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Democracy's Challenge to Us

Sudhir Chandra

It is embarrassing for me to be standing before you to deliver this year's JP Memorial Lecture. I could have avoided the embarrassment by confessing my unworthiness for the task. But that would have required a self-effacement of which I am incapable. So here I am.

Talking about 'Democracy's Challenge to Us' on a day that marks the 37th anniversary of the end of the Emergency, it is but apt that I should begin by recalling my first, and only real, meeting with the great man in whose memory this lecture is purposely organized on this date. This was exactly fifty-one years ago. I had written a fairly critical review of Sampurnananda's *Memories and Reflections* for *Quest*. One day I received a letter from Laeeq Futehally, the Reviews Editor of *Quest*, saying that she had been obliged to drop my review at the proof stage. Sampurnanada was a member of the Executive Council of the Indian Committee for Cultural Freedom of which *Quest* was an organ. She was told to avert the awkwardness that might result if *Quest* carried an adverse review of Sampurnananda's book.

For the young idealist that I then was, this was shocking. I promptly sent off a letter of protest to *Quest*. I was then teaching at the Agra College, and it so transpired that JP came to the College for a lecture. Since he, too, was associated with the Indian Committee for Cultural Freedom, I wrote him an impassioned letter about the matter. After his lecture was over, JP enquired about and sent for me. Saying that he was not expecting me to be so young, he asked if I could accompany him to his next assignment so that we could talk on the way. He said that he agreed with what I had said in my letter; which for me was no small matter. He allowed me to be with him that entire evening. Learning that my temporary teaching stint at the Agra College was to end within a few months, he promised to try and arrange something for me. He was as good as his word.

Also, he did not mind the fact that I preferred to take up a research scholarship instead of the research assistantship that he had arranged for me.

The withdrawal of an unknown young scholar's book review could easily have been an affair too inconsequential for an important personage like JP. But his commitment to the idea of freedom would not let him treat it as negotiable.

I am grateful to the People's Union for Civil Liberties for affording me a chance to recall, and put on record, this small but significant incident about JP. There is another reason for me to feel grateful to the PUCL. In asking me to deliver this lecture, they have recognized the contribution of those thousands of anonymous women and men who enthusiastically welcomed the founding of the Union as a possible safeguard against the kind of forces that had led to the nightmare of the Emergency.

I

We have, each one of us, our own ways of seeing the reality that, for weal or woe, we inhabit. It helps one, to the extent such self-awareness is possible, to be alert to one's distinct ways of seeing. It also helps the others to have a sense of where the one they are listening to is coming from. To the extent I can step aside and examine my own dominant mode of seeing, it is marked by a particular understanding of history. Let me briefly elucidate.

We tend to think in terms of certain primary binary oppositions, such as universal and particular, synchrony and diachrony, persistence and change. History, it is usually assumed, deals with the particular, the diachronic and with change. Over the years, and very slowly, I have moved towards an understanding of history – of human affairs – in which persistence and change are inseparably fused. Earlier my thinking was anchored in the profound formulation of Heraclitus that you cannot enter the same river twice. The truth of this mantra made itself available to me in two installments. Thanks to its flowing water, I immediately grasped the ever-changing character of the river. But it took me a while to realize that, apart from the river, even the person entering it a second time is not the same person who had entered it the first time.

Then, in the course of studying the kind of social consciousness that emerged in colonial India and now characterizes us, the discovery of persistence in the midst of ostensibly epochal change started leading me towards a very different truth. This truth had been with me all along, but I did not for long have the predisposition to recognize it. This truth is enshrined in the second chapter of the *Gita* where Krishna tells Arjun: 'It is not that I was not present at any time, you were not, or these kings were not; and nor is it that we shall not be in the future.' The *Bible* states the same truth thus: 'The thing that

hath been, it is *that* which shall be; and that which is done *is* that which shall be done; and there is no new thing under the sun.’ Nearer our own day, William Blake is led to say: ‘I see the Past, Present and Future existing all at once.’ And still nearer, though adding a note of uncertainty, T.S. Eliot says:

Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future,
And time future contained in time past.

My idea here is not to convince anyone. However, as a possible pointer to those who may suspect the idea of eternal persistence to be a piece of obscurantism, I may refer to the secular cognitive revolution that the 20th century French historian, Fernand Braudel, has brought about by demonstrating the indivisibility of time. Proposing three levels of movement of time – long duree, conjuncture and evenement (event) – and showing their inseparability, Braudel has argued that every historical moment encapsulates different times.

One more preliminary disclosure. Social science scholarship tends to be deeply suspicious of the vitiating influence of the knowing self on the act of knowing. Dismissive of what is contemptuously described as the anecdotal, it builds an elaborate and refined case against what is described as solipsism. Having initially shared the suspicion of the self, I have gradually learnt to accept, indeed celebrate, the unceasing mutuality of the personal and the academic, of autobiography and history. More so when people’s subjectivity – individual and collective – is at the centre of what is to be understood. When we are the subject of examination – like in this discussion of how we respond to the challenge of democracy – we need to valorize our experience.

II

How do I, given this way of seeing, see the question of democracy in India? I should like to begin from a moment until when change was a palpable reality, and did not carry intimations of inevitable resemblance between the new and the old. That moment was the termination of the Emergency thirty-seven years ago, the moment that the JP Memorial Lecture is meant to recall, celebrate and reflect upon year after year. That was a moment of liberation. The entire country was seized with euphoria. Democracy denied and regained had driven home the value of freedom. Idealism, in that euphoric moment, had returned to our public life.

It was shockingly brief. Hard reality was soon back in place, reviving the disenchantment with the political class. Certainly for me. My capacity for trust and hope,

in public life, was irretrievably damaged. But it was more an affective, existential experience.

The change acquired a different dimension, a serious intellectual dimension, following the sudden outbreak of anti-Sikh violence in the immediate aftermath of Indira Gandhi's assassination. On the second or third day of the violence, the following slogan made a sudden appearance on the walls of Delhi:

Hindu-Muslim bhai-bhai
Sikhon ki ab karo safaai.

I cannot produce in English translation the scary lilt of the Hindi original. But even a prosaic translation will suggest the slogan's sinister character. Here it is:

Hindus and Muslims are brothers,
Liquidate the Sikhs now.

Even in the midst of that violence, the starkness of the public call to exterminate the Sikhs stood out. And the effect was aggravated by the call's unexpected coupling with the otherwise stale 'Hindu-Muslim bhai-bhai'. Could such a slogan have been conceivable prior to the outbreak of anti-Sikh violence? Assuming the unlikely, even if it had been conceived, the slogan would not have been publicized. And even if some crazed mind had issued it, it would have been dismissed as wild and absurd; which it was not when it actually appeared.

What, then, was there in the actual outbreak of violence that made the slogan possible and plausible? In fact, that violence itself could not have been conceivable until it actually materialized. For, whatever might have happened during the years of separatist violence in the Punjab, relations between the Hindus and the Sikhs had remained unaffected and the two communities had not drifted apart. Yet, unimagined violence had suddenly been unleashed against the Sikhs. Could such relentless violence been produced solely by a single act of assassination? Could it have been sustained in the absence of a matching, even if latent, communal awareness? If not, what deep unsuspected divide had lain concealed between the two communities? Only the eruption of violence was sudden. Its continuation was on account, and a manifestation, of a latent communal divide. That manifestation is what made the slogan possible and plausible.

Things may be what they appear to be. But, completely invisibly, they can also be the very opposite. This is the intellectual lesson the existential experience of 1984 taught me. The lesson raises unsettling questions, one of which is: If things carry within them the possibility of suddenly being radically different, how reliable can be a description that is uninformed by those other possibilities?

But why am I talking in terms of neutral things? That only serves to sanitize the

formulation. The matter involves real people – us – and attached to it is a certain enormity which should be squarely faced. So let me rephrase the formulation within the context of our present discussion. People – not excluding us – may be what they appear to be. But they can also be the very opposite, without betraying any sign of being that. In concrete terms, the 1984 violence and the mentality which surfaced with the open call for the extermination of the Sikhs constituted a phenomenon that was not confined to just a lunatic fringe. It also involved, in varying degree, normal human beings like us.

Our recall of 1984 today usually remains confined to the politicians who are believed to have engineered the anti-Sikh violence and to the anti-social elements who perpetrated the actual violence. In a similar situation almost seventy years ago, when Calcutta was gripped by anti-Muslim violence and he felt obliged to stake his life, Gandhi had lashed out at the hypocrisy of blaming anti-social elements for communal violence. For, even if the actual deed was something from which the supposedly respectable middle classes had stayed scrupulously away, communal violence would never be possible without their tacit approval and countenance. It is important, therefore, to inscribe in the conveniently partial recall of 1984 that other aspect also which implicates those as well whose hands were unsoiled.

Those who have cared to remember will vouch that the stock response of many educated Hindu women and men to the anti-Sikh violence was: ‘What is happening is bad. But it is necessary.’ At the same time, unmindful of what that violence could be doing to alienate the Sikhs, these Hindus also maintained that the Sikhs were not different from the Hindus. The inseparability of Hindus and Sikhs was an article of faith with them, and they would – those Hindus – happily cite the Indian Constitution, and point to the then familiar phenomenon of Hindu-Sikh marriages and the practice of one son in many Hindu families being a Sikh.

The preceding account of 1984 indicates a very complex attitude towards both the Sikhs and the Muslims. We may be tempted to overlook that underlying complexity and, instead, see those happenings in Manichean terms. We may, consequently, see nothing but opportunism in the invocation of Hindu-Muslim fraternity, and dismiss as fake the expression of regret at the presumed necessity of violence against the Sikhs. We may even feel morally driven to be judgmental. To do that, however, will be to miss a fact which is crucial to how we respond to the challenges of democracy and citizenship. Symptomized by the preceding description of Delhi 1984, that fact is: Hindus are simultaneously, or alternatively, inclusive and exclusive. Any time, and often without fully grasping what they are doing, they can own or disown the others, depending upon what their response to certain circumstances might be.

It is a coincidence that the year I have been asked to deliver it, the JP Memorial Lecture is being held in Gujarat. This is a convenient and melancholy coincidence. Convenient because much of what I wish to say relates to Gujarat, which was home to me and my wife from 1985 to 2002. Melancholy because, while our years in Gujarat also brought us great joy and lasting friendships and enriched us in multiple ways, what needs to be said now is anything but joyful. Coming to Gujarat still feels like coming home. Home coming about which one of the living greats of Gujarat, Gulam Muhammad Sheikh, has written so poignantly. Whatever I say I say as an insider.

Gujarat has known communal violence intermittently. The violence to which I was witness occurred in 1990, 1992 and 2002. I have written about it, in the heat of the moment, as well as looking back in a spirit of introspection. Without attempting to rehash all that, I shall focus on what serves to highlight the complexity – ambivalence is my preferred expression – of people's attitudes. You will recall that Vyara, the small town near Bardoli in South Gujarat, was for two days in the grip of the violence which broke out against the Muslims in the immediate wake of the first unsuccessful assault on the Babri Masjid in October 1990. A young colleague of mine at the Surat Centre for Social Studies, Satyakam Joshi, my novelist wife and I decided to see things for ourselves. Among the many people we met and had intimate conversations with, there was a man who earned his living by ironing clothes and also doubled as the priest of a tiny wayside temple. He narrated to us in graphic detail, and with unmistakable pain, what the town's Muslims had to suffer. Just as he was talking with us, it was time for him to perform the evening *aarati*. The sacred ritual done, he resumed his account and told us how he was taken into custody by the police. As we expressed surprise that one with his kind of sympathies should have been arrested, he admitted that he had led one of the rampaging mobs.

In 1990 we had to travel to Vyara to get a sense of what had happened. Two years later we did not have to go anywhere. Suddenly, totally unexpectedly, beginning with the night of 6-7 December, Surat was in the thick of unimagined communal violence. Let me begin with the afternoon of 6 December when, like every working day at the Surat Centre, the whole Faculty had got together for tea. It was impossible that day to have any discussion apart from speculating about whatever was going on in Ayodhya. This, naturally, led to speculation about what might happen in case, God forbid, the Kar Sevaks really succeeded in their design. Everyone was agreed that the repercussions of that would be terrifying. However, there was unanimity that, whatever might happen elsewhere in Gujarat, Surat would remain quiet. The entire history and socio-economic profile of the city was there to bolster that confidence.

The confidence was belied by mid-night the same day. It was back within days, the confidence. Now it was explaining why violence had broken out in the city.

I am a professional academic, and narrate this particular incident to reiterate the earlier point that even the realities we believe we perfectly understand carry unsuspected latencies.

Surat 1992 was terrifying. It was, and this could be said only in hindsight, a preparation for Gujarat 2002. You will immediately have a sense of what ‘terrifying’ signifies in the context of Surat 1992. But there is an aspect of it which, ordinarily, you will not even imagine. To let you have an idea of that, here are two differently terrifying experiences of those days, which together actually constitute one experience.

The first experience relates to a relief camp during the worst phase of the violence. There was a frail little girl, barely in her teens, standing dazed beside an elderly woman. The woman was shouting away in helpless rage: ‘*Bhai, un haivanon ne is bachchi ke saath bura kam kiya! Is bachchi ke saath!!*’ (‘Brother, those devils abused this little girl! This little girl!’)

It will be easier to leave you to imagine the enormity of the experience than to try and describe it. And just then, within a day or two, occurred something utterly incredible. I was visiting a friend when a neighbor of his, a middle-aged woman, rushed in. A train, she summarily announced, had been forcibly stopped outside the Udhna railway station, and some women passengers raped. She rushed out as abruptly as she had rushed in. I heard the friend say that this must be another of those baseless rumours that were rife then, and caught myself wondering if the raped ones were *Hindu* women.

It required me a whole ten years to be able to speak of this incident. I have since written about it more than once. So far as one can look back and examine one’s making, there was nothing that could have warned me of this dark presence within me. My family and friends, my surroundings, my education, every conscious influence, years of association with the Jamia Millia Islamia and the Aligarh Muslim University, being treated like a son by my Muslim Chachaji and Chachiji – Janab and Begum Mahmudul Hassan – with whom I lived for an entire year as an impressionable under-graduate student, indeed everything that had made me what I believed myself to be should have been sufficient protection against a perversity like the one that, however fleetingly, possessed me that day. Surely I was more, and also other, than what I had believed myself to be.

This was a humbling and, hopefully, cleansing experience. Yet, having once been so possessed, can there be a guarantee that the cleansing has been complete and permanent?

This is a frightening thought, the kind of thought that our instinct for sanity tends to keep repressed. But the repressed, Freud has shown us, has a way of striking precisely when we are off guard. Also, eruptions, like the slogan on the walls of Delhi and the flash from my dark depths, may be sudden; but they are not aberrations. They are reminders that, in the unpredictable structuration of individual and collective consciousness, non-visibility does not necessarily signify non-existence. If anything, the rarer and more unexpected a surfacing, the greater the reason to worry about what it might portend.

Now on to Gujarat 2002. Not in its entirety, for that would entail going into the monstrosities that, beginning with Godhra, happened during those cruel months; but only in relation to its adverse repercussions for democracy in India. Seen that way, Gujarat 2002 is not an event that occurred over a decade ago. It is still alive and unfolding. Especially *now* on the eve of the 2014 parliamentary elections. There is much that can be said about this live event in the context of democracy, not least of which is the brazen miscarriage of justice. The notorious acquittal of the accused in the Baroda Bakery Case that obliged the Supreme Court to order the transfer of trial of certain cases away from Gujarat is only one index of that miscarriage. Welcome as the Supreme Court's effective intervention has been in a few high visibility cases, it also provides ground to worry about the many more cases not so transferred.

This is alarming. For democracy to be even minimally substantial, not just ostensibly procedural, the judiciary has to be – and should be perceived as – independent and unaffected by sectarian or other narrow considerations. A judiciary that makes a particular community feel marked and hounded inhibits the growth of a sense of common citizenship.

Important though the other aspects are, there is only one that I wish to particularly emphasize in the context of the fate of the democratic process. This relates to the as yet uninterrupted triumphal electoral march that began in Gujarat with the violence of 2002 and paved the way for the charisma of Narendra Modi. Scheduled in the immediate aftermath of anti-Muslim violence, the 2002 Assembly elections were held amidst fears of large-scale rigging by the ruling party. Those elections, in the event, turned out to be among the fairest the country has known. The verdict in those fair elections was a massive mandate for Modi, way beyond what those relying on large-scale rigging normally plot to achieve. The electors' fidelity flinched neither in 2007 nor in 2012.

That charisma is now being exported to – and apparently accepted in – the rest of the country as well. How much of that acceptance gets translated into immediate electoral gains will soon be clear. Whatever might happen in the immediate context of the 2014 elections, the export and acceptance of Moditva constitute a phenomenon of long-term

national significance.

Twelve years is not a long time, and yet some critical factual details seem to have been erased in the course of the increasing acceptance of Moditva. Indeed, the quiet substitution of Moditva for Hindutva itself has facilitated the erasure. Moditva focuses on development without giving up on Hindutva. Foregrounding development, Moditva so veils Hindutva as to make it an invisible, but real, presence that can be denied or invoked as contingency demands. Neither in 2007 nor in 2012, except when dared by the Congress, did Modi swerve from the plank of development. That is how the electoral triumph of 2002 shrouded in silence and the presumed vote to development in 2007 and 2012 highlighted.

The question I wish to raise is: What makes such a remembrance possible? Let us begin by recalling the then Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpeyi's not so cryptic advice to Narendra Modi to follow the *raj dharma*; and also Vajpeyi's resolve at the time of the BJP's Goa conclave to get rid of Modi. Similarly, although restrained from acting by political expediency, there were constituents of the then ruling NDA who did feel squeamish about the wrongs of 2002. It was in such an atmosphere, in the midst of acknowledged wrongs, that Modi was returned to power with more than two thirds majority.

Today what is supposed to matter is the image of Modi as Vikas Purush. So overwhelming is this image, and such its power to undo wrongs, that those who refuse to let that past be buried are accused of needlessly opening up old wounds. Without being invidious by choosing to cite only him, indeed in acknowledgment of the weight that attaches to his opinion as a liberal political philosopher, I wish to quote Lord Bhikhu Parekh. Speaking during a discussion on NDTV, he kept repeating with regard to Narendra Modi: 'But the man has moved on!'

Having already quoted Heraclitus, I would have been surprised if the man had not moved on. But has the man really moved on in the sense so confidently suggested by Lord Parekh and believed in by thousands? Speaking in Ahmedabad, the city from where Gandhi initiated his satyagraha in India, I cannot but think of a parallel from his life. Persuaded that Delhi was not where he was needed on the eve of Independence, Gandhi left for Noakhali and was detained in Calcutta to bring the city back to sanity. He chose as his partner in this peace mission Shaheed Suhrawarthy, the very man who, as the Muslim League Prime Minister of Bengal, had been implicated in the violence occasioned by the call for Direct Action. When asked by people not to trust Suhrawarthy, Gandhi argued that God alone knew what there was within an individual's heart. One evening a rather ugly situation arose as one person from among the people gathered for

Gandhi's evening prayer demanded to know of Suhrawarthy if he was not responsible for the Direct Action Day massacre in Calcutta. Suhrawarthy, the shrewd lawyer, tried all his powers of equivocation. But the man, with the entire crowd behind him, pressed for a direct answer. Finally, Suhrawarthy said: 'Yes, I was.' All was quiet thereafter. All that while Gandhi, who stood by Suhrawarthy for his physical protection, uttered not a word to defend him against the charge.

To return to Modi, it is striking that those who believe him to have moved on and see in their belief sufficient reason to write off past wrongs and to anoint the man, are predominantly Hindus. I am not talking of professed supporters of Hindutva, for whom there was no wrong-doing, but of those who admit wrong-doing but insist that the man has moved on. This is yet another manifestation of the same attitude that explains the 1984 kind of ambivalence towards the Sikhs. The roots of this attitude lie in an instinct that started developing among the Hindus coterminously with the rise and growth of Indian nationalism. They have since tended to assume an axiomatic identity between Hindu and Indian. So deeply has the identification got embedded in the Hindu consciousness that the Hindus cannot easily believe that they, too, can be communal. No other community can claim that privilege. The Hindus believe themselves, *ipso facto*, to be of the nation. The other communities must prove their nationalism, and leave it to the Hindus to decide and count them in or out.

This may seem an exaggerated proposition. But years of research – crystallized in *Literature and Social Consciousness: Literature and Social Consciousness in Colonial India* (1992, 2014) – have confirmed the presence of this trait. I emphasize it here because it leads otherwise well-meaning people with an expansive liberal outlook to, unbeknown to themselves, act in ways that are inimical to the growth of a sense of Indian citizenship. It is this trait that blinds them to elementary considerations of justice and humanity, and to the deepening alienation that their blindness must necessarily produce among those who, having suffered, are asked to forget.

There are various ways in which the deepening sense of alienation gets allayed from time to time, without being substantively attended to. We have already noticed how, for example, intervention by the Supreme Court created the comforting illusion of justice being in place. A similar effect was, in varying degree, created by the defeat of NDA and the successive electoral triumphs of UPA. The ousting of NDA in 2004 was hailed as the nation's repudiation of the violence of 2002. It did not matter that some of the constituents of UPA had been partners of NDA and had remained within it during the worst of 2002.

Surely the Congress – assuming that it is different, which it is not – does not possess a

magic mantra that can transform overnight the character of those that decide to be aligned with it. There is little between UPA and NDA to tell one from the other. Consequently, there is always a sense of déjà vu, an abiding sense of despair, that whatever change might occur, it will sooner or later change into the familiar old. The feeling has over the years been deepened by developments in the larger world and by reading. Be it, for example, the historic election of a non-white as the US President, or the stirrings in Tunisia or Libya or Egypt, there is always in me an anticipation of the ensuing lapse. This confession should serve as a warning.

Now another confession. A cheering one this time. Having thickened during the intervening thirty years and more, the disenchantment that set in with the crumbling of the Janta Government has begun to wane with the electoral victory of the Aam Adami Party in Delhi. A plausible narrative – there can be others too – of the six and a half decades of democracy in India would be one that described the relentless inferiorization of the ruled matched by corresponding brutalization of the rulers. You could exercise your franchise and elect your government, but you could only choose between Tweedledum and Tweedledee. Denting the inexorability of that dehumanizing process, the AAP experience has shown the viability of alternative politics. No matter whether AAP fails or succeeds as a political outfit, the dent it has made is going to stay.

In concentrating on the communal question, my primary concern has been to indicate how the emergence of a shared sense of citizenship, essential for any democratic polity, has been hampered by the ease with which different communities have, consistently or intermittently, been made to feel marked and besieged. A similar narrative can be offered for other marked and marginalized groups, such as the tribals, Dalits, certain regions like the North-East, the poor. Having chosen to speak from personal experience, I could, for example, draw upon my two and a half years in Mizoram to talk of the anguish and alienation the Mizo feel as citizens of India. A word to the wise, Gandhi would often say. Here is a telling bit which came at the end of a very friendly meeting with a distinguished Mizo writer during which he recalled for me many details of his life. These included his boyhood when, from the jungles where his family had taken refuge from the Indian army, he would every night see Aizawl burning. The writer's parting words to me were: 'I know that you know that we are very far from you. But I want to tell you that you do not know how far we are.'

A similar story from a different setting. Those were the days of the making of the Sardar Sarovar Project. The Surat Centre was monitoring the rehabilitation and resettlement of the Project affected people. Once we reported that of the two wells provided in a resettlement village, one had no water in it. The representative of the

Gujarat Government denied this, and a joint inspection was agreed upon. Sure enough there was water in the well. Tanks quietly sent by the concerned officials had done the trick. Whether the story is aberrant or representative, and what its relevance is in the context of the present discussion, is for you to decide.

Sixteen days before his assassination, Gandhi had said 'There are seven lakh villages, so I believe there should be seven lakh governments.' We could not have had a simpler and truer measure of democracy. Nor could we have strayed farther from it.

The process is hard to stall. Perhaps impossible so long as we remain sucked into the reigning world-system of production and what today is called 'growth'. The first decisive step on this path was taken, on the eve of Independence, when Gandhi's blueprint for a new India was summarily rejected. Nehru, himself the architect of mixed economy, had then made a prophetic statement which, inexplicably, has remained neglected. He said that, in the event of there being two kinds of economy in the country, there will either be conflict between them or one of them will swallow the other. Having all but swallowed its rival, the triumphant economy is now busy seeking to swallow the State.

Not just in India but the world over. Our attention at the moment is primarily directed against the nexus between the political system and what is described as crony capitalism and believed to be the real villain. An exceptional cleavage, like the one between the ruling Left Front and its rival TMC, may occasionally conspire to create a Singur, but the order of the day is free play for Big Business, no matter what the existing political arithmetic is. Even Arvind Kejariwal has been realistic enough to clarify that AAP is opposed to corruption and crony capitalism. There obtains an overwhelming consensus in favour of the existing global model of 'growth'. Besides, that alone will make us a super power, a worthy challenger to China's design of deposing the West. The problem, according to the prevailing consensus, is one of equitable distribution. Of making the same Business behave which threatens to swallow the State.

It was only the other day that thousand of ordinary US citizens came out to protest against the 1 per cent in the name of the 99 per cent. They were followed by their counterparts in Greece, Portugal, Spain and Italy who protested against the severe austerity measures that were imposed upon them. The protesters' dream in the US was for the 99 per cent to live like the 1 per cent. Likewise the protestors occupying the streets of Greece, Portugal, Spain and Italy were dreaming of living like their better-off German and French fellow-citizens of the European Union. Protesting against the monstrous inequality of wealth within their respective societies, they were not concerned about how far the prevailing global system can be sustained. About how much more of the internal

and international violence that system increasingly engenders can humanity withstand.

The problem, we are yet to see, is not simply crony capitalism or distribution. The problem is the limitless and uncontrollable rapacity of the Frankenstein's monster called the Market, and the way it has worked itself into people's thoughts, desires and dreams the world over.

As one whose vocation rests on uninhibited thought, and as one who has seen greater civility in our midst, there is an aspect that I should have liked to more than touch upon: the progressive erosion of tolerance and liberty within our society. There was a time when only militant ideologies or movements tried coercion or violence to suppress expressions they considered inconvenient. Usually their attempts were confined to controlling expressions within their respective communities. Thus, for example, a Tamil scholar could in Tamil Nadu feel constrained in expressing his/her views, but be forthright after crossing the Vindhyas; or a scholarly work published by the Guru Nanak Dev University on the making of *Guru Grath Sahib* could invite the ire of the Khalistanis. But now intolerance runs across the board and knows no limits. What is further alarming, and illustrated in the readiness of Penguin and Aleph Book Company to jettison Wendy Doniger's books on Hinduism, is that a mere threat can now ensure compliance to whosoever decides to take offence.

Before concluding, and by way of hinting at what is immediately and realistically possible, I should like to mention a telling detail relating to Anna Hazare's anti-corruption agitation. There was a sudden spurt in the demand for national flags as people thronged to the Ramlila Maidan in support of Anna who had undertaken an indefinite fast. This meant a windfall for traders in Delhi's Sadar Bazar. They started charging one hundred and fifty rupees for a flag priced fifty, and gleefully reported that people happily paid the enhanced price. The traders, it may be noted, were supporting Anna's anti-corruption campaign.

A people, the once popular cliché goes, get the government they deserve. Democracy is faced with many challenges in our country. There can be many ways of dealing with those challenges, and we can keep debating about them. One effective way is to make ourselves, individually, equal to meeting democracy's challenge to us. Knowing that this is an infinite work, an always unfinished project.

Prof. Sudhir Chandra

Democracy's Challenge to Us

People's Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL)
34th JP Memorial Lecture, Ahmedabad, 23rd March, 2014