

# Seminar

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## Comment

### 'India' against corruption

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THE recently concluded large scale protest triggered by Anna Hazare's indefinite fast on the Jan Lokpal Bill issue arguably had a distinctive urban middle class support base. The protest showed the resolve of the urban middle classes (upper/lower) to undertake a cleansing act emanating from their moral concern for growing corruption in the existing state and political institutions. It also revealed their distinctive lack of confidence in the political class across party divides. The capitulation of an otherwise recalcitrant government and opposition in the Parliament, as it finally agreed to accept the core demands of the campaign, duly exhibited the growing clout of the middle classes in India's democracy. As with 'corruption in high places' at the moment, the political drive to 'cleanse' the system in the coming months as proposed by 'civil society' (read Anna team) is likely to compel the political regime to focus with greater alacrity on issues that are of utmost concern to the largely discontented middle classes in a rapidly urbanizing India.

The protest raised two pertinent questions that need to be explored. First, how does one make sense of the growing trust deficit among the urban middle classes in the entire political class and, more importantly, in the formal democratic institutions and the procedures which enjoy constitutional sanction and have endured all these years despite grave challenges? Second, how does one make sense of the keenness of the political class as a whole or more specifically the two polity-wide coalition making parties, the Congress and BJP, to not alienate the middle classes, come what may. The question assumes significance given the middle classes' relative lack of 'presence' in numerical terms, a distinct disadvantage in a single plurality electoral system in India.

The urban middle classes' growing disenchantment with electoral democracy, evident in terms of its relatively lower level of electoral participation even as India witnesses a 'democratic upsurge', may be attributed to the following two factors: the first is the urban middle classes' wariness with the emergent identity based electoral politics that encourages populism and patronage along the lines of ethnic cleavages. Political apathy can thus be viewed as a 'backlash' of the upper caste urban middle classes, a progeny of the Nehruvian middle class, against emergent political processes that veer around regionalism and lower caste resurgence. Being both 'secular' and a votary of 'meritocracy', the urban middle classes, along with the Indian diaspora, tend to look at the emergent sectarian political culture as antithetical to its avowed dream of a harmonious 'great nation state'. Second, the apathy may also be attributed to the urban middle classes' overwhelming concern with economic, rather than political, issues. There is a growing realization among the 'new' metropolitan middle classes that the rampant corruption prevalent in the state institutions and services, constitutes a serious impediment to the ongoing process of neoliberal market-oriented growth that is propelled by infusion of global capital and arrival of the corporate sector and with which its class interests are crucially linked.

As to why the political class, cutting across party lines (including the mainstream left), can ill-

afford to alienate the middle classes, one can refer to the following factors: First, in terms of numerical 'presence', the middle classes form the fastest growing segment of India's population. While the exact number varies, depending on the criteria used for enumeration, the middle classes in India are widely estimated to be between 250 to 350 million, making it the second largest middle class in the world after China. So whether 20 or 30 per cent of India's population, the Indian middle class in terms of sheer numbers is bigger than the entire population of most countries of Europe and is almost as big as the US population in size.

Second, the middle classes, in a somewhat muted way, continue to retain their inherited caste/community based privileges and loyalties, even as they also seeks to delegitimize the language of caste in the realm of politics. As such the middle classes, more often than not, reflect the interests of and influence the ways their 'own' communities would operate in the democratic system.<sup>1</sup> Third, the middle classes are equipped with 'cultural capital' that give them access, not only to the higher echelons of state institutions involved in policymaking but also to print and visual media and global audiences in a web-connected world of Facebook, SMS and Twitter.

Fourth, the 'metropolitan' middle classes' tactical alliance with the entrepreneurial class (due to shared spatial and sociological origins, uncritical support for economic reforms and adherence to consumerist culture) contributes to its political influence.<sup>2</sup> After all, with campaigns increasingly becoming costlier, it is only the entrepreneurial class that is in a position to make serious money available to political parties (and also to 'civil society' campaigns like the present one).

At a more general level, there are several other questions raised in the aftermath of the campaign that at the moment remain unanswered. Would the increasing proclivity of the ascendant elitist middle classes, with the ordinary citizens as foot soldiers in toe, to 'dictate' to state institutions and circumvent democratic procedures, as evidenced during the recent campaign, pose a threat to the ongoing 'silent revolution' in the form of political power being steadily transferred to the lower castes/class through the electoral route? Would India's present and future democratic regimes, in facing the onslaught of the now confident, pro-market middle classes, be able to accommodate lower caste/class based claims by continuing with anti-reform affirmative policies and actions that enable direct and indirect transfer of public resources in the form of subsidies and protective discrimination to the lower castes/class with the same zeal?

Would the urban middle classes, having experimented and tasted success with the non-electoral technology driven 'civil society' route (referendum/recall/consultation) for exerting political power and influence, finally succeed in hegemonizing the national agenda (recall the 'India Shining' campaign)? And what about the distinct economic and political choices and concerns of the 'plebeian' middle class of lower caste/rural origin who are dissimilar in terms of its sociological as well as spatial origins? As the 'metropolitan' middle classes push hard for promoting a non-party 'new politics' based on legal activism/theatrical media powered campaigns like the recent one that was built around the support of local associations in civil society (NGOs funded by global capital) and the new middle class icons like a 'saintly' Anna Hazare and Medha Patkar or even spiritual/yoga 'feel good' gurus/swamis like Sri Sri Ravi Shankar and Baba Ramdev, the question remains whether all of this will further deepen the crisis of democratic governance.

1. Andre Beteille, 'Classes and Communities', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 17 March 2007; also D.L. Sheth, 'Secularisation of Caste and the Making of New Middle Class', *Economic and*

*Political Weekly*, 21 August 1999.

2. Leela Fernandes, *India's New Middle Class: Democratic Politics in an Era of Economic Reforms*. Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2007.