

Resisting Revolutions: Questioning the radical potential of citizen action

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ABSTRACT *Nishant Shah looks into the radical claims and potentials of citizen action that have emerged in the last few years. He seeks to show how citizen action is not necessarily a radical form of politics and that we need to make a distinction between Resistances and Revolutions. It locates resistance as an endemic condition of governmentality within a State–Citizen–Market relationship and shows how it often strengthens the status quo rather than radically undermining it. He examines a campaign against corruption in India to see how the dissonance between the claims of the future and the practices of the present is produced in citizen action.*

KEYWORDS *resistance; participatory technologies; governmentality; ICT4D; technology apparatus*

Introduction

The first decade of the twenty-first century has been marked with citizen action that has ranged from overthrowing authoritarian governments¹ to challenging the principles of established governments.² Across the Global South, but also in other parts of the developed world, there have been attempts at questioning the *status quo* of our living and being, demanding a change in contemporary conditions. These uprisings have often been characterized as radical and subversive because of their modes of engagement and mobilization and the political power that they wield. They are attributed to the widespread adoption and usage of digital and Internet technologies for the ways in which they have been orchestrated and conducted.³ There is also discourse that suggests that this kind of citizen action is unprecedented,⁴ at least in recent contemporary history, and that it signals a paradigm shift in State–Citizen relationships.⁵

In taking up a particular case study of a nationwide anti-corruption campaign that started in 2010, I demonstrate how these claims around citizen action, radicalism and articulation of future relationships need to be more carefully thought out than they have been in current popular and academic discourse. I do not want to discredit these claims, but to complicate them and offer a framework that demands more attention, both to the geo-political contexts and the temporalities, which inform and shape these uprisings.

Development 55(2): Thematic Section

I argue that the idea of 'citizen action' that marks these phenomena has been too easily understood as leading to systemic changes and revolutions. I question the radical potential of citizen action. I show how, in many cases, the promises of the interventions often disappear from media and popular consciousness. I argue this is a symptom of how the political edge is assimilated in existing practices of governance, thus defusing the actualization of the promise of the revolution. Before I analyze these questions, I first build a framework that will explain the various categories of political identification and engagement deployed in describing these revolutions, which seem to always bear a promise of the future that is never met.

State–citizen–market (SCM) relationships

One of the most basic structures within which Citizen–Civic Action can be placed is the triangulation of SCM relationships. As a structural model, it is mapped as a non-linear, reciprocal flow of information where each entity within the triangle interacts with and helps in conceiving the other two (Chatterjee, 1986). For example, the State emerges as the arbitrator of rights and justice, ensuring that the market logic does not compromise the essential rights of the citizen. The market keeps a check and balance on the State's monopoly over public services, challenges existing models through innovation and experimentation and engages with the citizen to counter the potential hegemony of State action and policy. The citizen becomes the embodied manifestation of State–Market negotiations, emerging as a consumer and a citizen, questioning possible collusion of State and Market, entering into specific rights and obligations contracts with both the State and the Market. Thus, resistance and contestation are not outside of this relationship structure. They are indeed an integral part of sustaining it (Chatterjee, 1993; Escobar, 1995).

This triangulation is in no way static and can only be imagined as a series of interactions and negotiations involving all three actors. It might

appear from such an Actor Network model that the sectors are pre-defined and have definite roles to play. However, it is a more fruitful exercise to understand the actors as being defined and coming into existence only through the interactions and negotiations; each one contingent upon the responses and actions of the other for its own actualization (Engels, 1884; Kothari, 1997). This is Resistance, which is an essential part of the SCM relationships, where each actor resists, questions and facilitates the different transactions that are mitigated and mediated by those technologies that produce assurances and precariousness of time and space.

These technology apparatuses constantly negotiate between the assurances and precariousness (Langton, 1993) in order to produce the SCM relationships model that is under discussion. They mitigate the risks of the present by giving us assurances of the future while drawing from the probability of the past. However, when any (or all) of the actors in this model start experiencing a crisis where the risk of the present is not worth the promise of the future, this leads to a paradigm shift in relationships, which is accompanied by a radical and dramatic shift in the technology apparatus (Pieterse, 2001). More often than not, these crises are propelled and orchestrated through new technologies, which reconceptualize the nature of governance, of production and life (Castells, 1996). When the futures become unimaginable or implausible and the presences (hetero spatial and temporal) do not provide the necessary infrastructure for biological, political, social or economic survival and satisfaction, we see the emergence of revolutions that demand that these relationships change (Prakash, 1996). Revolution, then, is different from resistance. It seeks to overthrow this established structure of relationships and transactions, and in the process articulates a future of change.

Resistance versus revolution

Making this distinction between resistance and revolution is the key to reading the promises of the current uprisings. Revolutions, as I have formulated here, lead to precarious futures that can no longer be articulated by existing relationships

and transactions. They not only change the mode of governance, they also undermine the very fundamental premises of governance and lead to the production of new categories, identities and structures of governmentality. Subsequently, we find new ways of defining citizenship, understanding state structure and the role that different actors play in facilitating the interactions between the two.

Resistance, conversely, seeks to reinforce the centrality of the State and the validity of the current model of governance. Resistance might arise from any of the three actors in the SCM model, and it might also engage with the current structure critically. However, the ambition of this critical intervention is to bolster existing relationships and address the existing problems in order for the model to survive. It introduces modes of engagement, ways of operation and frameworks of legibility that do not question or undermine the *status quo* in any ways. Instead, it builds scaffolding around the existing problems, in an attempt to produce a re-evolution of the contemporary structure as something that the future must build towards.

The language of resistance takes on familiar routes and ideas. It begins with the idea of access. Access to information, to participation, to resources, to democracy and so on marks the first stage of mitigating resistance. Access is looked at as leading to larger participation, deeper democracy and more equitable sharing of resources. Information and Communication Technologies for Development (ICT4D) portfolios across countries press for larger, affordable, ubiquitous access to digital and Internet technologies as a solution to problems of inequity. Even with the detractors of technology, Access remains a sore point, because it creates a schism between the haves and have-nots. Earlier categories of discrimination or exclusion are replaced with these new forms of technology exclusion as one of the biggest challenges, and access becomes the *de facto* answer. Access becomes the catalyst for larger infrastructural development, the digitization of public resources and expansion of market economies. More users need to buy interface time, in order

to avail of different State–Market services (Voslo, 2011).

The ideas of access are immediately followed by the notion of Inclusion. Learning from the distributed and multitudinous structure of digital and Internet technologies, we now talk of inclusion as a new mode of engagement. The mere inclusion of the citizen as the beneficiary – the intended recipient of the traditional centralized model of governance – is not enough. It is now thought of as imperative that the citizen be included in the processes of governance by giving them a voice and a say, by making sure that their voices are included in the processes by which the SCM model would be created (Dreze, 2004; Osiatynski, 2006).

It is presumed that Inclusion of the voices and opinions would lead to better and more sustainable modes of development that are more nuanced and context-appropriate. While this is true, the importance given to inclusion obfuscates the fact that only those voices are included in this process that give opinions on how the technologized model can be built. There is very little space for including ideas that might fundamentally challenge the *status quo* of the technologies being deployed and ask for a different set of technologies or a resistance to them (Heidegger, 2003). The rhetoric of Inclusion involves the users in storytelling, but not in defining the conditions of building the narrative (Pokharel, 2010).

Once access has been granted and the citizen has been included in the processes of execution and implementation of the new model – with its in-built resistance and negotiation structure – there is a clear promotion of presence as a way of maintaining equity of power. Presence makes sure that the new digitally disempowered – people who have been given access and included in the models of development, but still on the margins and fringes of this new model – are now acknowledged and their voices are given weight. A new discrimination now comes into being, which plays out along the older lines of affirmative action, quotas and so on.

These three concepts eventually get enshrined in a language of rights so that what means to be a human being, a person and a citizen are all reconceptualized in order to be accounted for in the

Development 55(2): Thematic Section

modes and methods developed by these new technologies (Bhabha, 1994). What emerges, appears to be a radical model of the SCM relationships because new kinds of resistances are articulated and revolts are staged (Bloor, 1992). However, as has been discussed so far, what it actually produces is Re-evolution (Riedel, 1984) of the SCM model rather than a revolution that challenges the power inequities of the earlier model.

This 'An-Other' model replicates the problems with the analogue structures and also inflects these, amplifies and augments them through the new techno-discriminations that come into being. The new model is not 'Another' model of governance – something that seeks to challenge the existing structures – but a new way of accounting for the older structures without having resolved any of the problems. This is the problem with the politics of hope. It is so infused with the joy of possibilities and potentials of the paradigm shift that it does not compare the precariousness and assurances with the earlier structure. It in fact comes to celebrate precariousness as a desirable condition that overthrows existing power structures and produces tenuous identities and relationships. However, these processes are only a continuation of the older processes of negotiation and perpetuate the power centralization and ensuing injustices while serving the benefits of the State and the Market.

India against corruption campaign: structure and claims

In the current spate of political mobilizations – in Middle East, Asia and North Africa, in Spain and in the United States of America, in Thailand, China, India and other parts of the Global South – there has been much hope and talk about how a revolution has happened. There are several phenomena that characterize this state of revolution: the middle classes coming to the streets to claim political space and voice, overthrowing existing governments, especially in more authoritative regimes, bypassing and questioning the State's sovereignty over its subjects, and demanding rights and resources that are more equitably shared and owned. From agitations about better

financial safety and security to stronger participatory forms of governance, there have been (in varying degrees) successful revolts celebrated by those who have despaired at the massive consolidation of power and capital that have marked the late capitalist global societies at the end of the twentieth century.

In India, the largest citizen action movement got embodied in an 'India Against Corruption'⁶ campaign that was spearheaded by an erstwhile Gandhian activist named Anna Hazare. In early 2010, Hazare started a fast-unto-death⁷ strategy to protest against a perceived increase in corruption in the political realm. Building upon a scandalous decade that has exposed billions of dollars misappropriated and misused by different governments in the last few decades and an hand-in-glove collusion of State and Market interests at the cost of citizen rights, benefits and services, Hazare, supported by a strong civil society representation and also the opposition political parties in the country, started a movement for the appointment of an ombudsman who shall be able to question and investigate the integrity and ethics of the entire State apparatus irrespective of its political status or standing.⁸ This call for the appointment of a Lokpal⁹ (protector of people), both at the national and state level, led to a viral movement in India, where tens of thousands of people across the country came out in support of this anti-corruption motif. The mainstream media and digital networks took the battle-cry of 'I am Anna Hazare'¹⁰ and brought people to demand their right not to be victimized by corruption from the government. Public demonstrations, candle-light vigils, open letters and discussions, and the spectacular acts of fasting in public for solidarity with Hazare all marked this movement.¹¹ While the politics (mislaid or otherwise) of the movement are complicated enough, what is particularly interesting for the argument of this paper is how this citizen action revolt lost its intensity in a few months and disappeared from all public interest¹² and media reportage¹³ without actually leading to the kind of change that was promised in its unfolding.¹⁴

The Hazare led campaign was characterized by three traits articulated both by its core team as

well as the public discourse around it: it claimed to be a revolution that was going to change the structure of governance towards an equitable future,¹⁵ it signalled the arrival of digital and internet technologies in the country enabling new constituencies of citizen activists¹⁶ and it sought to provide a sustainable future by recalibrating SCM relationships in the country.¹⁷

These claims are anchored on the Anna Hazare led campaign, but they are not contained to it. I am using this example both to illustrate some of the concepts I want to introduce, and in order to complicate these ideas that resonate globally in the various instant revolutions that we have seen in the last few years.

Reading Anna Hazare as resistance

However, a reconstruction of the Anna Hazare campaign offers a different reading that helps understand why the campaign mobilized such a huge interest and why it eventually petered out without meeting any of its claims and promises. Before Anna Hazare first went on his now famous hunger strike that catapulted the campaign into mass interest, on 5 April 2011, there was a series of events that had already been put into motion. India Against Corruption had already registered as an NGO and was trying to make a point about how the various anti-corruption committees that had been set up by the Government, especially the Shunglu Committee to investigate the Commonwealth Games scam, were ineffective and did not have adequate powers.¹⁸ On 14 November 2010, around 10,000 people assembled at the Parliament Street Police Station in New Delhi to protest against the rampant misappropriation of funds during the CWG, which led to national humiliation on an international forum.¹⁹ At the same time, the country was already abuzz with the Radia tapes²⁰ wiretapping demonstrating extreme collusion between market lobbyists and government leaders in the country. This was closely followed by the 2G spectrum scam²¹ that highlighted the scale of corruption within the political society, both in the amount of money being coveted and the high-level government

authorities involved. In the aftermaths of the Wikileaks Watergate scandal, there was already an atmosphere of suspicion and a clamour for disclosure of 'black money' from the elite Indian political society.²² The leaked diplomatic cables describing an Indian legislative aide showing a US embassy official 'chests of cash'²³ used to bribe Indian lawmakers over a vote on an Indo-US nuclear deal in July 2008 stirred fresh controversy.

The beginning of 2011 saw Indian corporate houses such as Azim Premji and Keshub Mahindra demanding a reform of the 'widespread governance deficit in almost every sphere of national activity, covering government, business and institutions'.²⁴ State ministers were already signalling their commitment to a 'war on corruption' in their own constituencies. The Supreme Court of India had taken cognizance of the fact that corruption was a burning issue for the country and had ordered all trial courts to expedite the handling of corruption cases.²⁵ The President of India, Pratibha Patil, announced in a public address to the Parliament of India that measures to ratify the United Nations Convention Against Corruption would be implemented through legislative and administrative measures in order to achieve better transparency and accountability in the country.²⁶ We witnessed a worldwide 50-city Dandi March II,²⁷ which was organized by People for Lok Satta and India Against Corruption. India's premier cricketer Kapil Dev became the first public celebrity to garner peoples' attention towards corruption when he wrote a letter to the prime minister,²⁸ complaining of the inadequacy of CWG corruption investigations and petitioning for the Jan Lokpal Bill in March 2011.

I want to show that corruption was already a new national worry in India. The State, the citizens and the Market were already denouncing the widespread reach of corruption and there were already certain measures that were being asked for by different groups. Corruption had emerged as a national concern and there was an overwhelming sense of how, if not dealt with efficiently, it might undermine India's visions of itself as articulated in Vision 2020 or India Shining campaigns, both at the national and international

Development 55(2): Thematic Section

levels. So, when Anna Hazare started his indefinite fast as a response to the prime minister's rejection of his demands for a stronger anti-corruption bill with strong penal actions and more independence to the Lokpal and the State Ombudsmen (Lokayuktas), Hazare found his political opponents. Until then, the Government, just like any other public actor, had also announced its commitment to fighting corruption. Hazare's demands were not antithetical to the government's avowed vision. The dissonance was in how he wanted it to be implemented.

The rest of the story of the Anna Hazare campaign is the stuff of political thrillers. The involvement of political parties and civil society organizations, the extraordinary exposure in public media, the series of accusations and counter-accusations which often forgot the issues at hand, an expose on the intentions and histories of the people who had lent voice to the movement – all add up to strange and complicated stories. However, as the Lokpal Bill got tabled in the Parliament and eventually got ratified to meet the demands of the protestors – though not accommodating all the demands – there was a sudden lull in the campaign. This particular campaign that was supposed to change India forever, to produce a peoples' revolution towards a corruption free India, suddenly lost interest and support. So that on 27 December 2011, when Anna Hazare began his fast demanding a stronger version of the ombudsman Lokpal bill in Mumbai, about 5,000 people turned up for support as opposed to the IAC's expectations of 50,000 people.²⁹ The passing of the bill by the parliament – in whatever form – assuaged the public outcry against the government's lack of concern around corruption.³⁰ And in a matter of six months, the revolution that was supported by 3.2 million netizens and had inspired millions of people across 52 cities in the country, suddenly disappeared from the media and public consciousness. It no longer incited citizen action and resulted in nothing more than yet another piece of legislation to add to the already existing set of laws to curb corruption. Last heard, the IAC and Anna Hazare's core team were at a loss of what to do next and are now in search of a new cause.³¹

If we go to the earlier framework that I have built, Hazare, then, was not questioning either the State's authority or its vision of a corruption-free India.

He was instead resisting the modes of operationalization that the government was setting into place and was demanding a structure that he thought was more efficient. We had the strange case of an 'India against corruption', which presumed in its articulation that it was fighting against an India that was pro-corruption. Or, to put it more simply, there was a hypothetically corrupt India, which precluded anybody who sided with Anna Hazare and hence, by corollary, anybody who became critical of Hazare's campaign automatically became the enemy to be fought. However, once the government was able to demonstrate its own intentions of supporting the cause, we were left without an enemy to fight with. The resistance provided by the citizens got assimilated in governmental practice. What we saw with the Hazare campaign was how the resistance led to a re-evolution of the SCM model, where the State remains the vanguard of public interest, the citizens invoke the State to protect their rights and the Market becomes a stakeholder in this state-citizen dialogue. The revolution that was supposed radically to overcome the democracy and trust deficit of the State becomes a way of endorsing the State's centrality and importance in a rights-based discourse. The movement lost its political teeth, its claims at radicalism and its intentions of creating new modes of governance, only to strengthen the very system it had set out to oppose.

The Anna Hazare campaign, which used digital technologies and mobilized an urban middle class around new social rights, managed to do nothing more than highlight corruption as a new axis of discrimination and inequity without actually engaging with older systemic forms of exclusion in the country. Many dalit, feminist, queer and rural groups pointed out that the movement was essentially urban and flattened out older forms of political protests and battles in the country.³² It mobilized the nation around a neo-liberal politics of class, while undermining the existing problems that have marked politics in India. At the end of the day, in six short months, the campaign showed how what was understood as revolution was nothing more than an amplification of the resistance that was already a part of larger

governmental structures in India. Reading the Anna Hazare campaign as Resistance rather than 'Failed Revolution'³³ allows us to understand the nature of these movements and complicating the claims of radicalism that they put forward.

Notes towards a future of citizen action

The intention of this paper was to show how the radical claims of revolution, which are mounted on citizen action in different parts of the world, are often amplifications of existing relationships rather than a recalibration of them. The Anna Hazare campaign shows how we need to look at citizen action and its claims more carefully. I have shown how citizen action, or rather action of a particular kind, by citizens, is the basis of the SCM model that we work within. Most governance structures depend on citizens acting in specific ways. Citizen Action is a part of maintaining the *status quo* of the current government systems. It often takes the form of resistance, demanding that

their rights be protected or certain demands be met in order to ensure that the present conditions assure a stable future.

This resistance, even though it might forward a radical claim, often is a mere reinforcement of the existing paradigm. In order to understand the political implications of citizen action that leads to change, we need to start looking at actions that actually lead to revolutions and reformulation of state-citizen relationships. If citizenship is an abstraction that is premised upon biological survival, social relationships, political identification, economic transaction and personal aspirations that are embedded in material practices, it might be more fruitful to see what goes wrong in order for the persons to reproduce themselves as citizens and amplify their actions. Instead of taking Citizen Action as a given, we need to unpack what citizenship means in specific geo-political and temporal contexts and what are the reasons that lead to everyday practices being invoked, read and amplified as radical Citizen Action.

Notes

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Development 55(2): Thematic Section

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