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Crusader for change

Arvind Kejriwal, Magsaysay award winner, on the RTI Act and his fight against corruption

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WE belong to a country long inured to corruption. We remember Mahatma Gandhi's Satyagraha; yet we have come to accept that the Mahatma's era is over. Telling the truth is naive. Getting away with crime is fashionable. Being a bully is not gauche; it is just practical. And through it all, we chorus that the common citizen can do nothing at all against a system in which entrenched hierarchies, profit-making priorities and a total neglect of the needs and rights of the people make it nearly impossible for ordinary folks to expect the government to provide necessities like water, power, electricity. The pervasive acceptance of corruption as a parallel "system" in every field has turned it into an industry.

All for change

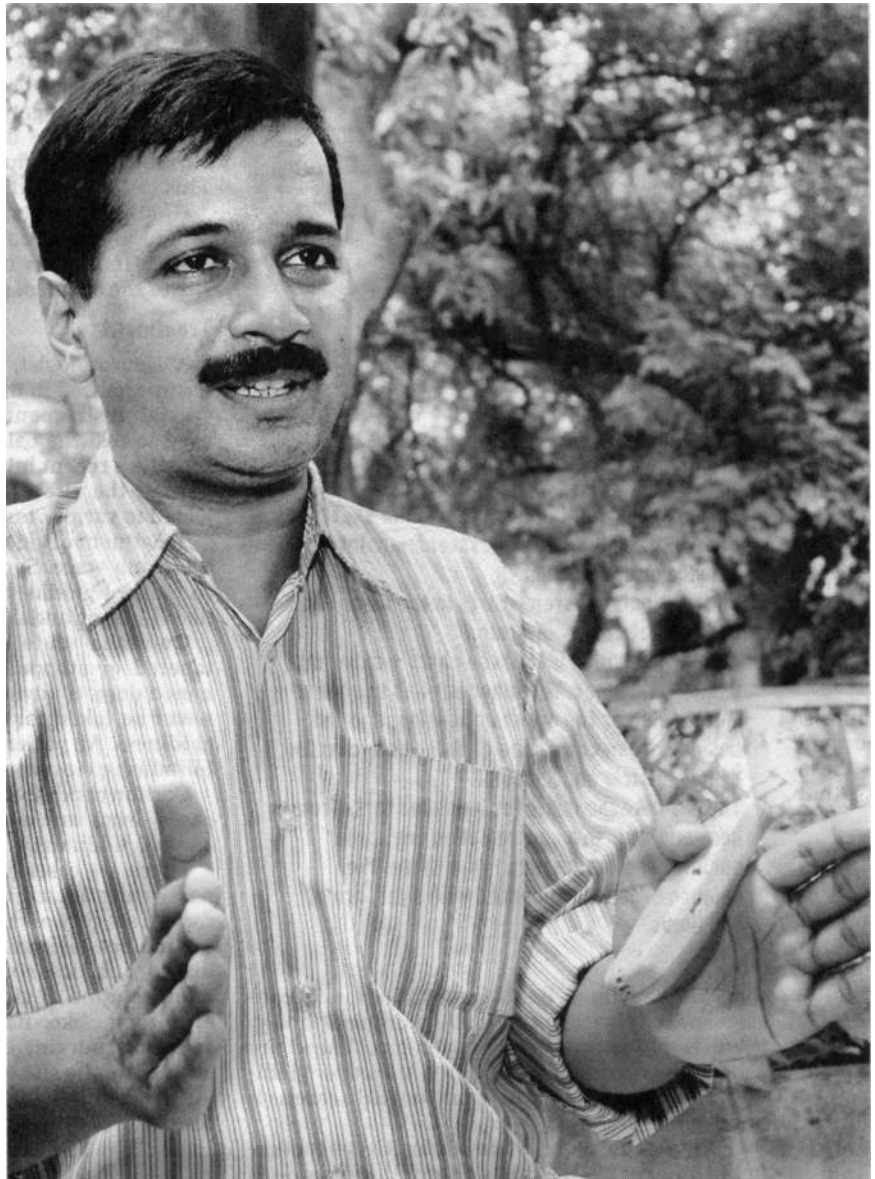
Arvind Kejriwal knows all about that attitude. He calls it "a kind of slow poisoning". He is also determined to tackle it, because change, *parivartan*, is what he stands for. Having recently been awarded the Ramon Magsaysay award for Emergent Leadership, the founder of the NGO Parivartan is back at work in Delhi, leading people from all walks of life to use the Right to Information Act as a tool to get justice. "Do you mind if I keep taking calls," he asks, even as he poses for a passport photograph and sundry visitors troop in.

While many are thrilled that the award recognises his work and vindicates his ideals, others feel even one corrupt, powerful politician can destroy any amount of good work done by individuals. Therefore, as long as Arvind and people like him stay out of politics, their contribution to society can be only marginal. "The way I look at it, the present political system cannot provide answers," says Arvind. "Two things are presumed here. One is that if we had 540-odd good people in Parliament, things would be fine. The other is that there aren't any good people in politics, which is also wrong. But I think there is something wrong with the system. What is the point of joining it? We have to bring about a change towards local self-governance."

Local governance

The idea, he explains, is to hand over responsibility to the people, who will govern their areas through general bodies consisting of approximately 1,000 families. By localising the power and the responsibilities, political apathy will be done away with. Also, these general bodies should have the right to sack municipal officials who do not do their job — providing, road repairs, clean water supply or electricity.

"It may not happen in my lifetime," adds Arvind, but he knows what is required. "First we need to figure out what kind of system we need, then translate it into legal language, then work out the demand for it.



FOR THE PEOPLE: Kejriwal believes in people power. PHOTO: V.V. KRISHNAN

The demand must come from the people."

Motivation is a key issue. "It is very dangerous when you find systems are degenerating, but you don't even feel they are degenerating. It's sort of interesting to see what society reacts to. Also, a huge amount of cynicism has crept in. People have given up. They feel nothing can change. That is why they have stopped questioning. For example, if you take a walk near Jantar Mantar you find the place full of *dharnas*. The issues are glaring; they have been there for so many months."

With a degree from IIT and a Joint Commissioner of Income Tax till recently, the soft-spoken Arvind seems an unlikely crusader against corruption. "I was also a cynic. But there was this huge agony." As an honest person in a department notorious for dishonesty, things might have got

hot for him at the office. On the contrary, he says, "There were good people who supported me and others who were silent. That way the department was quite kind to me."

Deep down, Arvind is convinced that everyone prefers the right path. Students want a transparent examination system; citizens want their needs met. "Even many bureaucrats who you would have thought corrupt actually support RTI in their heart of hearts."

Perhaps that explains why "Lage Raho Munna Bhai" is such a huge hit. "Anywhere we find something nice happening, everyone wants to join in. I think every human being is basically good. There is a basic truth and honesty in everyone," smiles Arvind, adding, "I'm becoming a little philosophical here." Having seen the

Parivartan was founded in January 2000. The Parivartan website, www.parivartan.com, states that the organisation is not an NGO but a people's movement and therefore not registered as a trust or a society. In income tax parlance, it is an Association of Persons. Convinced that enforcing transparency in government functioning can bring accountability and good governance, Parivartan focuses on educating the public on the use of the Right to Information.

Apart from Kejriwal, the other members include journalist Manish Sisodia; Rajiv Sharma, who ran a small business till he gave it up to work full-time for Parivartan; Rekha Koli, who edits *Apna Panna*, a local fortnightly publication in East Delhi; Chander; Santosh and others.

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RTI Act go through, he says, has given him and his colleagues hope. "Maybe we haven't been able to shake the system," he concedes, but points out, by way of example, "Yesterday if you didn't get a ration card you were forced to pay a bribe."

Making a difference

There is no doubt however, that Parivartan's forays have made a difference to at least one section of the Public Distribution System. A woman in Delhi's Sunder Nagari, whose ration shop habitually refused to serve the residents, filed an application under the RTI Act. 'We filed an application on her behalf and when she got the cash memos, they had thumb impressions, whereas she was a literate woman and could sign her name.'

Faced with the possibility of losing his license, the shopkeeper made his peace with the community and promised never to cheat again. It was not all smooth going, however. "Our volunteers were attacked seven times. One of them even had her throat cut."

But RTI alone is not enough. "Real democracy will come when people can govern their own areas. We need to move more and more from representative to direct democracy."

The Parivartan team consists of seven volunteers, but Arvind has no plans to expand. 'We want to encourage many people to start their own NGSs.' No rabble-rouser, he appeals to the public: "So far all of us used to feel helpless. We only criticised the government and the leaders. But let's start questioning the Government. When you give Rs.10 to your son, you ask how he spent the money. Similarly, ask about your own colony. Please try this out."