

Chaos theory and the two largest democracies

The so-called “Chaos Theory” in physics was developed to analyse (and, hopefully, to forecast the outcomes of) complex systems which have non-linear outcomes, sensitive to small changes in the initial conditions: weather, for example. The most widely quoted example in popular books is of a butterfly suddenly leaving a flower somewhere in, say, the West Indies, and becoming the root cause of a Tsunami that hits Japan a few months later: the implication is that if the butterfly had left a few minutes earlier or later, the Tsunami may not have occurred – or at least not as forcefully. (Some attempts were also made to use chaos theory for analysis of financial markets.)

To be sure, the Tsunami also needs many other “necessary conditions”, but these become “sufficient” only from the timing of the butterfly’s flight, which, as can be imagined, is impossible to predict! The provocation for remembering the chaos theory now has been recent developments in the political economies of the two largest democracies. In the U.S., the so-called Tea Party movement (obviously named after the Boston Tea Party in 1773, an iconic event in American history) opposes taxation in varying degrees and advocates reduction of the national debt and federal budget deficit by cuts in welfare payments and social services. At its birth, few would have imagined the immense power it would come to wield in a

few years. The Tea Party, a wing of the Republican Party, managed to get elected some representatives in Congress in 2009. It is today exercising veto power over the budget out of all proportion to its numbers, determining whether the U.S. would continue as, in effect, a welfare state as it has been for much of the last 60 years, or would revert back to *laissez faire* capitalism of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This butterfly's flight may still lead to a Tsunami!

In India, Anna Hazare was barely known outside Maharashtra even six months back and, even in Maharashtra, despite his numerous "fasts unto death", his major contribution was the significant socio-economic changes he brought about in and around Ralegaon Siddhi, his home town, through a grass roots movement – and his authoritarian, self-righteous methods. He is a simple, unsophisticated but sincere social worker, professing Gandhian values and style of living, comfortable in no language other than his Marathi. In less than six months, he has become a phenomenon attracting enough followers to shake the throne in Delhi.

The "necessary conditions" for the power the Anna Hazare movement gained in support of its Lok Pal demand have been in existence, and gaining strength, for several decades. (Nani Palkhiwala wrote as far back as 1984 that "*The picture that emerges is that of a great country in a state of moral decay..... The tricolour fluttering all over the country is black, red and scarlet – black money, red tape and scarlet corruption.*"). The urban middle class, the backbone of the movement, has been increasingly aggrieved by the inefficient and often corrupt delivery of basic

services like road maintenance, rickshaw licenses, rationing cards, driving licenses, prime plots of land distributed at throw-away prices to politicians, judges, bureaucrats, etc. etc.

Thankfully, Annaji's fast has ended on the basis of three days of Parliamentary debate and resolution last week, debate which became one of the more creative moments of our democracy. In retrospect, I think that, whatever the euphoria and celebration of his followers, Parliament conceded very little in terms of its power to frame and pass legislation. Good sense prevailed and Annaji backtracked on many of his earlier demands. Will the passing of a Lok Pal bill in whatever form lead to any basic improvement in services of which the government has monopoly? Or will the threat of a watchdog only further delay decision-making? Keep your fingers crossed!

One of the more worrying aspects of the last couple of weeks developments has been how the tired old leftist/socialistic rhetoric is coming back – from Annaji himself and many others, even the Supreme Court itself!. As far as the middle class is concerned it is not corporate corruption which is the main issue but the provision of basic services cleanly, and with a modicum of efficiency.

Again, the slogans and rhetoric during the agitation suggest that too many people believe all politicians to be corrupt: this is not only wrong, but extremely dangerous in a democracy. The fact is that a majority of politicians are sincere, well-meaning, and hard-working. Let us not condemn the whole class!

Will Annaji introspect on one point? He found it difficult to keep his core tam together even for two weeks, despite he being the only power centre in it. How much

more difficult it is for the Prime Minister to “deliver” the Parliament consisting of a hundred different power centres? But the way they got a Muslim and a Dalit girl to offer him the juice to break his fast, was an obvious “political” gesture aimed at his critics in these communities! Annaji is a fast learner!

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