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BOOKS

How a Government That Lifted 140 Million Out of Poverty Was Undone by an Anti-Corruption Movement



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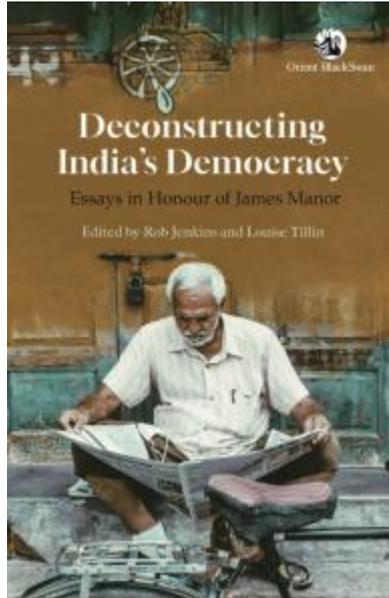
The conclusion of the IAC agitation marked, in a sense, the end of the road for the UPA, even though the economy was in much better shape than it ever had been under the previous NDA government.



Former prime minister Manmohan Singh. Photo: Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

The following is an excerpt from *Deconstructing India's Democracy: Essays in Honour of James Manor*, edited by Rob Jenkins and Louise Tillin.

At its peak, few campaigns have captured the public imagination quite like the IAC-led anti-corruption movement. It took Delhi by storm as it managed to gather wide swathes of public support on the issue of corruption. This movement had positioned itself in the non-political space, denying its platform to any politician. Undoubtedly the anti-corruption movement had garnered wide-ranging support, but some of it derived from the backing of the RSS and people affiliated with or sympathetic to it (Donthi 2017). Officially, the RSS denied participation. It was nevertheless eager to take credit for the storm that shook New Delhi in the summer of 2011. Mohan Bhagwat claimed that 'although the RSS never actively supported the Jan Lokpal movement, it was the RSS that urged Hazare to go on the anti-corruption crusade' (Firstpost 2011).



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The RSS leader also claimed that it had spoken to yoga entrepreneur Baba Ramdev too about launching an anticorruption movement (ibid.). The IAC movement was 'propped up' by the BJP and the RSS for their own political purposes to bring down the UPA government and to 'get themselves in power', noted Prashant Bhushan, once among its core members (Scroll 2020). He went on to say that Arvind Kejriwal, leader of the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) and later chief minister of Delhi, was aware that the IAC was propped up by the BJP-RSS. Bhushan later fell out with Kejriwal and was expelled from AAP. In a similar vein, one-time AAP leader Yogendra Yadav, who was later ousted by Kejriwal and went on to found the Swaraj Abhiyan political party, observed that the 'Anna movement and the AAP may not have been a conspiracy to aid Modi, but they did end up helping the BJP's rise' (Yadav 2021). This movement, he said, 'delegitimised an increasingly unpopular UPA government and intensified popular anger against it' (ibid.). This opportunity was deftly used by the BJP, which eventually paved the way for the rise of the Hindu Right. Several Congress leaders, notably P. Chidambaram, had made this point much earlier, saying that the RSS had decided to support anyone raising the corruption issue (Press Trust of India 2013). Their mission was to kill off UPA-II. The right-wing succeeded very well in this mission despite Manmohan Singh conceding to all of Hazare's demands – a Joint Drafting Committee (JDC), holding a special parliamentary session, and ultimately passing a Lokpal bill. The IAC campaign had developed from being a movement against corruption into a launching pad for the formation of a right-wing government headed by Narendra Modi.

The conclusion of the IAC agitation marked, in a sense, the end of the road for the UPA, even though the economy was in much better shape than it ever had been under the previous NDA government. According to Planning Commission estimates, between 2004 and 2012, approximately 140 million people were lifted out of poverty, an achievement hailed internationally. The poverty ratio declined by at least 15 percentage points. It was the fastest decline in India's history. Between 2004–2005 and 2009–2010, the gap between the rich and poor shrunk

appreciably, as 40% of the population experienced upward mobility. However, the Congress took no credit for this and did not woo this upwardly mobile 140 million poor people that entered into an emerging (lower) middle class. It was focused on the poor, who had declined to 22% of the population, according to the methodology employed at the time. However, many people from this class, too, had shifted their political loyalties. The now non-poor were not impressed with the pro-poor rhetoric. Briefly put, groups that were annoyed with the UPA were mobilised, while those who had gained from high growth were not. Narendra Modi, the putative leader of the BJP, to quote a 2017 Wall Street Journal article, 'tapped into the frustrations of a generation of Indians who climbed out of poverty in the past decade, but who have been prevented from joining the middle classes by slowing growth and a lack of employment' (Mandhana 2017). It was these classes that delegitimised the Congress and eventually voted it out.

The Congress focused on policies, and not enough on politics. It lacked coherence, political imagination and popular communication of its programmes and achievements. It was simply unable to use radical policies to change the political mood. Importantly, the ambiguity about the leadership issue complicated things further. And without clarity about political responsibility and accountability for decision making, there was no hope of communicating the truth about the 'scams' that the BJP hammered away at. In the event, the Congress began to implode due to the anti-corruption movement, which continued until 2012. The BJP clearly sensed the decline in the government's ability to resolve issues and swiftly moved into the political vacuum (Aiyar 2018). Their calculation was simple: the UPA is melting, the Congress is sinking, and this is the opportunity to corner it. They succeeded remarkably well in this mission by disrupting Parliament on a daily basis to demand the prime minister's resignation. This proved to be the Achilles heel of the UPA. It was in a free fall after this. While in 2011, the fallout of the anti-corruption agitation was difficult to gauge, it was clear even then that the government had alienated important social constituencies. It fundamentally generated a political mood which promoted the BJP's anti-Congress crusade. The BJP reaped the bumper anti-Congress harvest that the IAC had unleashed by emerging as the champion of anti-corruption.

Two governments, the Congress government in Delhi led by Sheila Dixit and the UPA government at the Centre, were essentially brought down by this agitation, which also prepared the pitch for the BJP to be catapulted to power in 2014. The IAC, which transformed itself into AAP, indirectly helped the rightwing forces. Barely a year after its formation, the AAP, which had appropriated the Congress's *aam aadmi* (common man) platform, made a dramatic debut in the Delhi legislative elections in December 2013, crushing the Congress. The Congress, fighting with its back to the wall, lost the battle on the corruption issue, despite having introduced the Right to Information (RTI) Act, the Whistle Blowers Protection Act, the Citizen's Right to Grievance Redressal Bill, the Public Procurement Bill, and the Judicial Accountability and Standards Bill, among other measures to curb corruption. But the big winner was the BJP. The Congress lost out because of its ineffectual handling of the anti-corruption agitation and its ineffectiveness in combating corruption allegations which had a shattering impact on its electoral fortunes. But there was more to it than disgust with corruption and crony capitalism. It is now clear that for the elite, this campaign was not simply aimed at ending corruption; it embodied an underlying disapproval of the UPA's redistributive policies (Rajagopal 2017).

The UPA ran out of steam just when India's constitutional democracy began to address inequality and to devise policies for the poor and their access to constitutional guarantees.

The corporate media played a key part in propagating the Gujarat model as providing a haven for business and thus a catalyst to growth. Surveys conducted before the 2014 election found that 75 per cent of top corporate leaders wanted Modi to be the next prime minister. This was the first time in India's history that the country's corporate leaders were open and united in supporting a prime ministerial candidate and the political party he represented. They repeatedly highlighted the issues of lagging growth and unchecked corruption, while maintaining that decisive leadership was the only solution. The BJP received massive corporate funding, easily outspending its rivals. It is not surprising that, since coming to power in 2014, the BJP managed to all but monopolise political donations from the corporate sector (Vaishnav 2019).

While the reality behind the claims of the Gujarat model was highly questionable, its popularity was a sign of things to come. The UPA's policy paradigm, which sought to balance the various dimensions of development, was pushed aside to make way for a right wing takeover by the BJP-RSS in the name of the Hindu majority. As a consequence, the socio-political landscape of the country has radically altered. Ten years on, the Gujarat model has been exposed for

what it is—a lopsided approach to development that has produced inequitable results and entrenched cronyism. It is a textbook case of what development should not be like.

India finds itself living under what might be called the Gujarat model of politics – one in which the norms and tactics perfected by the state’s chief minister have been upscaled to the national level, including contempt for democracy and diversity, a creeping authoritarianism, unconcealed majoritarianism, abuse of state institutions, shackling of the media, and demonisation and victimisation of Muslims.

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