

Satyagraha in Democracy: Opportunities and Pitfalls

Dr. Janmit Singh

Assistant Professor

Department of Political Science

Sewa Devi S. D. College

India

Abstract

Satyagraha was considered as morally rightful mean to resist unjust laws in totalitarian regimes. But there is a perspective which advocates granting scope to affirmative action by individuals and groups in democratic regimes. This may provide a channel to people to articulate their political resentment and insist for improvement where political class failed to represent their aspirations. But counterargument remains that any reform must usher from the constitutional structures and any attempt to circumscribe them would prove counterproductive as it would undermine the working of democratic structures. The analysis of various such movements in general and of Anna Hazare led movement in particular reveals that such movements act as means for the empowerment of people if continued to maintain their non-partisan nature. However, any attempt on their part to act as alternative to existing political class defeats not only their own cause but proves to be disastrous for democratic regimes.

Keywords: Satyagraha, Democracy, Civil Society Movements, Constitutional, Lokpal

Democracy has often been represented as panacea for all sufferings of civil society. The assumption is that system rests on choosing the representatives of the people who reflect the aspirations of society and execute them. Since constitutional and peaceful means are rule of game therefore democracy mitigates multiple cleavages existent in society. However, democracy despite all its virtues did not escape criticism. Political theorists Aristotle and Tocqueville had their doubts (Cunningham, 2005) which with the passage of time have been validated. The democratization of political institutions in plural societies in post-colonial period threw new challenges for governing elites. The latter still considered it as safest bet and went with argument that though it is hard but not impossible to achieve consociational democracy (Lijphart, 1977). Moreover, different constituents of society keep on exploring new horizons to deepen the roots of rule by consent. Here, the endeavor of social activists to raise people's concerns is seen as a mean to strengthen democratic structures. Recently, social activist Anna Hazare's anti-corruption movement in India raised theoretical questions regarding the scope of such movements in a democratic society. This movement was equated with Mahatma Gandhi's *Satyagraha* which he used as devise against imperialist British Government. One tends to agree with the fact that *Satyagraha* can be used against illegitimate regimes. But its usage as vehicle of mass agitation in/against democratically elected regimes needs to be seriously debated. There is point of view that *Satyagraha* holds its place in democracy as a corrective against the misuse of political power and even acts as a safeguard for the prevention of democratic spirit. It can serve as legitimate weapon of injured individuals and groups (Almust, 1998). Therefore, in the light of above arguments there is need to consider affirmative action by civil society groups as *Satyagraha* and then analyze its scope in democratic system.

Though civil society groups are formed within constitutional limits and they tend to follow constitutional means to get their demands accepted. But their functioning comes under serious criticism on the basis of their unrepresentative nature and thereby their right to challenge or coerce representative bodies to their point of view. It is argued that such precedents can damage the credibility of elected bodies and goes against the very logic that these bodies holds sovereign will of the people. Therefore, there is no room for *Satyagraha* or mass civil disobedience movement in a democratic system (Iyer, 2000). Governing elite do not grant such devise and argued that such methods are contempt against people's representation and violation of the spirit of democracy.

The denial of granting any legitimacy to civil society movements rests on assumption that no extra constitutional method needs to exist when people have democratic channels to aggregate and articulate their aspirations and grievances. Even Dr. Ambedkar was not in favor following modes of struggle which went outside the scope of constitutional framework. He was also of the view that political structures and processes available in democratic regimes offer means for social and economic justice. He urged people to abandon coercive methods such as civil disobedience, non-cooperation, coercive forms of *Satyagraha* and fast to force change. He argued that to use these methods under any circumstances would be charting on the course of anarchy therefore, the sooner they are abandoned, the better for us as a nation (Naik, 2003). However, peculiar situation emerges when counterargument is forwarded that these groups are composed of people who keep their inalienable rights of free speech and to criticize government. Therefore, these sections of society are not violating the democratic spirit rather complimenting it by raising their voice through constitutional means. These extra constitutional groups seem to thrive on civil rights provided to them in democratic regimes in all parts of world. However, one would have to determine the scope of their activity to bring reforms in a democratic system where vested interests stonewall any attempt to bring reforms in order to improve the existing structures of state. In this regard civil society movements face toughest challenge from political class.

Political parties are inseparable part of democracies as electorates elect the members of these political parties on the basis of their programs and policies. Members of political party are bound by the party discipline and their individual interests which do not allow them to take ideological line which is contrary to the core philosophy of the party. Their political actions would have to be in tandem with their political beliefs in order to be a viable political force in democracy. However, different political parties despite their mutual ideological differences agree that the demands of such groups must not be conceded. In general the response of political class was typical and contemptuous toward civil society groups which threaten their position of privilege. This reflected in handling of the Anna Hazare led movement where government was not ready to concede to his demand and agree upon the enactment of law for establishing *Lokpal* as it contended that it was prerogative of the people's representatives. Their argument was since legislative bodies represent the wishes of people therefore the right to deliberate and act on issues of public interests must remain their brief. They must not be coerced by extra constitutional bodies to act on certain issues in specified timeframe. The perspective of political class was that such attitude by civil society groups would be tantamount to hijack democracy.

Beside political class, the working of democratic institutions in India has been also under scrutiny of civil society members and academicians. There is a general perception of decline in the working of democratic institutions which needs to be arrested. The complacency on the part of political class precipitated the decline. However, there is divergence of opinion as far as mechanism to arrest this decline is concerned. The analysis of political history of India reveals that attempts have been made by political as well as apolitical groups to bring changes through the mode of mass agitation. When Jayaprakash Naryana called for Total Revolution to fulfill the aspirations of freedom fighters and get rid of vices inflicting Indian polity then another social activist R. K. Patil disagreed with the tactics and questioned the scope of *Satyagraha* and direct action in democracy (Guha, 2008). The former based its actions on the Gandhian philosophy that real *Swaraj* will not come by the acquisition of authority by a few but the acquisition of the capacity by all to resist authority when it is abused (Prabhu, 1961). It is argued that even Gandhi was aware of the fact that democratic institutions can be misused and peoples' voice stifled by vested interests. But people can refuse to be victimized by not cooperating against vested interests. As Gandhi said nothing is more difficult in this world than to administer the unwilling citizens (Dalton, 1996). Even imperialist powers were unable to rule over subjects and it was evident from non-cooperation movement. If it could be difficult for imperialist regimes then it would be more difficult for democratic regimes. But ardent constitutionalists though did not challenge the underlying arguments of philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi but struck to their viewpoint that any attempt to circumscribe constitutional system by extra constitutional structures and processes may play havoc with entire society.

One must understand that constitutional structures are meant to achieve public interests. In such attempt the citizens are granted constitutional rights and civil liberties. But merely granting rights do not solve multiple problems being faced by them. The regimes in decolonized societies such as India aspired to accomplish social and economic development in one go. But what these regimes were able to achieve was development of a small section of society. Consequently, there was emerging demand of Inclusive development in these newly free societies. It means the fruits of development must be shared by all sections of society.

However, the repressive nature of societal hierarchy and unequal distribution of economic resources further perpetuated the unequal distribution of political power. If democratic regimes gave right to marginal sections of society to raise their voice then they did not provide mechanism to liberate them from clutches of those with vested interests in society. This statement can be seen in the light that Indian constitution grants social and political rights but there is no provision of economic right in constitution. Therefore, in such situations new political elites perpetuated their position with the help of structures of state and tried to obliterate anyone who dared to challenge them. Consequently, these marginal sections were left with no choice but to rely on civil society groups as they thought it could help them in restructuring the power edifice. In this context, Jayaprakash Narayan's idea of Direct Action and Gandhian idea of non-violent *Satyagraha* seem to provide answer. It was argued that in the case of neo-liberal globalization where market and accumulation of profit predominate over the interests of people, solution is to come to the streets and peaceful mobilization against exploitative forces. Collective action and mass mobilization by the civil society could play important role in this direction (Sahoo, 2010).

Indian society is inflicted with daunting challenges such as increasing population, poverty, illiteracy and environment related issues coupled with many maladies such as corruption in bureaucratic and political life, elections becoming competition in elite class, increasing role of criminals in politics, political parties becoming private firms of few chosen ones, victimization of minority groups, widening economic disparities among different sections of society and deteriorating conditions of depressed classes. There has been argument suggesting that Indian society with its hierarchical structure based on caste breeds inequality and is least suitable for democratic form of government. The makers of Indian constitution were aware of this fact therefore they considered first General elections as biggest gamble of the history (Guha, 2008). However, the gamble paid. Indian democracy survived and political structures of state worked with reasonable success. The role played by the leadership with high political values needs appreciation for this survival. But with such leadership passing away and levers of power coming in the hands of new breed of politicians, the ability of these structures to act as vehicle of social, economic and political development was compromised. Even the makers of Indian constitution prophesied that the success of political institutions would depend upon tissues and fibers of social and economic equality.

Therefore, increasing disparities must be cause of concern and efforts must be made to remove contradictions otherwise those who suffer from inequality would blow up the structure of political democracy (Constituent Assembly Debates, 1949). The political class has developed vested interests and political power has become an end in itself. Political power was misused to for individual interest which resulted in lopsided economic development, environmental degradation, polarization of society and corruption in political and bureaucratic life. Not only this, greatest threats to constitutional order have come not from civil movements but from politicians themselves. We have instances of senior leaders of political parties burning the pages of the constitution, embarking upon *Yatras* which resulted destruction of places of worship of minority community and bloodshed and they even presided over structure of government when mass killings of citizens was taking place. However, no attempt was made to censure or charge these leaders for failing and even violating in their democratic and constitutional obligations. There are examples when there were deliberate attempts by certain sections to communalize society on religious basis and bloodshed followed. However, saddest part of the story is that such leaders went on to get huge majorities in next elections. And, such leaders went on to again hold constitutional positions. But when confronted with action by individual and civil society groups then the political class showed contempt and refused to accept any challenge from outside their ranks.

The failure of legitimate structures of state to redress the different needs of society proves *raison d'être* for genesis of many movements. Some of these movements rely on constitutional and others on extra constitutional means. Few movements also use violent means to achieve their self proclaimed goals. But violent movements breach the basic principle that state holds monopoly over means of coercion and no other group can employ force as mean to achieve its goals. Therefore, one must unequivocally condemn any use of violent means and state must crush such movements with force. But democratic regimes find it hard to manage and neutralize armed struggles and even if these movements are contained then it is done only with use of force. But even then these movements cause considerable damage to the man and material resources of state. In some cases armed movements posed serious existential crisis to the establishment.

There are numerous examples in India's political history where state had to use force to crush insurgent movements such as in Punjab, Jammu and Kashmir, North-East and Maoism hit states in central and eastern India. Some of these movements are still posing serious challenge to the establishment. But there are attempts by sections of society which aspire to change society through peaceful means. These movements strive to resolve issues by mobilizing public opinion and bringing pressure on government. Since these movements are based on public opinion therefore the establishment has to make compromise, surrender and even have to accept defeat before such forces. Union government's recent enactment of *Lokpal* Act shows that it succumbed to tactics of civil society movements.

The civil movements despite their inherent strength need host of supporting circumstances for success. Even during independence struggle it was argued that civil disobedience movements provided umbrella for a host of individual and corporate protest movements as it coincided fortuitously with the onset of the depression (Brown, 1977). Anna's movement against corruption and enactment of *Lokpal* could fructify under same circumstances. The gaining public perception of alleged scams in Congress led United Progressive Alliance government coupled with slow economic growth, inflation and anti-incumbency led to accumulation of anti government sentiments which were epitomized in Anna Hazare's movement for *Lokpal*. Though Anna Hazare was known as social activist due to his role played in development and structuring of his home town *Ralegan Siddi* in Maharashtra but he rose to prominent position with his movement against corruption. He got tremendous support to his demand for *Lokpal*. He was emerging as parallel centre of power by accumulating influence rapidly. His position of strength not only put pressure on government to act for the enactment of anti corruption ombudsman but was causing political damage to the Congress by portraying it as vanguard of corrupt. Therefore, Congress though did not want to come in open confrontation with his movement but wanted its erosion of goodwill and influence. However, one could ask for reasons that while movement launched by yoga guru Ramdev failed but one launched by Anna Hazare remained successful. This issue becomes very important when seen in the backdrop of union government's crackdown against movement launched by yoga guru Ramdev at Ramlila ground. The issues which distinguish the civil mass protest movement launched by Ramdev and Anna Hazare is that while former had his political inclinations toward a particular political party on the other hand the latter adopted non-partisan stand by strictly keeping equal distance from all political groups. Anna Hazare capitalized on people's anger against corruption.

There are numerous examples where movements by civil society groups achieved considerable success in protecting the societal interests. But these movements had to maintain their non-partisan nature and depend upon many other contributing factors in order to achieve their goals. Prominent civil society movements like *Narmada Bachao Andolan* opposed construction of large Dams in river valley in central India. Its support came from various sections of society like those affected with Dam projects, adivasis, farmers, human rights activists and environmentalists. The supporting circumstances came as increased awareness about liabilities of hydro projects as far as environmental and rehabilitation issues were concerned. *Chipko Andolan* was another movement which originated people's concern of rapid deforestation and awareness among different sections of society for sustainable development. *Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan* strives hard to achieve economic and social justice for the poor sections in rural India. The means employed by these groups unarmed state and challenged the ideological base of system. The state in order to maintain its legitimacy had to apply self correctives and accommodate the just demands of these groups.

The analysis of nature of struggle by civil society movements reveals that their functioning in democracies offers certain opportunities but at the same time poses some challenges. One has to accept that political class is supposed to be the voice of the people and vehicle of security and inclusive development. But the consistent failure of the political class has pushed people to find other avenues for redressal of their problems. In this regard affirmative action by civil society groups remain an option. One has to agree that peaceful movements based on political rights and civil liberties granted to citizens remain safest method to reform current dispensation without bringing harm to its foundations. There would remain demand of incorporating new structures and procedures as per changing needs of society. The aspirations of society are reflected when new institutions develop and old fade away. The ability of a system to restructure itself determines its longevity. The political system which refuses to reform, fall prey to revolutions and perish. So far the facts illuminate the nature of struggle by social activists like Anna Hazare and other civil society movements compliment political class for enacting laws for eradication of maladies affecting the functioning of democratic structure.

Moreover, civil society movements have complemented political parties as agencies of interest aggregation and interest articulation. These movements have helped in consensus building due to their non-partisan nature in society like ours which possesses highly fragmented political culture. Political parties need not to worry about losing political ground to these groups as leaders of groups leading civil society movements seldom showed any inclination to acquire political power. Again, these movements have helped secularization of political culture. As both the leadership and followers cut across identity lines of religion, caste, region and language therefore, they act as driving force for strengthening the foundations of political system. These movements have also provided voice to the marginalized sections of society who due to the lack of resources and channels of communication tend to go unnoticed in a political system. These movements raised certain vital issues affecting their lives and helped in bringing focus of ruling elite over the plight of depressed sections of society and thereby ameliorate their conditions.

If civil society movements offer opportunities then there is need to tread with caution when such movements confront democratic structures. Multiple interests remain active in any societal set up and one witnesses conflict and cooperation in groups representing these interests. Even, political institutes have emerged out of the disagreement and interaction among social forces and gradual development of procedure and organizational devices for resolving those disagreements. Therefore, disagreement has often proved to be boon in disguise as far as the development of political institutions has been concerned. But there has been also of the view that rapid social change and mobilization of new groups into politics coupled with slow development of political institutes results in political instability and violence (Huntington, 1968). Any haste could prove counterproductive for democratic structures and procedures. Therefore, movements based on civil rights would have to act without alacrity and would have to remain utmost vigilant about the legalities involved. The task of movements by social activists must mobilize people on real issues affecting them in social, economic, environmental and political spheres. However, beyond this they must leave to the legislative bodies. Moreover, there remains need of consensus among various interests existent in a society. Any attempt to ignore counter point of view and adopting self righteous approach may sound death knell to the very purpose of such movement. Moreover, there is issue of using coercive methods as fast unto death by any name as tool of political blackmailing. This is tantamount to hold someone by force to achieve objective which has nothing to do with societal welfare but serve personal individual interests. It goes by the name of *Duragraha*. The risk of development of personality cult remains real in civil society movements. Such movements hold high ideals to achieve and consequently get mass support by people. In the process the leader of the movements develop personality cult around them. This leads to hero worship and faith in a single powerful personality to deliver the goods. In the case of Anna Hazare's led struggle for the enactment of *Lokpal* act slogans were heard at Ramlila Maidan –“Anna is India, India is Anna” (Banerjee, 2011). Such development is violation of spirit of democracy as it lays too much power with single individual and has potential to undermine the functioning of democratic institutions.

Conclusion

Democracy rests on the assumption that shared power is safe power and seems to resolve the debate how to reconcile authority with accountability. And the best solution which evolved over a course of history is democracy where representatives of the people are repository of power. They remain under the consistent gaze of people, media, civil society groups and political opponents. Therefore, they act under restraint and find it difficult to use power indiscriminately. Moreover, the structures available within government create checks and balances and everyone is supposed to function within the parameters set by the constitution. The framework of the argument is that theoretically democratic regimes seem to fulfill utopia where power meets accountability. Internal vigilance on the part of people acts as prerequisite the success of democratic regimes. However, democratic regimes also act differently in different societies. Whereas these regimes have achieved reasonable success in developed societies but in developing societies these regimes have to face fragmented political culture and unequal distribution of resources in the terms of education, wealth, social status and consequent access to political power. Social revolution preceded political revolution in developed states. On the other hand developing societies are trying to establish egalitarian societies after adopting democratic regimes. As a result one witnesses a situation where the inequalities and discontentment reflects in the structures of governance in democratic societies. Since there remains provision of civil liberties coupled with the open channels of communications in such societies therefore, there is no bar on interest articulation and interest aggregation by different societal interests in society.

Consequently, there emerge various protest and anti-establishment mass movements which confront government. In most of cases these movement do not question the constitutional order but the role of political class as ruling agency. These groups resist any attempt to deny them any role as far as political order in a democracy is concerned. They base their argument on the assertion that democracy has to be judged not just by the institutions that formally exist but by the extent to which different voices from different sections of the people can actually be heard (Sen, 2009). There have been movements raising these voices concerning environment, social, economic and political issues. However, when these movements confront government over political reforms then questions are asked about their legitimacy in systems which are based on the consent of people. Since civil society movements are not accountable to the people through any political framework, therefore they must not force change in society without involving political structures.

Though political parties keep their inalienable right to mobilize people on various basis but they have to pass through electoral process in order to get legitimacy. But movements by social activists need not to face elections; therefore their claim of representative of the people remains untested. Therefore, political elite agrees on their role as agency of interest articulation but did not grant these groups any scope as far as policy formulation and execution is concerned. Moreover, questions are raised on methods which these groups employ for achieving their objectives. One would have to also accept the fact that such struggle has to be within the parameters of existing constitutional framework. Any inclination towards political action which is not in line with democratic norms tends to lose legitimacy and invite repression by establishment. Therefore, in order to be ideologically and tactically correct these movements needs to be based on the very principles on which the constitutional structure stands. Moreover, this is helpful as it has been proved that peaceful movements based on democratic rights and civil liberties corner democratically elected governments more effectively. The quality of democracy depends upon the quality of population in terms of their being conscious about social, economic and political issues. Otherwise despite best efforts by the makers of the constitution makers, one can end up having worst kind of democracy. Here the role of civil society groups is of crucial importance as they can act as agents of socialization in given society. They educate people on various issues and prevent dehumanization of society. However, the success of civil movements needs that those participating in it must be enlightened, informed, conscientious who are able to reach upon discreet judgments to subordinate their personal interests to those of society. Civil society movements which are guided by leadership with values tend to help society giving right direction to political culture.

As far as success of movement led by Anna Hazare was concerned it was achieved due to host of variables. He came became an icon of strength of mass agitation and epitomized that such movements could alter constitutional order for good and compel ruling elite to perform. Anna Hazare's phenomenal rise also perplexed social scientists. But his case seems to prove the claim that construction of leadership depends upon individual impulsions, the need and aspirations of others and their mutual satisfaction in a particular political context (Brown, 1977). Indian political system proves that democratic regimes keep the ability to rejuvenate them when faced with challenges from within. It was evident from the fact that in numerous instances state apparatus had to fall back when countered against the power of mass mobilization. It is this ability of democracy to accommodate forces of dissent which allows it to draw its strength from various sections of society and reform to be a dynamic system of governance. Civil society movements tend to be the catalyst of reform. But one has to accept these movements will have to limit their role to interest articulation and would have to remain non-partisan by not becoming agencies of political blackmail in the hands of vested interests.

Finally, one can argue that the *Satyagraha* or Civil society movements and democracy are not anti-thesis but complement each other. This can be understood by the facts that since democratic regimes are based consent of those who are ruled therefore governments provide everyone share in power. This share is in terms of power as well as in responsibility to act with restrain. Different sections of society representing different and sometimes conflicting interests are supposed to sort out their differences through the process of reconciliation. The government provides such structures and procedures which encourage the process under which consensus building can take place. One find political history of the world littered with examples where mass movements in non democratic societies have caused the downfall of regimes but democratic government circumscribe such movements and effectively prevent them to recoil. This is the reason that life span of democratic regimes is longer than dictatorial one.

The merits of democracy are evident from the fact that as per report of UNDP 60 per cent states possess electoral democracies in different forms (Freedom House, 2010). One could argue that democracies by accommodating civil movements prolong their lifespan and vitality. This is win-win situation for both.

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