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COVER STORY

ANNA-MORPHOSIS

The Kejriwal Conundrum

Arvind Kejriwal had tapped into a crucial anger. As chief architect of the Anna Hazare anti-corruption movement, he could have leveraged real change despite political resistance. **Revati Laul** assesses what his sudden change of course means



Photo: Shailendra Pandey

PERHAPS IDEALISM, conscience and a keen sense of righteous rage are not enough. Perhaps intransigent ego — even a modicum of megalomania, a small zone of blindness — are necessary traits in a would be revolutionary. How else can one make the leap and believe powerful vested structures can be overthrown overnight and supplanted with one's own?

At THINK — TEHELKA's event in Goa — last year, there was one man international guests like *The New York Times* columnist Tom Freidman and astronomer Mike Brown wanted to meet more than any other. A short, stout, earnest man in trademark loose grey pants and chequered shirt. And an even more trademarked earnest face. A man around whom zealous crowds had swelled last year, teeming seas of humanity, shouting anti-corruption slogans in 'I'm Anna' caps. All along though, it was clear to everyone that the real face of the India Against Corruption (IAC) movement wasn't Anna Hazare. It was Arvind Kejriwal. Anna was the mascot. Arvind was the architect.

In cruel contrast, in July this year at Jantar Mantar in New Delhi, Arvind the architect was no longer the most sought-after man. As he sat on an indefinite fast from 25 July, a reluctant media, tired from last year's breathless coverage, turned up in a tepid trickle.

Cameras dangled searchingly from cranes to reveal pockmarked aerial shots of much thinner crowds. Critics pronounced the Anna movement as last year's story. Until halfway through the fast, it didn't even make the headlines. Arvind, diabetic and weak, was losing weight and his health rapidly. Then the weekend was upon him. Anna joined the fast. Even so, a sceptical media continued to ask: if the Lokpal Bill wasn't the agenda this time, what was the fast really about?

Arvind said it was to get the UPA government to set up a special investigation team against 15 Cabinet ministers whom Team Anna had accused of corruption. This did

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not quite meet the eye. Why would a government that had spent all of 2011 playing combat games with Anna and Arvind over the Lokpal Bill now give in to demands that even affiliates saw as mere posture? That too under pressure from a team whose previous fast in December 2011 had been a complete washout? As one hard day of fasting rolled into the next, even Arvind sounded like he expected nothing to happen. So, as he kept reiterating his favourite line at Jantar Mantar that he had no faith in the government, the question that kept surfacing on the same TV screens that had propped up the movement in the previous year was: what on earth was the point? On the other side of the split screens, smug politicians said to cameras — “Let them do what they want.”

And then, sure enough, something did happen that forced the TV cameras back into position. In a masterstroke that enabled him to save his face and end his nine-day fast and Anna his five-day one, Arvind announced that the IAC crusade was now going to morph into a political party. Some called it the death of India's most watched anti-corruption movement. Others said it gave it fresh blood. Arvind and his co-strategist Prashant Bhushan termed it as total revolution. Anna ambiguously blotted his displeasure. And two days later, disbanded his team.

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So, what really had happened? Why had the crowds fallen away from Arvind in the past few months? Was this round of fasts a premeditated exercise to moul a skin that no longer fit? What changed in one day, and how, is not just a straightforward story of the Anna Hazare movement in a new bottle. It's a

complex and paradoxical account of the inner workings of one man. Arvind. And his ability to conjure a crowd from a consumer class and a party from a people's movement.

FOR ALL his purist rhetoric, a great irony that dogs Arvind Kejriwal is that, in many ways, he exactly mirrors the qualities he criticises in the political class. He is a canny strategist: that is what helped him build one of the most high-visibility movements in recent Indian history. But for all his talk of extreme transparencies, virtuous processes and absolute truths, he can be very expedient and fluid with the truth himself. And consensus building is clearly not his strength. This is what made him blow the movement he had built.

Arvind's sudden decision to float a political party has scattered the IAC, dismayed many of its core members, and brought simmering frictions into the open. According to Arvind, the idea of sitting on a door-die fast this time had a dual purpose. “It exposed the government's injustice in the eyes of the public and also prepared the public for the next stage of the battle.” What was this next stage? Was the decision to turn the movement into a political party then taken much before the fast and not spurred by popular demand as he had claimed at Jantar Mantar? Was the fast merely a stage prop constructed to provide the backdrop needed to announce his party? “Not at all,” says Arvind vehemently. “It was not planned from before.”

But several IAC core committee members have a different story. Activist Akhil Gogoi, one such member, says the idea of going political was seriously discussed at a meeting on 22 April, three months before Arvind's latest fast. “I opposed it. At least five other core committee members agreed with me. Then there was a second core committee meeting where this was decided. I wasn't present and wasn't asked.”

Justice Santosh Hegde, another key Team Anna member, also admits he was against starting a party and was not consulted about the decision. “I cannot tell you how much I regret the disbanding of this movement. The Lokpal Bill that is under consideration in Parliament is not everything we wanted, but it was 70 percent there. We could have accepted it and slowly built pressure to amend it bit by bit. But I think some psephologist told them that there is an Anna wave in the air, so you can win if you float a party.”

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Perhaps Gogoi and Hegde were genuinely outvoted by other team members but what their statements confirm is that the proposal to form a political party did not unfurl entirely as Arvind pronounced at Jantar Mantar. It also raises another important question. If forming a party was being considered as far back as April, why was this not shared with “the people” Arvind claims he works on behalf of?

It's a question many disgruntled core committee members are asking. Devinder Sharma, a veteran grassroots activist, in fact, goes a step further. He says Arvind paradoxically has a lot in common with Sonia Gandhi, his key adversary, in how he runs his team. Sharma says he had dived into the Arvind crusade with great enthusiasm only to find that “here too, it's only the high command that decides”. High command: The words are intended to sting Arvind, who has often shrilly denounced the Congress' top-down style of functioning and claimed the IAC has no such power structure and is driven purely “by the people's will”.

The sudden decision to float a party has scattered the IAC, dismayed many of its core members, and brought simmering frictions into the open

Is Arvind the crusader and anarchist then most well suited really to be a politician? Insight comes from a fourth core committee member. Sunita Godara, sportsperson and activist, and winner of the Asian Marathon in 1992. In 2010, when Arvind was looking for a suitable sportsperson to file a PIL on corruption in the Commonwealth Games,

Godara came handy. “Inclination towards a mainstream political formation was there for the past six months,” says Godara. By her reckoning, the idea was Shanti Bhushan's, former Union law minister and Prashant's father. “Shantiji always used to say, till when will we keep fighting like this? If they are not changing the system, we will have to get into the system to fight.” Arvind puts this down to “various discussions” the team had, part of the “churning process”. However, he insists the decision to go political was finally taken only on 1 August.

But even on that day, according to Godara, the crucial decision was taken only by a few. “It was clear that only a select lot — two or three people — will decide whether we go political or not,” she said.

Arvind rebuts these accounts, placing the onus of the decision to go political on Anna and narrating with standard polemic why things unfolded the way they did. “The government was not passing the Jan Lokpal Bill,” he says, “because there are 15 ministers in the Cabinet with serious allegations of corruption against them.” In the meantime, Anna had got some damning feedback that people were saying they still had faith in the movement's leadership but had lost faith in the movement. People were asking, what was the point of a fast? “When hope dies, people stop coming out on the streets,” explains Arvind.

For all his purist rhetoric, a great irony that dogs Kejriwal is that, in many ways, he mirrors the very qualities he criticises in the Indian political class

Amidst this pall of despondency, came the letter signed by 23 eminent citizens, including political scientist Yogendra Yadav, former army chief Gen VK Singh, former Chief Election Commissioner JM Lyngdoh and journalist Kuldip Nayar asking for the fast to be called off. This letter, suggesting that Team Anna come up with an alternative

form of politics, was projected as the main catalyst.

A message went out via TV channels to Arvind's largely TV audience. Twenty-four hours later, a Zee News poll came back with a verdict he had hoped for: 96 percent in favour of a political alternative. It didn't seem to matter that by “a political alternative”, these eminent citizens weren't necessarily suggesting Team Anna transform themselves into a political party.

Nayar, in fact, told TEHELKA, “This has completely shifted the goalposts away from

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what they were fighting for until now — a strong anti-corruption Lokpal Bill.” Nayar added further that the team would need to go to the masses and build itself patiently bottom up instead of what it is now — top down. But Arvind wasn't interested in the fine print. At 5 pm on 2 August, he sipped a glass of coconut water, broke his fast and announced the formation of a political party. A seemingly disastrous situation had been turned by him into the springboard for his next big step.



Focal point Arvind Kejriwal holds an early morning meeting during Anna Hazare's fast at the Ramlila Maidan in Delhi in August 2011

Photo: Shailendra Pandey

Devinder Sharma blogged that this decision was a “death warrant for social movements”. But Arvind says without a trace of self-reflective irony: “You see, the core committee is not important. The people of this country are.”

As the announcement broke on the networks, many of the 2,000-odd volunteers in the IAC team were deeply crestfallen. Suddenly, without warning, all their goalposts had shifted. For a year-and-a-half, Arvind had made the Jan Lokpal Bill seem the most redemptive tool in Indian public life, but having gained serious momentum, he didn't seem to have the patience to fight it through. For a year-and-a-half too, he had mocked the government and spoken headily about a new democratic form of functioning — where supra complex decisions would be made only with feedback from the people, and websites would solicit consultations.

Now suddenly, from Bhagat Singhs and Che Guevaras, without being told, were they all to become part of something that would one day look like the establishment? The IAC movement had been built on the backs of many people. Were they to be disbanded without even a *jan sunwayi*? Arvind and Prashant had to gather volunteers in a quick damage-control meeting. Insiders say it has had mixed results.

If forming a party was being considered as far back as April, why was this not shared with ‘the people’ Arvind claims he works on behalf of?

But disgruntlement among some IAC volunteers had begun to kick in even before this announcement. One of them, Shivendra Singh Chauhan, wrote his list of woes to Arvind; the letter was leaked to the media. The gist of Chauhan's grouse was that he had been happy to work back-breaking hours

to create IAC's Facebook page, but over time, it had become subject to an increasingly centralised style of functioning. Another disgruntled volunteer told TEHELKA they had wanted Arvind to set up an effective grievance redressal system within the movement itself. “We wanted to know how the core team was being chosen,” says the volunteer. “And why the donations and funds received from October

2011 onwards were not up on the website yet? But, the more questions we raised, the more difficult it became for us to function.”



Mastermind Kejriwal is a canny strategist who has succeeded in drawing support from both mass leaders and disgruntled people from across India

Photos: (L To R) Shailendra Pandey, Tarun Sehrawat

The story of Arvind then seems to be the story of double gyres: the capacity for creative energy, expansion and decline all locked into the same diagram. Over all of the past year, Arvind was able to whip up a public storm like few others in recent times. He was also able to corner the government into promising and tabling the Lokpal Bill. Yet, he seemed incapable of spotting “the peaking moment”, beyond which things can only go downhill. When the Lokpal Bill was passed by the Lok Sabha, he could have urged his co-team to claim a victory, short of the absolutes, and build on it. It would have given people hope, a second wind. But by insisting on his maximalist positions, Arvind seems to have lost the entire movement. It's not a loss that is his alone. For many Indians who believed in him and his extravagant promises, he has just made it more difficult to believe again. A new party may be birthed. But the infant movement is dead.

TO FOCUS only on the decline of the IAC, however, would be to flatten a very complex picture. Over 14 months and four fasts, Arvind repeatedly managed to draw crowds from what many derisively call the unthinking middle class. How did he do this? What pulse did he catch?

Sunita Godara describes Arvind's earnest anger management on stage. She says he mesmerised people with lines such as “Are we going to trust MPs who lie and steal our money?” While on a campaign across Haryana with Arvind in July this year, she said even in a small town like Bhiwani, there were more than 5,000 people waiting after 8 pm just to listen to him.

It's this ability to channel a sort of collective catharsis for people's frustration that made a beat constable come up to Arvind in August last year and say, “I have been taking bribes for the past 16 years. But in the past 10 days, I haven't taken a single bribe. And I have never experienced such bliss before.” It also made a car thief return a stolen car this year with a note saying: “This car had Anna posters on it. I don't want it. I'm sending it back.”

With his earnest, unyielding zeal, that is what Arvind most was: a figure of hope. Yogendra Yadav has called himself a friend of the movement for precisely these reasons. He said the tenacity and positive energy of the movement was a force to reckon with. Later, reacting to criticism levelled at the movement, he said in the *Indian Express*, “In a choice between two less than pure sides, I prefer the protesters' infirmities to the rulers' intransigence.”

Abhinandan Sekhri, a friend and a fellow traveller in the IAC, explains Arvind's charm. “The clarity with which he speaks and his ability to simplify issues of governance sets him apart from the policy wonks.”

This is what makes the story of Arvind and what he's brought to the theatre of political and social movements in the country most interesting. (And most riddled with

paradox.) He tried to awaken political consciousness in a class that doesn't care. It's a class the Congress, with its focus on the common man, has traditionally ignored. A class that the BJP, in forcing into the Hindutva right-wing box, has also managed to alienate many sections of. Many argue the political potential of this liberal middle class is a space that was almost completely ignored till the IAC movement. Intuitively, Arvind seems to have cracked how to speak to them: not for them the slow dialogues of democracy: street action here had to be accusatory, instant, high on spectacle and emotion. And short-lived. Basically, a vent for anger. But trading on their impatience, Arvind was also trapped by it. When you sell instant and miraculous change overnight, two years can seem a galactic age.

For many Indians who believed in him, he has just made it more difficult to believe again. A new party may be birthed. But the infant movement is dead

Arvind was not always an impatient man. But growing up in Hisar, Haryana, in the 1970s and '80s — in the era of Amitabh Bachchan's angry young man — Arvind has always understood the power of anger. An honest taxman in the Indian Revenue Service (IRS), his own anger and frustration with the system kept building up. In 1999, with no

alternative in sight, he started an NGO called Parivartan that began by sorting out people's tax problems. Amongst the hundreds of cases Arvind looked at was an old woman who hadn't got a tax refund since 1978. In 2000, finding it difficult to juggle his job with his activism, Arvind took a long sabbatical. Parivartan expanded its role from taxes to municipal problems and adopted two slum resettlement colonies — Sundernagari and Seemapuri in West Delhi.

Post-2002, Arvind began to use RTI for much of his social and political action. Though they now walk very divergent paths, Arvind acknowledges Aruna Roy as his most significant mentor. Having won the Magsaysay Award in 2006, Arvind used the money to start yet another NGO — Public Cause Research Foundation. In the same year, he formally resigned from the IRS to plunge into a full-time career as an activist.

Manish Sisodia, a key IAC member, who joined Arvind in 1999 to set up Parivartan, describes him as an obsessive worker, waking at 2 am to make notes and redraft policy. By now, a decade of wrestling with the system had made Arvind restless. He was waiting for his *Rang De Basanti* moment. 2010-11 brought exactly the canvas he needed. It was the year of scams. The CWG scam; the 2G scam; the Adarsh Housing Society scam; the Bellary mining scam.

Arvind, however, recognised that to launch a large-scale agitation against corruption he would need many things. Unlike other social movements built on communities linked through common causes of livelihood or gender, here there was no clear impact group. He needed symbols, glue, amplifiers. This is when he thought of approaching Anna Hazare — aware that, at least in his optics, he would resonate for middle-class Indians as a sort of modern-day Gandhi. But how could he ensure people would turn up?

Arvind went to people he knew could mobilise huge masses. Baba Ramdev and Sri Sri Ravi Shankar. For purists from social movements, this seemed heresy, and allying with them has often made the IAC look like moral contortionists. But Vijay Pratap, a political activist who has known Arvind for a decade, believes it's with this out-of-the-box thinking that Arvind really scores. His success stems from his capacity to have a brilliant strategy without an overarching ideology. What Yogendra Yadav characterised in an interview to TEHELKA, as "the politics of anti-politics".



New rules With Anna staying away from the political party, Kejriwal will have his task cut out

Photo: AP

No one, not even Arvind, expected this to work on the scale it did. Or for people with such disparate political beliefs to be able to come together and stay together. Prashant Bhushan from the political left, Arvind who many see as liberal. Kiran Bedi who some see as liberal right.

Possibly, this is why the draft Jan Lokpal Bill the team came up with also seemed so full of contradictions. It spoke to the left liberal when it recommended that grievances should be sorted out at the local level through a decentralised system. At the same time, it also sounded decidedly centre- right in recommending that the Lokpal be an overarching institution checking corruption at every level. It's also the reason why the IAC could not build consensus amongst civil society groups.

Arvind clarifies that the movement against corruption will continue alongside building a party. But the stakes for him just got much higher

Many veteran grassroots leaders are extremely critical of this. PV Rajgopal, a land reforms activist, joined the IAC core committee in April 2011. He says since the movement was chiefly propped up by the middle class, he'd joined in to make sure the campaign could be sustained even if middle

class interest waned. But the flipside, according to Rajgopal, was also a middle- class malaise. Arvind was a man in a hurry. From day one, the IAC movement was ratcheted up in volume, promises, expectation and assault. Social movements can't be run like that, Rajgopal explains. They take time and unfold slowly. If they are to overturn old, well-set systems, it must have patience and the moral muscle of a long-distance runner. Since Arvind had built his movement like instant noodles on short-term goals and expectations, it was almost inevitable that it would falter. When Rajgopal saw the first signs of the movement taking sides in party politics — in their anti-Congress campaign in the Hisar by-election, he bowed out of it.

Others like Madhuresh Kumar of the National Alliance for People's Movements say the crossroads Arvind has brought his movement to could either boost grassroots movements, help them occupy more space in the political mainstream, or it could serve as a warning of where not to tread.

Many, like Medha Patkar, have also pointed out that the success of social movements cannot be measured through short-term goals like the ones IAC set for itself: "Give us the Lokpal Bill of our choice in the next 10 days or else..." The Narmada Bachao Andolan, for instance, got 11,000 displaced people settled, another 40,000 are still waiting. Meanwhile, the movement has changed the discourse on land reforms and

people's struggles on the whole.

Nikhil Dey, another rights activist, points out that, in his stridency, Arvind seems blind to the success his campaign against corruption has already had. Its constant pressure on the UPA has brought the battle for transparency and accountability forward; the Grievance Redressal Bill is now with a Standing Committee in Parliament. So is the Whistleblowers' Protection Bill. A little more sustained pressure would also probably yield a strong Lokpal Bill.

But Arvind's failure and success are inextricably bound. Having tuned himself so loud, he is unable to back down. He cannot seem to accept that no Bill can get passed without building some degree of political consensus. That persuasion must be as much a strategy as accusation. He cannot seem to see that in August last year, and in December and now, as the Parliament sits in the monsoon session, opportunities to leverage what he has already won have been lost.

What choice did we have, Arvind counters. "It's wrong to say we should not be result-oriented. If we had continued in the same manner as many other NGOs, we'd be running the movement for the sake of the movement." He clarifies that the movement against corruption will continue alongside building a party. But the stakes for Arvind just got much higher than the do-or-die predicament he put himself in at Jantar Mantar in July.

As he kills his avatar of the anarchist to try and be ruler, people will now ask the same of him that he has asked of his political adversaries. To deliver on all the promises he makes. Including the Lokpal.

As architect of a people's movement, Arvind Kejriwal has left a very messy blueprint. To criticise him, however, is in no way to condone the venality of the political class in general, or the malafide of the UPA government, in particular. Rather, it is to ask what state have we brought ourselves to that a public warrior must speak so loud and hard to rouse our attention?

Building movements is difficult business. Building a political party will probably be even tougher. But if there's one lesson Arvind ought to take from his fight against corruption, it is to remember that when one is shaping the future, it's good to have both a chisel and a hammer. Good also to appeal to the better self in your adversaries than declare them incapable of change.

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