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Two Peas in a Pod

By THOMAS L. FRIEDMAN in Goa, India

The world's two biggest democracies, India and the United States, are going through remarkably similar bouts of introspection. Both countries are witnessing grass-roots movements against corruption and excess. The difference is that Indians are protesting what is illegal — a system requiring bribes at every level of governance to get anything done. And Americans are protesting what is legal — a system of Supreme Court-sanctioned bribery in the form of campaign donations that have enabled the financial-services industry to effectively buy the U.S. Congress, and both political parties, and thereby resist curbs on risk-taking.

But the similarities do not stop there. What has brought millions of Indians into the streets to support the India Against Corruption movement and what seems to have triggered not only the Occupy Wall Street movement but also initiatives like Americansselect.org — a centrist group planning to use the Internet to nominate an independent presidential candidate — is a sense that both countries have democratically elected governments that are so beholden to special interests that they can no longer deliver reform. Therefore, they both need shock therapy from outside.

The big difference is that, in America, the Occupy Wall Street movement has no leader and no consensus demand. And while it enjoys a lot of passive support, its activist base is small. India Against Corruption has millions of followers and a charismatic leader, the social activist Anna Hazare, who went on a hunger strike until the Indian Parliament agreed to create an independent ombudsman with the staff and powers to investigate and prosecute corruption at every level of Indian governance and to do so in this next session of Parliament. A furious debate is now raging here over how to ensure that such an ombudsman doesn't turn into an Indian "Big Brother," but some new ombudsman position appears likely to be created.

Arvind Kejriwal, Hazare's top deputy, told me, "Gandhi said that whenever you do any protests, your demands should be very clear, and it should be very clear who is the authority who can fulfill that demand, so your protests should be directed at that authority." If your movement lacks leadership at first, that is not necessarily a problem, he added, "because often leaders evolve. But the demands have to be very clear." A sense of injustice and widening income gaps brought Occupy Wall Street into the street, "but exactly what needs to be done, which law needs to be changed and who are they demanding that from?" asked Kejriwal. "These things have to be answered quickly."

That said, there are still many parallels between the Indian and American movements. Both seem to have been spurred to action by a sense that corruption or financial excess had crossed some redlines. In the United States, despite the fact that elements of the financial-services industry nearly sank the economy in 2008, that same industry is still managing to blunt sensible reform efforts because it has so much money to sway Congress. It seems to have learned nothing. People are angry.

Meanwhile, in India, the commodities and telecommunications booms, coupled with urbanization that is driving up land prices, have set loose billions of rupees, and officials who control zoning and mining permits have just been pigging out. Some 50 top officials have been jailed lately for everything from the crony allocation of wireless spectrum, leading to potential losses to the state of up to \$38 billion, to illicitly selling Indian iron ore, needed for development here, to China for a higher price. People are fed up.

Yet, commented the Indian writer Chetan Bhagat in *The Times of India* on Monday, "our government attacks almost every anti-corruption crusader" and "sadly, even our opposition parties have lots of corrupt people." Sound familiar? Democracy not only needs a decent ruling party, but an intelligent opposition, and neither India nor America has both today.

Yes, Indians are mad at a system that makes them pay a bribe to get their birth certificate. Americans are mad at a system that has made it legal for unions to bribe the officials who will decide their pay and for bankers to bribe the lawmakers who will decide how much risk they can take. But both are essentially threatened by the same disease, best captured in the title of Robert Kaiser's book about lobbying — "So Damn Much Money" — and it's being thrown around now by so many special interests that these democracies are not only being warped by it but can't fix themselves either.

Hazare has called this moment India's "second struggle for independence." I think he is on to something for both India and America. I think that repairing our respective dysfunctional democracies — so they are truly enablers for the 21st century and not inhibitors in India's case or "the sum of all lobbies" in America's case — is for our generation what the independence movement in India and the civil rights movement in America were for our parents' generation. Here's hoping we're as successful.