

Madam Speaker,

I have been deeply distressed at the developments of the last few days. Many aspects of the situation have caused me anguish.

We are all aware that corruption is pervasive. It operates at every level. The poor may carry its greatest burden but it is an affliction that every Indian is desperate to be rid of. Fighting corruption is as integral to eliminating poverty as is Mahatma Gandhi NREGA or the Land Acquisition Bill. Yet it is equally imperative to the growth and development of our nation.

Madam Speaker, we cannot wish away corruption by the mere desire to see it removed from our lives. This requires a comprehensive framework of action and a concerted political program supported by all levels of the state from the highest to the lowest. Most importantly, it requires firm political will.

Madam Speaker, in the past few years I have travelled the length and breadth of our country. I have met scores of countrymen, rich and poor, old and young, privileged and disempowered who have expressed their disillusionment to me. In the last few months, Annaji has helped the people to articulate this same sentiment. I thank him for that.

I believe that the real question before us as representatives of the people of India today is whether we are prepared to take the battle against corruption head on? It is not a matter of how the present impasse will resolve, it is a much greater battle. There are no simple solutions. To eradicate corruption demands a far deeper engagement and sustained commitment from each one of us.

Witnessing the events of the last few days it would appear that the enactment of a single Bill will usher in a corruption-free society. I have serious doubts about this belief.

An effective Lok Pal law is only one element in the legal framework to combat corruption. The Lok Pal institution alone cannot be a substitute for a comprehensive anti-corruption code. A set of effective laws is required. Laws that address the following critical issues are necessary to stand alongside the Lok Pal initiative:

- (1) government funding of elections and political parties,
- (2) transparency in public procurement,
- (3) proper regulation of sectors that fuel corruption like land and mining,
- (4) grievance redress mechanisms in public service delivery of old age pensions and ration cards; and
- (5) continued tax reforms to end tax evasion.

We owe it to the people of this country to work together across party lines to ensure that Parliament functions at its optimum

capacity and delivers these laws in a just and time bound manner.

We speak of a statutory Lok Pal but our discussions cease at the point of its accountability to the people and the risk that it might itself become corrupt. Madam Speaker, why not elevate the debate and fortify the Lok Pal by making it a Constitutional body accountable to Parliament like the Election Commission of India? I feel the time has come for us to seriously consider this idea.

Madam Speaker, laws and institutions are not enough. A representative, inclusive and accessible democracy is central to fighting corruption.

Individuals have brought our country great gains. They have galvanized people in the cause of freedom and development. However, individual dictates, no matter how well intentioned, must not weaken the democratic process. This process is often lengthy and lumbering. But it is so in order to be inclusive and fair. It provides a representative and transparent platform where ideas are translated into laws. A tactical incursion, divorced from the machinery of an elected Government that seeks to undo the checks and balances created to protect the supremacy of Parliament sets a dangerous precedent for a democracy. Today the proposed law is against corruption. Tomorrow the target may be something less universally heralded. It may attack the plurality of our society and democracy.

India's biggest achievement is our democratic system. It is the life force of our nation. I believe we need more democracy within our political parties. I believe in Government funding of our political parties. I believe in empowering our youth; in opening the doors of our closed political system; in bringing fresh blood into politics and into this House. I believe in moving our democracy deeper and deeper into our villages and our cities.

I know my faith in our democracy, is shared by members of this House. I know that regardless of their political affiliation, many of my colleagues work tirelessly to realize the ideals upon which our nation was built. The pursuit of truth is the greatest of those ideals. It won us our freedom. It gave us our democracy. Let us commit ourselves to truth and probity in public life. We owe it to the people of India.