



Holier than cow

Shekhar Gupta Posted online: Sat Oct 22 2011, 02:12 hrs

In Vishal Bhardwaj's *Ishqiya*, the most adorable uncle-nephew pair of tramps (played brilliantly by Naseeruddin Shah and Arshad Warsi) is vying for the affections of Vidya Balan, apparently a widow whose eyelashes never cease to flutter. The "uncle" catches Warsi and Balan in what police press handouts would usually describe as a compromising position. Hurt and indignant, he accuses the nephew of indulging in cheap, lusty behaviour. There is a quick and devastating comeback from Arshad Warsi, who says to uncle Naseer: "Tumhara ishq ishq, aur humara ishq sex!" Devastating, indeed, as it questions a senior's moralistic hypocrisy where you set one standard for yourself, and another for the rest. But why are we recalling that exchange today?

Now go over what we have been hearing from several members of Team Anna as questions have been raised about their own past. One lot has been found getting very, very sexy farmhouse properties at very, very, very lucrative prices from Mayawati's government in a totally discretionary, and non-transparent, "allotment". Remember, it is an "allotment", not even a lottery, or first-come-first-served. Their defence: yes, indeed, it looks rather unusual, and if somebody goes to court questioning these allotments he may have a good case. But that doesn't mean we will be returning these since we did no wrong.

Now please allow me the licence to translate that into simpler English: Mayawati was distributing these plots on some unknown and undisclosed criteria which look legally dodgy, but if I benefited in the process, why should I complain? If you have a problem, you go to the courts.

Now what if some of the beneficiaries in the Adarsh Housing society scam had used the same argument? They would have been called thieves and hypocrites, and charged with compounding their own original crime. So what would be pristine, charming, innocent love from a lonely uncle would be straightforward lust from a randy nephew.

Let's explore this further. Another member of Team Anna overstays his leave from his government job, flunks his employment bond, and is asked to pay back what is due to the government as per the law and procedure; it is still only Rs 9 lakh or so. And what is the answer? It is not that the government's claim is fake or even vindictive. It is just that, what do my former employers (the Central government in this case) think I was doing? Was I whiling away my time? I was campaigning for the RTI, which is so important for my countrymen. So even if I did not come to work meanwhile, or was effectively AWOL, the government should have the good sense to waive all claims on me. Waive all claims? Use discretion? Didn't you think this entire campaign was about curtailing discretion, ensuring rules are followed fully and no exceptions are made? And what if lakhs of absentee teachers in our government schools, who the Jan Lokpal is expected to straighten, find similar excuses?

Which leads us nicely to the more current story, involving so far the most respected and certainly most dramatically visible face of the Anna movement, who has been caught fudging her travel bills variously. Various because she has

travelled economy but claimed business, travelled for one host but asked two to pay for the same flight, travelled on deep-discounted tickets and claimed full fare. And here is her defence, variously: none of this money came to me; it came to my NGO which does such wonderful work. I only suffered the discomfort of economy-class travel to save money for my noble cause. That it is sinful to even attribute any corruption to me. Some of the explanation, in fact, has been more colourful. What if somebody invited me home and offered non-veg and veg food and I ate only vegetarian? This is where she starts running into problems.

No harm if you ate only vegetarian. But was it okay if you took your share of the non-vegetarian food home, irrespective of who you gave it to? And would it still be a kosher deal if you knew that this entire meal, veg and non-veg, had been funded by the taxpayer? Gets dodgy now, no?

Let me explain how. The angry and desperate defence unleashed by Team Anna following the expose by Assistant Editor Ajmer Singh in this newspaper on Thursday morning focuses entirely on the business/ economy-class issue. All that she did, the argument goes, was a non-violent, clever equivalent of Robin Hood. But what about the tickets bought at 75 per cent "gallantry award" discount from Indian Airlines and Air India and billed to her hosts at full price? Every paisa of these discounts on these fully state-owned and near-bankrupt airlines is paid for by the taxpayer. So, in this case, you vacuum-clean the tax rupees I, the honest taxpayer, offer you in my gratitude for your gallantry, and you divert them to your own gain, even if it is your own non-profit charity. Playing Robin Hood with money coming straight out of the Consolidated Fund of India? Maybe we do need that Jan Lokpal, after all. Would have been interesting to see how they would have dealt with something like this. And what if a political leader facing corruption charges tomorrow, like Rajiv Gandhi on Bofors or A. Raja on telecom, said hey, there was no personal gain here, I was only giving it to the party. Or Kanimozhi asked why are you raising such "silly and sinful" questions about money that has after all gone to her NGO, and whose accounts are audited? You will run into that same uncle-nephew, Arshad Warsi-Naseeruddin Shah, love-and-just equation.

Please note that at least we haven't yet committed the "sin" of calling somebody corrupt or even stupid. Because this argument is about arrogance and hypocrisy and not about greed or corruption. I would, in fact, go so far as to say that even if somebody came to me and said that he saw with his own eyes any of these members of Team Anna taking a bribe, I would question his sanity. They are victims of their own, unthinking, I-am-a-legend-in-my-own-eyes-so-how-could-I-have-ever-done-any-wrong arrogance. They set an impossible standard for others in the system, but fail to check if they have themselves fully lived up to it, because now they are exposed to the public gaze and will be fully, brutally tested against it. It is useful to recall former Supreme Court Chief Justice J.S. Verma's brilliant line when I once asked him if it was possible for an individual to change the system, build an institution. "It is possible," he said, "but you must have no past, and you must have no expectations in the future." Members of the now disintegrating Team Anna would do well to check if they pass this test.

The truth is that members of Team Anna are, individually, decent, well-meaning people. But the politics they have constructed is dangerously faulty, and the basic premise it is built on carries the trigger for self-destruction. They have built a highly personalised campaign, basically as if these 790 members of Parliament were responsible for all that is rotten with India. Unless their own past was perfect even by the impossibly high standards they have set for the rest of us, they should have expected a vicious fightback. Enough evidence has now surfaced that this Team Anna is no Team Gandhi. The more outrage it shows in its defence, the more hollow it sounds. The price, indeed, for holier-than-cow arrogance, hypocrisy and hubris.

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