

## **A CASE FOR DOWN-TO-EARTH GOVERNANCE**

**Strong local governance remains the unfinished agenda  
to make India's democracy strong and deep**

Nine years ago, Anna Hazare ended his historic fast when the Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh, informed him that Parliament had expressed support for proposed changes to anti-corruption legislation; "the 'sense of the House' was behind Anna Hazare's key demands". The historic bending of Parliament to the people's will was the result of a remarkable movement of citizens — rich, middle class, and poor — coming together to take politics back from politicians and to demand Parliament's accountability to citizens. Since then the nation's attention has moved on, from weaknesses in institutions of governance, to threats from China on the nation's borders and to global problems caused by COVID-19.

### **Hazare's point**

The single point demand of the Anna movement was the institution of the Jan Lokpal to try all government functionaries when accused of corruption; even the Prime Minister. Anna Hazare is a controversial person. However, one should not throw the baby out with the bathwater, and the thought he left while breaking his fast is worth recalling. He said Lokpals and Lokayuktas would not eliminate the root causes of corruption in politics and government. Electoral reforms and decentralisation of power were essential.

Parliamentarians of all parties were affronted by the claims of leaders of the Anna movement that they were the representatives of the people rather than the Parliamentarians. They taunted leaders like Arvind Kejriwal to prove it by winning elections. This spurred the formation of the Aam Aadmi Party. It joined the system which had to be reformed and had to play the game by the system's rules. This dismayed many and the movement for fundamental reforms of governance lost its steam.

### **It is about money**

Around the world, electoral democracies have become infected by the disease of funding political parties and elections. Money is required to win elections legitimately, even when people are not bribed to vote, which is illegitimate. Communications with citizens, essential for democracy, can be very expensive. Advertisements have to be paid for as well as teams of professionals for managing social media. If one party raises a million to spend, and the other raises two million, the first must raise even more or its million would have been wasted were it to lose the election. Thus, the race to raise more money for legitimate electioneering purposes can corrupt the process of funding parties and elections. Solutions are not easy because the right to free speech, and to put one's money where one's mouth is, is a fundamental right that cannot be denied as the Supreme Court of the United States ruled.

The debate continues about which is a better system. A presidential system, like the U.S. or the French one; or a parliamentary system, like the British one which India has adopted. Though the U.S. has a presidential system it cannot implement reforms to its flawed health-care system nor control the spread of dangerous weapons because party divisions within its democratically-elected Congress and Senate seem to make it impossible. Debates within India's Parliament, in which all members have been elected by the world's most impressive election machinery, hardly inspire citizens' confidence in their representatives' ability to govern the country.

### **Process and deliberations**

The problem in electoral democracies is not only with the process by which representatives are elected, but also in the conduct of their deliberations when they come together. This problem is not due to the quality of the individuals — whether they are 'educated' or not or even whether they have criminal records or not. It is inherent in the design of the process for electing representatives.

The framers of the U.S. Constitution had worried about this problem. Representatives of the people must be chosen by smaller electorates within geographical constituencies. However, when they meet together in the national chamber, they are expected to govern the whole country. They must shed their local hats and put on a national hat to consider what will be best for the whole country. However, if the people who elected them find they are not protecting local interests, they will not be elected again. Constituency favouring leads to challenges for equitable solutions for sharing of river waters, and to railway stations where there are very few people, because representatives fight for the largest share of the pie for their constituency rather than the growth of the whole pie.

Electing good representatives to Assemblies is not enough to ensure good decisions will be made. Imagine 500 representatives in a chamber, each clamouring for his constituencies' interests. How will decisions be taken? As James Madison wrote in The Federalist paper No.55 (<https://bit.ly/3h7Pn9V>), "had every Athenian citizen been a Socrates, every Athenian assembly would still have been a mob."

### **Inner democracy**

Political parties in electoral democracies provide a solution to the problem of creating an alignment of views among representatives from hundreds of constituencies around the country. A party's point of view on fundamental matters can unite many. Therefore, all representatives need not be heard from in Parliament. One can speak for many. It is easier to form effective governments in electoral democracies when there are fewer parties. When there are too many parties and too many contradictory points of view to be accommodated within a coalition, governance can break down. Therefore, political parties are not evil. However, when political parties are not internally democratic, they become reviled as the means for self-aggrandising politicians to amass power and wealth, and democratic nations suffer.

It has become very difficult in representative democracies, for reasons explained here, to arrive at good and fair decisions for the governance of a large state or country. It is tempting to abandon political parties and parliaments and revert to direct forms of democracy where every decision can be put directly to all citizens to vote on. New Internet technologies make this possible. But, if all voters have not understood what is at stake, they cannot decide well, as Californians have learned over decades with their forms of direct democracy, and the U.K. has too with its hasty Brexit referendum.

Complex issues, where many interests collide, must be resolved by reason, not settled by the numbers. Hence there is no alternative to good local governance, wherein citizens manage their local affairs democratically. Locals know best how to balance the preservation of their water sources while making it easier for local enterprises to do business, and how to make their local schools and health facilities accessible to all citizens. One-size solutions devised by experts at the centre cannot fit all: therefore, local systems solutions are essential to solve global systemic problems of environmental sustainability and inclusive growth.

### **Citizens must solve issues**

No doubt, electoral funding must be cleaned up, and democracy within political parties improved to make representative democracy work better. This will require big changes to entrenched systems, yet will not be sufficient for good, democratic governance. Citizens must appreciate that they have to be the source of solutions, and not become only the source of problems for governments and experts to solve for them.

Citizens must learn to listen to each other's perspectives in their villages and in their urban neighbourhoods. Those with the most needs in the community must be enabled to participate, alongside the most endowed, in finding solutions for all. Since India's Independence 73 years ago when the power of government was transferred from a centre in London to a centre in Delhi, strong local governance remains the unfinished agenda to make India's democracy strong and deep.

**Meanings of Difficult Words:**

- ❖ **case** (noun) – a set of facts (supporting something).
- ❖ **down-to-earth** (adjective) – practical, reasonable, realistic, rational.
- ❖ **deep** (adjective) – intense, sound, profound.
- ❖ **legislation** (noun) – body of laws, rules, regulations, statutes.
- ❖ **sense of the House** (phrase) – simple or concurrent resolutions, both houses of Congress/ parliament may express formal opinions about subjects of national interest. As such these so-called “sense of” resolutions are officially known as “sense of the House”.
- ❖ **bending** (noun) – directing one’s attention to a task.
- ❖ **will** (noun) – wish/desire, intention, decision, choice, disposition.
- ❖ **take back** (phrasal verb) – get back, regain, repossess, reclaim, retrieve, recover.
- ❖ **accountability** (noun) – responsibility, liability, answerability.
- ❖ **move on** (phrasal verb) – initiate something new, start/begin a new thing; progress, make headway, advance.
- ❖ **Jan Lokpal Bill** (noun) – Citizen’s ombudsman Bill; a draft anti-corruption bill drawn up by prominent civil society activists seeking the appointment of Jan Lokpal – which would be an independent body that would investigate corruption cases. This body would have the power to prosecute the government officials, politicians and bureaucrats involved in any wrong doing without any government permission. The Act allows setting up of anti-corruption ombudsman called Lokpal at the Centre and Lokayukta at the State-level.
- ❖ **functionary** (noun) – official, administrator, office-holder.
- ❖ **throw the baby out with the bathwater** (phrase) – throw something valuable away with something unwanted.
- ❖ **thought** (noun) – idea, notion, belief.
- ❖ **recall** (verb) – remember, recollect; bring to mind, call to mind.
- ❖ **root cause** (noun) – the basic reason of something.
- ❖ **decentralisation** (noun) – the process of distributing or dispersing functions, powers, people or things away from a central location or authority.
- ❖ **Parliamentarian** (noun) – a member of a parliament.
- ❖ **affront** (verb) – offend, disgruntle, provoke, displease, bother.
- ❖ **claim** (noun) – assertion, declaration, affirmation.
- ❖ **rather than** (phrase) – instead of.
- ❖ **taunt** (verb) – provoke, insult, ridicule/tease.
- ❖ **spur** (verb) – induce, prompt, stimulate, encourage, galvanize.
- ❖ **play the game** (phrase) – play by the rules, play fair, be fair.
- ❖ **dismay** (verb) – horrify, shock, shake.
- ❖ **steam** (noun) – energy, momentum, impetus.
- ❖ **infect** (verb) – contaminate, pollute, spoil, damage.
- ❖ **legitimately** (adverb) – legally, fairly, truly.
- ❖ **illegitimate** (adjective) – illegal, unlawful, against the law.
- ❖ **as well as** (phrase) – and in addition; and also.
- ❖ **electioneering** (noun) – campaigning, canvassing.
- ❖ **put one’s money where one’s mouth is** (phrase) – do something rather than talking about it; support something by giving money/taking action rather than talking about it.
- ❖ **Congress** (noun) – The United States Congress is the bicameral (two chambers) legislature of the federal government of the United States, and consists of two chambers: the House of Representatives and the Senate.
- ❖ **machinery** (noun) – organization, system, structure, administration.
- ❖ **hardly** (adverb) – barely, only just, narrowly, slightly.

- ❖ **race** (noun) – competition, contest.
- ❖ **deliberation** (noun) – consideration, thought/thinking, contemplation.
- ❖ **conduct** (noun) – management, direction, controlling, overseeing (an activity).
- ❖ **due to** (phrase) – because of, owing to, on account of, as a result of.
- ❖ **inherent** (adjective) – implicit, intrinsic, fundamental, basic.
- ❖ **electorate** (noun) – all the people who entitled to vote in an election.
- ❖ **chamber** (noun) – one of the houses of a Parliament/Legislative Assembly.
- ❖ **shed** (verb) – discard, reject, get rid of, do away with, abandon.
- ❖ **hat** (noun) – a particular role or occupation (particularly when someone has too many of them).
- ❖ **put on** (phrasal verb) – get dressed in, don, slip into, change into.
- ❖ **interest** (noun) – benefit, advantage.
- ❖ **constituency** (noun) – territory, region, area, place (from where a representative is elected by voters to a legislative body).
- ❖ **equitable** (adjective) – fair, impartial.
- ❖ **a share of the pie** (phrase) – a slice of the pie, a piece of the pie; a portion of something available can be distributed.
- ❖ **clamour** (verb) – protest, demand, push/press (a demand).
- ❖ **athenian** (adjective) – relating to a citizen of Athens, Greece.
- ❖ **mob** (noun) – a large, disorganized, and often violent crowd of people.
- ❖ **point of view** (phrase) – perspective, viewpoint, standpoint, opinion.
- ❖ **break down** (phrasal verb) – collapse, be unsuccessful, disintegrate.
- ❖ **revile** (verb) – criticize, censure, condemn.
- ❖ **means** (noun) – method, way, mode.
- ❖ **self-aggrandizing** (adjective) – promoting oneself as an important person.
- ❖ **amass** (verb) – gather, accumulate, pile up.
- ❖ **citizenry** (noun) – all the people/citizens (of a place/country considered as a whole).
- ❖ **representative democracy** (noun) – a type of democracy in which citizenry vote for government representatives to handle legislation and ruling the country on their behalf.
- ❖ **arrive at** (verb) – attain, reach, accomplish (a conclusion or decision).
- ❖ **tempt** (verb) – provoke, rouse incite, persuade.
- ❖ **revert to** (verb) – return, go back, change back.
- ❖ **at stake** (phrase) – at issue, at risk; or in question.
- ❖ **Brexit** (noun) – a term used for the (supposed) departure of the United Kingdom from the European Union.
- ❖ **referendum** (noun) – public vote; a direct vote in which people cast ballots to decide on a specific issue or policy.
- ❖ **collide** (verb) – conflict, be in conflict, be in opposition, clash, differ.
- ❖ **preservation** (noun) – conservation, protection, keeping.
- ❖ **one-size-fits-all** (adjective) – suitable for/used in all circumstances.
- ❖ **systemic** (adjective) – constructional, organizational, formational.
- ❖ **sustainability** (noun) – maintainability of something at a certain rate/level.
- ❖ **inclusive** (adjective) – all-embracing, overall; all-inclusive, comprehensive.
- ❖ **clean up** (phrasal verb) – make things clean, restore something.
- ❖ **entrenched** (adjective) – ingrained, established, embedded.
- ❖ **perspective** (noun) – outlook, viewpoint, approach.
- ❖ **neighbourhood** (noun) – (surrounding) area, region, district/country.
- ❖ **enable** (verb) – allow, permit, give permission to.
- ❖ **endowed** (adjective) – blessed, talented, gifted, enriched.

