

Do those against corruption know about Irom Sharmila?

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It was fashionable to be patriotic during the Kargil war and now it is fashionable to be fighters against corruption, thanks to Anna Hazare.

Within days of the fast of the veteran Gandhian's understandable ire against the delay in creating a Lokpal Act, the English media channels and their partners-in-arms, the English print media, have created a pseudo-war against corruption in India, with the middle and upper-middle classes suddenly waking up their consciences through candlelight walks.

Dear pseudo-comrades, have you heard of Irom Sharmila, fasting not for one or two days, but a full decade, with absolutely no media hype to create a single candlelight walk by the rich and the affluent of India.

Lend your ears not to me, friends, Indians and countrymen, but to Irom Sharmila, a fellow Indian like Hazare. Unfortunately, she is from Manipur, which many of us confuse with Manipal, where money gets education, whereas in Manipur, money cannot even guarantee you your life.

Here is a quick recap on Irom Sharmila. Assam Rifles, one of the Indian paramilitary forces under whose control Manipur is, gunned down 10 people, including an old woman, at a bus stop in Malom in the Imphal valley on November 1, 2000. The army claimed it

had fired against insurgents; other eyewitness accounts challenged that.

On November 4, Irom Sharmila, a 28-year-old girl, started a fast-unto-death demanding a repeal of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act of 1958, which empowers the army to kill without being questioned. She was arrested for attempting to commit suicide and force-fed by tubes.

For the last 10 years, the government repeats the farce of arresting her on the same charge every year, after a formal release for a day or two. This is because the charge of attempt to suicide does not entail imprisonment of more than one year even if convicted. Irom Sharmila continues to be under arrest till date and is being force-fed.

In 2004, Thangjam Manorama, another Manipuri girl was found dead, brutally killed by the Indian army and this led to hundreds of women protesting outside the army headquarters in Imphal. Forty women, young and old, went naked with placards demanding 'Indian Army, rape us'.

Irom Sharmila continued to fast under arrest while India carried on elections and cricket. (If Anna Hazare had been on fast during the World Cup, the media would have blissfully ignored him. Timing is very important in politics and media. If the government has taken 42 years to draft a Lokpal Bill, Hazare too has taken so long to launch a fast.)

Except for a customary and superficial mention every now and then, the entire Indian media ignored her. Why? Because it is unpatriotic to question the army or criticise it, even though it may be as corrupt as our politicians and even more brutal.

A government bullying the citizens of an entire state with its army is worse than corruption. This has been going on in the Northeast irrespective of that party holds power in Delhi. The candle vigilantes of the educated middle, upper-middle and rich dare not take up issues of human rights violations, or adivasis' traditional right violations. It is easier to shout from the rooftops about corruption while being part of the very same corrupt system in day-to-day life. And the politician is the favourite whipping boy for these classes.

And will corruption end with the Lokpal bill? No. Hazare's fast is for drafting of a water-

tight bill, which will take at least three to four months. Once the bill becomes an act, it does not dent corruption unless it is enforced. Enforcement is the responsibility of the same corrupt machinery and system we have.

We have enough laws to book corrupt politicians and public servants. Whatever cases that remain in court against a Lalu Prasad Yadav or Jayalalithaa or Madhu Koda or Ramalinga Raju or Ketan Desai have been booked under existing well-framed laws.

What we really need is an honest enforcement machinery to implement the best Constitution in the world. And such a machinery has to, unfortunately, come from the educated middle, upper-middle and rich classes, because it is these classes that have produced, protected and perpetuated the existing dishonest enforcement system.

What we need is not a candlelight rally around Hazare but a protest rally outside the houses of auditors, lawyers, doctors and teachers who have corrupted our system, blaming everything on an imaginary uneducated politician. But lo, they are an indistinguishable and inseparable part of the cacophony of the pseudo-war against corruption.

I wish someone would educate Anna Hazare about a place called Manipur and an unsung heroine called Irom Sharmila.

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