



Thousands of non-resident Indians across the U.S. joined rallies Apr. 9 to support New Delhi-based Gandhian activist Anna Hazare, who captivated the world with a four-day fast-unto-death to protest Indian government corruption.

More than 300,000 people across the globe joined Hazare's fast. In the U.S., rallies were held in New York; Seattle, Wash.; Houston, Texas; Cerritos, Calif.; and Milpitas, Calif., in the heart of the Silicon Valley. The septuagenarian Hazare gave up his fast Apr. 9 after the Indian government agreed to draft a new anti-corruption bill – known as the Jan Lokpal – by the end of June, 2011, and pass it by Aug. 15 (see separate story.)

“A grassroots movement of thousands of people, in a completely non-violent way, moved the government to act,” Naren Bakshi, a trustee with the India Community Center, told India-West. “The country saw a ray of hope and seized upon it,” he said.

More than 400 supporters joined a two-mile march around Milpitas mid-afternoon Apr. 9, before settling into the capacious ICC auditorium to hear speeches by special guests. A candle-light vigil was held in Cerritos, Calif., while activists gathered around a statue of Mahatma Gandhi in Seattle.

The Indian government had earlier drafted its own version of an anti-corruption measure, which Bakshi claimed was nothing more than an “empty promise.” Activists then got involved and drafted their own version of the legislation known as the Jan Lokpal bill.

Under the provisions of the proposed Jan Lokpal bill, the public could make complaints directly to a special commissioner, on matters of alleged bribes, unfair elections, and corrupt government officials, including judges and the prime minister.

Cases, including prosecution and sentencing, must be decided in one calendar year; currently, corruption cases take decades to prosecute, if they are dealt with at all. Finally, all public money taken as a bribe must be returned to the people.

In the past year, noted Bakshi, there has been a quick succession of Indian government scandals, including the 2010 2G telecom scandal, which lost the Indian government more than \$39 billion in revenue. The Indian Supreme Court announced Apr. 11 that it would appoint senior counsel Uday Lalit to prosecute former cabinet minister for communication and information technology A. Raja on charges of hugely undervaluing telecom bandwidth. The 2G spectrum scandal is one of India's most costly corruption cases to date.

The proposed bill targets no particular party, but instead calls for systemic changes throughout various strata of Indian government.

Another rally organizer in Cerritos, Sasidhar Kalagara told India-West, “There is currently no way to punish the corrupt nor there is a way to get out the money stored in safe havens.”

In 2010, claimed Kalagara, over Rs. 175 crore had been plundered by corrupt government officials. “It is time to act and make systemic changes to our democracy,” he asserted.

“The Jan Lokpal bill which is drafted by civic society has powers to prosecute the corrupted and also get the money that's being plundered back to the government and utilized towards development of the nation,” said Kalagara.

Globalization has increased corruption in India, asserted Kalagara, adding that the size of such scandals has also increased. He hoped the Indian government would heed its country's cry and create an anti-corruption bill with some weight to it.

In Seattle, several groups including the Federation of Indian American Associations organized a candle-light vigil as part of the rally.

In Los Angeles, Calif., Kevin Kaul, founder and chairman of the U.S. Asia Business Forum, told India-West that the Indian government must have oversight measures to keep it free of taint.

“Law enforcement should be in an autonomous body and it should be independent,” he said.

“The turnover of thousands of people not only in India but also abroad has reinstated the belief of everyone in the power of the people to bring about a positive change in a democracy,” said organizers in a press statement. “The fight for corruption has just begun but the lawmakers need to be careful because Indians in every nook and corner of the world are carefully watching their actions and will not keep quiet if anything goes astray.”