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‘Crusaders’ for Democracy

Aspirations and tensions in transparency
activism in India

Gaia von Hatzfeldt



PhD in Social Anthropology

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Declaration

I declare that, except where otherwise indicated, this thesis is entirely my own work, and that no part of it has been submitted for any other degree or professional qualification.

Gaia von Hatzfeldt

2014

*This thesis is dedicated to my parents,
Christian and Verena Hatzfeldt*

Abstract

Through an ethnographic study of the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS) – an organisation renowned for its persistent fight against corruption in India – this thesis explores the aspirations and tensions of anti-corruption activists. In their commitment to improving governance structures by means of campaigning for transparency and accountability laws and policies, these activists ultimately aspire to strengthen democratic practice and to improve statecraft. By studying in detail the forms of actions, dynamics, politics and relationships among anti-corruption activists, the thesis explores how ideas of the state and democracy come to be internalised and addressed by civil society actors.

The context is the nation-wide anti-corruption agitation that swept the country through most of 2011. This agitation gave rise to friction between civil society actors otherwise working for similar ends, leading to tension and competition on what constitutes democratic process and procedure. Based on extensive fieldwork, the thesis examines the ways in which MKSS responded to the shifting political landscape of anti-corruption activism. Drawing on the notion of relationality, I argue that political positions and identities are shaped and consolidated circumstantially through an oppositional stance and through processes of ‘othering’.

In considering the diverging understandings of democracy among civil society actors, this thesis seeks to expand ethnographically the theoretical concept of ‘agonistic pluralism’ (Mouffe 1999), that postulates that political conflict and disagreement is not only integral, but, moreover, crucial to democratic debate. Based on this conceptualisation, the conflict over the meaning of democracy among the anti-corruption activists is considered here as creating space for the expansion and enrichment of democratic debate. The very essence of democracy in India, as will be concluded, is constituted by such a productive tension.

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Glossary of acronyms

AAP	Aam Aadmi Party
BJP	Bharatiya Janata Party
IAC	India Against Corruption
IAS	Indian Administrative Service
ICDS	Integrated Child Development Services
MKSS	Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan
MP	Member of Parliament
NAC	National Advisory Council
NCPRI	National Campaign for People's Right to Information
NREGA	National Rural Employment Guarantee Act
OB van	Outside Broadcast Van
PDS	Public Distribution System
PRA	Participatory Rural Appraisal
RSS	Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh
SMS	Short Message Service
SR Abhiyan	Suchna Evam Rozgar Adhikar Abhiyan
SWRC	Social Work and Research Centre
VIP	Very Important Person

Glossary of terms

<i>aam aadmi</i>	common man
<i>Abhiyan</i>	Campaign
<i>Angrezi</i>	English, foreign
<i>anpadh</i>	Uneducated
<i>arya samaj</i>	Hindu reform movement
<i>Bache</i>	Children
<i>bankia</i>	trumpet-like instrument
<i>Benami</i>	transaction, contract, or property
<i>Bhajan</i>	Hindu devotional song
<i>bharat mata</i>	Mother India
<i>bhay</i>	Fear
<i>bhuk</i>	Hunger
<i>Brashtachar</i>	Corruption
<i>Chamcha</i>	literally, spoon; idiomatically, sycophant
<i>chapati</i>	unleavened flatbread
<i>Chokidar</i>	night guard
<i>Chula</i>	burner made out of clay
<i>Crore</i>	unit of measure that equals ten million
<i>Dan</i>	donations, gift
<i>dharma</i>	(Indian religion) the eternal law of the cosmos, inherent in the very nature of things
<i>dharna</i>	sit-in demonstration
<i>dholak</i>	hand drum
<i>gram panchayat</i>	local self-government institution at the village level – the base of the three-tier decentralised system

<i>gram sabha</i>	committees of all the adult citizen voters of the village
<i>gram sansad</i>	village parliament
<i>jan sunwai</i>	public hearing
<i>Janmadin</i>	Birthday
<i>janta durbar</i>	public hearing
<i>Kheer</i>	rice pudding
<i>lakh</i>	unit of measure that equals one hundred thousand
<i>lasan chutney</i>	garlic chutney
<i>lok sabha</i>	lower house of parliament
<i>Lokpal</i>	ombudsman (in Sanskrit: ‘caretaker of people’)
<i>ma-bap</i>	Parents
<i>Mazdoor</i>	wage labourer
<i>Mela</i>	fair, gathering, meeting
<i>mohalla sabha</i>	neighbourhood committees
<i>Nalayak</i>	Incompetent
<i>Neta</i>	Politician
<i>Nirvana</i>	a spiritual place of perfect peace and happiness
<i>pajama kurta</i>	garments worn by men
<i>panchayat</i>	village council
<i>panchayati raj</i>	local system of government
<i>Pandal</i>	tent, makeshift roof structure
<i>Ramarajya</i>	divine raj, kingdom of god
<i>Rozgar</i>	employment, wage labourer, earning
<i>sangathan</i>	organisation, union
<i>Sanyas</i>	Renunciation
<i>Sarpanch</i>	elected village headman
<i>sati</i>	former Hindu practice of a widow throwing herself on to her husband’s funeral pyre
<i>Seva</i>	selfless service
<i>Shramdan</i>	voluntary work
<i>Swadeshi</i>	self-sufficiency, domestic production
<i>swaraj</i>	self-government

<i>tamasha</i>	spectacle, an entertainment, a phenomenon, a farce
<i>tilak</i>	mark worn on the forehead by Hindus
<i>vande mataram</i>	hymn to the Mother Land
<i>varnashrama dharma</i>	system of classification, according to Hindu text
<i>yatra</i>	popular mobilisation journey

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Introduction

On the night of 15-16 January 2014, Delhi Law Minister Somnath Bharti attempted to raid the home of African nationals in the Khirkee Extension area of south Delhi. Residents of Khirkee Extension – a part of Bharti’s constituency – had complained to the Law Minister that the “Nigerians or Ugandans” living there were, they suspected, members of a prostitution-and-drug ring.¹ Bharti arrived on the scene, accompanied by party volunteers and a TV crew. He ordered the Malviya Nagar police to arrest the suspected foreign nationals and to search their home, which the residents of Khirkee Extension had identified as ‘a den of vice’. The police refused to do so on the grounds that they did not have a warrant authorizing the raid. The police cited the rules that prohibited such unwarranted search, upon which Bharti is reported to have said: “If the police do not even listen to the law minister, what will the common man do?”²

Following this controversial attempted midnight raid, Bharti’s party leader and Delhi’s Chief Minister, Arvind Kejriwal, asked the Union Home Minister to suspend four police officials on the grounds that they had disobeyed orders from the Delhi Law Minister. In conjunction, Kejriwal demanded that the Delhi government be given control over the Delhi Police, which currently falls under the jurisdiction of the Union Home Ministry.³ Kejriwal set a deadline, threatening to sit in protest outside the Union Home Ministry if no action on his demand was taken.

A few days later, defying prohibitory orders, Delhi’s Chief Minister and six of his cabinet colleagues attempted to reach the Union Home Minister’s office. Blocked by

¹ “Two Delhi ministers, Somnath Bharti and Rakhi Birla, turn vigilantes” *Indian Express*, 17 January 2014 [accessed 26 February 2014] <http://indianexpress.com/article/india/politics/two-delhi-ministers-turn-vigilantes/>

² Ibid.

³ This is because Delhi is a union territory and not a federal state.

the police, Kejriwal and his colleagues and supporters stopped near Rail Bhavan, in an important arterial avenue of the capital city, from where they staged their sit-in protest.⁴ Kejriwal announced to the largely young, white-cap wearing supporters that had gathered around him, that the protest could well extend to 10 days and that he would in the interim run the city government from the protest site. Adhering to his word, Kejriwal and his ministers started official work in the middle of the road by Rail Bhavan, studying and signing files. The protest attained much public attention, not least because it blocked traffic and forced the Delhi Metro to shut four major stations, threatening to bring the national capital to a standstill, just days before the country's major Republic Day parade was due.

Kejriwal had been in power as Delhi's Chief Minister for only three weeks preceding the protest. His party, the Aam Aadmi Party (the 'Common Man's Party' – abbreviated to AAP, which in Hindi reads as 'you') had won a landmark election victory in the December 2013 Delhi Legislative Assembly elections. AAP had only been formed the year before, and it took everyone by surprise when it ousted, by no meagre margin, the Congress Party that had been in power in the national capital for three consecutive terms. AAP's major election promise had been to fight corruption and to bring in a Jan Lokpal, or an anti-corruption ombudsman, within 15 days of being voted into power. The demand for a Jan Lokpal had been at the centre of a nation-wide agitation in 2011, of which Kejriwal had been one of the principal exponents (more on this agitation will be delineated below). From the day the Aam Aadmi Party had received the vote of confidence from the Delhi electorate, politics in India's capital took on an unprecedented, often theatrical turn.

The first expression of AAP's spectacular politics was when election results had just been announced and the party discussed whether they should form the next government in Delhi. With the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) – the victor of the Delhi Assembly elections, yet still short of the majority seats – refusing to form the government, the Congress Party had offered its unconditional support to AAP. In the

⁴ Rail Bhavan is the headquarters of the Indian Railways. It is located at Raisina Road No. 1, New Delhi, near the Parliament House.

past Kejriwal had spoken out vehemently against Congress, slamming it as a party steeped in corruption. In order to get out of the political dilemma of whether to form a government with the party it had so bitterly opposed previously, Kejriwal sought time to conduct a referendum. In accordance with his broader agenda of fostering forms of ‘direct democracy’, he wanted to seek the people’s own verdict on whether AAP should form a government with the support of the Congress. Over the span of a few days, citizens of Delhi had the option of either going to public meetings that would return a single “yes” or “no” answer by popular vote, or of sending in their answers through SMSes or missed calls. Through this means, AAP claims to have reached out to voters in all 70 constituencies of Delhi. The verdict given by the people of Delhi was that AAP should form the government. On 28 December 2013 Arvind Kejriwal was sworn in as Delhi’s (youngest) Chief Minister.

Aside from fighting corruption, one of Kejriwal’s major election promises had been to bring politics closer to the people by allowing more participatory and direct forms of democracy. He endorsed the politics of *swaraj* – local self-governance as famously promoted by Gandhi. AAP’s manifesto promised setting up *mohalla sabhas* (neighbourhood communities), and holding regular *janta durbars* (public hearings) as a way of making democracy more participatory and as a means of decentralising decision-making. Shortly after coming into power, Kejriwal and his entire cabinet held their first *janta durbar* outside Delhi’s Secretariat. It was intended as a public feedback session, where people could voice their grievances and make suggestions for the governance of Delhi directly to the Chief Minister. Exceptionally, the gates of the Secretariat, usually traversable only by VIPs, were opened to the *aam aadmi* (common man).⁵ The hundreds of people streaming in, jostling with each other to speak to the ministers, lead to a situation of increased chaos and mismanagement. Midway into the *durbar*, fearing a crowd stampede, Kejriwal had to flee the event and address the crowd from the roof of the Secretariat. This marked the end of the inaugural exercise of participatory democracy within the grounds of Delhi’s Secretariat.

⁵ The term *aam aadmi* is so common in everyday parlance in North India, that it is even used in English. It is for this reason that the term ‘aam aadmi’ crops up repeatedly in this thesis, used interchangeably to mean ‘lay person’, ‘ordinary citizen’, or ‘common man’.

A series of further tumultuous events and dramatic turns in AAP's politics then followed, most of them covered to the hilt by newspapers and TV channels. Then, on its 49th day in power, on 14 February 2014, Arvind Kejriwal announced the resignation of the AAP government. The reason given was that the Congress and BJP had thwarted his government's agenda by preventing it from tabling the Delhi Jan Lokpal bill (or, a Citizen's Ombudsman bill) in the legislative Assembly. Bringing in the Jan Lokpal to fight corruption had been a key election promise made to the voters by AAP. Abiding by his word, a few weeks into power, Kejriwal had presented his Jan Lokpal bill to the Delhi Cabinet. The bill was immediately criticized by many as disproportionate, for it sought to cover all public servants – from chief ministers to lower-level 'Group D' employees – and proposed to penalize those found guilty of corruption with life term imprisonment as maximum punishment. Despite the criticisms, Kejriwal had stated that he intended the bill to be enacted at a public session of the Assembly in the following week. However, he was informed that the Delhi government and legislature does not have jurisdiction to make laws covering central government officials, and that the Jan Lokpal bill had to be sent to the Union Ministry of Home Affairs for approval. Fearing that the bill would thereby get stuck or delayed, Kejriwal questioned the constitutionality of seeking the Home Ministry's clearance. Defiantly refusing to submit to legislative procedures, AAP brought its bill before the Delhi Assembly anyway, wherein it was fully squashed by both the Congress and BJP. A few hours after the Assembly impediment, Kejriwal announced his resignation as Chief Minister of Delhi.

Kejriwal framed his decision to quit government as a principled one, on the grounds that he was 'sacrificing' his power as Chief Minister in the name of anti-corruption. He stated that he did not have the right to stay in office if his promised Jan Lokpal bill did not get approval by the assembly. However, many commentators viewed his resignation as a staged calculation that would allow AAP to transform itself into a

national party and emerge as a serious force to contest the forthcoming general elections.⁶

Democracy yes, but what type?

The Aam Aadmi Party's brief dance with governance brought fundamental questions about India's political makeup and its democratic tradition to the surface. The unforeseen rise to power of Kejriwal's government, and its particular experiments with governance, unleashed a polemic on the meaning and practice of democracy in India. While some celebrated AAP for being a 'maverick force' that was challenging the established political institutions, others related more cynically to AAP's notion of democracy. There was no doubt that the rise of AAP had put an end to the bipartisan domination of Congress and the BJP, and that it had suddenly emerged as a viable and popular alternative to the established parties. However, for many others, the forms of politics and the notions of governance of the most recent party set alarm bells ringing, for they were seen to display a dangerous contempt for democratic institutions.

While scant attention had been paid to AAP before the legislative assembly elections in Delhi, with most people doubting its significance in the political landscape, AAP's unexpected election victory brought it into the centre of media limelight. Kejriwal and his party were receiving huge space and attention in India's media, with news portals – particularly English-language newspapers and TV channels – indulging in the party's actions and statements. The hype around AAP was a visible case of "mediatisation" of politics (Mazzoleni and Schulz 1999), whereby the media were

⁶ One member of AAP even provoked a controversial dispute when he stated publicly that Kejriwal's agenda had never been the Jan Lokpal bill in the first place, but that it had always been the upcoming Lok Sabha elections; according to this member's logic, the Jan Lokpal bill had intentionally been presented in an undemocratic manner so as to arouse political havoc and attention, and to thus justify AAP's exit from power. See "Arvind Kejriwal's exit was preplanned; eyeing Lok Sabha polls: Vinod Kumar Binny" in *DNA*, 15 February 2014 [accessed 3 March 2014] <http://www.dnaindia.com/delhi/report-arvind-kejriwal-s-exit-was-preplanned-eyeing-lok-sabha-polls-vinod-kumar-binny-1962326>

not only representing, but shaping the political discourses and processes around AAP. The debates in mainstream media as well as other public platforms (such as blogs and discussion forums, largely of left-leaning intellectuals) were split into a polemical divide between those who endorsed AAP's politics of 'shaking the system' and of leading the 'crusade on corruption', and those who were troubled by its ostensibly undemocratic strain.⁷

The case of the attempted midnight raid and the ensuing protest with which we began the account of AAP, reflects some of the main points of discussion around the polemic. It illustrates the split views around the processes of governance that the newly formed AAP government was adhering to. Then Law Minister of Delhi, Somnath Bharti, had justified the raid on the African nationals' home in Khirkee Extension on the basis that he was acting on the demands of the neighbourhood residents. It was thus in the name of the people's will and local sentiment that the Law Minister had acted. This is in consonance with Aam Aadmi Party's broader aspiration of advancing a system of direct democracy. AAP's stated political agenda is the institutionalisation of *swaraj*, with the conviction that "good governance happens when people have the power to influence decisions that shape their life".⁸ Accordingly, the agenda envisions redrawing the organisational structure of governance, with maximum emphasis on people's participation, such as through the institutionalisation of *mohalla sabhas*. *Mohalla sabhas* are neighbourhood committees whose decisions pertaining to the area are taken collectively by all residents at monthly meetings. Law Minister Bharti was acting in anticipation of such a notion of a *mohalla sabha*, with the intention of engaging residents of Khirkee Extension in participatory democratic decision-making processes.

⁷ Referring to anti-corruption activism and politics in India to a 'crusade' was common in the media. See for instance:

"Corruption crusaders turn politician" in *Washington Post*, 1 July 2013 [accessed 26 February 2014] http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/corruption-crusaders-turn-politicians/2013/06/30/ef5f0cd4-de85-11e2-ad2e-fcd1bf42174d_story.html or

"Why is Indian anti-corruption party creating waves?" in *BBC World*, 29 November 2013 [accessed February 26, 2014] <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-india-25135338>

⁸ As stated on AAP's website. "Political decentralisation – Aam Aadmi Party" [accessed 26 February 2014] <http://www.aamaadmiparty.org/political-decentralization>

However, this particular incident attracted much public flak, opening up broader questions and concerns with AAP's notion of direct democracy. By catering to local sentiments and basing decisions on the views of the *mohalla sabha*, Bharti was accused not only of overt racism, sexism, moralism and vigilantism, but also of acting with disdain for the legal process. His demand that the police immediately act on his orders was criticised as an unabashed attempt to bypass law and procedure. AAP's idea of bringing governance to the doorstep of citizens raised the question of who is the actual 'voice' of the *mohalla sabha*, and to whom it is accountable. It is a widely known dictate that in a society like India's, where deep fault lines exist in the social fabric, decisions taken by the majority are bound to coerce minorities living in a community to fall in line with their command. Thus, although AAP's radical democratic practice was acclaimed by some for posing a challenge to established politics and had attracted much public support, it was also registered by some as a signal of danger. This disquiet was captured, for instance, in an editorial piece in the *Economic and Political Weekly*, a left-leaning scholarly weekly magazine, when it stated: "it is only a thin line that divides direct democracy from mobocracy or majoritarianism. That ogre has raised its head in the actions of Bharti" (Editor of EPW 2014: 7).

Similarly, controversial discussions ensued about the Chief Minister's protest that immediately followed the raid. Some applauded the protest-activism of Kejriwal and his government for breaking free from conventions and for introducing a radical alternative approach to established political processes. With few precedents in India's democracy, Kejriwal's protest was seen as a creative combination of party and social movement politics and of thus prompting a new mode of conducting politics and governance in India.⁹ However, Kejriwal also came under heavy attack, with many questioning his interpretations and abilities in matters of governance. From many quarters, even from erstwhile supporters, the position was that once in government the political instruments of a social movement were no longer legitimate

⁹ One precedent that resembled this form of politics was the movement led by JP Narayan, also known as the 'Bihar Movement' or the 'Total Revolution' in the early 1970s, which led to the formation and, consequently, rule of the Janata Party. The JP Narayan Movement was driven particularly against government misrule and corruption, and later turned against Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's government.

methods and, instead, certain procedures and processes had to be followed. Kejriwal was accused, for instance, by the opposition party for being an ‘anarchist’ and of being clueless about running the government.¹⁰ This attitude was reproduced by Kiran Bedi, retired police officer turned social activist, who had, along with Kejriwal, been at the forefront of the anti-corruption movement. Bedi spoke out against Kejriwal’s protest saying “Delhi is under unruly political leadership!... He [Kejriwal] has remained an agitator, when he should have been an administrator. I think the habit of agitating hasn’t finished in them. They think that a solution to a problem can only be derived by staging a protest”.¹¹ Bedi expressed the sentiment that the domains of party politics and of social movements had to be kept at bay from one another.

Underlying the polemic around these particular incidences of AAP’s experiments with governance was a discussion about the parameters and implications of the country’s democracy. Although India is widely hailed as the world’s largest democracy, AAP arguably came into power precisely because of a widespread disillusionment with the state of democracy. AAP propagated hope in an atmosphere of deepening cynicism and suspicion of the political class, which was viewed as deeply corrupt and aloof to public concerns. AAP tapped into this frustration with the political system, by standing for a reanimated model of democracy, one that was truly ‘of the people, by the people, and for the people’. Accordingly, AAP’s version of democracy envisioned a paradigmatic shift from representative democracy to direct democracy. It claimed to address the lacuna in India’s nearly seven-decade old

¹⁰ The BJP leader, Arun Jaitley, spoke out against AAP for displaying “scant regard for the rule of law, political adventurism, extreme arrogance, lack of civility in public discourse and the least concern for established institutions... Its conduct is a challenge to constitutionalism”. In “BJP renews ‘anarchy’ fire at AAP” in *The Telegraph*, 22 January 2014 [accesses 26 February 2014] http://www.telegraphindia.com/1140122/jsp/nation/story_17849851.jsp#.Uw8d9hCVyKI

¹¹ Bedi had previously expressed her reservations against Kejriwal’s formation of a political party, arguing that more pressure could be exerted as a movement, with politics being inherently dirty and corrupting.

See “Kiran Bedi slams AAP government, says Delhi is under ‘unruly political leadership’” in *Economic Times*, 20 January 2014 [accessed 3 March 2014] http://articles.economictimes.indiatimes.com/2014-01-20/news/46374851_1_delhi-police-team-kejriwal-kiran-bedi

democracy that had failed to make its culture of democracy more participatory by giving ordinary people, or the *aam aadmi*, ownership of the political process.¹²

Kejriwal's idea of politics is based on the idea of popular sovereignty, where the people gain authority over parliament. It echoes Rousseau's social contract theory that romanticises the idea of governance based on the consent of the people and government as constituted by the 'general will'. AAP is premised on the idea that the people will drive the party and its forms of governance, rather than the other way around. This position led some observers to proclaim the emergence of AAP as a commencement of a new chapter in Indian politics and governance and as breathing new life into India's stagnant democracy. It was seen as an alternative political instrument in the hands of the common man, rekindling hope to the many who had been disillusioned and disinterested in party politics. Its novel forms of doing politics was applauded, not least by Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen, as "an important departure" in politics and as posing a challenge to established institutions.¹³

However, the overall exaltation, the ideas of politics and democracy of AAP were also a cause of concern amongst many others. Several commentators warned that AAP's notion of direct democracy was mired in liberal vagueness and populist motives. The politics that the newly formed party promoted was seen to be reduced to a simple equation that portrayed the system and politicians as being 'bad' versus the people who were depicted as 'good'. This rhetoric was read by some as being a catch-all populism that, relying on middle-class moralism, capitalized on popular discontent without providing a more sustained ideological coherence.

This lack of a clear ideological position was another concern expressed in media discussions regarding AAP's contribution to governance and democracy in India.

¹² Based on the case of Porto Alegre in Brazil where street assemblies decide the key elements of the city's budget, AAP propagated a system of handing decision-making on key governance and policy questions directly to the people, such as through the mohalla sabhas.

¹³ "AAP's rise has challenged established institutions: Amartya Sen" in *Economic Times*, 14 December 2013 [accessed 3 March 2014] http://articles.economictimes.indiatimes.com/2013-12-14/news/45191290_1_aap-kejriwal-aam-admi-party

AAP had openly resisted adopting an ideological position, and had instead focused on offering pragmatic solutions to widely felt problems. As the AAP website states:

We are very much solution focused rather than ideology driven. There is an age-old tendency to pin down political parties as left, right, center etc. In the process everyone forgets the issues at hands and their solutions. Our goal is to remain solution focused. If the solution to a problem lies on the left we are happy to consider it. Likewise if it is on right (or in the center) we are equally happy to consider it. Ideology is one for the pundits and the media to pontificate about.¹⁴

With AAP not displaying a coherent set of policies but acting and reacting *ad hoc* (such as with the attempted midnight raid and the follow-up protest), many were concerned that in the long-run this form of governance would have disastrous consequences. In articles and other public discussion, AAP's overzealous outreach programme was criticized as an attempt to cash in on the simmering anger against the system, without offering direction. In this account, AAP's appeal had been based on people's disillusionment with the brand of politics which the Congress and BJP offered, yet it remained unclear how the party would channel the anger of its electorate into productive outcomes.

What these split reactions to AAP's political discourse indicate, is that regardless of the position taken, AAP had struck a chord amongst many sectors of society. The emergence of AAP was treated as a phenomenon by those who supported and endorsed their politics, just as much as by those who were wary of AAP's implications for governance and India's democracy. AAP had unequivocally brought a wind of change to the way in which elections, politics, governance and democracy was being discussed.

¹⁴ "AAP are Leftist" in *Aam Aadmi Party* <http://www.aamaadmiparty.org/content/aap-are-leftists>

Metanarratives and Ethnography

This brief overview of the ‘AAP phenomenon’ brings to light some of the ways in which politics manifests itself in contemporary India and the ways in which the nature of politics is discussed in public discourse. More specifically, it draws attention to the ways in which democracy is thought about, disputed and animated in India. Both the supporters and the critics of AAP shared the view that corruption was one of the most severe blemishes in the country’s democratic makeup, and that through improved modes of governance, democracy could be resuscitated. However, there were conflicting perceptions of the political modes and processes required to salvage India’s democracy. For some, the only meaningful approach to transform a political system so deeply steeped in corruption was a thorough systemic overhaul. According to such a view, democratic practice in India was so flawed that the entrenched institutions and parties needed to be rigorously challenged and democratic ideas fundamentally rethought and reformulated. Others, while agreeing that governance systems had to be improved, endorsed the view that this had to be done within the given democratic paradigms. Politics and governance had to abide by democratic processes and procedures, or else risk being unconstitutional and posing a threat to the country’s democratic makeup.

What consolidates the opposing positions is an enduring and broadly spread commitment to the idea of India as a strong democracy. Despite all the evident contradictions – a political system permeated in corruption, governance structures impeded by inefficiency, a political class largely indifferent to the plights of the marginalised, a society fractured by inequalities and injustices, etc. – a faith in the idea of democracy continues to be ubiquitous in political discourse. The polemic around AAP reflects this faith, as much as it signals a basic tension on what the meaning and practice of democracy is. Underlying the conflicting views is a difference about the expectations made of democracy. For AAP and its supporters, democracy can be restored to its original idea only through a paradigmatic shift from representative to direct democracy. By handing over sovereignty and participatory

powers to the people, the essence of democracy can be truly animated. By contrast, for those critical of AAP's approach, the essence of democracy lies in democratic processes and procedures, whereby compliance to the constitution and to the rule of law is taken as the paramount component. What is seemingly at stake with these diverging understandings of democracy is the degree of conformity to processes and procedures. While for one camp the established procedural rules are the very obstacle to the unfolding of true democracy, for the other, democratic processes and procedures are the yardstick by which to diagnose the meaning and practice of democracy.

Widely-held faith in the idea of democracy on the one hand, and on the other, the more or less polemical deliberations on what comprises democratic processes and procedures, constitute the ongoing metanarrative through which Indian politics is largely framed. It is these discussions on democracy in India that are at the heart of this thesis. The ethnographic material that this thesis deals with reflects this metanarrative by examining empirically ideas that people have of democracy and their aspirations in strengthening democratic practice. Specifically, this thesis considers anti-corruption activism in North India. It explores the endeavours of a set of civil society actors committed to improving governance structures by means of campaigning for transparency and accountability in laws and policies.¹⁵ By attempting to eradicate corruption from politics and make the state apparatus responsive to the needs of the citizens, the fundamental aspiration of these actors is to deepen the meaning and practice of democracy in India. While the several fractions of anti-corruption actors that this thesis explores are united by their shared commitment for a common end, divisions on the means of getting there run through their political ideology. They agree that corruption poses a severe impediment to governance and thus to the unfolding of India's democracy, yet they disagree on what democracy means and how to advance the democratic process. They show that democracy is a contested terrain that is constituted by disagreement and conflict.

¹⁵ In a later section of this Introduction, I deal with some of the issues and problematics of the term 'civil society' and explain how I use this contested category throughout this thesis.

In this context, the thesis explores the playing out of friction in the field of anti-corruption civil society activism. It examines the various spaces in which tension arises amongst and within these actors as to what constitutes the correct processes and procedures in consolidating democracy. The main themes of this thesis are thus the *aspiration* of a particular idea of democratic governance and the *tensions* that arise out of the endeavours and expectations in bringing this aspiration into being.

In exploring the diverging understandings of democracy among civil society actors, this thesis draws on the theoretical concept of ‘agonistic pluralism’. Agonistic pluralism, as proposed most notably by the political theorist Chantal Mouffe (1999, 2000, 2005), postulates that political conflict is integral to democratic debate, and moreover, that it is a crucial ingredient for democracy to be deepened. In such conceptualisation, political disagreement and contention is constructive in that it produces space for rich and critical thinking. While Mouffe uses the concept of agonistic pluralism as a normative category – imploring that democratic debate *ought* to embrace conflict – I borrow the concept as an empirical category. In other words, ‘agonistic pluralism’ here serves as an analytic tool with which to understand the dynamics at work in anti-corruption activism in India. With this in mind, the conflicting understandings of democracy among the anti-corruption activists can be thought of as expanding the experience of democratisation in India. The tension between them over which processes and procedures constitute democracy does not lead to a fissure, but, on the contrary, is a crucial substance for rich democratic debate to emerge and for democratic practice to be deepened. The essence of democracy in India, as this thesis will show, is constituted by such a productive tension.

At the core of the ethnography of this thesis is the work of a particular civil society organisation that has been at the centre of public debates on anti-corruption for over two decades. The Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS, translatable as the ‘Organisation of Empowerment of Labourers and Farmers’) is known throughout India for being the leading civil society organisation in the fight against corruption and in the struggle to institutionalise transparency and accountability measures in

governance structures. Moreover, MKSS is celebrated for being the driving force behind the enactment of the Right to Information Act (2005), which empowers citizens to demand transparency from the government. With its aspiration of enforcing transparency and accountability measures in governance, MKSS is committed to making the state responsive to the needs of ordinary citizens and, by 'purifying' the bureaucracy and the practice of statecraft, to deepen the experience of democracy for the common citizen in India. MKSS's political conviction is in democratic processes and procedures and a reliance on the rule of law; it resorts to legal measures and institutionalised processes, with the expectation that this will purify the state from within and thus lead to the consolidation of democratic governance. In this, MKSS forms an integral part of the wider discourses on how democracy and the state are understood in India. The metanarrative on the nature of politics comes to be reflected in the aspirations and endeavours of MKSS. More specifically, MKSS is shaped by the prevailing ideas of democracy in political discourse, while simultaneously its work and motives contribute to shaping the overall metanarrative.

Tension among Interrelated anti-corruption actors

This introduction began with an account of the Aam Aadmi Party not haphazardly, but because of AAP's inextricable interconnection with MKSS. As will be explored in the following chapters, MKSS and AAP are linked both in terms of their commitment to making governance transparent and accountable through anti-corruption legislation, and also in terms of overlapping actors and a shared history. The interlocked relationship between the two groups found heightened expression in a nationwide anti-corruption movement that swept through India during most of 2011. As was alluded to earlier, AAP as a political party emerged out of a broader social movement that had demanded the institutionalisation of a Lokpal, or an anti-corruption ombudsman. The agitation around the Lokpal is the central event framing this thesis, from where both the aspirations and tensions of anti-corruption activism

surfaced ostensibly. This Lokpal agitation will be delineated in closer detail in Chapter Three; however, in order to set the context and the political landscape within which this thesis is embedded, and in order to understand the interrelated relationship between the various actors involved, a brief overview of the movement is apt at this point.

What is now referred to as India's anti-corruption movement, gained momentum on 5 April 2011, when Anna Hazare – a veteran anti-corruption activist from Maharashtra – began a fast-unto-death in New Delhi, demanding the enactment of a Jan Lokpal bill. Anna Hazare's fast immediately attracted mass support, for the demand to fight corruption appealed to many people who had reached a pinnacle with their frustration against political corruption. The prominence that the Anna Hazare-led anti-corruption movement took in public discourse, even in international news, finds evidence in its identification by the Time magazine as one of the "Top 10 World News Stories of 2011".¹⁶

Arvind Kejriwal, now leader of the Aam Aadmi Party, had been a key actor in the Anna Hazare movement. It is widely held that, although Anna Hazare was the public face of the demand for a Jan Lokpal bill, Kejriwal was the actual mastermind behind the orchestration of the movement. When the government failed to meet the movement's demands, Kejriwal and Hazare parted ways, with the former starting a political party and the latter shunning any association with party politics. This rift between the two on whether it was more effective to press for political change by working from within the system or by exerting pressure from outside, would play out and be captured by media on repeated occasions in the months to follow.

Members of MKSS were also involved in the anti-corruption movement of 2011. With their history of campaigning for transparency and accountability legislation in the past, they had their stakes in getting involved in the demand for the institutionalisation of an anti-corruption ombudsman. However, unlike most of the

¹⁶ "Top 10 World New Stories" in *Time*, 7 December 2011 [accessed 3 March 2014]
http://content.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,2101344_2101368_2101650,00.html

public euphoria galvanized around Anna Hazare, members of MKSS were critical of the Jan Lokpal bill. They saw in it an undemocratic propensity that concentrated too much power in one single institution and that would cave in under its own ambitions. They disagreed with Anna Hazare's demagogic approach of opposing politics and politicians unequivocally, and instead, championed an approach of applying due processes in their attempt to purify politics from within. In response, members of MKSS drafted their own version of a Lokpal bill, which they campaigned for before the government, presenting thus an alternative 'civil society voice' in the demand for an anti-corruption ombudsman. The political landscape that had already been permeated with tension between Anna Hazare's movement and the government, was strained all the more with the emergence of another civil society demand.

The tension between the civil society actors involved in the Lokpal agitation was primarily one over democratic process and procedure. The varying actors endorsed particular ideas of procedures of governance, clashing with one another over the best means to institutionalise transparency and accountability laws. There is a striking resemblance between the tensions that arose between MKSS and Anna Hazare, and the polemic discussion around the Aam Aadmi Party. In both instances, the cornerstone of debate was on the appropriate democratic process and procedure required to fight corruption. The continuity of this tension suggests the centrality that the idea of democracy has for civil society actors who are committed to making governance in India more transparent and accountable.

The politics of relationality

In focusing on the articulated differences between the civil society actors contending in the Lokpal movement, this thesis suggests that identity is constructed in opposition to an 'other'. This notion is informed by the concept of relationality, which highlights that a sense of identity alters according to the context and in relation to others. A sense of identity is constituted by being counterposed to others, resulting in

fluid, changing and dynamic identities. In this conceptualisation, identities emerge out of dialectic relationships and constellations that constantly redefine the substance and structures.

The notion of relationality is evoked in an anthropological classic, *The Nuer* by Evans-Pritchard (1969 [1940]). Here Evans-Pritchard illustrates the role of relationality in the formation of the sense of self in his study of the segmentary lineage structure of the Nuer. Accordingly, a lineage in and of itself does not have inherent substance. It is only when it is counterposed to some other equivalent group that the contours of the lineage take shape. Thus, a group that is normally segmented and disunited, consolidates when confronted by an external power – only to separate again when the threat subsides. What is crucial in this oppositional stance is that alterity is relational and not absolute: for the Nuer, it is groups “who are in every respect most akin to themselves”, such as the Dinka, that trigger more antagonistic relations “than any other foreign people” (1969: 131). It is in relation to such equivalent groups that the Nuer identity becomes salient. Differences begin to matter and become the source of hostility when the people are actually similar and close in relation.

As will be explored, although competing over spaces of civil society representation, MKSS and the other actors of the Lokpal agitation were united in terms of shared aspirations and by virtue of stemming from the same political class. It was precisely because of this similarity in background and aspiration, that difference was persistently emphasised. The greatest contention occurs when degrees of similarity are close and when contrast and comparison takes place amongst evenly matched opponents. It is, as Freud (2005 [1930]) pointed out, a case of the “narcissism of minor differences”. The narcissism between MKSS and the other anti-corruption actors, as the following chapters will explore, revolves around claiming higher democratic credentials and political integrity and authenticity.

Applying such a relational approach to the relationship between MKSS and the other anti-corruption activists helps to explain many of the dynamics going on between

these two civil society groups: it is precisely because they have such similar goals and strategies that their relationship is premised on antagonism. Although they share the objective of combating corruption through campaigning for transparency and accountability legislation, it is the minor differences between them that create the major cleavages. In other words, although they are very similar organisations, with overlapping objectives and backgrounds, they are at loggerheads with each other over particular aspects. Echoing Freud, Bourdieu notes that it is the people most similar to the self that represent the greatest threat, and against whom the distinct social identity must be asserted (Bourdieu 1984: 479). The importance of similarity in creating difference is well encapsulated by Huntington, who, albeit referring to a different context, cautions:

... we should not be naïve about the motives of disagreement. We need to remember that the harshest intellectual controversies are often not between adversaries of distinct persuasion... but between thinkers who if viewed from any distance look identical. (Huntington 2001: 6)

Ideas of relationality in the formation of identity have been picked up in the study of ethnicity, and shed some degree of insight into the case of MKSS. Such studies hold that ethnic groups are not self-defined or pre-determinatively distinct, but come to exist in and through interactions with others. It is through processes of ‘othering’ that boundaries are put up and within which ethnic identity can be asserted (Cohen 1985). Group identities, so conceived, “must always be defined in relation to that which they are not” (Eriksen 1993: 10). This draws on Bateson’s notion that “it takes at least two somethings to create a difference” (Bateson 1978: 78). Identity taken in isolation is to Bateson analogically similar to the “sound of one hand clapping” (Bateson 1978: 78).¹⁷

¹⁷ Gladney’s ethnographic study of the Chinese Muslim minority, the Hui, aptly illustrates how ethnic identities emerge within the context of social relations. His study shows that no fixed hierarchy of segmentation exists, but is consistently altered according to the shifting local contexts and the specific power constellations. For instance, Shanghai and Beijing Hui who are normally in competitive business relations with one other, unite as a unified ‘Hui’ when a non-Hui poses a threat. Similarly, when Hui move out of China, it is their ‘Chinese-ness’ that may be asserted as their common identity (Gladney 1996: 456). Ethnic identity is thus always situational, relational, shifting and negotiated.

All this suggests that identities and positions are shaped in relation to others, where the ‘other’ is crucial for the formation of the ‘self’. However, the other not only presents a mirror image of the self, as scholars of ethnicity suggest, but actually constitutes and incorporates the self. Theories of ethnicity propose that ethnic identity depends on boundaries through which groups come to reflect off one another. By contrast, the relationship between MKSS and the group around Anna Hazare, suggests that in differentiating themselves from each other, they actually embody each other. Relationality, so conceived, is a dialectic and interdependent process.

This analytical schema of relationality runs through the exploration of this thesis on the relationship and dynamics between MKSS and the other anti-corruption activists. It serves as a framework from which to understand their differences and from which to examine their contending understandings of democratic process. By keeping in mind the notion of relationality, we can comprehend the impetus of the civil society actors involved in the Lokpal movement. While they diverge on their understandings of the democratic processes and procedures needed to fight corruption, they are in overall agreement that structures of governance have to be ‘cleaned-up’ and made more transparent and accountable. This suggests that these actors share much more than first appears, and that it is precisely their shared aspirations and background that give rise to tension. In turn, drawing on Mouffe’s notion of agonistic pluralism, this tension can be thought of as the fuel that sustains their aspirations and actions.

The Embedded State and Democracy

India’s democracy

Suggesting that the aspiration to strengthen democratic practice and to improve statecraft lies at the heart of anti-corruption activism, should come as no surprise to

the scholar of India. Vast amounts of literature exist on democracy and the state, signalling the currency that these ideas have in contemporary political life. India is acclaimed to be the largest democracy in the world. In terms of sheer size alone this postulate holds true *de facto*, with universal suffrage institutionalised in a country with a population soaring at 1.2 billion. The presence of democracy in India can also be noted in its secular state institutions, its competitive multiparty system, the regular and typically fair elections, the overall observance of freedoms of expression and the press and an increase in politicisation by historically marginalised groups. Beyond these material manifestations, however, what makes the experiment with democracy particularly compelling in the case of India, is the putative entrenchment and internalisation of democratic ideas amongst ordinary people. As several scholars have noted, standing out amongst most other postcolonial countries, the idea of democracy in India has entered the political understandings of ordinary people and has deeply embedded itself in their consciousness (see Banerjee 2009; Hansen 1999; Jenkins 2007; Khilnani 2004; Kaviraj 2010; Michelutti 2008; Witsoe 2011). Political scientist Khilnani, for instance, notes:

The democratic idea has penetrated the Indian political imagination and has begun to erode the authority of the social order and of a paternalist state. Democracy as a manner of seeing and acting upon the world is changing the relations of Indians to themselves. (Khilnani 2004: 17)

This suggests that democracy does not exist as an abstract, or even extraneous, ideology, but is very much part of the political make-up of everyday life. In the context of India, democratic procedures and discourses are said to have gained so much depth, that they “profoundly modify and transform a society’s imagination of itself” (Hansen 1999: 9). In other words, democracy is not merely a form of governance implemented ‘from above’, but lies deeply entrenched in the “political imaginary of ordinary Indian people” (Kaviraj 2010: 68). The importance given to democracy by the civil society actors that this thesis deals with makes sense in the light of such conceptions of the social embeddedness of the idea of democracy. MKSS and the other actors involved in the Lokpal agitation were driven by an

aspiration to deepen democratic practice because the idea of democracy, as the above-cited scholars would have it, has ‘penetrated’ their ‘political imaginations’.

What this line of reasoning implies is that democracy is not a structural or institutionalised system standing above society, but that it takes roots and becomes tangible in social processes. Democracy is articulated through specific historical trajectories and social grammars and in so doing, gets ‘provincialized’. One area in which the internalisation and ‘indigenisation’ of the idea of democracy most markedly manifests itself is in the rise of low-caste groups in electoral politics. Since the 1990s India has observed an upsurge in the political participation and assertiveness of previously marginalised caste groups and the astounding rise of lower-caste politicians. Kaviraj describes this novel form of subaltern politics as going against “all historical scripts”, and as being “impossible to classify as either traditional or modern” expressions of democracy (Kaviraj 2000: 156). The increased participation in party politics of the lower-castes is regarded as so consequential, that it has been referred to as ‘India’s silent revolution’ (Jaffrelot 2003), or as the ‘second democratic upsurge’ (Yadav 2000). This phenomenon has been explained by anthropologists as being part of a process by which democratic practices are internalised and imbued with cultural idioms by lower-caste members.

Michelutti (2008), for example, shows that the popularity of democracy in India can be explained through the ‘vernacularisation’ of its values and practices by socio-cultural groups. She focuses on a low-caste group in north India, the Yadavs, and how they have adapted democracy to meet their particular settings and needs. Through local norms and idioms, the Yadavs appropriate the values of democracy and thereby embed it in their cultural and social practices. By referring, for instance, to Lord Krishna – the Yadav caste patron deity – as the ‘originator of democracy’, or to Yadavs as being intrinsically a ‘caste of politicians’, the democratic values are internalised. Through such processes of vernacularisation, democracy becomes entrenched in their consciousness. Simultaneously, the vernacularisation produces new social relations and values, which in turn shape their ideas of the political. Thus, as Michelutti notes, democracy is both “the product and the producer of different

social political relations” (Michelutti 2008: 3). It is through such processes that democracy has acquired social roots in India.¹⁸

Another approach to studying democracy ethnographically in India is put forward by Banerjee who studied electoral politics in a village in West Bengal. Banerjee focuses on the symbolic dimension of elections, noting that elections can be understood as “sacred expressions of citizenship” (Banerjee 2007: 1561). Elections, so conceived, not only serve the technical purpose of voting for politicians and engaging in party political processes; rather, for the villagers studied by Banerjee, elections also have a celebratory aspect in that they serve as festive social events and act as events in which the sense of democracy as sacred is fostered. Through the practice of voting and the festivities around it, elections serve to foster particular relationships and bonds. As Banerjee concludes: “From this [symbolic] perspective, democracy is really an untrue but vitally important myth in support of social cohesion, with elections as its central and regular ritual enactment that helps maintain and restore equilibrium” (Banerjee 2007: 1556).

The ethnographic findings of Michelutti and Banerjee reinforce the above proposition that democracy in India has been internalised into the political imaginaries of ordinary people. The examples of the unique expressions that democratic practice takes among low-caste Yadavs and Bengali villagers, shows the extent to which democracy has embedded itself in people’s consciousness. Democracy does not exist as a singular coherent idea, but is articulated through particular social imaginaries and historical junctures.

That democratic values are vernacularised finds confirmation in the fact that in contemporary Indian politics, it is the underprivileged groups who have become the staunchest supporters of the democratic system, and voter-turnout is highest in rural areas. It is the political participation and democratisation of low-caste and rural

¹⁸ Similar studies leading to similar conclusions have been made by Tanabe. Tanabe employs the term ‘vernacular democracy’ to refer to processes whereby democracy is realised in local areas through the bottom-up employment of “both indigenous and exogenous resources” by subalterns themselves (Tanabe 2007: 558). See also Witsoe (2011) on an ethnographic study of Yadav’s interpretation and experimentation with democracy.

groups that is taken as an indication of the deepening of the democratic experience, as comes to be reflected in the ethnographic studies discussed above. This thesis expands on the anthropological body of literature on democracy in India, by focusing on the ways in which democracy is experienced and discussed by more ‘elite’ movements. What makes this research unique, is that it shifts attention away from the so-called subalterns, by examining how more ‘privileged’ individuals and groups take part in processes of deepening democracy.

India’s state

The currency of democracy in political life in India is inextricably tied to the pervasiveness of the idea of the state and to procedural issues of statecraft. The modern state in India, with its gargantuan bureaucracy, its multi-tiered institutions and its innumerable laws, policies and programmes, is colossal both in terms of size and outreach.¹⁹ Although existing as a modern institution only since Independence from British colonial rule in 1947, the state has established itself as such a presence, that it comes to be experienced in some form or the other in most corners of the subcontinent. The Indian state is widely described as being all pervasive, making itself felt through its far-reaching bureaucracy even in the remotest areas of the country. Khilnani (2004) captures this pervasiveness of the state when he contends that the history of independent India *is* the history of a state, with democracy being its central political idea. Accordingly, the presence and significance of the state are the salient characteristics marking postcolonial India.

The scope that the state has in contemporary India can be traced back to the nationalist movement leaders, who defined the political shape that India would take once independence from British rule was gained. According to Khilnani, Jawaharlal Nehru, India’s first prime minister, played the most significant role in establishing

¹⁹ The ‘modern state’ is here understood as defined by Kaviraj and Khilnani as “the expression of [an] entirely novel structure of historical experience, dealing with [a] concentrated power, [an] ability to affect people’s lives on an unprecedentedly large scale” (Kaviraj and Khilnani 2001: 5).

India as a modern nation state. Nehru was one of the most articulate and influential founding fathers of the new nation, and it was his vision of India as a diverse and composite society that would become the foundation of the idea and identity of the Indian nation state. Through planned development and industrialisation, Nehru attempted to build a robust and effective state. His efforts were so tenacious that he succeeded in establishing “the state at the core of Indian society”, so much so that it “etched itself into the imaginations of Indians in a way that no previous political agency had ever done” (Khilnani 2004: 42).²⁰

According to Khilnani’s historical analysis, as that of many other scholars of politics in India, both the state and the idea of democracy form the central imperatives of contemporary India. It is these imperatives that come into sight in the ethnographic material that this thesis examines. The aspiration of MKSS as well as that of the other civil society actors involved in the Lokpal agitation, was to enforce transparency and accountability measures onto structures of governance so as to make the state work, and, consequently, to revive democracy. The commitment to the notions of transparency and accountability by the civil society actors of this thesis is a reflection of the faith that they place in the state apparatus. Their aspiration to make governance serve the interests of the people is tied to an expectation that the state can and must work responsibly.

This thesis contributes to the scholarly work on the state and democracy in India by exploring how these ideas come to be internalised and addressed by civil society actors. The rich literature that exists on post-colonial politics in India helps to contextualise the aspirations of the anti-corruption activists to deepen democracy and

²⁰ While the legacy of Nehru is at the heart of Khilnani’s exploration of the Indian state, he also ascribes other stages in history to the (trans)formation of the idea of the state. For instance, the liberalisation of India’s market in the 1990s was another historical marker with momentous implications for the experience of the state. This shift from socialism to neo-liberalism would play out in ideological and material transformations in the ideas of the state. This is echoed by Gupta and Sivaramakrishnan who observe that the last 10 years since liberalisation have had more impact on the Indian state than the first 50 years since Independence (Gupta and Sivaramakrishnan 2011: 2). The neo-liberal economic reforms of liberalisation were accompanied by a new logic of decentralisation, whereby powers would be devolved to regional states as well as to the village level, such as through the constitutional amendments made to Panchayati Raj Act in 1993. This context of liberalisation and decentralisation, according to Gupta and Sivaramakrishnan, radically transformed the state and had substantial implications for the functioning of democracy.

strengthen the state. It suggests that the commitment of these actors to bring about transparency and accountability in governance forms part of a larger story in India. This story is about the social embedding of the ideas of democracy and the state, as they have been internalised by people. The aspirations and commitments of the anti-corruption activists that this thesis deals with reflect this internalisation.

Corruption: diagnosing India's democracy and the state

The trope through which MKSS and the other anti-corruption actors express their commitment to democracy and the state is 'corruption'. Their immediate aspiration is to fight corruption, which, according to them, is the root of the impaired functioning of the state and the blemish in India's democracy. All the civil society actors involved in the Lokpal agitation were united in their conviction that for democracy to be restored, corruption had to be removed from the structures of governance. They shared a faith that transparency and accountability laws would help erode corruption from the political system. To these civil society actors, corruption exemplified the antithesis of all that they expected democracy and the state to be.

MKSS's fixation on corruption thus serves as a lens through which to understand the meanings that they ascribe to democracy and the state. By examining their attempt to fight corruption, we have an entry point from which to diagnose their relationship to, and their faith in democratic practice. In other words, the standpoint and convictions they have on corruption give insight into their broader political understandings. While ideas of democracy and the state are rather abstract and elusive notions, commitments to fighting corruption are tangible and concrete. MKSS's ideas of corruption can be studied empirically, for these are expressed in material form through their campaigns, demands, drafted laws and rhetoric. In such manner, the discourses of corruption of civil society actors offer a useful point of departure from which to study their broader aspirations and expectations of democracy and the state.

At this point I wish to clarify that this thesis will not engage in a study of the meaning and practice of corruption. My interest lies in the commitments and aspirations of anti-corruption activists, and less on the implications of corruption itself. Corruption, as an object of anthropological study, has fallen under much scrutiny, with many arguing against the ethnocentric connotations of the term. Harrison, for instance, notes that the anti-corruption discourse is closely tied to the recent trends in development paradigms that go hand in hand with policies of market liberalisation, decentralisation and privatisation (Harrison 2006: 17). Furthermore, the notion of corruption is argued to be premised on historically and culturally specific western notions of public service, which fail to describe the meaning and implication that corruption has in other parts of the world (see West and Sanders 2003). Such cultural-relativist approaches warn about the applicability of the term ‘corruption’ in non-Western contexts. However, in this thesis I do not problematize the notion of corruption for two reasons: firstly, the intention here is not to engage with definitions and understandings of corruption, but with the forms of politics of the anti-corruption activists and their commitments to transparent and accountable governance. The other reason for not engaging with the idea of corruption in depth, is that it did not appear as a problematized term for my informants or for the wider public discourse that informed my research findings. Corruption was defined by them largely as being an abuse of public office for private gain and thereby it fitted into their overall aspirations of strengthened governance, democracy and statecraft.

Reflecting the prevasiveness of corruption in India, several scholars have examined the phenomenon of corruption and its implications for the democratic experience in India (see Gupta 1995, 2012; Jenkins 2007; Parry 2000; Ruud 2001; Shah 2009). Jenkins (2007), for example, examines the correlation between corruption and the faith in democracy. He notes that corruption – or, its flipside, accountability – is used as a yardstick with which to assess India’s democracy. While, according to Jenkins, India can be applauded for standing out amongst all other post-colonial countries for the durability of its liberal constitutional system, its democracy is impaired by the lasting pervasiveness of corruption. Jenkins identifies two components that are crucial for democracy to be deepened: *inclusiveness* and *accountability*. While India

has seen significant advancements in the former component, with its politics becoming more inclusive – as evidenced by the increased politicisation by historically disadvantaged communities, as discussed earlier – it has largely failed in the second component of making its state more accountable. Within this context, “the bribe-taking politician has become the preeminent symbol of India’s democratic malaise” (Jenkins 2007: 56).

Despite this ‘democratic malaise’, Jenkins points out that the endurance of corruption does not undermine people’s faith in democracy. While some political scientists hold that in ‘less established democracies’ (i.e. those outside of North America and Europe) political corruption erodes public faith in democracy, Jenkins by contrast argues that corruption in India is not generally considered to be a threat to its democratic regime (Jenkins 2007: 57). Corruption is perceived widely as undermining the quality of governance produced by democratic politics, but not as undermining popular commitment to democracy *per se* (Jenkins 2007: 58). This argument holds true in the case of MKSS. Their drive to demand transparency and accountability laws is an effort to improve the quality of democratic governance, while their overall aim is to deepen democracy. The existence of corruption for them is not reason to give up on the ideas of democracy and their faith in the state; rather, corruption represents a defect that needs to be removed for democratic governance to unfold.

A similar argument is made by Parry who takes discourses on corruption as a lens through which to examine how the state comes to be understood in everyday life. Through his ethnography on factory workers in the Bhilai steel plant in north India, Parry makes the compelling case that the prevalence that corruption has in Indian political discourse, is a reflection of the fact that people have “internalised the universalistic and impersonal values associated with modern bureaucracy” (Parry 2000: 29). In other words, corruption is perceived as so widespread because people are committed to a particular idea of the modern democratic state that is expected to be transparent and accountable.

In contrast to cultural relativist readings that view corruption as part of the Indian folkloric make-up and as thus socially legitimated, Parry shows that employees of the Bhilai steel plant perceived corruption as a serious pathology and as a “galloping cancer” (Parry 2000: 29). People severely chided corruption and spoke of it as omnipresent and all-pervasive, often even exaggerating the existence and practice of corruption. This concern with corruption, Parry argues, reveals the high expectations people have of the state, indicating that norms of transparency and accountability have been widely accepted and internalised. The type of state the employees of the Bhilai steel plant evidently endorsed, was one based on a modern, rational bureaucracy. People condemned corruption on the grounds that it was the misuse of public office for private gain; they thereby demonstrated their understanding of the state in the Weberian sense as a rational bureaucracy premised precisely on the separation of the public from the private. These observations lead Parry to conclude that “corruption has seemed to get worse and worse not (only) because it has, but also because it subverts a set of values to which people are increasingly committed” (Parry 2000: 53). In this regard, discourses of corruption do not lead to discrediting democracy or destabilising the state, but on the contrary, they show the strength that the idea of the modern democratic state has.

It is this very commitment to democracy that comes to be reflected in the anti-corruption activism of MKSS. MKSS condemns corruption because it perceives it as an obstruction to democratic governance. Parry’s argument helps us understand the type of state MKSS calls for in its engagement to fight corruption. The idea of the state that MKSS aspires to is evidently one based on liberal values and norms of a modern rational-legal state. In condemning corruption, MKSS defines it as the misuse of public authority for public gain, reflecting the normative enterprise upon which the model of the Weberian bureaucrat is built: the bureaucrat as “the role-fulfilling, disinterested professional occupying a particular location in an organisational structure based solely on professional competence and merit” (Gupta 2012: 81). This understanding of the type of state that MKSS expects, helps to contextualise their aspirations and activities, as well as the tensions they have with other actors.

Gupta makes a very similar argument to Parry's, showing that the discourse of corruption "functions as a diagnostic of the state" (Gupta 2012: 100). Conducting fieldwork in rural Uttar Pradesh, Gupta notes the prevalence of discussions on corruption among villagers as well as in vernacular and English-language newspapers. Through their experiences and discourses of corruption, rural people gain knowledge about the state and insights into the functioning of democracy. What this is evidence of, according to Gupta, is that discourses of corruption are the key arena through which the state comes to be imagined and that they reflect "the degree to which the state has become implicated in the minute texture of everyday life" (Gupta 2012: 75). In this way, corruption is a mechanism through which the state comes to be discursively constituted and thus serves as "an essential lens for understanding the meaning of the state in the Indian context" (Gupta 2012: 78).

Echoing Parry, Gupta argues that the fixation on corruption emerges out of particular conceptualisations of the state. An examination of discourses of corruption thus gives insight into the expectations people make of the state. These expectations, according to Gupta's findings, revolve around values of right behaviour, standards of accountability and norms of conduct (Gupta 2012: 97). In this context, discourses of corruption can be understood as being the other side of discourses of accountability, which, in turn, can be traced to particular transitions in India's postcolonial history. In contrast to their colonial predecessors who ruled through political control and subjugation, nationalist leaders of the recently independent subcontinent, sought popular legitimacy by placing new responsibilities on state employees and vesting new rights in citizens (Gupta 2012: 98). These modernist values of citizenship and rights were accompanied by the notion of accountability, whereby, unprecedented under colonial rule, state officials were conceived as being accountable to the people. The idea of accountability or its inverse, corruption, is thus the direct product of the modernist project of the postcolonial nation-state. Borrowing Parry's argument, Gupta concludes that the sense of pervasive corruption in India is an effect of the postcolonial discourses of accountability. The independent nation-state of India is built on a system of electoral democracy that asserts that citizens have rights and that

the state is deemed accountable to the people. Corruption marks an infringement of these rights, which is why the discourse of corruption “acts to represent the rights of citizens to themselves” (Gupta 2012: 99). It is these very values of rights, citizenship and accountability that inform MKSS’s commitment to fight corruption.

Ethnographies of the state

To recapitulate the above, both Parry and Gupta argue that the state is constituted and imagined through discourses of corruption. Accordingly, an examination of the spaces and forms in which corruption is discussed gives insight into the ways in which people understand the state. Parry and Gupta thus propose that through the discourse of corruption the state can be studied ethnographically. An ethnographic study of the state focuses on the spaces in which the state comes to be experienced by people and the ways in which it is discursively constructed in public culture. What such ethnographies of the state propose to do, is to show the multiple and disaggregated meanings that are ascribed to the state, highlighting that the state does not exist as a unitary or coherent whole. Corruption, according to both anthropologists discussed above, offers an apt lens from which to approach such a study.

With this in mind, this thesis on anti-corruption activism in north India can be classified as an ethnography of the state. It explores the ways in which the state comes to be imagined by the civil society actors in their fight against corruption and in their campaigns to institutionalise transparency and accountability laws. As already noted, through the discourses of corruption as held by MKSS, we apprehend the expectations they make of the state, highlighting the type of state they aspire to and the faith they have in the democratic process. The focus of this thesis on the work and ideas about corruption of these actors, thus serves as an ethnographic study of how they discursively construct and ascribe meaning to the state.

Having such a looming presence in India, the state has been taken as an ethnographic object of study by several anthropologists (see Corbridge et al. 2005; Fuller and Harriss 2001; Gupta 1995; Ruud 2001; Tarlo 2003). As Fuller and Harriss (2001) note, the interest in the state by anthropologists has only emerged in recent years, with anthropologists previously shying away from studying ‘modern institutions’ (see also Vincent 1990). Here they echo Spencer’s observation that politics throughout most of the latter half of the twentieth century was considered by anthropologists as “determinedly unexotic, anti-cultural and dull” and thus as an unworthy area of study (Spencer 1997: 5). Politics, according to Spencer, was viewed as a dreary modern rational and transparent institution that was deemed diametrically opposed to the more challenging anthropological area of study of the ‘cultural’ and ‘symbolical’ (Spencer 1997: 3). Since the turn of the millennium, the state, along with ideas of democracy and governance, has recaptured the ethnographic attention of South Asianists (Fardon et al. 2012: 374). ‘The state’ has emerged as an object of study, with several anthropologists interested in the everyday expressions that the state takes and the ways in which it comes to be experienced by ordinary people. What most of these studies show is that the modern Indian state does not exist as a discrete, unitary entity with a unified intentionality, but appears in multiple forms and as plural ideas with different faces (Gupta 2012, 1995; Fuller and Harriss 2001).

Most of the ethnographic studies that exist on the state in India focus on local level state institutions and lower-level bureaucrats (Gupta 1995, 2012; Mathur 2012; Ruud 2001). It is in these institutionalised spaces that it is believed that the operations of the state and its relationship to people are best revealed. Gupta, for instance, ‘sights’ the state in the lower levels of the bureaucracy in a north Indian town, which acts as a site wherein rural people come into direct contact with ‘the state’. People encounter the state when they engage with decentralised and disaggregated bureaucracies, where the quotidian practices of local level bureaucrats show the effects of the state in the everyday. The local officials act as the contact between rural populations and the state and their offices are where “images of the state are forged” (Gupta 1995: 376). What the quotidian encounters with the state amount to, according to Gupta, is

the blurring of the boundaries between state and society, acclaimed so vigorously under western understandings of the rational bureaucratic order.

Another approach to studying the state ethnographically in India is put forward by Mathur who studies the everyday life of a development bureaucracy in a district in the Indian Himalaya. By following the implementation of a piece of legislation on rural employment among lower-level state functionaries, Mathur contributes to an ethnographic study of the state. She examines how the discourses and critiques of lower-level bureaucrats on the practices and effects of development schemes, actually produce the developmental Indian state. In other words, “cynicism might dominate the environs of development offices, but it simultaneously shares the stage with the desire to develop that envelopes the Himalayan portion of this northern Indian state” (Mathur 2012: 206).

‘Civil society’ and the state

Drawing on the findings and line of reasoning of the above ethnographic studies on the state, I suggest that my research similarly constitutes an ethnography of the state. It explores the expectations that anti-corruption activists have of the state and how they aspire to improve its governance structures and the practice of democracy. By advocating for transparency and accountability laws as a means to eradicate corruption from the political system, the anti-corruption activists express particular expectations of the function and responsibility of the state. Through their anti-corruption activism, they thus discursively construct the state and add to the public discourse on how the state is understood.

What distinguishes my study from most other ethnographic studies that exist on the state in India, is that I explore the state from the perspective of civil society, without taking state institutions as the frame of reference. Most of the existing ethnographic work on the state in India focuses on lower-level state actors or on local-level state

institutions (as we have seen in the work of Gupta and Mathur). My focus on the state through the perspective of civil society actors is different in that it deals with a category that, in theoretical conceptualisations, is largely deemed to be diametrically opposed to the state. The discussion on the relation between state and civil society is particularly perplexing in the context of India, where there is a long and inextricable trajectory of debate on this relationship. Herewith, my thesis addresses substantial questions on the complex literature on the state and civil society.

As Gupta notes, an ethnography of the state in a postcolonial context such as India's must "come to terms with the legacy of Western scholarship on the state", from where the term arguably derives (Gupta 2012: 77). Such scholarship is predicated largely upon the separation of the state from civil society. As Kaviraj and Khilnani note, this theoretical dichotomisation can be traced to the European tradition linked to John Locke, whose analysis of the social contract led to the clear distinction between 'civil society' and the state (Kaviraj and Khilnani 2001: 3). Out of this tradition of 18th century Enlightenment, Weber emerged with his conception of 'state autonomy', which assigns specific functions to the state, and consequently, places it above society. According to Weber's definition, which has been highly influential in modern understandings of the state, the state depends on being recognised as a political organisation that has monopoly on the legitimate use of force. In this conceptualisation, for the state to be imbued with authority, it needs to clearly stand apart and be insulated from society (Skocpol 1985).

While classical theories on the state are premised on the separation of the state from civil society, what exactly civil society is, is not self-evident and definitions are largely broad and indeterminate. In the contemporary world order, the term 'civil society' has become so widely embraced and employed, that the term has become a "fragmented and politically contested realm" (Fisher 2010: 250). Drawing on Wittgenstein's idea that categorisation places constraints on understandings, Fisher contends that there is little analytic utility in terms like civil society "that are used in many different ways to mean whatever anyone seems to want them to mean" (Fisher 2010: 252). The enthusiasm with which the term 'civil society' has been employed,

has rendered it an ambiguous and contested category, bearing little import in understanding the world.

Most analysts treat civil society largely in normative terms, hinging it on abstract debates and essentialized categories. Normatively, civil society has been identified as a domain for the expansion and realisation of rights and freedom (Cohen and Arato 1992), and as an alternative delivery system for services (Lewis 2010). Instrumentally, it is seen as a domain wherein the exercise and control of power are contested (Keane 1988; Chandhoke 1995) and as an area of ‘private’ activity into which government can shift responsibilities (Lewis 2010). For some, civil society encompasses all non-state aspects of social life and includes virtually all existing social institutions that lie outside the strict domain of the state. Here, civil society has been defined broadly as “that segment of society that interacts with the state, influences the state and yet is distinct from the state” (Chazan 1992 in Fisher 2010: 253). For others, it applies specifically to established associations such as the voluntary sector, traditional social networks, and social movements. Kaviraj and Khilnani capture the ambiguity of the term civil society when they ask: “exactly what sort of thing is the idea of civil society? Is it a descriptive term for a certain type of social structure, mode of social behaviour, or political ideal?” (Kaviraj and Khilnani 2001: 1).

Although an ambiguous category, the concept of civil society has significantly increased in salience in contemporary democratic theory since the 1980s. In contemporary understandings, civil society is typically perceived to be an integral part of democracy, whereby, in line with Tocqueville’s interpretation, it is seen to perform the role of watchdog in a democracy (Tandon and Mohanty 2003: 11). The increase in the employment of the category of ‘civil society’ can be linked to two recent theoretical trends. According to one trend, the conspicuousness of civil society can be correlated to theories of democratisation in the post-Cold War world order (Kaviraj and Khilnani 2001; Joseph 2001; Tandon and Mohanty 2003). Following the break-up of the communist regimes in Eastern Europe in the early 1990s, civil society as an independent space from the state was considered as a precondition for

establishing democratic institutions. In this logic of democratisation, civil society was seen as the sphere that would 'free' society from the overextended control of the communist state system and its stifling bureaucracy (Kaviraj and Khilnani 2001: 2). In a "simplistic teleological framework", civil society was celebrated for bringing democracy to countries previously denied democratic freedom (Fisher 2010: 253). In this liberal view, civil society was presented as an arena that balanced state and market and thus epitomized the virtues of democratisation processes.

Another explanation for the increased salience of the concept of civil society is linked to neoliberal theories that became prominent from the 1980s onward. According to these theories, civil society represents a sphere outside state control and one which gives maximum scope for individual freedom and self-determination. Neoliberal ideals are promoted by institutions such as the World Bank through the framework of 'good governance' that advocates civil society as a means to roll back the state. In line with neoliberal ideas that seek to loosen centrally held governmental control, civil society is here seen to mediate between state and society and to help contain state power (Joseph 2001: 300; Tandon and Mohanty 2003: 10). Civil society gained prominence among international development donors in the 1990s who followed the agendas of good governance (Lewis 2010: 169).

Amongst many scholars on politics in India, the analytical category of 'civil society' and its alleged separation from the state as postulated by liberal democratic theory, has been greeted with apprehension. Many have viewed this conceptualisation as a specifically Western theory that is alien and inapplicable in the context of India. Applying the distinction between state and society in India has been argued to amount to an "imperialism of categories" (Nandy 1990 cited in Gupta 2012: 78), seen as an attempt to universalise and naturalise an ethnocentric conceptual framework. In this context, Gupta cautions vigilance towards the "imperialism of the Western conceptual apparatus" and, instead, advises us to look at the "historically specific and ideologically constructed understandings of the state" (Gupta 2012: 106-7). In other words, the notions of society and state that emerged out of a specifically

European history should not be taken as a premise to understanding these concepts in India.

This unease towards the ‘alien’ categories of state and civil society, forms part of a larger theoretical trend in Indian scholarship – as promulgated largely by the subaltern studies and postcolonial scholars – that is critical of political ideas and institutions introduced by colonialism. Subaltern studies can be broadly characterised by its rejection of the universalizing categories of the Enlightenment and its anti-essentialist approach to the study of ‘history from below’ in the postcolonial world.²¹ Kaviraj, for instance, refers to liberal democratic institutions in India as being an “inescapable externality” in that they are foreign imports from Western political thought (Kaviraj 1997b: 11). Because of this externality, democratic institutions did not take root in India and remained restricted to the urban elite who absorbed and emulated the ways of the European rulers.²² Through such dynamics, civil society was always an exclusive domain, failing to incorporate the subaltern – the vast proportion of India’s population. According to Kaviraj, even the postcolonial state has not been able to modernise and transform society, with civil society being continuously an exclusive domain to the national elite.

This enduring externality of Western ideas and concepts in non-Western countries has, according to Kaviraj and Khilnani, resulted in a historical paradox in the postcolonial experience. In postcolonial countries such as India, a ‘Western language’ (with the vocabulary of state, civil society, bureaucracy etc.) is used to express the experiences of politics, yet the actual political processes are incongruent with their western counterparts (Kaviraj and Khilnani 2001: 5). In other words, “[p]olitical institutions taken from the West are introduced into societies which have embedded forms of sociability that are very different from the common

²¹ The field of subaltern studies is voluminous and expansive, with shifting trends throughout its history. I do not here propose to provide a comprehensive overview. Rather, I have selected just a few authors that characterise a sense of the ideas of the subaltern studies group. (For a more expansive account of the work of subaltern studies see Guha 1997, Ludden 2001, Prakash 1994, Spivak 1988, Chakrabarty 2000; for a critique of subaltern studies see Chibber 2013).

²² As Kaviraj and Khilnani describe, civil society was introduced by the colonial administration in order to justify their patterns of intervention, claiming that some matters were out of the jurisdiction of the colonial state and belonged to the realm of ‘civil society’ (Kaviraj and Khilnani 2001: 4).

individualistic forms of the modern West” (Kaviraj and Khilnani 2001: 5). Spencer (1997) proposes that this paradox can be resolved by focusing on the cultural implications and the different imaginations which people make of the institutions and political vocabulary left behind by the British.

Like Kaviraj, Chatterjee similarly speaks of the alien character of liberal democratic institutions in postcolonial countries. He notes that the historical and cultural contexts that gave rise to the ideas of civil society in Europe were starkly different to those in India, so that the processes that generated such institutions in the west could not be replicated in the postcolonial world. The idea of civil society is premised on the values of “equality, autonomy, freedom of entry and exits, contract, deliberative procedures of decision-making, recognized rights and duties of members, and other such principles”, which stem from a particular western history (Chatterjee 2001: 172; see also Chatterjee 1997, 2009). In India, by contrast, when civil society was introduced by the colonialists, caste, family and community had precedence over state institutions, and the social and political order was not based on contractual relations and rights of citizens. Under colonial rule, only a handful of elites were recognised as bearers of modernity and thus met the criteria of full citizenship. Even after the departure of the British rulers, the nationalist elites are continuously driven by the desire to “replicate in its own society the forms as well the substance of Western modernity” that includes the “virtues of the Enlightenment and of bourgeois freedom” (Chatterjee 2001: 174). However, civil society remains restricted to the privileged strata, leaving out most of the population that does not live up to the standards required by civil society. Because of the limited scope of civil society in India, Chatterjee defines it as “the closed association of modern elite groups, sequestered from the wider popular life of communities, walled up within enclaves of civic freedom and rational law” (Chatterjee 2009: 4).

Chatterjee proposes to solve the conundrum of the incongruity of the concept of civil society in the postcolonial world, by introducing the category of ‘political society’. Political society is a “domain of mediating institutions between civil society and the state” (Chatterjee 2001: 171) and refers to political transactions and social

interactions which take place outside the framework of formal institutions. The sphere of political society includes the vast domain that exists *outside* the designated spheres of modern politics that are grounded in the formal discourse of rights and individual citizenship. In other words, it comprises the subaltern that are excluded from the exclusive category of civil society. According to Chatterjee, most inhabitants of India are only tenuously rights-bearing citizens and so do not adhere to the formal grammar of rights and citizenship. However, although not recognised as part of civil society, political society is not thereby entirely excluded from the domain of politics. Rather than existing as citizens, they exist as ‘populations’ that come into contact with the state by being targets of policy through the numerous governmental agencies. The poor and the marginalised develop political channels and party connections to negotiate individual or collective advantages. Through such activities a political relationship is forged between these populations and the state, wherein claims on the state are made and associations and organizations are forged.

These debates on the relevance and meaning of civil society in the Indian context, shed some light on my research that deals precisely with the category of civil society. Throughout this thesis I employ the term civil society because it was under the banner of civil society that much of the anti-corruption activism was presented. Particularly during the Lokpal agitation, media drew heavily on the term ‘civil society’, emphatically characterising every actor and action that was not strictly the position of the government as ‘civil society’. Catchphrases were coined that alluded to the demand for a Lokpal bill as an “open war between government and civil society”.²³ In a similar tone, the differences in opinion between Anna Hazare and MKSS were presented as a “divide within civil society” and a “rift in civil society”.²⁴ By assuming an active role in the representations of the Lokpal agitation, media

²³ “Government and civil society in open war on Lokpal bill” in *DNA India*, 13 June 2011 [accessed 17 March 2014] <http://www.dnaindia.com/india/report-govt-and-civil-society-in-open-war-on-lokpal-bill-1554531>

²⁴ “It’s Anna vs. Aruna as rift in civil society shows” in *Business Standard*, 21 August 2011 [accessed 17 March 2014] http://www.business-standard.com/article/economy-policy/it-s-anna-vs-aruna-as-rift-in-civil-society-shows-111082100033_1.html

became an “important agent in the making of public life” (Navaro-Yashin 2002: 6). By drawing heavily on terms such as ‘civil society’, it shaped the frames through which the debates around the Lokpal came to be understood. In this regard, media came to construct public discourse. As Mosse and Lewis put it: “All actors (and not just sociologists) produce interpretations, and powerful actors offer scripts into which others can be recruited for a period” (Mosse and Lewis 2006: 7). In this form, though media’s broad employment of the term ‘civil society’ in describing the actors of the Lokpal agitation, the term became a ‘folk term’ that gained wide and accepted currency.

During fieldwork, I did not come across any instance in which the category of civil society was questioned or problematized. In fact, I found the term to be widely embraced and referred to extensively by everyone who had a stake in the Lokpal. Typically MKSS refers to itself interchangeably as a people’s organisation, a social movement or, more broadly, as part of the non-political process, with its members being referred to routinely as social activists. However, during the Lokpal agitation, with the entire public discourse fixated on the term ‘civil society’, members of MKSS themselves drew on this category in reference to themselves. They were referred to widely in public culture as ‘civil society’, and increasingly assumed the category themselves in their own self-presentations. Within the overall climate, ‘civil society’ entered their political vocabulary seemingly unproblematically.

Members of MKSS also referred to themselves as ‘social activists’. While during the Lokpal agitation they were drawn into the overall hype around the term ‘civil society’, before the Lokpal they had largely resorted to the term ‘activist’ in reference to themselves (see for instance their account of the MKSS history on their website, where the term ‘activist’ crops up profusely).²⁵ With the ubiquity that the term ‘civil society’ gained in the discussions around the Lokpal, ‘activist’ was largely replaced by ‘civil society’ in the self-presentations of MKSS. Given that the

²⁵ “The Non-Party Political Process Profile of a People’s Organisation” in *Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan* [accessed 25 March 2014] <http://www.mkssindia.org/writings/mkssandrti/the-non-party-political-process-profile-of-a-people%E2%80%99s-organization-mkss-rajasthan-%E2%80%93-madhu-bharat-dogra/>

Lokpal agitation is the key event framing the ethnography, this thesis therefore refers broadly to the term ‘civil society’, thus reflecting the overall public discourse through which the Lokpal agitation was presented. However, since ‘activist’ was also a term of self-reference for MKSS, I use both ‘civil society’ and ‘activist’ interchangeably throughout this thesis. As will be noted by the reader, the term ‘civil society’ emerges more prominently from Chapter Three onward, which are the chapters that deal with the events around the Lokpal agitation. By contrast, the first two chapters are on events preceding the Lokpal agitation, and so the term ‘civil society’ is invoked less frequently.

By reproducing the ways in which members of MKSS themselves employed ‘civil society’ and ‘activist’ in their discourse and practice during the Lokpal, I attempt to be consistent with the categories as used by my informants. In such manner, I treat the terms ‘civil society’ and ‘activist’ as ‘categories of practice’. Categories of practice, according to Brubaker, are those categories that people use in their everyday practice as a way to self-identify and to order the world around them (in Curtis and Spencer 2012: 143). These are in contrast to ‘categories of analysis’ that are reflexive categories invoked mainly by social scientists. ‘Civil society’ operates both as a category of practice and a category of analysis, whereby it is used in the everyday lives of actors to make sense of their world, yet simultaneously exists as a normative category for analysis. However, in this thesis I draw on ‘civil society’ mainly as a category of practice: I am interested in understanding what the term ‘civil society’ means to the anti-corruption actors and what work the term does for them. In other words, I treat ‘civil society’ as an ethnographic object of study, and less as an analytic category that seeks to demarcate what is and is not civil society. I provide an empirically based study on the relationships between and among actors who use the category ‘civil society’, in an effort to flesh out our understanding of the complexities of civil society in India (Fisher 2010: 255).

Nonetheless, while the category of civil society did not appear to pose any conspicuous problems within the field that I studied, analytically it still requires to be questioned. Despite being a category that the actors that I studied themselves drew

on in their account of themselves and the world, it needs to be borne in mind that ‘civil society’ is not an essential or natural entity. Being such an overused term, it has become an unwieldy concept laden with multiple, contradictory and problematic meanings. The same applies to the term ‘activism’, which, as Lewis points out, is “wide-ranging and [...] can be unpacked in several different ways” (Lewis 2010: 160). The risk in adopting the term as it appeared in the field-site as self-evident, is that it reifies and conflates such a category. A distinction must be made between treating civil society as a concept and as an actually existing ‘thing’.

One conceptual approach through which to unpack the use of the term ‘civil society’ as related to MKSS, is Chatterjee’s characterisation of civil society and political society. His definition of civil society as an association of modern elite groups that adhere to values of civic freedom and rational law, holds some degree of truth in the case of MKSS. The MKSS leaders, as will be explored in closer detail in Chapters One and Two, stem from urban, highly educated, upper-class backgrounds. They endorse particular ideas of rights and citizenship, which, according to Chatterjee, derive precisely from their specific class positioning. Based on this class-based and ideological reasoning, MKSS conforms to the criteria of civil society as proposed by Chatterjee. However, unlike Chatterjee’s characterisation of civil society, MKSS is not removed from the ‘subaltern’, but, quite the contrary, it is committed to improving the plight of the poor. In fact, MKSS acts as a medium to channel the political demands of the marginalised to the state. According to this interpretation, MKSS resembles Chatterjee’s portrayal of political society. However, this category does not fully apply to MKSS either, because, according to Chatterjee, political society characteristically resists the ideology and strategies of a developmental state and challenges the liberal democratic model. This is quite the contrary to MKSS, who, as we have examined, aspire precisely to strengthen democratic governance.

All of this shows that MKSS falls into the taxonomy of both civil society and political society. The elite background of its members, its work with the poor and marginalised, its commitment to democratic ideals and its faith in the state institutions blurs Chatterjee’s neat distinction between the ‘civil’ and the ‘political’.

What the work of MKSS suggests is that political associations cannot be classified as being either 'elite' or 'subaltern', nor as being either concerned with citizen rights or with the governmentality of populations. Rather, there is a middle ground where all of these spheres converge, as is evident in the case of MKSS. This corresponds to Gellner's observation that the 'Third Sector' is a blurry category that in practice does not correspond to the ideal type definition of the 'three sectors' as designating a separation of state, market and society. Rather, the category is open to negotiation, contestation and mobilisation, whereby individuals move across the boundaries (Gellner 2010: 5). In a similar way, the work of MKSS crosses between the 'civil' and the 'political' and blurs the separation to the state.

What my fieldwork suggests is that the term 'civil society', which is deemed to be an alien import by many subaltern scholars, is not all that alien in contemporary public discourses after all. In fact, its prevalence in public life and in media, and the naturalness with which it is referred to by the anti-corruption actors, intimates that it enjoys an endemic embeddedness. This pervasiveness of 'civil society' in India, as a practice and as an idea, can be explained as being part of a broader process of internalisation. Earlier I examined the ways in which notions of democracy and the state have gained currency among ordinary people by being vernacularised into their social and political grammar. If we take this premise, it follows that the idea of civil society, which forms an integral part of the conceptual tradition of state and democracy, is similarly embedded in people's everyday political imaginaries. With ideas of democracy and the statist position being so strong in India, so does the idea of civil society gain wide prevalence. Civil society is projected as the space through which democracy can be deepened. In many other post-colonial countries the state is weak and thus the notion of civil society has little import (see for instance Lewis's (2004) account of civil society in Bangladesh). However, the state in India is strong and omnipresent, and because civil society is interdependent with the state and with the modern concept of citizenship, civil society takes root in India (Béteille 2000 in Lewis 2004: 301).

Furthermore, while the notion of civil society may derive from a particular theoretical history in the west, in India it exists within a distinctive set of ideas and practices. Rather than being an imposition from ‘outside’, civil society can be thought of as a discourse that has been reconfigured and adopted to the particular context. Civil society as an idea may have been introduced through the colonial regime, and it may have increased in salience with the global trends in democratisation and neoliberalism, yet in India it comes into being in an exceptional way. As with the ideas of civil society in Bangladesh, as suggested by Lewis, civil society comes into being through “multiple local meanings and histories that are both politically contested and continually transformed” (Lewis 2004: 301). The particular expressions that ‘civil society’ can take in India, will be explored in this thesis through its playing out in anti-corruption activism.

What this suggests is that the discourses of civil society do not operate homogenously across the world, but they “articulate with distinctive historical trajectories to form unique hybridizations and creolizations in different settings” (Gupta and Ferguson 1997; cited in Gupta 2012: 106). The use of the term ‘civil society’ amongst anti-corruption activists in India thus does not imply a strictly Eurocentric tradition. I reach this conclusion by drawing on a large amount of anthropological work that focuses on how concepts are decoded, renegotiated and localised in different contexts and by different actors as they flow throughout the world (see Appadurai 1996; Arce and Long 2000; Comaroff and Comaroff 1993; Eisenstadt 2002; Kahn 2001; Merry 2001; Mosse 2005; Tsing 2005; Wilson 1997).²⁶

²⁶ Another way in which the embeddedness of the term civil society could be understood, is that it has never been an alien concept in the first place. This fits in line with Chibber’s (2013) recent analysis that argues that the distinction between the west and the non-west so vigorously maintained by postcolonial theorists is based on a misapprehension. Supposedly western values of liberalism are not foreign to the postcolonial world, which is much closer to Enlightenment values than is typically granted.

Chapter Outline

The two main themes of *aspirations* and *tensions* that run through the exploration of anti-corruption activism in this thesis, are introduced in Chapters One and Two respectively. Chapter One recounts the widely known story of MKSS, which describes a social movement that began with farmers and labourers fighting local cases of corruption in villages in Rajasthan, and that culminated in a national campaign for the enactment of the Right to Information (RTI) Act. This chapter explores the ways in which MKSS's campaign to enforce transparency and accountability measures in governance, expresses its commitment in making the state responsive to the needs of the poor and of deepening the experience of democracy for the common citizen in India. This chapter focuses on the tropes through which the story of MKSS is typically told, suggesting that such tropes serve to translate the particular experiences in rural Rajasthan into a broader discursive field of governance, democracy and statecraft.

Chapter Two continues with the history of the RTI movement by focusing on the tensions inherent in such a social movement. It argues that the demands for transparency and accountability legislation cannot emerge solely through grassroots activism by the rural poor, but require involvement also in a more 'formal' realm of campaigning. The technical and formal aspects of the RTI movement are explored in this chapter through the work of the National Campaign for People's Right to Information (NCPRI), a campaign based in New Delhi that is spearheaded and dominated by MKSS. NCPRI is constituted of high-ranking members, whose access to crucial social networks and social capital leads to the blurring of boundaries between civil society and the state. The differences and tension between MKSS and NCPRI sheds light on the inherent tension in politics that Weber discusses in "Politics as Vocation" (1919). This chapter introduces the complex overlapping and interchangeable nature of MKSS and NCPRI. Most of the chapters in this thesis will refer mainly to NCPRI – as it was under this banner that most of the activities during

the Lokpal agitation were carried out – but MKSS will inevitably feature repeatedly, reflecting the fuzzy nature of the split between the two organisations.

In Chapter Three I begin to explore the Lokpal agitation. The lens of exploration of this national anti-corruption movement, is through the perspective of MKSS/NCPRI, whose leadership was from the onset outspoken on its position on the Lokpal Bill. In this chapter the competitive relationship between MKSS/NCPRI and its contenders in the field of anti-corruption begins to emerge, whereby both groups were competing over spaces and discourses of representation of ‘civil society’. There were tensions around who best represented the needs of the people, who had the expertise and thus legitimacy to draft anti-corruption legislation, or who had initiated the debates on the Lokpal. What the heated debates and upheavals around the Lokpal agitation point to, is the importance given to notions of democratic process and to statecraft in civil society activism in India. The ethnographic material in this chapter suggests that competition, with the frictions and contestations that it engenders, provides opportunities for a reinforcement of political positions and commitments.

The competitive relationship between MKSS/NCPRI and its contenders in the Lokpal agitation is also the foundation of Chapter Four. This chapter explores how members of MKSS/NCPRI attempted to set themselves apart from their opponents and to establish themselves as legitimate representatives of civil society. Operating in a relational field with their competitors, members of MKSS/NCPRI had to make their difference publicly visible. One way in which they did this was by enacting their positions and ideas of ‘civil society’ through a public convention. Through such a performance, they could make tangible their commitments and political ideas that had been carved out of their difference to their Lokpal contenders. In their competition over representing civil society, a performance enabled them to summon an audience, and thus to bring into being their constituency. This chapter explores how the two opposing teams of the Lokpal agitation were ultimately competing over a ‘public’.

While the previous chapters examined MKSS/NCPRI's endeavours to present itself as legitimate civil society representatives *externally*, Chapter Five shifts focus to the *internal* aspects of credibility. It probes some of the inner organisational dynamics of MKSS/NCPRI, looking into the ideals, expectations and commitments held by the variously placed members. The explosion of activities during the Lokpal agitation demanded heightened involvement and reactions from MKSS/NCPRI, consequently giving rise to critique and disappointment by some of the members. This chapter understands these disappointments as inverted expressions of commitment and as a reaffirmation of ideals. It was through the doubts articulated by some of the members on the inner workings of MKSS/NCPRI, that they restated their expectations and aspirations. This tension between expectations and disappointments emerges out of the lofty ideals that these anti-corruption activists set for themselves.

Chapter Six continues exploring the conflicting relationship between MKSS/NCPRI and its contenders in the Lokpal agitation, zooming out to their conflicting ideas on democracy. The two teams diverged on their understandings of democracy, mirroring the split on conceptualisations of democracy as embodied by the two founding figures of the Indian nation, Gandhi and Nehru. This tension further reflects the inherently contested nature of liberal democracy. As in the previous chapters, this chapter contends that the political understandings held by the two teams are largely relational, whereby positions are modelled against those of the 'other'. It is this relational conflict on political understandings that opens up opportunities for 'agonistic pluralism': a form of democracy that embraces conflict and competition.

Methodology

Tension is a central theme running throughout my exploration of anti-corruption activism in this thesis. This tension plays out in multiple spaces and forms, as the following chapters will explore, and emerges ultimately out of a friction between the nature of expectations and the nature of actions. Expectations made of and by the anti-corruption activists are so lofty and exalted, that, given the messy contingencies of political and social life, they come up against hindrances and disillusionment. This disillusionment from finding expectations unmet, was one that I observed among many of my informants throughout fieldwork. Moreover, it was a tension that I myself experienced in relation to my own expectations. Tension, as it were, manifested itself to me not only analytically but also phenomenologically.

I had entered the field full of expectations. Without even having begun fieldwork, I was already breaking the ‘protocol’ of ethnography as postulated by Malinowski – the ‘father’ of modern ethnographic methods – who had stated that the goal of the anthropologist, is “to grasp the native’s point of view, his relation to life, to realize *his* vision of *his* world” (Malinowski 1961 [1922]: 25 (italics in original)). What Malinowski was establishing was that in order to understand another society, the ethnographer must put aside his own judgement and enter the field with a blank slate. My own ethnographic experience cast doubt on the possibility of adopting Malinowski’s axiom of non-judgmental openness.²⁷

Far from bringing with me a ‘blank slate’, I had arrived in the field with a series of preconceived assumptions about MKSS. I had distinct ideas about the type of organisation that MKSS was and the spaces in which I would find them. I had briefly

²⁷ I found solace in my approach from other notable anthropologists who have noted the impossibility of adopting Malinowski’s goal (Geertz 1973), not to mention the posthumous publication of Malinowski’s diaries that revealed that he himself had been unable to abide by his own rule.

encountered MKSS in the past and had read up much about them, to the point that I had composed an unmistakable depiction of them. MKSS to me stood for a grassroots organisation that was deeply rooted in the lives and concerns of the rural poor. Their work of giving voice to the downtrodden was, in my portrayal, challenging entrenched structures of power, and thus appealed to me as an example of ‘radical politics’. What is more, by actually succeeding in getting the demands of the poor institutionalised through laws at the national level (as had been the case with the Right to Information Act, for instance), MKSS stood as an exemplar of the potency of the ‘power of the people’. In other words, MKSS answered to my romanticised ideal of an authentic form of radical politics. With my propensity to romanticize ‘resistance’, I was falling prey to a tendency wide spread amongst academics, as Abu-Lughod (1990) notes, and of thereby limiting my ethnographic perspective, as Ortner (1995) warns. Furthermore, with the idea of MKSS as an organisation grounded in rural Rajasthan, I had expected to carry out fieldwork in ‘village India’ which similarly had a romanticized appeal to me. My research agenda was thus guided by ideologies that underlie academic political economy, whereby “the quest for the native’s point of view has now become a search for an authentic critical theory, embodied in the lives of those on the margins of capitalism” (Baviskar 2010: 5).

However, as I embarked on my fieldwork mission to document the work of this authentic grassroots movement, I found it increasingly difficult to locate. I began to be confronted with the realisation that this ideal I had imagined MKSS to be, did not exist as such. The organisation based in a mud hut in rural Rajasthan that carried out relentless protests, campaigns and mobilisations through the mass support of poor villagers, seemed to exist more vividly in my imagination and in accounts written about it, than in reality. MKSS has been documented prolifically, with copious written and visual accounts existing of their activities (see Chapter One for an exploration of representations of MKSS). The documentation evoked similar images of MKSS as an exemplary grassroots movement. What I was beginning to fathom was that the ideal I had of MKSS was one existing in the past (or in representations of the past), but that things had changed by the time I began fieldwork. This personal

experience of disappointment at not finding my idealised expectations met, was one that I would find shared among several informants and friends that I would make in the months to come.

In what follows I make a short excursion through some of my own fieldwork experience, in order to explore some of the tensions and contradictions that an organisation such as MKSS is confronted with. By tracing my trajectory through the field, we can approach an understanding of the gap that exists between an ideal and the actual playing out of things. My own experiences reflect some of the wider expectations that are made of MKSS and the disappointments that arise in finding these expectations unmet. The intention here is not to expose a ‘secret truth’ or to collapse the image of MKSS, but simply to highlight the type of organisation that MKSS is expected to be and the type of organisation that it is. The expectations and ideals that revolve around MKSS shed light also on the nature of anti-corruption activism in India.

Searching for a social movement

My first encounter with MKSS had been in 2005. At that point I had been volunteering at the ‘Barefoot College’ in northern Rajasthan, an NGO focused on issues of rural social and environmental advancement led by Bunker Roy. Bunker Roy is the husband of Aruna Roy, who is the de facto ‘leader’ of MKSS.²⁸ During my one year stint in Tilonia, the village in which the Barefoot College is located and where Aruna and Bunker’s home is, I had built somewhat of a personal rapport with Aruna. She would invite me to her home in the neighbouring plot of land next to the campus of the Barefoot College, where we would chat, drink tea, walk through her garden in the evenings of the hot Rajasthani summer or listen to classical South

²⁸ I put ‘leader’ in speech marks here, for leader is not a term employed by members of MKSS. However, as this thesis shows, MKSS, like most organisations of its sort, in effect does have ‘leaders’ in terms of individuals who have particular authority over decision-making processes and who have distinctive access to resources. In order to distinguish between MKSS as an organisation and MKSS as a few individuals, I employ the term ‘leaders’ throughout this thesis.

Indian music.²⁹ On several occasions Aruna took me along to MKSS events, such as their annual May Day celebration that also commemorates the anniversary of MKSS, and which thousands of villagers attend for a day of speeches, songs, skits, and food stalls. I also partook in a 10-day mass social audit, that was the first of what would become a series of social audits on that scale organised by MKSS around the recently enacted National Rural Employment Guarantee Act.³⁰ It was these events, with their colourful and festive spirit and their visible mass support, that planted the seed of enthralment with MKSS in me. Having experienced MKSS in ‘full action’, I was deeply impressed by their mobilisation skills and their deftness in translating political demands into local idioms and terms to which rural populations could relate. Beyond my own encounters, MKSS appeared prominently in public debates and discourses, for 2005 was the year in which the Right to Information Act for which MKSS had been campaigning for nearly a decade was enacted.

When I returned to India five years later, with the intention of researching the reverberations of MKSS’s work on rural people’s political understandings, I found the situation to be markedly different. Although I had assumed that my friendly rapport with Aruna would facilitate my access to MKSS, I could not track her down, nor Nikhil Dey (the other ‘leader’ of MKSS), for weeks on end. I came to find out that they were mainly travelling around the country and abroad, attending meetings, giving lectures at conferences, or politicking among government representatives. Even in Devdungri, the village in which MKSS is based, I could not find much MKSS-related action. On my initial trips to Devdungri, the only person I would find in the ‘home’ of MKSS was old Dauba, the so-called ‘caretaker’, with all other members of MKSS either travelling or in their own homes in their respective villages. Sometimes I would hang around in Devdungri for several days, waiting for

²⁹ Aruna Roy is from Tamil Nadu, South India.

³⁰ In the third month of implementation of NREGA, MKSS and the recently formed SR Abhiyan conducted a mass social audit to develop a model of public monitoring of the NREGA. The social audit began with a ‘training’ in mobilisation techniques by members of MKSS for 658 participants from 13 States, who had been invited to participate in the mass social audit. This involved an orientation in communication through folk art, song, dance and puppetry, and a basic training in the process of social audits. The participants then split up into groups, and over the course of a week they walked across the district to spread awareness and to identify the problems in the implementation of NREGA. They did this through a process of social audit involving a verification of the different provisions of the NREGA.

members of MKSS to appear, yet this did not always bear fruit. The only real ‘breakthrough’ I seemed to be making in my initial days of fieldwork, was to learn to make *chapatis* (unleavened flatbread) over an open-fire *chula* (clay burner), a skill that Dauba proudly taught me.

I discovered gradually that over the five years since my previous engagement with MKSS, the political landscape had changed significantly. Amongst other consequential factors, the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act 2006 (NREGA), had been enacted. Aruna and Nikhil, so I was finding out, had played a considerable role in this scheme by securing that social audits, based on MKSS’s model of ‘public hearings’, be institutionalised under NREGA. Since then, they had stopped conducting individual public hearings in their locality as they had been doing in the past, and instead, were focusing on monitoring the implementation and regulation of the government-mandated social audits. With individual public hearings being replaced by social audits of a national government scheme, the nature of MKSS’s work dramatically changed.

While MKSS had previously been characterised by its grassroots work of mobilising and campaigning on the ground, its attention had now shifted predominantly to policy-making levels. Over the years, Aruna and Nikhil had been increasingly invited as ‘civil society representatives’ into government bodies and committees. With their successful involvement in the campaigning for the Right to Information Act, Aruna and Nikhil were widely perceived as civil society experts on matters of transparency and accountability. This shift had led to increasing amounts of time spent in meetings in government offices in the national capital and less attention to work in and around Devdungri. With activities such as public hearings no longer taking place, and with the MKSS leadership predominantly absent, the activities of MKSS on the ground had largely lulled.

Given the changed landscape, it made little sense to persevere with my original research intention of examining the impact of MKSS on villagers’ political understandings. I had planned on approaching this through MKSS’s public hearings,

yet these hearings seemed now to be a thing of the past. In an effort to reorient myself to this unexpected turn of events, I decided to focus on the work of the Suchna evum Rozgar ka Adhikar Abhiyan (Right to Information and Employment Campaign – henceforth ‘SR Abhiyan’, where *Abhiyan* means campaign), an umbrella organisation comprised of various organisations, NGOs and individuals, including MKSS, that had been formed in 2006.³¹ The SR Abhiyan had as its central agenda the strengthening and advocacy of transparency and accountability measures, especially social audits, in NREGA works in Rajasthan. I travelled throughout Rajasthan intending to explore how transparency and accountability measures were being understood and realized by the several member organisations of the SR Abhiyan. However, I found that none of these organisations were giving much attention to NREGA social audits. Each of the organisations had their own areas of activities and projects and, as they told me, were swamped as it was with the management of all of these. SR Abhiyan-related action, I was increasingly working out, and hearing corroborated from several members, happened only when Aruna and Nikhil from the MKSS called for it. They were the effective decision-makers of the SR Abhiyan, and if they were not mobilising action, then the SR Abhiyan remained largely dormant. With Aruna and Nikhil busy with other activities, the NREGA social audits in Rajasthan had been temporarily abandoned.

Given this, in the initial months of fieldwork I found myself attempting to do research in a field that seemed to consist largely of *absences*: the absence of MKSS’s public hearings or other MKSS activities on the ground, and the absence of consolidated work by the SR Abhiyan. This turn of events was largely due to the absence of Aruna and Nikhil, upon whose directives the two organisations hinged. With the work of these two individuals shifting from grassroots campaigning to policy-making on national platforms, so too the work of MKSS and the SR Abhiyan

³¹ Some of the main organisations involved in the SR Abhiyan include: Jan Chetna (meaning ‘People’s Awakening’) in Abu Road, South Rajasthan, an NGO dedicated to tribal, rural and women’s development. Another organisation is Astha (meaning ‘Faith’), an NGO based in Udaipur working on raising awareness of the rights of citizens, mainly rural tribal people, and on making “the mass resources of the government available to the masses” (as stated in Astha’s website). Another important member organisation of the SR Abhiyan is Sankalp (meaning ‘Determination’), an NGO working mainly on the rights of the Sahariya, a tribal group categorised by the government as ‘primitive’. The SR Abhiyan has approximately 25 other organisations and individuals that form part of the campaign.

was changing. The implications of this for my own research was that I had entered a field in which my ideal of a grassroots radical organisation was difficult to locate tangibly.

And then quite unanticipated – and for me rather serendipitously³² – the Lokpal agitation broke out. From early April 2011 onward, national news was saturated with coverage on Anna Hazare who was conducting a hunger-strike demanding that the government enact his drafted Jan Lokpal Bill, a bill that sought the appointment of an independent body to investigate corruption cases. While media and many public platforms were galvanized around Anna Hazare and his demand for the Jan Lokpal Bill, members of MKSS were exceedingly apprehensive of this demand. For reasons that will be examined in closer detail in Chapter Three of this thesis, members of MKSS were in disagreement with the forms of protest of Anna Hazare and with the provisions of his Jan Lokpal Bill. Their response was to come up with their own version of a Lokpal Bill and to campaign for this by lobbying representatives of the government.

Through the explosion of the Lokpal agitation, MKSS was now in full action. Yet the action was of a dramatically different sort to what I had been anticipating prior to setting out on fieldwork. My expectation of MKSS, based on images of ‘bottom up’ grassroots politics, had envisaged villagers and farmers collectively protesting through sit-ins and marches, accompanied by vibrant music, songs, puppets and theatre as I had seen MKSS perform in the past. Instead, the Lokpal agitation that MKSS got involved in, was playing out largely in closed meetings, in cramped offices where bills were being drafted, in press releases and statements, in phone

³² The role of serendipity in ethnographic research has been picked up elsewhere. Serendipity, as has been proposed by some scholars, should stand at the heart of an ethnographic project. Anthropological research, so conceived, is “the art of making an unsought finding” (Van Andel 1994, cited in Rivoal and Salazar 2013: 178) whereby the researcher is open and reflexive to unanticipated and unexpected discoveries. Like a nomad, argue Hazan and Hertzog, an ethnographer has “built-in elasticity”, whereby the incessant changes encountered in the field propel the researcher to constantly “reinvent fieldwork practices, research methods and theoretical orientations” (Hazan and Hertzog 2011: 1). Such fluidity in research approaches gives rise to serendipity, understood not only as fortune and chance, but as the “masterful synthesis into insight by drawing novel connections” (Fine and Deegan 1996, cited in Rivoal and Salazar 2013: 178).

calls, emails and meetings with government officials, in presentations at lectures and conferences.

Fieldwork and thesis structure

The reason I have described my fieldwork experience in such detail is because it is in this detail that the content and structure of this thesis can be apprehended. My experience, although undoubtedly a very personal encounter with the field, nonetheless is indicative of some ‘material’ and ‘actual’ things taking place. For instance, it sheds some light on the type of organisation that MKSS is expected to be and the type of organisation that it is. MKSS is well regarded throughout India, associated clearly with particular people (most notably Aruna Roy), with particular forms of politics (grassroots campaigning), with particular achievements (most notably the Right to Information Act), and with particular ideologies (generally transparency and accountability in governance). Although having clear definitional boundaries, the actual location of MKSS is ambiguous. For example as my fieldwork experience showed, although Devdungri is presented as the base and home of MKSS, this appears to be mainly symbolic or representative, because most of the time activities and people could not actually be found in Devdungri. Throughout a large part of my fieldwork, MKSS was more of an enigmatic entity that I would hear about, read about and speak about, yet could not quite unearth in actual terms. It was with the emergence of the Lokpal agitation that MKSS became locatable again, becoming more present in public events and public discourses. This suggests that MKSS emerges and comes into being in and through events. It is precisely for this reason that this thesis takes the Lokpal agitation as the backdrop and key event from which to explore the ethos and politics of MKSS.

Another aspect of my personal journey through fieldwork is that it partially mirrors the trajectory of MKSS itself: my initial meandering through villages in Rajasthan and my expectation that this was where MKSS could be located, reflects the common

association of MKSS with rural India. MKSS is widely known to have begun its fight against corruption in a cluster of villages in central Rajasthan. However, my fieldwork experience showed that the situation had somewhat changed and that MKSS as an organisation, in terms of activities and people, could not be physically found in rural Rajasthan. It was through this that I came to realise that the nature of MKSS's work had shifted from work on the ground to greater involvement at the policy-making level. By moving my field-site from rural Rajasthan to New Delhi and opening up my ethnographic gaze to city-based activities, I began to grasp where and what type of an organisation MKSS is, or had become.

In this regard, the structure of this thesis physically mirrors my journey through fieldwork, as well as the trajectory of MKSS: the first two chapters deal largely with the historic work of MKSS starting with their campaigns at the village level, moving on to their related campaign at the national level. The MKSS portrayed in these first two chapters, particularly in the first, is the MKSS publicly known and the one I had been expecting to find. The following four chapters focus on MKSS's involvement with the events of the Lokpal agitation, which was the MKSS I ended up finding. The chronology of the following chapters thus reflects the chronology of transformations of MKSS.

The 'thick description' that constitutes this thesis is principally of two sorts. The first set of ethnographic material is based largely on participant observation in activities in and around MKSS during the Lokpal agitation. As MKSS drafted laws, and campaigned and lobbied for them in the government and the wider public, many spaces opened up in which MKSS was active. While I had set out to carry out research on MKSS's work on transparency and accountability in rural Rajasthan, I ended up encountering the work of MKSS mainly in meetings, emails, phone calls, documents, reports, lectures and other urban public events. Being swamped in work, MKSS had welcomed my help and participation. The intensity with which the Lokpal agitation had flared up meant that there was much work to be picked up, so that I could easily position myself within this setting. Moreover, with work of this sort being conducted largely in English, I could actively and effectively play my

part.³³ After months of patient lingering, the benefits of my personal rapport to Aruna was now playing out in my interest after all, whereby I was given access to exclusive spaces such as internal meetings, informal conversations and even passwords to email accounts.

The other source of ‘thick description’ is from media. The Lokpal agitation was a highly publicized event that found much coverage in English-language media, both conventional media such as newspapers, weeklies and TV channels, as well as social media such as Facebook, Twitter and blogs. Media became a crucial platform in which the Lokpal agitation played out, with many of the rifts among civil society actors, and between them and the government, being actively broadcasted. Views and positions were often expressed publicly through statements and press releases presented to the media. It was also through such platforms that the heated and polemical debates that Anna Hazare’s protest and demands had given rise to were articulated. Media, in this regard, not only represented public events, but were the actual stage on which public events took place. While many actions taken by the anti-corruption activists during the Lokpal agitation had tangible forms – such as hunger-strikes, protests, meetings, conventions, etc. – a large part of the Lokpal agitation played out in print news and visual broadcasting. It is because of this central role played by English-language media that many of the debates discussed in this thesis derive from such sources. The ethnographic material of this thesis thus combines data collected in the face-to-face encounter in “the field”, adhering to the ‘traditional’ approach of ethnography that attempts to understand another life world

³³ Although I am fluent in Hindi and the previous months of fieldwork in the villages of Rajasthan had not posed any language barriers, I could engage more proactively in tasks based on English.

using the self as the instrument of knowing (Ortner 1995: 173), as well as data collected in ‘public culture’.³⁴

With the work of MKSS revolving largely around the leader figures, Aruna and Nikhil, particularly during the Lokpal agitation where work was of a particular technical and legal sort, this thesis has a strong focus on these two individuals.³⁵ I had initially envisioned carrying out fieldwork principally on people at the ‘receiving’ end of MKSS’s work – those farmers and labourers that MKSS famously stands for. However, there are no explicit accounts of so-called subalterns in this thesis, as my fieldwork encounter with MKSS suggested that work on the ground, at least during the duration of my fieldwork, was not a prime concern of MKSS. Rather, their priority lay in campaigning and lobbying for legal drafts and bills, an area of work that only Aruna and Nikhil, given their class and education background, had mastery over. Aruna and Nikhil spoke out as representatives of MKSS, resulting in an overall conflation of their views with MKSS as a collective. This conflation as well as my own experience in fieldwork as outlined above, suggested that oftentimes Aruna and Nikhil *are* the MKSS, with little occurring without their directions.

This thesis focuses heavily on the voice of the leadership and the city-based work of MKSS. Tarlo suggests that the selection of which voices to include and exclude in an ethnography must not be thought of as authoritative control by the author, but, rather, as an indication of a researcher’s competence and familiarity in the field of study (Tarlo 2003: 17). As she notes, the essence of research is “to be able to follow leads

³⁴ I am emboldened with this approach by Gupta who draws on newspapers in his analysis of representations of the state. As Gupta implores, we need to question what he calls the “ontological imperative” of traditional ethnography that takes fieldwork “as rite of passage, as adjudicator of the authenticity of “data”, and as the ultimate ground for the judgment of interpretations” (Gupta 1995: 377). According to Gupta, this sense of superiority and authenticity associated with the face-to-face methods of ethnography clings to bounded notions of ‘society’ and ‘culture’, and fails to grasp the ways in which phenomena are discursively constituted. Drawing on representations that are distributed in cultural text, such as through media, helps to expand the method of ethnography. It is this approach with which I have persevered in my own research. This can also be linked to what John and Jean Comaroff call “ethnography and the historical imagination”, that focuses on reading historical sources ethnographically (Comaroff and Comaroff, cited in Ortner 1995: 173). In a similar way, in this thesis I have proposed to reading media sources ethnographically.

³⁵ Here I follow suit with many studies of NGOs that have focused on the role of leaders, as the central and most influential figures in the functioning of the organisation (Sheth and Sethi 1991; Morris and Staggenborg 2004).

intelligently, to select appropriately from different types of material, to recognise the difference between the person whose opinions are informative and the one who tries to lead them up the garden path” (Tarlo 2003: 17). It is based on my long-term acquaintance and engagement with MKSS that I claim to have selected my material and voices appropriately. It is the “built-in elasticity” (Hazan and Hertzog 2011: 1) expected of a researcher that allowed me to expand my expectation of MKSS from being a rural movement to being a city-based campaign.

Positionality and Ethics

As indicated, MKSS does not exist as a tangible or fixed organisation. Rather, it exists as an idea and in documented accounts of it, and comes into being momentarily through events and in particular actions. In order to locate MKSS, as a researcher I had to situate myself in a range of settings and be responsive to the different traces and leads that gestured toward MKSS. Fieldwork quickly taught me that MKSS is mobile and multiply situated, and that in order to fully comprehend it as an organisation, I needed to treat it as something “which is not stable, not re-articulable, but which blinks, momentarily shows itself, and escapes” (Benjamin, paraphrased in Navaro-Yashin 2002: 15). Eventually MKSS manifested itself to me most visibly through the Lokpal agitation. It is for this reason that most of the ethnographic material of this thesis was gathered around the events of the Lokpal that took place largely in New Delhi, India’s capital city. However, the ethnographic material is also implicitly infused with insights collected during my months of fieldwork on MKSS prior to the Lokpal agitation. While at points my initial search for MKSS seemed fruitless, in these months I nonetheless learnt a great deal about the history, impact and expectations associated with MKSS. I met individuals and organisations of all ranks who were associated with MKSS and who had explicit views on MKSS, and through whom my picture of MKSS significantly expanded. I found MKSS as an idea and as an organisation to exist through all of these people and sites and through all the expectations and aspirations associated with it.

Given the unfixed nature of MKSS, I was compelled to adopt a multi-sited approach to ethnography. Because of the type of organisation that MKSS is, I could not follow the single-sited method of traditional ethnography that would encompass staying in one locality and observing the entirety unfolding before me. Instead, I had to consider the complex network of factors affecting an organisation like MKSS, which entailed, “[e]mpirically following the thread of cultural process itself” (Marcus 1995: 97). According to Marcus, multi-sited ethnographies no longer define their objects of study simply by a ‘face-to-face’ approach of ‘being there’ in a locality, but by techniques that involve ‘preplanned or opportunistic’ movement and by tracing complex cultural phenomenon within different settings (Marcus 1995: 106).³⁶ I gained a complete picture of MKSS, by adopting a multi-sited approach that enabled me to “follow people, connections, associations, and relationships across space (because they are substantially continuous but spatially non-contiguous)” (Falzon 2009: 2). This involved traversing localities and engaging in ‘polymorphous engagement’, which Guterson defines as follows:

Polymorphous engagement means interacting with informants across a number of dispersed sites, not just in local communities, and sometimes in virtual form; and it means collecting data electrically from a disparate array of sources in many different ways. [It also involves] an eclectic mix of other research techniques: formal interviews of the kind often done by journalists and political scientists, extensive reading of newspapers and official documents, and careful attention to popular culture, for example. (Guterson 1997: 116)

Engaging in multi-sited ethnography, entailed renegotiating my social identity in the various sites that I moved through. Dealing at the village level with the so-called ‘subalterns’, as well as in the national capital with so-called ‘elite’ personalities and

³⁶ The shift towards multi-sited ethnography was congruent to a broader shift in social sciences, namely that of postmodernism and the phenomenon of globalisation. Within this shift, scholars have recognized the changing nature of the ‘field-site’ in response to an increasingly global, mobile, transnational world (Appadurai 1990, Hendry 2003, Hannerz 2003). Appadurai captured this analytic shift when he asked: “What is the place of locality in schemes about global cultural flow? Does anthropology retain any special privilege in a world where locality seems to have lost its ontological moorings? Can the mutually constitutive relationship between anthropology and locality survive in a dramatically delocalized world?” (Appadurai 1996: 178).

institutions, implies that I occupied diverse positions and roles. In the initial months of fieldwork, when I was still attempting to locate MKSS in rural Rajasthan, I assumed a more conspicuous role of a researcher. With little activity happening around MKSS that I could simply ‘observe’ and blend into, I had adopted a research approach of proactively seeking out informants and information. This approach, along with the highly visible traits that marked me out to everyone (white, single, female), positioned me as a discernible ‘outsider’.

This positionality as an outsider was to change dramatically during the Lokpal agitation. In this period, with work levels of MKSS soaring, I was given an active role to play. I was drawn into the activities of MKSS and assumed increasingly the function of an active member rather than that of a researcher. My engagement in the Lokpal thus led to a blurring of my status as being either that of an ‘insider’ or an ‘outsider’ (Marcus 1995; Mosse 2005, 2006) and collapsed the distinction between ‘desk’ and the ‘field’ (Mosse 2006: 937). Although I had presented myself as a researcher, and it was this identity that explained my appearance in the scene, this identification often slipped into the background.³⁷

The ‘insider’ positioning which I assumed during the Lokpal agitation brought me closer to taking on the role of an ‘activist’. Marcus states that the nature of multi-sited research forces ethnographers to take on numerous identities and to renegotiate identities in different sites, which “generates a definite sense of doing more than just ethnography, and it is this quality that provides a sense of being an activist” (Marcus 1995: 113-114). In other words, multi-sited research entails cross-cutting and, sometimes, contradictory personal commitments, and thus brings about the conditions for ‘circumstantial activism’. Such circumstantial activism and commitment, according to Marcus, “provide a kind of psychological substitute for the reassuring sense of “being there”” (Marcus 1995: 114). By shifting back and forth between Rajasthan and New Delhi, and between the different levels of activities

³⁷ Occasionally I felt compelled to restate my status as a researcher, knowing that not doing so would risk marking me as deceitful, yet on the whole my role was predominantly that of active member and friend.

of MKSS, I was actively carving out my own space of engagement, and making my own connections of activism.

This resonates with Scheper-Hughes's approach that calls for a politically committed and morally engaged anthropology. Scheper-Hughes does not believe that an anthropologist should be a "neutral, dispassionate, cool and rational, objective observer of the human condition" (Scheper-Hughes 1995: 410) and, instead, urges that anthropology must be ethically grounded. Here she argues against positivistic approaches to research and maintains that politically engaged advocacy is not only morally correct, but theoretically valid and practically advantageous. Accordingly, we cannot flee "from local engagements, local commitments, and local accountability" but must use our ethnography as "a tool for critical reflection and for human liberation" (Scheper-Hughes 1995: 417-418). Being an active member of MKSS and engaging in many of the activities around the Lokpal agitation, I became fully engrossed in their positions and became a champion of their cause, discarding any sense of having to disassociate myself or act as an 'objective' researcher.

This positioning, however, brought about its own set of ethical considerations. While during fieldwork I increasingly assumed the role of an insider, it was nevertheless known that I was there primarily out of scholarly interests, and that once I had gathered my material, I would pack up and leave. This, I could not fail but notice, put some constraint on my relationships with many of my informants. While I had built an overall good rapport with people involved with MKSS, and with some this rapport developed into closer friendship than with others, I was still regarded as one of the many researchers that would come and go. The work of MKSS has been studied extensively by a myriad of researchers, so that my being there was perceived as part of a larger trend. This was made clear to me at a very early stage of fieldwork, when Nikhil introduced me to a researcher who had just completed her extensive fieldwork with MKSS, jokingly telling us that since there were so many of us (i.e. researchers studying the work of MKSS), we should consider unionizing. Given this context, although I was greeted with overall acceptance, a sense of scepticism around my presence endured.

An ethical dilemma of research considered by many anthropologists is the relationship of power that exists between the researcher and the researched. Clifford draws attention to the power-laden relations between the ethnographer and the informant, when he notes “the historical predicament of ethnography, the fact that it is always caught up in the invention, not the representation of cultures” (Clifford 1986: 2). This indicates that the practice of ethnography is an inherently hierarchical enterprise, with the power resting ultimately in the researcher who holds authority as the author of ethnographic texts. Baviskar, for instance, addresses the “fundamental inequality” that she confronted in her research when she states that “the social arrangements of class determined that I had mobility and freedom *because* they [her informants] did not” (Baviskar 2010: 10 (italics in original)). Such ethical considerations are premised largely on the notion that the ‘subjects’ being studied are voiceless and marginalised. However, while power relationships undeniably exist in any context, the notion that the researcher occupies a position at the top of the power ladder is not always pertinent. In my case, to a certain extent, the inverse applied: I was dealing largely with powerful individuals, to whom I represented an insignificant researcher. In the world of anti-corruption civil society activism, it was I who was low in the social hierarchy. What is more, some of my main informants were analytically astute and engaged in critical reflexivity, so that my work as a social scientist did not offer much of a contribution. In this light, my informants were like the networks studied by Riles, who share a ‘formal aesthetic’ with modernist academics, whereby they have already produced the perspectives of analytical enterprise for their own purpose. In other words, the aesthetic form of networks is ‘inside’ the academic knowledge practice. When there is no outside, Riles points out, analysis is a replication of the same aesthetics, a turning ‘inside out’ (Riles 2000).

Ethical considerations beset an anthropologist not just during fieldwork. The textual production of an ethnography that follows fieldwork has been an area of much deliberation in debates on the ethics of anthropology. Since the late 1980s with the publication of *Writing Culture* (Clifford and Marcus 1986), the authority of the anthropologist has fallen under serious scrutiny. The postmodern movement in

anthropology has stripped away concepts of objectivity and truth, and consequently deconstructs ethnography as “always caught up in the invention, not the representation, of cultures” (Clifford 1986: 2). The reflexive critiques of anthropological research to which this deconstructing trend has given rise, draw attention to the always subjective and partial nature of the ethnographic process.³⁸

Writing on organisations and institutions, particularly when they are powerful or renowned, as in the case of MKSS, poses another series of ethical considerations. A dilemma faced by many anthropologists is about how to represent organisations and actors when one’s own findings do not match the representations that the organisations themselves seek to present. To what extent does one have responsibility towards one’s informants and to the public representation of their organisation? Mosse’s famous ethnography of the workings of a powerful development institution displays the perplexing ramifications that critical ethnographic representations can trigger. Mosse’s monograph was challenged by his informants as being unfair, biased, defamatory and damaging to the reputation of individuals and institutions (Mosse 2006: 935). In questioning the widely held faith that development is produced by a singular and unified chain of events in the policy process, Mosse’s findings generated much reaction and objection. This raises questions about the ethics of anthropologists in terms of what should be revealed or silenced if it can harm people.

In his defence, Mosse claims that he is not judging or evaluating the project itself, but rather looking at the relationship between policy and practice and the social construction of success, which can be relevant to all development projects in general. In a similar fashion, my account of MKSS is not intended as an evaluation or judgement. While my thesis does not present the story of MKSS as they themselves present it, and while aspects may appear as critical of the work of MKSS, my intention has been to bring forth an approach of ‘constructive criticism’. In exploring the tensions that arise out of the work that MKSS engages in, I have been guided by

³⁸ Fardon and others have accused this deconstructive trend in ethnography of being “confessional literature” and of slipping into unproductive solipsism (Fardon 1990: 28).

an effort to understand what their aspirations and commitments are. I have attempted to strike a balance of engaging constructively and actively with MKSS, yet simultaneously employing critical reflection on their work.

A related issue of consideration is how to engage with dissenting voices. No group or organisation is homogenous and unitary, and, even if not articulated, dissenting opinions are bound to exist. Thus, in order to depict an organisation in a way that at least partially reflects its complex reality, some of the varying opinions and perspectives must be attended to. However, this gives rise to serious ethical problems. Does such divulging have consequences on the public image of the organisation in question? What effects will it have on the individuals, whose dissenting views are being disclosed? Does one, as a (usually uninvited) researcher, have the right to poke around in the lives of others?

After much uneasy deliberation on these questions, I have come to the decision that in this thesis I will give space to some of the dissenting voices. In doing so, I am motivated by a conviction that MKSS is a commendable organisation and that to fully understand it, all its shades must be examined. What is more, the dissenting individuals whose voices appear in this thesis are themselves convinced by the praise-worthy excellence of MKSS, and, as I show, it is precisely out of this conviction that their dissent arises. In line with my overall argument that conflict opens up productive avenues, I argue that the critique and dissent of certain individuals is constitutive of their commitments, and thus does not pose a threat to the integrity of MKSS. Nonetheless, I have chosen to give pseudonyms to some of my informants, in an attempt to safeguard their anonymity. This is not a straightforward effort, since deciding on whom to anonymise in itself leads to entanglement. Many of my informants cannot be anonymised since they are renowned figures who are widely known to the public. By anonymising some voices in this thesis, I am suggesting who is and who is not publicly known, and thereby risking disclosure of who the possible 'dissenters' are. However, keeping in mind my overall argument that dissent is actually about commitment, this is a risk that I am willing to take.

A final point of reflection that sheds light on my positionality and on the possible ethical consequences of my research: the themes, voices, discussions and descriptions that appear in this thesis, more than anything, disclose my own ideological agenda. While I have attempted to describe events and occurrences as accurately and genuinely as possible, the selection of what to include and exclude is entirely my own. As stated earlier, I had chosen to do research with MKSS because it answered to my romanticised ideal of an ‘authentic’ politics of ‘resistance’. My selection of areas to discuss in this thesis are guided by that conviction. In such manner, my choice to bring out the dissenting and critical voices, reflects my own expectations – and, consequently, own critiques – of MKSS. Thus, while this research is a venture into the world of MKSS, indirectly, it is also a venture into my own ingrained ideologies.

1. A ‘Grassroots’ Social Movement

In the year 2000, Aruna Roy was awarded the Ramon Magsaysay Award for Community Leadership. The Magsaysay Award, sometimes also known as Asia’s Noble Peace Prize, pursues the mission of ‘honouring greatness of spirit in selfless service to the people of Asia’. The prestigious Award is given to groups and individuals engaged in purposeful social change in Asia. Aruna was elected for the Award because of her work with the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS) in “empowering Indian villagers to claim what is rightfully theirs by upholding and exercising the people’s right to information”.³⁹ The Magsaysay Award recognises Aruna’s role in assisting villagers to assert themselves against local power structures by employing the powerful weapon of information. Beyond the local-level work of MKSS, the Award also accredits the India-wide movement for transparency in governance and the enactment of the Right to Information Act (2005) to Aruna and the MKSS.⁴⁰

Awarding the Magsaysay Award to Aruna Roy was a reflection of the wider fame enjoyed by her and the MKSS. MKSS is celebrated throughout India, and beyond, as an exemplary grassroots organisation. It is extensively accredited for being the driving force behind the Right to Information movement that led to the drafting and

³⁹ “Roy, Aruna Citation” in *Ramon Magsaysay Award Foundation* [accessed 15 October 2013] <http://www.rmaf.org.ph/newrmaf/main/awardees/awardee/profile/19>

⁴⁰ Aruna’s response on receiving the Magsaysay Award was to acknowledge MKSS as a collective. She said: “Though I have been singled out to receive the award, it in fact belongs to the many women and men with whom I have had the good fortune to share struggles and emerging visions for a better world. No individual, however endowed, can bring about social change on their own. Community work is a collective exercise, and the greatest potential and challenge of the human condition is to work together to realize dreams far beyond the barriers of individual limitations.” See “Roy, Aruna Citation” in *Ramon Magsaysay Award Foundation* [accessed 15 October 2013] <http://www.rmaf.org.ph/newrmaf/main/awardees/awardee/profile/19>

enactment of the national Right to Information (RTI) Act. Although the demand for transparency and accountability in governance had existed prior to MKSS, MKSS is credited with breathing new life into the concepts and of catalyzing broader discussions on governance and democracy (Jenkins and Goetz 1999: 607). What is typically emphasised as being the distinguishing trait of MKSS as an organisation committed to transparency and accountability in governance, is its groundwork in village communities. MKSS is widely acclaimed for being firmly rooted in the struggles and concerns for survival and justice of the most disadvantaged rural people. Accordingly, its demand for transparency legislation is seen to have emerged out of real needs and concerns of the people, which in turn confers strength and pertinence to its demand.

The Right to Information Act itself is often described as one of India's most progressive and empowering pieces of legislation, and one of the strongest transparency laws in the world.⁴¹ With the RTI, any citizen can now legally claim access to official government documents – denial of which will be monetarily penalised against the bureaucrat in question. Provisions within the RTI – such as the compulsory proviso to allow the general public to access and make photocopies of documents in a timely fashion – aim to ensure that bureaucrats at all echelons of the state apparatus are made to comply with the doctrines of transparency and accountability. As the RTI Act's preamble states: “[D]emocracy requires an informed citizenry and transparency of information which are vital to its functioning and also to contain corruption and to hold Governments and their instrumentalities accountable to the governed”.⁴²

It is association with such a progressive law that accounts largely for MKSS's reputation. MKSS's efforts in bringing the RTI into being are celebrated for enabling “remarkable change in the lives of thousands of people, particularly in their

⁴¹ For instance, in a survey of information laws in 95 countries conducted by two human rights organisations — Access Info Europe (AIE) and the Canada-based Centre for Law and Democracy (CLD) – India's Right to Information Act was ranked second (after Serbia). “Global Right to Information Rating” in *Global Right to Information Rating* [accessed 23 October 2013] <http://www.rti-rating.org/>

⁴² The RTI Act is available on the government website: “A Citizen Gateway: Information Service Portal” in *Right to Information* [accessed 23 October 2013] <http://rti.gov.in/>

consciousness regarding resisting injustice and struggling for the creation of a better world” (Dogra and Dogra 1998).⁴³ Such laudatory observations find copious repetition, such as for instance, by the ‘Global Network of Freedom and Information Advocates’ that states:

MKSS pioneered the right to information movement in India and is among the best examples in the world of a grassroots movement that has been successful in demanding increased transparency and accountability in government. Through the right to information campaign, MKSS and its partners demonstrated how government information could be leveraged by ordinary citizens to enhance their participation in governance and decision making and thereby improve their own lives. (Global Network of Freedom and Information Advocates 2004)⁴⁴

Also in scholarly works the MKSS and its role with the Right to Information Act features as an exemplary model of civil society activism. Political scientist Jenkins, for example, portrays MKSS as a “paradigmatic grassroots movement” (Jenkins 2007: 59) that, with its sweeping support from poor and marginalised farmers and labourers, managed to force the government into bending to pressure from below. Anthropologist Baviskar notes the grassroots origins of the RTI when she presents MKSS as a “remarkable success of a campaign that started fifteen years ago in a cluster of villages in rural Rajasthan [that] managed to bring about a major piece of legislation at the national level” (Baviskar 2007: 15). In such accounts, MKSS is not only applauded for its grassroots campaigning and mobilisation, but moreover, for raising crucial discussions on the meaning and practice of governance and democracy in India. In an article on transparency and accountability in India, Jenkins and Goetz for instance accredit MKSS for its impact in addressing important questions, when they state: “The work of a small and unusual activist group in the north Indian state of Rajasthan has raised a series of practical and theoretical issues

⁴³ Dogra, M. and B. Dogra (1998) “The Non Party Political Process Profile Of A People’s Organization: MKSS (Rajasthan)” in *Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan: a Non Party People’s Movement* [accessed 10 January 2014] <http://www.mkssindia.org/writings/mkssandrti/the-non-party-political-process-profile-of-a-people%E2%80%99s-organization-mkss-rajasthan-%E2%80%93-madhu-bharat-dogra/> (Original text has no page numbers).

⁴⁴ “The Right to Know is the Right to Live: Profile of a Remarkable Peoples’ Movement in India that Links Information to Livelihood” in *Global Network of Freedom and Information Advocates* [accessed 17 October 2013] <http://www.freedominfo.org/2004/06/the-right-to-know-is-the-right-to-live/>

concerning the best means for combating specific instances of corruption, and for promoting accountability more generally” (Jenkins and Goetz 1999: 603).

This chapter examines in closer detail the history of this ‘small and unusual activist group’. This story of MKSS grounds the broader debates on ideas of governance, democracy and statecraft in India that this thesis explores. Through the history of MKSS we get an up-close impression of the ways in which such ideas are internalised and configured by anti-corruption activists. By campaigning to enforce transparency and accountability measures in governance and to mitigate corruption from the bureaucracy, MKSS expresses its commitment to making the state responsive to the needs of the poor and to deepening the experience of democracy for the common citizen in India. This story illustrates that MKSS’s political conviction is in democratic processes and procedures and a reliance on the rule of law; their aspiration is to ‘purify’ the state from within by resorting to legal measures and institutionalised processes. Their story thus contextualises many of the discussions and issues around anti-corruption activism that will be the focus of later chapters. By knowing the story of MKSS, we can understand the larger history and context of transparency and accountability activism, within which the anti-corruption agitation of 2011 (see Chapters Three to Six) is situated.

In order to convey their overall commitment, members of MKSS – particularly its leadership – typically recount their own story through a series of tropes. These tropes emphasise ‘participation’, ‘local knowledge’ and ‘empowerment’ and signal the ways in which they configure ideas of governance and democracy in the field of transparency and accountability activism. As we will note, through such tropes the MKSS leadership links their particular demands, born in rural Rajasthan, to their broader aspirations of improving systems of governance and deepening democracy in India. In other words, the tropes enable them to embed their story in a broader discursive field. By framing their story around particular tropes, the leadership interprets and makes meaningful the events and activities of MKSS to a wider audience. In such fashion, through the discursive frames of ‘participation’, ‘local knowledge’ and ‘empowerment’, the story of MKSS expresses the faith in

democracy of these anti-corruption activists. The following story of MKSS is thus told through the frames by which members of MKSS typically recount their own story.

History of a Social Movement for Transparency

The story of MKSS, as already suggested, is one that is widely known throughout India and beyond. The renown of MKSS can be explained, in part, by the active dissemination of the story by members of MKSS, particularly its leadership. They tell some version of the story, for instance, in lectures that they give to college students and other national or international meetings and conventions. Or it is recounted by Aruna, or in biographical accounts of her in news journals, websites, scholarly works or in other public fora. It is the story that is told by the various members of MKSS to any visitor who visits Devdungri, the village in which the entire RTI movement began and that purportedly continues to be the base of MKSS. It is a story that makes its way into reports of international organisations, such as UNDP or the World Bank, where MKSS is often referred to as a ‘good practice showcase’.⁴⁵

The version of the MKSS story presented here is composed of a compilation of sources. During fieldwork I was exposed to countless situations, documents and individuals, all of which highlighted MKSS’s role in the enactment of the RTI. Over and over again – be it in public meetings, in casual conversations both in rural and urban settings, in government offices, in pamphlets on the application of RTI, etc. – I heard the same story repeated, that the existence of the RTI is owed to the campaigning carried out by MKSS. Nearly everybody I met during the course of fieldwork – from a wide spectrum of upper-class Delhiites to subsistence farmers in Rajasthan – had at least heard of Aruna and the MKSS. By drawing on the multiple stories that I heard and read, and by expanding on the particular details of inclusion

⁴⁵ See for instance the report for the South Asia Rural Development Group of the World Bank (Shah and Agarwal 2005); or discussion paper of UNDP (Mishra 2003).

and exclusion by which they vary, I recount the story of MKSS. It is a collage of various accounts that I came across during fieldwork.

Within this collage of representations, I place particular emphasis on texts written by the MKSS leadership. What emerges out of a close analysis of the texts written by the leaders, Aruna and Nikhil (the only two English-speaking members of MKSS), is the repetition of the tropes of participation and empowerment. Since the early days of MKSS, Aruna and Nikhil have been writing prolifically about the movement, largely to an English-speaking audience. Strewn within the story of MKSS as recounted below are extracts selected from some of the numerous texts written by Aruna and Nikhil. These are mainly taken from published and unpublished articles, notes from lectures and public presentations, recorded interviews, pamphlets and circulars. Many of these texts are in the public domain, but a large part I gained access to over the 18 months I spent with and around the MKSS. My “deep hanging out” (Clifford 1997; Geertz 1998) with this group of actors, meant that I was allocated temporary ‘duties’, one such duty being to sort through their old files and emails. I was to select the ‘important’ articles to put up onto their website. This gave me access to a wealth of texts written by them for a wide range of audiences.

My time spent with MKSS not only facilitated my access to their writings and presentations, but, more crucially, it allowed me to contextualise these texts. During fieldwork I attended scores of public events organised by and with MKSS and heard members of MKSS – particularly its leadership – present their work on countless occasions. This enabled me to hear the repeated themes and to note the particular anecdotes and stories that found reiteration in their presentations. It is based on insights gained from my long-term engagement with MKSS, that I have identified the tropes of ‘participation’, ‘local knowledge’ and ‘empowerment’ as featuring centrally in MKSS’s account of themselves. These terms were not always employed explicitly, but it was the *idea* behind these terms that was invoked in implicit ways.

The intention in recounting the story of MKSS and the accounts of it by its leadership is not to assess its truth or validity or to assess why the story and the

related tropes are constructed. Rather, the aim is to explore the discursive field that the MKSS produces through which it conveys its broader aspirations. The story of MKSS not only tells us of the trajectory of a fascinating social movement that campaigned for transparency and accountability legislation. Through the interpretive processes by which the story is told, we also understand how the particular experiences and experiments in rural Rajasthan link to broader notions of governance, democracy and statecraft. In the following account of the history of MKSS, emphasis is thus placed on the ways in which those telling the story interpret and produce meaning of the events and debates of the movement.

Part I: Early Days in Rural Rajasthan

The MKSS story typically goes that it all began in the late 1980s, when a group of social activists moved to Devdungri – a village in Rajsamand district in central Rajasthan. These activists – Aruna Roy, Shankar Singh and Nikhil Dey – came together with “a dream of building an organization for the rural poor” (Kalaw-Tirol, no date).⁴⁶ Their initial years living amongst the villagers in order to grasp the ground realities of the poor, led them to a struggle for land redistribution and minimum wages, which would in turn instigate a fully-fledged campaign for the right to information.

Aruna Roy, Nikhil Dey and Shankar Singh had met in the village of Tilonia at the Social Work and Research Centre (SWRC) – an NGO that addresses basic needs of the rural poor on issues such as water, housing, health, education and income. The approach of SWRC is to empower rural people by equipping them with livelihood skills and helping them to develop appropriate technology. Notably, SWRC was set up by Bunker Roy – Aruna Roy’s husband.

⁴⁶ Kalaw-Tirol, L. (no date) “Roy, Aruna: Biography” in *Ramon Magsaysay Award Foundation* [accessed 17 October 2013] <http://www.rmaf.org.ph/newrmaf/main/awardees/awardee/biography/19> (Original text has no page numbers).

Prior to joining SWRC, Aruna Roy had worked in the Indian Administrative Service (IAS). The IAS is one of the most competitive and prestigious departments in the government services, considered a ‘plum’ vocation in middle class India for all the social, political and financial security it accords (Dogra and Dogra 1998). However, already within her first few years in this position, Aruna became disillusioned. Rather than catering to the welfare of the people, she found the structures of the IAS to be indifferent to the concerns of the poor. As Aruna herself writes of her experience at the IAS: “Officialdom is of course as faceless to the people as the aggregate of the poor is to the officers. I went to them [the poor] to sort out their problems as defined by us... we were trained to maintain our distance” (Roy, no date).⁴⁷ After seven years in the civil service, she renounced the life of comfort that this offered her, and joined her husband, who had already set up SWRC in rural Rajasthan. Aruna spent the next nine years living and working in Tilonia, the village in which SWRC is situated. However, she became increasingly convinced that an NGO, such as SWRC, could not tackle deeply rooted structures of inequality, and she grew in her conviction that “development is politics and there can be no development without political will” (Kalaw-Tirol, no date).

While at SWRC, Aruna met Shankar Singh and Nikhil Dey who would share her vision that social change could only come about through political mobilisation. Shankar, an extremely talented entertainer gifted with humorous and creative communication skills, was in SWRC setting up a ‘rural communication unit’. For this he was developing and experimenting with the art of traditional Rajasthani cultural resources, such as puppeteering and street-plays. Shankar is of a rural background himself but had worked himself up to get a bachelor degree. Before ending up in SWRC, Shankar had been through a series of mainly menial jobs, ranging from vending kerosene, to minding chickens, to being a *chokidar* (a night guard), to working in an oil mill, a slate factory and an ice factory (Singh 1993).⁴⁸ At SWRC Shankar was able to develop his passion for infusing theatrics with social and

⁴⁷ Roy, A. (no date) “Redefining Gurus” in *Selective Writings*, CD compiled and distributed by MKSS. Available also on MKSS website <http://www.mkssindia.org/writings/mkssandrti/132-2redefining-gurus/> (Original text has no page numbers).

⁴⁸ Singh, S. (1993) “Language of Change” in *Seminar: Culture Communication and Change* 408. (Original text has no page numbers).

political messages. However, he remained unconvinced with the overall impact that this was having. Shankar himself recounts this apprehension:

We showed Suabai Mrityu Bhoy, a play on funeral expenses that pushes a poor family into bondage and further poverty. After 300 performances, we still hadn't heard of a single case where there was resistance to the practice. So what was I doing for social change? (Singh 1993)

Through such experiences, Shankar grew in his conviction that meaningful social change could only come about by organising people and tackling deeply rooted political problems (Singh 1993). His experience at SWRC had instilled in him the view that the structures inherent in an NGO would never permit it to go deep enough in addressing questions of power. It was this persuasion that drew him to work with Aruna.

Nikhil Dey, a young postgraduate student was at that point volunteering in SWRC. He had a bachelor of law degree from the Delhi University but had broken off his postgraduate studies in the United States to find a 'more meaningful path' as a social activist (Dogra and Dogra 1998). He had volunteered at various local organisations before ending up at SWRC. Nikhil came from a background of privilege, with his father a senior Indian Air Force officer, and other family members in significant political positions. But Nikhil was driven by a dream of engaging in processes of sustainable social and political transformations. He wanted to move to rural India to learn about the reality and plights of the poor. His dream found resonance in the convictions of Aruna and Shankar who he coincided with at SWRC.

With the "joint conviction that most of the answers to the questions we had lay with the people themselves" (Roy, no date), Aruna, Shankar and Nikhil moved to Devdungri, a village 160 kilometres south from Tilonia, in 1987.⁴⁹ With no set agenda in mind, the trio endeavoured to live like and amongst villagers and thereby learn about the roots of social injustice. They lived frugally, living under the same

⁴⁹ Devdungri was chosen because Shankar's sisters in-laws had a house there, that they had abandoned as they had moved away in search for work elsewhere.

conditions and carrying out similar chores as their fellow villagers. They resolved not to take more than the minimum wage that an unskilled labourer received in the area (Dogra and Dogra 1998). Their initial stipend came from a research project grant they had received; in subsequent years and to this date, this would be replaced by private donations from individuals, by other cash awards or by honorariums received by members of MKSS for training they give to others. There are several sympathisers and supporters who donate to MKSS on a regular basis; other donations come sporadically, or when MKSS makes specific funding appeals for particular events or purposes.

While experimenting with the type of organisation they would set up, they resolved not to operate as an NGO; they would not register as a conventional structure and they would not accept any institutional funding. Their experiences at SWRC as well as their encounters with other NGOs, had persuaded them that dependency on any institutional funding would constrain them from engaging in fundamental political change. In India, NGOs are notoriously associated with cover ups for self-serving interests and with being largely aloof to the concerns of the poor (Dogra and Dogra 1998). As Jenkins notes, since the 1970s NGOs in India have been regarded as “a kind of lesser species of non-political or even depoliticized social action” (Jenkins 2007: 64). Reflecting this antipathy towards the category of an NGO, MKSS was labelled a ‘people’s organisation’, committed to challenging the inequality and inequity of distribution of power in the socio-political structure (see the MKSS website). To this date, MKSS is not registered as an NGO but describes itself mainly as a non-party political organisation.

The first struggle which Aruna, Shankar and Nikhil would engage in involved a dispute over land in the neighbouring village of Sohargarh (Dogra and Dogra 1998). Lal Singh from Sohargarh – who would later become one of the founding members of MKSS – had become acquainted with the recently arrived trio in Devdungri and had sought their support in his village’s ongoing struggle over land. The local landlord, from the upper-caste Rajput community, had usurped vast amounts of community land, and was levying a tax from residents for collecting wood or grazing

cattle on that land (Dey and Sampat 2005).⁵⁰ Very much entrenched in feudalistic structures and practices, he retaliated against any challenges by villagers with force. Supported by Aruna, Shankar and Nikhil, the villagers of Sohargarh organised themselves as a collective to reclaim their land. They sent applications to government administrators demanding the reallocation of their community land. While their demand was agreed to on paper, the landlord responded by sending armed men to beat up the villagers and activists. Subsequently, the villagers collectively marched to the sub divisional headquarters of the area and raised slogans against the landlord. With mounting pressure, eventually the landlord was forced to concede.

The confrontation with threats and violence in the struggle against the landlord impelled the three activists to form a *sangathan* (organisation), as a means to unite against embedded structures of power (Dey and Sampat 2005). The success in the dispute over land in Sohargarh village had bestowed the activists with a degree of credibility in the local area and afforded them sweeping support. On 1st May 1990, the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS) took formal shape. Aside from Aruna, Shankar and Nikhil, all the other ten founding members were from the local area, themselves labourers or farmers. On this historic May Day, hundreds of villagers pledged their allegiance to the MKSS. To this day, MKSS consists of approximately ten full-time members who receive the minimum wage, and thousands of members from Rajasthan and beyond who assert their support.

On the day that the MKSS was formed, all the villagers gathered made a pledge to not accept anything less than the minimum wage when employed in public works (Dey and Sampat 2005). This led MKSS subsequently to undertake a series of struggles around minimum wages. Typically, the state or central governments allocates funds to a *panchayat* (village council) for a particular development project. Particularly in Rajasthan, prone to severe droughts, the state has run regular drought relief programmes, whereby works are set up to provide relief through productive employment. Under the Minimum Wages Act, every state has to conform to its

⁵⁰ Dey, N. and P. Sampat, (2005) “Bare Acts and Collective Explorations: The MKSS Experience with the Right to Information”, in M. Narula, S. Sengupta, J. Bagchi and G. Lovink (eds.) *Bare Acts*, Sarai Media Lab, New Delhi. (Original text has no page numbers).

statutory minimum wage. However, on the rarest of occasions does a worker – even if working under a Government sanctioned programme – actually receive the minimum wage, with the allocated money being pocketed along the chain of government administration.

Minimum wage issues started being raised more and more often, and the MKSS was constantly confronted with the need to secure workers' livelihoods. By 1991 they held their first *dharna* (sit-in demonstration) in the sub divisional headquarters of the area, demanding their minimum wage (Dey and Sampat 2005). Workers who had toiled away on the construction of a water dam in the village of Dadi Rapat were being paid far less than what was their due. The Junior Engineer, who had been in charge of measuring and verifying the construction site, had closed the files and refused inspection – an obvious sign for the villagers that he was complicit in the extortion of the project funds (Mishra 2003). The *dharna* was lifted after a series of negotiations with the administration led to an agreement to raise the wages. Already in these early days of MKSS, their campaigning involved a combination of grassroots mobilisation with protests and agitations, as well as technical negotiations with government administration. This combination would continue throughout the RTI movement, whereby the latter would be escalated at later stages of the campaign.

As the minimum wage struggles grew, the importance of access to *panchayat* records became ever clearer to MKSS members. When labourers demanded their minimum wages they were told that the records proved that they had not worked sufficiently to merit the full minimum wage. However, these records were not made available to them on the grounds that they were confidential, protected under the extant colonial Official Secrets Act (1923). When MKSS members sought to access documents, such as muster rolls,⁵¹ they were denied these on a range of ludicrous grounds such as that they had been “‘eaten by cows’, ‘disappeared with a strong gust of wind’, concealed inside the vest of a ‘mate’⁵² from where it could not be snatched, and very

⁵¹ ‘Muster roll’ is the term used both in English and in Hindi in India for ‘attendance register’.

⁵² ‘Mate’ is the term used both in English and in Hindi in India for ‘worksite supervisor’.

often not there at all” (MKSS, no date, a).⁵³ It was thus in fighting for minimum wages under the development programmes that the MKSS first understood the significance of transparency and the right to information. Accessing records was important so as to prevent corruption, obtain the minimum wage, and ensure that infrastructure actually got built (Jenkins and Goetz 1999: 604).

It was out of these experiences of unyielding resistance by government officials that the demand to access government records and documents began to emerge. According to these accounts of the history of MKSS, it was the experiences of poor farmers and labourers themselves that led to the recognition that access to information would be indispensable in exposing the rampant corruption and anomalies in the implementation of government programmes. This recognition, as part two of the story will recount, would eventually lead to the formulation of transparency and accountability legislation and to the state-wide and later nation-wide Right to Information movement. According to this account, notions of transparency and accountability emerged directly out of tangible encounters with corruption faced by villagers and farmers and was rooted in the action and participation of ordinary villagers.

‘Participation’ and ‘local knowledge’

‘Participation’ of villagers is a trope that finds repetition in many accounts made by the MKSS leadership. This trope signals that the RTI movement stems from demands rooted in the grassroots, whereby it was poor and marginalised farmers and labourers who directly shaped the movement. What is emphasised in this account is that the struggle was born out of the fundamental livelihood and social justice concerns of the poor, who themselves identified access to information as a means to tackle exploitation and the abuse of power. This ethos is captured in one of the many

⁵³ MKSS (no date, a) “From Information to Accountability: Reclaiming Democracy” in *Selective Writings*, CD compiled and distributed by MKSS. Available also on MKSS website: <http://www.mkssindia.org/writings/mkssandrti/from-information-to-accountability-reclaiming-democracy/> (Original text has no page numbers).

slogans that are repeatedly chanted in most MKSS events: ‘*jaane ka haq, jeene ka haq*’ (the right to know is the right to live). The participation of the rural poor in determining the contours of the movement comes out in public presentations by the MKSS leadership, such as in the following Narayan Reddy Memorial lecture given by Aruna in 2000:⁵⁴

It is [the poor] who speak with numbers and who have been willing to risk even their own fragile existence for change. More often than not, they are right. That is why, despite the astonishment repeatedly aired by outside observers, it has not surprised us that the radical postulates of the Right to Information movement in Rajasthan have been formulated and worked out by a group of poor, largely illiterate rural Rajasthani workers. It is they who have for the first time defined the right to information not only as part of the freedom of expression but also as part of the right to livelihood and survival. (Roy 2000)⁵⁵

What is noteworthy about the emphasis on the participation of ordinary villagers is that they are not merely presented as participants in the movement, but are portrayed as the actual architects of the demand for information. In this account, the demand for RTI was formulated as a means to tackle direct and tangible forms of corruption and is thus rooted in the real and urgent needs of the poor. Such accounts accentuate the grassroots nature of the movement. Not only did villagers contribute to the movement, but it was their local knowledge and experiences that gave substance to the demand for RTI. This elevation of ‘local knowledge’ by the MKSS leadership is another interrelated trope repeatedly used in their presentations of MKSS.

Villagers are typically represented by the MKSS leadership as having deep understandings of questions of transparency and accountability. Being rooted in personal and practical experiences of injustice, rural populations are depicted as engaging out of true commitment and conviction. The attempt is here to show “how vital the perspective of the so called marginalised is for the health of a democracy”

⁵⁴ Narayan Reddy was a poet and writer from Andhra Pradesh. A lecture in his memory is held every year at the Indian institute of World Culture in Bangalore.

⁵⁵ Roy, A. (2000) “Information, Democracy and Ethics” in *Selective Writings*, CD compiled and distributed by MKSS. Available also on: <http://www.mkssindia.org/writings/mkssandrti/120-2information-ethics/> (Original text has no page numbers).

(Roy and Dey 2001: 2). The championing of ‘local knowledge’ of the poor is repeated in several presentations by the MKSS leadership, such as the following one, describing the early days of the movement:

The many meetings in which [the malfunctioning system of governance] was debated, led to the beginnings of the movement we now call the People’s Right to Information Campaign. Illiterate men and women in one of the more backward parts of Central Rajasthan sat and pondered over how this impasse could be met. No intellectual or university trained social activist found the answer. It was Mohanji, Narayan, Lal Singh, Chuni Singh, Sushila, and many others who steadfastly maintained that if the records did not see the light of day, no position we took could be vindicated by ‘objective’ data. (Roy 2000)⁵⁶

This excerpt suggests that it was simple, often illiterate villagers who conceived of a mechanism through which to enforce transparency and accountability in government structures. According to this account, no amount of intellectual deliberation on transparency and accountability could have contrived something as straightforward, yet as potent, as access to official documents and records. It was villagers, rooted in their daily local realities, who identified information as the tool with which to access their rights and entitlements. This elevation of local knowledge is further illustrated in the following excerpt:

The question most often asked – by outside observers – is how is it that a set of largely illiterate and poor rural people have chosen to formulate, and so clearly articulate a demand for something as academic sounding as the right to information? The underlying assumption is that such a demand and its linkages to issues critical to the lives of the poor could only have been identified, formulated and articulated by intellectuals, politicians, and theoreticians – all of whom are the ‘real’ architects of political thought... To do so is a fallacy, which would amount to ignoring the roots of the movement. The potency of these demands have emerged because they have been rooted in a commitment to articulate paradigms of change through action and a healthy respect for the instincts of those with a vested interest in such change. (MKSS, no date, a)

⁵⁶ These are all names of villagers who are members of MKSS. Incidentally, not all of them are illiterate.

Statements such as these highlight the importance which the MKSS leadership places on ‘local knowledge’ and the ‘participation’ of the rural poor. In these accounts, what granted the RTI movement its success was precisely the close participation of the rural poor. Accordingly, in the course of the RTI movement, citizens could actively participate in decision-making processes that affected their lives and shaped the demand for the RTI in ways that served their local needs. Herein ideas of participation feed into broader understandings of democracy. Making democracy work, so we are informed by much of the development literature, requires informed and active citizens who understand how to voice their interests, act collectively and hold public officials accountable. Participatory democracy typically emphasises the broad participation of constituents in the direction and operation of political systems.

This emphasis on participation is reflected in contemporary development policy and practice, where, since the 1980s, a participatory approach has dominated the development agenda. Such approaches emerged as an alternative to previous more technocratic and top-down approaches to development that assumed the superiority of ‘specialist knowledge’ over ‘local knowledge’ (Yarrow 2011: 108). Instead, in a participatory approach, beneficiaries are regarded as active participants in the planning and implementation of a project. Participatory approaches to development postulate that the participation of beneficiaries is a mechanism by which to strengthen local accountability and democracy and thereby expand the “important goal of development in the context of ‘good governance’ aims” (Gardner and Lewis 1996: 112).

The participatory approaches to development are manifested, for instance, in Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) programmes that have been in vogue in the field of international development since the 1990s, and that are geared towards enabling rural populations to contribute to the planning of a programme with their own knowledge and insights. PRA has been criticized by anthropologists as being a ‘quick fix’ solution (Gardner and Lewis 1996: 114) and as conceptualising ‘the local’ as a harmonious community and thereby as essentialising the poor (Mosse 2005; Cook and Kothari 2001; Nelson and Wright 1995). This resonates with other

critiques on the participatory approach to development. Particularly ‘post-development’ critics and anthropologists have challenged some of the politics and complexities of participation of the so-called beneficiaries. Some have argued that participatory approaches in development employ vague notions of ‘community’ and thereby mask differences and inequalities between people (Gardner and Lewis 1996); others have shown that such approaches get co-opted from below as much as imposed from above so that they fail to deliver truly bottom-up approaches (Mosse 2001: 32); yet others have argued that the emphasis on the micro-level of participatory approaches masks, and consequently fails to challenge, macro-level processes (Cook and Kothari 2001: 5) and that the rhetoric of participation is a restructuring of control (Ribot 1996). In other words, participatory approaches are viewed as a ‘softened top-downism’ that removes all radical connotations of participation (Rahnema 1992).

The MKSS leadership equates the participation of the rural poor in processes of demanding transparent and accountable governance to increased democratisation. As they state in one of their accounts of the history of MKSS, the RTI movement “has shown that ethical issues when raised by even a small group of committed people can positively and fundamentally affect the democratic discourse... This debate has opened new possibilities in participatory democracy” (Roy 2000). In other words, because of the central involvement of the rural poor and illiterate, the RTI movement is presented as a truly democratic movement that expands the ways in which democracy is discussed and experienced in India.

Part II: Public Hearings and the Campaign for RTI

By 1994, MKSS had conceived of a novel strategy for bringing people together to expose public corruption in an open and participatory manner: it came up with the model of a *jan sunwai* (public hearing), wherein villagers became the principle actors in uncovering government malpractices. The concept of a *jan sunwai* was ignited when an old man requested MKSS’S support in getting the minimum wages due to

him for work done on a drought-relief related public work project in his village of Kot Kirana. To probe into this, MKSS members sought access to copies of the muster rolls of the work in question, but were refused these by the *sarpanch* (elected village headman) and secretary of Kot Kirana. However, the Block Development Officer, one level above in the administrative structure, serendipitously gave them permission to view the records and note down the details (Dogra and Dogra 1998). The discovery of rampant corruption that the records revealed prompted MKSS to come up with a method whereby the revelations of the information could be shared publicly with the entire village. Thus, on 2 December 1994 the first *jan sunwai* was organised in the village of Kot Kirana (Dey and Sampat 2005).

At this first *jan sunwai*, MKSS presented the information they had collected to all the villagers gathered under the *pandal* (a colourful tent-like structure to provide shade) that had been set up for the occasion. Information from the obtained records was read out over a microphone to all those assembled, including the names of workers listed on the muster rolls, the amounts of money purportedly paid to them and details of various materials claimed to have been used in the construction. One by one the people whose names were called out as having worked on a particular project came forward to testify whether or not they had worked as stated on record. Many announced that they had never been at the work site. Some of the names listed on the muster roll could not be identified by any of the gathered villagers at all, while still other names were found to be of people long dead (Roy 2000). It was exposed that the names on the muster rolls had been copied from the electoral rolls of the village, as both rolls had the identical mistakes of names of non-residents and dead people. When bills for construction materials and labour were read out, people learned that certain buildings in the area had been listed as completed on official records, yet in reality they had been left half-built or had not been constructed at all (Dogra and Dogra 1998).

With this experiment with their first *jan sunwai*, MKSS had hit upon a simple yet potent method of exposing corruption. They were bringing into being very tangible practices of transparency and accountability, made meaningful to villagers with their

recognisable idioms. What made this method effective, in the words of the MKSS leadership, was that “it has been conducted in a comfortable, informal idiom of conversation and exchange. Yet it has all the seriousness and impartiality of court proceedings” (MKSS, no date, a). The association with a court was generated through a panel of ‘judges’ that had been invited for the occasion. Individuals with eminence in public life that Aruna Roy knew from her past life at the IAS – mainly urban-based journalists, bureaucrats, academics, lawyers, activists etc. – had been invited to preside over the *jan sunwai* as ‘neutral’ observers. In all the *jan sunwais* to follow, the format of having a panel of ‘judges’ to observe the proceedings would be replicated.

Following the *jan sunwai* in Kot Kirana, a series of further public hearings were held, based on any information members of MKSS were able to gather. Since a law granting access to information was not yet in place, MKSS had to rely largely on the goodwill of individual bureaucrats in providing records pertaining to government works in particular villages. Although most of these initial *jan sunwais* faced hurdles and acts of hostility of some kind, on the whole, they were proving to be effective in exposing the rampant corruption that village development projects were prey to (Dey and Sampat 2005). Furthermore, they were providing an unprecedented platform for villagers to speak up against those in power. The face-to-face dialogue that the *jan sunwais* enabled, brought home the need for accountability and the urgency and importance of citizens’ participation in matters of governance (Mander 2003). *Jan sunwais* not only demonstrated the importance of being able to access information, but also the critical need to have a platform controlled by citizens where this information could be put to use (Roy and Dey, no date).⁵⁷ The politicising nature of such a public hearing is noted by Jenkins and Goetz who report: “*jan sunwais* not only exposed the misdeeds of local politicians, government engineers and private contractors – in a number of cases leading to voluntary restitution – but also demonstrated the potential for collective action among groups that tend to shun organised ‘political’ activity” (Jenkins and Goetz 1999: 605).

⁵⁷ Roy, A. and N. Dey (no date) “Fighting for the Right to Know in India” in *Global Network of Freedom and Information Advocates* [accessed 17 October 2013] <http://www.freedominfo.org/documents/rtiessay.pdf> (Original text has no page numbers).



Figure 1 Villager ‘testifying’ at a *jan sunwai* (image courtesy of MKSS)

It was with these direct confrontations and experiences with corruption in villages in central Rajasthan that MKSS began engaging in a broader campaign for the access to information. It had by now become evident to them that the most effective way of fighting corruption at the local level would be to provide people with the right to obtain copies of official records relating to rural development and anti-poverty programmes implemented in their areas (Dogra and Dogra 1998). They began to wage a legal battle with the government to enact a right to information law. Their endeavours appeared to have a ray of hope when in April 1995 the Chief Minister announced in the State Legislative Assembly that Rajasthan would be the first state in the country to grant citizens the right to obtain photocopies of documents of local development works for a fee (Dey and Sampat 2005). However, an entire year later, this promise had still not been implemented.

In response to the failed implementation of the Chief Minister’s promise, in May 1996, exactly one year after the assurance had been stated, MKSS decided to launch a fully-fledged campaign for the Right to Information. The campaign began with a 40-day *dharna* in Bewar, a small town strategically located in the centre of Rajasthan. The demand was for the issuance of an administrative order to enforce the

right to information allowing citizens to obtain certified photocopies of any documents in local *panchayat* offices (Dogra and Dogra 1998). The *dharna* in Beawar created quite a stir and received widespread attention. Harsh Mander, then a high-ranking civil servant officer and friend of Aruna's, had attended the site of protest to lend his support. His impassioned account of what he observed in the town of Beawar is worth citing at some length:

Each day since the launching of the *dharna* meanwhile witnessed an unprecedented upsurge of homespun idealism in the small town of Beawar and the surrounding countryside. Donations in cash and kind poured in daily from ordinary local people, including vegetables and milk from small vendors, sacks of wheat from farmers in surrounding villages, tents, voluntary services of cooking, serving cold water, photography and so on, and cash donations from even the poorest. ... Even more significant was the daily assembly of over 500 people in the heat of the tent, listening to speeches and joining in for slogans, songs and rallies. Active support cut across all class and political barriers. Rich shopkeepers and professionals to daily wage labourers, and the entire political spectrum from the right wing fringe to communist trade unions extended vocal and enthusiastic support. (Mander and Joshi 1999)⁵⁸

The *dharna* was finally called off when the government agreed in principle to the formulation of the law and to setting up a committee to work out the details of implementation (Dey and Sampat 2005). However, this again proved to be a hollow promise. When the committee submitted its report, the government, unperturbed by the blatant paradox, declared it a 'secret' document (MKSS, no date, a).

By this time MKSS had scaled up its campaigning for the RTI legislation to a state-wide level. It had stepped up efforts to establish state level and national level linkages with other activist groups, lawyers, officials and media persons so that the struggle for the right to information could be broadened (Dogra and Dogra 1998). With public meetings, rallies and truck *yatras* (popular mobilisation journeys) being conducted by MKSS throughout the state, widespread support was amassed. In 1997 another indefinite *dharna* was held, this time in Jaipur, the state capital (Dey and

⁵⁸ Mander, H. and A. Joshi (1999), "Article 4: The Movement to RTI in India: People's Power for the Control of Corruption" in *Selective Writings*, CD compiled and distributed by MKSS. (Original text has no page numbers).

Sampat 2005). The specific demand was again the right to make photocopies of government documents, along with the general demand for a Right to Information law. This *dharna* in Jaipur was to attract national attention and a surge of support for MKSS (Dogra and Dogra 1998).

As was common practice by then at all MKSS public events, this *dharna* also employed the various modes of mobilisation that MKSS had been refining over the years, combining ‘education’ with ‘entertainment’. Shankar Singh, who had begun experimenting with his talent for performing at the SWRC, had over the years since then been developing various cultural modes of communication. Songs, skits, slogans and puppets were used to convey their message and attract people. Lyrics of popular folk songs, for example, were adapted using satirical texts, so that the tune was recognisable by rural populations, yet the meaning had been given a political twist.

At the *dharna* in Jaipur a novel satirical performance was conceived, one that was to be repeated many times in the years to come. It was contrived in direct response to LK Advani, president of the nationalist party BJP, who had entered Rajasthan as part of his national *rath yatra* (chariot pilgrimage) with a call to wipe out ‘*bhay, bhuk*’ and ‘*brashtachar*’ (fear, hunger and corruption).⁵⁹ It was Advani’s party – the BJP – that had refused to implement Rajasthan’s Chief Minister’s assurance on the right to information and Advani himself had shown disdain for the demand for RTI (MKSS, no date, a). In response, MKSS came up with the *ghotala rath yatra* (chariot of scams), a dramatic and satirical spoof on the nation’s mis-governance and an ironical celebration of the spirit of corruption. The *ghotala rath yatra* combined politics, bureaucracy and theatre in a creative and captivating form. Here is an illustrative description of such a ‘chariot of scams’ as described by members of MKSS themselves:

⁵⁹ A *rath yatra* is a form of political mobilisation used on numerous occasions by L.K. Advani to spread his party’s message. A *rath yatra* has religious undertones, deriving from a yearly Hindu festivity in which deities are paraded through the streets on chariots. The most infamous *rath yatra* of Advani was the Ram *rath yatra* that was linked to the dispute over the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya.

In contrast to Advani's air conditioned *Rath*, the "*Ghotala Rath*" was erected on a handcart that vendors use to sell their wares. Placed on the handcart was a garishly adorned chair topped by an umbrella. This served as the canopy, from which hung several cardboard placards enlisting the notorious scams of the last ten years. A swashbuckling *Kamdar* reminiscent of the feudal past of Rajasthan marched at the head of the procession. The *netā* sat on the chair, wearing a white *pajama kurta*, and a saffron scarf. (MKSS, no date, a)⁶⁰

As the procession drew in the curious crowds, the archetypal *netā* (politician), acted by Shankar, would revel in his power by shouting out his sarcastic election promises: "Public schools are defunct so I promise more private schools!"; "Drought areas will be provided with bottled *Bisleri* water!";⁶¹ "I promise free alcohol for all!", and other such promises that touched upon the heart of corruption and political hypocrisy. The *ghotala rath yatra* and the entertainment it sparked was yet another indication of MKSS's (particularly Shankar's) mastery in mobilisation and theatrics.



Figure 2 Shankar as the corrupt *netā* (photo courtesy of MKSS)

⁶⁰ This is the emblematic attire of politicians in India, symbolized through India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru.

⁶¹ Bisleri is a brand of bottled water in India.

The 53-day sit-in in Jaipur ended with the government of Rajasthan announcing that people would be entitled to access *panchayat* accounts and to procure certified copies. Despite falling short of a comprehensive RTI law, the MKSS welcomed this new development and seized the opportunity. They mobilised people to make use of the recent entitlement and set about conducting another spate of public hearings.

Concurrently, MKSS's demand for a comprehensive Right to Information law persisted. In 1999, the Congress party came to power in Rajasthan with the promise to implement the law at the top of their party manifesto (MKSS, no date, a). With a new Chief Minister receptive to the RTI, the process of lawmaking began. A committee was formed to draft the RTI legislation. Initially this committee consisted exclusively of bureaucrats, but after sustained negotiations and demands, MKSS members were included to make recommendations and identify essential features for a transparency law. The Right to Information Act of Rajasthan was finally passed in 2000. The Act fell short of various provisions that MKSS had vehemently been insisting on, but nonetheless, the legal entitlement to access and photocopy information that Rajasthan's new RTI Act authorized was greeted by MKSS as a move in the right direction (MKSS, no date, a).⁶²

While MKSS was campaigning for a state-level RTI law in Rajasthan, a national campaign was taking shape, making a similar demand of the Central Government. The National Campaign for People's Right to Information (NCPRI) was formed in 1996, with Aruna and Nikhil from the MKSS as its backbone figures. Other members included urban-based social activists, journalists, lawyers, professionals, retired civil servants and academics. NCPRI drafted a national RTI legislation that was submitted to the government and would form the foundation of the final RTI Act. The NCPRI would continue to play a central role in putting sustained pressure on the government to enact a nation-wide RTI law, which it finally did in 2005. (A more detailed account of the campaigning of NCPRI at the national level will follow in Chapter Two).

⁶² The provisions MKSS had insisted on included, amongst others, a stipulated time limit for providing information, regulated penalties imposed on any officials denying information, and the setting up of an independent appeal mechanism.

Trope of 'empowerment'

The RTI Act is widely presented as a progressive and emancipatory piece of legislation that gives power to the *aam aadmi* to ask questions from the government. The MKSS leadership, in its accounts of the RTI Act and the movement that brought it about, consistently emphasises the empowering nature of the RTI. It attributes the success of the RTI movement to being both the *product* and the *producer* of empowerment of rural populations. 'Empowerment', along with 'participation' and 'local knowledge', constitutes another key trope that finds reiteration in the accounts of MKSS by its leadership. Through this trope of empowerment, the enactment of the Right to Information is portrayed as a catalyst of broader engagement with political debates. In this light, the specific demand for access to records and documents is presented as permitting villagers to raise larger questions on democracy, participation, citizenship, power etc. This increased political empowerment enabled through the RTI comes out, for instance, in the following statement by the MKSS leadership:

The Right to Information movement in Rajasthan has developed into a spearhead which has opened up the possibility of a new kind of political activism, sown the seeds of fresh political alternatives, and has become part of an emerging political ideology. The people of Rajasthan have engaged the State in a historic struggle, which has begun to withdraw the power structures of Governance. It has provided a vibrant new definition to democratic functioning, especially from the point of view of the poor and the oppressed, seized the initiative in the battle against corruption, and perhaps most importantly, pointed out that the framework of citizenship and democracy can be so defined that the ordinary, oppressed and poor can be at the nerve centre of governance. (MKSS, no date, b)⁶³

⁶³ MKSS (no date, b) "Beyond Information: Breaching the Wall of State Inaction", in *Selective Writings*, CD compiled and distributed by MKSS. Available also on MKSS website: <http://www.mkssindia.org/writings/beyond-information-breaching-the-wall-of-state-inaction/> (Original text has no page number).

The demand for the RTI is thus presented by MKSS as an empowering tool and a substantive mechanism for addressing questions of governance and democracy. More than simply being a means to tackle corruption, RTI is a medium for people to participate in questions of governance and to shift entrenched power structures. The right to access official information “begins the process of shared decision-making, and consequently the sharing of power” (Roy 2000). This ethos is further encapsulated in the following extract:

One of the features of the struggle for the Right to Information is that it has facilitated the narrowing of the gap between precept and practice in our public and private lives. It has provided a framework where all of us are encouraged to participate more overtly in politics and governing ourselves. It has shown us that in this vast Democracy what we do, can, and does matter. (Roy 2000)

The RTI is thus presented as a tool for the just distribution of power. An aphorism often repeated by Aruna in lectures and public presentations in relation to this is: “we must speak truth to power, make truth powerful and power truthful”. This emphasis on the empowering nature of the RTI is further asserted by Aruna and Nikhil who state elsewhere:

The RTI is finally a demand for an equal share of power. But it is at the same time, a fetter on the arbitrary exercise of power by anyone. Its legitimacy in a democratic set up gives it the potential to keep extending the borders of struggles for empowerment and change. This legitimacy is further strengthened by its capacity to make transparent and accountable the user of the right as much as the power centre it is being used against. (Roy and Dey, no date)⁶⁴

The trope of ‘empowerment’ signals that the success of the RTI movement lies in its engagement with broader questions of governance and democracy. The term empowerment in development literature typically conveys the idea of people becoming agents of their own development, whereby they gain the necessary

⁶⁴ Roy, A. and N. Dey (no date) “Fighting for the Right to Know in India” in *Freedom of Information* [accessed 29 April 2013] <http://www.freedominfo.org/documents/rtiessay.pdf> (Original text has no page number).

resources, assets, and capabilities to demand accountability from those who hold power. Such literature premises that the increased participation of beneficiaries in development intervention will lead to their sense of ownership and, consequently, to their empowerment. Empowerment is a largely elusive term, but is typically defined as a reworking of social relationships in favour of the less powerful. The World Bank's 2002 Sourcebook, for instance, makes the links between participation and empowerment explicit, when it defines empowerment as "the expansion of assets and capabilities of poor people to participate in, negotiate with, influence, control, and hold accountable institutions that affect their lives" (Bebbington et al. 2007: 602).

In this way, there is a conceptual linkage between empowerment and democratic governance, in that both share a concern with citizens' ability to exercise control over state power. By emphasising empowerment of the rural poor in their account of MKSS, the MKSS leadership is thus inferring its ideas of democratic governance. The story of MKSS is a story of empowered citizens who deepened democratic processes by demanding and shaping better policies, expressing grievances, seeking justice and holding political leaders to account.

The Discursive Field of MKSS

To briefly recapitulate the story of MKSS as recounted above: MKSS is a grassroots movement that used innovative modes of struggle and constructive action to improve the lives of its primary constituents – the rural poor. It is an organisation that grew from mobilizing demands for the access to details of public expenditure at the local level in central Rajasthan, to eventually spearheading the national Right to Information movement in India. MKSS famously used the demand for access to government records as a tool to draw attention to the underpayment of daily wage earners and farmers on government projects, and more generally, to expose corruption in government expenditure. MKSS used many innovative strategies to achieve its goals of bringing social justice and dignity to the rural poor, such as conducting sit-ins, rallies, and campaigns, as well as creative communication through

music, puppets, and street theatre. MKSS came up with the model of *jan sunwais* wherein official records of state development projects were exposed to the scrutiny of the beneficiaries. The public hearings proved very successful in drawing attention to corruption and exposing leakages in the system. As we heard through the words of its leadership, in demanding a law for the Right to Information, MKSS was establishing the importance of being part of the democratic framework in which people would be assured accountable and transparent forms of governance.

In this account of the history of MKSS, emphasis was placed on the discursive frames used by the MKSS leadership in telling their own story. We noted a series of tropes that ran through their accounts of the history of MKSS, including those of ‘participation’, ‘local knowledge’ and ‘empowerment’. The MKSS leadership drew on such tropes and anecdotes in order to translate their particular experiences in rural Rajasthan into a broader discursive field of governance, democracy and statecraft. By highlighting the central participation of the rural poor in the formulation of ideas of transparency and by emphasising the empowering nature of their movement, they could convey their broader aspirations of improving systems of governance and deepening democracy in India. Through such tropes, the story moved beyond being a description of particular activities and demands by labourers and farmers in rural Rajasthan, to reflecting on more extensive questions of governance and democracy.

In order to understand the work that the tropes do in MKSS’s story, we may draw on Snow’s (2004) notion of ‘discursive fields’ and ‘master frames’. Discursive fields, according to Snow, provide the framework through which social movement actors can frame several disparate ideas and events, weaving them together into an integrated and coordinated interpretation. In other words, discursive fields contain the genres that actors can draw on to construct and contest meaning in a contextually related terrain. Similarly, master frames are elastic and flexible frames that move beyond particularised and contextual meaning; they can be deployed in a diversity of settings by aligning to wider discourses. Master frames thus link the specific activities and beliefs of a social movement with a broader terrain, or discursive field. In this conceptualisation, ideas of governance and democracy can be thought of as

the ‘master frames’, or as the ‘discursive field’ through which the story of MKSS is interpreted. Through such frames, the MKSS leadership can present its story by moving beyond the particular occurrences in Rajasthan and ascribing to a broader discursive terrain. The discursive field of democratic governance allows the leadership to produce and maintain meaning to a broader audience.

In framing the particular events and occurrences in rural Rajasthan within broader discourses of governance and democracy, the MKSS leadership is doing similar work to the development actors studied by Mosse who invest their energies in maintaining coherent *representations* of their projects, regardless of whether these correlate to actual practice. For instance, as participatory models that are employed by development actors “are often more part of the way projects work as systems of representation, oriented upwards and outwards to wider policy goals and institutions that secure reputation and funding (or inwards as self-representation), than part of their operational system” (Mosse 2004: 657). A development project’s ‘success’ thus derives from intelligible representations, rather than from actual outcomes. This idea draws on Latour, who notes that success derives from constant work of composition in which heterogeneous ideas “are tied together by translation of one kind or another into the material and conceptual order of a successful project” (Latour 2000, cited in Mosse 2004: 647). The crucial role of translation and representation in the work of development is developed further by Lewis and Mosse when they state:

The overall system can be stabilized only when actors are able to reconstruct the network of interactions through the creation of coherent representations, which they do through a process of ‘translation’ that permits the negotiation of common meanings and definitions and the mutual enrolment and cooperation into individual and collective objectives and activities. (Lewis and Mosse 2006a: 14)

Such a focus on translation enables an understanding of the ways in which actors operate to stabilise interpretations and to produce meaning. By framing their story within the broader discursive fields of democratic participation and empowerment, the MKSS leadership is making its story intelligible and meaningful. Similar findings are made by Webb in his study of the ‘success stories’ used by RTI activists in Delhi.

Success stories, according to Webb, are a narrative technique used by activists to persuade the public of their effectiveness and to make their work known. By reproducing these stories in a wide range of public spaces, the stories themselves “become artefacts, tools for and symbols of the movement” (Webb 2010: 297). Similarly, the tropes that are reiterated in the account of MKSS can be thought of as a technique through which the credibility of MKSS as an organisation committed to the public good is constructed. By embedding their story in the ‘broader enveloping context’ of democratic governance, their story can be interpreted and rendered significant to a wider audience.

Brokers of meaning

It is important to remind ourselves at this point of who exactly is doing the work of translating and framing the story of MKSS. While assertions are typically made on behalf of MKSS as a whole, it is predominantly Aruna and Nikhil, the leaders of MKSS, who are engaged in most of the framing processes. This point is significant, for, as has been pointed out in much of social movements literature, leaders are critical to social movements in that “they inspire commitment, mobilize resources, create and recognise opportunities, devise strategies, frame demands and influence outcomes” (Morris and Staggenborg 2004: 171; Diani 2003). It is the privileged background of leaders, typically from the educated middle and upper classes, that facilitates their role as translators, and that provide them with the intellectual skills to frame their work for wider audiences. In development literature, such leaders have been referred to as ‘interface actors’ or as ‘brokers of meaning’ (Bierschenk et al. 2000; Hilhorst 2003; Lewis and Mosse 2006a; Long 2001; Olivier de Sardan 2005).

Aruna and Nikhil, with their elite upper-class background, represent such intermediary figures, in that they are able to interface between more than one social configuration (Long 2001). In their capacity as interface actors who are able to translate the demands that arise on the ground into broader discursive fields, the

MKSS leadership can be thought to function as ‘brokers of meaning’. Brokers of meaning, according to Hilhorst’s definition, are able to bridge different life worlds and to forge social relations (Hilhorst 2003: 189). In the context of development, they are actors who derive their power from their knowledge of international discourses and their ability to transform these to fit their own political agendas. The social standing of brokers allows them to master a range of development discourses and to thus act as development interfaces. Brokers mediate between different knowledge systems, such as the language of development and the local language (Olivier de Sardan 2005). Bierschenk et al. (2000) coined the term ‘development broker’, referring to intermediaries who contribute to the influx of external resources from the development sector to a locality, where they play a significant political role.

As Lewis and Mosse (2006a) point out, the ‘broker’ is a classic figure in the history of political anthropology. Brokers have been variously studied as social actors who serve as a link between two cultural systems, and who can thus be thought of as ‘interstitial brokers’ (Wolf 1958). Brokers thus fill a ‘gap’ between clients, such as local populations, and patrons, such as political office-holders or candidates bearing status. Particularly in India, the existence of a particular type of broker has been associated with the blurred boundaries that exist between ‘state’ and ‘society’. Bailey (1960) who wrote on brokerage in the then recently Independent India, saw brokers as actors who employ their skills and knowledge to mediate between villagers’ demands and the Indian state. It is only through brokers that many people come to experience the state at all. This is complemented by Bierschenk et al. who contextualise brokerage within the politics of a postcolonial state, where “power is exercised both through formal bureaucratic logics and through a diverse range of “supra-local” associations and networks, in which there is a flourishing of intermediate actors and organisations” (paraphrased in Lewis and Mosse 2006a: 12). Brokers thus play a powerful political role in that they have “the capacity to construct and purvey meanings concerning a variety of relationships and interactions” (Cohen and Comaroff 1976: 88).

Development brokers, as much development literature points out, create their indispensability out of their capacity to manage meanings or, to continue in the terminology used so far, to frame and translate meaning. They attain their position by being able to ‘speak the right language’ and by drawing on appropriate discourses. The qualification of brokers depends not only on their technical knowledge, but also on their possession of organisational, linguistic, presentational and relational competencies (Lewis and Mosse 2006a: 16). In other words, brokers require social and cultural capital that they can apply in various social fields. Mosse has referred to such actors as “skilled brokers” who “read the meaning of a project into the different institutional languages of its stakeholder supporters, constantly creating interest and making real” (Mosse 2005: 9).

Given this conceptual framework, Aruna and Nikhil, the leaders of MKSS, can be conceived as brokers of meaning. They are strategically placed at the interface between the realities of rural Rajasthan, and the broader development discourses, with particular understandings of governance and democracy. With their privileged social background, they have a vantage point that enables them to bridge several ‘life worlds’: they are able to stand for the interests of the rural poor and simultaneously manage broader discursive fields. Furthermore, their ability to ‘speak the right language’ and their familiarity with particular development discourses allows them to manage meaning and to create practices. Through their translation and framing of the story of MKSS, they act as brokers of meaning *par excellence*.

Conclusion

The history of MKSS is fascinating and revealing on several accounts, some of which have been explored in this chapter. For one thing, the story chronicles the events and activities of a grassroots movement that succeeded in pressurising the government to enact the progressive Right to Information Act. Through this story we learn about the forms of campaigning and mobilisation of a group of activists who connected specific demands for government records and information to broader

questions of transparency and accountability. By being rooted in rural Rajasthan, MKSS could put forward the needs and concerns of the poor, and thereby connect up to broader discussions on governance and participatory democracy. The story tells us of an extraordinary grassroots movement that is widely acknowledged as being the driving force behind the national RTI Act.

However the story is more than a narration of events and occurrences of a social movement. Embedded in the story lies an expression of the aspects deemed important by MKSS in anti-corruption civil society activism. By focusing on the discursive frames used by the MKSS leadership in conveying their story, we can understand the discursive field within which they embed their story, ideas and activities. As noted, the discursive frames through which the story is told are shaped around the tropes of ‘participation’, ‘local knowledge’ and ‘empowerment’; combined these signal the commitments and beliefs of MKSS towards improving governance and deepening democracy. It is through these tropes that the MKSS leadership act as brokers of meaning and attempts to interpret and make meaningful the events of MKSS’s history to a wider audience. For this, they embed the tropes within a more comprehensive and recognizable discursive field.

This discursive field of MKSS, as noted, echoes several aspects of development policy and practice that similarly emphasise participatory approaches to development. By drawing on terms and tropes from mainstream development discourse, an account can be interpreted and rendered meaningful to a broader audience. As several scholars of development studies have suggested, certain buzzwords in development are so wide in circulation that they are accorded recognition as ‘legitimated terms’ (Brown and Jagadananda 2007). Cornwall and Brock point out that these “fine-sounding words that are used in development policies do more than provide a sense of direction: they lend the legitimacy that development actors need to justify their intentions” (Cornwall and Brock 2005: 1044). Development agencies, including MKSS as I argue for this purpose, are said to employ key terms of development “for the ideological legitimacy it brings” (Gardner and Lewis 1996: 113). In this conceptualisation, employing terms such as

participation and empowerment, allows civil society actors to convey their message within a recognisable discursive framework.

The story of MKSS in this chapter emphasised the grassroots nature of the RTI movement and the central participation of empowered rural populations. The following chapter explores some of the tensions that lie in the RTI movement, suggesting that MKSS's aspirations of improving governance and strengthening democracy cannot occur solely through 'bottom up' forms of grassroots activism. The nature of the demand of MKSS – technical transparency and accountability laws and policies – requires work and engagement of a particular legalistic and procedural nature. It is this aspect of the RTI movement that is examined in the following chapter.

2. A ‘Technical’ Social Movement

How to engage in democratic politics in campaigning for anti-corruption laws is a contested terrain. I noted this tension in the introduction to this thesis in the discussion about the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP). The polemic in public discussions that the newly formed ‘common man’s party’ had given rise to, was, as noted, principally around diverging understandings of democratic processes and procedures. For AAP and its supporters, the only meaningful approach to transform a political system so deeply steeped in corruption was a thorough systemic overhaul and a radical rethinking and transformation of democratic paradigms. By contrast, those critical of AAP’s approach aspired to restore governance and democracy through abiding by democratic processes and procedures and complying with the constitution and the rule of law. These different standpoints signified a split between a concept of politics that positioned itself outside established institutionalised norms and practices, and an approach that believed in strengthening and consolidating those very institutions from within.⁶⁵

A similar discord around modes of political engagement ran through the Right to Information movement. In the previous chapter I examined the RTI movement through the lens of MKSS. The story of MKSS, as described, is a story of a particular ‘ideal’ type of social movement. It is a social movement that began at the grassroots

⁶⁵ What is interesting to note here, is that AAP positioned itself in an ambivalent arrangement between the two extremes of whether to work from within or outside the state institutions. The Lokpal movement, out of which AAP emerged, had followed a clear politics of being a force outside the system. Members of the Lokpal movement, including Arvind Kejriwal now leader of AAP, had stated repeatedly in public that they shunned party politics, believing that a social movement has more power in effecting systemic change if it exerts pressure from outside (more on this in Chapter Three). When the Lokpal movement tapered off and members parted ways, AAP was formed as a political party, thus entering the stage of the institutionalised state system. However, as I explored in the introduction, it did so through unconventional and transgressive modes. AAP thus blurred the difference between party politics and movement politics and collapsed the strict distinction between ‘outside’ and ‘inside’ the system.

level and that campaigned its way up to the policy-making level. According to this story, the enactment of the Right to Information Act was due to the active participation of the rural poor and to the resolute mobilisation skills of MKSS. Accordingly, it was the poor who were the true architects of the RTI, and who, based on their own experiences with corruption and injustice, themselves identified access to official documents as the solution to their problems. The images of protests, *dharnas* and colourful banners and puppets, contribute to the characterisation of MKSS as an ‘authentic’ social movement.

However, as this chapter will explore, there is an underlying tension with such an authentic social movement, in that the nature of its demands commands a particular type of engagement that removes it from its very authenticity. Such a pure form of politics, led by the rural poor, and entirely uncontaminated by party politics and state involvement, does not and cannot exist. In campaigning for the enactment of transparency legislation, with the procedural and technical aspects that this entailed, the RTI movement dealt with legislative matters and, as a matter of course, entered the purview of state institutions. In demanding improved governance and statecraft, it itself needed to engage directly with the state apparatus. The demands for transparency and accountability legislation cannot emerge solely through grassroots activism by the rural poor, but require involvement in another, more formal realm of campaigning. In other words, while the RTI movement was depicted widely as an ‘authentic’ social movement strictly outside the realm of the state through vibrant collective citizen action, its aspirations for legal transparency measures compelled it to engage directly with the government.

While in the previous chapter the emphasis was on the grassroots aspects of MKSS, strewn amidst the story there were indications of its involvement in a more formal realm. Over the span of more than ten years, one notes some evidence of MKSS acting beyond its grassroots mobilisation in activities involving technical legal drafting and lobbying the government. This becomes noticeable, for instance, in the inclusion of members of MKSS in the committee to draft the RTI law in Rajasthan, and in the drafting of a national RTI law by a national campaign, of which Aruna and

Nikhil are founding members. This type of work intimates that beyond the more bottom-up forms of mobilisation taking place in rural Rajasthan, there is also a technical and formalistic aspect to MKSS's demand for transparency and accountability in governance. What this suggests is that there is more to the RTI movement than the ideal of a grassroots politics set in rural Rajasthan with farmers and labourers conducting characterful protest and direct action. The RTI movement also entailed procedural and bureaucratic politicking.

This tension between an ideal and a 'mundane' form of politics in the RTI movement reflects the classical problem raised by Weber in his seminal piece, 'Politics as Vocation'. According to Weber, political action is underpinned by a fundamental tension. Sound politics emerge only through a synthesis of a commitment born out of passion, a sense of responsibility toward the cause, and a sense of measured proportion (Weber 1919: 76). To achieve this, a politician must be able to marry the two types of ethics of politics, an 'ethic of ultimate ends' and an 'ethic of responsibility'. An ethic of ultimate ends resembles a faith-based conviction that holds absolute and unambiguous positions, with pure intentions as the ultimate end. By contrast, an ethic of responsibility involves a sense of proportion and a measurement of the possible consequences that one's actions have.

Politicians, according to Weber, are faced with an inherent tension because combining an ethic of ultimate ends with an ethics of responsibility is challenging and difficult. Without passion and a vision for an ultimate end, a politician lacks charisma and devotion for a cause. At the same time, without a sense of proportion and responsibility, politicians risk acting blindly by "intoxicat[ing] themselves with romantic sensations" (Weber 1919: 33). The world according to Weber is pervaded with irrationality and unpredictability, with "diabolic forces lurking" in all political actions and corroding pure intentions (Weber 1919: 32). It is only an ethic of responsibility that can take into consideration "the average deficiencies of people" and "stand up under the ethical irrationality of the world" (Weber 1919: 29-30). Politics cannot stem from ardour or conviction alone, but must involve "a strong and

slow boring of hard boards” (Weber 1919: 34).⁶⁶

The two type of ethics identified by Weber are constitutive of one another, in that passion without responsibility leads to stifling ‘romantic sensations’, while responsibility without passion “endangers the ‘salvation of the soul’” (Weber 1919: 33). In other words, someone who wants to engage in politics as a vocation, must embody an ethic of ultimate ends and an ethic of responsibility by bringing both into consonance with one another. The dialectic aspect of the tension identified by Weber will be examined in closer detail in the conclusion.

This chapter sheds light on the Weberian tension that confronted the RTI movement. MKSS represents a type of politics that is driven by ideals and passions, or, by an ethic of ultimate ends. However, for its politics to be sound and effective, the RTI movement must also involve an ethic of responsibility and measured proportion. This aspect is realised through the formal component behind the movement for the Right to Information, which is the centre of attention in this chapter. Focus here is on the work of a Delhi-based organisation that emerged out of MKSS in order to campaign for transparency legislation at the national level. This organisation – the National Campaign for People’s Right to Information (NCPRI) – was constituted by high-ranking individuals who were well connected to prominent figures and to influential networks. It was these members of NCPRI who could push for the demand for the right to information in policy-making spaces, and thus institutionalise the demands that MKSS was making on the ground.

The following account of NCPRI is mainly about ‘important’ people, in ‘important’ places doing ‘important’ things: assembling professional expertise, building on

⁶⁶ Particularly in times of social upheaval, Weber argued, there is a propensity for an ethic of ultimate ends to prevail. A social upheaval inflames passion and consequentially relinquishes any sense of responsibility and proportion. The context in which Weber formulated his analysis on politics as vocation helps to explain his views on the two types of ethics. Weber gave his seminal lecture to students at the University of Munich in 1918, when Germany was on the brink of a social revolution. In this lecture, Weber was warning students about being enticed into the revolution, driven exclusively by their passion and losing thereby any sober perspective. He explained that absolute imperatives, stemming from the religious gospel commandments, reappear in periods of social upheaval where they retain their revolutionizing force (Weber 1919: 31). The peril of acting exclusively out of absolute imperatives, Weber warned, was the failure of considering the consequences of one’s actions. He appealed to students to fuse their passion with an ethic of responsibility.

contacts and connections, networking and lobbying. Much of this takes place in the 'backstage'. The story of NCPRI does not circulate as widely in accounts of the RTI movement as does the story of MKSS in Rajasthan. As Sharma notes, the story of MKSS appears as the 'singular dominant narrative' in most of the literature describing the history of the evolution of the Right to Information Act, ignores the non-grassroots elements of the RTI movement and thus leads to an overall 'flattening' of the events (Sharma 2012a: 85). However, some detailed reports and investigations do highlight the crucial role played by NCPRI in the Right to Information movement and it is largely from these sources that the following account of NCPRI's history is made (Baviskar 2007; Mishra 2003; Puddephatt 2009; Sharma 2012a; Singh 2011). With a few exceptions, the existing sources of the history of NCPRI are largely in the form of official studies and working papers for leading institutions, such as the World Bank, the United Nations Development Programme and the Indian Institute of Public Administration. The authors of these studies are themselves either members or personal acquaintances of NCPRI. In this regard, the high-ranking nature of the sources mirrors the eminent nature of NCPRI itself. The following account of NCPRI's history is drawn up largely from these sources, as well as from the official website of NCPRI and from disparate accounts collected during fieldwork.

An exploration of MKSS and NCPRI combined, suggests that there is a tension between a social movement 'ideal' as represented in the form of MKSS, and the actual contingencies of a social movement as embodied by NCPRI. Another way of formulating this tension is as a disparity between 'order' and 'disjuncture', as proposed by Lewis and Mosse in the context of development. While 'order' refers to the 'ideal world' that development actors intend to bring about, 'disjuncture' refers to "the gap between these ideal worlds and the social reality they have to relate to" (Lewis and Mosse 2006b: 2).⁶⁷ Such a fixation on 'ideal' versus 'social reality', as Lewis and Mosse point out, fits into a longer tradition in anthropology that focuses on the contradictions between what is said and what is done in development. By

⁶⁷ This can also be thought of in terms of Abrams (1988) famous distinction between the 'state-idea' as a projected and believed idea, and the 'state-system', as constituted by existing institutional structures and practice.

examining the tension within the RTI movement, as illustrated by MKSS and NCPRI, this chapter contributes to the characteristic concern in anthropology.

This chapter begins with a description of the events around the formation of NCPRI and of the work carried out in campaigning for the RTI. It should be read in direct sequel to the MKSS story recounted in the previous chapter, whereby both constitute one and the same social movement, albeit coming to expression through different registers. A grasp of the interrelated and interlocked nature of MKSS and NCPRI is crucial in understanding the tension inherent in this convergence. While one can be said to comprise the ideal aspect of a social movement, the other represents the technical toil. By emphasising the high-ranking background of the members of NCPRI and their access to crucial social networks and social capital, I suggest that the opposition between civil society and the state is more blurry than is often maintained. In conjunction with the story of MKSS as recounted in the previous chapter, the following account of NCPRI's involvement in the historical Right to Information movement additionally contextualises its future role in the Lokpal agitation, which will be the focus of the remaining chapters.

The 'Silenced' Story of NCPRI

The formation of an elite campaign

While MKSS was campaigning for a state-level RTI law in Rajasthan, a national campaign was taking shape, making a similar demand of the central government. The National Campaign for People's Right to Information (NCPRI) was formed in August 1996, drawing together urban-based actors who converged in their commitment to the adoption of a comprehensive transparency law. The inspirational source for this campaign was allegedly MKSS's work for the RTI in Rajasthan, where the grassroots forms of mobilisation against corruption and the experiments

with *jan sunwais*, appealed to the urban intelligentsia (Mishra 2003: 26). In fact, NCPRI would be modelled on the MKSS model, with Aruna and Nikhil of the MKSS acting as the backbone members of NCPRI. It was these two figures, with their experience in grassroots campaigning and with their mobile and connected backgrounds, who would, in effect, become the leaders of NCPRI.

What characterises NCPRI, and what distinguishes it from MKSS, are the high-ranking public figures that constitute its membership. The very idea of NCPRI emerged out of discussions between the MKSS leadership and certain eminent individuals, largely known to Aruna from her past in the Indian Administrative Service, who had been sympathetic to her work with MKSS. As several members of NCPRI recounted, they had watched in awe as Aruna had renounced her position of privilege at the Administrative Service and dedicated herself entirely to the plights and needs of the poor. In his study of the history of MKSS, Sharma similarly finds that this trope of ‘giving up’ resources and privileges is emphasised in “almost ritualised fashion” (Sharma 2012a: 128). Coining it the ‘currency of sacrifice’, Sharma notes that the repeated discourse of Aruna’s self-abnegation of her comfortable position in the administrative service works by “adding greater legitimacy to the cause and its leadership” (Sharma 2012a: 129). The ‘currency of sacrifice’ is insightful in that it points to the significance of the notion of renunciation associated with leadership figures in India. Mahatma Gandhi is the best known embodiment of this notion of ‘personal morality’ associated with a leader. One of Gandhi’s most enduring legacies that continuously reverberates through social life in India is that of moral purification and modesty of the self.⁶⁸ The most recent renunciation from the post as Chief Minister by Arvind Kejriwal, leader of the Aam Aadmi Party, has similarly been portrayed as a ‘sacrifice’ and as an indication of political and moral virtue (see Introduction).⁶⁹ In this context, Aruna’s own

⁶⁸ Gandhi’s ethics will be further developed throughout the thesis, particularly in Chapters Five and Six.

⁶⁹ Keriwal’s resignation has been portrayed as “a matter of political principle instead of settling down to milk the State. Renunciation is a powerful gesture in desi [national] politics”. “Blessed are the righteous: the political charisma of virtuousness” in *The Telegraph*, 13 March 2014 [accessed 4 April 2014] http://www.telegraphindia.com/1140313/jsp/opinion/story_18072391.jsp

sacrifice of bureaucratic privilege for rural simplicity can be read as lending legitimacy to her cause.

From the onset of the Right to Information movement, right through to the present day, Aruna is publicly recognized, and even venerated by many, as the principal figure of MKSS and NCPRI. It is Aruna who features prominently in most accounts of the RTI movement or of any other activities of MKSS and NCPRI. This sole attention to a singular figure can be explained both practically and symbolically: in practical terms, Aruna is effectively one of MKSS and NCPRI's most active members, representing their cause eloquently in a range of settings; symbolically, attention is focused on Aruna because she represents the publicly revered figure of a righteous leader who sacrificed privilege for the wider good. It was thus Aruna's trajectory from the high echelons of India's bureaucracy to the heart of rural Rajasthan, combined with the struggles and efforts of MKSS to confront corruption that had convinced many urbanites to support and expand the RTI movement.

The first significant antecedent to the formation of the NCPRI illustrates the high-ranking constitution of NCPRI. This was a meeting held in October 1995 at the Lal Bahadur Shastri National Academy of Administration, a government institute that trains all recruits to the elite higher civil services (Mander 2003: 157). Harsh Mander, then Deputy Director of the Academy of Administration, was, as he told me, an age-old friend of Aruna's. Similar to Aruna's career trajectory, Mander had begun his career in the Indian Administrative Service; however, the rampant corruption that he had found to be endemic in the governance system, prompted him to leave the civil service and become an anti-corruption activist. Over the years, Mander had visited MKSS in Rajasthan and had attended many of their events, which convinced him that MKSS "has struck upon something of national and international importance" (Baviskar 2007: 14). Mander became ever more committed to campaigning for right to information legislation. Prompted by the Director of the Academy of Administration, N.C. Saxena (who would later also become a founding member of NCPRI), Mander organised an RTI meeting at the Academy of Administration, inviting from his broad network of acquaintances that ranged from

activists, bureaucrats, lawyers, academics and administrators. Representative guests were Aruna and Nikhil from the MKSS. It was at this meeting that a Right to Information Bill began to be drafted. At this point it was decided that a national body must be set up to collectively formulate and draft a national RTI legislation (Singh 2011: 55). Many of the attendees at this meeting would become founding members of NCPRI, and the RTI Bill that began to be drafted in this meeting would shortly become known as the 'NCPRI draft'. This RTI Bill, as founding member and then convenor of NCPRI Shekhar Singh told me, was among the first pieces of legislation to be drafted entirely by 'civil society' actors.

In 1996, yet another high-powered meeting was held in the Press Council of India (Baviskar 2007; Puddephatt 2009; Singh 2011). The Press Council of India is a quasi-judicial body set up by Parliament to safeguard the freedom of the press and to maintain and improve the standards of the press. The then Chairperson of the Press Council, Justice P.B. Sawant, had been active in extending freedom of speech to a comprehensive Right to Information law (Singh 2011: 54). Being personally acquainted with Aruna, Justice Sawant had attended the first major *dharna* held by MKSS in Beawar in 1995 in solidarity with their cause. It was at this *dharna* that he had begun urging for a national campaign for a transparency law to be set up (Singh 2011: 54). By having the institutionalised and reputed Press Council of India on board in the campaign for the RTI, significance and salience was lent to the demand.

The meeting at the Press Council was attended by Delhi-based intelligentsia, including lawyers, judges, bureaucrats, editors, journalists, academics and activists. Some of the prominent participants included editors of leading English and Hindi newspapers such as Ajit Bhattacharji and Prabhash Joshi; retired Judges such as Justice P.B. Sawant from the Supreme Court and Justice H. Suresh from the High Court; lawyers, including the then Attorney General and renowned Supreme Court lawyer Prashant Bhushan; activists such as Medha Patkar, 'leader' of the Narmada Bachao Andolan; civil servants such as the Chief Secretary of the state of Madhya Pradesh; politicians such as the ex-prime minister of India V.P.Singh, and Chief Minister of Madhya Pradesh, Digvijay Singh; and various other such eminent

individuals (Puddephatt 2009: 24). It was in this meeting that the RTI Bill as it had been conceived in the National Academy of Administration was re-drafted and finalized.

Following these two crucial meetings – the first in the National Academy of Administration, the second in the Press Council of India – the NCPRI was formed on the back of the campaigning carried out by MKSS in Rajasthan, with the intention of strengthening and furthering their cause (Mishra 2003). Other founding members who did not attend the Press Council meeting, but who would play a crucial role in the NCPRI campaign, included S.R. Sankaram, a former bureaucrat who retired as Secretary of the Ministry of Rural Development in 1992, and Shailash Gandhi, entrepreneur-turned-RTI activist, who would later become an exemplary Central Information Commissioner (Baviskar 2007: 13). It was the backing of these two illustrious and prominent institutions that would give significant leverage and legitimacy to NCPRI and to their RTI Bill.

NCPRI was set up as a non-registered group with the principal aim of campaigning for national right to information legislation. Based on the MKSS model, it was resolved that NCPRI would not receive institutional funding, either from India or from abroad, and instead rely entirely on individual contributions and donations. The official structure of NCPRI is constituted by a working committee of maximum 21 members, which makes policy decisions and raises resources. The working committee nominates a campaign committee, comprised of people with a background in RTI-related activities. Every two years, the working committee selects one or two convenors. The convenors and working committee are assisted by a full-time secretary, who is the only NCPRI member to receive a salary.⁷⁰ This composition is possible by virtue of its members having the financial means to afford voluntary association. They are active out of commitment and ideology and not out of economic necessity. Compared to MKSS, where the rural members depend on their

⁷⁰ This was the structure of NCPRI at the time of my fieldwork. In the meantime, this structure has changed. In 2013 NCPRI held a convention in Hyderabad, wherein the structure of NCPRI was reformed, now constituted by ‘state campaign committees’ and ‘national campaign committees’. They now also have seven rather than two convenors.

wages for subsistence, members of NCPRI have the flexibility and leisure to move between their engagement with NCPRI and their respective positions of privilege.

Beside the ‘senior’ members, there are also a number of ‘base’ members that make up the NCPRI membership. Base members I identify as those who do most of the organisational and logistical work of NCPRI. This is in contrast to the senior members who lend symbolic credence to NCPRI through their high status and connections to decisive decision-makers, yet are not active in practical activities. The base members are all based in Delhi, and are typically aged in their 20s or 30s. For reasons of anonymity, I do not spell out here their specific backgrounds, but most of these members are of middle class backgrounds (defined here in terms of education and levels of mobility) and work in the field of social work, in the broadest sense of the term (including NGOs, academia, journalism). When asked why they joined NCPRI, all of these base members told me that it was because of their admiration for the work of MKSS.

The very strength of NCPRI lay from the onset in its illustrious membership – those members often referred to within NCPRI as the ‘senior’ members. These senior members were in a position to promote and push the proposed RTI legislation in their respective fields and thus to broaden the spectrum of engagement. As Mander and Joshi (1999), both members of NCPRI themselves, recount, each member of NCPRI played a significant role in pressing for the RTI in their spheres of influence: the serving civil servants and activist lawyers were particularly crucial in working out the specifics of the drafting and operationalisation of the RTI; members from the press, such as journalists and retired editors, used their platform of the media to build up public opinion on the importance of a RTI legislation; the academics of the NCPRI expanded the debates of transparency to questions of the nature of democracy. With many members familiar with the proceedings of bureaucracy and savvy about legal technicalities, NCPRI members collectively were engaged in tactical lobbying. As Shekhar Singh recounts, NCPRI could successfully agitate at multiple levels, including by regularly briefing media; by gathering support amongst senior civil servants and other “prominent citizens”; and, not least, by meeting and

appealing to the Prime Minister and other political leaders (Singh 2011: 61-62).

NCPRI in action for the RTI

Made up of such prominent individuals, NCPRI set about campaigning for RTI. The first action taken by NCPRI in 1996 was to send its draft RTI Bill to the Government of India (Mishra 2003). With the backing of illustrious institutions and individuals, the government had to attend to the demands of NCPRI. The government responded seemingly in favour of NCPRI's demands by constituting a working group, chaired by consumer activist H.D. Shourie. The Shourie Committee was to examine the 'NCPRI draft' and make appropriate amendments. However, the revised Bill finally submitted by the Committee to the government was a severely watered-down version of the original NCPRI draft. In response to NCPRI's sustained lobbying, various political parties had pledged their support to a Right to Information law, but in the corridors of actual decision-making the law was evidently being greeted with hostility (Mishra 2003: 27). Although formally the government spoke in favour of a transparency law, it was becoming increasingly evident to members of NCPRI that there was resistance from a range of political leaders and bureaucrats (Singh 2011: 59).

A breakthrough seemed in view when in 1999 one cabinet minister ordered access to information in his Ministry (Singh 2011: 59). However, the Prime Minister immediately reversed this order. At this, Prashant Bhushan, NCPRI member and noted Supreme Court lawyer, filed a petition in the Supreme Court, challenging the Prime Minister's right to reverse a minister's order. After two years of litigation, this resulted in the Freedom of Information Act, 2002. At first sight, in the words of Singh, this Act appeared to signify "that the will of the people, supported by the might of the Supreme Court of India, had finally prevailed and the representatives of the people had enacted the required law" (Singh 2011: 60). However, this hope was soon to be shattered, for the Freedom of Information Act was not only severely

watered-down, but it was never to be implemented.

After years of continuous impasse, suddenly the political climate shifted drastically in favour of NCPRI: in 2004, the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance Government replaced the National Democratic Alliance led by the right-wing BJP. The newly formed Congress-led government promised in its manifesto (the ‘Common Minimum Programme’) that: “The Right to Information Act will be made more progressive, participatory and meaningful”.⁷¹ This favourable development in the Congress election manifesto did not develop entirely serendipitously, but can be linked to NCPRI’s involvement. As a senior member of NCPRI recounted to me, prior to the elections in 2004, NCPRI had been in direct contact with crucial members of the Congress Party and not least with the Chairperson of the Party, Sonia Gandhi. According to this account, the Congress Party had been aware of the heightened demand for Right to Information legislation throughout the country, and had consulted NCPRI for guidance during its election campaign. Shortly before the elections, a Congress Party leader had called certain members of NCPRI, asking them to draft a statement on the RTI law that the Congress could include in their election manifesto. Contrary to expectations, according to the senior member, the very statement drafted by NCPRI became part of the Common Minimum Programme. It was therefore directly out of consultation with NCPRI that transparency was given primacy in the Congress election manifesto (this account of NCPRI’s role in the formulation of the Congress election manifesto is also reported by Baviskar 2007: 19; Chopra 2011: 96; Puddephat 2009: 25). The association between the Congress and NCPRI is corroborated by Yamini Aiyar, director of the Accountability Initiative at the Centre for Policy Research, who said in this context: “The Congress interacted with MKSS [i.e. NCPRI] activists when preparing its manifesto for elections; as a result, the intention to legislate on a right to information went into the manifesto” (Dubochet 2011: 2).

In order to oversee the implementation of the government’s Common Minimum Programme, the National Advisory Council (NAC) was set up, with Sonia Gandhi as

⁷¹ “National Common Minimum Programme of the Government of India, May 2004” in *Dr Manmohan Singh: Prime Minister of India* [accessed 3 November 2013] <http://pmindia.nic.in/cmp.pdf>

its Chairperson. Acting as the interface between expert ‘civil society’ and the government, the task of NAC, as its website proclaims, is “to provide inputs in the formulation of policy by the Government and to provide support to the Government in its legislative business”.⁷² NAC occupies the ambivalent position of being both within and outside of the conventional boundaries of the state. It is not part of the executive domain, yet it has the bargaining power to draft policies and to have these deliberated in government (Chopra 2011). Crucially, three members of the NCPRI were selected to join the NAC, one of whom was Aruna Roy.⁷³ It was access to this semi-legitimate body that opened the floodgate for non-state actors to affect policy making.

Through the NAC that enjoyed bargaining power over crucial decision-makers – largely on account of Sonia Gandhi, who was also Chairperson of the Congress party and thus held direct sway over the Prime Minister – the NCPRI had a platform from which to push its Right to Information Bill anew to the government. As soon as the NAC was formed, NCPRI seized the window of opportunity and revamped a draft RTI Bill that it submitted to the NAC (Puddephatt 2009: 26; Singh 2011: 60).⁷⁴ Immediately following, Sonia Gandhi sent the NCPRI draft RTI Bill to the Prime Minister, calling him to urgently prioritize its enactment. It is allegedly standard procedure in the NAC, that if the Chairperson endorses a decision taken by the NAC members, she communicates this directly to the Prime Minister, who stands under moral compulsion to take action. In this period, the NAC became the official channel through which the specific demands, drafts, recommendations, and amendments by NCPRI were passed directly on to the government. Aruna Roy and the other NCPRI members who formed part of the NAC became the embodied interface between non-

⁷² “National Advisory Council” in *National Advisory Council of the Government of India* [accessed 12 May 2014] <http://www.nac.nic.in/>

⁷³ The other two NCPRI members to be included in NAC were N. C. Saxena, a bureaucrat, who while serving in the Planning Commission, had recommended in the 10th Five Year Plan that the administration make access to development-related information a legal entitlement; the other was Professor Jean Dreze, an economist and social activist, and leading figure in the campaign for the right to food and work (Puddephatt 2009: 26).

⁷⁴ For strategic purposes, NCPRI decided not to submit a new Bill altogether, but to make amendments to the already existing Freedom of Information Act (Singh 2011: 60). This draft had been sent for feedback to international fora such as the International Task Force on Transparency, initiated by Stiglitz as a part of the International Policy Dialogue, to which Shekhar Singh, founding members of NCPRI had connections (Baviskar 2007: 19).

state actors and the government.

However, even with the NAC as the ‘intermediary’, the government continued to oppose the passing of a transparency law. The months to follow saw NCPRI continuously using NAC as a platform from which to exert pressure on the government. It also intensified its campaigning and lobbying with political leaders and MPs. In these months, NCPRI members were able to establish a close rapport with the chairman of the parliamentary standing committee that would oversee the RTI Bill (Puddephatt 2009: 26).

According to an anecdote recounted to me by Shekhar Singh, the ultimate sway that NCPRI had over the government boiled down to Aruna Roy’s charisma.⁷⁵ Although many of the NCPRI members had contacts with high-ranking government officials, it was Aruna’s personality, and her credibility as a grassroots activist in Rajasthan, that had the final clout. According to this anecdote, it had been agreed by the government that the RTI Bill was going to be passed in the Parliamentary winter session of 2004. However, a few days before the end of the Parliamentary session the Bill had not yet been tabled and there were no signs of it happening. There was a sense amongst NCPRI that if the Bill was not passed in that session, it would linger on for many years to come. That is when Aruna employed her good rapport with previous Prime Minister V.P. Singh (in office as Prime Minister from 1989-1990). She rang him personally, urging him to put pressure on then current Prime Minister Manmohan Singh. Shekhar recounts that it was Aruna’s charisma, and the esteem with which she was held in the ex-Prime Minister’s eyes, that convinced V.P. Singh to answer the phone call. Had it been any other member of NCPRI, the phone call would in most likelihood have gone unanswered. V.P. Singh organised a meeting with the Prime Minister for the very next day, which Aruna, Shekhar and Nikhil attended. Collectively they requested the Prime Minister to ensure that the RTI Bill be presented to Parliament. On the following day the Bill was tabled before Parliament.

However, the RTI Bill that was finally introduced in Parliament in December 2004,

⁷⁵ The importance of charismatic authority has been famously laid out by Weber who defines such leaders as displaying “exceptional sanctity, heroism or exemplary character” (Weber 1978: 215).

was again severely diluted and had omitted some of the critical clauses that had been recommended by NCPRI and endorsed by NAC (Puddaephatt 2009: 26; Singh 2011: 62). This caused outrage amongst NCPRI and other groups involved in fighting for the RTI, who exerted pressure on the government to review the changes. The NAC also reacted by sending a letter to the Prime Minister, expressing the Council's unanimous support of the original recommendations (Singh 2011: 62). This pressure resulted in the RTI Bill getting referred to a Parliamentary Standing Committee, before which NCPRI members were invited to depose. Allegedly it is thanks to NCPRI's convincing arguments before the Parliamentary Standing Committee and its previous sustained lobbying amongst committee members, that most of their provisions were eventually reintroduced (Puddaephatt 2009: 26; Singh 2011: 62). The Right to Information Act was passed by Parliament in May 2005 and finally notified on 13 October 2005. India's Right to Information Act is considered among the most progressive pieces of transparency legislation in the world.

Temporality of the Political Landscape

As this account of NCPRI suggests, and as will be explored in closer detail below, it was largely the social positioning of members of NCPRI that contributed to the enactment of the RTI.⁷⁶ However, the broader political landscape in which they were located must also be considered in order to grasp more comprehensively the overlapping forces behind the enactment of the transparency legislation. While the astute campaigning and lobbying by members of NCPRI without doubt played a crucial role, there were also elements of contingency and timely opportunities in their demand.⁷⁷ It is the temporality of the RTI movement that is briefly explored here.

⁷⁶ I thank Luke Heslop for pointing out the importance of considering the aspect of temporality in my analysis of the RTI movement.

⁷⁷ For a comprehensive study on the multiple forces behind the enactment of India's Right to Information, see Sharma. As he notes, the 'dominant narrative' on the enactment of the RTI focuses exclusively on the grassroots elements of the movement, presenting it thus as an entirely 'home-grown' process and as having no external influences (Sharma 2012a: 240). Accordingly, the role of international actors and processes in the account of the evolution of the RTI Act are widely 'silenced'.

Even before the emergence of NCPRI, or MKSS for that matter, corruption had been a theme in political discussions in India. Corruption had been a theme of public vilification throughout most of Independent India's history, with allegations of scandals already plaguing India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru's government (Jenkins 2007: 58).⁷⁸ Over the years, corruption became ever more extortionate, reaching a climax with the Bofors scandal in the 1980s and 1990s that implicated Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, and which saw kickbacks in defence procurement on a scale unprecedented in India. It was out of this political climate of built-up discontent with corruption that NCPRI had been formed and which gave their demand for a Right to Information law wider support and approval. It was embeddedness in a wider anti-corruption climate that lent credence to their demand for the Right to Information.

Beyond the national mood against corruption, the political constellations at an international level also provided favourable conditions for the enactment of transparency legislation. The enactment of the Right to Information in India coincided with a period marked by heightened promotion of 'good governance' in global development discourse. Leading transnational organisations, such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and Transparency International, foreground notions of efficiency, accountability and transparency, and prescribe a set of technical prerequisites as the solution to many deficiencies and irregularities within public institutions. The proliferation of agendas of good governance in development discourse and practice is perceived to be an outcome of shifting trends that accumulated in the 1980s and 1990s. Corbridge et al. (2005) point out that the inception of good governance advancements dates back to the debt crisis of the 1980s. This crisis was widely condemned as being a result of state failures, largely due to practices of government misrule such as rent-seeking and other forms of corruption (Kiely 1998). Politicians as representatives of the state were thus conceived of as impediments to a prospering market and, consequently, to effective development. With the World Bank at the forefront, the initial stages of the promotion of good governance saw the advancement of a set of structural adjustment

⁷⁸ Jenkins notes that two of Nehru's ministers resigned because of allegations of corruption and that Nehru himself was accused of indulging corrupt allies (Jenkins 2007: 58).

programmes that aimed to free the market from the burdensome control of government.⁷⁹

In the context of India, the liberalisation of its market in the early 1990s marked a heightened point in the promotion of good governance agendas. Facing an economic crisis, various stabilisation and structural adjustment plans were implemented to enliven the market. In 1991, the World Bank supported India's economic policy reforms through a 'structural adjustment operation' (SAL) worth \$500 million.⁸⁰ A range of conditions, in line with the Bank's agenda, accompanied the SAL, including the liberalisation of trade, by promoting exports, abolishing import licensing and introducing cuts in subsidies. Beyond the Bank's conditions-tied loans, the government of India introduced its own economic reforms with the incentive of 'slimming down' the state and its welfare institutions by emphasising managerial forms of economic rationality and cost-benefit. It was within this wider configuration in development discourse, with transparency and accountability high on the development agenda, that the pressure to enact the Right to Information in India had sway over the government.

Blurring Boundaries

The account of NCPRI, as we noted, recounts the trajectory of an organisation that carried out its campaign for the right to information principally through bureaucratic jockeying and technical manoeuvring. Being constituted by high-ranking individuals with contacts to influential figures within the polity, NCPRI could push for the enactment of transparency legislation through its connections within the 'system'. The NCPRI story is essentially a story of social networks and social capital. As we

⁷⁹ Since 1999, the World Bank has shifted its approach from Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAP) to Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSP). PRSP are distinct from SAPs in that they no longer focus exclusively on macroeconomics but include microeconomics and social policies oriented towards poverty reduction. Principles guiding PRSPs include participation by civil society, a poor-oriented approach, and long-term perspective for poverty reduction.

⁸⁰ "Structural Adjustment in India" in the *World Bank Group*, 2012 [accessed 3 May 2014] <http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/PROJECTS/0,,contentMDK:20120705~menuPK:51557~pagePK:41367~piPK:51533~theSitePK:40941,00.html>

noted, NCPRI was called into existence by high-ranking individuals who were known to Aruna through her previous career in the administrative services. Aruna's time serving in the highest tiers of India's bureaucracy had provided her with contacts and connections to prominent individuals and to influential acquaintances. On top of this, it was Aruna's charismatic personality that had mustered support amongst differently placed individuals. People who had been drawn to Aruna and to the work of MKSS, and who had their own commitment to the enactment of transparency laws, became the founding members of NCPRI. These members in turn had access to further influential figures within the polity, who could be appealed to in their demand for the Right to Information. NCPRI was thus constituted by a social network of individuals with privileged access to influential resources and to high-level decision-making.

The forms of campaigning of NCPRI – that constituted primarily meetings, reports, councils and parliamentary proceedings with government officials and politicians – suggest that the separation between 'civil society' and the state is more blurry than is commonly presumed in abstract theories of civil society. In the Introduction, we noted that traditional scholarship on civil society is predicated upon a dichotomisation of state and society. By contrast, the case of NCPRI illustrates that so-called 'civil society' actors are interlinked with state actors in numerous ways, either by virtue of having once been state functionaries themselves or by having contacts and exposure to influential figures in the government. Unlike the campaigning of MKSS that agitated for the Right to Information largely outside the state structures, NCPRI lobbied for it from within through its networks and connections. The type of work that NCPRI engaged in suggests, as does Mitchell, that the boundary between the state and society is "elusive, porous and mobile" (Mitchell 1991: 77) and that actors cut across both fields.

That boundaries between 'civil society' and the state are ambiguous and permeable has been noted by others, such as White who argues that the separation between NGOs and the state is largely 'mythic'. According to White's findings in Bangladesh, the two realms are often closely linked "through family ties, contracting

relationships and an often overlapping dependence on foreign donors” (White 1999, cited in Lewis 2004: 313). Others, such as Chandhoke, note the blurriness between ‘civil society’ and the state by focusing on the patronage relations that interlink the two (Chandhoke 2002, cited in Lewis 2004: 319). This view maintains that informal and personal mechanisms of a type of ‘patron-client system’ bring ‘civil society’ actors and state actors into a mutually obligatory arrangement.⁸¹

The social networks that connect members of NCPRI to important figures in the government similarly indicate a blurring of the boundaries between ‘civil society’ and the state. Through social networks, vertical social relations exist between NCPRI and state actors, thereby collapsing a stark separation between the two realms. The social networks that NCPRI has access to bring it in direct contact with state actors, which in turn lends significance to its demand. In fact, the effectiveness of NCPRI in pushing for the enactment of the RTI Act can be accounted for in large part by its embeddedness in influential social networks. Through such social networks, NCPRI blurs the boundaries between itself and the state and is thus able to push for its demands in crucial decision-making spaces.

Social networks, as several social movement theorists have noted (Diani 1997, 2003; Knoke and Wisely 1994; McAdam 2003; Snow et al. 1980), are a pivotal component of social movements. Social movement literature often correlates the impact that a social movement has with the degree in which it is embedded in a network. What is taken as decisive in the literature on social networks is the degree of contact by the social movement actors with elite circles. As Knoke and Wisely (1994) point out, it is the social movement’s leaders’ integration among political elites that accounts for the overall influence of a social movement. When movement actors are firmly integrated in social networks and are linked to influential figures, they have greater

⁸¹ Another study on the blurred boundaries between state and society is presented by Gupta. His ethnography shows how lower-level bureaucrats collapse the distinction between their roles as public servants and as private citizens, so that “[o]ne has a better chance of finding them at the roadside tea stalls and in their homes than in their offices” (Gupta 1995: 384). The Weberian notion of the rationalised and autonomous bureaucracy as clearly distinct from society does not play out in the everyday operations of the state in India. Furthermore, the assumption that civil society exists as a mutually exclusive social space does not capture the diverse ‘social groupings’ that take place in India (Gutpa 1995: 393; 2012: 107).

influence over significant decision-makers, thereby significantly increasing their impact. NCPRI's installation in an influential social network comprised of Delhi-based intelligentsia – premised largely on Aruna's prior social ties – is a significant factor affecting its levels of influence. While the 'dominant narrative' (Sharma 2012a) credits mainly the grassroots campaigning of MKSS for the enactment of the Right to Information Act, the story of NCPRI suggests that it was advantageous positioning in a social network that also contributed significantly.

According to social movement theorists, the key element that enables certain social movement actors to position themselves centrally in a network and to build up strong linkages is their 'social capital' ties. Through social capital, actors get embedded in relationships and networks of mutual acquaintance, and it is through such social relations that "resources circulate, and trust and norms are generated and reproduced" (Diani 1997: 133). Accordingly, a social movement's impact is greater, the broader the range of its social capital ties.⁸²

Conceptualisations of social capital are helpful in understanding the dynamics of NCPRI, and in noting the ways in which they blur the boundaries between themselves as non-state actors and the state. In the story of NCPRI, we noted social capital ties working through the various layers of engagement of NCPRI. The social capital of the members of NCPRI gives them access to advantageous resources,

⁸² Social capital as a concept has featured in the analysis of many social scientists who examine the productivity of resources, particularly intangible resources to which certain individuals or groups have access. Typically, social capital refers to the benefits that actors can derive from their web of social relationships and ties to social structures. Bourdieu and Wacquant famously define social capital as "the sum of the resources, actual or virtual, that accrue to an individual or a group by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition" (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 119). Their notion of social capital is associated with class, with a focus on how dominant classes retain their positions and thereby reproduce social structures (Bourdieu 1986). Others have ascribed a less instrumental and more productive force to social capital, arguing that social networks help to bond and bridge people (Dekker and Uslaner 2001), or to provide crucial information, influence and solidarity (Adler and Kwon 2002). Putnam conceives of social capital as a constructive element in social relations that comprise "features of social life – networks, norms and trust – that enable participants to act together more effectively to pursue shared goals" (Putnam 1993: 664). Such a conceptualisation of social capital views it as a facilitating force that enables greater participation and communication. Coleman similarly sees social capital as something that generates networks of relationships, reciprocity and trust and that thereby "facilitates certain actions of actors" (Coleman 1988: 98). Whatever view on social capital is taken, what they all have in common is that they identify social capital as a resource embedded in social structures that can be used and mobilised for purposive action.

including contacts, social standing, a diversity of platforms, know-how on technical proceedings, familiarity in bureaucratic manoeuvring, legal expertise, etc. All of these resources together enable members of NCPRI to gain access to influential figures in the bureaucracy and the government and to permeate political decision-making processes. Through such means, they obscure their role as social movement actors and their role in actual law-making. These roles are further confounded by the diverse backgrounds of the NCPRI members – bureaucrats, civil servants, lawyers, judges, journalists, editors, academics, activists – that facilitate access to crucial decision-making spaces.

It is thus the social capital enjoyed by members of NCPRI that enabled their access to social networks, which in turn gave them entry into the bureaucratic and governmental realm. Through such processes, the boundaries between NCPRI as non-state actors and the state were blurred. Herewith, NCPRI resembles more the category of civil society as defined by Gramsci (2006 [1948]), that sees civil society as a sphere that is separate and yet simultaneously enmeshed with the state. According to Gramsci, through struggles for power among different interest groups, civil society blurred the boundaries between state and society (Lewis 2010: 171). In this light, civil society was the public sphere that gained concessions from the bourgeois state, and wherein bourgeois ‘hegemony’ was reproduced in cultural life.

Conclusion

What emerges out of the story of NCPRI, read in conjunction with the previous chapter on MKSS, is the analogous nature of the two organisations. Both organisations are indistinguishable from each other in terms of their objectives, their ideological inclinations and some of their membership. With the leadership overlapping in both organisations, they are in fact the same organisation that faces different directions. MKSS is presented as a people’s organisation that carries out radical politics from the ground up, and that exerts pressure on the government by means of collective citizen action. By contrast, NCPRI is known to consist of well-

established and influential members, who have a degree of bargaining power over crucial decision-makers. It is through the platform of NCPRI that the demands of MKSS that arise at the ground level are pushed forward. Simultaneously, it is the renowned grassroots actions of MKSS that lend credibility to NCPRI. Both organisations are thus interwoven in a dialectical relationship.

Following Weber's notion of 'politics as vocation', MKSS can be thought of as the 'ethic of ultimate end', whilst NCPRI represents the 'ethic of responsibility'. The existence of NCPRI allows the idea of MKSS as an authentic movement to persevere, whereby both constitute the same social movement, with one representing the technical aspects, and the other the ideal. Combined they complement each other, leading to the overall success of the RTI movement. MKSS needs the existence of NCPRI, just as NCPRI relies on the ideal of MKSS, whereby both together constitute the "strong and slow boring of hard boards", which, as Weber notes, is the prerequisite for politics as a vocation.

Weber, in highlighting the tension between the two types of ethic that he identified, does not conclude that they are entirely incommensurable. On the contrary, he holds that individuals who have a true 'calling for politics' can bring passion, responsibility and proportion into congruence. A person with a calling for politics will understand that one type of ethic cannot exist without the other, and that passion or responsibility in and of themselves lead nowhere. An ethic of ultimate ends and an ethic of responsibility are dialectically intertwined. Weber describes it as "immensely moving" when "a *mature* man – no matter whether old or young in years – is aware of a responsibility for the consequences of his conduct and really feels such responsibility with heart and soul" (Weber 1919: 33 (emphasis in original)).

Expanding on Brecht's (1985 [1943]) moral in *The Good Person of Szechwan*, where virtuous and 'good' actions can only survive if protected by a ruthless alter ego, NCPRI can be thought of – with some literary exaggeration – as MKSS's alter ego. While MKSS embodies the grassroots elements, and thus the virtues of purity and simplicity, engagement in the technical aspects of campaigning and lobbying is left

to NCPRI. In this light, NCPRI is the other end of the spectrum of the RTI movement; it is an extension of MKSS, representing the high-brow end of the movement. Connections and networks, as the social movement literature suggests, are crucial for a social movement, for which NCPRI was *compelled* to come into existence in order for MKSS's demands to have an impact. The grassroots demands of MKSS depended on the social networks of NCPRI; simultaneously, NCPRI's social networks attained force and recognition because of MKSS's work on the ground. The dialectical interdependence of both MKSS and NCPRI symbolise the marriage of an ethic of responsibility and an ethic of ultimate ends as Weber would have it, and thus constitute the success of the RTI movement.

These inherent tensions between ideals and practice in a social movement, as embodied (and resolved) in the dual form of MKSS and NCPRI, will become all the more evident in the Lokpal anti-corruption agitation that will be the focus of attention in the following chapters. The Lokpal agitation set in motion a series of heightened debates and controversies as to the meaning of a social movement, and what the degree of separation between 'civil society' and 'politics' should, or could, be. Underlying the Lokpal agitation, and, consequently, underlying the following chapters, there was inherent tension as to what anti-corruption activism entails. The following chapter begins to explore this tension by describing the emergence of the Lokpal agitation and the role played by MKSS and NCPRI in it.

3. Competing to Speak for ‘Civil Society’

On 5 April 2011 Anna Hazare, a veteran anti-corruption activist, began his ‘fast onto death’ in Jantar Mantar, the demarcated area for protest in central New Delhi. He was demanding the speedy enactment of the Jan Lokpal Bill – an independent ombudsman bill.⁸³ Hunger strikes are a popular political tactic in much of Indian social activism and invoke the memory of those famously undertaken by Mahatma Gandhi.⁸⁴ Anna Hazare’s hunger strike, combined with his Gandhian attire of white clothes and white cap, quickly lent him the honorary title of the ‘new Gandhi’. With his air of Gandhian austerity and his simple anti-corruption message, Anna Hazare’s fast unexpectedly unleashed a nation-wide mass movement. Thousands of people flocked to Jantar Mantar to gather around the new fasting ‘Gandhi’. Within days the anti-corruption agitation being staged in New Delhi became the talk of the town, with eminent public figures even coming out in support of Anna Hazare, not least a number of Bollywood stars and legendary spiritual gurus. Across the country, hunger

⁸³ As I have indicated in the Introduction, civil society is analytically a loaded and complex category, whereby its normative connotations are generally far removed from the actual ways in which civil society operates on the ground. For this reason, the term needs to be employed with caution. However, drawing on the term as a ‘category of practice’, in this chapter I use ‘civil society’ as a category through which the actors defined themselves. The extensive invocation of the term in this chapter reflects the broad use of the term as it appeared during the Lokpal agitation.

⁸⁴ Some of the most publicised hunger strikes in recent years have included those of Irom Sharmila, who has been on a continuous hunger strike since 2000, demanding the repeal of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) in the North East. The imposition of AFSPA has been described as synonymous to militarization, leading to gross civil and political rights violations including enforced disappearances, extra-judicial execution, torture, inhuman and degrading treatment, rape and other forms of sexual violence. Sharmila has been in solitary confinement in a hospital prison, on and off, for over 13 years, where the doctors force-feed her a liquid diet. Sharmila is charged with attempted suicide — a crime carrying a one-year prison sentence. She is released every year on the completion of her sentence, but is arrested again for attempting to commit suicide as she resumes her fast, refusing even liquids. Another social activist famous for her hunger strikes is Medha Patkar who is best known for her active role in the Narmada Bachao Andolan. Patkar has carried out several hunger strikes on a range of issues, such as slum demolitions and the construction of dams.

strikes and other forms of protests, such as candle-lit vigils, were orchestrated in major cities in solidarity with Anna Hazare.

A significant explanation for the instant garnering of wide-scale support for Anna Hazare and his demand for an anti-corruption Jan Lokpal Bill, was that he had tapped into many people's long-simmering grievances against corrupt politicians. Multiple corruption scandals at the highest levels of government had recently hit the headlines in both national and vernacular newspapers. Amongst the most extraordinary of scams, and one that has been called India's largest corruption scandal of all times, there was the 'telecom scandal'. This had involved the deliberate underselling of telecom licences by the Ministry of Telecommunications, costing the exchequer allegedly over 1.76 *lakh crore* rupees (£24 billion) in potential revenues.⁸⁵ Another major scam to receive widespread media coverage was the 2010 Delhi Commonwealth Games that had seen exorbitant misappropriation of funds. Although corruption is endemic to the everyday practices of politics in India, the recent extortion of public funds to line the pockets of senior officials and cabinet ministers had hit a public nerve amongst many Indians. 'Team Anna' – as media coined the group organised around Anna Hazare – and its demand for anti-corruption legislation, had tapped into this very nerve.⁸⁶

Team Anna's success in mobilizing public indignation with corrupt politicians lay in its adept employment of social media and PR campaigns. Only days before Anna Hazare's fast, his team had sent out SMS messages at random, asking people to give a 'missed call' on a certain number to express their solidarity. More than two *crore* such missed calls were registered.⁸⁷ Team Anna's use of platforms for social networking such as Twitter and Facebook brought them regular followers and more than 800,000 Facebook 'friends' within a few days (at the moment of writing this,

⁸⁵ *Lakh* and *crore* are units of measure used in South Asia; *lakh* equals one hundred thousand, while *crore* equals ten million.

⁸⁶ Officially the civil society formation around Anna Hazare was called 'India Against Corruption' (IAC). However, throughout this thesis I refer to them as 'Team Anna', as they were widely and publicly known.

⁸⁷ Garnering support for the enactment of the Lokpal bill, Team Anna launched a unique drive where supporters of the movement could give a missed call to 022-61550789 to express their support. It was described as a national missed call drive to help citizens raise their voice against corruption.

the number of Facebook ‘friends’ of Anna Hazare has reached 1.3 million).⁸⁸ Such social media targeted mainly urban-based youth, which accounted for Team Anna’s largely middle-class constituency.

Beyond electronic media, Team Anna brought high visibility to their campaign by printing messages on caps, t-shirts, placards and banners. Throughout cities and towns in this period, many people could be found wearing the caps that marked the Anna Hazare campaign: white politician-style caps (as worn iconically by Gandhi and Nehru) with the letters ‘*mai Anna hu*’ (I am Anna). Shop keepers, bus drivers, and college students could be seen with this new accessory to their daily attire. Anna Hazare in those days was everywhere.



Figure 3 Protesters wearing the distinctive ‘Anna cap’

Media also played a significant role in prompting the wide scale support for Team Anna’s cause and for amplifying the Lokpal *tamasha* (spectacle or phenomenon).⁸⁹ In a media-saturated political culture, Anna Hazare with his Gandhian appearance

⁸⁸ 28 October 2013

⁸⁹ *Tamasha* is a Hindi word used to describe interchangeably a spectacle, an entertainment, a phenomenon, a farce. It is a word that cropped up often, even in English media, during the height of the Lokpal agitation to describe the dramas that ensued around the demands for an anti-corruption ombudsman.

presented an irresistible figure. His anti-corruption message targeting politicians was a ‘sexy story’ for a media ravenous to lay into the faults and misdeeds of the political class. The overall euphoria was caught in statements such as calling the Lokpal agitation ‘India’s second Independence struggle’, ‘South Asia’s Tahrir Square’ or ‘an inflection point in India’s history’. Anna Hazare was generously dubbed the ‘anti-corruption crusader’ and his movement demanding the Jan Lokpal Bill was often eulogized as a ‘crusade’. News channels’ ratings – particularly those of national English-language channels – shot up with coverage of Anna Hazare’s dramatic fast, with one TV channel continuously broadcasting the fast at Jantar Mantar twenty-four seven. Propelled by an excitable media, Hazare brought corruption onto the centre-stage of public discussions.

The buzz around Anna Hazare and his Jan Lokpal Bill spilled well beyond the national borders and caught the attention of international news media. The world looked on as the new Gandhian anti-corruption crusader took on corrupt politicians and brought people around India out into the streets. *The Guardian*, for instance, reported regularly on the events occurring around Anna Hazare, with columns such as this:

The Jantar Mantar in New Delhi is a hot favourite of the average tourist in the summer. But since 5 April 2011, the astronomical observation site has become a focus of an anti-corruption campaign that has never been seen before, thanks to Anna Hazare. After decades of utter frustration, this one man, a veteran Gandhian, has emerged as the champion for tackling the menace of corruption. His crusade is a measure of the pent-up anger, especially among the young, springing from the manner in which politicians of all hues are taking the country for a ride through misuse of office and naked corruption. With the gap between the haves and have-nots widening, there is a sense of frustration among the diminishing tribe of honest Indians which is ready to explode... Over the past six decades, the four pillars of democracy, the legislature, judiciary, executive and the press, have all developed serious problems in India.⁹⁰

⁹⁰ “Waking India – one man’s campaign against corruption” in *The Guardian*, 8 April 2011 [accessed 20 November 2012] <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2011/apr/08/india-campaign-corruption-anna-hazare>

This chapter explores the phenomenon of this anti-corruption movement that exploded in 2011. MKSS and NCPRI, with whom I had already been doing research for a few months, found themselves right in the middle of the nation-wide agitation around Anna Hazare's Lokpal Bill. It is from the perspective of MKSS and NCPRI that I here approach the key episodes of the Lokpal agitation. As examined in the previous two chapters, MKSS and NCPRI combined had gained nation-wide standing for being the leading activist force behind the enactment of the national Right to Information Act 2005, which aims at curbing corruption through increased transparency. With questions of transparency and accountability in matters of governance their primary focus, members of MKSS/NCPRI soon became involved in the Lokpal agitation, initially under the banner of MKSS but thereafter in the name of NCPRI.⁹¹ However, with the emergence of Team Anna on to the anti-corruption playing-field and with the media hype around them, MKSS/NCPRI was relegated to a mere side role. It was no longer a protagonist in the field of transparency, but had to compete for recognition against the widely popular Anna Hazare.

This chapter examines how MKSS/NCPRI positioned itself in the anti-corruption movement that swept the country throughout most of 2011. It explores the heated public upheavals and contentious debates that arose in conjunction with the demands to set up a law for an anti-corruption ombudsman. MKSS/NCPRI, being in disagreement with Team Anna's demands and forms of protest, came up with its own public responses and alternatives, thereby confounding the debates and representing an alternative 'civil society voice'. Rather than being united in a demand for an anti-corruption Lokpal, 'civil society' was presented widely as being fraught with tension and competition. There were fervent debates as to what constitutes 'civil society' engagement, what the role of democratic institutions is and how much power should be vested in an anti-corruption ombudsman. These disagreements were ultimately about conflicting ideas of democratic process and procedure and diverging

⁹¹ A note of clarification to the reader: in the very early days of the Lokpal agitation, it was not yet apparent whether action would be taken under the banner of MKSS or NCPRI. It is for this reason that at this point of the chapter, reference is made to 'MKSS/NCPRI'. However, as the positioning clarified over the duration of the Lokpal agitation, so the overlapping terminology of the two organisations will be clarified at a later stage of this chapter.

expectations of statecraft. It is this disagreement and competition within ‘civil society’ that frames this chapter.

The competition between Team Anna and MKSS/NCPRI amounted to a competition over the category of ‘civil society’. The contested terrain of the Lokpal agitation made the category of ‘civil society’ up for grabs. Each group claimed ownership over the term, insisting to be better suited to speak on behalf of ‘civil society’. This upholds Fisher’s definition of civil society not as a sector that either contests or supports the aims of governments but as a “vector of agonistic contentions over governmental relations” (Gordon 1991, cited in Fisher 2010: 255). In this conceptualisation, civil society is not an institution, but a process that grows through a fuelling of ongoing contentions. The relationship between MKSS/NCPRI and Team Anna was premised on an oppositional stance, with each one claiming to represent a more ‘authentic’ form of ‘civil society’. Lewis notes similar oppositional forces in the identification processes of activists, who define themselves as constituting a “less compromised, ‘purer’ form of political or social action” in contrast to international aid and the NGO world (Lewis 2010: 161). Categories such as ‘civil society’ and ‘activism’, are value-loaded and evaluative, whereby each practitioner denies having anything in common with the other (Gellner 2010: 3). It is such a competitive and fragmented arena of civil society that explains the competitive relationship between MKSS/NCPRI and Team Anna.

The ethnographic material in this chapter suggests that competition, with the frictions and contestations that it engenders, provides opportunities for a reinforcement of political positions and commitments. A competitive playing field brings together conflicting opponents who contend with one another for recognition. Consequently, through such processes, positions and commitments can be fashioned and rearticulated. The Lokpal agitation gave rise to friction between ‘civil society’ actors otherwise working for similar ends, leading to tension and competition on what constitutes democratic process and procedure. In other words, while MKSS/NCPRI shared the overall aspiration with Team Anna of fighting corruption from structures of governance, they were split on the means of getting there. This fissure between the

two ‘civil society’ groups, as we will explore, came into being through processes of differentiation and ‘othering’. As it entered into a relationship of confrontation with Team Anna, MKSS/NCPRI consolidated its position on how to campaign for anti-corruption legislation. As I discussed in the introduction of this thesis, identity is constituted circumstantially and in relation to others.

The chapter is divided into two parts. The first part provides an overview of the main occurrences around the Lokpal agitation, and MKSS/NCPRI’s response. Through written articles and public presentations MKSS/NCPRI, particularly its leadership, established what they deemed to be the undemocratic and unrepresentative nature of their contender’s politics. This in turn enabled them to define their own understandings of democratic processes and ‘civil society’ engagement. The second part of the chapter provides a deeper exploration of the competition between the two main ‘civil society’ organisations involved in the Lokpal agitation. The ethnographic account shows that competition was a crucial driving force behind the campaign for anti-corruption legislation.

Publicised Discord: Team Anna as Undemocratic

The Lokpal agitation that became the sensation in Indian politics for months on end, had erupted relatively quickly. What emerged as a wide-scale national campaign had not been preceded with much public notification. It appeared as though from one day to the next, the entire country suddenly began talking about an anti-corruption Lokpal. Team Anna had only recently been formed, and Anna Hazare, although having a profile as a long-time anti-corruption and rural development activist in his state of Maharashtra, had never previously been a household name. Mobilisation in support for their Jan Lokpal Bill had only started a couple of weeks before Anna Hazare’s fast was scheduled. Although discussions on a Lokpal had been around in India for over 50 years – with the concept of a constitutional ombudsman first proposed in parliament in the early 1960s – they had been largely dormant of late, lacking political will or civil society initiative to push them. That Anna Hazare and

his team would become the face of the demand for a Lokpal Bill had not been foreseeable.

The relative abruptness with which the Lokpal agitation had escalated caught most people off guard, including members of MKSS and NCPRI. Although usually at the forefront in public discussions around corruption, and considered pioneers in the field of campaigning for transparency laws, this upheaval had excluded MKSS/NCPRI. Because the Lokpal agitation had caught MKSS/NCPRI unprepared, their initial reaction came in somewhat disjointed ways. From the onset, Aruna and Nikhil, the leaders of MKSS/NCPRI, had been deeply disturbed by Anna Hazare and his Jan Lokpal Bill. However because of the speed and scale with which events had happened, they did not conduct public events or activities of direct action, as they typically had been doing when campaigning for an issue, nor did they discuss as a collective the positions that MKSS/NCPRI would take. Rather, their initial response came in the form of written statements and presentations. Aruna and Nikhil were unequivocal about their concern about the public euphoria over Anna Hazare that had suddenly arisen and they expressed this view publicly. Although they wrote many articles on their positions, in the early days of the Lokpal agitation they remained largely marginalised from mainstream public discourse, with media consistently mesmerised by Anna Hazare.

The first piece written by Aruna and Nikhil that was to circulate publicly was a feature article published in the national weekly magazine *Outlook*, shortly after Anna Hazare had ended his fast in April 2011.⁹² This article was in response to the recent developments around Team Anna and was a public warning by the MKSS/NCPRI leadership on what they perceived to be the perils of the Lokpal agitation. The immediate demand of Anna Hazare's fast had been for inclusion in government processes of drafting a Jan Lokpal Bill. With media attention on Anna Hazare's fast so heightened, within 98 hours of the start of the fast the government conceded to this demand: a Joint Drafting Committee was set up, comprised of five members

⁹² Roy, A. and N. Dey (2011) "Make Sure the Cure isn't Worse than the Disease" in *Outlook*, 25 April 2011, [accessed 29 April 2013] <http://www.outlookindia.com/article.aspx?271400> (Original text has no page numbers).

from Team Anna – as representatives of ‘civil society’ – and five members from the government.

Every step of the Joint Drafting Committee was covered by the English-language national media, with any disagreement or accusation from either the government or the ‘civil society’ side presented in soap-opera style. It was in this climate that Aruna and Nikhil first made public their views on the Lokpal agitation. Their principal concern was with Team Anna’s mode of protest and with the content of their demands. The thrust was on the perils that Team Anna posed to the meaning and practices of democracy, and on the perceived unconstitutional dangers of the Jan Lokpal Bill. Team Anna was denounced by Aruna and Nikhil as acting undemocratically.

A key disquiet voiced in the Outlook article was the haste and prematurity with which the demand for a Jan Lokpal Bill had been launched. This haste had precluded wide consultative processes and public drafting – processes deemed crucial by Aruna and Nikhil for a law to be truly a ‘people’s law’. ‘*Jan*’ means ‘people’ and by calling their Bill the ‘Jan Lokpal Bill’, Team Anna was signifying that it was espousing a ‘people’s law’. However, Aruna and Nikhil argued in the article that the ‘people’ had been entirely excluded, and instead, the drafting of the Bill had taken place in haste by a select few. By taking discussions to the Joint Drafting Committee, Team Anna had forsaken opening up the drafting of the Jan Lokpal Bill to public consultation. The effect of this, according to Aruna and Nikhil, was that people remained uninformed on the details of the proposed Bill. Team Anna had “raised expectations to epic proportions” by tapping into the extensive indignation with corruption, yet its followers remained largely ignorant of the details they were actually supporting. The article stated that “a demand for democratic representation (even of ‘civil society’) comes with the responsibility of commitment to democratic practice” (Roy and Dey 2011). Such a commitment, according to Aruna and Nikhil needed to include wide public debate, as well as adherence to democratic institutions.

The haste of the Lokpak campaign, Aruna and Nikhil furthermore warned in this article, implied that the poor, who bear the true brunt of corruption, had been excluded from the campaign. The concerns of *bharat* – inferred in the article as referring to rural India – were left out. This agitation had been reduced to urban-based middle-class followers who had been galvanized by means of media and communication through social networking. Yet it did not speak to people in rural India, who constitute the vast majority of India’s population. The failure to engage with the concerns of the poor, according to Aruna and Nikhil, divorced the fight against corruption of the Lokpal campaign from real struggles for justice. What was presented as an all-encompassing nation-wide social movement, was, according to Aruna and Nikhil, in fact limited to an urban, mainly young middle-class constituency that left rural populations out of the equation. Team Anna did not represent ‘the people’, Aruna and Nikhil asserted.

Furthermore, the understanding of corruption as endorsed by Anna Hazare and his team was described in this article as hollow and bereft of substance. By accusing exclusively politicians of being corrupt, citizens themselves were morally absolved from any responsibility in corruption. The irony of this, according to Aruna and Nikhil, lay in the fact “that many in the middle class who expressed angst are an integral part of processes where speed money, tax evasion and *benami* transactions contribute to the black-money economy berated so much at Jantar Mantar” (Roy and Dey 2011).⁹³ Corruption, furthermore, needs to be thought of beyond monetary extortion, to include more broadly the unjust and arbitrary system of governance, especially as experienced by the poor. Aruna and Nikhil’s definition of corruption extended to include “the arbitrary use of power for undemocratic, anti-people policies, legislation and providing support to corporate houses” (Roy and Dey 2011). A simplistic blaming of the corrupt politician as the sole cause of the decay of the system would not lead to any substantial transformations, they argued.

⁹³ Merriam-Webster dictionary defines *benami* as: “made, held, done, or transacted in the name of (another person) —used in Hindu law to designate a transaction, contract, or property that is made or held under a name that is fictitious or is that of a third party who holds as ostensible owner for the principal or beneficial owner”.

The provisions of the Jan Lokpal Bill were also concern for great alarm, the article confirmed. The Jan Lokpal Bill, as proposed by Team Anna, purported to create an independent institution that would deal with corruption at all levels – from the common man’s grievances to the Prime Minister’s Office. Such a Jan Lokpal would have power to exercise jurisdiction over the executive, legislative and judiciary. It would combine in itself executive powers to formulate sentencing policies, as well as judicial powers to appoint its own judges who could award punishments from six months to life imprisonment. The perils of the independent anti-corruption ombudsman as proposed by Team Anna would be that it was unelected and therefore not accountable to the people. Aruna and Nikhil warned that the authority vested in the Jan Lokpal would make it an unconstitutional all-powerful body that would subvert the bedrock principle of the democratic separation of powers. By centralising so much power in a single institution, the proposed Jan Lokpal Bill disempowered the citizen whose role would be “confined to the right to file a complaint and be heard”. There was the further question of the accountability and integrity of the Jan Lokpal, whereby the draft Bill of Team Anna proposed that selection processes could be transparent by being based on ‘good faith’. The article’s warning was that “we need to make sure that the cure is not worse than the disease, and not end up with a Frankensteinian structure” (Roy and Dey 2011).

The underlying message of the article was an appeal to Team Anna to respect due democratic processes. It reminded members of Team Anna that with their membership in the Joint Drafting Committee as self-claimed representatives of ‘civil society’, it was their duty to act responsibly and democratically in the processes of law-making. It prompted them to be open to the multiple opinions and dissenting viewpoints that existed. The appeal was emphatically summarised with the caution: “Democracy is much too complex to become a personality debate, a media campaign or an event, however remarkable” (Roy and Dey 2011).

With this article, Aruna and Nikhil were plainly laying out their understandings of democratic process and of the politics of representation. In accusing Team Anna of failing to conduct wide public consultation and of excluding the poor from their

campaign, they were establishing how they considered a social movement ought to comport. The article juxtaposed the Jan Lokpal Bill with the RTI Act – with which MKSS/NCPRI is famously associated – emphasising that the latter was a truly ‘people’s law’ in that it empowered the common person to hold every wing of the state accountable. Doing politics, Aruna and Nikhil were professing, involves wide representation and inclusiveness, particularly of the needs of the poor.

In the subsequent months a whole range of such articles and criticism was to follow, in which Aruna and Nikhil publicly spelt out their misgivings about the Lokpal agitation. As the weeks progressed, and as their involvement intensified, they decided to embark on the Lokpal debate, not as members of MKSS, but under the banner of NCPRI. This, they explained to me, was because NCPRI had been the primary drafting and lobbying body of the RTI movement, and thus enjoyed a reputation in matters of law and policy-making. While MKSS was characterised by its mass mobilisation and campaigning, NCPRI was associated with the technical drafting of and campaigning about transparency and accountability legislation, which the current Lokpal agitation demanded. Furthermore, being based in Delhi, it made most sense for NCPRI to engage in the Delhi-based Lokpal agitation.⁹⁴ In the name of NCPRI, Aruna and Nikhil were promulgating their critiques on the Lokpal in numerous published articles, as well as in the many public and internal meetings that they attended over this time.

One of the main areas of concern voiced by Aruna and Nikhil in the name of NCPRI, and one that was shared by many other critics, was Team Anna’s claim to represent all of ‘civil society’. Team Anna was exerting pressure on the government on the ground that it was speaking on behalf of India as a whole, so that the government must listen to the will of the people. It was with this claim to represent ‘civil society’ that five members of Team Anna had entered the law-making stage through the Joint Drafting Committee. In several public presentations and articles, NCPRI questioned the self-appointed and unelected nature of this select group and asked why only the

⁹⁴ It is for this reason that the chapters that deal with the Lokpal agitation in this thesis refer mainly to NCPRI, rather than MKSS. However, as noted in the Introduction, the boundaries between these two organisations are very blurry.

drafters and defenders of the Jan Lokpal Bill were acting as representatives of the people. What was being referred to publicly as a ‘citizen’s movement’ was, according to NCPRI, actually the preserve of a few and could thus not be called a movement at all.⁹⁵

Members of NCPRI were also concerned by the tactics of protest used by Team Anna. The repeated public utterances that Anna Hazare’s fast amounted to a form of ‘blackmail’ (as was most vehemently pronounced by certain government officials), found reverberation amongst members of NCPRI. By demanding that their Jan Lokpal Bill be enacted within a time frame specified by themselves, Team Anna was accused of dictating to parliament. Members of NCPRI condemned this as a disregard for democratic procedures and as being “tantamount to hijacking the democratic system”.⁹⁶ Several members of Team Anna had openly said that they considered parliament to be defunct and that it was a waste of time to pass legislation through it. Instead, they urged, the government should directly enact the Jan Lokpal Bill, because, by virtue of the mass support that the movement received, it was a ‘people’s law’. This assertion that parliament must listen to ‘Us the People’ led NCPRI and other critics to term Team Anna’s tactics as falling nothing short of populism. Above all, members of NCPRI deplored the precedent that Team Anna was setting with their form of protest. They warned that Team Anna was presenting a scenario wherein right-wing groups such as the RSS could gather mass support, and insist on nationalist and communalist demands. There was a further sensed danger that the government would no longer listen to the demands of protests after the experiences with Team Anna, and therefore any future civil society effort would be discredited. In a private conversation Aruna complained to me that “even the honest

⁹⁵ This critique by NCPRI unleashed a series of related retaliations. Arvind Kejriwal, core member of Team Anna, was cited in several newspapers as expressing his reservations on the unelected nature of the National Advisory Council. Aruna and several other NCPRI members are often presented publicly as members of the NAC (see Chapter Two), so that Arvind’s statement could be read as a direct attack on Aruna. For instance, the Facebook page of Team Anna posted that the “NAC is a group of unelected people who are dictating a law to the parliament...”, echoing the language used by NCPRI against Team Anna. The question of representation and ‘civil society voice’ was quickly becoming fraught with tension and competition.

⁹⁶ Reported for instance in:

“It’s Anna vs Aruna as rift in civil society shows” in *Business Standard* 21 August 2011 [accessed 25 October 2013]

democratic space for protest that we have carefully carved out over the past 60 years has been corrupted by Anna Hazare”.⁹⁷

Another area of great disquiet amongst NCPRI, as well as many other critics, was the unmistakably right-wing edge to the Lokpal movement. Renowned Hindu spiritual leaders had supported Team Anna, either by sharing the dais with Anna Hazare during his fast or by speaking out for his cause. This included the likes of Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, the spiritual teacher and founder of the ‘Art of Living’; Swami Agnivesh, a scholar of *arya samaj* (a Hindu reform movement) and social activist; and Baba Ramdev, known throughout India for his mass yoga camps and his teachings of yoga on TV. These were all individuals with a markedly Hindutva leaning, largely associated with nationalist ideology and anti-minority politics. This ‘saffron’ and nationalist character was further substantiated through imagery and symbolism employed during the first fast at Jantar Mantar. National flags were assertively waved around on stage, and chants such as *vande mataram* (hymn to the Mother Land) and *bharat mata ki jai* (Victory to Mother India – a slogan used by Hindu groups and the Indian army) were chanted by the participants. A massive depiction of *bharat mata* (the national personification of India as a mother goddess) served as the backdrop of the stage on which Anna Hazare sat on his fast. It was this conspicuously Hindu symbolism and imagery that led sceptics to wonder about Team Anna’s political leanings and to suspect an ‘RSS plot’. When Anna Hazare praised Narendra Modi – Gujarat’s Chief Minister accused of initiating and condoning violence in the communal riots in Gujarat in 2002 – for his efforts in rural development, accusations of Hazare’s right-wing leaning mounted. His defence that he had only referred to the development work of Modi and that he did not want to get into politics, did not appease his critics, including those at NCPRI.

⁹⁷ Notes from personal conversation with Aruna Roy, (dated 20 August 2011).



Figure 4 Anna Hazare before the image of *Bharat Mata*

Constructing the Self through the Other

Underlying all these critiques of Team Anna by NCPRI was their disquiet with the undemocratic nature of the form and content of protest. Team Anna was accused of derailing democratic procedures and of being illegitimate civil society representatives. By way of their critiques, members of NCPRI were demanding that civil society function within the bounds of democratic procedures and institutions. The emphasis on the perceived danger that Anna Hazare's form of protest was posing to democratic process said as much about Team Anna as it did about NCPRI. Embedded in the critiques by members of NCPRI of their opponent, lay a reflection of their own positions regarding notions of civil society engagement. Through their accusations, members of NCPRI were professing their own faith in the democratic procedures of the Indian state and in democratic institutions. In so doing, they were delineating their normative understanding of democratic engagement by civil society in policy-making.

This competitive engagement in the Lokpal agitation thus enabled NCPRI to articulate and reinforce its normative understandings of doing politics. The emergence of a contender in the field of anti-corruption legislation forced members of NCPRI to reposition it in a field previously considered its own turf. By having an opponent to differentiate from, members of NCPRI could carve out their own understandings of political engagement. Civil society, according to the portrayal presented by NCPRI, must act within the frameworks of democratic institutions and the Indian constitution. As NCPRI's own experience with the RTI had shown, civil society plays a crucial role in law-making by exerting pressure on the government, yet this must occur within the confines of due democratic process. Based on the identified shortcomings and undemocratic nature of their civil society opponents, the contours of NCPRI's own ideas of democratic civil society engagement could be consolidated. This suggests that conflict and competition provide opportunities for a reinforcement of political positions and commitments.

This idea that an organisation's political commitment is shaped vis-à-vis an opponent, correlates to the theoretical conception that an 'other' is required to establish the existence of the 'self'. Through processes of 'othering', identity comes to be shaped around distinction and exclusion and of being that which the Other is not. This philosophical tradition was arguably set by Hegel (1977 [1807]), who in his examination of the master-slave dialectic, noted the importance of the Other for the development of self-consciousness and selfhood. Both master and slave are interrelated in a relationship of dependency, whereby the juxtaposition to the Other ascertains the existence of the self. De Beauvoir (2009 [1949]) applied this Hegelian theory of the Other to gender, arguing that a man establishes his superior identity by establishing the category of woman as his inferior Other. 'Man' is set as the norm, with 'woman' always constituting the lacking and deviant Other.

Theories of Othering have been most notably advanced by Said. In *Orientalism*, Said explains how colonialism and empire building were justified through discourses and narratives of Othering, through which dichotomies between the self and the Other

could be created and maintained. By constructing the Orient as 'strange' (read: exotic, inferior, lazy), the West could define itself as superior and civilized. As Said wrote:

The development and maintenance of every culture requires the existence of another different and competing alter ego. The construction of identity... whether Orient or Occident, France or Britain... involves establishing opposites and otherness whose actuality is always subject to the continuous interpretation and reinterpretation of their differences from us. (Said 1995: 332)

Many theories on the construction of identity have advanced the logic of Othering. Derrida, for instance, approaches it through the notion of '*différance*', a term he composes of both 'difference' and 'deferral'. In the context of language, following on from de Saussure, Derrida contends that meaning does not lie in words and signs in themselves, but derives only out of the relation to other words and signs. Meaning is deferred because "the circulation of signs defers the moment in which we can encounter the thing itself, make it ours, consume or expand it, touch it, see it, intuit its presence" (Derrida 2000: 87). True original meaning does not exist as such, but emerges out of processes of difference and deferral. Meaning only exists in a relational system. This notion of *différance* is equally germane in the context of the construction of identity: no essential identity exists absolutely in itself, but comes into being in a relational system through process of difference and exclusion.

Drawing on Derrida, Hall contends that identification necessarily operates across difference whereby it "requires what is left outside, its constitutive outside, to consolidate the process" (Hall 2000: 17). No essential pre-given identity exists, but is constructed through differentiation, through exclusion and in relation to the Other. Identities shaped around difference, Hall highlights, are inherently unstable and must be enacted performatively to continuously reaffirm themselves. Elsewhere Hall and Du Gay expand on the notion of exclusion as central to the construction of identity when they contend:

Identities are constructed through, not outside, difference. This entails the radically disturbing recognition that it is only the relation to the Other, the relation to what it is not, to precisely what it lacks, to what has been called its *constitutive outside* that the ‘positive’ meaning of any term – and thus its ‘identity’ – can be constructed. ... Throughout their careers, identities can function as points of identification and attachment only because of their capacity to exclude, to leave out, to render ‘outside’, abjected. Every identity has at its ‘margin’ an excess, something more. (Hall and Du Gay 1996: 4-5)

These theoretical arguments help to explain how members of NPCRI constructed their political positions. Their ‘identity’ as an organisation was reinforced by means of exclusionary lenses through which the Other was defined. By constructing Team Anna as an ‘aberrant Other’, NPCRI could set itself apart, and establish its own notions of civil society engagement in policy-making. In emphasising the undemocratic nature of Team Anna, NPCRI could reinforce its own commitment to democratic processes. Furthermore, Anna Hazare’s Jan Lokpal Bill that was deemed by NPCRI as unconstitutional, became the contraposition against which NPCRI drafted its own anti-corruption laws.

NCPRI’s ‘basket of measures’

Having established its oppositional stance to Team Anna and their Jan Lokpal Bill, in the weeks following the end of Hazare’s fast NPCRI came out with its own set of anti-corruption laws, a total of five laws that were to become known as NPCRI’s ‘basket of measures’.⁹⁸ These were presented as being a response to the danger of

⁹⁸ The ‘basket of measures’ comprised five concurrent anti-corruption measures, four of which were recommended amendments to already existing or pending legislation, whilst one (the Grievance Redress Bill) was entirely drafted by NPCRI. The basket of measures included the following set of laws: 1) an anti-corruption Lokpal (ombudsman) to tackle corruption only of higher-level officers (Prime Minister, Ministers, Members of Parliament and senior bureaucrats); 2) an amendment of the already existing Central Vigilance Commission Act to control mid-level bureaucracy; 3) strengthening the pending Judicial Accountability and Standards Bill to ensure that the judiciary is made appropriately accountable, without compromising its independence; 4) the strengthening of the pending Whistleblower Protection Bill; 5) setting up a Grievance Redress Commission for common citizens to make the government answerable in terms of its functions, duties, commitments and obligations towards citizens. NPCRI advocated that these concurrent laws would tackle corruption, without compromising democratic processes.

vesting too many powers and functions in a single Lokpal institution as advocated by Team Anna. In contrast to the latter, NCPRI's 'basket of measures' advocated a multiplicity of bodies. The premise for this was that corruption and grievances needed to be addressed separately by different legal measures. One single institution, as proposed by Team Anna, could not possibly address corruption at all levels of the state apparatus as well as redress the grievances of each and every citizen. Furthermore, whistleblowers needed to be protected by a separate law, as the many experiences of coercion and even death of RTI activists around the country in recent years had made starkly apparent. To emphasise the importance of separating grievances from corruption and from the protection of whistleblowers, Aruna often cited a saying from rural Rajasthan in this context: *lasan chutney* (garlic chutney) and *kheer* (rice pudding) are both very important and desirable, but you cannot mix the two. For this reason, NCPRI proposed identifying the different types of corruption and grievances and dealing with them with respective legal measures. It was also their response to abiding by the bedrock of democracy: the separation of powers.

NCPRI's 'basket of measures' gradually emerged as a recognised alternative to Team Anna's Jan Lokpal Bill and the government's Lokpal Bill. On some fronts, the emergence of an alternative was praised for widening debate and pluralizing opinions in the vexed situation around the Lokpal. On other fronts, NCPRI's 'basket of measures' was denounced as an act of splitting a unified civil society and as thus playing directly into the Congress government's hands. Whether one supported or opposed NCPRI's emergence, the fact remained that with their 'basket of measures' NCPRI came to take an increasingly centre-stage position in the Lokpal agitation. They were now no longer acting only through reactive articles and presentations, but had their own anti-corruption laws that they would campaign and lobby for. With the entry of NCPRI and their 'basket of measures', the political field of civil society and anti-corruption law-making had become more complicated.

Personalised Discord: Internal Rivalry

This section explores further the contested landscape around the Lokpal Bill. It looks into the interaction between members of NCPRI and members of Team Anna and how this was premised on a contentious and competitive relationship between the two groups. What in the previous section appeared as ideological differences on what the role of civil society in law-making should be, in this section gets a personalised twist. The competitive relationship between NCPRI and Team Anna was not only posited on diverging ideas of democratic means and processes, but also derived from a personal and emotional rift. The shared commitment to anti-corruption campaigning between the two groups was not coincidental, but was on account of personal relationships and overlapping membership. In fact, it was the competitive relationship between NCPRI and Team Anna that was a significant component of the Lokpal agitation. It was in part the friction that arose out of the competitive nature of the relationship between the two teams that gave rise to the Lokpal agitation (Tsing 2005). By competing with each other, members of each of the teams could more discernibly define and articulate their own positions as political anti-corruption actors.

NCPRI becomes the 'third voice'

On 16 August 2011, Anna Hazare began his second hunger strike, staging it this time in Ramlila Maidan.⁹⁹ This was in response to the failure of the Joint Drafting Committee to adopt all the provisions for the Lokpal Bill suggested by Team Anna. The Lokpal Bill that had been passed by the Joint Drafting Committee to the government to table before parliament was attacked by Team Anna as being weak, and as lacking all the provisions proposed in their own Jan Lokpal Bill. Anna Hazare had consequently threatened to carry out another fast-unto-death if the government did not introduce the Jan Lokpal Bill, as drafted by his team, into parliament during

⁹⁹ Ramlila Maidan is a large ground in central Delhi that is used for major political rallies, religious festivals and entertainment events.

the upcoming ‘Monsoon Session’. The Monsoon Session in parliament had started; the government had not introduced the Jan Lokpal Bill; and so, in accordance with his threat, Anna Hazare began his second fast. The condition was that he would not end his fast until the government conceded to introducing his Jan Lokpal Bill into parliament.

With the revived public commotion around Anna Hazare and the Jan Lokpal Bill, NCPRI had mounted its own campaign for its ‘basket of measures’. Because Anna Hazare’s conditions were strictly time-bound, time was ticking against NCPRI, forcing it to act and react hastily. Ever since Anna Hazare had begun his second fast, NCPRI was inundated in finalising drafts and campaigning for these by lobbying the government. Given this intensity in workload, I was asked to join them in Delhi to help out. Eager to be involved, I took the next bus from Jaipur to Delhi and thereby found myself in the middle of the major national agitation that was then at its climatic peak.

I arrived in the NCPRI office in Hauz Khas – an uptown residential area in South Delhi – to find it packed with people and in a highly charged commotion. Multiple tasks and activities were going on simultaneously: some people were crowded around the two computers, either watching the online news broadcast or drafting emails; others were sorting through the many versions of Lokpal-related bills that NCPRI had drafted and amended over and over again; another group of people were sitting around someone who had just come back from Ramlila Maidan and was recounting with amazement and horror the scene of the galvanized masses around the fasting Anna Hazare; someone else called on Nikhil to get ready to go to the NDTV studio, where he would be presenting the ‘NCPRI approach’ in a debate on the

Lokpal bill. Outside the office, three OB vans were parked; they were from English and Hindi news channels, waiting to interview Aruna.¹⁰⁰

Not yet quite sure what task I could take over, I joined Ushma and Purnima who were crouched in one corner of the office working amendments into the Grievance Redress Bill drafted by NCPRI.¹⁰¹ They told me about a meeting they had had the day before at the Ministry of Rural Development (MoRD). The Minister of Rural Development, Jairam Ramesh, had shown great enthusiasm for NCPRI's Grievance Redress Bill and had offered to press for it through his ministry. Over the years of NCPRI's engagement in drafting laws and campaigning for transparency measures, they had established a friendly relationship with Jairam Ramesh.¹⁰² When he was made Minister of Rural Development several months previously due to a cabinet reshuffle in July 2011, the appointment was greeted with great enthusiasm by members of NCPRI, who now had a favourable avenue through which to advocate their 'basket of measures'. From amongst the five bills in their 'basket of measures', it was the Grievance Redress Bill that addressed questions of rural development most directly, making the MoRD the most likely platform through which to champion for it. The Grievance Redress Bill aims to tackle daily delays in government offices. Under the Bill, each public authority must issue a statement of obligations, including a list of all the services and goods it provides, and the means by which redress can be obtained when the obligations are not met. Public authorities are monitored by designated Grievance Redress Officers (GROs), who receive and dispose of complaints and fix responsibility for the grievance. Each district has a District Grievance Redress Authority (DGRA) exercising appellate powers over the GRO.

¹⁰⁰ OB vans parked in front of the office-garage in the Hauz Khas Apartments Colony were no rare sight over the weeks of the Lokpal agitation. Typically there were several vans from various broadcasting channels queuing up to interview Aruna on the NCPRI approach to the Lokpal. Fellow residents of the colony no longer stopped and stared at the commotion of reporters and cameras as they initially did – such scenes seemed to have entered their daily frame of vision. The journalist from Zee TV that day had also come to interview Aruna. His news channel was following the trajectory followed by so many other channels: after months of monomaniac broadcasting of each and every action of Team Anna, there was now an eagerness to bring in alternative voices into the Lokpal *tamasha*. Aruna and the NCPRI were prime targets for this.

¹⁰¹ Ushma and Purnima are pseudonyms I have given to two of my informants.

¹⁰² In a personal interview with Jairam Ramesh, he told me that he respected the demands and positions of NCPRI for they represented honest activists, committed to the cause of the poor. The views of the Union Minister indicate the widely reproduced conflation of MKSS and NCPRI.

An appeal against the DGRA lies with the State or the Central Grievance Redress Commission. The Grievance Redress Bill also envisions the establishment of independent information and facilitation centres in every block, in which all the details of the government schemes would be available.

In the meeting that NCPRI had had with Jairam Ramesh on the day before my arrival, the Minister had made some recommendations and suggestions about NCPRI's Grievance Redress Bill. He had agreed to put the bill up on his ministry's website to go through the process of open consultation, once NCPRI had incorporated his suggested amendments. When I joined Ushma and Purnima they were in the process of doing this.

I began to realise that that was the state in which things had been in the NCPRI office, ever since Hazare had started his second fast a few days earlier. The media were at that point obsessed with Anna Hazare, with every newspaper and every news channel reporting on Ramlilia Maidan. But a conspicuous shift had taken place, whereby the publicity bombardment on Team Anna had now made some space for other groups and opinions to be covered. While during the first fast, only select publications had published the position of NCPRI on the Lokpal – mainly those whose editors were on friendly terms with Aruna – now the entire spectrum of media was eager to report on the 'NCPRI approach'. Reporters were rushing to the Hauz Khas office, journalists incessantly called Aruna on her phone, and NCPRI representatives were requested in TV debates on a daily basis. Although Aruna is the most prominent public face of the NCPRI, and initially all reporters wanted exclusively her coverage, over these days of media frenzy, other 'senior' NCPRI members increasingly began to appear as public figures.¹⁰³ Interest in the 'NCPRI approach' to the Lokpal was growing at an unexpected scale. In fact, the NCPRI was surging as the 'third voice' in the Lokpal drama, with media coining it as a contention between 'Team Anna' versus 'Team Aruna'.

¹⁰³ The members of NCPRI to appear most frequently on TV channels or to issue press statements, were, aside from Aruna Roy: Nikhil Dey, Anjali Bhardwaj, Shekhar Singh.

I was told that what had sparked off this sudden attention to NCPRI and their ‘basket of measures’ was a press conference that they had held at the Press Club of India a few days after Anna Hazare begun his second fast. They had apparently been prompted to do so by Vinod Mehta, editor of *Outlook*, and a friend of Aruna’s, who had urged them to publicise their alternative to Anna Hazare’s Jan Lokpal Bill. Mehta had told them that there was growing public disquiet with the demands of Team Anna, and that it was NCPRI’s ‘public responsibility’ to come out with its sounder and more convincing alternative. It was apparently after this press conference that NCPRI began to enter the limelight. TV channels and newspapers that had previously swarmed exclusively around Team Anna, now were anxious to get coverage of the NCPRI approach. For the media this was fuel for its fire, as the entry of ‘Team Aruna’ brought with it a dramatic twist to the Lokpal spectacle.

Even in international news, the entry of NCPRI to the scene of the Lokpal agitation was noted. While previously attention had been exclusively around Anna Hazare, it was around the time of his second fast that coverage started opening up to alternative views. *The New York Times*, for instance, reported the following on 23 August 2011:

Aruna Roy’s two cellphones were ringing before breakfast on Tuesday as she braced for another day in the media storm of the Anna Hazare anticorruption movement. Ms. Roy, a pillar of India’s civil society who has fought for greater government accountability, has been appearing on television to talk about Mr. Hazare’s populist campaign, which includes his current hunger strike. She might seem a natural ally.

She is not.

Ms. Roy opposes the negotiating stance taken by Mr. Hazare and his advisers, and opposes their solution to official corruption. Nor is she alone. Much of India’s intelligentsia, if sympathetic to fighting corruption, has greeted the Hazare movement with unease or outright hostility, with one critic describing some elements of the flag-waving, middle-class supporters as an Indian incarnation of the Tea Party.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰⁴ “Many in India see danger in Hunger Striker’s Anticorruption Plan” in *The New York Times*, 23 August 2011 [accessed 10 December 2012]
http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/24/world/asia/24india.html?_r=0

This extract captures the way in which the Lokpal agitation was being covered. This tone was repeated in countless other media reportages, wherein the anti-corruption movement was presented as a live drama, replete with tensions and rivalry. The conflict between NCPRI and Team Anna was increasingly a focus of publicised scrutiny. Accusations made by one team against the other immediately made it to national headlines, as did a number of exchanges of letters between members of each team. In so doing, the media were not only presenting but, moreover, accentuating the rift between NCPRI and Team Anna. It was making publicly visible a personalised conflict. In other words, the media were not only playing a significant role in the reproduction of public life but in its very creation (Hall et al. 1978; Herzfeld 1992; Navaro-Yashin 2002). Here, the public discourses raised by the media can be thought of in terms of what Navaro-Yashin calls the ‘culture of news’, which works by “inciting a political structure of feeling” and constituting thereby an “important agent in the making of public life” (Navaro-Yashin 2002: 6). Herzfeld notes that news coverage can be thought of as “analogous with the play of gossip and reputation in the local community” (Herzfeld 1992: 132). This parallel between publicised news and internal gossiping, as the following account illustrates, was quite literally played out in the Lokpal agitation.

Discord expressed through gossip

The work of NCPRI during the days of Anna Hazare’s fast evolved mainly in making NCPRI’s position on the Lokpal known within the government, among political parties and with the wider public. For this, numerous activities were being undertaken simultaneously: the bills from their ‘basket of measures’ were continuously amended and re-drafted; internal meetings were held to discuss strategies of action; letters delineating their proposed ‘basket of measures’ were sent out to leaders of all opposition parties; Members of Parliament were met to inform them on the ‘NCPRI approach’ to the Lokpal; regular meetings took place in the Ministry of Rural Development regarding the Grievance Redress Bill; conferences

and lectures were attended in Delhi and other parts of the country to represent the alternative ‘civil society voice’; interviews and TV debates were continuously held.

Over this time I had established myself as a constant presence in the office. Work arose in an ad hoc manner and increased and decreased in intensity in unforeseeable waves. Much of the work involved technical skills and detailed understanding of the amendments and drafts being proposed by NCPRI, for which I was of limited use. However, my eagerness to help out, regardless of the intensity of work and regardless of the intellectual levels entailed, meant that I was appreciated as the ‘odd-jobber’ who could be called upon whenever so required. The effect of this was that my presence was justified and that my sticking around in a range of settings did not appear as too peculiar. Through this role, I was able to attend many of the internal NCPRI meetings, get access to their email accounts, be around as spontaneous decisions were taken, overhear ‘important’ phone-calls, and be part of the many sessions of chatting and gossiping that arose during work, tea and lunch breaks, or while driving through the city from one of the many meetings to another.

It was through these casual conversations and informal gossip that I began to better comprehend NCPRI’s position. Through the jokes and entertaining chatter, the complexity of the Lokpal agitation began to unravel for me. What at first appeared to be light-hearted tattling, soon revealed itself as an expression of a charged and personalised relationship between NCPRI and Team Anna. Much of the gossip within the NCPRI office revolved around members of Team Anna, with specific core members being targeted. Remarks and anecdotes ranged from humorous and harmless, to more bitter and resentful.

With the media broadcasting so many of Team Anna’s moves, particularly from the stage in Ramlila Maidan where Anna Hazare was holding his second fast, several gaffes by some of the members reached public light. Each time a new blunder was covered, members of NCPRI did not fail to catch them and to comment jeeringly on them. A favourite source of ridicule was Kiran Bedi (a retired Indian Police Service officer turned social activist), whose vaudeville-like performances and obscene

statements were often televised live. She was often caught on TV waving the Indian flag fervently next to the fasting Anna Hazare, or covering her face with a scarf in mock of politicians, who she said were all ‘double-faced’ and ‘wore masks’. She accused Members of Parliament of being *anpadh* (uneducated) and *nalayak* (incompetent). Such incidents gave rise to much laughter in the NCPRI office. Comments by Bedi that “all politicians as a class are corrupt” or that anyone who is “anti-Anna is pro corruption” lead members of NCPRI to mark her out as holding naïve and populist political views. This was further consolidated by her remark that “Anna is India and India is Anna” – a slogan that echoed disturbingly with the calls during the period of ‘Emergency’ in the 1970s that “Indira is India and India is Indira”.

Another repeated figure of ridicule was Anna Hazare himself. Although he was portrayed publicly in nearly messianic light, at NCPRI he was described as a simpleton, with conservative and nationalist propensities. According to members of NCPRI, Anna Hazare was entirely incompetent in drafting laws and should never have been permitted to join the Joint Drafting Committee. Just because he could fast and appear as an ascetic and moral voice, that did not credit him with the technical know-how to draft a complex piece of legislation. Members of NCPRI alleged that Anna Hazare was being used by the Lokpal campaign simply to appear as its mascot and draw in mass support, and that beyond the ‘personality cult’ that had formed around the figure of Anna Hazare, there was little substance in his role. Moreover, members of NCPRI greeted with contempt the general veneration of Anna Hazare as the ‘new Gandhi’. They responded to such proclamations by drawing attention to Hazare’s authoritarian tendencies exemplified in his assertions that any politician caught in an act of corruption should have his or her hands chopped off, or even be hung. By exclusively blaming politicians as corrupt, Anna Hazare was accused by members of NCPRI and others of depoliticising the debate on anti-corruption and of thereby rendering it a superficial movement.



Figure 5 Anna Hazare as the 'new Gandhi' on his second hunger fast



Figure 6 Candle-light procession By Anna Hazare supporters

Other members of Team Anna were derided in the NCPRI office with significantly less humour than with the likes of Kiran Bedi and Anna Hazare. Those who were commented on with a tone of disappointment were members who had a longer history of connection with NCPRI. It was the personal nature of the relationship amongst these members that triggered resentful remarks. Prashant Bhushan, for instance, a core member of Team Anna, had been a long-term member of NCPRI. Bhushan, Supreme Court lawyer and social activist, was renowned for his Public Interest Litigation and for taking up contentious cases and speaking up on

controversial matters.¹⁰⁵ The ways in which members of NCPRI spoke of Prashant Bhushan, showed great fondness and respect for him and, consequently, disappointment that he had gone over to the ‘other camp’. How a fervently left-leaning and legally astute lawyer could be advocating the Jan Lokpal Bill, which according to NCPRI was straightforwardly undemocratic, entirely perplexed and dismayed NCPRI members. A similar disappointment was shown toward Medha Patkar with whom members of NPRI had worked in the past and had held in high esteem until she had joined Team Anna.¹⁰⁶ The conflict over the Lokpal Bill had deep undertones of personalised division.

The greatest rancour in the NCPRI office, however, was targeted at one particular individual in Team Anna: Arvind Kejriwal. What I heard repeatedly was that the single mastermind behind the entire Lokpal agitation was Arvind. It was he who orchestrated the moves of Team Anna, deciding the contours of the bill and determining the lines of negotiation with the government. Arvind was satirically referred to as ‘Anna’s General’ in the NCPRI office. On several occasions during internal meetings, various NCPRI members indicated their suspicion that Arvind’s real aspiration was not to get the Jan Lokpal Bill enacted, but to get into the limelight so as to ultimately enter politics. The ‘evidence’ of Arvind’s political intentions, it was argued, could be found in the Jan Lokpal Bill itself. Some members of NCPRI postulated that the provisions of the Bill were so blatantly flawed and legally untenable, that only one possible conclusion could be drawn: Team Anna was not actually committed to the Jan Lokpal Bill – its provisions were simply too absurd to be meant seriously. Instead, they were guided by ulterior motives and a concealed agenda. “This is blatant politicking, not law-making” uttered one NCPRI member at a public lecture. That Arvind Kejriwal has since formed a political party – the Aam Aadmi Party – makes the speculations of NCPRI members somewhat prophetic.

¹⁰⁵ Public interest litigation is defined as the use of litigation, or legal action, which seeks to advance the cause of minority or disadvantaged groups or individuals, or which raises issues of broad public concern.

¹⁰⁶ Medha Patkar is a social activist, most famous for her activism around the Narmada Dam.

Since 2001 Arvind had been an active member of NCPRI and closely allied to MKSS. The NGO Parivartan (Change) that Arvind had set up in 2000 to facilitate the implementation of the RTI amongst people in East Delhi, was modelled on MKSS. In 2002 Parivartan had conducted a major *jan sunwai* on development works in Delhi, with the help of MKSS and NCPRI. The influence that MKSS had had on Arvind was evident when he referred to Aruna as his mentor and his ‘guru’ in matters of RTI –“Arunaji taught me everything about democracy”, Arvind announced publicly.¹⁰⁷ The strained relationship between Arvind and Aruna was captured by media through descriptions of them as ‘friends turned foes’, or of Aruna as at once Arvind’s ‘mentor and eventually detractor’.

With the long-term acquaintance between members of NCPRI and Arvind, his idiosyncrasies were well known to the NCPRI team and were a source of much discussion. He was described as a shrewd, self-righteous and megalomaniac personality with a lust for power. Along these lines of argument, the Lokpal campaign, under the umbrella of India Against Corruption, had been set up by Arvind to give him a platform from which to find a place in the limelight. In fact, the covert explanation that I heard from several members of NCPRI was that Arvind had stepped out of NCPRI and formed his own campaign, because as long as he did not do so, he would remain in the shadow of Aruna. Aruna’s stature and public celebration would keep Arvind on the margins of publicity if he continued to work with her. According to this view, Arvind separated from NCPRI not so much because of a clash of opinions but because of his desire to personally enter the centre-stage in public debates. It was Arvind’s ego, according to several members of NCPRI, that was ultimately the driving force behind the Lokpal agitation.

The role of gossip in the NCPRI office indicated several things. Firstly it made apparent how personalised was the rift between NCPRI and Team Anna. It illustrated

¹⁰⁷ “Arvind Kejriwal: a genial face hiding a shrewd political mind” in *Hindustan Times* 25 January 2014 [accessed 4 February 2014] <http://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/arvindkejriwalacommonmaninpolitics/that-man-in-the-corner/article1-1176778.aspx>

that the competitively charged relationship between NCPRI and Team Anna was not based simply on ideological grounds, or on political differences, but derived from personal antagonism and a clash of personalities. Competition here was unequivocally about entering the limelight, about accessing the public, about being the face of civil society. It was about Arvind competing with Aruna for publicity. Furthermore, the act of gossiping enabled members of NCPRI to distinguish and differentiate themselves from Team Anna. By characterising members of Team Anna as holding politically naïve views and as acting undemocratically, NCPRI emerged as an organisation that adheres to democratic processes.

This highlights that gossip plays an important social function. Gossip, according to Gluckman (1963), helps to maintain the coherence and unity of a group, whereby a group's social values, customary rules, moral and ethical judgements come to be expressed through the act of gossiping. Other anthropologists, such as Paine (1967), have eschewed focusing on the function of gossip in society, and instead view gossip as a type of informal communication amongst individuals. Through gossip, individuals attempt to bend the moral order so as to protect their self-interests. Gossip, according to Paine, allows individuals to control and access the flow of information and thus to enhance their social status. Gossip and informal chats amongst NCPRI members illustrated these two analytical strands: by accusing Team Anna of acting undemocratically, members of NCPRI were setting themselves apart, thereby adhering to Paine's understanding of the psychological dimension of gossip. At the same time, the act of gossiping created a sense of unity or shared identity amongst members of NCPRI, who were able to identify with the values and positions of NCPRI as set against Team Anna.

Claiming genesis

The roots of the tension and competition between NCPRI and Team Anna, as the informal conversations in the NCPRI office indicated, were largely premised on the

question of who initiated the debates for a Lokpal. Members of NCPRI repeatedly reinforced (in private as well as in public presentations) that discussions on institutionalising a form of Lokpal had been initiated by them, which, accordingly, bestowed on them a particular claim on the debate. According to NCPRI, the trajectory of the Lokpal debate had begun at an NCPRI meeting in mid September 2010, six months before Anna Hazare's first fast. The meeting had been convened to discuss the serious issue of acts of violence and even death faced by many Right to Information activists. A government-drafted Whistleblower Protection Bill was at that point (as it is now at the time of writing) still pending before parliament, implying that to date no comprehensive legal protection existed for RTI activists. In this September meeting, NCPRI had decided that they would revamp and redraft the Whistleblower Protection Bill. It was also decided that an anti-corruption ombudsman post needed to be set up, for which an anti-corruption law would be drafted. Arvind Kejriwal was selected as convenor of this working group.

One month later in a closed meeting in October, Arvind had presented his first draft of a Lokpal Bill that he had single-handedly been working on over the past month. At this stage, allegedly no other member of NCPRI objected. In a private conversation, Shekhar Singh, a founding member of NCPRI, admitted that at that point most members of NCPRI were preoccupied with other concerns and were not 'switched on'. Consequently, nobody really engaged with Arvind's proposals nor did they react to his Bill. It was only in the following months, when Arvind became increasingly assiduous with his Jan Lokpal Bill endeavours and had even set up a separate 'India Against Corruption' campaign, that alarm bells started to sound in NCPRI. When in March Anna Hazare announced that he would soon begin a fast-unto-death for the Jan Lokpal Bill, NCPRI called an emergency meeting. Disagreeing fundamentally with various aspects of the provisions of the Jan Lokpal Bill, NCPRI requested Arvind to postpone Anna Hazare's fast so as to allow for comprehensive discussions on the bill. But, as NCPRI members often recounted, by this point it had become evident that Arvind was set on his bill and his campaign and that he had drifted away entirely from NCPRI.

Establishing legitimacy

As the Lokpal agitation continued to grow in scale, members of NCPRI increasingly went about establishing publicly the central role that they had played in initiating discussions on the Lokpal Bill.¹⁰⁸ They had been accused of coming up with their ‘basket of measures’ at a late state and thereby splitting the civil society voice. By diverging from Anna Hazare, NCPRI was accused of helping the government to resist enacting the Jan Lokpal Bill. This fell in line with a wider critique that circulated in some public forums, which held that members of NCPRI were on too ‘chummy’ terms with the ruling national party, the Congress, a criticism corroborated not least by Aruna’s membership in the NAC.¹⁰⁹ Within this climate of accusations, NCPRI wanted to legitimise its positioning in the Lokpal debate. Discussions on the Lokpal had begun within NCPRI, and this needed to be made publicly known so as to justify their involvement in the debates.

Over this period, members of NCPRI (particularly Aruna and Nikhil, but also other ‘senior’ members) significantly increased the number of their lectures and public presentations. While before they had mainly attended public events to which they had been invited, they now proactively sought out spaces in which to present their positions on the Lokpal. This was mainly in colleges and universities in and around Delhi. In many of these public meetings and lectures, they not only discussed their views on Anna Hazare’s Jan Lokpal Bill, or presented their version of the ‘basket of measures’, they also emphasised that they had been part of the process from the very beginning and that it had been internal disagreements that had resulted in the rift. To a significant degree, members of NCPRI were attempting to counter accusations and to establish their credibility as civil society representatives for anti-corruption legislation.

¹⁰⁸ See for instance interview by Aruna in *Tehelka* news magazine: “The Third Flight Path” in *Tehelka Magazine* 13 August 2011 [accessed 20 November 2012]

http://archive.tehelka.com/story_main50.asp?filename=Ne130811COVERSTORY.asp

¹⁰⁹ During the media frenzy, Aruna complained on several occasions of having been called Sonia Gandhi’s *chamcha* – *chamcha* literally means ‘spoon’, yet idiomatically it refers to a sycophant.

A crucial method by which they sought to establish their legitimacy over Team Anna as civil society representatives, was to draw on their past experience in social activism. In many of their public lectures and in many of their articles and in interviews that they gave, a message that seeped through was the important role that they had played in the RTI movement. As noted earlier, the RTI movement is a reputed success story in India, with MKSS and NCPRI widely celebrated for being the driving forces behind the enactment of the progressive transparency legislation. By emphasising their history in the RTI movement, members of NCPRI could remind the public of their expertise in the field of transparency. They could position themselves as civil society pundits in the campaigning and drafting of anti-corruption legislation and thus as having a stake in the ongoing Lokpal agitation.

The reiteration of their experience in the RTI movement further served to underline what members of NCPRI deemed to be the undemocratic aspects of Team Anna's approach. Their critiques of Team Anna were often juxtaposed to their own modes of protest and mobilisation during the RTI movement. For instance, in contrast to Team Anna's haste in drafting the Jan Lokpal Bill, members of NCPRI repeatedly emphasised that the Right to Information Act had taken nine years to formulate, thus allowing for extensive and broad-based public consultation. Furthermore, NCPRI maintained that they had adhered to all the due processes of law-making in their campaigning and lobbying for the RTI. In contrast to Team Anna demanding the immediate adoption of their proposed Bill, members of NCPRI reiterated that they had not attempted to bypass parliamentary procedures in their own campaigning for the RTI. On the contrary, they had used institutionalised platforms, such as the Parliamentary Standing Committee, to push for their demands (NCPRI's reliance on democratic institutions will be elaborated on in Chapter Six).

What the emphasis on NCPRI's involvement in the historic RTI movement in public presentations allowed them to do, was to differentiate themselves from Team Anna. Their campaigning for transparency legislation, proven successful by virtue of the implementation of the RTI Act, served as a 'benchmark' for how civil society ought

to work. By juxtaposing their own experience with what they identified as Team Anna's undemocratic flaws, members of NCPRI were in a better position to articulate their own positions on political activism.

NCPRI entered the scene of the Lokpal agitation to contest against Team Anna. They opposed Anna Hazare's form of protest and the content of the Jan Lokpal Bill, and, given their own successful campaigning for the RTI, saw it as their obligation to get involved. They formulated their own 'basket of measures' against the Jan Lokpal Bill, and spoke out against Team Anna. NCPRI's involvement in the Lokpal was thus triggered by its conflicting and competitive relationship with Team Anna. However, Team Anna also stemmed from the same set of competitive relationships. If the stories told by members of NCPRI as explored in this chapter hold any worth, it was in direct competition to Aruna that Arvind Kejriwal had left NCPRI to form a separate civil society group. He wanted recognition as a civil society representative, which he would not attain as long as he worked with Aruna, who till then was the most prominent face in anti-corruption activism. In this light, the campaign around Anna Hazare and the demand for a Jan Lokpal was formed and ignited by a personalised clash in civil society personalities. It was a politics of competition that contributed to the emergence of the nation-wide anti-corruption movement.

Conclusion

This chapter has examined the competitive landscape of the Lokpal agitation. It explored the nation-wide anti-corruption movement through the complex web of frictions and charged relationships that shaped it. Focusing on the perspective of NCPRI, this chapter illustrated how strained and divided anti-corruption civil society activism in India became in respect of the formulation of a Lokpal Bill. There was competition about who best represented the needs of the people, who had the expertise and thus legitimacy to draft anti-corruption legislation, and who had initiated the debates on the Lokpal. NCPRI, which had previously played a central role in campaigning and drafting transparency legislation, had been side-lined in this

movement. In order to re-enter the stage of civil society involvement in anti-corruption law-making, members of NCPRI drafted their own version of a Lokpal. To campaign for these drafts, they had to swim against the tide of hype surrounding Anna Hazare. Pointing out publicly what they deemed to be the undemocratic nature of Team Anna's form of protest and the unconstitutionality of the demands of their Jan Lokpal Bill, was one way in which the campaigning by NCPRI played out. It was their way of repositioning themselves in a scene from which they had been outflanked in the bid to dominate the scene.

What the heated debates and upheavals around the Lokpal agitation point to, is the importance given to notions of democratic process and statecraft in civil society activism in India. Both Team Anna and NCPRI had diverging ideas of what their role as civil society actors should be in enforcing anti-corruption, yet both shared a conviction that they had a role to play. They were essentially in competition over the category of 'civil society'. That civil society engages directly in the drafting of laws and policies, and that the government must make room for this, seemed to be axiomatic for both groups. According to the logic of both, while diverging on their understandings of the means of getting there, civil society was a crucial element in deepening the experience of democracy in India. Both groups also shared the persuasion that anti-corruption legislation was crucial to improving governance structures in India and to strengthening the practice of statecraft. The notion endorsed by both was that if transparency and accountability was legally enshrined then the state could be 'cleaned-up' and become responsive to the needs of India's citizens. Through some version of a Lokpal bill (either through Anna Hazare's Jan Lokpal bill, or through NCPRI's 'basket of measures'), faith in the state could be restored. That the Lokpal agitation received such mass support and media hype, suggests that this faith in the state and in democratic politics struck a chord among India's wider public.

4. Performing ‘Civil Society’: Public Consultation in Action

If man is a sapient animal, a toolmaking animal, a self-making animal, a symbol-using animal, he is, no less, a performing animal, *Homo performans*, not in the sense, perhaps that a circus animal may be a performing animal, but in the sense that a man is a self-performing animal – his performances are, in a way, *reflexive*, in performing he reveals himself to himself. (Turner 1986: 81)

As we saw in the previous chapter, the Lokpal agitation that dominated public discourse for months on end throughout most of 2011, raised a series of crucial questions on civil society’s involvement in democratic processes in India. Whilst the most conspicuous topic of discussion was corruption, another extensive area of debate was on the role of civil society. Team Anna’s movement’s demands for greater civil society involvement in the governing of the country gave rise to a debate on the meaning and scope of civil society in democratic politics. Although there was lingering confusion as to who makes up civil society, the term nonetheless gained wide political currency during the months of the Lokpal agitation. Media and public debate was full of discussions on whether Team Anna could speak on behalf of India’s civil society and, for that matter, of all Indians.¹¹⁰

Particularly when members of Team Anna were included in the Joint Drafting Committee as a result of the demand of Anna Hazare’s first fast in April 2011, disputes flared up as to what exactly constitutes civil society. Team Anna had entered upon the official drafting platform with the reasoning that they represented the people of India and therefore civil society as a whole. Arvind Kejriwal, one of the

¹¹⁰ As in the previous chapter, this chapter draws on the term ‘civil society’ as a category of practice, and not as a category of analysis. In other words, ‘civil society’ here is used to refer to the category that my informants themselves used in describing themselves and their environment. The intention is not to analyse the term ‘civil society’.

five members of Team Anna in the Joint Drafting Committee, had justified their position as civil society representatives by claiming that “civil society means this country’s 1.2 billion people”.¹¹¹ According to this conceptualisation, the mass movement around Anna Hazare signalled that they had sweeping support from the Indian population and they could thus speak on behalf of ‘the people’. While many did salute Team Anna for their force in tackling the government, and for asserting people’s power, there was nonetheless controversy about their notion of an all-encompassing unitary civil society voice.

Niraja Gopal Jayal, professor at Jawaharlal Nehru University, for instance, expressed her scepticism about Team Anna’s claim of representing civil society when she asked: “Is civil society accountable to anyone at all, or does the virtuous glow of its very existence accord it exemption in perpetuity?” (Jayal 2012).¹¹² On a similar note, academic Pratap Bahnu Mehta opposed Team Anna’s assertion of comprehensive representation, stating that

Anyone who claims to be the “authentic” voice of the people is treading on very thin ice indeed. It is a form of Jacobinism that is intoxicated with its own certainties about the people. It is not willing to subject itself to an accountability, least of all to the only mechanism we know of designating representatives: elections. (Mehta 2011)¹¹³

The controversy over Team Anna and the Jan Lokpal Bill thus exhibited a deep-rooted disagreement about the role of civil society in politics. Several commentators expressed publicly their perturbation with the increased influence in politics of this unelected civil society group. Anna Hazare’s hunger-strikes, and the claims to represent ‘The People of India’, were seen by some critical voices as a populist tactic. Such claims were seen as infringement of the legitimacy of civil society as a

¹¹¹ “Anna Hazare & Co. Up the Ante” in *India Real Time*, 8 June 2011 [accessed 23 June 2013] <http://blogs.wsj.com/indiarealtime/2011/06/08/anna-hazare-amp-co-up-the-ante/>

¹¹² Jayal, N.G. (2012) “Annus Civicus: the Year of the Citizen?” in *Seminar* 629 [accessed 9 January, 2014] http://www.india-seminar.com/2012/629/629_niraja_gopal_jayal.htm (Original text has no page numbers).

¹¹³ Mehta, P.B. (2011) “Of the Few, by the Few” in *Indian Express* 12 April 2011 [accessed 9 January, 2014] <http://www.indianexpress.com/news/of-the-few-by-the-few/772773/0> (Original text has no page numbers).

realm separate from the institutions of the state. While consensus in the debates promulgated by media seemed to be that an active civil society was an important force in exerting pressure on the government, there was growing concern that Team Anna was going too far. By threatening to fast-unto-death unless the parliament immediately passed their draft of the Jan Lokpal Bill, they were interfering in the legislative domain. Professor Jayal stated in this context:

Giving civil society the legitimate prerogative of formulating the law is not just procedurally dubious, it is a slippery slope, for there are no principled arguments that can be used to deter others, whether less well-intentioned leaders or industry bodies, from demanding the same privilege. On what basis can we arbitrate the representational claims of one segment of civil society as against another, or say that one is legitimate and the other is not? (Jayal 2012)

The underlying question framing the heated debates in the period around the Lokpal agitation was whether civil society activism as practised by Team Anna impaired democratic processes, or whether it was reconnecting Indian democracy with popular sentiment. Although it was widely agreed that an active civil society is a crucial component of India's democracy, Team Anna's form of protest aroused concerns that civil society could well cripple India's democracy and undermine the country's constitution. Mehta, for instance, warned in this context that "sometimes a sense of unbridled virtue can also subvert democracy" (Mehta 2011). The question lingering over many discussions was: Should Team Anna be welcomed for opening up a space for a non-political people's movement, or did they represent an extra-constitutional authority assuming the role of anti-democratic vigilantes?

This controversy over the meaning and practice of civil society was echoed amongst members of NCPRI. They were explicit about their reservations with Team Anna's form of protest and with the content of their demands. They contended, as we have seen, that Team Anna did not represent civil society because they catered exclusively to an urban-based middle-class constituency and thereby ignored the interests of the vast portions of the population, namely the rural poor. Furthermore, they criticized Team Anna for failing to conduct wide scale public consultation before drafting their

Jan Lokpal Bill and thus being unrepresentative of the people's interests. Team Anna's claim that they represented the will of the people and that therefore the government must immediately enact their Jan Lokpal Bill, was denounced as being un-constitutional and anti-democratic. For demanding that their Jan Lokpal bill be passed by government without going through parliamentary procedures, Team Anna was criticised by members of NCPRI as derailing democratic processes and procedures. According to members of NCPRI, Team Anna did not follow due process and procedure and thus could not speak on behalf of civil society.

Underlying their critiques of Team Anna's undemocratic nature, were NCPRI's own ideas of what civil society's role should be. This was premised on all that Team Anna was not. That is to say, in NCPRI's version, civil society must conduct wide-scale public consultation, it must include the voice of the rural poor, and it must comply with democratic processes. Based on its experience in the RTI movement, NCPRI had enjoyed a reputation of being precisely that: inclusive, consultative and procedural. Through its interchangeable association to the MKSS that is reputed for its grassroots work, NCPRI had been known as a civil society organisation deeply connected to the needs and demands of the poor. Over the years of campaigning for the RTI, NCPRI had amassed a 'tool-kit' of methods and procedures on how to campaign for its demands. One central component had been extensive public consultation; allegedly, over the nine years between NCPRI's first draft of the RTI Bill in 1996 and the final enactment in 2005, NCPRI had reached out to a wide range of audiences, gathering people's views and opinions that were then incorporated into its RTI Bill. For NCPRI, public consultation thus constituted one of the pivotal components of due process and procedure for civil society actors.

The sudden emergence of Team Anna onto the scene of anti-corruption campaigning and the public hype around them had dislodged NCPRI from its previously uncontested position in matters of transparency and accountability. The exigencies of the Lokpal agitation forced members of NCPRI to reposition themselves as civil society actors. With the emergence of Team Anna, NCPRI now had to contest for recognition and to differentiate itself from its contenders. Members of NCPRI thus

needed to refashion their sense of organisational identity and to define their positioning in the field of anti-corruption campaigning. In order to speak out on the Lokpal, and to be recognised as a contender in the debates specifically over an anti-corruption ombudsman, NCPRI had to present itself as a legitimate organisation able to speak in the people's interest. It did this by emphasising its commitment to ideas of due process, particularly regarding public consultation.

This chapter further explores NCPRI's ideals of civil society. It examines how these ideals, consolidated in its oppositional stance against Team Anna, were expressed in tangible form. In the previous chapter I examined how members of NCPRI differentiated themselves from Team Anna at a discursive level through written articles and public lectures; in this chapter I explore the ways in which this differentiation was 'enacted'. After establishing that the crucial component of civil society engagement involved public consultation, NCPRI needed to make this publicly visible. Their commitment to broad public consultation and to the inclusion of the rural poor had to be made discernible and concrete again. It was along these lines that they could position themselves as legitimate civil society actors in the drafting of anti-corruption laws. To bring to life their ideals of civil society, it was important to publicly present these very ideas.

This chapter is divided into two sections: the first section explores the preparatory meeting for NCPRI's upcoming public event, in which the definitions and boundaries of the type of organisation that NCPRI is, or should be, were determined and demarcated. The second section focuses on how these ideas of what civil society engagement in anti-corruption law-making entails, were enacted in a public performance.

Off-Stage Preparation

One day, during the period of frenzy surrounding the Lokpal agitation, Nikhil announced at the NCPRI office that it had occurred to him that NCPRI must organise

a public convention on its position on the Lokpal. This should happen as soon as possible, he said, while public attention on the Lokpal was still high. Over the weeks around the time of the Lokpal hype, Nikhil had become the prime mover within the NCPRI in pushing for their ‘basket of measures’. It was he primarily who lobbied government representatives and who orchestrated action on behalf of NCPRI. Quickly a few emails were sent and calls were made to most of the Delhi-based members of NCPRI, with the invitation to a meeting to plan an urgent public convention.

A few days later the planning meeting was held, to which both ‘base’ and ‘senior’ members turned up.¹¹⁴ Nikhil introduced everyone to his idea of holding a public convention. He mentioned that with the urgency of events of the past months, as propelled by Team Anna, NCPRI had been pushed into a reactive position. This had meant that NCPRI had had to draft and campaign for its version of the Lokpal according to the time-scale dictated by Team Anna. Nikhil admitted that this had come at the cost of forsaking procedures of public consultation. Nikhil argued that NCPRI needed to urgently organise an event of public consultation so as to reverse the position it had got itself into. Over the weeks, members of NCPRI had repeatedly accused Team Anna publicly for failing to conduct public consultation on their proposed Jan Lokpal Bill. However, with his call for a public convention, Nikhil was admitting that NCPRI had not been participatory or consultative with its own draft bills either. It was in this context that Nikhil had decided to urgently organise a convention that would put into the public view NCPRI’s practice of public consultation.

Nikhil further mentioned that the government – predominantly Jairam Ramesh, the Minister of Rural Development with whom he had interacted the most – had shown receptiveness to the NCPRI approach to the Lokpal and particularly to their proposed Grievance Redress Bill. This resonated with a wider sense among NCPRI members, as well as in some public settings, that the government evidently favoured NCPRI’s approach to the Lokpal over Team Anna’s. Nikhil announced that NCPRI must seize

¹¹⁴ For a definition of ‘base’ and ‘senior’ members, see Chapter Two.

such a climate and create wider public awareness on NCPRI's approach to the Lokpal. It was important that NCPRI emerge from its position of re-action to one of pro-action.

Although NCPRI's approach to the Lokpal was a 'basket of measures' with five concurrent laws to tackle corruption, Nikhil suggested at this meeting that the convention should focus only on the Grievance Redress Bill. This was because the Grievance Redress Bill was the only one of the basket of measures entirely drafted by NCPRI and thus required most deliberation. Indeed among some NCPRI members it was said that Nikhil, along with Shekhar, had exclusively drafted the Grievance Redress Bill, and it was sometimes referred to endearingly as 'Nikhil's baby'. On several occasions before, Nikhil had referred to the Grievance Redress Bill as the most important anti-corruption measure for the 'people', particularly for the poor, because this Bill proposed to deal with corruption at the lower levels of the bureaucracy, and thus the levels directly encountered by ordinary citizens. Unlike Team Anna's Jan Lokpal Bill that stipulated one ombudsman to deal with all cases of corruption, the Grievance Redress Bill would be a separate regulatory body that would oversee exclusively the delivery of services and government schemes. Through the insistence of some of the senior members present at the meeting, it was agreed that the convention must also deal with the Whistleblower's Protection Act as amended by NCPRI. It was decided that the redress of grievances and the protection of those who address grievances go hand in hand.

A central point of discussion in this planning meeting, was the importance of public consultation. It was argued that Team Anna merely held occasional meetings here and there and then called it wide-scale public consultation. One senior member, for instance, indicated his disquiet with Team Anna's notion of 'public debate', which he described as being reduced to mass SMSs, some Facebook messages and Tweets. This rendered their constituency shallow and unrepresentative. Another member remarked that Team Anna's unidirectional mode of communication did not constitute informed debate or consultation in any way. Decisions within Team Anna, someone else argued, were taken by a very select few and then promoted as being premised on

wide public consultation. The consensus amongst the NCPRI members appeared to be that Team Anna's approach was not consultative and that therefore their Jan Lokpal Bill could not be presented as a people's law.

Nikhil reminded the members that through its history in the RTI movement, NCPRI was highly experienced in the processes of public consultation. Its campaigning for the RTI had taken over nine years, allowing for extensive public consultation. NCPRI needed to draw on this experience and make its reputation as being widely consultative publicly visible. In recent weeks NCPRI had not had time for this, but it needed now to capitalize on the momentary lull in Team Anna's activities and on the receptiveness of their views by the government. NCPRI needed to publicly present its commitment to public consultation.

What was not mentioned in this meeting was that, in several instances during the previous few weeks, NCPRI had faced internal criticism amongst its own members for not being sufficiently consultative. Dispersed members of NCPRI had privately or publicly complained that they had not been consulted on the NCPRI approach to the Lokpal. The climax of this was when a newspaper reported that a Pune-based member of NCPRI, retired Major General S.C.N. Jatar, had been "peeved" about not being consulted by NCPRI on its stand on Anna Hazare. "The NCPRI has taken a stand on the Jan Lokpal Bill without consulting its members and seeking their suggestions" the newspaper quoted his letter to NCPRI.¹¹⁵ On a similar note, a senior journalist from the weekly magazine *Governance Now*, had jokingly sneered in a public panel that he had shared with Aruna, that he was a member of NCPRI but that he did not know what this membership entailed, as he had never been informed about NCPRI's approach to the Lokpal. This, along with other public and private comments along similar lines, had stirred up some alarm in the NCPRI office. In semi-private settings, such as over lunch in the NCPRI office, Aruna and Nikhil often discussed how to mitigate such disappointment amongst members. Nikhil's decision to organise a public convention can be read as a response to this.

¹¹⁵ "Anna Shocker: Aruna Roy's NGO loses its Pune man" in *DNA*, 22 August 2011 [accessed 15 November 2012] http://www.dnaindia.com/mumbai/report_anna-shocker-aruna-roys-ngo-loses-its-pune-man_1578392

Here we begin to note how the exigencies of the Lokpal agitation forced members of NCPRI to modify the identity of their organisation. During the upheavals of the Lokpal, NCPRI had been faced with external and internal tensions that demanded response and reaction. NCPRI as an organisation was impelled to clarify its positions both to an external public as well as internally to its own members. In order to speak out on the Lokpal and to be recognised as a contender in the debates over an anti-corruption ombudsman, NCPRI had to present itself as a legitimate organisation. Members themselves needed to be convinced of NCPRI's consistency of standards, as did the broader public. As the account of the preparatory meetings for NCPRI's upcoming public event illustrated, it was public consultation – necessarily with the participation of the rural poor – that was identified by members of NCPRI as being one of the crucial building blocks constituting civil society engagement. As such, a public convention would not only serve as a way of putting into practice processes of public consultation, but would furthermore appease the members and the public about NCPRI's credibility.

These endeavours to present NCPRI as an organisation committed to public consultation can be understood in terms of Goffman's dramaturgical analysis of social life, which seeks to uncover the norms and meanings that underlie social interaction. According to Goffman, everyday life can be likened to a theatre, wherein social interaction is between actors playing a variety of roles before an audience. Through a 'performance', individuals, or actors, deliver impressions and confirm their identity to others and thereby give meaning to themselves and to their situation. Although the weakness of Goffman's analysis is that it can evoke the sense of duplicity, it nevertheless provides a useful framework with which to organise routine elements and dynamics into meaningful schemes. The efforts to present NCPRI's commitment to public consultation can be thought of in terms of Goffman's notion of "impression management", which understands social actors as crafting and managing the modalities of their communication in their performance (Goffman 1990: 203). In

other words, in a performance actors present ‘fronts’ that provide the framework that enable their impression to be rendered meaningful. Goffman describes a front as the projected character traits that are crafted in such manner so as to be made meaningful to others. Accordingly, fronts are “expressive equipment of a standard kind intentionally or unwittingly employed by the individual during his performance” (Goffman 1990: 32). A front establishes normative settings and appearances from which the social role of the actor can be convincingly communicated. Crucially, a front is constructed for a given audience. Actors deliberately construe a front in order to render their identity socially meaningful to a specific audience. It was this front of NCPRI that was being contrived in the planning meeting.

NCPRI’s ‘public’

A crucial issue discussed during the planning meeting was the type of audience that the upcoming public convention would address. It was very quickly established that the key participants of the convention would be marginalised people, or those people with the highest stake in grievance redress. With the proposed Grievance Redress Bill designed to tackle principally the needs of the poor, it would be the poor who should be invited to the public convention. To ensure this, it was decided that organisations and campaigns from throughout the country working on issues of transparency and accountability at the grassroots level would be asked to send representatives from their diverse constituencies. With most of the attendees expected to come from low-income backgrounds it was settled in the meeting that the budget of the convention must be held at a bare minimum. Not more than 100 rupees (£1.2) per person could be charged.

The emphasis on the participation of the rural poor was not least in response to NCPRI’s critique of Team Anna. On several occasions, members of NCPRI had publicly accused Team Anna of having a largely urban middle-class constituency, and of failing to represent the interests of rural populations. In contrast, NCPRI

presented itself as a more inclusive organisation that had experience in mobilising people from rural areas (principally through the reputation of MKSS). A public convention would allow NCPRI to publicly demonstrate its rural constituency. This suggests that NCPRI was ultimately competing against Team Anna over a ‘public’. Team Anna, with the mass upheaval it had stirred through its demand for a Lokpal, was addressing a massive audience. It claimed wide-scale public support and consequently representation of ‘the people’. NCPRI, in its attempt to swim against this turbulent current, was responding by creating its own audience to address. It too needed a ‘public’ to legitimise its engagement in civil society. In this competitive climate both organisations were bringing into being their own public.

The endeavour of creating a legitimising audience corresponds to the intrinsic processes of a democratic setup. Popular sovereignty, the basic tenet of democracy, rests on the principle that political power is positioned in ‘the people’ whose consent legitimates the democratic form of government. However, as several political theorists have noted, ‘the people’ as a category is inherently contested and divided and thus needs to be continuously rearticulated and re-defined for legitimacy to be sustained. Lefort for instance, maintains that in a democracy “the locus of power is an empty place” (Lefort 1988: 17) implying that a stable category of ‘the people’ does not exist, but must be constantly reinvented. He explains this by contrasting modern democracy to the premodern monarchic system of rule, which according to Lefort, was characterized by the idea of the king as the visible embodiment of the ‘body politics’.¹¹⁶

The abolition of the king and the emergence of modernity according to Lefort signaled the ‘dis-incarnation of society’. By disconnecting power from the king’s body that represented the social whole, society’s unity was disembodied, leading to the emergence of individuals and split groups. Society in modernity, unlike the pre-modern, according to Lefort’s analysis, is thus based on an irresolvable division and

¹¹⁶ The mystical body of the king was thought to intertwine the visible and the invisible and to thus incarnate the identity of society’s members. In other words, what allowed for pre-modern European society to establish its unity was a representation of power embodied in the king, which made it possible to understand society as ordered and stable.

disjuncture. In a modern democracy power still remains, but its reference is to an 'empty place' that no representation can occupy. In other words, the beheading of a king signifies "the dissolution of the markers of certainty" and consequently a "political mutation of the symbolic order" (Lefort 1988: 17). In modern democracy, society's unity can no longer be represented by a single figure and so the legitimisation of authority is always in question. Lefort is not suggesting that society cannot be represented, but rather that all representations of society are imaginative and hence disputable. Consequently, modern democracy involves various individuals and factions constantly jockeying and competing for power. Lefort thus concludes that in a democracy the institutions of society are in a constant legitimisation crisis and that any representation of society forever begs justification.

Laclau similarly notes that the construction of a 'people' is "the political operation par excellence" in a democracy (Laclau 2005: 153). Similarly to Lefort, Laclau argues that the 'public' is indispensable for a democracy to be legitimised, but that since the 'public' does not exist as a category *a priori*, it must be called into existence. Society is inherently heterogeneous and divided, with diverging and conflicting interests, yet for representation to be legitimised, a bounded category of 'the people' must be created. The political logic of populism, according to Laclau, functions by attempting to unify and stabilize essentially contested groups and disparate demands through the building of 'chains of equivalence'. Populist movements stress equivalence by means of a shared antagonism, whereby 'the people' is posed against "an institutionalized 'other'" (Laclau 2005: 117). Through the emergence of what Laclau refers to as 'empty signifiers', generic and loosely defined demands come to stand in for specific demands. It is through such empty signifiers that a populist movement can represent 'the people' as a whole. Political subjects are not given, but are constituted through particular narrative frames and modes of rhetoric of the political logic of populism.

These political theories of democracy indicate that NCPRI was grappling with the constitutive questions of democracy. Just as in the legitimisation processes of a democratic system, NCPRI needed a 'public' for its legitimacy to be sustained. It

needed an audience before whom to present its ideas of civil society engagement. Given that a category of a 'public' is inherently contested and divided, its audience and constituency needed to be continuously rearticulated and re-defined. The planning meeting deliberated and re-established the idea that NCPRI's primary public are the poor. Within the context of the Lokpal agitation, faced with a contender, NCPRI had to compete for recognition. It was this competitive climate that propelled NCPRI to define and summon its audience. Holding a public convention was one instance through which NCPRI could bring into being its public.

In order to ensure public attention to NCPRI's convention, a number of strategic decisions were taken in the planning meeting. Although the main invitees would be the so-called stakeholders, it was also decided that 'eminent persons' would be invited. If bureaucrats and representatives of all political parties were invited, as well as a famous keynote speaker, journalists would be more likely to attend. A similar intention of assuring media coverage underlay the setting of the date of the convention. It was determined that the convention could not fall on a Sunday, as journalists tend to take the day off unless there is a pressing issue. With NCPRI's convention unlikely to be deemed 'pressing', it must be held on a 'journalist-friendly' day. Also, it was decided that it could not overlap with a public event organised by Team Anna, as that would be bound to steal media limelight. The coverage of NCPRI's event by the media was crucial in order to present NCPRI as an organisation committed to public consultation.

On-Stage Performance

On the day of the public convention, the frames that had been carefully deliberated during the planning meetings became the backdrop for the public presentation. The public convention was an instance of giving tangible form to the notion of NCPRI as an organisation engaged in public consultation with the participation of the rural poor. NCPRI's ideas of civil society could here be enacted and performed. The term

‘performance’ is here not to be understood as a contrived, or somehow false presentation of the self. Nor is a performance to be thought of as merely a symbolic representation of NCPRI’s positions and commitment, removed from the everyday working of things. Rather, as the following account will illustrate, the various elements of the performance actually bring to life the very positions that NCPRI stands for. It is through the acts, symbols, rhetoric and rituals of the performance that the core tenets of NCPRI are brought into being.

Tangibility of ideals

Posters and banners were hung up in the auditorium and across the halls and courtyard of the school that had been chosen as the venue. Apart from some that had been especially made for the occasion, most of the banners had been brought from Rajasthan by the MKSS team who had arrived in Delhi the previous evening. Hardly any public event in which MKSS is involved goes by without the appearance of these banners: they are the props that accompany all their public performances. Over the years of MKSS’s tireless action and experience in public mobilisation, innumerable printed banners have accumulated with a whole range of slogans and messages that can be employed depending on the circumstance. For the occasion of the Grievance Redress Convention, it was MKSS’s more generic banners that had made it to Delhi. Paradigmatic slogans of MKSS such as *yeh sarkar hamari aap ki, nahi kisi ki baap ki* (this government is yours and mine, not somebody’s fiefdom) hung in the auditorium. These were interspersed with MKSS’s logo of the emblematic revolutionary raised fists.¹¹⁷ Although largely plain – red or black letters and images on white canvas material – these banners create a decorative component to any event.

¹¹⁷ The fist in the forefront of MKSS’ logo is identifiable as a woman’s hand as it has the bangles typically worn by women in rural Rajasthan. The fist in the background does not have such bangles, so presumably represents a man’s fist.



Figure 7 MKSS's logo



Figure 8 Rozgar mela held by MKSS in Jaipur (author's own photo)



Figure 9 MKSS public event – with puppet show – in Bhim (author's own photo)

The kits that had been put together by the volunteers (mainly Delhi college students) were handed out to the participants as they began to arrive. The kits were simple cloth bags stitched together by the ‘craft section’ of SWRC (Social Work and Research Centre – more recently renamed the ‘Barefoot College’), as they have done on innumerable occasions in the past. SWRC is the well-funded NGO run by Aruna’s husband and is also where Aruna’s career in grassroots work began. With ties based on kinship and emotional affinity, SWRC is one of MKSS’s closest allies in its network of connections. The kits for this convention contained copies of the Grievance Redress Bill and Whistleblower’s Protection Act as drafted and amended by NCPRI. Each kit also contained a notebook and pen – surplus stationary that had been donated to NCPRI for a previous convention they had held. Along with the programme for the two-day event, and a booklet with songs and slogans of MKSS, there were coupons for tea and meals.

As the participants gathered in the auditorium and found a place to sit on the floor, and as some of the speakers for the opening plenary session were still awaited, Nikhil spontaneously gave a brief introduction. As a welcome note he listed all the states from which the approximately 150 participants had come, including from as far as Assam, Orissa, and Andhra Pradesh. The majority of the participants however had come from Rajasthan, as is typical for any NCPRI/MKSS organised public event. In a mix of English and Hindi because some of the participants present came from non-Hindi speaking states, Nikhil explained the context of the convention. In simple, non-technical language, characteristic of Nikhil’s public oratory in events with the *aam aadmi*, and contrary to many other public speakers stemming from a middle-upper class background who are largely unable to present their message in simple Hindi, – Nikhil delineated the main concerns that NCPRI had with Anna Hazare’s Jan Lokpal Bill. The problem with the Jan Lokpal Bill, he explained, was that it was expected to deal with all levels of corruption, from the Prime Minister all the way down to the village level. Expecting one single institution to deal with all levels of corruption,

Nikhil explained to the audience, was unrealistic as it would lead to an utter inundation of complaints and grievances.

At this point Nikhil asked everyone in the audience to raise their hand if they had any pending grievance regarding a government scheme or service. Everybody's hand went up. Nikhil then pointed out that if one assumed that every citizen has at least one grievance against the government, it would amount to 1.2 billion grievances that a Lokpal would have to deal with. It was unthinkable, he argued, to expect one single Lokpal institution to deal with all of these, as well as with the corruption of all the politicians, ministers, bureaucrats, police and judges. Amongst people in the audience, heads nodded emphatically in agreement. It was for this reason, Nikhil further explained, that NCPRI was proposing separate anti-corruption measures, one of which was the Grievance Redress Bill. Following a standard procedure in all public events organised by MKSS, Nikhil concluded with a slogan: he shouted "*hum sab*" to which the audience responded in unison "*ek hai*" (combined they translate to: we are all united).

Once all the speakers of the plenary session had arrived, Nikhil handed over. But before the microphone was passed to the speakers, Shankar from the MKSS stepped in, and in his habitual joking tone said that in good Rajasthani spirit, nothing could begin without a song. Accompanied by a *dholak* (hand drum) and a *bankia* (trumpet-like instrument), a group of MKSS members sang one of the many songs written and sung by MKSS. I noticed many people in the audience singing along, evidently familiar with the lyrics. Many of the people present at the convention, especially those from Rajasthan, had attended other similar events organised by MKSS and were thus evidently familiar with the elements of the event. Songs, along with slogans and puppets, have become the *sine qua non* of any MKSS event.

The performative aspects of NCPRI began to manifest themselves already at this point. By invoking specific symbols and rhetoric, NCPRI's political identity was being performed. In his introduction, Nikhil was not merely stating NCPRI's position on the Lokpal, and their wider views on civil society representation, but was also

enacting the very positions NCPRI stands for. He was directly involving the audience, thereby giving form to NCPRI's notion of participation by the rural poor. The slogans and songs further served as direct forms of engagement by the participants. NCPRI's commitment to public consultation was simultaneously being *stated* as well as *done* (Brickell 2005; Butler 1996; Cameron 1997). In this regard, NCPRI's Grievance Redress convention was not merely a spectacle of public consultation, but involved the actual bringing into being of their notion of consultation. The performance of the norms and ideals of NCPRI and the reiteration of slogans and songs by the audience were the very act of consultation itself. The signs, symbols and rhetoric of the convention did not just stand as representations of NCPRI's ideas of public consultation, but actually substantiated those very ideals. It was in the act of performing, that members of NCPRI rendered meaningful to themselves and to others what their positions and commitments were.

This notion of performance as 'acting upon the world', rather than being mere illustrations or descriptions, is explained by Austin through his work on speech acts. Austin identifies 'performative utterances' as those that are "doing something rather than merely saying something" (Austin 1976: 137). These he contrasts to 'constative utterances', as considered by traditional philosophy of language, that encompass those statements that provide descriptions that can be appraised as either true or false. By contrast, performative utterances produce that which they name and constitute the reality they describe, rather than describing or reporting on the reality. Performative utterances do not have any inherent truth-value, but by being uttered perform a particular action. Austin's archetypal examples of performative utterances include pronouncing 'I do' in a marriage ceremony; or uttering 'I name this ship Queen Elizabeth' while smashing a bottle against the stern; or in a bet such as 'I bet you sixpence it will rain tomorrow'. What makes utterances such as these performative is that they do not simply describe what is being done, but actually do it. In other words, the very act of uttering brings into existence that which is being uttered. As applied to the performances in NCPRI's public consultation, this illustrates that performatives are acts that actually bring about practices of public consultation and are not mere representations of ideas of public consultation.

Reiterated performance

Two main plenary sessions were scheduled over the two-day convention. That the sessions had ‘important’ people with ‘big’ names, was evident in the many flashes of journalists’ cameras that went off during the sessions. The first plenary session had Binayak Sen as the key speaker, along with several other veteran activists and journalists, including Aruna and Shekhar from the NCPRI.¹¹⁸ The second plenary session was with politicians and senior incumbent or ex-bureaucrats, made up mainly of ‘old’ friends and associates of NCPRI, who had somehow been involved in the RTI movement. Although representatives from all political parties had been invited, only Members of Parliament from the two Communist parties – the CPI and the CPI(M) – attended. All of the panel speakers, in their own way and with their own allegories (and own language, as some spoke in English, others in Hindi, yet others in ‘Hinglish’), spoke of the importance of protecting the common man from mal-governance and from the abuse of power.¹¹⁹ They all stated their endorsement of a separate Grievance Redress Bill and of a strengthened Whistleblower’s Protection Act.

After the first plenary session there followed the most entertaining component of the convention: a play showcasing the realities of common citizens who attempt to seek redress of their grievances. The play had been written and directed specifically for this occasion by Tripurari Sharma from the National School of Drama, New Delhi. Tripurari has been a long-time associate of MKSS and has directed countless plays for them on the various issues they have campaigned for. A group composed mainly of members of NCPRI, MKSS and SWRC had spent a three-day workshop in Tilonia using the SWRC facilities for rehearsing. The play combined acting, puppets and music, and was an entertaining satirical account of the dangers and coercion faced by whistle-blowers who attempt to uncover government malpractices and seek the redressal of grievances. It was based on recent true stories of two individuals in

¹¹⁸ Binayak Sen is a doctor and human rights activist, extending health care to poor people in the rural-tribal areas of the state of Chhattisgarh, North India. In 2010 he was controversially convicted for sedition and for allegedly supporting Naxalites.

¹¹⁹ ‘Hinglish’ is the word given to the mixing of English and Hindi, a ‘language’ that is spoken characteristically by middle-class north Indians.

Rajasthan, Manglaram and Avdesh Kumar, who risked their lives and livelihoods to seek information pertaining to irregularities in the implementation of key government programmes. Manglaram, a member from the untouchable caste community, after repeatedly seeking information on the implementation of NREGA (National Rural Employment Guarantee Act) in his *gram panchayat* (self-government institution at the village level), was severely beaten up by the headmen of the *sarpanch*. He only barely survived, but yet, partially paralyzed, he continued to demand information and justice in his village. Avdesh Kumar similarly was put through endless excruciating processes in his persevering quest for information on government projects in his village. Both cases highlighted the layers of oppression faced by RTI activists in their struggle to uncover government malpractices. The theatre performance was given a final touch when the real Manglaram appeared on his crutches and attested the accuracy of the play by giving his version of the story.

Not even half way through the event, and already all the symbols and signs that mark a typical MKSS/NCPRI event had surfaced in this convention: the banners and slogans, the songs and music, the theatre and puppets, the panels with eminent individuals, the rhetorical style of interacting with the audience. Having attended countless public events by MKSS/NCPRI, I immediately recognised the repetition and reproduction of these symbols. These elements had been developed by MKSS over the many years of their engagement with rural populations and were characterised by their intelligibility, even for illiterate audiences. The active response given by the audience in singing along to songs, cheering the slogans in unison, and responding to the oratory style of the presenters also indicated that these elements had been performed before and that they formed part of the toolkit of MKSS. Many people in the audience, evidently having attended public events of MKSS in the past, knew how to play their role within the performance. This suggests that a performance is naturalised through the reiteration by the same audiences that sees it over and over. A performance constitutes reality by being repeated and reiterated. This resonates with Derrida's (1988) concept of iterability, which suggests that for an utterance to be comprehensible, it must be repeatable. An utterance is not a singular event but is an effect of 'citational doubling'. Accordingly, it is through the process

of repetition and recitation that a subject is brought into being. Butler (1993) famously argued for this notion of recitation by showing that gender identity is performed through a similar process of reiteration. So conceived, gender is not an innate and natural character of a person, but is essentially a performance, a citation of all previous performances of gender.

This notion that through the reiteration of a performance, the subject – in this case, the essence of an organisation – comes into being, is germane to the work of MKSS (and, consequently, of NCPRI). MKSS exists in and through its staged events wherein its characteristic as an organisation that is rooted in the concerns and needs of the poor is animated. The ideals it stands for, primarily of being a grassroots movement driven by the participation of the rural populations, are enacted and thus substantiated in such public performances. The repertoire of symbols, signs and rhetoric that MKSS draws on in all its public performances, reify such ideals. While the public convention described thus far was in direct reaction to the occurrences around the Lokpal agitation, it was nonetheless modelled on public events organised by MKSS and NCPRI on countless occasions. In organising this particular public convention, members of NCPRI and MKSS could draw on the wealth of experience in the field of public organisation that they had accumulated over more than 20 years. A description of another public event of MKSS serves to further illustrate the ways in which the reiteration and performance of certain signs, symbols and rhetoric, lends to the constitution of the essence of MKSS.

On 2 February 2011, to commemorate the fifth anniversary of the implementation of NREGA (National Rural Employment Guarantee Act), MKSS organised a *rozgar mela* (a fair for wage labourers). And quite a fair it was! More than 500 villagers had come to Jaipur from all over Rajasthan for a day of talks, exchanges of experiences, music and dance. Busloads of people arrived in Statue Circle, a public area in central Jaipur designated for protests and public events. Like in most big events organised by MKSS, a colourful marquee (as typically used in weddings) had been put up for this occasion to provide shade to the participants, which, combined with the posters

and banners, lent the scene a festive mood. As the villagers arrived, they huddled together on the carpets that had been spread across the dusty ground.

The tone of the *mela* was festive too. Shankar from MKSS opened up the event with his entertaining and charming communication style, welcoming everyone to the *janmadin* (birthday) of NREGA. Standing in front of the crowd, he said through a microphone that all the people gathered here today were *mazdoor* (wage labourers) and thus the *bache* (children) of NREGA, which could be considered everybody's *ma-bap* (parents). This brought smiles and laughter to the crowds, who were already endeared to Shankar's style, not least because he spoke in the familiar and colloquial Marwari (the local dialect of Rajasthan). Most other public speakers (including Aruna and Nikhil as well as other invited guests) were not from the area, or had been educated in English medium schools, so resorted to Hindi, English or 'Hinglish' – languages that remained 'foreign' to most of the rural participants. As Shankar was talking to the audience about the importance of NREGA, a group of approximately 50 people arrived from Bara district. These people had been bonded labourers who, with the support of a Bara-based NGO called Sankalp, had recently been freed, some from as long as 20 years of bondage. Through negotiations between Sankalp, MKSS and the Rajasthani government, the recently-freed bonded labourers had been promised 200 days of guaranteed employment under NREGA, in contrast to the stipulated 100 days that a NREGA worker is normally guaranteed. Shankar welcomed the group from Bara calling them the most recent *bache* of NREGA, and concluded by shouting with raised fist "*hum sab*", to which everyone automatically responded raising their own fists "*ek hai*" (we are all untied).

Next, Nikhil stepped up, calling to the stage representatives from all the districts of Rajasthan present that day to share some of their stories of success with NREGA. Most of the people who came forward to the microphone to speak of their experiences quickly slipped into complaints about the failure with NREGA. They complained, amongst other, about not receiving the 100 days of employment due to them, or of receiving far less than the stipulated minimum wage, or of having to pay for their 'job card' that they were supposed to receive for free. Nikhil intervened,

reminding the speakers to focus on the positive aspects of NREGA and on the benefits that it had brought to them. “*Yeh kanun apna hi hai*” (this law is our very own) and we must make it work, he said. At this point, Nikhil asked the audience to raise their hands if they had ever worked under NREGA. Nearly everyone’s hands went up. He then asked if people would prefer it if the scheme was scrapped. Everybody shook their head in refusal. For this reason, Nikhil emphasised, it was important to give attention to the positive aspects of NREGA so as to strengthen the scheme. “Did you know that no other country in the world has a scheme as large as NREGA?” he asked the crowd. “Let’s ensure it stays strong and that it serves our interests” he added to a consenting crowd.

After the testimonial accounts of personal experiences with NREGA, two *sarpanches* were asked to speak to the audience about their efforts in strengthening NREGA in their respective *gram panchayats*. Kalu Ram, for instance, spoke of his efforts in preventing corruption from NREGA in his *gram panchayat* Vijaypura, whereby he had painted the details of works under NREGA on the walls of the *panchayat* office. This included information regarding work sanctioned, families to whom work had been provided, the amount paid to each worker, and all expenditure details. Being a member of MKSS, Kalu Ram was guided by an ethos of transparency, believing that access to information would enable greater accountability to the people and thus enhance participatory democracy. He proudly told the audience gathered at the *mela* that Rajasthan’s Chief Minister Ashok Gehlot had been so impressed by his idea that he had ordered the authorities to follow the system across the state.



Figure 10 Sarpanch Kalu Ram in front of one of his 'transparency walls'

Kalu Ram's presentation of his work in Vijaypura was followed by several other accounts on experiences of strengthening NREGA across Rajasthan. Then Nikhil took over again and welcomed the group of workers who had just arrived from Godliya village in Tonk district. Months earlier, these villagers had been paid as little one rupee for ten days' worth of hard labour. Members of MKSS, primarily Nikhil, had taken up this case and persevered in ensuring that these workers be granted their full wages. This had led to wider discussions with the state government – and later, the national government – on linking the wages granted to NREGA workers to the state stipulated minimum wage. Each of the workers from Godliya village present that day told the audience how much – or rather, how little – they had been paid for their labour under NREGA. When one woman said she had received five rupees for ten days of labour, Nikhil stirred indignation among the audience by asking: “can we buy a kilogram of wheat with five rupees?” to which the audience shouted in unison “no!” Nikhil continued: “can we buy a kilogram of rice?” with the response being again a clear “no!”; “a kilogram of onions?”, “no!”, and in such manner, Nikhil listed several food items. He then continued in his inciting tone: “will we accept anything

less than the minimum wage?” – again a loud and concerted “no!” Finally, he ended with a rallying cry: “*ham apne mazdoor ke lie lareng, ham 135 se kam nahi lenge!*” (we will fight for our wages, we will not accept less than 135 [rupees]).¹²⁰

Finally, Aruna came to the stage and spoke a few words. In very simple Hindi she spoke of the importance of being united and of looking forward to strengthening NREGA. She said that the struggle for the Right to Information and the Right to Work had begun in Rajasthan, and, turning to the audience, she said: “it is because of you and your sustained struggle that the entire country can now benefit from the RTI and from NREGA. Let’s not stop here! Let’s continue our struggle and ensure we get all our rights and entitlements”. She continued explaining that the democratic governance in place meant that people had the right to demand accountability from the government; she urged everyone to be active and to strengthen democracy by speaking up for their rights. She explained that with every item which people bought – from a bar of soap to a light-bulb – people were paying taxes, thus making the government’s money essentially the people’s money. Aruna shouted a slogan often repeated in such public events, and therefore known to many in the audience: “*hamara paisa, hamare hisab!*” (our money, our accounts).

After about five hours of speeches and presentations, a ‘delegation’ set off to meet the Chief Secretary of State, to talk to him about the points of discussion raised at the *mela*, primarily that of minimum wages in NREGA. The delegation consisted of Aruna, Nikhil, a few representatives from the bonded labourers and a few from Godliya village. In the meantime, the *mela* continued with songs, dancing and a few more testimonies of people wanting to share their experiences with NREGA over the microphone. The songs sung by MKSS were widely known to most of the people in the audience, who sang and clapped along jovially. Then, some people stood up and began to dance, turning the *mela* into a large dance gathering. Once the delegation had returned and announced that the Chief Minister had agreed to discuss the issue of minimum wages with the Prime Minister, as well as other issues raised, the

¹²⁰ 135 rupees was at that point the minimum wage as fixed by the Government of Rajasthan.

participants got back into the buses in which they had arrived and travelled back to their respective villages across Rajasthan.

While taking place in Jaipur for an entirely different occasion, the *rozgar mela* resembled in many ways the public convention organised by NCPRI in New Delhi. Both involved much vibrancy through the music, songs, and dance that accompanied the talks and discussions. Both were very colourful and decorative events, with the posters and banners making up a familiar setting. Most significantly, both events were performed in a participatory manner, whereby the audience was drawn into the discussions by being addressed and asked to respond directly. The repetition and reiteration of particular signs, symbols and rhetoric suggests that MKSS and NCPRI come into being through such performances. MKSS, as we have noted, is an organisation reputed for being rooted in the concerns of the rural poor and of being participatory and consultative in its approach. This very characteristic is brought to life in such public events. MKSS exists less in daily occurrences (see discussion on this in the methodology section), as much as in events wherein the ideals it stands for come into being. In a way, the public performances *are* MKSS.

After the introductory presentations, the rest of the two days of the convention in New Delhi consisted of workshops. The aim was to discuss the mechanisms that would be needed to ensure the redress of grievances in particular government services and programmes. For this, parallel workshops were set up, each one dealing with a separate sector, including, health, education, NREGA (National Rural Employment Guarantee Act), *panchayati raj* (local system of government), PDS (Public Distribution System), social security, and ICDS (Integrated Child Development Services), amongst others. A coordinator with experience in the sector was assigned to each workshop. The participants of the convention split up into the different workshops, discussing the mechanisms that could be implemented to address the possible grievances pertaining to the specific sector. For instance, the participants of the workshop on NREGA agreed that the mechanism of social audits

must be strengthened, in a way that would enable the beneficiaries of the employment scheme to directly address grievances. The plan was that each workshop would come up with key recommendations, which would then be included in NCPRI's Grievance Redress Bill.

Ritual of 'resolutions'

The final session of the convention was scheduled to be a discussion of the 'key recommendations and resolutions arising out of the workshops'. I had assumed that this session would be the final enactment of 'public consultation' and thus the highlight of the convention. However, the spectacle of collective consultation that I had been expecting was somewhat of a let-down. By the time the session was scheduled in the afternoon, the attention of most of the participants had dwindled. Many of the participants had already left. From those who remained, most seemed tired from the previous sessions and apparently more keen to sit and chat in the courtyard or on the grass under the warming Delhi sun, than to attend yet another discussion. A group of volunteers was sent to urge participants back into the auditorium. From amongst the main NCPRI figures, only Shekhar was in the auditorium, as Aruna, Nikhil and the others were in the midst of a press conference in a different room. In this final round of the performance, there was a conspicuous absence of both 'actors' and 'audience'.

Shekhar stood before the audience that had been reduced to approximately 25 people and began to read out the 'resolutions', point by point. The resolutions were not based on recommendations raised in the workshops as had been announced, because there had not been sufficient time to compile all the resolutions from the individual sector-specific workshops. Instead, the resolutions were based on NCPRI's pre-formulated generic demands. These included demands such as: 'The government is urged to put up draft Bills on Grievance Redress for widespread public consultation immediately' or 'Grievance Redress mechanism must be as decentralized as possible,

must be independent, and have an element of people's support'. After each point, Shekhar asked the audience: "*ham samit hai?*" (are we in agreement?). From the few people remaining in the audience, there were only about ten people who were not already entirely distracted that raised their hand in agreement. In such manner, Shekhar went down the list of nine recommendations. At the end, the resolution was declared passed.

This last scene of passing the resolution signals the importance that NCPRI places on 'due' process and procedure in civil society engagement. According to NCPRI, civil society derives its legitimacy by being inclusive of the rural poor, such as by conducting public consultations. NCPRI defines itself as a civil society organisation precisely by conforming to such procedures, which, according to its members, amount to democratic processes. The final session of passing the resolution as performed by Shekhar was an instance of demonstrating this commitment to processes and procedures. The fact that not many people were present to witness this act or to participate in it, was less important than the actual process of conducting it. This suggests that the form of the public performance of NCPRI is at least as relevant as its content and outcome. The commitments that NCPRI stands for came to be enacted and renewed through the process of passing the resolution, thus giving visible form to NCPRI and its principle of public consultation. The symbolic reading out of the resolutions, the raising of hands in agreement and the final passing of the resolution, was a 'dramaturgical display' through which certain norms that NCPRI stands for were reified.

Conclusion

This chapter has examined the ways in which members of NCPRI enacted their sense of 'civil society' through a public performance. Their notion of public consultation was given tangible form through a public convention. In the planning meeting preceding the convention, discussions evolved around the type of organisation that NCPRI is and the type of constituency it represents: NCPRI is distinct from Team

Anna in terms of its commitment to public consultation and to the participation of the rural poor. This was brought into being in the public convention through symbols, rhetoric and rituals. Convening a public performance enabled NCPRI to summon an audience and to thus bring into being its public. Legitimacy, within a democratic framework, is understood to derive from representing a unitary and identifiable 'public'. NCPRI's legitimacy as civil society representatives could be furnished by having a public before whom to present its positions and commitments. It was further argued in this chapter that NCPRI's public convention not only served as a display of its positions but, furthermore, by being performed, it brought into being the very commitments it stands for. Performances, so conceived, are not merely representations of political positions but are, as Spencer suggests in the context of the performance of elections, "crucial sites for the production and reproduction of the political" (Spencer 2007: 78). In other words, a performance is not only an emblematic enactment, but actually constitutes and brings into being the very commitments and positions.¹²¹

The backdrop of the performance of this particular convention was the highly charged Lokpal agitation in which NCPRI was competing with Team Anna over civil society representation. The Lokpal agitation, and the tensions it engendered among civil society, can be read as a type of 'social drama' in the field of anti-corruption activism. According to Turner, a 'social drama' is a moment of interruption of social life and of the suspension of normal roles, and thus forces groups to consciously reflect upon their values so as to redress the social order. Social dramas "induce and contain reflexive processes and generate cultural frames in which reflexivity can find a legitimate place" (Turner 1979: 83), thus enabling groups and actors to reflect, understand, act and portray themselves in a heightened fashion. Social dramas arouse consciousness of the self, or as Myerhoff states: "As heroes in our own dramas, we are made self-aware, conscious of our consciousness" (Turner 1980: 156).

¹²¹ In this it corresponds to so many political rituals – such as the ritual of elections (Banerjee 2007; Lukes 1975; Spencer 2007) – that do not just represent the democratic process but actually provide its very substance.

The social drama around the Lokpal led to the ‘suspension of normal roles’ of NCPRI that no longer was at the centre of debates on transparency and accountability legislation. This opened up an opportunity for members of NCPRI to reflect on their positions as civil society actors, and to identify the centrality of public consultation in their ethos. Their understandings of themselves as civil society actors could come into being through the processes of the public convention. They were thus acting as *Homo performans*, in that “in performing he reveals himself to himself” (Turner 1986: 81).

In this context, NCPRI’s notion of what constitutes civil society engagement in law-making processes, was propelled by its competition with Team Anna and emerged, at least in part, through an oppositional stance. The contours of NCPRI were defined consciously around the perceived differences and absences of Team Anna, so that the identification of Team Anna’s failure to engage in proper public consultation became the premise against which NCPRI consolidated its own commitments. This notion that identity is constructed through difference resonates again with broader conceptions of relationality, a theme that was discussed in the Introduction. A relational approach to identity highlights the circumstantial nature of a sense of identity that alters according to the context and in relation to others. A sense of identity is constituted by being counterposed to others – particularly during a ‘social drama’ – resulting in fluid, changing and dynamic identities. In this conceptualisation, identities emerge out of dialectic relationships and constellations that constantly redefine the substance and structures.

This analytical schema signals that the identity of NCPRI as an organisation is premised on similar grounds of relationality. The commitments and positions that NCPRI stands for, in terms of what it deemed to be appropriate civil society engagement, became salient as it engaged in an antagonistic relation to an opponent. By defining the absences of Team Anna, the idea of what NCPRI represents come into being. It depended on Team Anna fine-tuning to fine-tune its own commitment to public consultation and its understanding of civil society engagement. Through

such processes of differentiation, MKSS latently and unwittingly came to embody Team Anna.

5. Ideals and Disenchantment: Diagnosing Commitment

In the previous chapter I examined how an organisation such as NCPRI establishes its credibility as representing civil society through public performance. I explored how members of NCPRI enacted and made tangible their ideas of civil society to a wider audience. By holding a convention on public consultation they could present themselves externally as an organisation committed to what they defined as legitimate democratic processes and procedures. This chapter focuses on how NCPRI's organisational credibility is experienced internally. Drawing again on Goffman's terminology from dramaturgical analysis, while the previous chapter concerned a 'front-stage' public performance, this chapter focuses on the 'back-stage' dynamics within NCPRI.

This chapter is an exploration of ideals and expectations. It is an attempt to understand the finer-grained levels of commitment of social activists and the motives for their engagement. It is about understanding the ethos of an organisation that is committed to transparency and accountability, and to social justice more widely. It is about visions of an ideal notion of doing politics. The particular commitments expressed by members of NCPRI are about ideals of simplicity, renunciation and autonomy. These ideals, it will be demonstrated, are infused with particularly Indian notions of authenticity that derive from a Gandhian ethics.

Although seemingly paradoxical, commitment in this chapter is examined through the lens of disappointment and critique. It will be shown that acts of doubting and criticising are ways in which ideals, commitments and convictions are communicated. The various areas of disappointment raised by several members of

NCPRI that this chapter deals with, reveal what these members expect an organisation committed to transparency and accountability to be. By focusing on what NCPRI is *not*, the members carve out a space from which to restate their search for what it *ought* to be. In other words, their disenchantment, rather than shattering their hopes and aspirations, engenders a reaffirmation of their ideals and visions.

The context of this chapter is again the Lokpal agitation. This large-scale agitation serves as the framing scheme through which to examine the micro-politics of NCPRI. It takes the ‘critical event’ of the Lokpal agitation as the background from which to approach the internal dynamics and tensions of NCPRI. While the previous two chapters focused principally on public debates and events orchestrated by the NCPRI leadership in response to the Lokpal agitation, this chapter shifts attention to the experiences of other NCPRI members. As the Lokpal agitation gained momentum, and the leadership increased its engagement, several cracks in the nature and structure of the organisation began to appear to various members of NCPRI. Certain members became increasingly conscious of the leadership not living up to the ideal that the organisation supposedly represents. The result of this was a sense of disenchantment.

This experience of disappointment by members of NCPRI derives from the relationship between MKSS and NCPRI. Many people who had joined NCPRI had done so out of a commitment to MKSS. MKSS, as we have seen, is widely renowned for being a grassroots organisation, rooted in rural India and with virtuous political and ethical positions; for many, NCPRI signified an extension of MKSS and its core values. NCPRI and MKSS are typically conflated by their members, by their leaders, in media and in public presentations, so that the same high moral ground is expected from both organisations. While it is known that NCPRI is Delhi-based and that MKSS is based in rural Rajasthan, they are nonetheless expected to stand for similar ideals and commitments. That both organisations share the same leadership adds to the conflation. NCPRI and MKSS are treated as both distinct and at the same time equivalent organisations, which is thus the source of much tension.

Given this context, this chapter deals with the inherent tension that organisations such as MKSS/NCPRI confront. As examined in Chapters One and Two, there is a Weberian tension in the political action of MKSS and NCPRI: in order to prompt motivation in its cause for transparency and accountability, MKSS has to set an ideal of moral and political engagement. High ideals of pure and virtuous social action are the fuel for its commitments. However, in order to carry out its ideal, MKSS has to engage in mundane and humdrum processes. Its ideal and its actual modes of operation are thus in perpetual tension: in order to strive towards its ideal, it needs to engage in routine activities; as soon as it engages in these activities, however, its ideal gets ‘polluted’. Like a utopia, the realisation of the ideal is always deferred. In order to resolve this tension, as noted in Chapter Two, NCPRI was called into existence.

With this in mind, this chapter explores some of the ideals of MKSS and the types of contradictions and tensions that it confronts in its political engagement. The disappointments, as articulated by the members, are here examined as a means to understand their commitments to an ideal. The first part of the chapter examines the ideal of MKSS as rooted in the village and the appeals it makes to a Gandhian type of ethics of *swaraj*. The second part deals with the morality around funding. Both parts indicate the tension between ideals of purity and virtue and the highly complex nature of doing politics. As will be concluded, the tension between lofty ideals and practical politics is crucial in keeping commitment continuously dynamic and re-energized.

The Mud Hut

It was another early September afternoon with many of us crowded into the NCPRI office. The still ongoing Lokpal agitation was generating continuous intensified levels of activity. Anna Hazare had ended his fast, but the Parliamentary Monsoon Session was still in progress and NCPRI still needed to make its ‘basket of measures’ widely known. Besides attending meetings and conferences, and lobbying among

MPs and other government representatives, another way in which NCPRI was making its alternative approach to the Jan Lokpal Bill known, was by reaching out to the media. For this very reason, on that September afternoon, a journalist from Zee TV who had requested to interview Aruna Roy was invited to the NCPRI office.

The journalist was let into the office and sat next to Aruna in one corner of the room. While the cameraman was setting up his camera and lights, Aruna and the journalist engaged in small talk before the formal interview proceeded. The journalist told Aruna that he was grateful to her for the service she had done for the country by bringing about the Right to Information. He was not a journalist back then to cover the movement himself, he said, but he was familiar with the campaigning carried out by MKSS to get the RTI enacted. His tone of reverence was one I had heard on countless occasions when strangers met Aruna. In public events she was often surrounded by people who wanted to pay their respects, recount their personal experiences with corruption, or even, as some college students seemed keen to do, ask her for her autograph.

At this point Aruna asked Ushma, who was working on one of the computers, to move aside and show the journalist the image on the desktop background.¹²² The image depicted a crumbling stone wall, with a wonky wooden door. Behind this decrepit wall, one could just about make out a small house made out of adobe and a tiled roof. In the foreground a blossoming bougainvillea crept along the stone wall; the background was bare, with only a lone house followed by the Aravalli Hills in sight. Combined they evoked an aesthetic allure of a rustic village setting. The photo had evidently been taken during the monsoon as the elements contained in the frame – the crumbling layer of adobe on the stone wall, the dirt path leading from the house, the dazzling red of the bougainvillea – had a crispness and sharpness to them, rare in the usually dry desert landscape of Rajasthan.

¹²² Ushma is a pseudonym.



Figure 11 The home of MKSS (photo courtesy of MKSS).

After pointing out this image to the journalist, Aruna told him that this was where MKSS had begun and where her home had been for the past 30 years. She explained that life there was simple, but that it was precisely the simplicity that formed a crucial aspect of the process and identity of being a people's organisation. The journalist's reaction was one of discernible awe; he expressed his bewilderment by saying that he never expected the architect of the momentous RTI legislation, and someone who had once been in the prestigious Indian Administrative Service, to be living in quite such humble conditions.

This procedure of showing the desktop image of the house of MKSS in the village of Devdungri was repeated many times throughout the Lokpal agitation. Journalists and other visitors who flocked into the NCPRI office over these weeks were often introduced to a glimpse of the image on the desktop. It was usually described as the home and base of MKSS. This routine seemed to be serving as a constant reminder that even though NCPRI was now operating out of the office in upscale South Delhi, its actual roots were in the mud hut.

The refrain of living in a mud hut and of being rooted in the village cropped up in various other ways throughout the Lokpal agitation. At this time, in a concerted effort to raise awareness of NCPRI's position on the Lokpal, Aruna and Nikhil gave

many public talks and interviews. Many of these began with an introduction of the work of MKSS. Even though they were making statements on the Lokpal under the banner of NCPRI, it was their association to MKSS that served as their point of introduction. It was MKSS that rooted them in rural India. Typically the scene of their public presentations was set by first establishing the grassroots engagement that they carried out through MKSS. Only then would NCPRI's position on the Lokpal follow. This introductory tone can be noted in statements such as the following made by Aruna:

I moved to Devdungri in 1987 in order to live and work as a people's organisation. The MKSS does not accept institutional funds either from the government and private institutions or from foreign ones. All its members draw minimum wages. We don't have a campus and live in two mud huts. We do all the work ourselves – we fetch water, we cook together and we campaign. We feel both living and working are political statements. We live, perhaps in many ways, the way Gandhi would have liked us to live. (Roy, no date)¹²³

The series of tropes contained in this statement found reiteration in many public presentations. As the Lokpal agitation picked up in heat, NCPRI received growing public attention. This opened up an array of public spaces and platforms including conferences, lectures, and panel discussions as well as interviews and TV debates. The evocation of the village background of MKSS – encapsulated in the image of a mud hut – set the tone of many of these presentations.

The myth of the village

All of the members of NCPRI had at some point spent time in the village of Devdungri and had participated in some of the earlier campaigns and mobilisations by MKSS. Everybody who had come into touch with MKSS's work on the 'ground'

¹²³ "On being 'ex' a lot of things, among them an ex-IAS officer..." in *infochangeindia* [accessed 21 February 2013] <http://infochangeindia.org/other/changemakers/we-have-to-start-the-process-of-thinking-about-alternatives.html> (Original text has no page numbers).

had been captivated by this organisation's active grassroots work. For many of the 'base members' of NCPRI their experience with MKSS in Devdungri had been their first encounter with 'rural India', where they had learnt about the simplicity but also hardship of village life.¹²⁴ Many of the members spoke enthusiastically about the impressions that everyday life in Devdungri had left them with, such as sleeping on the ground, fetching water from the well, and making *chapatis* on the open-fire *chula*. Beyond these romantic village experiences, they also learnt about the daily plight of labourers and farmers. Through the engagement of MKSS, these members had come face-to-face with the dire implications of corruption, which left villagers largely bereft of their basic entitlements and thus struggling for survival. This insight into MKSS as an organisation unwaveringly rooted in the real concerns of the most marginalised, was for many precisely what had lead them to join NCPRI, in solidarity with MKSS.

Yet, it was this enthusiastic, assumed association of MKSS to rural Rajasthan that would become the source of disappointment amongst some members who noted MKSS's increasing distancing from Devdungri. Indeed, the MKSS leadership had shifted its work and activities predominantly to New Delhi during the Lokpal agitation, with the high-powered nature of engagement that it demanded. Certain base members felt uneasy about this shift, since they feared that it indicated a general withdrawal from grassroots work to exclusively urban-based policy-making. They complained in private that Aruna and Nikhil spent so much of their time in Delhi and travelling around the globe to meetings and conferences that hardly any time remained to even visit their village. This can be effectively illustrated, for instance, by the appointments calendar of Aruna and Nikhil: a lecture at St Xaviers College in Mumbai, a meeting with the Chief Minister of Jharkand, a key talk at a seminar in Indonesia organised by UNODC, a conference by UNCAC in Morocco, another conference by Open Government Partnership in Washington D.C., all within the span of a few weeks. At least to some of the base members, this "jet-setter lifestyle" of Aruna and Nikhil invalidated their claims of still being rooted in the mud hut.

¹²⁴ See Chapter Four for a definition of 'base' members.

During the weeks of the Lokpal agitation, I was privileged to have a fast-developing relationship of camaraderie with some of the members of NCPRI. During the countless hours that I spent in the NCPRI office, participating in their routine work and their many meetings and public events, I was befriending many of the base members of NCPRI. My friendship to these base members gave me entry into some of their inner worlds, including their worlds of dismay. Increasingly I heard grumblings articulated by these befriended members on the running and the structure of NCPRI, particularly on the role played by the leadership. These grumblings came to my ears only gradually, after certain levels of trust had been established and, often, after some probing on my part. Several members expressed appreciation at being able to give vent to their reservations with me, as the general tone through which MKSS was typically spoken about was one of reverence.

While the feeling of disenchantment was the dominant sense among several members of NCPRI during the Lokpal agitation, they nonetheless continued to express their overall conviction in MKSS and NCPRI. In the following sections I explore in closer detail the ways in which the doubts and critiques of the members served as inverted idioms of their deeply held commitment. Members who complained that Aruna and Nikhil no longer spent time in the village, nonetheless expressed their great respect for the work done by the leadership. They were in overall awe of the unwavering commitments by the MKSS leadership in attending to the needs of the poor. However, they were upset that the leadership continued to claim to be based in a mud hut in Devdungri, when in fact they were mainly in Delhi or travelling around. This disappointment boiled down to a perceived gap between what the leadership was claiming and what many of the members felt was actually going on. The disappointment seemed to lie in not finding that NCPRI/MKSS represented what it was expected to represent. The claim of the mud hut was just one such perceived gap between ‘rhetoric’ and ‘reality’.

As will become apparent shortly, this expectation of what MKSS ought to represent showed close affinities to particular Indian notions of authenticity that derive from a Gandhian ethic of simplicity and renunciation. With their critiques, the disappointed

members were making calls for certain notions of purity and virtue, resounding strikingly with Gandhi's philosophy of *swaraj*.

In quest of the Gandhian village

The mud hut as evoked by members of MKSS epitomizes humbleness, rootedness and authenticity. In this context, it conjures up the image of a group of social activists living in simplicity directly amongst the people they seek to represent. Depictions of the mud hut seemed to act as a reminder of the inherently grassroots origins of MKSS. They are saying that although their political engagement was compelling them to sojourn predominantly in Delhi or to travel around, at the heart of it they were still rooted in the village. The mud hut thus was a visual representation of the idea of MKSS as a 'popular grassroots' organisation. In the quotation cited earlier, Aruna made reference to the mud hut as symbolising a 'political statement', in accordance with MKSS's other life and work commitments.

This political statement is in line with wider views that characterise the village as the core of 'authentic India' and as being a pure site unblemished by the 'immorality' of modernity. The trope of the village as a site of virtue finds repetition in much of literature on the Indian subcontinent. Indian sociologists, for instance, have described the village as a microcosm that permits generalisation of the "social processes and problems to be found occurring in great parts of India" (Srinivas 1955, cited in Jodhka 2002: 3343) and as having "a design in which [are] reflected the basic values of Indian civilisation" (Beteille 1980, cited in Jodhka 2002: 3343). As Jodhka notes, the conceptualisation of the village as a "signifier of the authentic native life", is a characteristically Indian phenomenon with historic roots in colonialism (Jodhka 2002: 3343). The centrality of the village originated under the British, who construed India as a 'village republic', in order to justify their rule over India. With leaders of the nationalist movement adopting colonial categories, the conceptualisation of the village as the core of the nation continued post-Independence. For them, the village

signified 'real India'. According to Jodhka, the conceptualisations professed by leaders of the nationalist movement have been subsumed in "the Indian common sense" (Jodhka 2002: 3344). Writings on the village by nationalists, most notably by Gandhi who is known as the 'ideologue of the village', have influenced contemporary critiques of a corrupt modernity and the elevation of an authentic village life.¹²⁵

Gandhi famously envisioned the village as 'the essence of Indian civilisation' when he said: "If the village perishes, India will perish too."¹²⁶ For Gandhi the village stands for an authentic and pure site that needs to be protected from immoral Western influences. As Jodhka notes, for Gandhi the "Indian village had a design, a way of life, which had the potential of becoming an alternative to the city based and technology driven capitalist west" (Jodhka 2002: 3346). The village symbolises both a political and moral ideal to Gandhi. Politically it represents the ultimate level of local self-governance and thus the heart of political decentralisation (we will examine Gandhi's outline of a village government in more detail in the next chapter). Morally, the village for Gandhi represents a site of self-organisation where an individual can develop his or her full potential. It is the site for the moral regeneration of India (Corbridge and Harriss 2000: 25).

This notion of moral advancement of the individual is at the core of Gandhi's principle of *gram swaraj* (village self-rule). The term *swaraj* is most commonly used in reference to 'self-rule' from the British, becoming synonymous with India's Freedom Struggle. However, for Gandhi *swaraj* has a more spiritual meaning. For him it connotes an ethic of moral conduct whereby an individual strives for 'control of the self'. Accordingly, Gandhi postulates that the foundation of a functioning and

¹²⁵ This emphasis on the 'village' resonates with emphasis placed on the 'local' in development literature. Fisher, for instance, notes that all NGO practices remain discursively constructed through reference to the 'local', because it is connection to local constituencies that builds up an NGO's legitimacy (Fisher 1997: 454). Yarrow in his ethnography on NGOs in Ghana, similarly notes that being able to speak from a 'local perspective' confers legitimacy to a development project (Yarrow 2011: 119).

¹²⁶ It is interesting to note that Gandhi's notion of the village diverged significantly from that held by his nationalist contemporaries. While for Gandhi the village represented authenticity, for Nehru the village denoted backwardness, while for Abedkar the village signified the site of oppression (Jodhka 2002: 3343).

wholesome community relies on an ethic of self-realisation, whereby all individuals work towards a state of self-respect, self-responsibility and self-discipline. “*swaraj* really means self-control” Gandhi asserts; “only he is capable of self-control who observes the rules of morality... A state enjoys *swaraj* if it can boast of a large number of such good citizens” (Fox 1989: 45). In other words, the premise for political independence is self-liberation through spiritual and moral cleansing.

The MKSS ideal displays several traces of principles of asceticism and of Gandhi’s notion of *swaraj*. This is not to say that this is an explicit aspiration, yet it creeps into their ideas of political activism and their ethic of moral conduct. Members of MKSS do not ascribe to Gandhi’s philosophy by the book, but it hovers as an ideal over their work ethics. It appears in symbolic gestures, such as, for instance, in the implicit ‘codes of conduct’ within MKSS and NCPRI that each individual has to wash their own plate after a meal. In a hierarchical system where washing dishes is considered of lowly status, this act of washing one’s own plate is deemed to be in line with a Gandhian virtue of simplicity. Similarly, the non-existence of chairs at MKSS in Devdungri was explained to me with a similar Gandhian reasoning: chairs are seen to be *angrezi* (literally ‘English’, usually implying ‘foreign’ in the widest sense of the term) imports, that are not only unnecessary in rural India, but, furthermore, are markers of hierarchy, for, whoever sits on the chair, has all others sitting at their feet. In Devdungri categorically everyone squats on the ground or on low stools, as this eliminates visible signs of hierarchy. It is, in a Gandhian way, an effort towards self-purification from status and rank. The portrait of Gandhi as the sole frame decorating the bare walls of the mud hut in Devdungri, brings to the fore the symbolic identification of MKSS with Gandhi’s ideal.

Doubt as commitment

As described earlier, several base members expressed their misgivings and doubt about the credibility of MKSS living up to a Gandhian ideal. By accusing the MKSS leadership of being perpetual jet-setters, some of the base members lamented the increased distancing of MKSS from the village. Although such critiques were expressions of disappointment and doubt, embedded within the very commitment and motivation of the NCPRI members, through questioning aspects of the MKSS leadership, these members indirectly articulated their political commitments.

The commitment held by members of NCPRI lay precisely in the Gandhian ideal that MKSS supposedly represents. When asked what had made them join NCPRI in the first place, the base members unequivocally responded that it was MKSS's authenticity as a social movement. In their varying ways, all members pointed out that unlike most organisations and social movements that make up the Indian political landscape, MKSS represented to them an organisation truly rooted in rural India. Conspicuous in many conversations I had with several of the base members, was their emphatic debunking of the world of NGOs. Repeatedly they portrayed NGOs as corrupt and aloof entities that serve as mere 'fronts' to draw in funds for personal gain. India is notoriously swamped with NGOs, all claiming to represent some group or cause; yet, according to what I heard from members of NCPRI, only a fraction of them are trustworthy. Within such a climate, MKSS represented for these members the rare organisation that is authentically committed. Being rooted in the village and driven to campaign for policies that have the needs of the marginalised as prime objective, convinced many of the members of MKSS's legitimacy. It is these reasons, as well as the lack of credible alternatives, that led many members to join NCPRI. With NCPRI being the Delhi-based extension of MKSS, many individuals became members of NCPRI, in solidarity to the MKSS cause.

This commitment to an authentic and rooted MKSS became emphatically articulated during the Lokpal agitation, which demanded drastic shifts in campaigning and operation from NCPRI. The nature of the Lokpal agitation required technical and

legal engagement with politicians and bureaucrats in New Delhi, steering NCPRI away from grassroots work at the village level. With the Anna Hazare-led Lokpal movement erupting with such magnitude, NCPRI had been forced largely into a reactive position. This shift in engagement was perceived by some of its members as a disappointing departure from the ideal of the authentic and rooted MKSS. Some members began to doubt the credibility of the MKSS leadership who now appeared more as ‘jet-setters’ and less as grassroots activists. Their lament that MKSS was no longer based in the mud hut was an expression of this disappointment and doubt.

By the very act of lamenting, however, these base members were expressing their commitment to MKSS. By criticising the recent behaviour of the MKSS leadership, members were voicing the ideal type of organisation that they were committed to. Their ideal of MKSS as authentic and rooted in rural Rajasthan had been taken for granted in the past, but through the shifting nature of the Lokpal agitation it found re-articulation. By noting its disappearance, members of NCPRI reaffirmed the ideals they held about MKSS, and the type of politics that they endorsed.

That critique and doubt is constitutive of commitment, rather than an expression of sheer disillusionment, finds evidence in the continuous engagement with NCPRI by even the most critical members. Despite being at odds on various issues with the leadership during the Lokpal agitation, not one of the members stepped down from the organisation at any point. This continued commitment, in spite of the sense of disappointment, can be understood through Hirschman’s conception of loyalty. According to Hirschman, loyalty by members to an organisation expresses itself in attachment, holding them back from ‘exiting’, even if disagreement prevails. Loyalty ‘neutralizes’ the desire to leave an organisation and thereby serves “the socially useful purpose of preventing deterioration from becoming cumulative, as it so often does when there is no barrier to exit” (Hirschman 1970: 79). According to Hirschman, when an organisation begins to deteriorate, members have either the option of ‘exit’ or the option of ‘voice’, whereby the former implies simply choosing a different ‘product’, while the latter is more complicated and constitutes “political

action par excellence” (Hirschman 1970: 16). Loyalty to an organisation tends to preclude exit and in turn to favour voice.

Hirschman finds that loyalist behaviour amongst members occurs particularly in organisations producing ‘public goods’, whereby the commitment to the good binds the member to the cause, regardless of the disagreements that may exist. In such scenarios, Hirschman notes, the option of exiting the organisation is reduced, as the member is committed to prevent the deterioration of the public good. Although Hirschman focuses largely on how this theory operates in economic organisations, such as firms and businesses, it also applies to non-economic organisations, such as NCPRI. Some members of NCPRI are in discord with the running and structure of NCPRI, yet their commitment to the cause of transparency and accountability, stops them from stepping down. It is through their critiques and reservations that they reinforce their commitments to the cause. It is their questioning that keeps the ideal continuously alive and dynamic. We will return later to a closer examination of how doubts and critiques can be read as expressions of commitment.

The Morality of Funding

Another idiom that highlights the expectations made of MKSS and the politics it is assumed to represent, and, consequently the disappointments generated by a perceived distancing from this ideal, can be found in its position on funding. MKSS espouses a specific morality around the sources of its funding and on the ways in which it is supposed to be spent. This again points to the expectation of a particularly pure and virtuous form of doing politics as held by members of MKSS and NCPRI. The idiom here again resonates with a particular Gandhian ethics.

The high moral tone with which funding is discussed within MKSS, reflects broader public debates on funding in India. During the peak of the Lokpal agitation a public controversy erupted concerning the sources of funding of Team Anna. The themes highlighted in this controversy echo in many regards the positions on funding held by

MKSS/NCPRI. Both cases point out the morality with which sources of funding are assessed and deliberated within political activism in India. This section begins with a description of the public debate on funding that flared up during the Lokpal agitation, providing a flavour of the overall climate on funding within which MKSS's positions are contextualised. It then moves on to explore the positions on funding as held by the variously placed members of MKSS/NCPRI.

The Kabir Controversy

One day we were all sitting around the TV in the NCPRI office. With a mood of unrest hovering in the air, we were watching IBN Live as Arundhati Roy was interviewed on her position on the Lokpal.¹²⁷ One issue that she picked up on in this interview was an article she had written ten days earlier, decrying the sources of funding of the Anna Hazare campaign. "The campaign is being handled by people who run a clutch of generously funded NGOs whose donors include Coca-Cola and the Lehman Brothers," she had provocatively written (Roy 2011).¹²⁸ The interviewer on IBN Live asked Roy to expand on this view. Roy pointed out that the NGOs run by the three core members of the campaign received funding from foreign sources, including the Ford Foundation and the Rockefeller Foundation. In the centre of her scrutiny was Kabir, one of the NGOs run by core member of Team Anna, Arvind Kejriwal, which allegedly had received large sums of funds from the Ford Foundation over the years. Institutions such as the Ford Foundation, according to Roy, inject funds into NGOs with the intention of gradually replacing the functions and duties of the state. By accepting funds from US-based institutions, Roy maintained, Team Anna was reproducing the World Bank's neo-liberal agenda that seeks the gradual displacement of the functions of the state.

¹²⁷ Arundhati Roy is a well-known Indian author and political activist.

"Jan Lokpal Bill is very regressive: Arundhati Roy" in *IBN Live*, 31 August 2011 [accessed 24 February 2013] <http://ibnlive.in.com/news/jan-lokpal-bill-is-very-regressive-arundhati-roy/179990-3.html>

¹²⁸ Roy, A. (2011) "I'd rather not be Anna" in *The Hindu*, 2 October 2011 [accessed 24 February 2013] <http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/article2379704.ece?homepage=true> (Original text has no page numbers).

In the weeks following Arundhati Roy's statements on the sources of funding of Team Anna, a whole range of public discussions ensued around this topic. These appeared in articles, in editorials and in other public forums. The controversy increased when Arvind Kejriwal first denied allegations that Kabir received funding from the Ford Foundation, only to admit to it and justify it soon afterwards. This was further corroborated by publicized accusations that the website of Kabir had initially not made transparent all its funds and had only at a later stage accounted for its funding from the Ford Foundation. The issue in all of this was the propriety of a national social movement against corruption receiving funding from outside India.

Also at the NCPRI office, the public debates around Kabir's funding controversy had stirred new levels of commotion. Throughout the Lokpal agitation, one of the many tasks given to the base members (and one that I often took up in my petty attempts to help out with office work) was to track some of the public discussions arising in the media. Articles considered of importance, particularly if they contained references to the NCPRI approach to the Lokpal, were filed in a designated folder. During the weeks around the Kabir funding controversy, the folder grew exponentially. Searching the net, we came across a profusion of articles and blogs that took issue with the foreign funding received by the NGOs of various members of Team Anna. In various blogs the Ford Foundation was decried as having links to the CIA, and was thus seen as being part of a 'foreign hand', infiltrating Indian domestic politics. By accepting funds from big foreign institutions, the Lokpal movement of Team Anna was being charged with being taken "hostage to outside interests".¹²⁹ A feature article published in the weekly English news magazine *Outlook* similarly contended that the recent "closer dialogue of policymakers with civil society groups is considered an indirect form of engagement by overseas agencies".¹³⁰

¹²⁹ "No clue where donations in the past year came from" in *Outlook*, 19 September 2011 [accessed 20 October 2014] <http://www.outlookindia.com/printarticle.aspx?278266>

¹³⁰ "No clue where donations in the past year came from" in *Outlook* 19 September 2011 [accessed 20 October 2014] <http://www.outlookindia.com/printarticle.aspx?278266>

This hostility towards foreign funding resonates with particular tropes of ‘impurity’. One need not look far afield in anthropology to find accounts of the importance of notions of purity and pollution in the maintenance of social order and social cohesion. Such studies typically emphasise the rules and practices that exist in a society to keep out the polluting in order to maintain internal purity. Accordingly, boundaries between purity and impurity need to be demarcated so as to protect social cohesion. One notable study is Douglas’s (1966) *Purity and Danger* in which she shows that purity signifies clear boundaries and orders, while pollution is associated with unwanted ambiguity and disorder. Societies, Douglas argues, relate pollution to their moral values, with rites and practices aimed at reducing risk and danger to their people. This ‘politics of pollution’ can help to explain the hostility towards external funding in the Indian context: foreign funding is an external intervention, risking the contamination of national integrity. Purity here is associated with maintaining clear boundaries and with keeping things apart. Jenkins traces this hostility towards foreign funding in the NGO sector in India to the early 1980s when sections of the Indian left attacked NGOs that receive funding from abroad as “agents of imperialism” (Jenkins 2007: 64).

Latour’s (1993) study of modernity similarly helps to explain the hostility toward foreign funding in India, by hinting at the importance given to processes of purification as demarcators of order. According to Latour, purification is a central process of modernity, consisting of the attempted separation of nature from culture, science from society, things from subjects, humans from non-humans. While according to Latour such discrete separations do not exist because, as he contends, everything is hybrid and happens in the ‘Middle Kingdom’, modernity would collapse if such separation could not be upheld. It is precisely through the process of purification that modernity is distinguishable from premodernity. Thus, the very *raison d’être* of modernity is to repudiate hybrids, and to divide the world into clean and discrete entities. Funding from outside of the national borders obscures the purified entity of the Indian nation-state.

The ascription of polluting qualities to foreign funding, finds particular pertinence in the context of post-colonial India. With its history of foreign domination, there are strong hangover resentments in India to dependence on external control. The aversion to the ‘foreign hand’ infiltrating domestic politics can be understood as a residue of nearly a century of colonialism. Concepts of ‘purity’ as based on dismissal of external influences, can be traced back to *swadeshi* (self-sufficiency) campaigns that preceded Independence. For instance, Bayly (1986) recounts how Gandhi’s campaigns for *swadeshi* industry and the boycott of foreign goods were infused with notions of purity. Cloth was inscribed with new meanings by the nationalists and became an ideological symbol of the freedom struggles against British rule. This association of purity in clothing (as discussed for instance by Cohn 1989 and Tarlo 1996) falls under what Copeman terms “the Indian armamentarium of purification techniques” (Copeman 2009: 26). Impurity associated with foreign funding today echoes the antipathy towards foreign goods, such as cloth, from pre-Independent India.

Clean Funds

The controversy around Team Anna and the Ford Foundation animated discussions within the NCPRI office as to their own position regarding funding. The public debates on the perils of receiving institutional funds provided them with a discursive platform from which to restate their own long-held views. Since their inception nearly two decades earlier, the dictates of both NCPRI and MKSS had been that they did not accept institutional and governmental funding, or any funding that could jeopardise their independence. The widespread focus on Team Anna’s funding controversy created a climate that invigorated MKSS/ NCPRI to publicly present their position on funding.

The official stance of MKSS is that it does not take institutional or governmental funding, as such funding, it professes, compromises an organisation’s independence

and political freedom. During the Lokpal agitation, the MKSS leadership emphasized its position on funding in public presentations. For instance, it was in this period that MKSS's website was updated, having been neglected for many years. Some of the recently added content elucidated MKSS's position on foreign funding:

At the theoretical level, it is not acceptable to us to receive foreign funds to fight battles with our own governments. There is a complex debate regarding the politics of inequality that underlie foreign funding. It is sufficient to state that we feel that there is a contradiction in receiving money from abroad to conduct political campaigns within our own country, when there is a democratic system in existence which we feel should be activated to exercise our rights, and influence policy formulation.¹³¹

Given the context and timing of the website's updating, this can be read as a direct response to the controversy around funding from the Ford Foundation and Team Anna. Foreign funding, according to MKSS, not only jeopardizes an organisation's independence, but also has detrimental effects on the essence of democracy. Hereby it was making a principled claim that funding relates to questions of equality and democracy, and ultimately independence and autonomy.

Here again we find resonance with a Gandhian ethic. For Gandhi, true *swaraj* begins with self-governance, where each individual is responsible for his or her own moral project. An individual who masters *swaraj* and can overcome obstacles, enjoys a state of autonomy. The notion of autonomy is at the root of the anti-colonial movement. According to Terchek, "autonomy stands at the centre of Gandhi's political philosophy. It is his greatest good and precedes in importance his other political and social goals" (Terchek 1998: 21). An autonomous actor must self-sufficiently contain all virtues within him/herself and must not be affected by external obstacles. This notion of the autonomous 'self' appears to be in operation in the ideal of MKSS in the form of an autonomous 'collective-self' that does not depend on external funding.

¹³¹ "About" in *Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan – a non party people's movement* [accessed 17 February 2012] <http://www.mkssindia.org/>

MKSS's clear moral position on foreign funding applies similarly to funding from within the national borders. It asserts that it is unacceptable to receive funding from any governmental or institutional sources, as this too would lead to a dependence on external agendas. Instead, MKSS promulgates the principle of raising funds from local residents and individual donations. This proximity of sources of funding, according to MKSS, furthers a sense of ownership and participation, preserves independence of operation, and ensures a basic accountability to the people. An anecdotal reference often repeated by Aruna and Nikhil in public presentations in this context, is on the donations in 'cash and kind' that MKSS receives from villagers: it is the accumulation of the five rupees here, the one kilogramme of grain there, and the habitual voluntary labour support from villagers that has significantly contributed to MKSS's sustenance. This form of local support, in MKSS's logic of financial autonomy and morality, does not pose a threat to the autonomy of the 'collective self'. In Douglas's sense, funds from local sources represent a 'pure' source of funding that does not threaten boundaries, and reduces external risks.

Expensive Poverty

Triggered by the public debates about the Kabir funding controversy, I had many conversations with my base member friends of NCPRI about the propriety of the sources of funding of MKSS. One concern that featured conspicuously in several of these discussions was the perceived conflict of interest in the support that MKSS receives from SWRC, the organisation set up and run by Aruna's husband, and the organisation in which Aruna had begun her career in 'social work'. According to this view, SWRC provides MKSS with unaccounted substantial resources, financial, material and menial. These resources, as I was told, found evidence in various instances: the unrestricted access to SWRC's jeeps and drivers for the countless journeys undertaken by the MKSS leadership between Delhi and Rajasthan; the recruitment of SWRC's 'communication team' that, with its puppets and instruments, provides 'entertainment' at public events organised by MKSS; the loans

that SWRC regularly issues to MKSS. Without the support of SWRC, some NCPRI members contended, MKSS could not sustain its ideology on funding.

The support which MKSS receives from SWRC was viewed as controversial for two reasons. Firstly, SWRC is a registered NGO, drawing funds from a wide range of governmental and institutional sources both national and international. Some NCPRI members described this as a contradiction of MKSS's claim of rejecting institutional funding. Taking support from SWRC was criticized for being a double standard that allowed MKSS to appear as unadulterated by institutional funding, yet indirectly sustained by it. The other crucial point of contention was that SWRC is run by Aruna's husband, and that this amounted to a form of nepotism, as one member went as far as contending.

It is this 'kin-based connection' to a heavily-funded NGO that makes the MKSS model non-replicable, according to the critical NCPRI members. It is only because of the sustained perks which it receives from SWRC that MKSS can maintain its principle of institutional independence. While many members said that they respected MKSS's position regarding institutional funding, and agreed that an organisation should not be dependent on funders, they noted that in practice MKSS proved that such utter independence could be achieved only under specific, and privileged, circumstances. This links to a further concern about the sources of funding of MKSS. Several members noted that MKSS's assertion of refusing foreign and institutional funding and accepting only local donations, could be upheld only because it has a source of regular and generous donations from Aruna and Nikhil's 'rich friends'. These friends are from the high establishment and are known to Aruna and Nikhil through their own elite backgrounds. Without such high-ranking connections, some members of NCPRI objected, the MKSS model could not be reproduced. The irony of this, as one base member friend mockingly said to me one day, is that in order to be grassroots and radical, one has to be connected to the elite establishment. "It is expensive to stay in poverty" he joked.

In quest of frugality

As the controversy over MKSS's funding suggests, the public discussions on the funding of Team Anna were being reproduced at a microcosmic level within NCPRI. Certain members of NCPRI expressed their apprehension regarding the sources and accountability of funding of MKSS. The theme running through these critiques was again the perceived gap between rhetoric and reality. MKSS stood for many of these members as symbolising a moral high ground, guided by simple and humble living standards, that is, by a certain purity in action and practice. What their disappointment was expressing was an abandonment of this moral ground.

Contained within these disappointments regarding the sources of MKSS's funding lay again the commitment of members of NCPRI. It was through their critiques and doubts that their commitment was articulated. This commitment was again premised on a particular Gandhian ethic of purity and autonomy. By questioning the sources and expenditures of funding, members of NCPRI were voicing their expectation that an organisation's funding must not only be transparent and accountable, but also unblemished from polluting external sources. An organisation committed to social causes was expected to be autonomous from external support, and to rely on local sources. The closer the source of funding is, the purer it seems to be considered. Through such expectations, members of NCPRI were attempting to maintain the purity of MKSS by keeping boundaries between the self and the external. Funding thus became another idiom that expressed notions of purity and virtue in political commitment.

This expectation of frugal purity and virtue among members of NCPRI, it must be noted, is largely a discursive one that does not reflect their own lifestyle. Most members of NCPRI are based in Delhi – more specifically, in South Delhi, which is the most affluent residential area in the capital. They lead 'middle-class lifestyles', in so far as this is defined by educational backgrounds, occupational opportunities and consumption patterns. Aside from membership in NCPRI, all the base members are involved in 'socially-beneficent' activities (working in NGOs, as investigative

journalists, as academics), without this entailing conspicuous frugality in their lifestyles. None of the members themselves live in a place that even remotely resembles a mud hut, nor do they draw their funding from local sources. The irony of the high expectations held regarding MKSS hit home on occasions when members would share with me their disappointment while sipping on a glass of imported wine. This indicates that expectations of an ideal of purity and virtue are externalised; it is the ‘others’ that must comport to the ideal in order to be credible. MKSS as an organisation represents particular ideals for its members, which are the markers that convince them to join in the first place. If the leadership of MKSS corrodes these ideals, then the organisational integrity is questioned. However, the members’ own lifestyle is left out of the equation.

This points to the impossibility of aspiring to a Gandhian ideal. Neither the MKSS leadership nor the base members are able to live up to the high ideal of purity and virtue. The ‘world out there’ demands engagement and operations that are inherently removed from their ideal. In order to engage at the levels that it does, MKSS depends on favours and connections. These informal forms of support stem from the social location of the leadership, but do not match the ideal of simplicity and renouncement. The base members themselves are similarly caught in a tension between their externalised expectations and their own lifestyles. Here lies the inherent tension that an organisation like MKSS is faced with as it attempts to move between its aspirations and objectives while keeping its members on board. In order to give meaning to its struggle and cause, such an organisation must set high moral ideals and expectations. In the case of MKSS, as with many other social movements in India (Copeman 2009), the expectation is of political action and a lifestyle in conformity to a Gandhian ethic. Throughout the history of Independent India, many social movements have emerged that draw heavily on the theories and symbolism of Gandhi.¹³²

Gandhi’s ethics are premised on an attempt to infuse a modernist touch to traditional Hindu texts on morality and renunciation. While orthodox Hindu philosophy is

¹³² See for instance Shah (2004) on the influence of Gandhi in the work of women’s movements.

predicated on the idea of a total seclusion from social ties and material desires, Gandhi advocates a form of engaged asceticism. For him it is not through renunciation from the world, but through engagement in the world, that true *swaraj* and autonomy can be attained. Gandhi's philosophy thus adapts traditional Hindu texts on renunciation and self-purification to the modern political world.

Gandhi's attempt to adapt Hindu philosophy to contemporary concerns has been copied by other modern-day religious reformists. Copeman, in his study of the interface between devotional movements and blood donations in India, highlights how key religious principles, such as *seva* (selfless service), *sanyas* (renunciation) and *dan* (gift/ donation) are being transformed by modern day reformists. While in orthodox religious scriptures such principles require total renunciation of the individual from society, in the reformist versions they are being directed toward the service and "uplift of humanity" (Copeman 2009: 56). That renunciation in India is no longer associated exclusively with asceticism but with service to society, is encapsulated by Mayer, who notes that "renunciation of selfishness through social service has taken the place of traditional forms of renunciation as leading to spiritual merit" (Copeman 2009: 56).

It is in the convergence of these contrary moralities between asceticism and political action, that the fundamental tension in Gandhi's philosophy lies: of ascribing to 'traditional' values in a 'modern' context; of renouncing yet of being engaged; of being spiritual and political at the same time. These nearly saintly characteristics propagated by Gandhi become inherently contradictory in practice and impossible to live up to. R.K. Narayan (1983), through the narrative figures in his novels, evokes the impossibility of embodying a Gandhian morality of purity in the 'real world'. Fictional characters, such as Jagan the sweet vendor and many others, profess to live by the principles of the Hindu scriptures and by Gandhi, yet their daily conditions lead them to veer off from these pious principles. Such characters are inflicted with relentless tension.

For the same reasons, the Gandhian ethic of virtue and purity that MKSS aspires to, cannot be implemented in the type of work that it engages in. With the Gandhian philosophy itself being contradictory, there is an inherent tension in the expectations made of MKSS. Its objective of campaigning and lobbying for social legislation forces it to engage regularly at the policy-making level, often through government bodies and bureaucratic procedures. To carry out its aspirations, it has to engage with the humdrum and prosaic aspects of doing politics. These forms of engagement are divorced from the ideal it presents and thus manifest as contradictions and tensions. The disappointments of the members of NCPRI illustrate this inherent tension between particular notions of authenticity that derive from the gap between Gandhian ethics and the actual modes of operation.

Cynicism or Commitment?

In criticising the village rootedness and the sources of funding of MKSS, NCPRI members are expressing their expectations of what MKSS as an organisation *should* be. They are signalling the values and commitments that they consider to be central in political activism for transparency and accountability in governance. This commitment, as we saw, revolves around a Gandhian ideal of simplicity and authenticity. Thus, by pointing out the separation from village life, and the ‘impure’ sources of its funding, members of NCPRI are criticising the MKSS leadership for distancing itself from this ideal. Cynicism would at first glance appear to be a useful trope through which to examine the critiques by members of NCPRI. By doubting the leadership’s village rootedness and objecting to their lifestyle, members are indicating their distrust of the workings of MKSS. However, although insightful in some regards, the ideas of cynicism as developed by various theorists – most notably by Žižek – do not fully grasp the productive work done by the disappointment that this chapter deals with. Cynicism denotes an entrapment in critique and a deadlock in perspective. In contrast, the disillusionments by members of NCPRI are productive.

For Žižek a cynical individual is someone who is fully cognizant of the faults of an ideology, yet continues to reproduce it by *pretending* that the faults do not exist. “Cynical reason is no longer naïve, but is a paradox of an enlightened false consciousness: one knows the falsehood very well, one is well aware of a particular interest hidden behind an ideological universality, but still one does not renounce it” (Žižek 1989: 29). Žižek posits this against Marx’s tenets of ideology that presuppose actors have a false consciousness, which, according to Marx can be characterised as: “*sie wissen das nicht, aber sie tun es*” (they do not know it, but they are doing it) (Žižek 1989: 28). In contrast, following from Sloterdijk’s theory that the dominant mode of functioning of ideology is cynicism, Žižek contends that “they know very well what they are doing, but still, they are doing it” (Žižek 1989: 29).

Navaro-Yashin’s ethnography of public life in Turkey shows how Žižek’s notion of cynicism operates on the ground. Her study focuses on how everyday critiques by people of the state in Turkey produce and maintain ‘the political’. Her examples are of people who habitually express their cynicism about the state and its ideology, yet continue their daily work – often within government jobs itself – *as if* they were unaware (Navaro-Yashin 2002: 170). While people are highly critical of politics, and are aware that the state does not exist as a unity, their cynicism enables the state power to regenerate itself. Cynicism, Navaro-Yashin argues, “is part and parcel of a practice of keeping the signifiers “Turkey” and “Turkish state” intact” (Navaro-Yashin 2002: 186). Being conscious of the ‘farce’ of the state, she contends, “does not help us achieve emancipation from the chains of statism, but to remain forever (foreseeably) locked into it” (Navaro-Yashin 2002: 159).

This deadlock that cynicism leads to is explained by Žižek in terms of a Lacanian understanding of the persistence of the psychoanalytic symptomatic (Navaro-Yashin 2002: 160). According to Lacan, the identification of a symptom, contrary to what Freudian psychoanalysis would contend, does not lead to a cure, because the individual actually does not want to let go and renounce the symptom. Through the concept of *jouissance*, Lacan explains that the individual enjoys the symptom, because it has become part of that person’s mode of identification, characteristic and

meaning. Because of this *jouissance* for the experience of the symptom, an individual remains consciously entrapped in the symptom. Žižek applies these psychoanalytic processes to the political level (Navaro-Yashin 2002: 161). Even if fully conscious of the counterproductive elements of a practice or ideology, a cynical individual does not want to transgress these, but prefers to stay trapped in the zone of comfort.

It is because of this state of ‘stalemate’ that the concept of cynicism denotes, that the members of NCPRI cannot be thought of simply as cynics. Although expressing dissatisfaction with various aspects of the organisation, they are not guided by an “enlightened false consciousness”, as Sloterdijk defines a cynic (Sloterdijk, cited in Žižek 1989: 29). They do not remain stuck in the ‘chains’ of their cynicism. On the contrary, their critiques produce a productive process, keeping their commitment in motion. By doubting the presumed ideal, these members engage in an internal process of moral questioning, reflection and meditation. The act of doubting and putting certain aspects into question – even if largely an inward process – opens up an opportunity for the members to identify and to rearticulate to themselves what they hold to be important. Ethnographic accounts by Yurchak (2003), Hopgood (2006) and Kelly (2011) elegantly illustrate the creativity and productivity that can emerge out of critique and doubt.

The disappointments of members of NCPRI, rather than being expressions of cynicism, may be better understood as articulations of commitment, similar to that expressed by the youth under Soviet socialism, as illustrated by Yurchak. Yurchak’s study shows that activities that appeared as contradictory to or in divergence from Soviet ideology were, in fact, an expression of deep commitment. The various examples he draws on illustrate that seemingly anti-state activities by some young people, were actually an expression of that very ideology, internalised and made meaningful by the actors themselves. People who truly believed in the state ideology found creative ways of reinterpreting it and “effectively domesticated it” (Yurchak 2003: 502) to match their ideas and activities. So, for instance, people like Andrei and Nikolai who Yurchak describes, were able to listen to illegally imported Western

hard rock music and at the same time sincerely uphold the state ideology that denounces Western immoral bourgeois culture. This was possible, according to Yurchak, because within the Soviet ideology there was the possibility of distinguishing between a literal meaning and a pragmatic interpretation. The latter allowed space to render the communist ideology meaningful to suit an individual's own context. Accordingly, for young people such as Andrei and Nikolai, listening to music from the 'bourgeois culture' was not an act of resistance or an attempt to undermine anti-bourgeois Communist ideology. Rather, as his ethnographic material shows, acts that seemingly contradicted the system's official ideology, were an expression of deep commitment. "The act of the reproduction of form with the reinterpretation of meaning... allowed many Soviet people to continue adhering to Communist ideals and to see themselves as good Soviet citizens" (Yurchak 2003: 504).

In a similar manner, the act of questioning aspects of the MKSS leadership is a way in which base members of NCPRI articulate their commitment to the overall cause. By accusing the MKSS leadership of being perpetual jet-setters, the disappointed members of NCPRI are expressing what they believe MKSS ought to be. It provides them with a platform from which to articulate their political commitment. Their disappointment in the gradual distancing from the village by the MKSS leadership expresses their expectations of a particular rootedness and purity of action. They are indicating a commitment to an ideal based on a Gandhian ethic of simplicity. This commitment serves as the fuel for their political engagement and motivation.

Hopgood's ethnographic study of the International Secretariat (IS) of Amnesty International, similarly sheds light on the significance of critique in keeping an organisation animated. Hopgood examines the internal struggles and contradictions that unfold in face of the mounting institutional changes that Amnesty has been

undergoing over the previous 15 years.¹³³ His ethnography shows that feelings ‘run high’ for people who work in organisations based on ethical and moral values, particularly if an organisation undergoes structural and ideological change. The motivation and moral altruism of the employees is constantly at stake. However, it is precisely the hope for an ideal, a pure form of morality (a type of ‘Disneyland’) that creates “fire in the belly”, as Hopgood cites one of his interviewees (Hopgood 2006: 17). Both disappointment and vision go hand in hand: “Often pained and suffocating, it is full of commitment and determination alongside unhappiness and resentment” (Hopgood 2006: 17). It is this tension that keeps Amnesty continuously alive.

Kelly, in his study of human rights practitioners as they engage with the UN Committee Against Torture, similarly identifies the productivity generated through doubt and criticism. The human rights practitioners studied by Kelly are perturbed by an underlying “tension between lofty goals and sluggishness of everyday legal and bureaucratic toil” (Kelly 2011: 741). The bureaucratic, technical and tedious nature of their work in the Committee is at variance with their ideology and their ethical commitments towards the eradication of torture. This fissure between routine bureaucratic experiences, and commitments and conviction, expresses itself amongst the human rights practitioners in doubts: doubts whether the bureaucratic apparatus they engage with can be a means towards attaining their ethical aspirations. The doubts that Kelly analyses do the productive work of engendering possibilities for change. It is the gaps and inconsistencies experienced by the human rights practitioners that open up spaces for them to question and reflect their moral commitments. Their doubts spark projections of what ought to be, which in turn breathe new life into their aspirations and convictions. Thus, a sense of doubt is not burdensome or constraining, but, on the contrary, it “creates a pendulum in perpetual motion” which keeps the human rights project animated (Kelly 2011: 742). In this light, “the importance of the Committee Against Torture can therefore be found as

¹³³ The struggle is mainly between two fractions that Hopgood presents as the ‘keepers of the flame’ and the advocates of reform. The former see themselves as the guardian of the Amnesty ethos and attempt to keep true to the original inspiration of focusing mainly on ‘prisoners of conscience’. The latter are the reformers – the modernizers and campaigners who want to make Amnesty more up to date with contemporary human rights concerns. This divide leads to a messy ‘culture of the IS’ – replete with internal conflicts and contradictions.

much in what is not there as in what is, and as much in what is not done as in what actually takes place, as it is the gap between the two that produces time and space for thinking about the possibility of change” (Kelly 2011: 740).

It is precisely such “time and space for thinking about the possibility of change” that members of NCRI are creating through their own doubts about MKSS. Whilst the doubts of the human rights practitioners discussed by Kelly bring about possibilities for change, the process of questioning by members of NCPRI leads to a reformulation and reassessment of their commitments and convictions. Rather than leading to a stifling impasse, their disappointments open up opportunities to restate their aspirations. Like the employees of Amnesty International who infuse life and vigour into the human rights project with their internal critiques, so the disappointments and reservations of members of NCPRI perpetually and dynamically recreate their commitment.

Conclusion

This chapter has examined how the expectations, convictions and commitments of members of NCPRI come to be articulated through their disappointment. I have suggested that embedded within their critiques of the MKSS leadership, lies an exposition of the ideals of the members. By taking their critiques beyond their nominal value, one can grasp what members envision an organisation such as MKSS to be and what their aspirations for political action are. The doubts and reservations expressed in their critiques are an inverted idiom articulating their ideas of what ought to be.

In this chapter I showed that the ideal of MKSS held by the leadership and some of the members centres on particular Indian notions of authenticity that derive from a Gandhian ethics. Idioms of virtue and purity run through the self-presentation of the leadership and in the critiques of the members. These idioms are found, for instance, in the image of the mud hut. The MKSS leadership, by publicly emphasising that it

lives in a mud hut, presents itself as abiding by a particular rooted and authentic lifestyle. It echoes the modern Indian imagination of the 'pure' village, which reflects Gandhi's ethics of *swaraj*, which advocates purity of action through simplicity and humbleness. The NCPRI members similarly reproduce this Gandhian ethics of purity through their critiques. They convey their belief in village rootedness by lamenting the gradual distancing from the village by the MKSS leadership. In accusing the leadership of jet-setting and of living largely in the capital city, the members communicate, inversely, how they believe a social activist ought to live. A similar case runs through the idiom of funding. Unequivocal convictions around 'clean' sources of funding exist among both the leadership and the members, indicating a particular morality around funding. By accusing the leadership of receiving funding from questionable sources, and of being unaccountable in their expenditure, the members of NCPRI are asserting their definitions of 'clean' funding and their expectation of autonomy.

What the stories in this chapter indicate is that the expectations made of MKSS are exceedingly exalted. It is from this platform of lofty ideals that the tension between rhetoric and 'reality' arises. The virtuous moral standards ascribed to MKSS are inherently unattainable in face of its engagement in the 'real world' of messy politics. The objective of MKSS is to advocate for social transformations by means of legal reforms. To do so, it attempts to influence policy-making by engaging with the state apparatus, largely under the banner of NCPRI. The type of work that this entails, however, necessarily compromises its ideal of moral purity and estranges it from its Gandhian ideal. The ideal of simplicity and renunciation cannot be attained because of the nature of MKSS's political engagement, even if it defers these political activities to NCPRI, its 'alter ego'. The expectations of purity and virtue continue to be associated with its leadership.

This is the inherent tension that an organisation such as MKSS is confronted with. Like the RTI movement as discussed in Chapter Two, we note again the central problem of doing politics as identified by Weber: in order to be driven and motivated, actors of MKSS/NCPRI need to have a vision for a cause, an ideal of

social activism, an ethic of ultimate ends. However, in order to move towards the ideal, they need to meander through the muddy exigencies of *Realpolitik*. They need to follow an ethic of responsibility. Members of NCPRI fuse their passion with an ethic of responsibility through their doubts and disappointments. Such doubts enable them to assert and establish their commitments to the organisation. It is their questioning that keeps the MKSS ideal continuously alive and dynamic.

Here we may think of the commitments of the members of NCPRI as part of a utopian project, in Mannheim's sense of the term. Mannheim understood utopia as offering a perspective critical of the given reality, exposing the gap between *what is* and an ideal of *what should be*. A utopian ideal seeks to challenge the status quo whereby it "transcends the present and is oriented towards the future." It differs in this from ideology, which, according to Mannheim involves legitimating the status quo in that it "conceals the present by attempting to comprehend it in terms of the past" (Mannheim 1985: 97). It is a future oriented vision of MKSS that fosters continuous commitment amongst the members; even if at present particular aspects seem faulty.

6. Agonistic Democracy: Endurance of the Gandhi and Nehru legacy

Does ‘representative’ democracy represent the ‘will of the people’, or should India adopt forms of ‘direct’ democracy? Should all decisions be taken at the local level or should most decisions be the prerogative of the government? Should there be referendums or does this lead to majoritarianism? Should laws be passed through parliamentary procedure, or should they be enacted directly if they have wide-scale support? Do government schemes alleviate the situation of the poor or do they lead to dependency? In what ways and in how far should ordinary citizens be given control over governance? Are Gandhi’s notions of *swaraj* still tenable in today’s world?

These were some of the questions that arose amongst members of NCPRI and Team Anna in the context of the Lokpal agitation. Parallel to discussions on the Jan Lokpal Bill and issues of corruption, a host of related questions were being raised in a range of settings during the Lokpal agitation. The competitive relationship between members of NCPRI and Team Anna was sparking off disagreements beyond the provisions and format of a Lokpal Bill. Each civil society group was marking off its ideological distinctiveness by posing its own understandings of the meaning and practice of democracy.

This chapter is about conflict and tension over the meaning of democracy. It traces ethnographically the playing out of an instance of contestation in the context of democratic debate. Specifically, it examines the diverging and conflicting understandings of democracy as held by members of NCPRI and Team Anna, and

explores how these reflect a wider democratic polemic. The ethnographic material of this chapter suggests that democracy, understood broadly as “a type of government, a political regime of laws and institutions” (Khilnani 2004: 16), does not exist as a singular coherent idea. Rather, it is inherently contested and comes to be articulated through particular social imaginaries and historical junctures, making up what Taylor calls the “cultures of democracy” (Gaonkar 2007: 16).

The contested nature of democracy in India can be traced back to the early days of the Independence struggle against the British – the conjuncture in history when the nationalist leaders were already deeply divided on the democratic structures that the future Independent India would have. An ethnographic exploration of the diverging ideas of democracy as held by members of NCPRI and Team Anna, illustrates that they reflect and re-articulate the early debates on the meaning of democracy. It suggests that the conflict over the idea of democracy during the time of Independence continues to underlie the meaning and practice of democracy today. Both the historical and ethnographic examples indicate that ideas of democracy are bifurcated, and that no single normative understandings of the nature and practice of democracy exist.

It is this bifurcation as set out by India’s nationalist leaders that constitutes the distinctive characteristic of India’s democracy. The Indian ‘twist’ in democratic meaning and practice in India today, as this chapter will explore, lies in the enduring legacy of the conflict between the two main nationalist leaders, Gandhi and Nehru. The political ideologies of these powerful symbolic figures are consistently invoked and articulated in a diversity of settings and causes. The conflict between Gandhi and Nehru over the meaning of democracy and over the ideas of the state continues to haunt the political landscape of India.

Although the schism around the figures of Gandhi and Nehru is a characteristic and unique feature of democracy as thought of and practised in India, this chapter suggests that this fissure reflects a broader tension inherent in democracy generally. The conflict over the meaning and practice of democracy as debated by the

nationalist leaders in India, and later by members of NCPRI and of Team Anna, mirrors the deep-rooted discord in debates over liberal democracy. This chapter is thus an examination of the playing out of the contested nature of liberal democracy in the context of India.

The chapter begins with a detailed account of the two principal conceptualisations of democracy as conceived by the nationalist leaders during the struggle for India's Independence. It provides an historical overview of the debates on the meaning of democracy as India emerged as an independent democratic nation. These conceptualisations are then examined in their contemporary articulations through an ethnographic account of the political understandings endorsed by members of NCPRI and Team Anna. I explore the division and tension between the two main civil society contenders around their notions of democracy. Because the meaning and practice of democracy is inherently contested, in order to understand democracy in India, the spaces in which this conflict manifests and is articulated must be examined.

The Legacies of Gandhi and Nehru

It is widely argued by historians and other scholars that 'the idea of India' was forged during the Independence movement against the British by nationalist leaders, who set the tone for the future shape and contours of India's democracy (Khilnani 2004: 5). As I shall note, it was these initial debates that shaped the political forms and institutions of modern India and that continue to form the premise of understandings of democracy today. The nationalist movement was marked by conflicting ideas on the future of India, with each of the leaders endorsing "diverse, often contending visions of India" (Khilnani 2004: 6). As Corbridge and Harriss note in their incisive account of the rise of Hindu nationalism and popular democracy, "contradictions of 'democratic development' in India... were latent in the first designs for the post-colonial state" (Corbridge and Harriss 2000: 234). As they describe, although Indian nationalists were unanimous in their struggle against the British, they were guided by

different political intentions and agendas for India's future. The 'invention of Independent India' was marked by competition, conflict and uncertainty. Each of the nationalist leaders, most notably amongst them Nehru and Gandhi, but also others such as Patel, Bose and Ambedkar, had their own idea of what the new Indian nation should look like. They each entertained their own "imaginaries of India" (Corbridge and Harriss 2000: 15). These imaginaries were often in competition with one another and it was not self-evident during the nationalist movement which version of democracy and nationhood would eventually prevail (Khilnani 2004: 28).

Kaviraj traces the emergence of conflicting political discourses amongst nationalists to one particular moment during British rule. In 1829 the colonial state had banned *sati* (the practice in which a recently widowed woman was expected to immolate herself on her husband's funeral pyre). This abolition of the social practice of *sati* was to bifurcate nationalist discourse, giving rise to two strands of nationalists who were joined in their objection to the abolition of *sati*, but split on the reasons for their objection. One strand disapproved of the abolition of *sati* because they saw it as interference by the state in the social realm of traditions; the other strand did not object to the interference by state powers per se, but objected to the fact that it was a foreign power meddling with Indian social rules (Kaviraj 2010: 56-57). These strands would become the basis of the split between Gandhi and Nehru: Gandhi who endorsed a nationalist discourse that was highly sceptical of the state in general, and Nehru who was in favour of a modern state, but one that was not in the hands of alien powers. These strands, it will be noted, mirror splits found in most discussions on democracy the world over.

It was this conflict on the idea of the state and its role in social affairs that would characterise the competitive nationalist discourse (Hansen 1999: 44). Historical contingencies made Nehru the Prime Minister of Independent India for nearly two decades, enabling him to put into effect many of his political visions. His legacy conspicuously affects the political and economic landscape of India today, perceivable in its state structures and processes. Gandhi, revered as the 'Father of the Nation', also holds a significant, if mainly symbolic, imprint on contemporary ideas

of India. Yet, in spite of being the two principal figures in the history of modern India, the visions of India endorsed by Nehru and Gandhi were in most regards in stark contradiction and in conflict with one another. They differed on what would be the role of the state, on nationhood and on the meaning of democracy. In the following section I examine some of the main aspects that constituted the political thought of both Gandhi and Nehru respectively, emphasising the areas of conflict.

Gandhi's imaginary of village India

Representatives will become unnecessary if [...] national life becomes so perfect as to be self-controlled. It will then be a state of enlightened anarchy in which each person will become his own ruler. ... In an ideal state there will be no political institution and therefore no political power. (Gandhi, cited in Chatterjee 1995: 92)

Even before his assassination in 1948, although having been the spearhead of the Independence struggle, Gandhi had chosen not to participate in the formation of the government. This gesture reflects his opposition to the move India was making towards becoming a modern nation-state, and his morally-charged hostility to 'modern civilization'. Gandhi opposed state institutions for being a Western import that was alien to the traditions of India. He blamed modern civilization – or, 'a civilization only in name' as he referred to it – for its immoral culture that made "man a prisoner of cravings for luxury and self-indulgence" (Chatterjee 1995: 86). According to Gandhi, western notions of progress and modernity were inextricably tied to industrialisation, consumerism and competition and were thus condemned for being the root cause of all the evils in society, such as poverty disease, war and suffering.¹³⁴

¹³⁴ It is important to note that Gandhi's political reflections had been preceded by other thinkers, such as Bhudev Mukhopadhyay, who already at an earlier stage had decried modernity for being materialistic and individualistic. As Kaviraj argues, it was Gandhi who had made these thoughts internationally known, yet thinkers such as Mukhopadhyay had set the scene for him and his philosophy (Kaviraj 2010: 59-64).

The enemy that had to be fought, according to Gandhi, was not only the British imperialists, but also the ‘enemy within’. Indians, according to Gandhi, had been seduced by the ‘razzle-dazzle’ of modern civilization and were being kept under a spell of illusion of the progressive qualities of the West. The reason that colonisation had been able to take place in the first place was the moral weakness of Indians who had been “tempted at the sight of their silver” (Chatterjee 1995: 85). The danger of this was that even if the British rulers left, India would still remain “English rule without the Englishman” (Chatterjee 1995: 86). Modernity spread “the cancers of materialism and envy and excess” and it was these that had to be defeated (Corbridge and Harriss 2000: 17). It was the moral integrity of Indians that had to be restored. This dual understanding of political self-rule and moral self-purification informed Gandhi’s appeal for *swaraj* (see Chapter Five for a closer examination of *swaraj*).

Gandhi’s condemnation of modern civilization included a critique of representative democracy. According to Gandhi, the Western notion of the people as sovereign is deceptive, because under representative democracy people are only sovereign in so far that they can vote for a representative every few years. The representative then acts as a medium of the sovereignty of the people, leaving them with no power or control of their own. Gandhi also criticised modern political institutions as breeding grounds for hypocritical, selfish and self-serving politicians. He called parliament a ‘sterile woman and a prostitute’ on the grounds that, like a sterile woman, it cannot enact a law according to its own judgement because it is swayed by external pressure and, like a prostitute, it continuously shifts allegiances (Chatterjee 1995: 90).

To protect against the corrupting and immoral perils of modern civilization, Gandhi sought a distinctively ‘Indian’ form of government. His alternative vision of India, or *bharat*, was a village republic, whereby governance would be decentralised to the most local level. Gandhi idealized a peaceful, non-competitive and moral Indian society of the past and made a plea for a return to the simple self-sufficiency of traditional village life (Chatterjee 1995: 99, 103). According to this vision, it was through village self-governance and rural development that “the moral regeneration of India” could take place (Corbridge and Harriss 2000: 25). India, according to

Gandhi, could recover its lost self and attain true freedom if its villages were reconstructed as harmonious and self-contained (Jodhka 2002: 3351).

In Gandhi's vision, a village republic would be constituted by a *panchayati raj* system, whereby the village council would have supreme powers, whilst all bodies above it would handle only a minimum set of functions. In a *panchayati raj* system villagers would directly elect the village councils while the other bodies of the *panchayat* would only be indirectly elected (Corbridge and Harriss 2000: 26). Drawing on Hindu mythology, Gandhi described his political utopia as a *ramarajya* (a place that is not ruled by consensual democracy but by a "patriarchy in which the ruler, by his moral quality and habitual adherence to truth, always expresses the collective will") (Chatterjee 1995: 92).

Although Gandhi, with his ability to draw in the masses in support of the nationalist movement, was without doubt the pre-eminent figure of the nationalist movement, ultimately his historical conservatism failed to capture the dominant public discourse. As Kaviraj frames it, Gandhi had been unable to captivate the political imagination of Indians who had extensively fallen for "an abiding enchantment by the state" (Kaviraj 2010: 67).¹³⁵ Elites saw the modern state as an instrument to expand their own control over society, whilst for subaltern groups the state served as an instrument to guarantee their emancipation from traditions of subjugation. The seduction of the idea of a modern state, for both subalterns and elites, enabled Nehru's visions to ultimately triumph. According to Kaviraj "Gandhi brought Independence to India, but it was Nehru – an entirely unrepentant modernist – who obtained the historical opportunity to decide what to do with that independence, and how the powers of his newly acquired sovereignty should be used" (Kaviraj 2010: 67).

¹³⁵ Gandhi's vision of a *panchayati raj* democracy was relegated to the Directive Principles of the constitution – the provisions of the constitution that are not enforceable by any courts and serve as mere 'guidelines' in the framing of laws and policies.

Nehru's imaginary of a modern state

It can hardly be challenged that, in the context of the modern world, no country can be politically and economically independent, even within the framework of international interdependence, unless it is highly industrialized and has developed its power resources to the utmost. (Nehru, cited in Chatterjee 1995: 144)

In contrast to Gandhi's political imaginary born out of moral conviction, Nehru's version of nationalism was guided by modern and rational political thought, with a clear objective of establishing a sovereign national state. At the heart of Nehru's political vision was the conviction of a path towards modernisation. Gandhi had opposed the British on the grounds that they introduced 'polluting' values of modernisation into India; Nehru, quite on the contrary, opposed British rule because he saw it as an obstruction to the realisation of true modernisation (Kaviraj 2010: 68). Modern institutions and modern values would, according to Nehru, summon India out of the poverty and destitution that colonialism had subjected it to. In this Nehru was not all that different from nationalist leaders of other recently independent countries that were leading their countries out of colonialism and into modern nation states.

Central to Nehru's idea of modern India was the notion of a strong, reformist and centralised state that would guide the nation through economic and social transformation. Nehru's state idea envisioned "a vast, bureaucratic instrument of collectively-willed, elite-directed social change" (Kaviraj 2010: 68-69), that would intervene to reduce social and economic inequalities. This would involve structural transformations of the Indian economy that would lead to the reorganisation of systems of production, generating enough wealth for distribution and ensuring social justice for all (Chatterjee 1995: 133). Such transformations, the new Prime Minister held, would uplift the poor and liberate them from the backwardness that kept them chained in deprivation. They would become economically atomistic individuals who would have the opportunity to work in an open economy and thereby overcome the tradition of caste-determined occupations (Kaviraj 2010: 68).

Nehru understood democracy as a system of institutions that would enable the poor to assert themselves, while simultaneously preventing the collapse of the existing system. According to Manor's analysis, the strength of Nehru's idea of democracy lay in its balancing act that managed:

to maintain order while enabling new social forces to emerge as serious players in the democratic process; to keep prosperous groups happy while providing the deprived with at least some opportunities and hope; to divert agricultural surplus into the drive for industrialisation without alienating hugely important landed groups; and to maintain national unity while allowing a baffling diversity of social groups freer play in open, competitive politics. (Manor 1996: 90)

Nehru forged his own unique version of socialism that combined economic planning, nationalism and development (Sinha 2003: 294). Through state-centred development planning he sought to combine economic growth and modernisation with redistribution of economic wealth and social justice. The state under Nehru was also imbued with the duty of rescuing Indian society from "erroneous" traditions (Kaviraj 2000: 155). The ethos of a paternalistic responsibility of the state as Nehru envisioned it was manifested, for instance, in his first five-year plan that stated: "[Certain] conditions have to be fulfilled before the full flow of the people's energy for the task of the national reconstruction can be assured. The ignorance and apathy of large numbers have to be overcome" (Hansen 1999: 47). Kaviraj notes that the state under Nehru emerged out of his philosophical thoughts and contemplations, and did not reflect the collective will and support of the people (Kaviraj 2010: 68). Similarly, Khilnani points out that democracy in India was introduced by the political choice of an intellectual elite rather than emerging out of popular pressure (Khilnani 2004: 34).

Underlying Nehru's political philosophy was a spirit of reason and progress, whereby he saw it as being within the state's purview, through the institutionalisation of education and health, for instance, to heal society from 'social evils' such as casteism and communalism. Nehru's ideas of the future of India were heavily

influenced by European Enlightenment thought, which held as sacred pillars notions of rationality and progress, reason and universality, democracy and the ‘will of the people’ (Chatterjee 2009; Corbridge and Harriss 2000; Kaviraj 1988). Nonetheless, Nehru practised a very particular ‘Indianised’ version of democracy and modernity that was infused with notions of social justice. As Khilnani notes, although Nehru was the most ‘anglicized’ of all nationalist leaders, he retained a profound sense of India’s past and integrity (Khilnani 2004: 8).

Although Nehru’s political imaginary faced initial contestation by other nationalist leaders, it was Nehru who eventually became the principal political architect of India’s modern nation-state. By becoming the first Prime Minister of Independent India, Nehru became the central figure of the newly formed government and could gradually give flesh to his political visions. During his early years in power, Nehru set up crucial institutions that would help him in his endeavours to modernize India. Most of these institutions, such as the All India Services, the Planning Commission, the practice of regular elections, a Supreme Court, respect for a free press, and reserved jobs for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, remain to this day. Thus, Nehru’s democratic ideas did not remain mere idealism or platitudes, but were entrenched through state institutions into the core of India’s society. Nehru’s legacy was to lead the state to inscribe itself “into the imaginations of Indians in a way that no previous political agency had ever done” (Khilnani 2004: 41).

Gandhi and Nehru in contemporary India

These early debates and deliberations by the two political figureheads of post-colonial India do not exist simply as bygone accounts or as historical anecdotes. They continue to be very much alive and to continuously inform debates on questions of India as a state and as a democracy. Kaviraj argues that discussions on the meaning of ‘Indian democracy’ continue to be bifurcated along the visions of India as upheld by either Nehru or Gandhi, as revamped versions adapted to “the

current generation's new meanings and desires" (Kaviraj 2010: 13). He further states that:

While there is no doubt that [Nehru's] state-centered view gradually 'won', [Gandhi's] theories offered dense, intricate, considerably detailed, and subtle ideas on thinking about the modern state, and many of these 'elements' are in constant circulation. They provide, in a certain sense, the underlying repertoire – of concepts and arguments – by which Indians have thought about the state for nearly two centuries. (Kaviraj 2010: 43)

Kaviraj is pointing out the sheer force of the personalities of Gandhi and Nehru, whose ideas on the state and on democracy continue to make a significant imprint on the political landscape. Particularly the political class and intellectuals in India continue to articulate their ideas and demands through the ideologies of these two powerful and symbolic figures. Moreover, Gandhi and Nehru can be said to act as 'empty signifiers', whereby they are materialised in a diversity of contexts and deployed for a wide range of causes. Like Ataturk in Turkey as Navaro-Yashin's ethnography shows, Nehru and Gandhi have a public 'aura' around them, making them into almost cultish figures (Navaro-Yashin 2002: 188). Navaro-Yashin shows that, although being the figurehead of secularism in Turkey, Ataturk manifests in public life in magical and ritualistic forms. Accordingly, it is through the manifestation of the figure of Ataturk that the state in Turkey is personified and fetishized (Navaro-Yashin 2002: 191-198). Similarly, the employment of the figures of Nehru and Gandhi in a diversity of settings in India allows the ideas of the state and democracy to materialise in people's consciousness.

The difference between Gandhi and Nehru can be broadly classified as being a difference between appeals to a traditional authenticity and an embrace of modernity. Herewith Gandhi and Nehru symbolically embody a dualism that resonates with broader Indian imaginings. Chatterjee (1993), in his famous account of the *Nation and its Fragments*, notes this conflicting and paradoxical dualism when he traces how the notion of India as a sovereign nation emerged. The colonial encounter forced anti-colonial nationalists to frame their assertions for a nation in Western

terms. In order to struggle against the colonial domination, the colonized had to accept the logic of modernity of the colonizers. For instance, in order to make claims for a nation they had to do so exclusively through political action in the public sphere. However, this meant that they were subjugating themselves and conforming to an 'alien culture'. Thus, as Chatterjee explains elsewhere, in order to avoid losing their own distinctive identity, nationalists had to find ways to furnish their own ideas of nationalism. This process, according to Chatterjee, was deeply contradictory for:

It is both imitative and hostile to the models it imitates... It is imitative in that it accepts the value of the standards set by the alien culture. But it also involves a rejection: 'in fact, two rejections, both of them ambivalent: rejection of the alien intruder and dominator who is nevertheless to be imitated and surpassed by his own standards, and rejection of ancestral ways which are seen as obstacles to progress and yet also cherished as marks of identity'. This contradictory process is therefore deeply disturbing as well. (Chatterjee 1995: 2)

The anti-colonial nationalists had to find ways to assert their difference. They emphasized this difference, for instance, by constituting the intimate realm of the family as the 'authentic' Indian space. This space was posited as being autonomous from the discursive regulations of the political domain as demarcated by the colonizers, and provided the nationalists with their own political nationalism. The outcome of this was a notion of nationalism that was premised not on identity but on *difference* whereby the Indian nation was defined against the Western counterpart. This resulted in a split between two discursive spheres: a split between the intimate and the public, between the inner/spiritual and the outer/material, between the universal and the particular. Herein, according to Chatterjee, lies the predicament of the post-colonial state. It is this split in Indian nationalism that finds resonance with the conflicting colonial ideologies of Gandhi and Nehru. If we take Chatterjee's notion of the predicament of the post-colonial state seriously, it becomes apparent why the divide between Gandhi and Nehru looms so large. It explains why so much public discourse continues to be shaped around the ideas of these two figures.

The manifestation of the ideas of Nehru and Gandhi for different causes can be noted, for instance, in Klenk's (2003) study on the contemporary educational system

in India. Her ethnography provides an example of how Gandhi's and Nehru's competing visions for a postcolonial state continue to fuel debates in Independent India. The National Education Committee, Klenk finds, identifies education as the site where the idea of a unified India and the national culture of its citizens are shaped. School syllabi devised under Nehru were designed according to the state's plans, articulating the developmentalist agenda of industrialisation. However, as Klenk notes, such education syllabi do not cater to the realities and needs of rural people. In response, local initiatives and NGOs introduced systems of education based on Gandhi's *naii taaliim* (literally 'new education'; used by Gandhi to mean 'basic education') scheme, which envisioned education as located in rural daily life outside of the classroom and outside of textbooks. Such a split between systems of education as promoted by the state Education Committee, and the experiments with local educational methods, parallels, according to Klenk, the competing visions of the Indian nation as posed by Nehru and Gandhi. This reflects the split between Nehru's vision of industrialisation and a developmentalist state, versus Gandhi's vision of revived village-level economies.

The conflicting political visions of Nehru and Gandhi are also found reflected in the competing imaginaries of NCPRI and Team Anna. As the following section will examine, the competition between NCPRI and Team Anna finds expression, amongst other things, in their diverging understandings of democracy. Each of the two civil society organisations endorses a different conception and relation to state institutions and consequently, a different notion of what democracy means. While members of NCPRI advocate for transparent and accountable forms of state institutions and governance, Team Anna endorse the idea of decentralised and direct democracy. The ideological divide between the two teams that became manifest through the competitive playing field of the Lokpal agitation, parallels to a significant degree the split between Nehru's idea of the radical expansion of state powers, versus Gandhi's notion that the state's outreach must be limited. These continuous debates are evidence that democracy in India is still framed around normative political frameworks set by the founding fathers of the nation.

The Gandhi and Nehru Comeback

Before expounding on the different understandings of democracy as endorsed by members of NCPRI and Team Anna, a brief note must be made on the contextual nature of these views. Although each civil society group reproduces the split between Nehru and Gandhi in their own ideas of democracy, this divide is more blurry than may at first appear. What may seem as clear-cut divisions between the two groups on what constitutes democracy, at closer inspection turn out to be ambiguous. The boundaries are not so much shaped around actual differences, as much as they emerge and acquire form in relation and in opposition to the other team.

This notion, that boundaries are shaped in relation to an opponent, echoes the theme running throughout this thesis that emphasises the politics of relationality in the construction of identity. In earlier chapters it was noted that the sense of being of an individual, group or organisation is solidified by being confronted with an opposition. We saw that members of NCPRI positioned themselves in the field of anti-corruption activism, by differentiating themselves from the positions of Team Anna.

The standpoint that members of NCPRI and Team Anna take on the meaning of democracy is also similarly relational. Although the two civil society organisations are evidently split on their positions on what constitutes democratic practice, there is no single or clear-cut way to demarcate their two camps. The categories that they employ to define their political positions are relational, in that they shift in confrontation to the positions of the other. This indicates that symbols of identification do not exist as neat stables, but that they emerge out of messy relationships of competition. For instance, the identification with the symbolic figure of Gandhi is not absolute or constant, but shifts according to context. While in some contexts Gandhi's ethics may be a point of association for MKSS/NCPRI (as we saw in the previous chapter with reference to the ideals of simplicity and authenticity), in other contexts there is a deliberate effort to dissociate from this very figure. This shift

emerges out of the competitive relationship between NCPRI and Team Anna, where difference to the other becomes the main point of identification. A similar process can be observed with the notion of ‘participatory democracy’. While members of NCPRI may be guided by the notion of ‘participatory democracy’, the term becomes unstable to them through its espousal by Team Anna. The split between NCPRI and Team Anna on conceptualisations of the meaning of democracy is thus largely relational rather than substantial.

This is evidence of the notorious messiness of politics. Symbolic markers and categories are not absolute but are transformed and employed to meet particular ends. In the case of NCPRI and Team Anna, both groups are working in the same ideological field, with the same points of reference and language, yet they each accentuate particular aspects to mark their difference. In other words, both NCPRI and Team Anna share the same rhetoric, yet differ in their projects. The difference emerges out of their relational relationship. Let us now examine what these different views on the meaning and practice of democracy as endorsed by NCPRI and Team Anna entail.

Team Anna and the ‘neo-Gandhians’

Meandering through the winding and chaotic streets of East Delhi, I found the office of Kabir on the third floor of a dark and grimy building. Amongst piles of books, pamphlets, documents and DVDs scattered throughout the small office space, young volunteers were squatting over laptops or sorting through documents on the floor. I was led to a small room in the back where Manish Sisodia sat cross-legged on the floor with two elderly men from Haryana. They were discussing the public action these gentlemen would take in their area on 5 April 2011 when Anna Hazare was to begin his fast in demand for a Jan Lokpal Bill.

I had met Sisodia a week earlier at a national convention on the Right to Information convened by NCPRI in Shillong. Amongst the dozens of parallel workshops running during the convention, Sisodia had screened a short video clip in which an elderly man dressed in white and clad with a Gandhian hat called to the nation to support him in his struggle against corruption. This man called Anna Hazare declared that he would start a fast on 5 April 2011, demanding that the government adopt the Jan Lokpal Bill. Intrigued by this anti-corruption legislation that I had thus far not heard of, after the screening I sought Sisodia in the booth that represented both the NGOs *Kabir* and *Parivartan* that had been set up on the convention grounds.¹³⁶ I found him and Arvind Kejriwal there distributing pamphlets, leaflets and DVDs on their work with the RTI. We had a brief chat and arranged to continue our conversation with more calm in Delhi after the convention. Since the beginning of fieldwork I had come across Parivartan and Kabir and had heard of Arvind Kejriwal and Manish Sisodia on several occasions, and had been intending to visit them, as I knew that through their common work on the RTI they were somehow related to MKSS. I thus greeted favourably the impromptu opportunity that arose in Shillong.

After the men from Haryana left the Kabir office, Sisodia and I continued our conversation started in Shillong. He told me that he had great respect for the work of MKSS but that he did not agree with all of their approaches. He explained that one of his main disagreements lay with MKSS's endeavours in advocating government schemes such as the NREGA. The organisations of Parivartan and Kabir, Sisodia continued to explain, do not believe in government schemes, for these are top-down approaches that lead to dependency. Government schemes turn citizens into beggars, whereby they passively rely on the government dole and fail to take charge of their own lives. Instead, Parivartan and Kabir, he explained, believe in a system of local self-governance whereby the people themselves become masters of their destiny. Citizens must have control over governance and not depend on political leaders or government officials to meet their demands. Democracy must be decentralised and participatory whereby local assemblies, such as *gram sabhas* (committees comprised of all the adult citizen voters of the village) in rural areas and *mohalla sabhas* in

¹³⁶ Both Kabir and Parivartan were NGOs set up by Arvind Kejriwal dedicated to strengthening the Right to Information.

urban areas, take decisions on matters concerning their affairs. Only when power is directly in the hands of the people, Sisodia told me, will there be true democracy in India. Through this short initial exposé, the influence of Gandhi's political thought on Sisodia's visions for democracy in India, began to emerge. Gandhi too would have been highly sceptical of centralised government schemes and he too would have made a plea for *gram sabhas* and *mohalla sabhas*.

In order to clarify his understanding of self-governance, Sisodia showed me a documentary film which he had made on Hiware Bazar, a village he deemed to be an exemplary model of *swaraj*. This village, he told me, comes very close to representing a village of Gandhi's dreams and is a model village that Kabir wishes to see replicated throughout the country. He had screened the film in numerous villages around India, holding discussions with villagers on their views of it.

The film began with a quote by Gandhi, who said that true democracy begins when villagers at the grassroots level govern themselves, and not when representatives in the central government take decisions on their behalf. The film then zoomed in to a village in the state of Maharashtra that was described as a place where the governments of Delhi and Mumbai have become irrelevant as it is the villagers of this village themselves who form the government. The viewer was then shown the *gram sansad* (village parliament) – the place where people themselves plan the welfare and development of the village. Villagers supposedly meet here once a month and collectively decide on all matters ranging from education, health, and ration distribution to land allotment or disputes that may arise. A narrator (the voice of Sisodia) told us that in Hiware Bazar the government is never formed nor removed, for the villagers form the permanent government. Popatrao Pawar, the only graduate of the village, was elected as *sarpanch* in 1989; ever since, *panchayat* elections have no longer been held and Pawar remains in the position of *sarpanch*.

We were told that before 1989 Hiware Bazar, like all villages in the severely drought-prone area, had suffered acute deprivation. This had led to the migration of masses of villagers to urban areas; those who remained turned to alcohol as the

panacea for their despondency and hopelessness. When Pawar was elected *sarpanch*, he succeeded in getting the 22 illicit liquor shops in the village closed down and concentrated his energies on irrigation systems and water conservation and management programmes. Through a system of *shramdan* (voluntary work) and *dan* (gift/donations), the villagers collectively participated in regenerating the village. Today Hiware Bazar is considered a shining example of sustainable development and has received several awards.

The film ended with a close up of Arvind Kejriwal who made a proclamation that Hiware Bazar is a live example that ought to be replicated throughout the country. He appealed to the viewers to follow the Hiware Bazar model in their own villages. If such model villages get replicated, Kejriwal professed, true democracy would spread across India. Direct democracy, he was herewith stating, is possible.

Ten days after meeting Sisodia in his Kabir office, Anna Hazare began his first hunger strike for a Jan Lokpal Bill. From then on for several months to follow, much public attention was galvanized around this anti-corruption campaign. Anna Hazare was the conspicuous public face of the campaign, yet other core members of Team Anna also made their public appearances. Although the evident cornerstone of their discussions in this period was their Jan Lokpal Bill, over time the positions on *swaraj* by several of the core members of Team Anna occasionally trickled through. Many of these were caught by members of NCPRI and become topics of conversation in the NCPRI office. For instance, Prashant Bhushan was quoted in national newspapers as saying that the real issue emerging from the campaign for a Jan Lokpal Bill was not corruption but direct democracy.¹³⁷ He endorsed a system in which all public issues are discussed at the local level throughout the country, and in which collective decisions are taken through a system of weekly voting or referendums. Representative democracy, which Bhushan (2012) held to be entirely

¹³⁷ “Biggest challenge for India is participatory democracy: Prashant Bhushan” in *DNA*, 18 July 2011, [accessed 25 June 2013] <http://www.dnaindia.com/bangalore/1566870/report-biggest-challenge-for-india-is-participative-democracy-prashant-bhushan>

defunct in India, must be replaced with a model of direct democracy.¹³⁸ Here Bhushan was directly echoing Gandhi, who had been explicit on his aversion to a system of representative democracy and who made pleas for power to be entirely decentralised.

The association of Anna Hazare with Gandhi had been established from the onset of the anti-corruption movement. At first this largely took a ‘visual’ element, where he was lauded for being the ‘new Gandhi’, made symbolically visible by his Gandhian attire. However, it took some time before Anna Hazare made direct reference to the Gandhian politics of direct democracy. Days after completing his second hunger fast, he declared that his new line of action after the Jan Lokpal Bill had been passed would be electoral reforms, namely the ‘Right to Recall’ and the ‘Right to Reject’. The Right to Recall would enable the recorded disapproval of a certain minimum section of the electorate to recall an elected candidate. This could be done through plebiscite or referendums, or through petitions signed by a minimum percentage of the electorate. The Right to Reject would allow voters to reject all candidates in the ballot paper. The Right to Recall and the Right to Reject would hand over more power to the people and would give them direct control over their representatives. It was what Gandhi had in mind when he said that the people should be the masters over politicians, who are but their slaves.

As already examined in Chapter Three, Anna Hazare was an object of scorn amongst NCPRI members. His naivety in matters of politics was at best ridiculed and at worst treated as deeply problematic. When Anna Hazare came out with announcements on the Right to Recall and the Right to Reject, there were many discussions at the NCPRI office on Anna Hazare’s ‘twisted’ relationship to politics. In this context, I repeatedly heard accounts by different members of NCPRI on Anna Hazare’s background in Ralegan Sidhi. I was to hear that before entering the limelight as the face of the Lokpal agitation, Hazare was most widely known for his work in environmental conservation and social reforms in his village of Ralegan Siddhhi in

¹³⁸ Bhushan, P., “The Saga of the Lokpal Bill” in *The Hindu*, January 2, 2012 [accessed 17 June 2013] <http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/the-saga-of-the-lokpal-bill/article2766561.ece> (Original text has no page numbers)

Maharashtra. He is applauded for transforming a village ridden by drought, poverty, unemployment and alcoholism into one that is economically and environmentally thriving. Ralegan Siddhi has been widely acclaimed as a ‘success story’ and as a ‘model village’, not least by international organisations such as the FAO or the World Bank.

One day during the hype of the Lokpal agitation, I joined several members of NCPRI to attend a weekly seminar at the Nehru Memorial Library given by the social scientist Mukul Sharma who presented his work on the politics of Anna Hazare. Based on extensive fieldwork in Ralegan Siddhi, Sharma (2012b) presented to us the findings of his soon-to-be published book entitled *Green and Saffron: Hindu Nationalism and Indian Environmental Politics*. According to Sharma, Hazare’s work in rural environmentalism is a window onto his overall political vision and ideology. Sharma recognised the environmental and economic success that Ralegan Siddhi is acclaimed for, yet he questions the means of attaining it. According to Sharma, Hazare holds absolute power and command in his village and is driven by a moral zeal in enforcing his objectives. He has set strict environmental and socio-political rules and norms to govern the conduct of his fellow villagers. For instance, he has banned alcohol and the sale of tobacco; satellite TV and the playing of film songs are prohibited (even on festive occasions, such as weddings, only Hindu religious *bhajans* are permitted); the village is declared vegetarian and Hazare has prohibited low-maintenance crops, such as sugar cane, on the grounds that these deplete ground water and make farmers lazy; further, according to Sharma’s findings, people are ‘forced’ into family planning. The rules that govern conduct in Ralegan Siddhi are infused with a desire to purify the village from immoral behaviour and toxic ‘Western’ influences. It seems to reflect a ‘stern’ version of Gandhi’s vision of a pure and harmonious village.

Sharma recounts that Hazare is not reluctant to use force and coercion if rules are transgressed. For instance, anyone caught drinking alcohol in Ralegan Siddhi is tied to a tree and publicly flogged. Hazare, Sharma writes, likens his authority to that of a mother who is entitled to slap her child, and whose right to use coercive means is

unquestionable for it is done out of good heart. Similarly according to Hazare, a social activist or an environmental authority has to use force to implement rules and laws, as long as he is guided by good intentions for the people. As Sharma writes elsewhere, Hazare's legitimacy and authority, like that of an archetypal village patriarch, derives from an overall belief system, "where the people following him consider it their natural duty to obey, and the exercising person thinks it a natural right to rule" (Sharma 2011).¹³⁹ Hazare's ideological framework is based on 'common moral values' that "become the structures of governance, and work as normative regulations" (Sharma 2011). In theoretical terms, Hazare's Ralegan Siddhi approaches Gandhi's *ramarajya*.

Another area in which Hazare can be seen to display Gandhian political philosophy is in stressing 'village unity'. Jodkhka in his detailed examination of Gandhi's village politics notes a populist streak in Gandhi's depiction of the village in terms of a 'unit' and of a 'unity of interests' (Jodkhka 2002: 3359). Similarly, Hazare's rhetoric, according to Sharma, emphasises village unity as being above all other political institutions. A crucial political implication of this is the dismissal of the worth of electoral democracy and any formal structures of democracy. In fact, under Hazare's leadership "elections are not welcomed", and instead, representatives of the *panchayat* and village societies are nominated 'through consensus'. There have been no elections to the *gram panchayat* in Ralegan Siddhi in over 24 years. Hazare's logic is that elections "bring party politics and divide the people" and that the village must be kept clean from dirty politics. In the village, no poster or pamphlet is permitted during the state/national elections and political parties are not allowed to set up their units in the village. The association of party-politics as dirty and corrupting is not all that far from Gandhi's vision of an ideal state, in which "there will be no political institution and therefore no political power" (Chatterjee 1995: 92).

¹³⁹ Sharma, M. (2011) "The Making of an Authority: Anna Hazare in Ralegan Siddhi" in *Kafila* 14 April 2011 [accessed 4 October 2013] <http://kafila.org/2011/04/14/the-making-of-an-authority-anna-hazare-in-ralegan-siddhi/> (Original text has no page number).

Sharma also notes the dangerously anti-democratic Hindutva ethos in Hazare's political philosophy. His morals and beliefs are guided by a conspicuously Brahminical worldview, noticeable for instance in Hazare's residence in the Hindu village temple, which serves as the centre of his activities. This has repercussions not least on people of the lower castes of Ralegan Siddhi, whose role and occupation in the caste system is treated by Hazare as unquestionable and as 'natural'. Gandhi, as noted above, was similarly sympathetic in conserving the status quo of the caste system. Sharma concludes that "authority and its legitimacy is the key to Anna Hazare. Not only is this authority deeply rooted in the dominant socio-political tradition of the region; it is often blind to many basic and universal issues of rights, democracy and justice" (Sharma 2011).

NCPRI and the 'neo-Nehruvians'

The public statements made by members of Team Anna on their understanding of direct democracy did not go unnoticed amongst members of NCPRI. Along with the critiques of Team Anna's modes of protest and the content of their Jan Lokpal Bill (see Chapter Three), members of NCPRI expressed concern with the political motives of Team Anna. In closed meetings, they discussed what they repeatedly referred to as Team Anna's naïve and even dangerous political positions. Besides scorning Anna Hazare's announcement of campaigning for the Right to Recall and the Right to Reject as being guided by populist motives, the other members of Team Anna and their calls for direct democracy were also heavily criticised. For instance, Prashant Bhushan's appeal for referendums was challenged in conversations amongst members of NCPRI as falling under a simplistic and reductionist politics of majoritarianism.

Members of NCPRI rejected the politics of direct democracy and *swaraj* as being politically and socially untenable. Bhanwar, the 'intellectual' Dalit member of MKSS, was particularly vocal in expressing his concern with Team Anna's notion of

swaraj. With society's deeply divisive hierarchical structures, he explained to me, the removal of a system of representative democracy would indubitably imply that the most marginalised sectors of society would get even further marginalised. Lower castes have historically been silenced and it is only through a politics of representation that some degree of voice and protection has been granted to them. If governance were entirely decentralised, as Team Anna seemed to be suggesting with their appeal to *swaraj*, lower castes would fall prey to entrenched exploitative power structures. This did not mean that MKSS/NCPRI did not itself endorse ideas of participatory democracy – in fact, they also stand for the strengthening of *gram sabhas* as a way of strengthening the participation of rural populations in governance. However, as Bhanwar and other members of MKSS and NCPRI repeatedly emphasised, this must be done within the ambit of the constitution and state institutions. In this context, Bhanwar often cited Dr Ambedkar, the principal architect of Indian's constitution, who, in contrast to Gandhi, was highly sceptical of institutionalising village *panchayats* and any forms of direct democracy. Handing over powers to the *panchayat*, according to Ambedkar, would infringe on the constitution:

A population which is hidebound by caste; a population which is infected by ancient prejudices; a population which flouts equality of status and is dominated by notions of gradations in life; a population which thinks that some are high and some are low — can it be expected to have the right notions even to discharge bare justice? Sir, I deny that proposition, and I submit that it is not proper to expect us to submit our life, and our liberty, and our property to the hands of these Panchas. (Bombay Legislative Council debates, 6 October 1932)¹⁴⁰

MKSS's reservations on a politics of decentralisation mirrored in many regards Nehru's understandings of democracy. Nehru stood for a strong and centralised state that distributed wealth and ensured social justice for all. What Bhanwar, along with other members of MKSS was espousing, was a degree of centralisation, whereby an overarching institution protects the interests of the marginalised. Without an external

¹⁴⁰ Quote by Ambedkar found in: "Selling women's rights short" in *The Hindu*, January 24, 2014 [accessed 22 March 2014] <http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-opinion/selling-womens-rights-short/article5612165.ece>

guarantor, the weak would fall prey to traditional structures of power that would keep their subjugation cemented. Nehru had expressed similar criticisms of Gandhi's idea of a village republic, when he contended that until people had been liberated from their traditional modes of thinking, patterns of oppression would continue. Members of MKSS, like Nehru, believed in the strengthening of state institutions so that the principles contained in the Indian constitution could be guaranteed.

A critique of Team Anna's political ideology allowed members of NCPRI to elaborate and define their own positions. For instance, in reaction to Team Anna's demand that their own version of the Lokpal Bill be passed regardless of parliamentary procedures, members of NCPRI issued public statements defending democratic institutions as sacrosanct. Echoing Gandhi's declaration that parliament is a 'sterile woman and prostitute', members of Team Anna made known their disdain for parliament: they stated publicly their view that passing their Jan Lokpal Bill through the parliamentary procedure was a waste of time. In response, members of NCPRI made public statements in the English-language national media, urging Team Anna not to derail the parliamentary institutions.¹⁴¹ Repeatedly members of NCPRI declared that bypassing democratic institutions was not the solution, but that instead they must be made to work in the interest of the people; the state serves as a form of protection for the poor against vested interests such as corporate groups or village landlords. At the peak of the agitation, Aruna, for instance, told me: "The government is not supreme, but it is an institution that we have created, or that the constitution has created. We must make it work for us, so ultimately we have to follow certain procedures".

Particularly when it came to campaigning and lobbying for laws, members of NCPRI expressed their clear understandings of what constitutes legitimate democratic process. Team Anna's form of protesting through hunger strikes and mass agitations was deemed as adversarial and as disdainful to the democratic process. In contrast, members of NCPRI emphatically emphasised their own compliance to democratic

¹⁴¹ "Anna shouldn't undermine democratic institutions" in *Times of India*, 21 August 2011 [accessed 25 June 2013] http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2011-08-21/india/29911458_1_ncpri-version-lokpal-bill-anna-hazare

processes and institutions in their own form of campaigning for laws. The parliamentary Standing Committee, for instance, was portrayed by members of NCPRI as a crucial institution in India's democracy that serves as a platform from which civil society can continue lobbying for a given legislation, even when the legislation has already been tabled before parliament.

In order to reinforce their faith in the Standing Committee, members of NCPRI often publicly narrated their past experience with the parliamentary institution. An anecdote recounted repeatedly derived from their campaign for the RTI Act: after years of people's struggles and an enormous range of consultations, civil society had drafted a strong RTI draft bill. Yet, in spite of this, the draft introduced by the government in parliament was a very weak one. However, civil society could continue campaigning through the parliamentary Standing Committee, whereby as many as 153 amendments were re-introduced into the final RTI Act. The result was one of the most powerful right to information laws in the world (Mander 2011).

Given such effective experience with the Standing Committee, NCPRI was of the position that the parliamentary process must be used as a democratic means to push for civil society's demands. State institutions are in place to serve the interest of the people and they must be put to use. Members of NCPRI shared Nehru's optimistic faith in the state. On these grounds, as Team Anna was conducting its hunger strike, members of NCPRI announced that they would present their own version of the Lokpal Bill before the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Law and Justice and Personnel.

Swaraj becomes official

Nearly a year after Anna Hazare's second hunger fast, with attention on the Jan Lokpal Bill significantly declining, what had until then been a murmuring about the true political motive for *swaraj* by certain members of Team Anna, was made

concrete: Arvind Kejriwal (2012) who was unmistakably the most influential force behind Team Anna, launched his book *Swaraj: Power to People*. In direct accordance with Gandhi's political philosophy, the overall tenet of the book was that "only when power comes directly in the hands of the people, will true democracy dawn in the country" (Kejriwal 2012: 34). The book was written as a type of manual on how to restore true democracy in India by making citizens "partners in the sharing of power".

In *Swaraj: Power to People*, Kejriwal contextualises democracy within a particular Indian history, arguing that "democratic traditions are ingrained in our psyche" (Kejriwal 2012: 18). Accordingly, he claims that democracy in India was not introduced by the West, but existed already during the period of Gautam the Buddha. Kejriwal describes the times prior to the arrival of the British as being strongly democratic ages, when kings ruled through the dictate of the people. According to Kejriwal, although kings were not elected, they did not have absolute power as decisions were taken by the *gram sabha*. The king had to accede to the wishes of his people. The British Raj, according to Kejriwal's account, abolished the system of *gram sabhas*, removing once and for all the true participation of the people.

Just as Gandhi blamed colonialism for the corruption of Indian minds, so too Kejriwal remarks on the continued mentalities of foreign rule in Independent India. Although democracy was reinstated with Independence, the new rulers, Kejriwal argues in his book, "kept all the paraphernalia of the British government as it is: its arrogance, its unapproachability, its mentality of being a ruler" (Kejriwal 2012: 19). Throughout the book, Kejriwal refers to politicians as 'greedy', 'arrogant', 'selfish' and 'autocratic' amongst other vices, mirroring Gandhi's deep apprehension with the realm of politics.

In his book Kejriwal emphasises the role of *gram sabhas* and thereby expands Gandhi's notion of the reinstatement of village republics as the key instrument toward *swaraj*. *Gram sabhas*, according to Kejriwal, should have the power to decide on all matters regarding local affairs. Even on issues such as land acquisition by

corporations or the government, decisions should be taken exclusively by the *gram sabha*. Rather than receiving funds for specified government schemes and programmes as in the current state system, villages should be allotted 'free funds'. Villagers will ensure the appropriate and fair spending of the funds, because they have their village's best interest at heart. This is demonstrated by Kejriwal's rhetorical question: "Who loves child more, mother or secretary of education?" (Kejriwal 2012: 30).

The conspicuous moral tone running through Gandhi's writings is discernible also in Kejriwal's *Swaraj: Power to People*. Towards the end of the book, Kejriwal correlates the virtues of honesty and justice with the improvement of the political system. According to this understanding, what is needed for good models of governance to develop is the building of the character of people. This resonates with the countless appeals made by Gandhi for restoring moral integrity as the vehicle towards attaining true liberation and freedom. As has been noted, *swaraj* to Gandhi entailed both self-rule from foreign domination, as well as self-purification at the individual level. Politics and morality are inextricably linked in the thoughts of both Gandhi and Kejriwal.

What is also linked in the equation of politics and morality of both Gandhi and Kejriwal is their employment of religious terminology. Both infuse their politics with Hindu symbolism and sentiments. Gandhi's vision of a legendary political utopia, *ramarajya*, as noted earlier, is steeped in Hindu cultural iconography. He drew on other themes from Hinduism, such as his defence of *varnashrama dharma* (the teachings in Hindu texts that maintain that the caste system is a natural classification of society). Misra notes that the strong Hindu framework running through Gandhi's politics is epitomised in his famous salt march:¹⁴² for one thing, the march was called a *yatra*, which denotes a religious pilgrimage undertaken by Hindus, with the aim of freeing Mother India; secondly, like a Brahmin priest or a pious Hindu, Gandhi wore a *tilak* on his forehead (a mark worn by Hindus) and religious *bhajans* (Hindu

¹⁴² The Salt March, which took place from March to April 1930 was an act of civil disobedience led by Gandhi to protest against British rule. It was a campaign of tax resistance and non-violent protest against the British salt monopoly.

devotional songs) were played as the march proceeded (Misra 2004: 98). In a similar manner, Kejriwal frames his political convictions with religious idioms. The ultimate aim, writes Kejriwal in his political ‘manifesto’, is the attainment of *nirvana* (a spiritual place of perfect peace and happiness) because “to move towards perfection is the aim of life and the universe” (Kejriwal 2012: 30). In order to move in the direction of a sound system of governance, actions must be “in consonance with the path of Dharma” and “the path of righteousness” must be followed (Kejriwal 2012: 50).¹⁴³

Since writing his book, Kejriwal has advanced sensationally in his endeavour to establish his political dream of *swaraj*. On 2 October 2012, the birth anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi, he announced that he would form a political party. On 26 November 2012 the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) was formally launched.¹⁴⁴ The vision of AAP, as its official website states, is “to realise the dream of Swaraj that Gandhiji had envisaged for a free India – where the power of governance and rights of democracy will be in the hands of the people of India”.¹⁴⁵ One year into its existence, as I explored in the introduction of this thesis, the AAP won a landslide victory in the 2013 Delhi assembly elections and Arvind Kejriwal became Chief Minister of Delhi. At the time of writing this, AAP is contending in the national elections.

The Democratic Paradox and Agonistic Pluralism

The above ethnographic accounts have explored some of the practices and discourses through which the ideas of democracy as conceptualised by members of NCPRI and Team Anna come to expression. What emerges out of these accounts is the conspicuous resemblance of the positions held by NCRPI and Team Anna to the

¹⁴³ *Dharma*, in the Indian religion, can be broadly defined as the eternal law of the cosmos, inherent in the very nature of things.

¹⁴⁴ Throughout the Lokpal agitation Kejriwal had refuted the idea of having any political motives. Members of NCPRI, however, had voiced their suspicion that Kejriwal’s hidden agenda behind the demand for a Jan Lokpal Bill was to enter party politics.

¹⁴⁵ “Goal of Swaraj” in *Aaam Aadmi Party* [accessed 1 July 2013]
<http://www.aamaadmiparty.org/goal-of-swaraj>

ideas of democracy as endorsed by Nehru and Gandhi respectively. In this, NCRPI and Team Anna fall neatly into the categories of what Joseph calls the ‘neo-Nehruvians’ and the ‘neo-Gandhians’. According to Joseph, these two groups arise in contemporary India in response to the overall disappointments with the failures of India’s democratic institutions. The ‘neo-Nehruvians’ attribute the unsuccessful development of India to the failures of political leadership and to vested interests that stand in the way of sound governance. They propose to solve the problems of development by restoring the autonomous functioning of state institutions, by improving the implementation of policies, and by establishing institutionalised links with interests in civil society (Joseph 2002: 299). The ‘neo-Gandhians’, by contrast, question the very model of representative democracy and argue that it is inappropriate in a plural society like India’s. They instead lay emphasis on the non-state sector – or what might be called ‘political society’ – as a means to regenerate Indian democracy. Neo-Gandhians appeal to ‘the masses’ and ‘the people’ by calling for a form of radical democracy (Joseph 2002: 299). This finds striking resonance with the politics of the Aam Aadmi Party that, as a people-centred political party, seeks to shift away from representative democracy, as discussed in the introduction of this thesis.

The split between the neo-Nehruvians and the neo-Gandhians that Joseph describes suggests, as does the above ethnographic material, that Gandhian and Nehruvian thought continuously informs significant areas of public discourse in India. Questions of development, democracy and the state are still largely framed along the competing frameworks as set by the two founding fathers of the Indian nation. This division is principally around the duty and function of state institutions, the idea of representative democracy, the degree of sovereignty to the people, and the role of civil or political society. This signals that the two most revered nationalist heroes continue to haunt contemporary political thought. We saw this through the diverging views of NCPRI and Team Anna, and we see this, as suggested by Joseph, in other responses to development taken in India.

While it is a distinctly 'Indian' characteristic that this division in ideas of democracy gets expressed through the figures and rhetoric of Gandhi and Nehru, it nonetheless expresses a tension at work in broader conceptions of democracy. The political visions of Gandhi and Nehru (as well as of their contemporary avatars) can be broadly classified as falling under the categories of 'direct democracy' and 'representative democracy' respectively. This division extends beyond the context of India and finds wide reiteration in much of contemporary democratic debate. One of the perpetual questions dominating democratic discourses and the key divider marking all party politics is: should there be more or less government in the running of things? Should state institutions intervene in the welfare of society and act as guarantor of the common good, or should individuals be given responsibility and rights over their own affairs? Accordingly, the fissure between the 'neo-Nehruvians' and the 'neo-Gandhians' suggests that political life in India grapples with the same divisions and conflicts that underlie democratic discussions elsewhere.

Mouffe explains this inherent conflict within modern democracy through what she calls the 'democratic paradox'. Tracing historically the advent of liberal democracy, Mouffe finds that it was constituted by the merging of two separate traditions and strands of thought: the democratic tradition with its principles of popular sovereignty and equality, and the tradition of liberalism that emphasises individual liberty, human rights and the rule of law. The paradox of modern liberal democracy is that it articulates two distinct traditions that are incompatible and in conflict with one another. In other words, perfect liberty and perfect equality can never coincide. The merging of these two traditions did not emerge out of ideological consonance, according to Mouffe's argument, but out of historical contingency (Mouffe 2000: 2-3). Given this contingency, the model of 'liberal' democracy is not a unitary given, holding absolute sway. Conflict and contestation is inherent, even in a liberal democracy.

However, as Mouffe explains elsewhere, such conflict ought not be thought of as destructive or stifling, but, quite the contrary, as something highly constructive. In fact, it is out of conflict that true democratic debate emerges and 'agonistic

pluralism' arises. 'Agonistic pluralism', as proposed by Mouffe (1999) in her paper 'Deliberative Democracy or Agonistic Pluralism?' is a method for envisioning an extensive and radical form of democracy. At the heart of Mouffe's vision of antagonistic pluralism, is the acknowledgement that radical difference and contentious expression are present, and even necessary, in the practice of democracy. Agonistic pluralism is a model of democracy grounded in productive conflict or contest.

Even though, in proposing a conception of democracy that acknowledges contestation as an inherent aspect of democracy, Mouffe is making a normatively loaded claim, it is nonetheless insightful in understanding the conflict over democratic conceptions between NCPRI and Team Anna. For my purpose, the notion of agonistic pluralism serves as an analytic tool with which to understand the conflict between the two anti-corruption groups. I draw on the work of Mouffe by 'suspending' the normative dimension of her theory – an approach inspired by the work of Spencer. Spencer proposes that 'theory-in-general', such as the normative concept of agonistic pluralism, can be used as a tool to "illuminate some very specific processes" (Spencer 2012: 730). While anthropologists tend to criticise political theories for being abstract and therefore blind to empirical processes, Spencer notes "an unexpected affinity" between political theories and local expressions of the political (Spencer 2012: 730). In other words, abstract theories can be used to explain empirical practices and processes, as long as the normative is put on hold. It is with this in mind that I draw on Mouffe's theory of agonistic pluralism in helping me to understand the dynamics between NCPRI and Team Anna and their relationship and contribution to broader ideas of democracy.

Mouffe sets her theory of agonistic pluralism against liberal models of democracy, particularly 'deliberative democracy' as upheld by Habermas and Rawls. Proponents of deliberative democracy contend that the ultimate aim of democracy is to create consensus, which is attainable through process of rational deliberation and reason. It is believed that collective decision-making, in which all individuals are taken as free and equal, leads to the articulation of the common good. This is based on the premise

that impartiality, equality, openness, lack of coercion and unanimity are guaranteed. What such a model assumes is that power does not exist, and where it does, it has the best interest of all in mind, which justifies its legitimacy.

Drawing on Wittgenstein's concept of 'form of life' (*Lebensform*) and Lacan's notion of the 'master signifier', Mouffe undermines the conception of rational dialogue as held by proponents of deliberative democracy. Accordingly, she underlines the 'rhetorical dimension' and the inescapably authoritarian structure inherent in deliberation as endorsed by Habermas, challenging thereby his "dream of a rational consensus" (Mouffe 1999: 750). As she notes:

[T]he impediments to the free and unconstrained public deliberation of all on matters of common concern is a conceptual impossibility because, without those so-called impediments, no communication, no deliberation could ever take place. (Mouffe 1999: 751)

It is here that pluralistic antagonism enters. According to this understanding of democracy, the so-called fiction of perfect harmony and transparency is replaced by the recognition that "there can never be total emancipation but only partial ones" (Mouffe 1999: 752). Power and conflict are indispensable in Mouffe's formulation of democratic practice. In fact, "the workings of power *constitute* the very identities around which political competition works" (paraphrased in Spencer 2012: 729; *italics in original*). By denying that power and conflict exist, proponents of deliberative democracy disconnect 'the political' from democracy. The point at which democracy becomes radical and plural, according to Mouffe, is when this power is acknowledged and transformed and channelled to become compatible with democratic values.

What significantly distinguishes pluralist democracy from deliberative democracy is that while the latter attempts to eradicate all difference and 'otherness', the former embraces antagonism. Under agonistic pluralism, an enemy is transformed into an 'adversary' and a relationship of 'antagonism' is transformed into one of 'agonism'. What this entails is the recognition that differences and conflict with the enemy will

always remain, but that the “adversary is a legitimate enemy, an enemy with whom we have in common a shared adhesion to the ethico-political principles of democracy” (Mouffe 1999: 755). In this conceptualisation, democracy consists of a mutually tolerant contest among people who disagree on views but are united by shared identifications.

By accepting disagreement and conflict with the adversary and by recognising the inherent power in all social relations, a truly democratic politics can be achieved. As Mouffe maintains:

The prime task of democratic politics is not to eliminate passions nor to relegate them to the private sphere in order to render rational consensus possible, but to mobilise those passions towards the promotion of democratic designs. Far from jeopardizing democracy, agonistic confrontation is in fact its very condition of existence. (Mouffe 1999: 755-756)

In order for the multiplicity of voices in any society to be respected, what is needed is “awareness that difference allows us to constitute unity and totality while simultaneously providing essential limits” (Mouffe 1999: 757). Radical democracy can be approached, as Laclau and Mouffe note elsewhere, when there is acceptance of the “polyphony of voices, each of which constitutes its own irreducible discursive identity” (Laclau and Mouffe 2001: 191).

Conclusion

This chapter has emphasised the constructive aspect of disagreement and the constitutive effect of conflict. It argued that the competition over normative conceptions of democracy, as laid out by members of NCPRI and Team Anna, reflects the inherent tension in democracy. By being split over which version of democracy is the legitimate one – the Gandhian or the Nehruvian version – members of each of the civil society groups are bringing to light the essence of democracy. As

Mouffe's notion of agonistic pluralism suggests, conflict is at the core of politics. In this conceptualisation, it is precisely the disagreement between members of NCPRI and Team Anna on what constitutes democratic practice in campaigning and in overall governance that deepens democratic practice. Through their contestation, they opened up discursive spaces in which the idea of democracy was deliberated and discussed, consequently animating and contributing to democratic debates. This accentuation on the affirmative dimension of contestation draws on Arendt's ideas of an agonistic public space.

According to Arendt (1972), in an 'agonistic public space' rich debate is constituted through difference and conflict. As a response to totalitarianism, which Arendt accounted to the 'human condition' that induces unreflective behaviour and conformity, she conceived of a public space that would be constituted by 'agonistic rhetoric': rhetoric and discussions that are fruitful precisely because they are confrontational and adversarial. Habermas (1974) famously conceptualised the public sphere as a discursive space guided by reason and rational deliberation; by contrast, Arendt's public space envisioned people arguing with each other with passion, vehemence and integrity (Benhabib 1993). 'Agonism', in contrast to antagonism, is productive and creative, bringing about intensified critical reflection.¹⁴⁶ In this logic it is precisely a passion for ideas and politics that drives people into action and from where competition stems. As Roberts-Miller notes in her account of Arendt's (1972) polemical agonism, a "situation is agonistic, not because the participants manufacture or seek conflict, but because conflict is a necessary consequence of difference" Roberts-Miller 2002: 589). It is when a diversity of interlocutors brings together diverging ideas and standpoints, without aiming for consensus or agreement, that critical thinking comes into being and the risk of totalitarianism is uprooted.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁶ Chambers, in a similar discussion on agonistic public space, notes that 'agonism' derives from the Greek word '*agon*' that refers to an athletic contest in which the struggle, and not the victory, is the aim. Such a contest requires the existence of opponents that are worthy of each other to compete, with agonism implying "deep respect and concern for the other" (Chambers 2003: 96).

¹⁴⁷ Other distinguished theorists on agonistic pluralism include Honig (1993) on the politics of agonism; and Connolly (1995) on democratic pluralism. All pick up on different points of convergence, yet have in common their emphasis on the potentially positive aspects of political conflict.

As we have examined in this chapter, Indian democracy is inherently constituted by conflict. The independent nation was shaped around the competing political imaginaries of Gandhi and Nehru, and it is these discourses that continue to inform the meaning and practice of democracy in India today. No single idea of democracy exists in India and it is precisely the diverging conceptualisations that feed and sustain democratic debate. The reproduction of Gandhi and Nehru's conflicting ideas of democracy in various social and political fields, contributes to attaining truly democratic politics. In such a light, the differences between NCPRI and Team Anna can be considered as opening up opportunities for the deepening of democracy and the emergence of agonistic public spaces.

The ramifications of the agonistic public space created by members of NCPRI and Team Anna through their different views on democracy have come to fruition in recent months, with the phenomenon of the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP). The recent rise to power of AAP can be thought of as a result of the productive avenues created by tension and conflict over the meaning of democracy. Arvind Kejriwal, who was ostensibly the 'master mind' behind Team Anna, set up AAP. When the government failed to meet the demands of the Lokpal campaign, Kejriwal and Hazare parted ways, with the former starting a political party and the latter shunning any association with party politics. AAP thus was born out of the heated discussions, disagreements and conflicts that the Lokpal campaign had given rise to.

AAP's short stint in power in the Delhi government, and its current campaigning for the upcoming general elections, has brought fundamental questions about India's political makeup and its democratic tradition to the surface. As explored in the introduction of this thesis, it gave rise to a heated polemic debate in public discourse as to what constitutes democratic meaning and practice. While some celebrated AAP for being a 'maverick force' that was challenging the established political institutions and reanimating democracy, others saw in AAP a populist tendency that posed a threat to India's democracy. AAP emerged out of zealous conflict on what the meaning and practice of democracy is, and, once in power, in turn fuelled a

continuous debate on the idea of democracy. Whether for the supporters or the critics of AAP's form of politics, what stood unquestioned was that the new party of the 'common man' had reinvigorated the ways in which democracy is discussed in public discourse in India. In such manner, the ongoing conflicting understandings and interpretations of democracy expand the experience of democratisation in India.

Conclusion

In this thesis I have explored the aspirations and the tensions in anti-corruption activism in India. Focusing on social movements demanding transparency and accountability laws, I examined how civil society actors committed to combating corruption can take opposed political routings and positions, even though they are ultimately driven by similar aspirations to improve state governance structures and to deepen democracy. I asked how the multi-layered ideas of democracy and the state so prevalent in Indian political discourse come to be reproduced, interpreted and internalised by anti-corruption civil society actors.

This thesis explored the ideals and aspirations of anti-corruption activists largely through conflict and competition. It observed that divisions and tensions run through anti-corruption activism – between organisations and among actors, notwithstanding their ultimately similar objectives and aspirations. Drawing on the concept of relationality, I have argued that the political positions and commitments of the actors involved were shaped and consolidated largely in relation, and in reaction, to each other. A relational approach to identity highlights the circumstantial nature of a sense of identity, emphasising that it is constituted by being counterposed to others. In other words, both the individual and likewise the collective identity depend on the internalised existence of ‘the other’. What such conceptualisation points out, is that ‘the other’ is a subjectively configured mirror image of one’s own identity. Hence, all identity in essence emerges out of dialectic relationships and constellations, and thus results in fluidly changing forms.

The notion of relationality suggests that tension is affirmative and constructive. Conflict, so conceived, is a productive and constitutive force, in that it enables the consolidation of identities. As my ethnography corroborates, a competitive playing

field provides opportunities for the reinforcement of political positions and commitments. Such a setting brings together conflicting opponents who contend with one another for recognition, enabling their respective ideals and norms to be fashioned and rearticulated. It was thus the competitive landscape of the Lokpal agitation that provided the opportunity for the anti-corruption activists to enrich their respective positions and commitments mutually. This resonates with concepts of agonism that postulate that conflict and difference must be at the heart of critical thinking. According to Arendt's (1972) conceptualisation of 'agonistic public space', rich debate emerges not through consensus, but through confrontational and adversarial engagement. Applied to democratic debate, Mouffe (1999) makes the normative claim that political conflict is integral for democracy to be truly deepened.

That tension ran through anti-corruption activism and that, moreover, it constituted a dynamic and constructive force came to expression in all the chapters. Throughout this thesis, I explored the multiple levels and the different historical conjunctions in which the tension experienced by actors engaged in transparency and accountability campaigns played out. In the following, I recapitulate some of the main articulations of tension and the productive avenues that it opened up. I then turn to a brief discussion on how these findings reflect and contribute to political debates on the idea of democracy and the state in India.

The presence of tension became apparent already in the historical Right to Information movement as explored in Chapters One and Two. As shown, the enactment of the Right to Information Act is widely accredited to MKSS and to its grassroots forms of protest; still, there was also necessarily another, more technical aspect to its campaigning. On the one hand, MKSS is an organisation that is rooted in rural India and that is constituted by poor labourers and farmers. Yet on the other, this ideal alone could not bring into being MKSS's commitment to transparency and accountability laws and policies, which demanded bureaucratic procedures and technical expertise. NCPRI was brought about in order to address such technical and 'unauthentic' needs. By being constituted by influential members that had bargaining power over crucial decision-makers, NCPRI represented the other side of MKSS.

Both organisations were interdependent whereby the grassroots demands of MKSS depended on the social networks of NCPRI, while simultaneously NCPRI's social networks attained force and recognition because of MKSS's work on the ground. However, the dialectic dynamics of two heterogeneous organisations, though dedicated to the same cause, inevitably led to tensions; these very tensions, in turn, resolved the very conflict immanent in the RTI movement, and were thus conducive to its overall success.

The main context framing this thesis, and the event in which tension among civil society became most conspicuously expressed, was the Lokpal agitation. This agitation for an anti-corruption ombudsman legislation gave rise to divisions among actors who were split on how civil society should engage in law-making processes. While they were united in their aspiration of making governance transparent and accountable, they were divided on the means of getting there. Both MKSS and Team Anna shared the persuasion that anti-corruption legislation was crucial to improving the practice of statecraft, and that through civil society activism the experience of democracy in India could be deepened. However, they were in ideological disagreement on what democracy means and on what civil society's role should be in advancing the democratic process. Consequently, the Lokpal agitation caused deep tensions both within the public discourse and within the several fractions of anti-corruption activists. Although stemming from a similar political class and having overlaps in terms of history, membership and objectives, the civil society actors involved had to reposition themselves unequivocally in their allegiance.

Expanding on the notion of agonism, I showed that the tension between MKSS and Team Anna did not lead to stifling impasses, but, on the contrary, opened up opportunities for productive reaffirmation and consolidation of positions and commitments. By accusing Team Anna of being undemocratic in its form of protest and in the content of its demands, members of MKSS could articulate and fashion their own position as democratic civil society representatives. Informed by the notion of relationality, I argued that MKSS's positions on democratic process and procedure was shaped in large part in confrontation to the politics of Team Anna. Chapter Four,

for instance, explored a particular instance in which MKSS enacted its sense of appropriate civil society engagement. In opposition to Team Anna that was accused of failing to incorporate public opinion into its drafted Jan Lokpal bill, MKSS identified public consultation and participation of the poor as a crucial component of democratic civil society engagement. By performing an event of public consultation, members of MKSS thus positioned themselves as legitimate civil society actors. In this manner, it was the tensions underlying the Lokpal agitation that opened up an opportunity for MKSS's ideal of public consultation to be reaffirmed and enacted.

A similarly productive ramification to emerge out of the tension between MKSS and Team Anna was explored in Chapter Six in relation to their understandings of democracy. Reproducing the competing political imaginaries of Gandhi and Nehru, MKSS and Team Anna disagreed on what constitutes democratic processes and procedures. While one group endorsed ideas corresponding to direct democracy, whereby decision-making powers are directly in the hands of the people, the other group advocated abidance to the processes and procedures of representative democracy. Borrowing Mouffe's normative notion of agonistic pluralism and applying it to my empirical setting, I argued that it was precisely the diverging conceptualisations as endorsed by the contending anti-corruption activists that deepened democratic debate. By being divided over what constitutes democratic practice and meaning, the two groups animated and strengthened debates over democracy. They hereby contributed to expanding political debates in India that, as we explored, is constituted by such conflict and tension.

I also explored tension at the intra-organisational level, that is, among members of NCPRI themselves. During the Lokpal agitation, MKSS and NCPRI were positioned outwardly as a homogenous whole; however, internal divisions and tensions characterised these organisations. Certain members of NCPRI expressed disappointment in the workings of MKSS, particularly of its leadership, lamenting an increased distancing from the village-based ideal. However, as explored in Chapter Five, these critiques were not expressions of cynicism, but rather, re-articulations of a deeply held commitment to MKSS. The disappointments of certain members of

NCPRI served as inverted assertions of their expectations and ideals of anti-corruption activism. Thus, through an exploration of their critiques and the areas of their disappointment, we could comprehend the finer-grained levels of commitment of these activists and the motives of their engagement.

The various expressions of tension in civil society activism as explored in this thesis – within NCPRI, among MKSS and Team Anna, between MKSS and NCPRI – resonate with the tension in the recent discussions around the Aam Aadmi Party with which we began the introduction. AAP's experiments with governance during its brief stint in power in Delhi, we noted, unleashed a polemic on what the meaning and practice of democracy is in India. Public discourse was divided between those who celebrated AAP for challenging the established political institutions, and those who contended that AAP derailed democratic procedures. This tension emanated ultimately from conflicting expectation of the political modes and processes required to restore democratic practice in India.

It was precisely this tension over the procedural means required to attain the ends of anti-corruption that characterised also the sets of tension as explored in this thesis. This type of tension came out in the following: 1. the tension in the RTI movement between an idealised authentic social movement that exerted pressure on the government through collective citizen action, and an organisation that was well connected in the state system and familiarized with technical, bureaucratic and legalistic proceedings; 2. the tension between MKSS and Team Anna emergent from different understandings of the democratic processes and procedures required for civil society engagement in anti-corruption law-making; 3. the tension within NCPRI around expectations of a social movement that adhered to pure and authentic forms of politics. All of these expressions of tension signalled the importance given to particular understandings and ideals of democratic process and procedure among anti-corruption civil society. Each indicated the overall commitment to strengthening democracy by campaigning for transparency and accountability laws, yet tension arose out of disagreement of what means to employ to advance the democratic

process. They show that democracy is a contested terrain that is constituted by disagreement and conflict.

The recurrence of a certain type of tension among actors committed to anti-corruption suggests that it bespeaks the broader contemporary political discourses in India. As has been examined extensively by scholars of Indian politics, the ideas of democracy and the state constitute the central imperatives of modern India. Not only do these ideas have wide currency and salience, but, moreover, they are said to have been internalised and vernacularised by ordinary citizens. The findings of this thesis similarly illustrate the centrality of these ideas, whereby a faith in the idea of democracy and a commitment to improving the functioning of the state were shown to be deeply embedded in anti-corruption activism. Additionally, my findings expand this engaged discursive trend on India's democracy and state, by demonstrating that it is characterised by tension and conflict. As my ethnographic material suggests, conflict and competition enrich in multiple ways in which democracy and the state come to be imagined in India. By exploring the playing out of friction in the field of anti-corruption activism, I have proposed that the metanarrative through which Indian politics is framed, is characterised by a widely held faith in the idea of democracy, which simultaneously coexists with a polemic fissure on what democratic processes and procedures exactly is. It is this polemic that sustains rich democratic debate.

Tensions and aspirations are in this regard mutually constitutive. For action and commitment to be prompted, aspirations need to be tied to lofty expectations. Accordingly, ideals and expectations are the driving force of the engagement of anti-corruption activists. However, ingrained in such expectations lies tension and contradiction, for – like in a utopia – the realisation of an ideal is unattainable and is always deferred. This, as Weber (1919) already pointed out in the early twentieth century, is the fundamental tension in politics. Politicians, according to Weber, are faced with an immanent dilemma: they need to combine an ethic of ultimate ends – a faith-based conviction that holds absolute and unambiguous positions, with pure intentions as the ultimate end – with an ethic of responsibility – a sense of proportion

and a measurement of the possible consequences that one's actions have. Without passion and a vision for an ultimate end, a politician lacks charisma and devotion for a cause. At the same time, without a sense of proportion and responsibility, he risks acting blindly and sentimentally. Only a person with a true calling for politics will recognise that an ethic of ultimate ends and an ethic of responsibility are mutually constitutive and dialectically intertwined, and that they must be brought together through "a strong and slow boring of hard boards".

Drawing and expanding on Weber's theory of 'Politics as Vocation', in this thesis I have shown how the tension inherent in political practice plays a constructive and constitutive role. Arguing along these lines, this thesis showed that it was the tension and competition between MKSS and Team Anna that enhanced their commitments and positions. Team Anna challenged members of MKSS to set themselves apart from them, and to thereby reflect about their own positioning. Triggered by perceived confrontation, the ensuing space of reflection enabled MKSS to enrich its own commitments to democratic processes. The 'identity' of MKSS was thus sharpened against and through Team Anna. This implies that, while the two groups *ideologically* seemed more adversaries than just competitors, *essentially* they re-affirmed each other as the prototypical protagonists of 'Politics as Vocation'. They were the exemplary 'siamese twins' that in their very polarity contained each other within themselves. It is in this light that through the Lokpal agitation both MKSS and Team Anna consolidated – even if only marginally and possibly only temporarily – India's democracy.

In such conceptualisation, conflict is at the heart of modern politics and constitutes a productive force. Here we may draw on Tsing's metaphor of 'friction' that postulates that difference and disparity is what produces movement, action and effect: "A wheel turns because of its encounter with the surface of the road; spinning in the air it goes nowhere. Rubbing two sticks together produces heat and light; one stick alone is just a stick" (Tsing 2005: 5). Similarly, aspirations for transparency and accountability in anti-corruption activism go nowhere without friction and tension.

With India representing the largest democracy in the world, these ethnographic findings on the playing out of ideas of democracy in civil society activism prove particularly insightful. Understanding that conflict and tension is at the heart of the idea of democracy, enables the enrichment and deepening of the debate on civil society's role in it. This thesis gains all the more pertinence in the current political conjuncture, as India is in the midst of staging the biggest voting event in human history.¹⁴⁸ What characterises the general elections of 2014 is the appearance of the Aam Aadmi Party as a major contender, fielding candidates to contest in many of the seats up for election to the *lok sabha* (lower house of parliament). Many political commentators are presenting AAP as promising to break the mould of Indian politics by challenging the existing parties (BJP and Congress) with a popular campaign. The emergence of AAP in the political scene is argued by many to be a turning point for Indian democracy.

As observed in this thesis, AAP is a direct effect of the tensions and frictions in anti-corruption activism: it emerged out of the heated conflict and debates on what civil society engagement entails. The very existence of AAP can thus be concluded to be an outcome and development of productive tension. These current political occurrences support the overall argument of this thesis that postulates that conflict lies at the heart of politics, and that such conflict is not constraining as would intuitively appear, but, on the contrary, it constitutes the substance out of which dynamic productivity emerges.

¹⁴⁸ This conclusion is being written three weeks into the start of India's 2014 *lok sabha* elections that is taking place in nine phases.

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