

Anna Hazare and the Historical Moment

A Pulitzer Center interview with historian Ananya Vajpeyi

On Oct. 30, 2011 Pulitzer Center Executive Director Jon Sawyer interviewed Ananya Vajpeyi at her home in New Delhi. Vajpeyi teaches South Asian history at the University of Massachusetts in Boston. She is currently a fellow at the Center for the Study of Developing Societies in New Delhi. She is completing a book on the founding leaders of modern India.

Ananya Vajpeyi: My name is Ananya Vajpeyi and I teach, I've been teaching for the past few years at the University of Massachusetts in Boston and I'm currently a Fellow at the Center for the Study of Developing Societies, which is a think tank here in New Delhi. And I've just finished writing a book about the founding of the Indian Republic and some of the ideas of the founding fathers, particularly their search for an "Indian Self" and the sources of that Self in many of India's traditions and classical texts.

So today I guess we're talking about the couple of pieces I recently wrote on this new India blog that the New York Times has recently started called "India Ink" where they invited me to comment on a major anti-corruption movement that has been ongoing in India through the Summer of 2011 and they wanted me to set it in a historical context. Because the leader of this movement or the figurehead around whom the movement grew this summer is somebody called Anna Hazare who is a farmer in his 70s and an activist, a social activist, from Western India from the state of Maharashtra. And he suddenly rose to great prominence this year although he's been involved in various kinds of low-key political struggles for most of his life. And a lot of things were said about him but I think the general public perception was that he was a sort of Gandhian figure and one of the main triggers for that kind of evaluation of his political style was that he declared to the government of India that he would go on a hunger strike, he would fast in order to have his demands and the demands of his movement be addressed by the government and by the state. And these demands included a sort of renewed attention to the problem of corruption, both in the state and in private corporations—endemic corruption that afflicts a lot of Indian public life and Indian business. And what the movement, what the Anna Movement, as it came to be called, was essentially asking was that the government should create an ombudsman or some kind of an anti-graft body that would be able to monitor corruption and adjudicate how to deal with corruption, perhaps at a level that was even above that of the government itself and its various legal and legislative arms.

So there was a big debate about what this body should look like, who should be in it, what should be the criteria for selecting members of this "ombuds-body." But Anna's

stance was that not only would he mobilize people to protest against corruption and to make this demand but that he personally would go on a fast. And fasting is a tactic that Gandhi used most famously and most effectively against British rule in India back in the earlier part of the 20th century so it's a well-recognized sort of form of protest against state power or the misuse of state power and it's based on a sort of idea of being morally in the right even if one is politically weak or not in a position to fight back against injustice in other ways.

So the thing that I was asked to write about was: is Anna really a Gandhian, is he like Gandhi, how would Gandhi have felt about this movement, does it make sense to have a movement like this when you're not talking about an anti-colonial kind of resistance but rather Indians against the Indian state, which is also democratically elected and a popular state, you know, a popular government, a representative government. It's not as though this is imperial rule or colonial rule. So does it make sense to have the kinds of tactics that were used in the anti-colonial and anti-imperial movements, the nationalist movements in the early part of the 20th century, does it make sense to use those kinds of tactics against a democratically elected government?

And the second question I was asked to address was how would another founding father who was also more or less a younger contemporary of Gandhi's—Dr. B. R. Ambedkar—how would he have looked upon the Anna Hazare phenomenon? Ambedkar was a very interesting figure, a very important leader and figure in the nationalist period and during the creation of the Indian nation-state. He was an Untouchable and became the leader of the Untouchable community. The Untouchables are sort of the lowest of the low in the Hindu caste system and have, for as far as anyone can tell, for centuries, really been oppressed and marginalized by upper castes, by the rich, by the elites, by every kind of powerful group on the Indian Subcontinent. So Ambedkar was the one to really modernize this community, give it a sense of modern political identity, and try to transform the basis of personhood and subjecthood in India from caste and from colonial subjectivity to citizenship, equal citizenship; he kind of introduced that idea.

He was a great juridical and legal mind and in fact was the chairman of the drafting committee that made the Indian Constitution, that wrote the Constitution of the Republic of India between 1946 and '49. India became independent in 1947, the constitution came into force in 1950 and Ambedkar was the man to kind of shepherd the constitution into its existence—although he didn't author it by himself by any means, there was an entire constituent assembly, which he led in many ways; he and many others, including [Jawaharlal] Nehru, who was the first prime minister. Gandhi died. Gandhi was assassinated before the constitution came into being. He was assassinated in early 1948. The constitution was promulgated in early 1950. And Ambedkar gave a famous speech right before the constitution went "live," as it were, in November 1949; he addressed the constituent assembly and basically what he, I mean he said many things but the interesting part, for our purposes, is that he said that yes, there had been a nationalist movement or set of movements and there

had been anti-colonial resistance and that the methods of resistance that had been used against the British Empire and British rule in India had served their purpose and were no longer relevant since India was now already an independent nation-state. And that now that India had given itself a constitution it needed to graduate into constitutional modes of dealing with social, political and economic problems. In other words, India needed to move from a kind of revolutionary mode into a sort of more procedural and state-led, institutional mode. And Ambedkar made that clear in his speech, in a way obliquely critiquing or perhaps even in a kind of final sense putting to rest the entire Gandhian revolution. And he called it, he called the set of Gandhian methods including civil disobedience and non-violent resistance and tactics like fasting and so on, he kind of grouped them together and referred to them as “the grammar of anarchy,” and now he wanted India to move into a mode that looked like law and order. So you see that kind of transition in mindset from an oppositional—from India and the Indians and Indian nationalists thinking of themselves as an oppositional force vis-à-vis a colonial state—to them becoming actually the leaders and makers of that state, becoming the establishment, as it were. And you see Ambedkar making that statement in his final closing speech to the constituent assembly when their business was all done.

So one of the things that I was asked to address in my pieces for this *New York Times* blog is if Gandhi, if Anna Hazare is a Gandhian, right, then what is the other legacy of incremental change, institutional change and constitutionally led transformation, that you can actually trace from Ambedkar in Indian politics and what relevance does that have in the present, if any? And can you then predict, I mean I didn't really go that far—just a couple of pieces I had to write, a few hundred words—but can you really predict you know this movement, the Anna Hazare movement, whether it can it have some kind of popular base and force, or whether it's basically anarchic in its nature . . .

So how would Dalits [Ambedkar's term for the Untouchables] basically react to the Anna movement? That is potentially one question to be asked, you know. And another way to approach that question is something that has been noted about the Anna movement or the Anna phenomenon and the popularity of this movement in 2011 is that most of its followers and advocates are from the middle class. So they're urban, educated, professional salaried, upper-caste, upper-class Indians in many ways. And a lot of the team that gathered around the figure of Anna Hazare and basically coordinated his public appearances, you know, spoke to the media, organized city-by-city campaigns—a lot of those people are actually former civil servants, people working in companies, sort of middle class, upper-class, salaried professionals, English-speaking, from the cities; not, you know, grassroots kind of folks.

So who can identify with that kind of leadership, right? Can people in the villages? Can Dalits? Can the poor? Can the non-urban populations, the disenfranchised populations, can they identify with this movement? And I frankly, I don't know what the answer is, because while this movement did seem to have a lot of energy, it

wasn't—I mean it had a particular demand and it has a particular demand which is the setting up of mechanisms to address widespread corruption, right? And its open-ended as to what the shape of those mechanisms actually will be. But, you know, the end was not to topple the government. And the government, in fact, seems to have survived the entire crisis, even through a session of parliament and what looked like some pretty hectic activity in July-August, that period. The current regime is still in place and looks like it will stay probably to the end of its term, until the next election. And you know it's not an insurmountable problem in terms of designing the right kind of institution, if there is indeed a national consensus that corruption has reached levels where it has to be addressed in some way that is over and above just your regular mechanisms of criminal justice and law and order and whatever other rules and regulations are in place in the running of the bureaucracy of the state. So you know there is that question as to what is really at stake, how widespread does this need to be, in fact, or can it - is it actually, basically, looking at a problem that can be solved provided policy-makers and, you know, some activists, some sort of alert citizens put their heads together.

Jon Sawyer: The whole Ambedkar strain of thought would say that now that colonial rule has been overthrown and we have a functioning democracy, there's no place for this type of movement—that these issues should be resolved within the norms of parliamentary procedure and so on. But there are many, many examples in the United States and other representative democracies of people taking extra-parliamentary action—whether it's Occupy Wall Street or the civil rights movement or the civil disobedience of Martin Luther King and other people, many of whom cited Gandhi along the way. And so why wouldn't there be space, as long as you're prepared to go to jail, to take the legal consequences of your extra-legal action, why wouldn't that be as effective today against a recalcitrant government as against colonial rulers?

AV: Actually, you know the Gandhian legacy is alive and well in India. And throughout the past six decades of independent self-rule and nationhood, there have been popular movements- some very famous ones being for example against the damming of the Narmada River, which is a river that flows through central India. And for years, a woman called Medha Patkar led a campaign called Save the Narmada campaign, which was basically all the people who lived along the river and would be affected by the damming of the river, and whose houses were going to be submerged and whose habitats and livelihoods were going to be affected by the changes in the architecture of the river and people were going to be displaced. And basically they used Gandhian methods. They would sit in. You know the waters would be about to rise in their village or their small town or their fields. Their houses would be on the verge of drowning and they would just sit and say "we are not going to move because you can't do this to us." Right. Medha Patkar has been many times herself on a hunger strike, a strike unto death, sometimes a fast unto death. I myself have seen her lying on a cot in central Delhi, which is a designated

area for popular protest, you know practically on her deathbed just about five years ago. And many people gathered around her, one of our former prime ministers, V.P. Singh, who is now dead; Arundathi Roy; many others, prominent and not so prominent activists and so on. And that's a Gandhian, a direct kind of Gandhian movement.

There have been others. For example, against deforestation in the Himalayan foothills, when they had a kind of tree-hugging movement, the *Chipko Andolan*. And these things go on in big and small ways throughout the Indian countryside because of, you know, the challenges and depredations, really, of certain kinds of capitalist modernity and technological development and now the coming of the market in such an aggressive way into Indian homes and ecosystems and, you know, into the political economy of this country . . . So you know, the Gandhian method is absolutely a part of the repertoire of politics in this country. It is well understood. It is routinely used. And it is used across classes and castes and regions and linguistic groups and religions in different parts of India. In the northeast, for example. Northeastern states in India have a very complicated relationship with the Indian state and are in many ways under kind of, you know, suspension of the rule of law and democratic rule, in a kind of limited military state – a state of emergency for the last 40 to 50 years. And a very prominent activist from Manipur, a woman called Irom Sharmila, has been on a hunger strike off and on for over 10 years to protest an imposition of something called The Armed Forces Special Powers Act in the northeast which actually prevents citizens from having a full set of democratic rights. It's unfortunate that her hunger strike has not struck the kind of chord that this anti-corruption strike on Anna's part did strike. Irom Sharmila has basically been starving and has been force-fed for over a decade, you know, and it seems not to have sort of caught the public imagination quite the same way as Anna was saying.

JS: Why has the Anna Hazare Movement struck a national chord at this moment in history when all of these other regional conflicts and low-level conflicts and protests haven't had the same impact, haven't galvanized the public in the same way? Why this moment? Why now?

AV: Well, I mean to answer one question, I think, you know, Gandhi's appeal was in fact to the poorest of the poor and to ordinary people and that's why Gandhi was so effective is because he really did manage to trigger a response in all kinds of people across the spectrum of wealth and poverty, and class and caste, and so on. Right? So if another leader arises who can do something of that order, then I think there is much to be learned from Gandhi. I mean, he spoke in a simple language. He dressed in a way that identified closely with the poor. He had a set of values that he tried to teach, including simplicity and poverty as virtues, actually. And everything he advocated was, in a certain sense, uncomplicated enough that anybody could do it. You didn't have to enter into complicated kinds of structures, organizations or modes of practice, in order to be a Gandhian. It's easy to be a Gandhian, because what Gandhi tells you to do has in many ways to do just with your own relationship

with your body, with your family, with your home, with your village, with your immediate community, with your immediate environment—where you can make a difference. So if somebody is able to be a Gandhian in that sense, as a leader, I think even all these years later, even at this moment in time, they can have the kind of popular appeal that Gandhi himself had.

JS: Is Anna in that tradition, authentically in that tradition of Gandhian practice?

AV: You know, many people say that he is. That's the short answer. That he is authentically in that tradition. Although one hasn't seen him or heard of him much, I would say, in the last twenty years or so. He seems to have been "doing his thing" at a very small scale, in his immediate village where he lives...

JS: Isn't that what Gandhi did for years at a time? In his Ashrams, focusing on very small communities?

AV: Yes, actually that was part of his theory of effective change—it was that "go local, stay rooted in your context, do what you can, where you can, where you live, where you have a community, where you have stakes—that's where you can bring about change," and if everybody starts doing that then that kind of incrementally adds up to global change. So in a way that is the right way to go, but the question is are you going to scale up from that, and is Anna Hazare the person, actually, to scale up? And is India looking for that kind of leader at the moment? Because the big difference is in Gandhi's time we didn't have representative democracy, we didn't have the vote, people weren't actually electing their leaders and their legislators on a district-by-district basis. Now they get to have that kind of outlet for their political choices and their political demands- so that's kind of routinized now. So over and above that, do you still need this kind of charismatic figure who is going to stand for something more than just whether your municipality is providing water and you have enough electricity, and your interests are being taken care of by the local party leader or whatever. What is that extra thing, what is that gap that somebody like Anna may/might/may not actually end up filling?

JS: Another point of comparison with Gandhi and another issue in terms of relevance to India as it exists today is this whole question of focus on "the village," and Anna, like Gandhi, puts great emphasis on the importance of "the village." And people staying in villages. We were talking to somebody this week and they were saying that one of the difficulties he's faced in his own town of Ralegan Sidhi is as the town became more prosperous, people became more aware of opportunities elsewhere. They are still leaving the village and he wants them to stay in the village. And in a globalized world and an industrializing India, is that message which is—that part of it, at least—a Gandhian message, is it relevant today?

AV: This goes back to your earlier question. Why today? Why did Anna Hazare come to the fore today? Why do we have an anti-corruption movement today? Why are these questions being asked today? I have a theory about that, which I don't know if it's right or wrong, but I think it's very interesting that the issue that's getting people all riled up is corruption. Because corruption is essentially an economic issue. And the main story, what is really the big thing that is going on in India right now involves a very dramatic shift in the direction of economic process.

What has changed in India in the last 20 years? That's the big story—that India has opened up to the market. India has made this right turn. It has tried to go the capitalist route, in however so limited a way, by some standards. And the story is a story of an aspiration for economic growth, an aspiration for becoming competitive in a rapid globalizing world, being something in the running with a force like China—that is the story. And so the questions of economic value, economic direction, wealth and poverty, development and constraints—that set of questions is what everybody is now thinking about, writing about, engaged with.

Seventy, 80 years ago the central question was a political question: Can we be a nation-state? Can we be an independent polity? Can we get rid of colonialism and imperial rule? Now the question is what is our economic model? It is the intended and unintended consequences of such drastic economic shifts that we see being played out in terms of social, political, and cultural responses and movements. So people are worried about corruption because such massive corruption is only now possible when there is such massive generation of wealth, in a way that hasn't actually gone on for a very long time in this country.

This country was the Mughal Empire in the 16th Century. The Mughal Emperor was the richest man in the world, but India was systematically impoverished through colonial rule, and ended up being one of the poorest countries in the world when it became an independent nation. And it has kind of lifted itself up from the bootstraps; is still very poor, is still not growing fast enough, but now has sort of landed itself in the middle of a slew of changes. The major one of which, really, is urbanization. We know that in the foreseeable future more of India's population will be urban than is going to be rural. Now that is a change in order that is unprecedented in the history of this part of the world. As you know, we have the second largest population; we are going to have the largest population in the world. And most of that population is very poor still, and is going to continue to be very poor. Economic inequality in a sense is exacerbated by economic growth. And if you're going to try to urbanize a population of 1.2 or 1.5 billion people without having the capacity to build those cities, to have that infrastructure without the natural resources, environmental resources, actually, to do that, and without necessarily the strategic relations and alliances in the region or in other countries in the world that allow you to prosper, then you are going to produce immense amounts of social conflicts. There is going to be more violence, there is going to be more struggle, and people are really going to have to speak up for their rights which are constantly being attenuated—if not by the state, since the state is now

withdrawing itself relative to the kind of socialist state that we had before in the 1990s, then those same rights are also under attack from transnational corporations and from Indian corporations and from economic forces that have an extractive stance vis-à-vis the people.

So the political process is going to have to compensate for the deleterious impact that a certain kind of economic growth has on people's rights. Is democracy sufficient to counter-balance this kind of aggressive capitalism in a country with so much social injustice and economic and social inequality? Or do you need "democracy plus"? And that's where you get these kinds of new movements and new formations. They also take other forms. They also take violent forms. Remember that in the last few years India has seen the sudden rise in Maoism and Naxalites, as it's called—sort of violent, anti-state action- guerilla action is called in this country- "Naxalite ideology." That is concomitant also with this new economic order. So whether violently or non-violently, whether in a Gandhian strain or more in a kind of revolutionary strain, I think a lot of populations are feeling the pressure. People want to urbanize because actually they are losing their livelihoods in the forests, in the villages, in the fields. The government is disinvesting and getting out of agriculture, whereas agriculture has been the mainstay of this country for forever.

And Gandhi's vision of being grounded, of India actually living in its villages, and agriculture being the base of everything, in the life of this country—that is in direct conflict with, that is directly contradicted by the decisions that have been taken in the last 20 years to move populations out of the villages into cities, cities that don't even exist before, to disinvest from agriculture and go into other kinds of secondary and tertiary forms of production: manufacture, service, what have you. Basically to have India stop being a land-based economy and turn it into some other kind of economy.

Those kinds of decisions are exactly the opposite of what Gandhi had in mind. So if somebody is going to come along and remind us that wait a minute, there was a time not so long ago that we honestly thought about going that route—and how are we ending up in a situation where we are further and further and further away from that vision.? And it's not as though by now Indians don't know the consequences, the environmental, ecological, social, and political consequences of a certain kind of neo-liberal economics. It is there to see in the economic ruin of America. It is there to see in the sort of totalitarian regime that you have in a place like China. It is there to see in the unrest in the Middle East . . .

JS: ...the fact that another similarity with Gandhi is the focus on "the self, and "self-rule," and personal behavior and, whether in the case of Gandhi it's celibacy or the roles of the community in the case of Gandhi himself cleaning the toilets and sort of that's very important in the community. The emphasis in the case of Anna and in Ralegan Sidhi, his town, on the collective volunteering activities for everybody—on trying to eradicate alcohol, say,

imposing his values on people, and part of that is the power of example and part of it is, depending on your point of view, it's oppressive- telling you how you should behave.

AV: Well there's two things to be said about that. I mean, the Gandhian carigree, the word used by Gandhi and others in his time since is Swaraj—in which “Swa” means “self” and “Raj” means “rule” (which is how you get British Raj), so “Swaraj” means “self-rule.” And you can define that “self” narrowly or broadly. So it's a question of mastering, of achieving rule, or achieving sovereignty over a self, but how you define that “self” is up for interpretation and discussion. And for Gandhi, since he had a fairly integrated approach, you really did begin with your individual self. And that's where certain practices like celibacy and chastity and cleanliness and all kinds of things to do with diet and dress and sexual behavior and so on—the field for that is the personal self. And that's where you have these ideas of self-discipline, which are almost religious in character—or which are most easily recognized actually when you look at religious practices of various kinds.

But that self can be expanded, like a set of concentric circles to include your family, your immediate community, your village, and ultimately your people. And practices of the self can also be widened as you go along building a broader and broader conception of what constitutes your own or your self and that's a very different way of thinking about a political basis for nationhood than some idea of basically self-interest, enlightened self-interest, or the pursuit of happiness, or the monopoly on violence. So the Gandhian basis for collectivity and for political collectivity is this notion of the “self.” And the practices governing that “self” are essentially moral practices. They are not economic practices and they are not practices of force. Or rather, they are practices of “soul” force, as he calls it, and not of brute force. Which is why non-violence becomes such a central value for Gandhi, which is the exact opposite of the kind of Hobbesian state, which is based on the idea of the monopoly of violence. So when you put morality or moral force or “soul force” at the heart of your politics then yes, some people are going to read that as basically being didactic or even in a sense fundamentalist, or almost bordering on the theocratic—on the order of how religion conceives of human subjectivity rather than how politics conceives of human subjectivity. But you know that is the reality of what Gandhian ideas are about. You cannot take the morality out of Gandhi and still have Gandhi...

AV: This is something that Lloyd and Susanne Rudolph wrote about in the '60s. They described Gandhi in terms of the traditional roots of his charisma and they talked about chastity being a source of political potency, which is a long tradition in India. In that sense Gandhi is tapping into well-understood and deeply embedded ideas of what constitutes “true power.”

In many ways, a lot of Indian theories, and some of them are coming out of religious discourses and some are not, but Indian theories of what constitutes “true power” have to do with a moral self-mastery, the cultivation of moral values and virtues and not with the pursuit of either material gain or wealth or military or material power

of these kinds. The truest strength lies in the cultivation of the virtues and the mastery of the “self,” because the “self” is the source of the passions which ultimately result in wars and mayhem and destruction and greed and so on and so forth. So that vocabulary is very old, it is culturally well understood, and Gandhi was wise to activate and tap into and utilize it—to construct a form of politics that people could comprehend and relate to. They were already always kind of schooled in it on account of being Indians, in some cultural sense.

So if Anna is able to ring those same bells, or resonate on those same sort of frequencies, then I don’t see any reason why he would not be successful. And going back to the question of whether the poor or the Dalits can relate to a middle-class movement, it should be remembered that the entire nationalist leadership in the 1920s, ‘30s, and 40s consisted of highly elite, westernized, cosmopolitan, English-speaking, British-educated men and women. It’s not as though there was a problem for people identifying with someone like Gandhi, even though he himself was not from a poor family or not from a backward background or anything like that. I mean, he was from one of the three upper castes and he was educated in England, and a lawyer. Of course he had to go a distance. He had to remove his western attire, don the garb of a peasant. He had to stop speaking and writing in English and start speaking and writing in Gujarati and Hindi. He walked the length of the country on foot. He travelled everywhere. He went into the villages. And even an aristocrat like Nehru did that. You know, travelled thousands and thousands of miles, actually meeting people in every village. And these people made it possible for India to become a democracy.

I mean, who could have said, really, even up to the mid-1940s it wasn’t clear, that a country that had been feudal and monarchical, and on top of that colonized, and had a caste system, and had all kinds of racial politics on account of colonial rule, that this country would awake the next morning in August 1947 a full-scaled democracy with universal adult franchise? We had universal adult franchise, which means men and women get to vote, long before many other democracies. Even in America it was a staggered arrival at the “universal” vote. There were constituencies of people who couldn’t vote up until a certain point. Women couldn’t vote, blacks couldn’t vote, people without property couldn’t vote. In India we got going from the get-go with universal adult franchise. And you know, many historians have written about this: Ramachandra Guha wrote about this . . . It was kind of a miracle and the fact that this has worked for decades continues to be a surprising thing.

But you know we’ve also reached a point where just because people have the vote doesn’t mean that in fact the state is taking care of them, that the state is responsive, that the political process is working efficiently, that there isn’t great inequality and great injustice. So it’s not enough to be the world’s largest democracy, you actually have to deliver what democracy promises. And if you’re not going to deliver that then people are going to find ways to speak up and speak out. And I think that in this country we had a pretty thorough schooling in protest and dissent from the 1880s to the 1950s. And it’s fine, two or three generations have passed, but our parents

and grandparents were in the national movement, and it's not clear to me that those legacies have simply vanished or that we're so depoliticized and so demobilized and so unaware and so quiescent on account of economic sops that if there isn't—that if there is widespread inefficiency or malpractice or corruption or injustice that people are not going to find ways to speak up against it. I think they will.

And I think they will precisely draw on all these legacies—on the Gandhian legacy but also the Ambedkarite legacy because it's not that Ambedkar's achievement was any less. There's one way to present him as a status quo'ist and a constitutionalist in the bad sense—as in trying to dampen revolutionary forces within society. But that's not actually who Ambedkar was. Ambedkar made it possible for this country be rid of Untouchability. Ambedkar and Gandhi together both came at the problem of Untouchability, which is the worst form of social inequality imaginable in this part of the world. And it became unconstitutional and illegal, thanks to Ambedkar's efforts. He made a modern community and he made a political identity out of the untouchables, and made it possible for them to refashion themselves as Dalits. So that is no mean achievement. And those energies are also alive and well, I think, within the body politic. As you can see the largest state of India, Uttar Pradesh, now has a Dalit woman as its chief minister. Again, you know she may be corrupt and this and that. But how did she even get there? This is inconceivable even 50 years ago—it was completely inconceivable to have a figure like this [Mayawati] and that she should be in power in the largest, politically the most important state in this country.

I think our democratic impulses, the quest for justice, the quest for true equality—these legacies are there, these forces are active. Whether they bubble up into a kind of—I'm mixing metaphors here—but whether there's a tipping point or whether there's a kind of boiling point, that remains to be seen. And the debate about violence and non-violence, and non-violent forms and violent forms of dissent, is also a living one. But I do think that India has a better chance actually at solving these sorts of problems than many other countries in the world, because we have been dealing with these sorts of problems for at least a century now. There is no dearth of people who know this, who have lived this, who have experienced this, who think and write about it. And unlike Chinese intellectuals, we're not in a position in this country where we can't speak up. We do have a press; we do have freedom in it. Whatever you might say about our media, you know, it's huge. And at the end of the day it is a democracy. So I think that, I mean, I'm not pessimistic. But I think there does need to be some degree of introspection and soul-searching, and some return to the lessons of history, you know, as we go forward into the future with an understanding that what we are facing is a new set of challenges, occasioned by the coming of neo-liberal economics to India. And if we can foresee—and we surely can—what its effects could possibly be, then we need to be cognizant of that and to act accordingly and not recklessly destroy our forests, and kill off our tribal populations, and mine the hell out of our earth, and sell off our country to corporations. That's not the way to go. And I think there are enough people who know that.

JS: Is it likely in your view that six months from now, a year from now, that the Anna Hazare movement will be seen as a success? If you think yes then why-what are the reasons for that? And if not, why in your view is it likely to fail?

AV: You know, frankly, I don't know. I don't know. There has been a slew of new laws and new legislation in the last five or 10 years; a lot of these laws are very progressive and very good. You have this Right to Information Law, you have the National Rule and Employment Guarantee Law, laws related to homosexuality, to women's rights, to communal violence, and to minority rights, which are [in process] or have recently put into place. And as I understand, there's been a lot of debate and a lot of compromise and consensus around formulating the architecture for these laws. So it's not clear why anybody should expect that a law against graft and corruption, or a law creating a new kind of ombudsman is not possible to make.

You know there's a lot going on in policy and legislation and the legal sphere. And this could be one more thing that needs to get put into place. And I mean I'm not a legal expert but intuitively I don't see why this is an impossible thing to solve. And there certainly have been enough scandals and exposes in the last 12 months to occasion a good hard look at corruption. So in that sense I think Anna's demand should be successful. I don't see why it won't be. Unless everybody across the board, in the government and in every other political party is so thoroughly fiscally compromised and so corrupt that basically no one can pull the carpet out from anybody else's feet. How could that be? No matter how deep the rot, I can't imagine that in the end the government will not feel the pressure to actually institute some basic structure of this kind that has some resemblance to what the movement is asking for.

As far as predicting the future, a hundred years ago Gandhi wrote *Hind Swaraj*, in 1909 . . . Even at the time he was saying—that text is very hard to read because it's almost prophetic, and remember he is writing before the First World War, before the atom bomb. He's writing before anything actually that we recognize as modern technology in the modern world, and he's still saying things like "I really don't know if railroads are a good idea" or "I have my doubts about the modern legal profession, about modern medicine" or "I question speed as a value." "I'm not sure about auto mobility and vehicles," he says. "A man should walk." He was saying that a hundred years ago. Basically he's foreseeing the direction that a certain kind of technological modernity is taking, a certain kind of capitalism that is coming, and it has taken a hundred years in a sense to actually come to India, although Nehru was a great proponent of certain kinds of development in the 1950s and '60s but it has still taken a hundred years for India to finally make this decision.

So Gandhi's impressions and his warnings are as relevant today as they were a hundred years ago. The reason he's been taken up by the Civil Rights Movement or by the Green and ecological movements and other kinds of non-Indian movements

in different parts of the world is because those kernels of predicting a certain kind of future are already there in his thinking a hundred years ago. And I think the time is coming for India to heed Gandhi in a way that it hasn't necessarily done. He was put on the backburner for a really long time by the mainstream, by the people who actually rule this country—even though it was the Congress Party, the organ of the Nationalist Movement that drove independence, that has been in power for the most part since. The Congress Party itself has distanced itself from its Gandhian heritage, which is why Gandhi now reappears as a force of opposition.

JS: So apart from everything else, bringing Gandhi back to the front burner is a very useful thing?

AV: Absolutely, I think it's not only useful but its necessary. It's almost inevitable. Here is somebody who foresaw our current condition and who still has something to tell us about our own future. And we need to listen to him.