

A Gendered Reading of the Anna Hazare Phenomenon

Written by Bairavee Balasubramaniam

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BAIRAVEE BALASUBRAMANIAM, OCT 14 2011

When Anna Hazare was detained by the Indian authorities to prevent him from protest-fasting against the government's version of the Lok Pal Bill, he declared the "beginning" of India's "second freedom struggle"[1]. Though in an interview for The Hindu, Hazare claimed he did not consider himself the 'next Gandhi' [2], the use of *satyagraha* (non-violent resistance), fasting-as-protest and even the adornment of the Gandhi cap are materially, discursively and performatively evocative of Gandhi's freedom struggle. Whether the comparison is valid is another issue[3]. This evocative comparison is used as the basis for a gendered analysis of Hazare's movement, inspired by the history of women's participation during the Gandhian struggle for independence. .

Indian Women and the Promise of Emancipation-through-Participation

In the Constituent Assembly Debates of 1947, Ms. Renuka Ray expressed her "gratitude" to Gandhi whose "call so specifically" to the women to participate in "the national movement... broke down... [the] social barriers of centuries"[4]. She was confident that "when the men who have fought and struggled for their country's freedom came to power, the rights and liberties of women too would be guaranteed". These were not merely Ray's words, they echoed the hopes and dreams of women's organizations across the country, such as the All-India Women's Conference and the National Federation of Indian Women. Indian MPs, till this day, continue to use this rhetoric in debates on furthering women's political representation.

Despite the plethora of socially progressive, pro-woman legislation that exists in India – these promises and expectations starkly contrast the social, political and economic realities faced by Indian women. For instance, the practices of female infanticide and foeticide account for a highly skewed gender ratio of 933 females per 1000 males[5]. Between 63-85% of married women in 4 heavily-populated Indian states suffer from anemia[6]. Approximately 360 million people live below the poverty line in India; 73% of them are women and children[7]. In a survey conducted by the Thomson Reuters Foundation, India ranks alongside the Democratic Republic of Congo, Pakistan, Somalia and Afghanistan in being the "most dangerous country in which to be born a woman"[8]. In political terms, Indian women occupy only 11% of seats in the directly-elected Lower House of Parliament, the Lok Sabha[9].

Taken together, these social, political and economic indicators point towards the "betrayal" of Indian women during the re-writing of the "post-colonial sexual contract" embedded within the Indian Constitution [10]. Women who were consciously politically mobilized by (mostly male) political leaders to secure independence, were expected to return to their "accustomed place", i.e. domesticized, feminized roles in the private sphere once the desired political transformation was achieved[11]. The history, rhetoric and reality of the status of women in India, can be situated within this narrative.

In light of this history, does the form and extent of women's participation in Hazare's anti-graft movements merit our consideration? How is their role read or interpreted? Does the movement implicitly or explicitly provide the promise of female empowerment or the feminization of anti-corruption discourse in any form? Will this constitute a platform for including more women into India's political mainstream?

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Since the protests began, the media has flooded the public domain with images of women wearing I-Am-Anna Caps, carrying their children, marching en masse alongside men. The resulting narrative is that the movement is truly representative, comprising of “leading social activists, legal experts, professionals, students and, in some cities, *even* women carrying their children [author’s emphasis]”[12]– as though it is exemplary to see women as equal participants in a moment of national significance. Another newspaper report described people waving flags, singing patriotic songs and getting their faces painted in the Indian tricolour while Hazare supporters claimed that “Anna has pulled off a miracle” by “cutting across the barriers of age and gender” to make the “whole country stand up against corruption”[13].

What is conspicuously missing from all the academic and journalistic materials publicly available is a gendered analysis of the movement’s representativeness[14]. There are of course, numerous images and videos showing women wearing I-am-Anna caps, hoisting flags, marching, chanting slogans. Women’s presence in the movement cannot be denied, but how should it be read? Where are the orienting voices that ask or enquire: Are there feminized forms of corruption, or specific modes of corruption that involve or affect women in particular? What are the women *themselves* saying?

Despite women’s presence in the movement, there has (as of yet) been no attempt at generating a feminized, or even a gender-specific discourse on curtailing and preventing corruption. When women do speak out, the linkages between feminized forms of or specific vulnerabilities to corruption are not articulated verbally, and are only tenuously hinted at[15].

To understand *why* a gendered discourse on anti-corruption has not (yet) emerged through this movement, we must explore the terms of and critiques surrounding existing discourse.

Though the media has spent hours on talk shows featuring Hazare (and his proponents, opponents, etc.) in what appears to be ‘dialogue’, the notion of “corruption” has become a “convenient target onto which a whole complex of anxieties can be shifted”, with debate largely focusing on the “need for a strong Lok Pal bill” without spelling out its consequences for democracy[16]. The apparent public support for the movement (as reported by the media) and the strong claims that Team Anna have made to influence legislative politics through ‘extra-constitutional means’ have provoked responses from other long-time observers and participants in Indian politics[17]. A 24-strong Citizen’s Group composed of academics, artists, lawyers, and activists such as Mohini Giri (former Chairperson of the National Commission for Women) and Rajeev Dhawan (constitutional-legal expert) have cautioned the Standing Committee of Parliament on the Lok Pal Bill against the significance afforded to Team Anna, which appears “to claim that its members alone have the best legislative prescription for eradicating corruption”[18]. The lack of a gendered discourse can be linked to the lack of measured public debate on the merits of the Bill itself and the lack of discussion surrounding the legitimacy of Hazare’s movement to make such claims[19].

Final Thoughts

In contrast to the expectations surrounding women’s participation in the freedom struggle, so far no rhetoric observed in the Hazarian movement specifically calls upon Indian women or makes them any political guarantees of equality through their participation.

While the movement itself does not appear to be overtly patriarchal or inimical to the causes of women’s advancement, at best, one notes a tenuous under-articulated sense that tough anti-corruption laws will somehow further the advancement of women’s welfare. There is still ample room to discursively explore the gendered effects, dynamics and aspects of anti-corruption and their practical impact upon women in India. Gendering discourse in this fashion is a project that opens numerous avenues to increase women’s political engagement with and within political institutions.

The argument that political participation (through physical presence alone) will *automatically* grant further political rights to women has been thoroughly debunked: Despite greater numbers of women participating in elections (47.73% of the total voters registered), women only occupy 60 out of 543 (of seats in the Lower House of

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Parliament[20]. Despite the political participation of masses of women who heeded Gandhi's call during the struggle for freedom, they have yet to achieve political and social equality alongside men in Indian society.

In practical terms, women participating in the Hazare movement will have valuable, first-hand experiences of political mobilization, agitation and peaceful protest. Such experience can be channelled towards fuelling the demands for greater political representation for women. Whether this will happen remains to be seen.

Bairavee Balasubramaniam is currently a final-year PhD candidate at the University of Warwick. She interprets Indian parliamentary proceedings as performances made up of rhetorical and dramaturgical techniques embedded within interpersonal and institutional, rituals, ceremonies, norms and procedures. She is part of a larger research group called *Gendered Ceremony and Ritual in Parliament*, also based at the University of Warwick.

[1] The Hindu. (2011a). It's the beginning of second freedom struggle: Hazare. *The Hindu*, 16th August. [<http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/article2361213.ece>]

[2] The Hindu. (2011b). I am not Gandhi: Anna Hazare. *The Hindu*, 17th September. [<http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/article2462369.ece>]

[3] See also Dina Ben Patel's commentary in ZeeNews. (2011). Anna no modern-day Gandhi, says scholar. *Zee News*, 2nd October. [http://zeenews.india.com/news/nation/anna-no-modern-day-gandhi-says-scholar_734599.html].

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[14] See also Guha, R. & Uniyal L. (2011). Debating Anna Hazare. *Outlook India*, 1st October. [<http://outlookindia.com/article.aspx?278189>]; Mohanty, M. (2011). People's movements and the Anna upsurge, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 46 (38), pp. 16-19 for a class and caste-wise analysis of the Hazare movement

[15] See also The Times of India. (2011). Women join Anna Hazare campaign in Meghalaya. *The Times of India*, 20th August. [http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2011-08-20/guwahati/29908643_1_tribal-girl-corruption-anna-hazare]; Indian Express (2011). Muslim Women Personal Law Board backs Anna, slams Imam Bukhari. *Indian Express*, 24th August. [<http://www.indianexpress.com/news/muslim-women-personal-law-board-backs-anna-slams-imam-bukhari/836261/>]

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