

Strategist Anna Mobilised Aspirers

This group of middle-class wannabes is protesting against a privileged class that corners the fruits of reforms



RAJESH SHUKLA

Sandwiched between the glistering Delhi Stock Exchange building at one end and the MTNL office at the other lies Ramlila Maidan where an outraged public vented its anger against the 'corrupt system' last month. With bated breath, the country watched as the self-appointed crusaders took on the mighty government to rid the system of the systemic corruption and poor governance that has taken hold.

As I made my way through the 'thinning' crowd towards the makeshift platform where the man at the heart of the movement stood, the inherent irony of the movement crept on me. How a 74-year-old man, raised during the freedom struggle, on ideals long forgotten, had not only caught the attention but also inspired the self-serving globalised urban middle class to act. Like many, I assumed that such a movement, which has been characterised by many as a middle-class one, would be driven by a young, aspirational leader, vowing to lead them to the 'promised

land'. But the manner in which the movement has become a rallying point, a symbol of the frustration against the corrupt system and bad governance at all levels, is truly astonishing.

In our rush to characterise the movement, one particular section has been forgotten or has been conveniently merged into the middle class. This class lies between the deprived and the middle, and is what I have often referred to as the 'aspirers'. Aspiring to join the middle-class ranks, households in this category have an annual household income of ₹1,50,000-3,40,000 (at 2009-10 prices). Most chief wage earners in this category are not educated enough and end up in low-paying, clerical and menial jobs. But they want a better future for their children so that they may enter the middle-class ranks.

It is the desire of this category, where education is the new food, to be part of the much-publicised India growth story and to join the ranks of the middle class that is the force driving their participation in this movement. Their fight against corruption is part of a much larger movement against the system that perpetuates inequality and, thus, thwarts their growth by preventing their access to affordable and quality education, healthcare and good job opportunities.

By 2015-16, the projected strength of this class would be 44

million (34% of total population) while that of the middle class would be 267 million (20%). Thus, while this class is numerically more significant than the middle class, the two categories together will account for about 54% of the total population by the middle of this decade. This implies that the poor will no longer be the biggest and most influential constituency that politicians will have to appease. With electoral results increasingly being

The 'aspirers' are fighting the system that prevents their access to quality education, healthcare and good job opportunities

decided by economic considerations, the crucial issue is not fractionalisation but how social cleavages map on the income distribution (Alesina and Glaeser, 2004, Selway, 2011).

Thus, the rising political consciousness of this combined group will play a pivotal role in setting up the future political and developmental agendas. But this is only a part of the story. What we are now witnessing is a confluence of events that will play a deciding role in the shaping of not only our economy but also our democracy, and, with it, the polity.

Seen in conjunction with the rising political consciousness is the issue of demography. The 'youth' population in the coun-

try, that is, individuals in the age group of 13-35, was estimated at 459 million in 2009. This category will be eligible to vote in the coming elections (I'm hoping that heightened political consciousness will increase electoral participation). This key group, raised and educated in the liberalised era, believes in the idea of meritocracy and a level playing field. Faced with systematic corruption and the growing concentration of resources in the hands of a few, they realise how shallow the slogans of inclusive growth are and how the odds are stacked against them.

Anna's success in mobilising individuals from such diverse sections of society stems from his ability to skillfully tap into this growing undercurrent of frustration against the system, one that cuts across classes. So, the movement, in addition to becoming a symbol of our deep-seated desire to cleanse the system, also represented the desire to create an egalitarian society. Also, the massive expansion in television and mobile subscribers not only implies that we live in a hyper-connected world, but it has ensured that reverberations of events are felt across the length and breadth of the country.

While this movement may be characterised as one against corruption, the outpouring of sympathy and support makes me believe that this is part of a

larger movement that reflects the changing dynamics of the country, where more emphasis is being laid on development and public accountability. The movement seeks to establish a society based on merit and level playing field, and not one where a privileged section of society garners a disproportionate share of the gains accruing from growth. Although such movements might be 'necessary' to raise awareness and, thus, the people's voice, they are not 'sufficient' to be the panacea of all social problems.

We as citizens need to be more responsible and should act morally if we are to rid ourselves of corruption, but what needs to be kept in mind is that we live in a democratic country. While this movement is the first of its kind, the likelihood of such outbursts relating to national and regional issues may rise in future. Although there are many possible explanations for this outburst, principle among them being the emergence of the aspirers, and middle class has been associated with a change in the social order. As their numerical strength grows, this class seeks a realignment of existing power dynamics by challenging the status quo. By demanding their legitimate share in power and, thus, policy formulation, they challenge the power of the elite.

(The author is director of NCAER-CMCR)