

Why Anger Against Civil Society?

by A.K. VERMA

That the government should have turned down Team Anna's draft on the Lokpal Bill and pushed him to protest is quite understandable. Anna's desire to fast at Jantar Mantar, and the government's pre-empting the same by imposing Section 144 all over Delhi, and suggesting some insignificant place for the fast with ceiling on the number of people who can join the fast was a clear indication of some panic driven anger on the part of the government. But, should the government show anger and panic against the initiatives of the civil society?

The civil society is not only the precursor of political society (state/government), but also its mentor. It is true that the state possesses legal sovereignty, yet the government exercises that sovereignty only as a 'trustee', a trust created by mutual covenant among the members of the civil society. At the time of creating that trust, the civil society had laid down certain norms for the exercise of that sovereign power and those included the power to make law and govern well.

For centuries, the civil society gave political society (state/government) a free hand by way of love, confidence and trust. The government was expected to govern so that the civil society could concentrate on its multifarious civil, cultural, economic, religious, educational, philanthropic and humanitarian activities. That led to a disconnect between the civil and the political society enabling the latter to wrongly visualise itself not simply as the 'trustee of sovereignty' but its actual 'proprietors'. With this, it not only acquired arrogance, but also became intolerant about the policy interventions from the civil society. That often led to conflict between the civil and political societies. Anna's example is not the first; we have the example of JP (Jayaprakash Narayan) representing the civil society clashing with the arrogance of the state and government represented by Mrs Indira Gandhi during the early seventies.

When the political society (state/government) goes astray and grossly misuses its power and transgresses its mandate, what are the options before the civil society in a democracy? One, the civil society could be a hapless spectator; two, it could protest democratically; and, three, it could challenge the political society by temporarily assuming the 'political role'. It is only when the civil society tries to assume the third role that the political society feels greatly disturbed. This is precisely what is happening in the case of team Anna's initiatives towards legislation (basically the work of the political society). The same thing happened in the early seventies against the JP movement that dislodged the government and captured power at Delhi in 1977.

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It is true that the earlier fast of Anna for creating an institutionalised mechanism to fight corruption created unprecedented euphoria and support across board, and his new initiative is also going to attract and involve all, including the political institutions like parties and politicians in their individual capacities. That reminds us of the JP movement which had such a hysterical public response acquiring the character of a political hurricane that threw away the authoritarian regime of Indira Gandhi in 1977; in the entire Hindi belt, Indira's Congress did not win even a single seat. However, the political role of the civil society is very short-lived and it wants to extricate itself from the hustle-bustle of power politics very quickly. That happened in 1977; JP did not join the government nor choose to be its advisor; and, the same will surely happen to any initiative by Team Anna—which would also like to withdraw to the 'shell of civil society' once the mission of Lokpal is accomplished.

The ire and annoyance of the political society (state/government) against the civil society are precisely because of this. The political society apprehends that the civil society is trying to force something on the political society without being available or prepared to take the responsibilities of its consequences. This apprehension is not without any basis. But, then the issue of corruption is so grave that it has the potential to denigrate our democracy into a 'mafocracy' and replace the 'rule of law' by 'rule over law'. How can the civil society remain a mute spectator to all this? Will such a society with 'rule over law' be good for the health of a democratic political society?

The present crisis is not simply about handling corruption through the Lokpal. On a deeper rethink, it's a crisis emanating from the fact that the civil society has come out of its self-imposed political hibernation and entered into the arena of the political society which the latter resents as unwarranted encroachment. By its very nature and constitution, the civil society is a loose, unorganised and non-institutionalised entity; hence, though it may have a serious and massive public following, finally it has to vacate the field for the political society which is firm, organised and institutionalised. And, precisely this is the reason why the anger of the government about the legislative initiative of the civil society appears misplaced. The government should be gracious enough to engage the civil society in developing a collective bulwark against corruption and misgovernance, ills that are detrimental to the health of both the civil and the political societies.

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