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## Anti-corruption movements and the 'twittering classes' in the postcolony: an Indian case study

### Abstract

Recent events in the Middle East and North Africa have been widely celebrated as the triumph of civil society. Such accounts extol the role of social media and the Internet as the loci for the mobilisation of popular protest, so much so that news narratives and scholarly commentary both see these technologies as shaping these revolutions, as enabling such upheavals in civil society. Using a recent case of popular mobilisation in India, namely the anti-corruption movement inspired in 2011 by Anna Hazare, this paper attempts to locate these developments within particular formations in the postcolony.

### Keywords

study, movements, case, corruption, anti, indian, postcolony, classes, twittering

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# Anti-corruption Movements and the 'Twittering Classes' in the Postcolony: an Indian Case Study

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## Abstract

*Recent events in the Middle East and North Africa have been widely celebrated as the triumph of civil society. Such accounts extol the role of social media and the Internet as the loci for the mobilisation of popular protest, so much so that news narratives and scholarly commentary both see these technologies as shaping these revolutions, as enabling such upheavals in civil society. Using a recent case of popular mobilisation in India, namely the anti-corruption movement inspired in 2011 by Anna Hazare, this paper attempts to locate these developments within particular formations in the postcolony.*

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In their preface to an edited collection of essays on law and disorder in the 'postcolony', Jean and John Comaroff identify what they consider both a problem and a paradox: are postcolonies in the non-West plagued by more violence and terror than other nation-states, and if so, how does one reconcile that with the fetishisation of the rule of law in these postcolonies? This is a pertinent question, one that has been singularly absent in the recent celebrations of the role of new technologies, Facebook and Twitter in mass mobilisations leading to democratic change, particularly in the Arab world. Using a recent case of popular mobilisation in India, namely the anti-corruption 'movement' inspired in 2011 by Anna Hazare, this paper attempts to bring Partha Chatterjee's insight on the formation of civil society in India to these questions, and by extension other postcolonial societies, especially in the wake of socio-political changes brought about by the opening up of their economies. In doing so, the argument presented here seeks to go beyond the digital divide thesis, which, while mostly valid, argues a different case. Given the prevalence of mobile technology in India, the point in this instance isn't so much access to technologies as the nature of contemporary political formations. In what ways does Hazare's strategy and the movement it has inspired illustrate specific aspects of the current political landscape in India? Hazare's use of Gandhian iconography and adoption of the method of hunger strike are not only direct references to the anti-colonial struggle of the 1940s, but are also meant to evoke the ethics of satyagraha and the memories of grassroots, popular protest against the British administered state that included diverse sections of the Indian population. However, how Gandhian is the current protest?

Chatterjee (1990, 2004, 2008) makes an important distinction between 'civil' and 'political' societies in India, in particular the dynamic logic that brings together the latter, which he conceives as comprising peasants, artisans, and the informal sector, with the hegemonic operations of the bourgeoisie in 'civil' society. For him, it is a mistake to consider the Indian political system as an instance of the classic capitalist democracy. This is because of the break between civil society and what he refers to as 'a more ill-defined and contingently activated domain of political society'. (2008: 57). While civil society in India, 'peopled largely by the urban

middle classes, is the sphere that seeks to be congruent with the normative models of bourgeois civil society and represents the domain of capitalist hegemony', political society 'includes large sections of the rural population and the urban poor' (ibid.). Crucially, according to Chatterjee, the members of this political society relate to the state differently from those belonging to the bourgeois civil society even though they are recognised as formal citizens, and the institutions of the state do not...

...treat them as proper citizens belonging to civil society. Those in political society make their claims on government, and are in turn governed, not within the framework of stable constitutionally defined rights and laws, but rather through temporary, contextual and unstable arrangements arrived at through direct political negotiations (ibid).

One of the consequences of this is that members of the capitalist class, which has formed the moral-political leadership in India, 'have come to acquire a position of moral-political hegemony over civil society, consisting principally of urban middle classes'. Therefore, in Chatterjee's terms, should we consider the recent popular mobilisation against corruption in India as an instance of urbanised middle-class bourgeois intervention? Is the movement's use of social media a further instance of the exclusion of the majority of the country's population, including the urban poor and those living in rural areas?

As in many developing economies, India faces large-scale corruption at all levels of government and the private sector, as well as in everyday transactions in the public sphere. According to the Corruption Perception Index (CPI) 2010 of the Transparency International (TI), the nation is ranked a poor 87 among 178 countries with a score of 3.3 out of 10 (Bhanu, 2011). The social activist Anna Hazare, known for his rural development work in his home state of Maharashtra, began a fast unto death to prevail on the Indian Government to draft a stronger anti-corruption Jan Lokpal Bill. Wearing a Gandhian cap and white khadi (home-spun), with a portrait of Gandhi displayed prominently behind him on the public stage, Hazare used potent iconography that recalled the moral convictions of the independence struggles. This inaugurated spontaneous demonstrations and protest marches in New Delhi and Mumbai, when, with the support of other prominent and iconic civil society representatives, the movement went viral in urban India. Its use of social networking platforms such as Twitter and Facebook to mobilise online and offline support was especially noteworthy. This paper charts the course of the civil society group's Twitter feeds during two important phases of the movement: a) the course of the week ending on the weekend of Ramdev's arrest on 6 June; and b) the day of, and the two days following Anna Hazare's most recent fast. It then attempts to situate the unfolding impact of the anti-corruption movement and what it means for India's contemporary political formations.

## **Case Study: Twitter Monitoring of #Janlokal (Phase 1)**

According to statistics cited on Shubho Sengupta's blog, within the first four days of its existence the anti-corruption movement had 116,000 fans on Facebook, 5600 followers on Twitter, and the highest interaction rate of the top ten Facebook pages in India (Sengupta, Shubho, 2011). At the same time, Sudarshana Banerjee, reporting a few days after the beginning of Hazare's fast unto death reports: 'Anna Hazare is the top trend of India in Twitter, followed by Lokpal, Mera Neta Chor Hai's "My Politician is a Thief", and Jantar Mantar' (Banerjee 2011a). While this may look like a case of online support only, there is ample evidence to suggest that it translated into

offline action. According to an article in *The Economic Times*, the movement's Facebook page is not only attracting comments in the hundreds, but is also 'serving as an effective platform to co-ordinate protests in various cities' (*Economic Times*, 2011).

Twitter monitoring of self-proclaimed 'civil society' group titled 'Janlokalpal' (after the Jan Lokpal Bill movement) was conducted from Tuesday 31 May to Monday 6 June 2011. The most significant events with regards to the anti-corruption mass mobilisation issue in India over the course of the above week were:

- 1) A live media debate of which there were frequent Twitter mentions, and to which replies were posted (especially to questions that couldn't be answered in detail during the live telecast).
- 2) The debate over whether all arms of government (including the Parliament and the Judiciary) should be subject to the Bill.
- 3) The fast unto death and protest demonstration organised by Baba Ramdev, as well as the curbing of the same by the Indian Government.

The five categories used for classifying the Twitter posts, as well as brief descriptions of what they included are as follows:

1) **Mentions of civil society, citizens, or common people**

There were frequent calls made (especially on behalf of Anna Hazare) to citizens to fast again, or gather at a public venue, or to join the movement or to 'wake up'. One post addressed itself to the youth and added that it was time to 'awake and arise'. A post on 5 June, following the government's actions to curb Ramdev's march and arrest his supporters, said: 'We get asked a lot, if you are the civil society, who is the un-civil society? Answer is obvious now'. It appears that the nation-state government is being cast in the role of the villainous enemy of the so-called people's movement here. In another post, it is mentioned that India Against Corruption (IAC) is not an NGO or a registered organisation, but rather a 'citizen's movement' for Janlokalpal. This attempt to distinguish itself from other kinds of non-governmental or established organisations is noteworthy as it appears to be a bid to convey the authenticity of its popular (and populist) mass base.

2) **Mentions of political ideology or arms of government**

There appears to be widespread condemnation of the government's actions at the Ramlila Grounds on the 5 June when Baba Ramdev was arrested and taken to the airport, and his supporters subjected to a charge using canes (lathi) to disperse them. In addition, there are quotes from prominent army and judiciary personnel on the matter of having a Jan Lokpal Bill. One of the tweets calls for followers to participate in a government questionnaire on the Janlokalpal site, while another one says that bribery in Parliament must be investigated. The overall tone is not just anti-government, but against politicians in general as the following tweet explicates: 'Soldiers protect country, politicians sell it to foreigners'.

3) **Mentions of Gandhian methods (including references to the anti-colonial struggle)**

There are frequent references to 'peaceful protests or demonstrations', including the post-Ramdev arrest on 6 June that mentions peaceful protest as being a citizen's fundamental right. One of the tweets refers to Ramdev's supporters as satyagrahis (or followers of the truth force) which not only harks back to the methods used by Mahatma Gandhi, but also to India's struggle for independence from British colonial rule. Perhaps

picking up on the Gandhian overtones, a tweet on 5 June refers to the anti-corruption movement as a 'second struggle for independence'. Individual citizens posting comments on the *Janlokalpal* twitter page appear to be responding positively to the independence analogy as one says that it is like *Lagaan* (an anti-colonial Bollywood film) versus the British Government. *Janlokalpal* itself makes a direct reference to the specific occurrences of the independence movement by invoking the spiring of the 1942 Quit India Movement in the following tweet: 'After 1942 angrezo Bharat Choddo... now it's Corruption Bharat Choddo' (After 1942's British Quit India... now it's Corruption Quit India). The exclusion of rural as well as lower class citizens from the current protests does not seem to have been registered in such comparisons with the anti-colonial struggle.

#### 4) **Mentions of the mainstream media**

The mainstream media (especially commercial Hindi and English language satellite news television channels) are talked of as accomplices or mediators between the movement and the general public. A media debate on the anti-corruption issue, titled 'Civil Society versus Civil Society' is frequently referred to in the tweets during the week being monitored. Additional replies to the questions posed during the debate are also addressed in the twitter feed of #janlokalpal. A consultation with the media in Delhi is advertised in a tweet on 3 June, but it is not made clear what this consultation entails.

#### 5) **Mentions of social networking platforms such as Facebook and Twitter**

Janlokalpal's page on Facebook, and the events and albums on this page, receive a few mentions in the Twitter feed over the course of the week. One of the tweets also refers to the movement's own Twitter application. Another appears to request Twitter users or followers to use #janlokalpal in their anti-corruption tweets as it is 'the official tag of Anna Hazare Jan Lokpal movement'. This is noteworthy as despite the movement's attempt to distance itself from any organised political or non-governmental group, it is nonetheless distinguishing itself on social networking platforms as a distinct civil society movement with a recognised leader.

## **Twitter Monitoring of #Janlokalpal (Phase 2)**

Since the first hunger strike and the arrest of Baba Ramdev, there have been several other significant online and offline developments (both events and issue-based) in the anti-corruption agitation. The most noteworthy amongst these is the second fast unto death undertaken by Anna Hazare at Delhi's Ramlila Grounds in August 2010 that lasted 12 days. This produced further embarrassment for the government, and sparked debates in all forms of media, especially about the role of democratically elected representatives in initiating reforms. While the Prime Minister assured Hazare that his team's draft of the anti-corruption legislation will be considered in Parliament, significant delays have led to the Gandhian leader threatening to agitate and go on an indefinite fast once again. As a precursor to what could happen in the coming weeks if his team's demands were not met, Hazare went on a day-long fast on 11 December to protest the government's watered-down proposals on the legislation. Therefore, this phase of the Twitter monitoring of #Janlokalpal pays close attention to the tweets commenting on democratic processes and institutions, as well as on civil society members on the day of, and the two days leading up to Hazare's third and most recent fast.

The case study of the first phase shows that both Anna Hazare, and other members of the team are actively resisting affiliation with any political group. However, by the time the second phase

begins, members of most political parties are sharing the stage with Hazare, and 'Team Anna' members are openly declaring that their movement has built a socio-political base to agitate on issues other than corruption. At the same time, the unmistakably politicised nature of the civil society movement is disguised in a discourse of the common good as the social activist and former Commissioner of Police Kiran Bedi declared in a tweet on 13 December: 'As we hear commoner-volunteers from across d country its brilliant to c foundation being laid for Janlokpai+social revolution'. Those handling the #Janlokpai account sometimes appear ambivalent in their embrace of the word 'political' to describe the recent metamorphoses of their movement. While not using the word themselves, they re-tweeted the tweet of a member of the public who declared: 'Turning it into political movement. Good sign for representative democracy. Let's see how it goes from here'. While the context of this message is unclear, the re-tweeting suggests that the tag of being a 'political movement', rather than merely a 'social revolution', is one that Anna Hazare and members of his civil society group are no longer shying away from.

Simultaneous with the growing politicisation of the anti-corruption movement (or at least their acceptance that it is so), is the intensification of attacks on members of the Congress ruling party who may or may not be in Government, as well as commentary on the malfunctioning of democratic institutions and processes. Again, it is Kiran Bedi who proclaims that the form of democracy being exercised by the civil society movement is far superior to that being practiced in Parliament House in the following tweet on 11 December: "@janlokpai its action democracy. From vote to action. Its deepening democracy where the elected and electorate are communicating". Echoing a similar statement, a member of the public, re-tweeted by the #Janlokpai team, says "#Parliament does not belong only to the leaders in Delhi, It belongs to all citizens of India: #AnnaHazare". Another public member appears to be attacking critics of Anna Hazare who rebuke him for flouting the Parliamentary process for drafting and passing legislation: "Those who think anna is damaging parliamentary system, should study more about democracy. Our system is already rotten, anna trying a surgery". What is significant about the above message is not merely the anti-institutional rhetoric, but the choosing of this tweet to be reposted on the #Janlokpai page. It suggests that the Team Anna message is working in convincing members of the Twittering public, at the very least, that theirs is a more transparent and moral form of democratic action. By virtue of the ephemeral nature of the medium and the truncated form of the messages, the finer points of political context, their preferred definitions of democracy and the crucial clauses of their own draft of the anti-corruption bill are never explicitly spelled out.

## **Public campaigns, new media and civil society**

While Hazare is recognised as a leader of rural struggles and his use of Gandhian tropes evokes the powerful forces that included the peasantry in the anti-colonial struggles in the 1940s, the recent mass protests and marches in cities in protest against enduring corruption can be seen as an instance of Chatterjee's argument regarding the moral hegemony of the urban capitalist class over Indian civil society. It is the contention of this paper that, despite Indian citizens' overall low usage of the Internet, and in turn, relatively insignificant participation in ostensibly open platforms, movements such as Janlokpai benefit from an online presence as this segment traditionally resorts to visibility in the print and electronic media rather than electoral mobilisation to persuade the state to meet its demands. In addition, although new media may be

used as an aid to the mainstream media, it helps engage the urban youth demographic as well as lending the movement a transnational dimension. While in some ways similar to the use of social platforms in the US, especially during the last election, the Indian context is peculiar due to its almost wilful exclusion of large sections of rural and the urban poor (or Chatterjee's 'political society'). Minority groups in America may be excluded from online formations of civil society, but the masses constituting political society are almost entirely missing from new media deliberations occurring between civil society and the state. What is nonetheless common to both contexts, and warrants an in-depth examination for its impact on politics, is the use of new media to create a social experience of news.

In his study of the role of the social media in enabling and facilitating urban Indian women's Pink Chaddi campaign, Saayan Chattopadhyay notes that it is 'useful to think about these movements as surrogate activism and not merely as clicktivism' (2010: 65). The definition of 'surrogate activism' entails earmarking new media as a surrogate social-political space where 'gradual legitimisation and the solidification of the politics of belonging occurs prior to the deployment of the movement in realpolitik' (Chattopadhyay, 2010: 65). The Indian case underlines a different set of issues. It can be argued that India's current anti-corruption movement, particularly in its social media avatars, appropriated Gandhian visual symbols to galvanise political action, is an instance of bourgeois moral hegemony rather than a non-hierarchical grassroots phenomenon.

This is evident in online blog and forum posts that comment on the role of new media in the dissemination of the anti-corruption movement. For instance, digitally-savvy blogger Shubhi Sengupta attributes the success of the social media campaign to finding a grassroots leader in Anna Hazare, and identifying a widely understood cultural symbol in Hazare fasting to death at the Jantar Mantar (Sengupta, Shubho, 2011). The figure of Hazare is particularly crucial in creating an amalgam of Gandhian methods (harking back to India's well-known non-violent independence struggle) and new content popularised through social media and television. Another web post refers to him as 'Modern Mahatma' and 'Mahatma Gandhi 2.0' (IndiaTech Online, n.d.), thereby reinforcing both the inflection of new media, and also nostalgically referring to a past consisting of seemingly unproblematic political hierarchies and leaders. However, as Aditya Nigam's analysis points out, such nostalgic elements may have moralist appeal, but they also possess authoritarian tendencies as exemplified by Hazare's frequent appropriation of Hindu symbolism in addition to Gandhian protest methods (Nigam, 2011).

On the other hand, others such as Gaurav Mishra at *Gauravonomics* and Amit Verma at *India Uncut* appear sceptical of people's support for a bill whose intricacies and flaws they do not comprehend (cited in Rezwan, 2011). Mishra also notes that the Twitter trends quickly shifted to the Indian Premier League (IPL) once the India Government accepted Hazare's demands (cited in Rezwan: 2011), thereby suggesting that the movement's so-called popularity and social media itself are ephemeral phenomena. The lack of understanding of the Janlokal Bill is evident in blog posts such as that of South Bombay resident Sahil Shah, who offers little insight apart from statistics and comparisons with the social media movements in the Middle East and China (Shah, 2011).

In his blog, devoted to mapping youth trends and differentiating Indian youth from their western counterparts, Kaustav Sengupta writes that not only is India one of the youngest countries in the world with 60% of its population less than 24 years of age, but also that this is the first ever non-socialistic generation with both aspiration and money (Sengupta, Kaustav, 2011). It is noteworthy

that this pro-youth blog refers to the anti-corruption movement as an 'a-political revolution'. In the analysis of Janlokal's twitter feeds at the start of this paper, there seemed evident a similar apathy towards political representatives and organised politics. Hence, it is not surprising that the movement caught on with the India's urban youth, and that the politician-free message was frequently highlighted in the social media. Others like Nigam refer to Hazare as an 'empty signifier', thereby suggesting that his populism worked with India's middle class youth precisely because it is not associated with radical or reactionary politics (Nigam, 2011).

## Conclusion:

As the brief account of the anti-corruption movement's Twitter feeds suggests, the movement had a strong presence on social media, which was ostensibly translated into online activism in the form of demonstrations and big turn outs in public meetings in New Delhi and Mumbai. Our preliminary look at sample Twitter posts suggests the reiteration of several themes including calls for Gandhian strategies, participation in the drafting of the Janlokal Bill, civil unrest, and social networking platforms. On the other hand, these are indicative of an inchoate civil society movement with a designated leader in the form of Anna Hazare, assuming the Gandhian mantle of people's leader, and being ascribed Gandhian associations in the social media.

Examining the social basis of corruption in India, Banerjee points out that 'According to one survey, 77% of all reported bribe demands in India are related to securing timely delivery of a service. ... But bribery in India moves beyond the sphere of such public transactions with the government departments. It takes insidious forms in our daily engagements with functionaries in the private sector.' (2011: 13). Such corruption does not recognise class distinctions or urban-rural differences. In addition, it touches almost everyone's quotidian life in some form, everywhere in India, so much so that corruption has become a way of life, accepted as such by the majority of the population. As a cause therefore, it is immediately recognisable, even without the high level, high profile scandals that have recently been reported in the media and are currently being investigated by the Supreme Court.

In the context in which discernible figures representing the state are implicated in corruption scandals on the one hand, and on the other petty corruption is very much a part of everyday existence, the relations between the state and civil society become more fraught. As Kothari has noted, in the absence of the state performing its constitutional obligations and the populace not having an alternative to turn to, 'that is setting the stage for the growing incidence of violence, inequity, destruction of natural resources ... and the consequent decline in more moderate and constructive modes of dissent.' (p.13). This was evident in the recent riots in London and other cities in the UK. In India, this has led to 'two opposing tendencies', namely, 'a techno-managerial response from the elite and an ethnic response from the diverse social peripheries.' (Kothari, p.13).

Given Chatterjee's important distinction between political and civil societies in postcolonial nations, how can protests such as Lokpal be interpreted? Scholars such as Gupta (1999) have demonstrated how the ways in which the state is encountered and imagined by the rural populace in postcolonial societies vary from that of the urban, educated, middle classes. Are they instances of exclusively urban, middle class civil society, mobilised through new communication technologies? What role do such mobilisations play in political change in such societies, and how valid are these changes if they leave out large sections of the rural population and the urban

poor? More importantly, whose interests are being served by the consequent changes to political formations? What is the role of new media and communication technologies in engendering political and social change in postcolonial nations? It can be argued that, at the very least, insights such as Chatterjee's need to be considered in academic accounts of new technologies and political movements.

It was pointed out in an earlier paper (Harindranath, 2000) that analysing popular protests and grassroots social movements in postcolonial societies require new conceptual frames that are appropriate to specific historical and socio-cultural contexts. At the very least, this demands an adoption of existing frameworks to suit local conditions. In this instance, any analysis the role of social media in the emergence of the popular anti-corruption movement in India needs to engage with the complexities that make up the contemporary Indian political landscape. Chatterjee's distinction between civil and political society, and the way in which that informs the constitutive elements of this anti-corruption movement, seems at least a good place to start revising the relatively unconstrained and at times uncritical enthusiasm for the potential of social media to engender social and political change.

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