It is amply evident that the expansion of civil society and social mobilization, public protests, and collective action have engendered a new awakening and tumult in Indian society. The political churning reflects the shifting equations between civil and political society, and changing public perceptions of both which are likely to define the future of democratic politics, as also the nature of social mobilization. This presentation briefly analyses how different forms of social mobilizations and the state interact and influence one another in India’s democratic politics. It examines two sets of social mobilization in favour of landmark acts to legislate a right to socio-economic entitlements and the Anna Hazare led anti-corruption movement demanding an anti-graft ombudsman. Notwithstanding their narrow social base, these mobilizations resulted in socio-economic entitlements, while the riveting anti-corruption movement emanating from the Ram Lila Maidan mobilized huge public support but did not succeed in reaching a culmination point – the enactment of a Lokpal Act, until now. It lost momentum in December 2011 when it failed to achieve its immediate objective of establishing a Lokpal. Two years later however, the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance government saw it fit to pass this piece of legislation.

Two questions stem from this. The first is whether it was public pressure or unparalleled access to spaces of power that led the state to accept the demands of the rights-based campaigns? Two, was the Lokpal Act passed in response to the pressure exerted by the mass movement or were political circumstances and a consequent change in party strategies that determined the eventual outcome. All these legislations have been regarded as important events of democratic deepening both in terms of the process that led to their enactment (initiated by grass-roots movements) as well as their outcome (fundamentally altering the citizen - state relationship). This presentation problematizes this narrative and suggests that the explanatory factors underlying these events are possibly the political context and changing leadership strategies. The focus is on process and not the validity and implementation of these policies. By drawing attention to these issues we can shed light on the contrasting trajectories of state-society engagement and the nature of political process which produces positive outcomes in some specific cases of mobilization, and not others.

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