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Youth and ‘Refo-lution’?

Protest Politics in India and the Global Context

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The purpose of this paper is to set research on youth, social change and politics in India, conducted by the Singapore-based Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS) in collaboration with partners in India,² into the context of the patterns and possibilities of what we may call the ‘protest politics’ of the present. The paper begins with commentary on the wider global context, where we observe apparently comparable patterns of political action, in which youth have been centrally involved. The parallels and similarities should not be emphasised too much, but the events appear to involve some combination of the following features:

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² ISAS is partnered in this research by Professor Surinder Jodhka, Dr Divya Vaid and Dr Arshad Alam, of the Centre for the Study of Social Systems of the Jawaharlal Nehru University; Dr Shaibal Gupta and Dr Prabhat P Ghosh of the Asia Development Research Institute in Patna, Bihar; and by Dr M. Vijayabaskar of the Madras Institute of Development Studies. Research has been conducted, according to a common framework, in Delhi, Bihar and Tamil Nadu.

- They are characterised by spontaneity and the absence of hierarchical leadership
- Youth have played a central though not an exclusive role
- Social media have been integral to the events
- They have been directed against existing political systems, entrenched elites and political corruption
- They have apparently been motivated by some combination of the following factors: unemployment, austerity/welfare cuts/deteriorating public services, inflation and rising prices, sometimes by concerns about rising inequality
- They have commonly been triggered by a particular event, and often by police harassment
- They have often brought together groups from across the political spectrum
- They have sought to compel present regimes to reform themselves rather than to replace them; they have not been driven by a particular programme of social and political change – which has been both a strength, because it has allowed for support from across a wide range of groups, and a weakness, because it has meant that the movements have tended either to peter out or to succumb to reaction

The suggestion (put by Glasius and Pleyers, discussed below) that they are fundamentally underlain by the values of democracy (reflected in their critiques of present politics and their attempts to practise alternative politics), social justice (reflected, for example, in the focus on political corruption), and dignity (or indignation at affronts to the dignity of the individual), is persuasive.

What accounts for this pattern of recent politics? And what are their implications? The argument put by one scholar concerning the Arab Spring, that it amounted to a ‘refo-lution’, by which he meant it was in some sense a revolutionary movement but one that ultimately ‘wished to compel the incumbent regimes to reform themselves’ (Bayat 2013: 598), is one that perhaps applies very generally to recent protest politics. I then turn specifically to India, to the experience of protest politics following from the campaign against corruption launched by Anna Hazare and his supporters in 2011. Does this episode mark a rupture in the politics of the country, as some commentators have suggested, driven mainly by young people from the ‘new middle class’ – well-educated, actually or potentially professional people? The argument of the paper is that it is of course too early to tell whether the Aam Aadmi (Common Man’s) Party [AAP] (to which the Hazare movement gave birth) will have a

lasting impact. It is almost certain, however, that the dissatisfaction with ‘politics as usual’ that is articulated by AAP will not go away. The paper concludes with questions about the politics of youth in India today.

‘A Global Narrative of Anger’³: Protest Politics

Public protest, riots and demonstrations have always been an important part of political life, and some have been associated with and instrumental in bringing about regime change or sometimes social revolutions. It is now recognised that there has been a whole series of such protest events over the last five or six years, occurring in many different countries, that seems to suggest a more-or-less definite pattern of politics in which youth has played a central role. These recent events and the movements associated with them are certainly not wholly new. In some of them inspiration is acknowledged of the student-driven events in Europe of 1968 which, though they did not bring regime changes, did transform European political cultures. In some there is a more-or-less direct connection with the anti-globalisation activism of the 1990s. There are certainly ideological connections with the Zapatista movement that took off in Chiapas in the 1990s. But there appears to be a distinctive pattern in the recent series of protest events. Only the most notable of them is the Arab Spring of 2011,⁴ which began with demonstrations in Tunisia following the self-immolation of a young man, who was a street vendor, in protest against harassment by the police and local authorities. But the list of events is a long one. Even before the Arab Spring there were major demonstrations and rioting in Greece that began in December 2008, following the killing of a fifteen-year old boy by two policemen. These events triggered protests in more than 70 cities across the world, marking solidarity with what was taking place in Greece, and showing how rapidly, in the context of present-day technology and flows of information, especially through the social media, a spontaneous reaction to an event in one place can spread across the world. While the immediate trigger of protest in Greece was police brutality, it was thought at the time that the way in which the protests swept across the country, and resonated in so many other parts of the world, was a response to underlying concerns about unemployment and about their prospects on the part of youth, and anger over the extent of corruption in political life. These

³ I take this nice phrase from a study by Richa Singh for the Heinrich Boll Foundation, India, on *New ‘Citizen’s’ Activism in India: Moments, Movements and Mobilisation* (2013)

⁴ There are by now a good many sources on the Arab Spring, including articles by Maha Abdelrahman and by Asef Bayat in the special issue of *Development and Change*, volume 44, no 3 (2013), on ‘Transforming Activisms 2010+’

concerns have continued to fuel protest in Greece ever since, in the context of the austerity regime to which the country has been subjected.⁵

Following the Arab Spring and partly inspired by it, widespread and widely-supported protests took off in Spain. In what was called the ‘Take the Square Movement’ or the ‘15-M Movement’ (it began on 15 May 2011), with its focal point in the Puerto del Sol Square in Madrid, ‘*los indignados*’ – as the protesters called themselves (‘the outraged’) – agitated against unemployment and welfare cuts, and sought radical change in Spanish politics.⁶ It has been estimated that as many as 6.5 million to 8 million Spaniards took part in these protests, which also spread to Portugal. Later in 2011, the Occupy Wall Street Movement, which took the slogan ‘We are the 99 per cent’ and was a protest broadly against social and economic inequality, spread rapidly to at least thirty countries.⁷ More recently, in 2013, there have been major episodes of protest in Turkey, sparked by opposition to a development plan for the Gezi Park in Istanbul, but which came to articulate broad-based hostility to the government of Recep Erdogan, and may have involved more than three million people;⁸ and in Brazil, in the so-called ‘June Days’, when a proposed hike in bus-fares sparked demonstrations across the country (Singer 2014). Anti-regime protests have occurred widely across the Balkans, notably in Croatia, in Slovenia (where they contributed to the fall of a right-wing government), in Bulgaria, and most recently in Bosnia where anti-elite protests, denounced by the elite as ‘hooliganism’, have been followed by efforts to establish ‘plenums’ – self-governing citizens’ assemblies.⁹ And latterly anti-regime protests, especially in Kiev, have led to the fall of the Yanukovych government in Ukraine. Whether these last events should be bracketed with the others referred to here is perhaps questionable, since there was from an early stage a determination to bring about regime change. The principled 1500-or-so

⁵ On the events in Greece in December 2008 see Takis Michas ‘Greek fire: lost principles, lost control’ on the *Open Democracy* website: <http://www.opendemocracy.net/article/greek-fire-lost-principles-lost-control>. Accessed 20 March 2014. See also Michael Theodosiadis ‘Lessons from 6 December 2008: www.opendemocracy.net/can-europe-make-it/michael-theodosiadis. Accessed 20 March 2014.

⁶ See Marina Prentoulis and Lasse Thomassen ‘The legacy of the indignados’: <http://www.opendemocracy.net/can-europe-make-it/marina-prentoulis-lasse-thomassen/legacy-of-indignados> Accessed 20 March 2014

⁷ Amongst many sources see David Graeber (2012) *Inside Occupy*, New York: Campus

⁸ See Burak Kadercan ‘Turkey’s Gezi Park episode is far from over’: <http://www.opendemocracy.net/burak-kadercan/turkey%E2%80%99s-gezi-park-episode-is-far-from-over> Accessed 20 March 2014

⁹ See ‘The New Balkan Revolts’ at www.opendemocracy.net. Accessed 20 March 2014

protesters made a deal with the devil – with right-wing thugs – to pursue their struggle with the Yanukovych regime.¹⁰

The Experience of Precariousness

This brief account lists only some of the more notable events of recent protest politics. While each set of events has its own specific features there are clear commonalities between them. All (according to evidence in the sources cited above) have apparently been characterised by spontaneity and non-hierarchical, dispersed activism. They have usually been sparked by a particular event or action, such as the murder of the boy in Athens, or the development plan for Gezi Park, and have subsequently snowballed rapidly through the passage of information via the social media. They have then articulated opposition to political elites, and a range of demands. In a few cases (as in the riots in London and other English cities in the summer of 2011) they have been so inchoate as to have had no clear aim at all. In most, however, bread-and-butter issues of employment, prices and public services have been prominent. Observers very generally have concluded – as Glasius and Pleyers (2013) argue – that it is the common experience of precariousness, shared especially by younger people,¹¹ and relating to employment, housing, and their prospects in life, in a context of rising expectations and of the widespread diffusion of the discourse on ‘rights’, that underlies most of these movements of protest. The incidence of unemployment amongst youth in Spain was at one point around 50 per cent, and this is only one of the more extreme examples. The precariousness of the circumstances of this generation is neatly captured in the idea of the ‘precariat’ coined by the economist Guy Standing (2011).¹² This term is evocative and might be applied to all those very many people, in the erstwhile ‘developed’ countries of the West, in the ‘emerging economies’ and in the ‘less developed’ parts of the world, who are engaged in insecure forms of work that are unlikely to help them to build a desirable identity or a career: informally employed and temporary and part-time workers and sub-contracted labour, even call centre employees and many interns. The days of ‘full employment’ of the 1950s and 1960s in the

¹⁰ The protests also seem to have won support from Ukrainian oligarchs who had become increasingly disaffected. See: <http://www.opendemocracy.net/od-russia/oleksander-andreyev/in-ukraine-oligarchs-hedge-their-bets>. Accessed 9 April 2014.

¹¹ By ‘younger people’ I mean youth – those now aged between about 16 years and 28 years – and their immediate seniors, those in their early- and mid-30s.

¹² Standing’s view, however, that the precariat is a ‘dangerous class’ in the making, seems dubious, as Jan Breman points out in a critical review. See Breman 2013.

West, and which at that time the ‘developing’ countries were expected to reach through industrialisation, are long gone.

Protest about unemployment and jobs, about prices and prospects, has been linked with protest against the existing political regimes – held (not unreasonably) to be responsible for the existing circumstances of people’s lives. In some cases, as in the Arab Spring, protest has been directed against authoritarian governments; very widely protesters have attacked the corruption of politicians and governments. The corrupting effect of money on politics was one of the issues taken up by the Occupy movement. But as the argument that the Arab Spring amounted in the end to a ‘refo-lution’, aiming to compel the existing regime to reform itself, suggests, the protest movements have not generally offered an alternative political leadership or a new political agenda, unlike left-wing political movements of the late-19th and 20th centuries, or the anti-colonial movements. In a similar way while the protest movements have commonly been broadly anti-capitalist they have not offered nor adhered to an alternative way of organising economic activity. Some of those associated with the Occupy movement had an agenda of specific demands, but these were for the reform of capitalism – through such measures as the better regulation of banking and stronger action against tax evasion, or the adoption of the ‘Tobin tax’ on currency transactions – not for its replacement.

Politics of Performance

Protest politics, partly stimulated by easy access to information, supported by cell-phone technology and by widespread access to social media, and to an extent by diffuse social networks (such as those based around the World Social Forum), is usually clear about what it is against (corrupt or autocratic politicians, bankers, capitalism, or just ‘the system’) but rarely, if ever, at all clear about what the alternative is or should be. These politics may be as much or more about subjectivities and ways of being as they are about policy. Marlies Glasius and Geoffrey Pleyers argue that ‘The transformation of people’s subjectivities, notably by the overcoming of their fear and by the joy of experiencing freedom and expressing their ideas, has represented a major stake for these movements’ (2013: 554) – and they think that this will probably be the lasting legacy of the revolutions in the Arab world, and elsewhere.

Glasius and Pleyers see three values as being the guiding principles of the protest movements: democracy, social justice and dignity. This is almost certainly too much of a

simplification of complex events, as the account given by Andre Singer of the protests of June 2013 in Brazil, discussed below, clearly shows.¹³ There, certainly, bread-and-butter issues drew in some of the groups of protesters. Still, Glasius and Pleyers present a persuasive argument about what does appear to be a recurrent pattern.

Protesters denounce actually-existing democratic regimes as lacking in the substance of democracy. The absence of real alternatives through the routine alternation of political parties was one of the concerns that drove '*los indignados*' in Spain, who denounced 'democracy without choice', and Occupy activists in New York articulated the same criticism of the American political system. Activists in these and others of the movements are fundamentally mistrustful of formal party politics, and they aim rather to '*do* democracy' – in Tahrir Square, for instance, or Plaza del Sol or the Occupy camps – by making themselves informed citizens and then by acting in their own practices according to horizontal democratic values. The movements are non-hierarchical and opposed to the entrenchment of power. They look for deeper, participatory or deliberative democracy and reject hierarchical, individual leadership. Two members of the *Movimento Passe Livre* (the Movement for Free Passes)¹⁴ that was the initial catalyst for the June 2013 protests in Brazil, interviewed on television about their Movement's aims, would say only what their assembly had authorised them to say and refused to answer personal questions. They would not allow themselves to be projected as individual leaders. Andre Singer says of their action: 'this absolute respect for the collective and rejection of the opportunity for personal promotion brought a new political ethic into the spotlight – marking the appearance on the Brazilian scene of a new left, in tune with Occupy Wall Street and the *indignados* in Spain' (2014: 31). The movements, it is said, are 'prefigurative' – acting out in their own practices the forms of politics that they seek as the goal. As Craig Jeffrey has put it, they offer performances of an alternative future (Jeffrey 2013).

Social justice, on the part of the recent protest movements, connotes not just the denunciation of rising inequality and the echoes, at least, of an older demand for redistribution or for socialism, but also an attack upon the collusion between banks and big corporations and politicians. The Occupy Wall Street activists pointed out the power of 'the 1%' – the

¹³ In fairness I must point out that the Brazil protests took place after the publication of Glasius and Pleyers's paper, so I am not suggesting that they failed to take account of the evidence presented in an article published many months later.

¹⁴ The MPL emerged in the early 2000s with its roots in the Workers' Party, and in anarchist and anti-globalisation currents.

fabulously wealthy – over politicians and policy directions in the United States. In Europe protesters sought to ‘break the vicious link between capital and the representatives of democracy’ (Glasius and Pleyers 2014: 558). Demands for social justice and for democracy are connected, and indignation over the links between capitalists and authoritarian regimes was one of the outstanding aspects of the revolutions in North Africa. And as with democracy, activists seek to implement social justice in their own practices, espousing alternative economy projects, and undertaking such actions as occupying empty buildings for social housing.

As Glasius and Pleyers argue, ‘Dignity, and its counterpart, indignation, are central to the subjective experience of both deprivation and lack of respect’ (2013: 560), and there is surely reason for accepting their view that an important part of the reason why the young street vendor in Tunisia set fire to himself was because of what he experienced as the assaults of the police and the local authorities on his dignity as a human being. Commonly, as the evidence referred to by Glasius and Pleyers suggests, those involved in these movements of protest politics search for and seek to uphold in their own practices the value of human dignity. This is an assertion of shared humanity, and an extremely important aspect, for instance, of *dalit* movements in India. It implies mutual respect between people, and it is clearly connected with direct democracy and social justice. Democracy-as-participation is unimaginable in the absence of mutual respect between people. Social justice is incompatible with philanthropic hand-outs that demean their recipients.

Some of the key issues that have been prominent in these important episodes of protest politics – the entrenchment of political elites, the lack of ‘real’ democracy and the extent of political corruption, rising prices, and deteriorating public services – can bring together groups from across the political spectrum. Who could be in favour of corruption – even if it is condoned as being necessary? The powers of political elites and the connections between them and some sections of big business may be one of the most important issues for those on the left, but may also be a focus for those on the liberal right who see it as being a matter of ‘rolling back the state’. Deteriorating public services can bring together activists from left and right, even if they may have radically different ideas of what to do about them. Thus it is that some of the movements, certainly, have been ‘ideologically multifaceted’, as Andre Singer says of the Brazilian protests of June 2013. In this case there is some fairly detailed survey evidence about the protesters which shows that young people (those up to the age of about 25) were most prominent amongst them. The incidence of higher levels of education amongst

them was much higher than in the population as a whole, while at the same time a substantial proportion were from the lower half of the income distribution for Brazil. These findings lend some support to the idea that those most involved were well-educated, middle-class young people who are, nonetheless in poorly-paid, precarious jobs (members of the ‘precariat’ indeed). Singer’s analysis suggests, however, that the protesters included both young adults from middle class backgrounds and their peers from the poorer sections of society. The June events were started by the distinctly left-leaning, anti-capitalist MPL, but concerns about inflation and rising prices, and their criticisms of the present Workers’ Party government of Brazil quickly drew in middle-class people. The right emphasised the anti-corruption message; the left the sorts of social inequities that were being thrown into sharp relief by massive expenditure on stadia for the upcoming World Cup. The political centre bridged the two by putting out such ideas as that of ‘FIFA-standard’ schools and hospitals (in other words, facilities of a standard comparable with the glittering new football stadia). It successfully put across the implicit idea of ‘society’ taking on ‘an oppressive, backward-looking and corrupt state apparatus’ (Singer 2014: 34); and at their height the protests were both cross-class and brought together different ideological currents. Similar tendencies have probably emerged in others of the movements of protest, as well.¹⁵ Then the concern is that when they go so far as to bring about regime change, it may be ultimately to the benefit of the right, and quite possibly of neo-fascists.

This account of some of the apparent commonalities amongst the more notable episodes in the recent wave of protest politics may neglect or obscure questions about the differences between them. They have certainly been influenced by the transnational diffusion of ideas, partly mediated through transnational networks of social movements and civil society organisations, but each episode is also influenced by its national context. This point emerges strongly in the following account of recent trends in Indian politics. It also poses the problems of leadership, and of whether and how protest politics can lead to sustainable change in a political system – a ‘refo-lution’ indeed.

¹⁵ I have not so far found other analyses of a comparable depth with that of Singer for Brazil.

Protest Politics Indian Style

India is of course no stranger to protest politics, even if we discount the very many incidents of protest in the course of the anti-colonial struggle which were often – if not quite always – moulded by the Congress leadership in the pursuit of nationalism. In post-colonial India the most notable movement of protest politics, and the most direct precursor to those of the last three or four years, was that around Jayaprakash Narayan of 1973-1975 – the Bihar Movement or JP Movement – directed against the government of Indira Gandhi. This Movement, too, had the aim of putting a stop to the corruption of a Congress government, and it played an important part in the series of events that led up to Mrs Gandhi's declaration of the Emergency in 1975. At one point JP called for 'Total Revolution' – a social revolution that would be driven by youth. In the end, however, the Movement gave rise to a new political formation – the Janata, in government from 1977 to 1979 – that was a congeries of older political parties with diverse platforms, and that quite clearly failed to establish alternative politics.

The recent events of protest politics that bear some resemblance, at least, to those described above, are the protests against corruption mobilised around the Maharashtrian social worker Anna Hazare in 2011, and the subsequent formation of the Aam Aadmi Party in 2012; and then the protests that followed the terrible incident of rape in Delhi in December 2012. The last involved especially young, middle-class people. The protests, centred in Delhi but taking place across the country, were spontaneous and non-hierarchical, with no very clear leadership, at least to begin with. Professor Surinder Jodhka is reported to have said in an interview that 'The anti-rape protests did not have a centralized leadership. A leader-driven protest like the Anna/anti-corruption movement was clear about from where authority was driven, but with the anti-rape protests it is difficult to give credit to only a few people' (Singh 2013: 35). They were sparked by a particular event that was a savage, bestial offence and an affront to ideas of shared humanity and of human dignity. They were not about toppling the state, but rather about compelling the state to fulfil its function of providing protection for people to lead their own lives. Anger was directed against the state, which was held to have failed India's women. Political leaders responded with platitudes, or a few of them with frankly sexist remarks. The protests were met with official violence, and what was seen by observers as excessive force (justified by the police on the grounds that the protests had been hijacked by 'hooligans'). The protest came, in the commentator Pratap Mehta's view, to be

about more than rape: ‘It is now an open, generalized and largely justified contempt of the state’, in a context in which the Indian state has long projected itself as being ‘the site of all that is egalitarian, emancipatory and progressive’ (*Indian Express*, 26 December 2012). All these are features in common with protest events elsewhere – the involvement of youth and the use of social media (widely attested: see Singh 2013 37-8), the spontaneous and non-hierarchical character of the demonstrations, and the expression of anger against the state and political leaders.

The anti-corruption movement, and the mobilisations around Anna Hazare in 2011-12 have been seen by one commentator as perhaps marking ‘a critical moment of rupture in politics’ (Singh 2014: 18). The movement started in 2006-07, with the aim of monitoring the accounts of the Commonwealth Games which were to be held in Delhi in 2010. India Against Corruption (IAC), as the movement came to be known, was led by a group of middle-class professionals – lawyers, professors, journalists, engineers – some of whom had become social activists working in different fields, and by such figures as Kiran Bedi, the first woman member of the Indian Police Service, as well as by Anna Hazare. In 2011, in the wake of a series of corruption scandals (over the Games, over mining in Karnataka, the affairs of the Adarsh Housing Society in Mumbai, and the 2G Scam), the movement articulated anger against corporate and official looting of public resources. IAC gained momentum, and took up the demand for a *Lokpal* – an ombudsman – with very strong powers to investigate charges of corruption against public officials at whatever level. Anna Hazare’s undertaking of a fast unto death in April 2011, which attracted large numbers of supporters, compelled the government to respond to demands for a stronger version of the Jan Lokpal Bill. Thereafter there was a series of other protest events, involving large numbers of demonstrators, around Hazare’s actions, which were directed against the efforts of government to water down the provisions of the legislation. The movement began to lose momentum in 2012, and it was in this context that there came about a split in the leadership – what was called ‘Team Anna’ and which was constituted by much the same group of middle-class professionals – between those who followed Hazare in resisting the idea of entering formal politics, as being inconsistent with their rejection of the current political system, and those who followed Arvind Kejriwal in believing that this now had to be the way of carrying the struggle forward.

‘Politics Itself is the Problem’

Kejriwal and his supporters formed the Aam Aadmi Party in November 2012, taking over for their name a term – that of *aam aadmi*, or ‘common man’ – that had been used earlier by the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) Government. The name is redolent of populism. What above all else defines populism is an appeal to the idea of ‘the people’, and implicitly if not explicitly, that of ‘the common people’ who are held to have been done down in various ways by elites. There is more than a whiff of populism about the AAP, as there was in the election campaign that it fought with great success in Delhi only a year after its formation. Remarkably for so young a political formation, AAP took over the Government of Delhi following the state elections in December 2013, with support from the outside of the Congress Party. Kejriwal’s tenure as Chief Minister was brief but dramatic. It included his staging of public protest against the Union Home Ministry, over control of the police force of the capital. It was at this moment that the Chief Minister declared himself to be an ‘anarchist’ and seemed to be intent on creating politics of chaos. Shortly afterwards the AAP Government resigned when it was unable, in the face of the opposition of both the Congress and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), to introduce the Jan Lokpal Bill in the Delhi Assembly. AAP is now (in March-April 2014) campaigning vigorously in the general election, and (as of 9 April 2014) had put forward the names of 433 candidates for *Lok Sabha* [the powerful Lower House of Indian Parliament] seats, across the country.

These events share many of the features of the wave of protest politics elsewhere in the world. As has been said ‘Notably middle class youth were amongst the most active participants in the street, as well as in cyberspace throughout the movement’ (Singh 2013: 23). To begin with those involved were mainly professional executives and others from the ‘new middle class’, students, young men and relatively fewer young women. But as the anti-corruption movement developed, it embraced a much wider range of social groups: ‘While retaining its middle class character, it came to be peopled by school children, migrant workers, teachers, autorickshaw drivers, college students, RSS cadres, film actors ... in Mumbai the dabbawallas (lunch-box carriers) broke their 120-year-old tradition of never going on strike ...’ (Singh 2013: 23). Women, however, were much fewer in number than men, and relatively few *dalits* and Muslims were involved. With these particular absences, Hazare sparked, to begin with – and with the support of the media, both television and the

social media – a spontaneous movement of different groups of people, though a number of civil society organisations also became involved.

The central role played by Hazare himself, and the fact that he had a core leadership team around him distinguish these events from those elsewhere, which have not been focused in the same way around a particular individual. The cause, movement against political corruption, and the aim of compelling the existing political system to reform itself, are certainly in common with protest movements elsewhere. The movement was seen as showing up the crisis of representative democracy in India: as one young man put it ‘It is not about supporting one particular party or being against another party. Politics itself is the problem’ (Singh 2013: 24). This thrust of ‘anti-politics’ is of course profoundly political, and it has arisen in a context in which there has for some time been a strong tendency for middle classes to turn away from participation in electoral politics. The extent of distrust amongst the middle classes of popular politics – ‘the politics of din’, as Javeed Alam describes it (2004) – has been reflected in the inverse correlation that has sometimes been observed in India between socio-economic status and voting. It is quite exceptional amongst electoral democracies for poorer, lower class people to be more inclined to vote than those who are wealthier and of higher social status – as has been the case in India.

What characterises the Indian anti-corruption movement and may distinguish it from other movements elsewhere is the particular combination within it of authoritarian elitism and the impulse of direct democracy. As Pratap Mehta said at the time of Hazare’s fast in April 2011:

There is something deeply coercive about fasting unto death. When it is tied to an unparalleled moral eminence, as it is in the case of Anna Hazare, it amounts to blackmail. There may be circumstances ... (in which) ...some such method of protest is called for. But in a functioning constitutional democracy, not having one’s preferred institutional solution to a problem, does not constitute a sufficient reason for the exercise of such coercive moral power (*Indian Express*, 7 April 2011).

Mehta went on to point out, as did others, that what Hazare and his supporters sought in their then-preferred version of the Jan Lokpal Bill was an institution which would represent a tremendous concentration of power, commanded by a few people and who would be selected, in turn, by a small body of people with supposedly unimpeachable credentials. But what would ensure that this body itself would be incorruptible? The whole idea was of a piece with the technocratic impulses of a good many civil society organisations whose ideas and actions

imply complete mistrust of democratic institutions and an inclination towards an authoritarian elitism (Harriss 2007). Democratic institutions may, at the very least, get in the way of securing the best possible solutions to particular public problems, even if they do not subvert them for the private benefit of particular individuals. As Mehta said, the civil society agitation over the Lokpal Bill showed an absolute contempt for representative democracy, and ‘the claim that “the people” are not represented by their elected representatives, but are represented by their self-appointed guardians is disturbing’ (*Indian Express*, 7 April 2011).

Yet there was as well, in the anti-corruption movement, a searching after the sort of direct democracy that is espoused in some of the people’s movements of India, and this is now seen quite clearly in the way in which the Aam Aadmi Party tries to operate. The party says in a ‘Background’ statement on its website that ‘Our aim in entering politics is not to come to power; we have entered politics to change the current corrupt and self-serving systems of politics forever’. The party’s principal strategist, political scientist Yogendra Yadav, speaks frequently about establishing ‘alternative politics’, involving a much more direct relationship between the people and the decision-making that affects their lives, and implying a level and kind of participation that goes well beyond participation in elections every five years. The party says in its Vision statement: ‘We want to create a political system where the political leaders we elect and place in the Parliament are directly responsible to the voters who elected them. Our party’s vision is to realize the dream of SWARAJ that Gandhiji had envisaged for a free India – where the power of governance and rights of democracy will be in the hands of the people of India’.

AAP envisages achieving this Vision partly by means that resemble those that Gandhi advocated, of political decentralisation. It also emphasises what it calls the principles of ‘referendum’ and of ‘initiative’, meaning that people, on the one hand, should be able to reject laws that are proposed through referenda, and on the other, that they should be able to propose legislation. The party also advocates the right of recall – in the event that electors are dissatisfied with the performance of their representative – and the ‘right to reject’. By this the party means that ballot papers should include the possibility of voting for ‘none of the above’ (the listed candidates) and that in the event that this ‘NOTA’ wins a majority, fresh elections should be called.¹⁶ These seem relatively modest, contestable certainly, but practicable steps

¹⁶ Ballot papers in the current general election will include for the first time the ‘NOTA’ (‘none of the above’) possibility, but without the implication that the election can be nullified if ‘NOTA’ has an effective majority in the constituency.

towards making representatives more directly accountable. Still, ‘refo-lution’ rather than revolution.

If we follow Glasius and Pleyers’s suggestion about the core values that underlie protest politics then it is fairly clear that AAP is underlain by the same set of ideas. For sure ‘democracy’ is of foundational importance, and just as in other movements of protest, AAP attempts to ‘prefigure’ democratic values in the ways in which it works. In a page on the web-site headed ‘Why We Are Different’ AAP makes the point that it practises internal party democracy and has no central high command like the other major political parties in India (and in the Delhi elections candidates were selected locally); that it will not allow two members of the same family to contest elections (and that it opposes ‘dynastic politics’); and that it will not allow special privileges for elected representatives. During its short period in office in Delhi, much was made of ‘doing different’ from the established parties in these ways, and of the aspiration to direct democracy. ‘Social justice’ figures prominently in the programmatic pronouncements of the party, and it has focused on the issues of access to water and electricity, and of their pricing, and on the pricing of gas, which surveys (the National Election Survey of 2009, for instance) have shown to be the most significant issues for voters. These are matters of livelihood that bear on the economic and social rights that were relegated to the non-justiciable Directive Principles of the Constitution of India – to the implementation of which AAP has committed itself. Some of the more prominent individuals who are involved, notably Yogendra Yadav, come out of the Lohiaite tradition of Indian socialism; and it has seemed to a good many observers that there is in principle much common ground between AAP and the communist left. Commitment to ‘dignity’ is of course implied in the party’s very name, with its implication of giving respect to the needs, interests and ideas of ‘the common man’.

Above all AAP articulates the disaffection that many people from across Indian society feel with regard to representative politics, and the idea of an ‘alternative’ is a persuasive one. But there seems to be no recognition of the antinomies of ‘participation’ in the context of a society which is marked both by sharp economic inequalities and by hierarchical social values. Evidence from a good many empirical studies shows that the levels of participation in politics in India beyond voting – whether in the narrow sense of participating in activities such as political meetings or in the broader sense of participation in local associational life – are low. The latter, associational activity, is substantially a middle-class sphere (Harriss 2007). Women, *dalits* and *adivasis* are often under-represented amongst those who are active.

The possibility that institutions that are established in the name of participatory politics, such as local government bodies, may be very easily taken over by those who are most powerful, and used to further their interests against those of minorities and of the poorest people, seems to be scrupulously avoided. ‘Anti-politics’ sentiment may be profoundly conservative and incline to authoritarian elitism: better that ‘experts’ should make decisions for us rather than politicians who command electoral majorities and who pursue populist policies. But then the experts may come up with plans, for example, about how to develop our cities so that they become ‘global cities’ which require the exclusion of slum-dwellers, who are denied a voice as citizens, to the benefit of real-estate developers. The weakness of the AAP, thus far, is that it has no clear economic policy. Born of a movement around and against a single issue, political corruption, it has been able to draw on support from across society. The idea, however, of ‘alternative politics’ depending upon the more direct participation of ‘the people’ in decision-making will surely remain a utopian fancy so long as the deep inequalities of Indian society remain unaddressed and are exacerbated – as they are – by the pursuit of liberal economic policies. But then, a critique of the prevailing economic orthodoxy is likely to lead to the loss of support from amongst many, perhaps most, of the new middle-class individuals who have been drawn to AAP because of its articulation of opposition to the existing political elites.¹⁷ There is then the further question of whether there is a meeting ground between the ‘anti-politics’ espoused by AAP and the politics of the working poor.

In sum AAP is an instance of the transformation of protest politics into a party-movement that is dedicated to realising political change. This has depended upon leadership. It is no accident that Arvind Kejriwal has come to appear in the campaigning for the general election of 2014 as a kind of a ‘presidential’ figure, just like the leaders of the two main parties, the BJP and the Congress, against whom he is pitted.¹⁸ But whether the new party can sustain its transformative potential – rather than becoming, as many believe is already happening, just another political party – will probably depend upon whether or not it is able to build a solid alliance between an important fraction of the ‘mass middle class’ that has by now emerged in India, and the mass of the working poor. AAP’s extraordinary success in the Delhi elections was based on such an alliance. But can it be sustained? This is the key question to which only the passage of time will provide an answer.

¹⁷ Points made in this paragraph are all developed in articles by Palshikar (2013) and Shukla (2013)

¹⁸ Of course India’s parliamentary democracy is not a presidential system, and so this reference to Kejriwal and the leaders of the two main parties as ‘presidential figures’ will seem misleading. What I have in mind is that the characters of the party leaders have come to figure in the current general election campaign in a way that is much more like the pattern of presidential systems than has been the case before.

Youth and Politics in India Today

The rise of AAP in 2013-14 surely does reflect the profound dissatisfaction with the ruling Congress Party felt very widely in this time, but a change of ruling parties is unlikely to make the critique of the political system that AAP articulates go away. Only time will tell whether this really is a moment of rupture in Indian politics, driven above all by young people. Research on the political activities, the values and attitudes of Indian youth today will not answer the question, but from such research we stand to understand the present moment much better. How are young people from different social backgrounds – rural, urban, low caste, high caste, from educated families or from families with little history of education, and from different class backgrounds – able to respond to the circumstances in which they find themselves? These are circumstances in which there are great opportunities, no doubt, but in which there is also a great deal of uncertainty. For many ‘precariousness’ probably does describe very well the circumstances in which they find themselves. They are circumstances that might well induce what Durkheim described as ‘anomie’, when established norms have broken down. They are circumstances in which there are ‘glittering prizes’ of a style of life and consumption that were remote and even unimaginable a generation ago. But can they be attained? How do young people from different backgrounds cope with these pressures, and how do such pressures influence their political actions, values and attitudes? How are young people reacting politically? We have seen that there is evidence that some have been prominent in the broad movements that have articulated criticism of the present political system. On the other hand the National Election Survey of 2009 found virtually no difference at all in the voting patterns of younger and older people. And it seems possible that very many young people are still quite apolitical, being so much bound up with trying to cope with the challenges of finding work and establishing their own families. Ethnographic studies, such as those of Nandini Gooptu (2009), suggest that amongst some groups of youth – in the case of her research, those employed in retail sales in a shopping mall – values of self-driving, enterprising individualism have become firmly established. They have become ‘neo-liberal subjects’; they seek personal solutions to social problems, disavowing political activism, and having little expectation in regard to the state and the political system. From the account that Gooptu gives it would seem perfectly possible that such young people may be drawn to authoritarian elitism. The everyday politics of youth, according to ethnographic studies by Craig Jeffrey and Stephen Young (2012), can change rather rapidly, and though

young people may develop novel cultures that bridge caste, class and religious divides, caste inequalities can quickly re-assert themselves and restrict collective action.

In short, there are many questions about the subjectivities and the political attitudes and practices of Indian youth. We aim to contribute to their illumination.

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