

## POWER & POLITICS

PRABHU CHAWLA

# All Hail the Lokpal, But Don't Forget Party Funding Mess



It's definitely a great victory for a thought germinated by the even-greater Anna Hazare

think tank. As legal eagles from both sides ready themselves for a war of words on the framing of the Jan Lokpal Bill, the nation has thrown up another issue for discussion. Even those who actively participated in the debates, televised 24x7, on the well-choreographed happenings at Jantar Mantar are now pointing at the inadequacies in the Hazare argument. The question being raised is: Can a Lokpal institution, however powerful, solve corruption at all levels? A powerful Lokpal may serve as a lethal deterrent for the people who occupy top posts. But can he or she contain the virus that has infected all levels of bureaucracy and political establishment? Hazare and his team haven't had the time (or inclination?) to track and attack the source of the scourge.

The truth is corruption has become an integral part of our political life. It begins at village offices of a political party and ends at its fortress-like headquarters in the state capitals and/or Delhi. Has anyone of us or any member of the Hazare team raised a question about the source of funds that political parties collect every year? According to conservative estimates, 765 registered political parties—six national, 57 state-level and 702

others—together spend over Rs 25,000 crore on elections every five years. Here's the math. All the political parties together spend over Rs 50 crore a year to maintain their offices and office-bearers. The Election Commission has fixed a limit of Rs 35 lakh for a Lok Sabha election. But which candidate covers a constituency of over 12 lakh voters and spends only Rs 1 lakh a day? According to Income-Tax sources, each candidate ends up spending over Rs 5 crore on an average. Even if we take four serious candidates for each of the 542 constituencies which go to polls, we are talking about an expenditure of Rs 10,000 crore. Top that with the 15,000-plus candidates who contest 4,500

Assembly seats in the states, with an average expense of Rs 1 crore per candidate, and we're talking about a total poll expenditure of around Rs 25,000 crore. And the story's not even done yet.

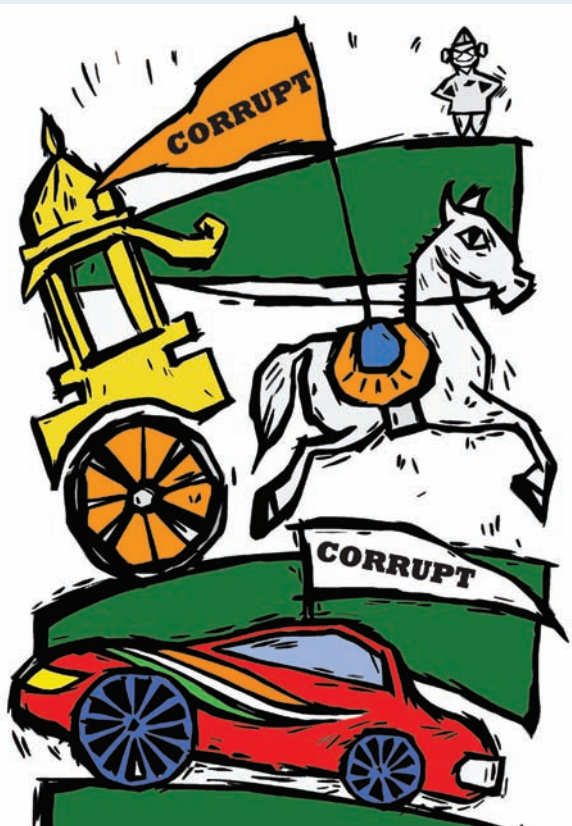
Most of our political leaders have forgotten the contours of the pot-holed roads that criss-cross their states, since they travel only by chartered jets or custom-made *raths*. All national and state-level parties have posh state and central offices running the organisation. Even the district-level office-bearer of a ruling party owns a big house and a fleet of cars. All

Committee, which was appointed by the party in 2003 to suggest how to raise finances for the party, ignored the role of tainted money in politics... In its three-page report, Manmohan skirted the issue of election funding and ended with a high-sounding sentence: "The committee is convinced that the Congress must take the lead in bringing about a new culture of transparency, accountability and integrity in financing." He conveniently forgot his own report after becoming the prime minister. Sonia Gandhi, who was part of the committee, also forgot to take it forward.

The fault doesn't lie with her or other political leaders. They have become slaves of a system which encourages cash-for-votes for winning an election, and Cabinet notes in exchange for currency for getting the Government policies changed. The past three decades of economic reform have opened new avenues of raising big money by manipulating economic policies so that India's GDP can grow at 8 to 9 per cent. The rise of crony capitalism and the emergence of a highly powerful coalition of the urban elite, irrespective of their political affiliations, have insulated the decision-making process from scrutiny. The chosen few may fight and shout against each other on TV screens and on the floor of the legislature, but once the cameras are off, they hang out together in the same city or abroad, wining and dining.

Real estate tycoon Shahid Balwa is a classic example of a cultural, corporate and political coalition that has total control over the system. Even the beneficiaries of both the CWG scams and Adarsh Society reflect the growing affinity between the rich and mighty. What else could explain the ruling elite's reluctance to give up the discretionary powers of ministers, chief ministers and other authorities? It is through these powers that the Chavans, Rajas and Kalmadis make their money and use it for winning elections. Unless the business of elections is tackled, valiant fights put up by even hundreds of Hazares will not be able to defeat the coalition of the corrupt.

TANMAYA TYAGI



*The rise of crony capitalism and the emergence of a highly powerful coalition of the urban elite have insulated the decision-making process from scrutiny.*

the political parties are bound to file their balance sheets with the Election Commission every year. Most of them do so. But these are balance sheets that would shame even a small-scale entrepreneur. While the truth is that, on an average, both the Congress and BJP spend over Rs 2 crore a month on their offices and office-bearers.

So, where does the money come from? The BJP initially decided to collect money through cheques only, but had to give up because people were unwilling to pay that way and party leaders were not ready to change to a more transparent system. The Congress has not even bothered to pretend to cleanse the system. Even the Manmohan Singh