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**Addressing corruption through visual tools in India: the case of three civil society initiatives and their Facebook pages**

**Anwasha Chakraborty, Research Fellow, Department of Political and Social Sciences,  
University of Bologna**

**Alice Mattoni, Associate Professor, Department of Political and Social Sciences,  
University of Bologna<sup>1</sup>**

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## **Abstract**

*In the past decades, several grassroots movement organizations across the world have tackled the issue of corruption with the aim of mobilizing knowledge on this widespread problem. In our paper, we look at three bottom-up civil society organisations and collective actors fighting for greater transparency and curbing of corruption in Indian society, highlighting how they employ visuals to debate on these issues and to communicate their mission to their audiences. The focus is on how the initiatives employed visuals to discuss a particular anti-corruption policy of the central government. In particular, our paper sheds light on the dynamics between the three initiatives and the government especially at a time when democratic credentials of the country are in decline. Inspired by Rodriguez and Dimitrova's (2011) four levels of visual framing, we propose a revised schema for visual framing analysis, taking into account contextual dimensions, in our study of visuals as tools enhancing public debates on corruption and anti-corruption practices.*

Keywords: anti-corruption, civil society, visual framing, social media, India

Word count: 8750.

## **Introduction**

In the past decades, several grassroots movement organizations across the world have tackled the issue of corruption to mobilize knowledge on this widespread multidimensional global problem. In many countries, mass protests emerged in the streets that linked the issue of corruption to other contentious issues, like in the case of the anti-austerity protests in Spain and other countries (della Porta 2017), the environmental protests in Romania (Olteanu and Beyerle 2017) or the pro-democracy protests of the Hirak movement in Algeria (Mattoni and Sigillò 2022). However, mass protests do not seem to be the rule when considering anti-corruption efforts: activists frequently engage in collective actions that do not necessarily involve street protests (della Porta and Mattoni 2021) and often sustain collective actions that aim at producing knowledge about corruption and its consequences, making people aware of their role in fighting corrupt behaviours of all kinds, and promoting accountability and transparency both in the public and private sectors. When considering anti-corruption efforts by social movements, movement organizations, or civil society actors, scholars have focused their attention to the use of visuals within mass mobilizations against corruption in Romania, and their connections to transnational cultural flows (Dumitrica 2021), the employment of art-based activism to increase the awareness of corruption by the Romanian NGO Funky Citizens (Oprea 2020), and Transparency International's integration of pictures in its anti-corruption strategy worldwide (Hellman 2019). Beyond these valuable exceptions, however, the extant literature on anti-corruption from the grassroots does not usually pay attention to visuals.

Indeed, corruption as an act and as a phenomenon is difficult to visualise and therefore it is not a surprise that sociological and cultural studies on the employment of visuals in corruption is limited (Hellman 2019). However, literature shows us that visuals might become relevant tools in the hands of activists allowing them to express themselves in a rather effective way also beyond protests in the streets and through their own communication channels. For instance, Morrison and Isaac (2011) illustrate how the Industrial Workers of the World extensively used visuals and cartoons to make abstract ideas more concrete, communicate their grievances and objectives, and narrate some aspects of their struggles. Images produced around a certain contentious event can become powerful symbols of visual injustice as Olesen (2013) illustrates in the case of the Facebook page 'We are all Khaled Said' that functioned as a catalyst for the protests that erupted in Egypt in 2010. Furthermore, Casas and Williams (2018) found that the circulation of activists' images on Twitter contribute to increased online participation in the

case of Black Lives Matter, especially when such images evoked specific emotions like enthusiasm.

In this paper, we contribute to this literature looking at the rarely investigated grassroots anti-corruption struggles to understand which roles visuals play in the framework of a contentious issue that is frequently highly sensitive and therefore often difficult to visualize. We investigate three anti-corruption bottom-up civil society organisations based in India, that interact with the public through various communication channels including their social media pages where they publish posts and images through which they engage citizens to react on policies and practices of the State and public offices that affect them. The organisations intend to elicit responses from the public by employing a range of communicative strategies through the visuals they share – these strategies reflect the complex dynamics between the initiatives and the public offices (and representatives) that they seek to hold accountable.

The remainder of this article is structured as follows. In the next section, we introduce the context in which the three civil society organizations under investigation act – India – and discuss why it is relevant to understand the role that visuals have for the struggle against corruption in such a context. Then, we explain the methodology and discuss the analytical framework employed in the study. This is followed by the findings and analysis section, where we present the three cases and their visual styles in detail focusing on their visual repertoire on one specific anti-corruption policy of the government. Following that we present a discussion of our findings and finally, we offer concluding remarks.

## **Visuals and Anti-Corruption in India**

As corruption is mostly an invisible crime, understanding how civil society actors employ visuals to mobilize on this contentious issue in their countries is vital to develop a fine-grained and critical public debate around such topics. This is even more relevant if we think about the broader country context in which such debates occur: India. While still the largest democracy in the world, according to multiple international indices, India in the recent years is experiencing a steady democratic backslide with shrinking civil society spaces to debate and to critique the powerful. India is ranked 46<sup>th</sup> of 167 countries in the Democracy Index 2022 and is considered a “flawed democracy” by the Economist Intelligence Unit. The American NGO Freedom House dubbed India “partly free” in its 2022 profile of the country, the second straight year when India has been given a low score on civil liberties resulting in the slide from the ‘free’ status that the country steadily maintained over the last three decades until three years back. A government working paper published in November 2022 notes the results published by these indices show a democratic decline in the country (Sanyal and Arora 2022). At the same time, it takes a strong critical stance on what it terms ‘opinion-based indices’, questioning the credibility of the reports by calling them perception-based and subjective with no clear transparency on the experts who were consulted in their publications. (ibidem)

While the democracy indices are showing decline, the country has also failed to show any visible improvement in one of the most well-known indices that report perception of corruption

in different countries. According to Corruption Perception Index (CPI) 2022 published by the transnational anti-corruption coalition, Transparency International, India ranked 85 out of 180 countries alongside Guyana, Maldives and North Macedonia. In 2019, India was ranked 80 showing a decline in position. In 2020, one of India's leading English dailies *The Hindu*, reporting on the CPI, reported that India recorded the highest rate of bribery in Asia that year (*The Hindu* 2020). These data points are of particular importance as the nationalist political party, which has been in power since 2014, formed the government at the centre on an anti-corruption, pro-governance plank which it termed as the basis of development. The Prime Minister who built his image as the crusader against corruption (Varshney 2017) has carried out several digital reforms to improve e-governance which was supposed to curb corruption (Sam et al 2021; Sam et al 2022). The scrapping of high-value cash notes in 2016 – the demonetisation policy (which is discussed in this paper) – in favour of digital payments is one such example (ibidem). In the same period, however, some troubling developments have also occurred in legal reforms which make the struggle against corruption more difficult for civil society actors. One such example is the tightening of rules for foreign donations to NGOs through the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act which, as some experts have argued, has constrained critical voices from civil society (Rahman 2022). Another significant example is the reform related to electoral bonds, the primary source of political party funding, enacted in 2017, which allows anonymity of donors and no action on the part of receivers (in this case, political parties) to disclose the source of their income. Senior journalist and political commentator, Shekhar Gupta, went as far as to call it a legalisation of political corruption (Gupta 2022). Considering these diverse data points, it can be argued that India continues to be in the throes of the abiding problem of corruption while its civil society faces increasing hurdles at speaking truth to power.

Visuals, we therefore contend, carry loaded meanings in those contexts, like India, where it is ideally better to evoke the need for anti-corruption efforts through cartoons and satirical memes than to explain them in detail through lengthy texts. Visuals, when employed creatively through irony and humour, can allow these initiatives to communicate their intended message effectively with relatively less fear of censorship than if they were to use solely words whose meanings are less ambiguous. In the scenario where civil society's potential to critique government policies and activities is on a decline, actors working in the grassroots mostly want to remain politically non-partisan, as we will see with the descriptions of our cases in the next sections. Instead, what they focus on is making information available to people in a wide variety of formats employing effective as well as affective strategies and on playing a role in building an active, deliberative citizenry. Visuals in this context are specifically important as they are used by civil society organizations, such as those in our cases, to frame the public understanding of the issues they are trying to highlight (Corigall-Brown and Wilkes 2011). This is even more relevant when visuals are produced in settings that are strongly multilingual: as it has been showed regarding transnational European activism, visuals have a key role in sustaining mobilizations where activists do not share the same language (Doerr and Mattoni 2014). Visuals seem to be even more important when employed to sustain activism in multilingual political contexts characterized by decreasing democratic tendencies, as it is the case of India. In short, India is a relevant case study to gain knowledge on how civil society

organizations employ visuals in multilingual flawed democracies on highly controversial topics, like the one of corruption, hence complementing already existing studies that instead consider the role of visuals in multi-lingual democratic settings in the Western world (i.e. Doerr 2017, Doerr 2010, Doerr and Mattoni 2014)

## **Research design, methods and analytical framework**

To understand how Indian civil society organisations and activists make use of visuals to participate in the public debated around corruption and anti-corruption, we selected and compared three case studies, namely: *Association for Democratic Reforms*, *I Paid a Bribe*, and the *India against Corruption movement*. The cases have been carefully chosen after considering the spectrum of civil society organizations and collective action in India which utilise words such as transparency, accountability, governance, democratic participation, apart from corruption, as part of their *raison d'être* and as seen in instances of public communication on their websites, reports, and social media pages. Data on these initiatives were collected as part on an ongoing research project which studies anti-corruption initiatives globally. While this paper utilises visual data generated by the three initiatives, our interviews with 17 key activists and stakeholders from these organisations allowed us to understand the rationale of the initiatives better as well as their relationships vis-à-vis the government, which is evinced further through the type of visuals they produced when discussing the highly publicised and controversial anti-corruption policy of the government, ie. demonetisation. The interviews have thus been utilised exclusively to inform the context in which the initiatives are situated.

Our three cases present themselves as anti-corruption and pro-transparency grassroots activists' organizations univocally and hence have been selected for investigation. They make a wide range of data available on open digital platforms with the assumption that open data empowers citizens and fosters democratic processes and values (Helbing and Pournaras 2015; Ruijer et al 2017). Concomitantly, they supported collective action initially (and continue to do so in the first case) in three distinct ways: through citizens' participation in politics and acting as pressure groups for policymaking (in case of Association for Democratic Reforms), supporting public protest activities (India Against Corruption) and, finally, sustaining diffused monitoring mechanisms to account for corruption from a bottom-up perspective (I Paid a Bribe).

Since each of them sought to mobilize people on corruption differently (indicative of the dynamics they share with the government), we expected to find a diverse employment of visuals as tools to influence public debate. In this paper, we have focused on one particular debate, around the proclaimed anti-corruption demonetisation policy initiated by the Government of India in November, 2016, discussed in the next section. We chose to examine images posted by the initiatives on their Facebook pages, as it is the most widely used social media platform in India (Statista 2021) and because our third case study does not have an official website. It was necessary to render all three cases comparable, and Facebook was therefore the obvious choice. The choice of focusing on demonetisation was also to ensure comparability, as it was the last big public policy declaration pertaining to corruption when all three Facebook pages were actively posting.

To gather the visual materials on the three Facebook pages, we first considered those posts which used #demonetisation and #demonetization, as also those status updates and shared links which used ‘demonetisation’ or ‘demonetization’ in their descriptions. All posts from November 2016 till April 2022 bearing these tags were collected in the first round. (See Table 1 for a snapshot of the posts and their contents). At this stage, it was seen that while Association for Democratic Reforms and I Paid a Bribe had stopped posting about the policy within a year from its declaration, the IAC movement continued to post on it for several years. While all three initiatives shared links to news by other media houses which aligned with their points of view about demonetisation, the IAC movement shared conspicuously more, even in recent years, leading to a skewed data set heavily representing the movement. These links often had images embedded as thumbnails in the posts that were created and shared by the initiatives. However, such images were not selected for analysis because the thumbnails are chosen by the external news agencies who deem them representative of the news article they generated. Therefore, the initiatives themselves did not have any control over the images that they shared by default when they posted news articles on their pages. Thumbnails appearing along a news article from an external site are also inherently unstable as sometimes, the news itself does not appear anymore as it was taken down by the parent site. Because of these reasons, we chose only those posts with visuals which were created either by the initiatives or by pages of their friends and sympathisers. Additionally, to ensure the comparability of the type of visuals, we only included in the dataset still images, leaving out the videos produced by one of the three civil society organizations. The resulting dataset included 22 visuals.

### Table 1<sup>2</sup>

The collected visual materials, focusing on the same topic and published in the same time frame, can be fruitfully employed to compare the three anti-corruption civil society organizations and their engagement with visuals. We analysed all the collected visual data through visual frame analysis. Framing as an analytical device is well established in communication studies’ literature. Entman’s widely used definition of framing explains its purpose as “*to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and/or treatment recommendation* for the item described. Typically frames diagnose, evaluate and prescribe...” (Entman 1993, 52: italics in original). Frames are known to use myths and metaphors to derive symbolic significance (Hertog and Macleod 2001) and have been termed as a ‘metaphor for contextualisation’ (Bock 2020, 3). Bock (2020) further explains that frames help select, highlight or obscure certain details while trying to make sense of a topic or an issue. In similar terms, Coleman (2010) talks about framing of images as an action which involves ‘the selection of one view, scene or angle when making the image, cropping, editing or selecting it’. (p.237). At the same time, frame analysis is also well established in social movement studies literature, where scholars see collective action frames and the related framing processes (Benford and Snow 2000) as relevant for the understanding

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<sup>2</sup> We have refrained from adding the exact number of posts by the Facebook page ‘Final War Against Corruption’ as it continues to post on the policy move at the time of writing.



of social movements and their dynamics. Overall, collective action frames are analytic devices to reconstruct, understand and explain how activists and their movement organizations make sense of the social problems they face through their collective struggles, also with the aim to recruit protest participants and gain relevant allies, and engage in the development of collective identities and propose alternative critical views within public debate (Snow, Rochford et al. 1986; Gerhards and Rucht 1992; Snow and Benford 1992; Hunt and Benford 1994). Classic studies on collective action frames mostly focused on the textual level of framing processes and their outcomes; but, in the past decade, scholars have also begun focusing on visuals as framing devices (Saifan and Teune 2021, Luhtakallio 2013).

This article contributes further to this literature drawing on the analytical framework proposed by Rodrigues and Dimitrova (2011) suggesting that frames might be analysed at four different levels: the denotative, stylistic and connotative levels impart information on the main visual contents of frames, the way in which they are visually ordered, and the meanings that visual contents evoke respectively; finally, the ideological level allows researcher to focus on visuals to reconstruct the overall purpose of the frames. In our analysis, we took inspiration from Rodrigues and Dimitrova to develop our visual frame analysis in two steps. First, we reconstructed frames considering the denotative, stylistic and connotative levels of visuals. Then, starting from the first step of the analysis, we considered the ideological function of the frames emerging from the visual materials we collected, also paying attention to the contextual level in which such visual materials were inserted. Indeed, as recent research on visuals and collective action frames in social movements also shows, visuals are rooted in the specific contexts in which they are produced, diffused and then interpreted by audiences (Safaian and Teune 2021, Daphi et al 2013). For each dimension of the analysis, we considered specific elements as detailed in Table 2.

### **Table 2**

The dimensions of analysis and the specific elements outlined in the schema were used to guide the coding of the visual data. Coding was performed on MAXQDA and a total of 331 codes were obtained analysing all the 22 visuals selected for the study. We then compared the codes across the three anti-corruption initiatives under investigation, to let emerge similarities and differences among them. This enabled us to carry out a fine-grained analysis that casts light on how activists' and civil society's grassroots initiatives employ visuals to frame contentious issues related to corruption and anti-corruption in the public debate.

### **Findings**

Due to our focus on reactions of the three civil society initiatives on the government's demonetization policy, we first considered the overall context in which the discourse on a cashless society as an anti-corruption policy developed in India. As already discussed above, the focus on the broader context in which images circulate is vital, as the literature also shows, to fully grasp the role that they have with regard to specific issues. The reason is that the same image spread in a different context can gain additional meaning or also lose some of its initial significance (Hariman and Lucaites 2007); similarly, the same photograph usually function in

a different way according to the context in which it is published (Zelizer 2006); and the circulation of images from personal archives to the news media or, more generally speaking, from a context to another, produce a reframing of the images themselves (Van Dijks 2008). In India, the civil society organizations produced and circulated visuals about anti-corruption with reference to the demonetization policy that the Government implemented in November 2016. While each initiative posted on the issue, the resulting visuals and the embedded messages in them were diverse due to the specific contexts in which each was born and how those contexts shaped their relationships with public authorities.

The demonetisation policy resulted in the de-valuation of two high value Indian banknotes, namely Rs.500 and Rs.1000. The rationale provided was that the move would help to curb transaction of unaccounted money (unaccounted because of tax evasion or illegal earning), widely termed as ‘black money’ in India. By scrapping these two bank notes, the Indian government had wiped off 86% of the total cash supply in the economy then (Athique 2019; Sam et al 2021). Mainstream discourses in economics have attributed cash to corruption; with Rogoff (2016) declaring cash as a “curse” which has been used for a wide range of wrongdoings in society such as tax evasion, corruption, financing terrorism, the drug trade and human trafficking. The Indian PM Modi seemed to be influenced by this line of argument as he argued for the need for a shock demonetization in India saying it would break the grip of corruption and black money (Business Today 2016). The announcement of this policy happened suddenly when the Prime Minister declared the overnight devaluation of the currency notes in a televised address to the nation at 8pm on 7<sup>th</sup> November 2016. While the policy purportedly focused on curbing corruption and promoting transactional transparency, the sudden-ness of the move was criticized as being coercive in a democracy (Chandrashekhar & Ghosh 2017) and generating hardship for the poorest citizens (Sam and Chakraborty 2019).

The three civil society initiatives under investigation framed the policy move and its impact on Indian polity and society in three distinct ways, which reveal their core values and motives to organise anti-corruption efforts, the transparency mechanisms that they promote and the relations they have with those at the helm of governments and finally, the type of affective elements they engage with while fighting corruption. (See Table 3 for a quick summary). In the rest of this section, each initiative and its visual repertoire on demonetisation is discussed in detail.

### **Table 3**

#### ***Critique and deliberate: the stance of Association for Democratic Reforms***

The Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR hereafter) is a non-partisan civil society organisation born in 1999 due to collective efforts of like-minded professors, who decided to tackle the issue of corruption in electoral processes. In 2002, the Supreme Court of India ruled in favour of the activists of ADR which made it compulsory for all candidates to disclose educational, financial and criminal background before contesting elections. In more recent years, ADR has stepped into tracking political party financing because it influences both

elections and democratic processes while the opacity around it has been legalised (see Introduction).

Since its inception, the ADR has also increasingly made use of digital technological tools to reach out to potential voters and make all the gathered data openly available. Their [website](#) carries large volumes of data gathered on elections and political party financing and funding. The organisation has developed an app called 'Myneta' (which translates to 'My leader') as an additional platform to share such data. The type of democratic intervention that the organisation envisages is twofold: on one hand, they expect the electorate to monitor the data shared by them to make informed choices in selecting transparent candidates. On the other, members of the organisation have in the past actively sought to reform the electoral system by acting as a pressure group; and they continue to do so with meetings and seminars conducted at regular intervals with a wide range of stakeholders from politicians to students to other civil society members. In the wake of the demonetisation policy, ADR organised one such seminar dealing with the effects of scrapping cash notes on political party donations. It posted three times about the seminar in January 2017, along with six other news items by external parties about the policy, as seen from the Facebook search.

The Facebook page of ADR was created in September 2009 and has 66418 likes as of July, 2022. The overall impression on visiting the page is that their posts are serious in tone and informative in character. Concerning the topic under focus, ie., posts on demonetisation, the ADR (out of the three cases) carried the least number of posts on the policy move with a total of nine. In what seems to be an attempt to abide by its non-partisan credentials, it refrained from commenting on the government's discourse on corruption and black money. The three posts from 2016 - those temporally located close to the period when the policy was implemented - were all connected to the primary mission of ADR, which is to clean up the electoral process. The posts reflected this as they asked whether demonetisation would make political party funding more transparent. Little use of images was made in these posts. Some images visible in them were thumbnails of visuals from newspaper articles that were shared. In early 2017, the ADR shared posters of an event they organised on how the policy move would affect political party financing on their Facebook page. The event was titled 'Effects of Demonetisation on Political Financing and Black Money'. They also shared the programme list of the event as a separate post. These were the two images that were considered for the data analysis as they were created in-house.

As Step 1, the denotative, stylistic and connotative elements of the two visuals were coded. As both posts were related for the event, the denotative elements such as time, place, contact persons, programme schedule were prominently placed to provide relevant information. The poster (Figure 1) had a warm light blue palette while the programme list carried black text on a white background. The poster, interestingly, carried the various pieces of event-related information in circles adding to the softness of the visual. These circles were placed in larger concentric circles, both of which carried the watermark of the face of Gandhi, inarguably the tallest leader known internationally of the Indian independence movement, who symbolised truth and integrity and whose face adorns all Indian currency notes in the last few decades.

Gandhi's face therefore connotes efforts to seek transparency as well as the scrapped cash notes by the government in this specific visual.

### **Figure 1**

At the second step, the analysis moved to ideological and contextual considerations. The core idea presented in both visuals was to critically appraise the government's move towards moving towards cashlessness and its narrative that scrapping cash would lead to curbing of corruption. Political party financing is an opaque activity and thus, the purpose of the ADR event and the visuals related to the event, was to analyse the policy through serious deliberation. We identified that at the macro-discursive level, ADR, through these visuals, was promoting greater deliberation involving different civil society actors, while at the micro-level, the idea was to do so without being partisan to any specific political party. The affects and emotions tied to the visuals reveal serious contemplation, reflection and deliberation on the part of civil society without taking any particular side. For a topic which could be considered politically polarising, the poster resists from overtly criticising the government and the political party at the centre. However, it stays true to its mission and its organisational ideology, that is, to ask questions about political parties and elected candidates and to engage in creating a healthy, discursive democratic space.

#### ***Monitor and collaborate: the position of I Paid a Bribe***

The second case study is IPAB, an emblematic example used in anti-corruption research on ICT-based civil society interventions. This online initiative by a Bangalore-based non-profit organisation *Janaagraha* (roughly translated to 'people power') leverages the anonymity of the Internet to provide a voice to citizens of India who have been the victims of corruption to report details of bribes paid, including the bribe amount, the name of the corrupt official (if they want to reveal), and services for which bribe was extorted. IPAB collects these bribe reports, not necessarily to proceed against wrong-doers with legal actions, but to build a repository of corruption-related data across government departments (Hough 2015). The portal then aggregates these data to create maps and charts of corrupt activities across Indian cities (Ramanna and Tahilyani 2012). While the primary aim was to create a platform to monitor the retail value of corruption, the initiative, however, hired two retired highly-ranked public officials as consultants to look into the complaints and suggest administrative reforms to respective offices where incidence of bribery was high. As of July 2022, IPAB [website](#)'s figures denote that 198027 reports have been registered from 1081 cities (with over 15.4 million visitors to the site), however, it is to be noted that in the last few years, the initiative, IPAB has taken a backseat, as *Janaagraha* has focused more on projects that deal with local issues working in collaboration with local governments, such as improving city infrastructures and participatory budgeting. As a result, IPAB's social media pages, while still on the live web, do not carry new posts since the last four years.

When we examined the IPAB Facebook page (created in August 2010; with over 119k followers as of July, 2022) in light of posts on demonetisation, we found three unique visuals, posted by the initiative which were not thumbnails of external news reports. At the denotative level, the three visuals depicted: a long line of men standing in a bank holding wads of cash with smiling faces; a group of women sitting in a semi-rural setting and looking at their mobile phones seriously and a set of colourful vignettes denoting various aspects of the Indian economy, including scientific research, agricultural and financial activities. Moving to the symbolic level, we found that the first visual depicted men standing in line to deposit cash notes with smiles on their faces, with the wads of cash foregrounded representing the invalid notes due to demonetisation. The smiles on their faces indicate that they are happy to deposit the notes in the bank as cash connotes corruption and unaccounted money, a framing strongly pushed by the government when announcing the policy. In the second visual, we find women in a semi-rural setting looking intently at their mobile phones which are prominent in the foreground. These women are seen in their *mangalsutras*, a type of necklace and an abstract symbol connoting that they are married. Married, rural women in India have historically had little financial independence, and this visual, coming on the heels of the demonetisation plan, shows that they are now being taught to use digital payments, which would in turn, ensure greater financial inclusion. The move towards digital payments was one of the effects of demonetisation which became evident soon after the policy was announced. Finally, the third image with the vignettes of various activities of Indian economy is filled with figurative clues such as a firm handshake with the Indian flag prominently behind, a hand with a test tube and the building of the Bombay Stock Exchange (the building which is used as a shorthand for Indian financial market). All these images which make up the visual point to a robust and productive economy, which as the original post suggests, has not been affected negatively due to demonetisation.

In the next step, we considered the ideological and contextual dimensions of these visuals. The core idea that emerged from these images is that the people are happy about the demonetisation policy as an anti-corruption measure and that they are appreciative of the move towards greater digitisation of economy. At the micro-discursive level, following the posts about the policy by the IPAB page, it could be discerned that the initiative, and hence the parent organisation, is broadly positive about the policy. These visuals evince the same level of positive narrative-making as was characteristic of some of the macro-discourses of the demonetisation, especially those from the pro-government voices which claimed that demonetisation was being carried out for the greater good and people would have to suffer a little while by standing in lines, but it would help flush out black money. The celebratory images about a policy which also drew several criticisms from the opposition political parties and other finance and economy experts are understandable because Janaagraha, and therefore IPAB, share a collaborative relationship with governments at various levels – city, state and centre. As the purpose of an initiative like IPAB was to curb bribery – and cash being one of the main means of paying a bribe – a policy like demonetisation which set out to decrease cash transactions was feted by the initiative. As the core emotions that come through the visuals suggest, people were happy to be sacrificing some of their time for the greater good of the nation. When the visual frames are examined from the perspective of these core emotions, it appears that the initiative was speaking in unison

with the central government and exhorting the public through evocative images to participate in the demonetisation drive with happiness and pride of contributing constructively to the Indian economy. This can further be understood in light of the co-operative relationship that the initiative shares with the state machinery, as they work closely with the federal and various state governments to create citizen engagement e-tools.

***Protest and question: how ‘Final War Against Corruption’ stood vis-à-vis the other two cases***

Our final case study is the ‘India Against Corruption’ movement, which was a series of street protests and hunger strikes carried out in Indian cities, and one of the Facebook pages that was born out of it. The movement captured the national media attention for one year between April 2011 and April 2012 (Chowdhury 2019). While the movement was started by grassroots anti-corruption activists who had drafted the ‘Lokpal’ (or anti-corruption ombudsman) bill, the protests truly gained momentum in April 2011, when Anna Hazare, a Gandhian figure carried out the first of several hunger strikes at Jantar Mantar, an important protest site at the heart of the capital, New Delhi. The movement which captured public attention for over a year between 2011 and 2012, with several important political outcomes, including the birth of a new political party, the Aam Aadmi Party (‘Common people’s party’ in Hindi), in 2012, whose primary agenda is fighting corruption and cleaning up the political system. The Facebook page which was officially associated to the movement is Final War Against Corruption (FWAC hereafter), created in 2012. The page declares that it is not affiliated to any party; however, at a quick glance, it is evident that the page engages in heavy criticism of the ruling political party (at the helm of the national government) and its policies, and to some extent, other opposition parties that dot the Indian political system. At the same time, the page often posts positive comments about the Aam Aadmi Party and its policies. As we will see in the following paragraphs, unlike the measured criticism of ADR and the strong support of IPAB, FWAC took a different stance – vociferous criticism – towards the demonetisation policy.

It is FWAC (created in April 2012; 599505 likes as of July, 2022) which has a significantly higher number of posts on demonetisation than the other two cases, all of which are heavily critical of the policy. As it was evident from the posts, the page engages in contentious issues in a provocative manner, which is distinct from the strategies of the other two pages/initiatives. The data retrieval process revealed that there were over 50 posts on the topic. While IPAB’s Facebook page is inactive today and ADR stopped posting on demonetisation after early 2017, FWAC has kept conversations on this topic alive with the most recent post occurring in November 2021, the fifth anniversary of the policy. After sifting through all the gathered posts, 17 were determined fit for the criteria set out for selection for in-depth analysis.

The visuals in these 17 posts can be classified under two broad categories: political cartoons and memes laced with dark humour with pictures and comic depictions of the top leaders of the government; and thought-provoking images and informative posters showing how demonetisation brought extreme hardship to the Indian people while they waited in lines to deposit cash while not curbing black money as the government had promised. These themes have remained consistent signalling the persistence of a particular political narrative coming

from the opposition and highlighting how politicised anti-corruption action and its evaluation can be in these contexts.

Moving to the two-step analysis that we performed with the visuals, we found that at the denotative level, the images of important cabinet members of the central government appeared several times in the memes. Notably, one of the people who was presented and critiqued the most, was the Prime Minister himself who had announced the demonetisation policy with many promises. At the stylistic level, the visuals offered bright palettes as many of the posts were humorous in nature.

The core idea behind both categories of visuals was criticising the government for its demonetisation policy which caused hardship to the working and middle classes while big corporates and the rich were not affected by such a move. This is reflected, time and again, through various satirical posts criticising especially the Prime Minister, who famously announced it and was appreciated by many actors of mainstream media for this sudden and decisive action taken to curb corruption. The macro-discourses that FWAC was drawing from were mainly coming from opposition voices who argued that the government did not understand the pain of the common person on the street and that the rich and powerful would not be affected by a policy like demonetisation. These discourses fed the core emotions that the visuals were trying to invoke: sometimes, they were sympathy and outrage (with one visual showing a policeman beating people with a stick), sometimes, it was contemplation (several posters juxtaposing promises related to the policy made by the government and the facts related to how much money re-entered the system due to its implementation). Almost all the visuals considered, however, were provocative, which we argue is a communicative strategy that FWAC adopts in its own discursive framing of the anti-corruption agenda, which is to consistently critique and to keep the pressure on the government on key policies, as expected in a democratic polity.

## **Discussion and conclusions**

Studies on the role of visuals in the struggle against corruption are still rare, despite the growing literature that explores the role of visuals to mobilise protests, to tease out the tensions in democratic and non-democratic settings and to produce debates with hitherto unarticulated stimuli (McGarry et al 2019, Rovisco and Veneti 2017, Doerr, Mattoni and Teune 2015, Mattoni and Teune 2014). This article contributes to expand knowledge on how civil society actors employ visuals to sustain their anti-corruption claims and, in so doing, it contributes to the emerging literature that seek to understand how images, cartoons, posters and other visuals might be employed to fight corruption from the grassroots. More specifically, the article investigated three civil society initiatives in India. Focusing on visuals produced and shared by them on their respective Facebook pages, we showed how these initiatives navigate through a complex political terrain to speak to the public on issues of (anti-)corruption.

We showed how the three grassroots activists' initiatives under investigation utilise(d) their Facebook pages to address a wide range of issues of corruption: each case addresses a specific type of corruption – ADR addresses political corruption related to political party and election

financing, IPAB retail/petty corruption and IAC big ticket corruption and scams. They also employed three types of anti-corruption mechanism when they began: protests in case of IAC, political participation for legal reforms in case of ADR and monitoring in case of IPAB. Strong stylistic differences are also reflected in the in-depth analysis of the visuals related to the demonetization policy, that the Indian government framed as an anti-corruption policy move: while ADR employs rather neutral and informative visuals, IPAB relies more on the affective depictions of individuals' engagement against corruption and IAC/FWAC mostly produce satirical visuals that employ dark humour as an affective strategy. Despite these differences, we illustrated that through the use of visuals, the activists' grassroots initiatives seek to shift the individual agency related to corrupt practices to a more pro-active collective agency that is able to produce a public debate on the issue of corruption, including different viewpoints on governmental initiatives.

In this regard, it must also be noted here that not all these strategies are against higher authorities even if they all rose from the grassroots. In case of IPAB, the initiative was celebratory about the government policy, as they saw it as a tool to fight corruption, which aligned with their own objective. It seems clear that the two grassroots activists' initiatives that are linked to more institutionalized social movement organizations and which depend heavily on donors for their activities - ADR and IPAB - steer clear of any political commentary and stay very close to their own mission. ADR shared a poster of an event at the aftermath of demonetisation to see if such a move, broadly proclaimed as one that would curb corruption, would indeed affect political financing. They did not criticise the government openly on their social media page and remained a neutral voice. In case of IPAB, their visuals, especially the ones posted in the immediate aftermath of the policy declaration, showed their appreciation and whole-hearted encouragement of the move. It is only the third case, IAC/FWAC, which is openly antagonistic towards the government policy and have continued to criticise it well into 2021. However, in this case, the grassroots activists' initiative is connected to a less institutionalized social movement organization which was created to critique the government in power. Thus, we see that the three collectives employ visuals following various styles, each of them mobilizing a different strategy of negotiations with those in power to engage the public to participate in a wide range of anti-corruption efforts. The three types of negotiation strategies employed by our cases showcase the complex and dynamic terrain of civil society efforts against corruption in a country like India as well as the individual ideologies that fuel each initiative.

Similar to what Orgad (2013) found with regard to the visual production of NGOs concerning human suffering, the intricate network of power relations in which activists are positioned seem to shape their visual framing of anti-corruption politics. This reflects the broader dynamics that characterize corruption in India. As Akhil Gupta's (1995) insightful essay already pointed out some decades ago, drawing on extensive ethnographic data, in India the state is ubiquitous insofar as people's lives are deeply entangled with local bureaucracies, especially in small towns where the state through its various institutions and actors is omnipresent. Corruption is rife in such spaces and even the acts of bribe-giving and bribe-taking are performative negotiations which require socio-cultural capital and deep contextual knowledge. In corruption research, a common assumption is that with greater knowledge about corrupt officials and



practices, the public will rise in indignation to seek accountability but in societies where corruption is endemic, people will instead react with resignation believing that no fruitful change is possible (Bauhr and Grimes 2014). However, following Gupta's account, it can be argued that lived experiences of corruption in India are rather negotiations where the public can negotiate the terms and conditions of corrupt practices. The public interacts with authority figures demanding bribes through attitudes which are neither indignation nor resignation but are rather linked to deliberations of various intensities in the negotiations with local power holders. Such negotiations with power holders, also happens, as we discussed above, at the level of civil society actors when they do engage in the production of anti-corruption discourses regarding specific policies. From this perspective, visuals let emerge such negotiations and make them somehow visible to the broader public of social media platforms.

To conclude, the article makes three contributions to the literature. First, it broadens the study of visuals as they are employed in anti-corruption activism, an under-researched area, by developing theoretical insights from the empirical investigation of three civil society organizations in India. Second, it adds to the literature on visual framing by proposing a fifth level of framing - contextual framing - inspired by communication studies and social movement studies, thereby expanding Rodriguez and Dimitrova's four levels of visual analysis. Finally, it provides a dynamic picture from the grassroots regarding the types of collective actors in the fray in society speaking against corruption through a comparison of the visuals posted by them on one particular issue. While the article's findings cannot be generalized, they open at least two paths for further research on visuals in anti-corruption from the grassroots. First, additional studies are needed to investigate how civil society actors employ visuals in contexts of flawed democracies to speak about corruption and sustain their anti-corruption struggles. In this regard, what seems to be particularly interesting is how visuals are tools through which civil society actors might navigate complex relationships with power holders in repressive contexts. Second, to fully understand visuals' role in countering corruption, studies that investigate how such visuals are produced by civil society actors and then understood by citizens should also be developed.

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