

## THE DAISY'S PETALS

Will we get a Lokpal? Will we not? The answer is blowin' in the wind

**I**T'S ANAIL-BITER. I predicted in another column that the Lokpal Search Committee of eight eminent persons might cap a five-year slow waltz just before the general election. On January 17, the Supreme Court instructed the committee to come up with a list of candidates by February 28.

The search committee has been hobbled by insufficient infrastructure like space and staff since its inception four months ago. Even if the improbable happens, the candidates will then be vetted by a Selection Committee headed by Prime Minister Narendra Modi. By end-February Modi will be nearly immersed in the election campaign and it will be four weeks after Anna Hazare started his latest hunger strike in protest against the pussyfooting.

Does an ombudsman work? About 20 states have Lokayuktas but neither their powers nor their resources are the same. Delhi Lokayukta, Justice Reva Khetrpal, the capital's fourth since 1997, has completed three years of her five-year term. She has dealt with about 1,400 cases so far. She has jurisdiction over Delhi ministers, MLAs, municipal councillors and officials of government-owned organisations, but the Delhi Lokayukta enjoys fewer powers than its counterparts, for instance, in Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh and Bihar. Karnataka's Lokayukta has power to investigate, conduct raids, and seize ill-begotten assets, and commands half a dozen police stations. Delhi has only one Additional Director of investigation.

Delhi's Lokayukta can enforce norms of integrity, conduct, accumulation of disproportionate assets, abuse of office, and bribery. Unlike other states, it does not have jurisdiction over the bureaucracy. It can bring corruption charges against the Chief Minister with the President, and against ministers or legislators with the Lieutenant-Governor. "It is not toothless, but it can have better teeth – the canines are missing," a senior official said.

A Khetrpal recommendation for the removal of a municipal corporator from office is pending before the Delhi LG, but such actions are rare. Usually cases like public misconduct are resolved with a censure and an apology.

Ironically, 50 Aam Aadmi Party legislators refused to list their assets in defiance of Justice Khetrpal, who was nominated by Arvind Kejriwal, a man who was Anna Hazare's understudy in 2011 when the nation was all agog about corruption. Kejriwal, as you might recall, won a landslide victory in 2015 on the plank of transparency and probity.

Under the law, the Lokpal will have jurisdiction over the Prime Minister, his cabinet, all members of parliament, and all public functionaries. The eight-member Lokpal will have the power to probe corruption nationwide. If it is allowed to work the way the law envisages. "No authority likes an authority above it," one Lokayukta told me wryly.

The day before Hazare's hunger strike, Transparency International published its global corruption rankings for 2018. India has gone up to 78 from 81 among 180 countries. This is worse than 76 in 2015, although that was among 168 countries. "As India gears up for its upcoming elections, we see little significant movement in its Corruption Perception Index score (a measure distinct from rankings and in which a lower score equals higher corruption perception), which moved from 40 in 2017 to 41 in 2018." Despite spectacular public mobilisation in 2011 efforts ultimately fizzled out, with little to no movement on the ground to build the specialist anti-corruption infrastructure required, TI said. **BW**

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