income and livelihood when government officials and private developers conspire to cheat farmers of their land; the hunger when subsidized food, meant for the poor, is siphoned off and sold on the open market; the missed opportunities when teachers, employed by government schools, take up private tuition instead of delivering their classes.

Hazare and his advisory team have been quiet on a range of recent developments, such as illegal mining and the land acquisition process for special economic zones, in which corruption hurts poor farmers, fisherfolk, and indigenous communities rather than well-heeled urbanites. Reckless and rapacious economic transformations have proceeded unchecked, even as Hazare has prayed, fasted, and stressed the virtues of vegetarianism, celibacy, and teetotaling. Gandhi would surely have been critical of such unwillingness to connect personal ideals of moral living with a broader vision of social and environmental justice. One might recall that, while Gandhi curried favor with wealthy business elites—a strategy that earned him enduring opprobrium from the communist left—his primary base of support was always the rural poor, in whose service he advocated a smaller-scale and more ecologically conscious road to development than the one India ultimately adopted. Hazare, in contrast, has yet to formulate a position that challenges the larger objectives of his financiers and middle-class, upper-caste following.

It is unreasonable, of course, to expect the average protester to be armed with an erudite analysis of the state and the economy. Gandhi would have resisted such banal elitism. The responsibility rests with Hazare and his advisors—dubbed “Team Anna” by journalists—who must strive harder to connect the problem of corruption with its root causes and push the movement beyond its issue-based nature. Unfortunately, in the year that has passed, there has been no shift of consequence in Hazare’s discourse on corruption, which continues to be framed as a moral question, above all else.

#### HAZARE, ON THE LOKPAL

If Hazare’s diagnosis of the problem of corruption is un-Gandhian, so is his prescription of a Leviathan-like Lokpal, which is based on the concept of

“ombudsman” in Western democracies. While Gandhi would probably not worry about the monitoring of elected representatives by a Lokpal, he would surely raise questions about, if not oppose, the creation of another colossal and centralized institution of the state, over which ordinary citizens appear to have little control. The nine-member Lokpal bench proposed by Hazare’s Jan Lokpal Bill would comprise former judges, former bureaucrats, and other “persons of eminence in public life,” thus ceding enormous powers to “experts” cut off from the grassroots.

The immediate reason for Hazare’s hunger strike in August 2011 was a bitter dispute between the government and Team Anna over which version of the Lokpal Bill the parliament should accept. Despite apparent differences, however, the government and Hazare held the same technocratic approach to reducing corruption, centered on correcting individual behavior, and ceding power to a nonelected body. The government’s bill differed from Hazare’s not in terms of basic design, but in terms of questions such as who could be investigated by the Lokpal (Hazare wanted the prime minister, the government did not), who would select the nine-member bench (Hazare wanted more “civil society” people, the government wanted more government people), the sorts of investigatory powers the Lokpal would enjoy (Hazare wanted wiretaps, the government did not), and whether “whistleblowers” would be protected by the law (Hazare wanted a guarantee that they would, the government did not).

While the government’s bill called for a weaker Lokpal than did Hazare’s, both imagined the Lokpal as a policing institution with considerable influence. An anti-corruption route more in keeping with Gandhian principles is that of the National Campaign for People’s Right to Information (NCPRI). The NCPRI’s approach more genuinely empowers ordinary citizens by recognizing that they are entitled to a transparent and accountable government. Under the Right to Information Act (2005)—passed by the Indian parliament in response to pressure from the NCPRI—any citizen can ask to review the government’s records and documents. The NCPRI has also created space for the voicing of grassroots concerns, through locally grounded mechanisms such as Jan Sunwais (public hearings).

Sadly though, for purist Gandhians, the grassroots approach to solving corruption has been secondary to the demand for a strong, autonomous, and quasi-judicial Lokpal, even within the world of NGOs and social movements. The government, opposition parties, and broad swathes of civil society, including the NCPRI, have embraced the idea, though they diverge on the potential powers, terms, and composition of such an office (lower-caste parties, for example, would like their communities adequately represented), and on the nature and scope of supplementary reforms. Hazare is thus not alone in his distance from Gandhi when it comes to the demand for a robust, top-down ombudsman. He has exceeded most others, furthermore, in his pursuit of supplementary reforms, such as (most recently) the inclusion of a “right to reject option” in electronic voting machines.

## HAZARE, THE MOVEMENT

When it comes to the movement inspired by Hazare, and its characterization by the government, the comparison with Gandhi starts to make sense. Hazare's willingness to sacrifice himself for a cause is indeed a Gandhian principle and strategy, and given the history of India's anti-colonial movement, the government's depiction of Hazare's hunger strike as "illegal suicide" was disingenuous, if not worse. Also unconvincing was the government's justification of Hazare's arrest in the name of "law and order," its description of Hazare's supporters as "armchair fascists, overground Maoists and closet anarchists," and its portrayal of Hazare as personally corrupt (embarrassing for the government, an official inquiry soon exonerated him). Even those with a rudimentary understanding of Indian history will know that these were precisely the sorts of arguments the British used to counter Gandhi.

The government's argument that Hazare presented a threat to parliamentary democracy was also not credible. Even at his most belligerent—when he insisted that the parliament discuss his version of the Lokpal Bill over that of the government—Hazare was hardly a dangerous insurgent. He was not calling for regime change. Nor was he disputing the parliament's authority to make laws. Moreover, even if Hazare's ideas were truly revolutionary (which they are not), the concept of parliamentary supremacy is not absolute. What about popular sovereignty, the political principle that the legitimacy of the state is created by the will and consent of its people, who are ultimately the source of all political power? According to this ideal, the distrust of government is healthy, and it is the duty of citizens to monitor their elected representatives.

Many important changes would have not occurred had lawmakers been left to their own devices to enact just laws. People such as Gandhi, Susan B. Anthony, and the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. had to challenge and breach existing laws in order to pave the way for better ones. Perhaps Hazare, too, will be remembered for forcing open doors when no one else would—for jolting India into starting a countrywide discussion on corruption, of a scale that small, locally rooted civil society groups could not possibly hope to initiate. Team Anna could certainly pave the way for change on a grand scale by building a multifaceted and inclusive alliance against corruption, not only individual acts of corruption by unethical public servants, but also processes that have precipitated some of the most injurious forms of corruption, such as unregulated mining by private companies. In the year that has passed, has it succeeded in doing so?

During the Ramlila protests, there were hopeful signs that such a transformation was underway. Within a week of his fast, Hazare had broadened his demands beyond corruption to issues such as farmers' rights to land, the rights of laborers to humane conditions of work, and even nuclear nonproliferation. He acquired important allies, such as social activist Medha Patkar, who is known for her guiding role in the Narmada Bachao Andolan, a social movement



opposed to the construction of an ecologically destructive mega-dam on the Narmada River. Patkar is also a key organizer of the National Alliance for People's Movements (NAPM), a broad alliance of social movements that has resisted various initiatives of the postliberalization state through the use of Gandhian means. Patkar's steadfast support has lent the Hazare movement a measure of credibility that other high-profile allies (Bollywood stars and sports personalities) cannot possibly provide.

The role of Aruna Roy, a prominent leader of the NCPRI, is also worthy of mention. While Roy refused to condone Hazare's fast-unto-death, which she saw as an arm-twisting tactic "derisive" of democratic institutions, she endorsed his demand for a strong Lokpal and shared many of Hazare's criticisms of the government's Lokpal Bill. Roy's version of the bill—dubbed by the press as a "third way" of sorts—was similar to Hazare's, the main exception being her suggestion that the Lokpal comprise several separate institutions, rather than one, looming monolith. Furthermore, Roy provided a crucial measure of support to Team Anna in its final hours of negotiations with the government by endorsing three issues, pressed by Hazare, that were prolonging the standoff. Roy's intervention is said to have made a difference, pushing the government to relent to Hazare's demands with a "sense of the house" motion.

Another reason for optimism during the Ramlila protests was that Hazare's following no longer seemed confined to the urban middle class and the Hindu upper caste. Major civil society groups, including the NAPM, pledged support to Hazare, as did hundreds of students' groups, farmers' groups, senior citizens' societies, sex workers' unions, taxi drivers' unions, and small vendors' associations. Mumbai's *dabbawallas*, for example, went on strike for the first time in 120 years to protest Hazare's arrest. (*Dabbawallas* are a unique service industry in Mumbai and other large metropolises in India: they deliver boxed lunches—*dabbas*—to office workers in the inner city.) Furthermore, while the leaders of lower-caste and religious minority groups generally steered clear of Hazare, many ordinary Dalits, Muslims, and Christians poured into Ramlila to offer support to Hazare and his cause. (Dalit, which means "suppressed," is a self-designation for lower castes traditionally known as "untouchable.")

As I picked my way through the jam-packed grounds of Ramlila Maidan on Wednesday, August 24, 2011—20,000 people are said to have shown up—I was struck by the crowd's diversity, at least in terms of class and generation. Young urbanites wearing jeans and sunglasses mingled with gray-haired farmers in traditional Indian garb and bare feet. An atmosphere of calm prevailed despite much loud sloganeering and generally lax security. (I have had more trouble getting into Delhi's malls.) My companions and I spoke with farmers, who complained of relatives languishing in jail for daring to oppose the government's land acquisition policies. We spoke to students, who despaired that there would be no good jobs when their degrees were done. A group of women lamented the ever-increasing rate of inflation, which was compromising their children's well-being.

While these complaints were not articulated in a systematic way, and the flag-waving bursts of patriotism were alarming at times, it was clear that injustice, in the broadest sense, was on everyone's minds. The experience left me with the impression that Hazare's "one-man show," as it was derisively labeled by critics, had turned into an authentically broad-based mass movement. Hazare will never be Gandhi, of course, but in those turbulent days of August, the movement inspired by Hazare had begun to approximate the Gandhian ideals of empathy, inclusiveness, and systemic change. Hazare's immediate demand—the passage of the Jan Lokpal Bill—seemed of minor import in the face of the tremendous possibilities at hand. When those tense days of brinkmanship were over, however, the ground shifted again.

In the year since the Ramlila protests, Anna Hazare's anti-corruption movement appears to have lost steam. Plagued by internal divisions and Hazare's declining health, it has had to contend with the damaging allegation that it is but a mouthpiece for the BJP, which leads the opposition at the center, and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, an ultra-nationalist paramilitary organization that caters primarily to middle-class Hindu males. A three-day hunger strike, organized by Hazare in Mumbai at the end of December 2011, was called off within twenty-four hours. Hazare's deteriorating health was cited as the reason for aborting the fast, but skeptics said that Team Anna had been too rattled by the thin crowds in Mumbai to have continued. People had lost some passion for the cause, it was said, because the government no longer seemed entirely recalcitrant after the showdown in August. Indeed, following a dramatic debate that was televised nationally, the lower house of parliament passed a Lokpal Bill on the very night before Hazare's Mumbai hunger strike. Although Hazare was quick to reject the new legislation, a mood of optimism had taken hold (the bill did not clear the upper house, however, as the parliament's winter session was adjourned without a vote). The debacle in Mumbai had also proved, it was said, that Hazare's anti-corruption crusade is a Delhi-centric phenomenon, and has little relevance in the states, where the politics of region, religion, language, and caste reign supreme. The facts do seem to fit this theory. During Ramlila, Hazare had boasted that political parties opposing his version of the Lokpal Bill would be drubbed at the polls. Yet in many states, including the mammoth Uttar Pradesh, political parties that had resisted Hazare's demands were swept to power, often with healthy majorities.

Team Anna's reputation of being a front for the BJP has turned out to be particularly destructive at the state level, where tensions over religion and caste run high, and where the BJP is a much-reviled political entity among minorities and lower castes. Team Anna has denied the charge, pointing out, for example, that Hazare's regard for Narendra Modi's economic success has been tempered by his criticism of the Gujarat government's anticorruption efforts. But Hazare's unrelenting ire for the ruling Congress party, and the fact that many rank-and-file supporters of the movement have campaigned for BJP candidates in state and



municipal elections, have made the reputation of partisanship a well-deserved one. (*Open Magazine*, a popular weekly in India, ran a feature on Hazare in February 2012 titled “BJP’s Team B.”)<sup>4</sup> In a country where elections are the lifeblood of the body politic, it is perhaps unavoidable for social movements to be drawn into party politics. Yet the costs of doing so are typically high, as the impression of partisanship tends to undermine claims to universality and inclusiveness.

The challenge before Hazare is immense. Unlike Gandhi, he must grapple with a fragmented party system, not to mention frequent elections at different levels of the political system. In the years to come, Team Anna will have to navigate the difficult terrain of contemporary Indian politics, striking a balance between opposing the government, without which it will not get the Lokpal it wants, and maintaining a semblance of political neutrality, without which it will lose its moral authority. In many ways, Hazare and his advisers will have to return to the proverbial drawing board, to reflect on how the idea of Gandhi may be translated into political victory in a postcolonial and postglobalization India. One of Hazare’s top advisers, Arvind Kejriwal, has said as much in a public letter that acknowledged the movement is at “a crossroads” and needs the people’s guidance. The letter, which was published in the *Times of India* in January 2012, also declares that the movement is not “anti-Congress.” It is perhaps with this in mind that Hazare has extended his demand for a strong Lokpal Bill to 2014, the year of the next general elections. In the months until then, he has said, he will campaign across the country, raising awareness about the need for an effective Lokpal, but never seeking power.

<sup>4</sup>Dhirendra K. Jha, “BJP’s Team B,” *Open*, February 11, 2012, <http://www.openthemagazine.com/article/nation/bjp-s-team-b> (accessed March 28, 2012).