

Corruption a Key Factor in Indian General Election 2014

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Abstract – The 2014 General Elections was a vote against the incumbent government and the reason behind it was lack of faith in the government's political will and integrity. A series of corruption scandals had rocked the nation and the opposition was ready and armed with the opportunity to showcase their personal and political integrity case studies. The opposition convinced the Indian voters to oust the current government and bring them in with the promise of a beautiful vibrant democracy, corruption free India, a land of everyone's dreams, a Ramrajya. We must, however, remember that such democratic changes are not short term but in fact a long term commitment requiring continuous and sustained effort. Also, any attempt to create a corruption free infrastructure is not possible by a one man army or any one political party. If we wish to create a vibrant democracy that is corruption free, transparent and accountable, we need to have a holistic, all inclusive systematic and structured approach starting with our political institutions. High cost of funding elections, with unaccounted for black money, has been a major factor behind corruption amongst all political parties for decades and unless this is changed, one of the major causes of corruption will go unaddressed. A vigilant and conscious population can play a significant role in fighting against corruption, by batting for a corruption free political leadership that is more accountable and transparent.

Key Words – Political Integrity, Corruption, Vibrant Democracy, Transparency, Accountability

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INTRODUCTION

The Indian Democracy is the largest democracy in the world and also a stable and strong democracy. But for any democratic institution to sustain itself, it needs to be continuously nurtured with honesty, strong idealism and a sense of commitment. It must also keep pace with the changes in the ever evolving world. We are gradually witnessing that with a weak and inefficient political leadership at helm of affairs, the India Shining story is getting dim day by day. Free and fair polls, committed and respected political parties, leaders who can inspire and whose honesty people can vouch for seem to be a thing of the past. Today elections are contested with money and not honest ideals and commitment. The period just preceding the General Election of 2014 witnessed one of the lowest periods of democracy with a series of corruption scandals rocking the nation and politicians putting self before service. The bureaucratic machinery was also not able to ensure free and fair governance. The mood of the population was one of anguish and they were more than ready for a change and a new India.

Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index 2013 ranked India 94th out of 175, doing worse than Brazil, China, and South Africa. The costs of corruption in India undermined the potential

of 10 years of consistent economic growth. With an estimated \$419 billion being laundered out of the country. Over the past decade, corruption had left an indelible stain on Indian society hampering both growth and its ability to improve living standards. India has been rocked by repeated scandals from Rolls Royce Defense scam to Common Wealth Games scam, which had undermined faith in politicians and public figures and prompted mass outcry and protests. In the early 2000s, the social activists' Anna Hazare spearheaded a movement demanding that state government should give citizens the right to information which culminated in the Right to Information Act 2005, which promised responsible, transparent and more accountable government.¹

The genesis of any strong democracy is in a free and fair election process such that the elected representatives are the true representatives of the population and can provide a free and fair government. The state of the Indian democracy was far from this before the 2014 elections and the institution was crumbling under pressure of a corrupt and inefficient political leadership. Criminalization of

¹What is political voice, why does it matter <https://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/publications-opinion-files/8950.pdf> 2014

politics was the norm of the day. People could not identify with the political leadership and the government had ceased to represent the peoples will and mandate that had brought it to power with a resounding majority in the last elections.

The General Elections of 2014, or the Dance of India democracy, as it was often referred to by, in the media, was a very important election. The Indian population was ready for change but it wanted to make a studied choice when voting and there were passionate debates amongst both the intelligentsia and the common man on secularism, corruption free government, economic reforms, growth and development. Change was inevitable and in fact the India population was hungry for change. It was fed up of rampant corruption, negative economic growth and the sense of shame that India was facing in the international community because of a corrupt and weak political leadership. The Indian election history has seen several instances of change of government due to the anti-incumbency phenomenon, but the 2014 General Elections was more than that. This election was all about rejecting corruption, inefficiency and welcoming a strong honest and fair government which would bring us the Ramrajya.

The issue of corruption had evolved over the years and the increasing importance attached to it not just as an election issue but as an issue that was likely to affect Indian democracy and its institutional systems and processes in multiple ways. Elections have been used by the persons involved in big scams to whitewash their crimes. A common Indian sees corruption as a widespread problem. They also think no government is doing enough to combat it and this issue had emerged in the elections 2014.

The general Indian population would have lost the will and energy to fight against the might of a corrupt and inefficient political leadership and bureaucracy but the movement started by Anna Hazare in the early 2000's had reminded the people of their power and their rights as defined in the Constitution – Government of the people, for the people and By the people. The Citizens Right to Information movement started by Anna Hazare, culminating in the Right to Information Act (RTI), 2005 promised an accountable and transparent government. While we are still to see the full benefit of the Act, the very fact that people realized the strength of the public mandate had made them stronger and the seeds of anti-corruption movement's had been sown. The voters were rearing to flex their muscles and make their voices heard for change and a strong honest government as they readied for the 2014 elections.

The Anna Hazare movement rekindled the social activists and the Indian intelligentsia which started several movements against corruption. With more questions being asked and more answers being available, skeletons of corruption started tumbling outside of the cupboards and the voter became more

aware and informed. An informed and aware voter who understands his rights and can make right choice is one of the major pillar for the development of a strong, stable, mature and vibrant democracy.

The informal movement thus started soon acquired the shape of a strong political narrative which sought to question both the current government and the previous governments. It started questioning the system and its inefficiency, the inroads that corruption had made in each political party, bureaucracy, the lack of transparency and after a long time ignited the people for a need for change and to sweep out corruption. It was with this intention that we witnessed the birth of the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) in 2012 which adopted the broom as its symbol, seeking to broom or clean up politics by wiping out corruption. AAP presented itself as a party inspired by the Anna Hazare movement and positioned itself as the only clean alternative to the corrupt political class in India. AAP was successful in translating the resentment and sense of frustration amongst the Indian electorate, especially in Delhi, into electoral success and for the first time a new party shook the Congress stronghold in Delhi and defeated them to come to power in 2013 Delhi elections. Their victory in a way positioned corruption as a big ticket item on the national electoral map.

The Indian electorate had always been vociferous but the axe was losing its sharpness. The movement by Anna Hazare and the AAP win, coupled with the slow economic growth, corrupt system, rekindled the voice of the Indian voter, especially the middle class urban voter and they took the center stage with the help of the media to question the system and the political leadership. Not to lose the opportunity, Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) and Bhartiya Janta Party (BJP) kindled the fire in the masses and especially the middle class trying to woo them with their promises of clean governance and promise to clean out corruption from its very roots.

The mood of the nation was changing and the promise of the political parties to create a corruption free system resonated with them. The demography of the voting population was also changing. 150million youth were joining the electoral field during the dance of the India democracy and they would be casting their ballot for the first time. They were eager to make the right, informed decision and actively participated in the electoral debates making their voice heard. Three fourth of Indian adults aged eighteen to thirty four said that corruption was widespread in their government, nearly just like the chances of equally minded adults aged thirty five to fifty four (76 percent) and fifty five or older (72 percent).. As per the regional comparison analysis, the east gave the Congress party-led government the most credit for fighting corruption (50%) and 26 percent said it is not, but in the north it was reported that the government was not doing enough. Gall up

said older Indians were more confident in the honesty of the election.² Confidence in the honesty also varied by region, with the north leading the country in terms of electoral pessimism. Less than a fifth of residents in the north said the electoral system was honest while majorities (south -52%, west-64%, east-63%, a central part of India-67%) were more confident.³ In general election 2014, corruption and infrastructure were the main agenda. Tens of millions of Indians headed for the voting booths on 7th April 2014. Around 110 million voters were registered to vote in 92 constituencies located in 14 states across the country, this was about a fifth of the total number of seats in the Indian parliament. The polling day with the biggest number of constituencies involved was 17th April when voters decided the outcome of 122 seats. On 24th April, 117 seats were decided and corruption was one of the decisive factors. In Chandani Chowk constituency of Delhi, having 20 percent of Muslims population, had a three-way fight between the Congress, the BJP, and the common man party AAP.

The last three decades had witnessed a gradual but a deep seated change in the mind of the Indian electorate. The electorate that had fought on issues of India freedom, development and growth was now more concerned with caste and religion. These two factors started dominating the Indian political scene and were also the agenda for elections in the last three decades. Growth, economic development, honesty, all had taken a backseat. This feature was visible in the entire government machinery at the state or the central level and consequently even the bureaucracy. For the first time in decades, the 2013 Delhi elections and the 2014 General Elections witnessed a shift in the platform on which election was being fought. The anti-incumbency movement in India was not just any anti-incumbency movement but a very strong voice raised against corruption. The entire nation came together for once. The electorate was not voting for different religion or caste based agenda which divided them but all of them came together on one common platform – fight against corruption. The Indian voter was now becoming mature. He was voting for a cause, economic growth and to make his country great. The young Indian voter wanted to put India on the global map of growth and be a part of a strong global economy. The citizens of India had an enhanced sense of their rights and the Anna Hazare movement, Aam Aadmi Party victory in Delhi elections had emboldened them to take a stand for themselves and move out of the shadows of corrupt governments, demanding a corruption free government and a free and fair economy. They no longer wanted to be pawns in the hands of leaders who divided them on grounds of

caste and religion. They wanted to be united for a great country and this is the sign of a mature democracy and a mature electorate.

The AAP fought its first assembly elections in 2013 and emerged as the second largest party and formed a minority government with external support. This was a victory for all people who fought to change the picture of the Indian electorate. It was a small victory for democracy and it laid the foundation for the fight against corruption to become the platform for the 2014 General Election. The resolution to fight against the system was further strengthened when after 49 days the AAP government had to resign. One of the agenda in the election manifesto of the AAP was to investigate charges against corrupt ministers but no political party came forward to support them and Kejriwal resigned. This was followed by a landslide victory for the AAP in the 2015 elections when they made a clean sweep of the Delhi Assembly elections completely wiping out the opposition. The "Dillikijanta" had matured and was now voting on issues and not on caste and religion. The Indian democracy had become mature.

The Aam Aadmi Party wanted to truly reflect the spirit of the common man and it adopted the Swaraj model of government which would be directly accountable to people. The focus was on community building, decentralization and self-governance. They reached out to people for suggestions and adopted good practices of self-governance that was accountable and transparent. In fact it was the AAP that first popularized the Right to Reject during an election! Their actions also led to auditing of the inflated power and electricity bills which were troubling the common man. They also established the anti-graft helpline for citizens making it easier to expose the corrupt. Strong anti-rape laws were also proposed. The party reflected the mood of the nation which wanted a government focused on growth and development and not corruption, caste, religion and criminalization.

AN OVERVIEW

The face of democracy is changing and changing positively for the better. We are witnessing a mature electorate. The question however, is if this one-dimensional agenda of anti-corruption will be enough to sustain this evolution of a strong, stable and mature democracy or will it die its own death if not channeled properly. We are today also witnessing the challenges faced by the Kejriwal Government because of its focus on just one agenda. While people want a corruption free government, they are actually looking for a government that focuses on their economic growth and not be corrupt. Such an economic growth will only be possible by a well-rounded development agenda adopted by every government rather than just one agenda of punishing the corrupt. The political parties need today to focus on a wider

². <https://news.gallup.com/poll/168488/corruption-concerns-generations-indian-voters.aspx>

³ Ibid – survey results are based on face to face interviews with 3000 adults aged 15 & older, conducted in September, October 2013 in India.

range of all-encompassing issues faced by the people of the country.

In the 2014 General Elections while there was a strong wave against the congress government but still in some states as Punjab and Haryana, Congress fared better because the people in these states felt that as against the BJP, Congress had a much more holistic and all-encompassing approach towards their development.

The Indian voter has now gone beyond the election agenda based on caste and religion. The 2014 election was fought on the agenda of corruption but the political leadership now needs to be more mindful of the composite needs of the population. The focus should now be on transparency, accountability, rule of law and being a true democracy of the people. The policies have to represent the issues of their constituencies as economic development, gender issues, education, labour laws etc.

A mature and vigilant society is the very base for a mature and vibrant democracy which is based on issues and not individual political leader or party. Such a democracy is transparent, accountable and has only people development as its agenda for a vigilant electorate holds the power to change the face of the government.

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