



Research Foundation for Governance: in India

Summary of the public debate

Is fasting necessary to change the system in India?

10th June, 2011, 6:00 pm to 7.30 pm, AMA

Research Foundation for Governance in India (RFGI) organized a debate on “Is fasting necessary to change the system in India?”, on Friday, 10 June, 2011 from 6 PM to 7:30 PM at the Ahmedabad Management Association (AMA).

The debate was attended by people from different walks of life, age-groups and socio-economic backgrounds. It was full of strong opinions and arguments floating all around the room. The debate was anchored by Ms. Kanan Dhru, founder of RFGI.

Some of those present at the debate, opined that fasting has become a rage for the people to force the government to act as per their wishes. The recent movement of fasting to grab government’s attention in India, first started by Anna Hazare and then Baba Ramdev, has sent strong signals that coercion might be one of the only ways left to bring about a reforms in the present lethargic and unaccountable system. However, many argued against this opining as to till what extent such a force is justified? India is one of the most unique countries in the world, where our democracy has held the diverse country together since independence. Would such tactics threaten the very fabric of our democracy? Some also argued that fasting was paralyzing the systems of checks and balances present and was slowly becoming a way to blackmailing our government. It becomes crucial that people understand the larger implications of these fasts and their demands before jumping on the bandwagon. A lawyer from the Supreme Court, who was present at the debate, talked about how some of these matters are already sub-judice and that the Court is looking at solving these dilemmas of our democracy. The legality of fasting should also be considered, it rises legal as well as constitution problems. Some believed that the present democratic machinery must be tested by those who are raising their voices against the system. People such as Anna Hazare and Baba Ramdev should fight the elections themselves.



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A couple of youngsters from other countries were also present at the debate, with one of them who had first-hand experience of the revolution in Egypt. He narrated his experiences of the Egyptian revolution and tried to draw comparison of the same to the recent wave of fasting in India.

The debate also had a couple of activists who have been working on the grass-roots level in India since many years and have experienced the wide-spread corruption and unfair practices in the public systems within our country. They brought an interesting perspective to the debate arguing that time has come to take a drastic step to overcome the inefficiencies within the system. A fast is a much better way than a bloody revolution. These kinds of movements have generated a public sentiment against corruption and that there was nothing wrong in it. The people who have been on the fast have also tried other methods to change the things around them but as everything else have failed, they have took to fasting. Of course, as some other participants pointed out, there was a difference between fasting by a celebrity compared to an ordinary person. Lord Meghnad Desai, one of the mentors of the RFGI, pointed out to the team by an email that in a country where so many are starving, why fasting by one person is given so much importance! He suggested that what was needed was analyzing the 'case studies of corruption and creating detailed formulation of draft legislations that are discussed in 'People's parliaments' before being presented to the powers that be. Only a sober online discussion which catches a lot of active young people will make a dent. All this fasting is diversionary.'

One of the participants pointed out an interesting comparison between Gandhi's satyagrah and those being undertaken by Baba Ramdev and Anna Hazare. Gandhiji's credentials were much higher than these and tried to unite people rather than creating a rift amongst them. The present phenomenon is divisive tactics undertaken for personal gains. Issues such as corruption had to be tackled in a way that is sustainable and can create a long term impact. The present battle has to be fought on several fronts and this has to be kept in mind by those in power and also within the civil society. Technology has to be used for bringing transparency and accountability within the system. An activist also suggested having the Right to Recall at various stages in our democracy.

The debate concluded with the thoughts that India is slowly moving on the path of creating a transparent and accountable democracy that a matured thinking is needed



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while making these difficult decisions as there is a long way to lead. It is the onus of all of us to create a morally and ethically strong society.

RFGI would like to thank all the people who participated in the event and AMA for providing with the venue. We look forward to continue organizing more of such debates on critical issues of governance in future.