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**Article:**

Chowdhury, R, Banerjee, S and Nagarkoti, DS (2017) Anna Hazare: A Corruption Crusader and His Grassroots Wisdom. *Journal of Management Inquiry*, 26 (4). pp. 383-389. ISSN 1056-4926

<https://doi.org/10.1177/1056492616649441>

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## **Anna Hazare: A Corruption Crusader and his Grassroots Wisdom**

### **Abstract**

This paper explores the fight against corruption through the eyes of Anna Hazare, a renowned social activist from India, who spent more than 35 years of his life fighting corruption. Anna Hazare provides a detailed description of the anti-corruption movement he has led, provides his views on the World Bank guidelines to lower corruption, and highlights the need for sacrifice and righteousness on the part of leaders who fight corruption. The paper presents insights into these concepts, which deserve greater attention from organization scholars and must be researched further if the literature on corruption is to be enriched.

## **Introduction**

Anna Hazare (AH) is India's leading corruption crusader. This man of 78 years of age is regarded as a "Gandhi of the 21<sup>st</sup> century" who advocates non-violent mechanisms such as social movements and hunger strikes to bring social issues of concern into the limelight. He has no family, property, or fortune, lives in a temple, and wears only khadi (a hand-spun and hand-woven white cloth). Having been born into a poor family in the drought-prone village of Ralegaon Siddhi in the Indian state of Maharashtra, he spent his childhood in abject poverty and his youth serving in the Indian Army. After taking voluntary retirement from the Army, he returned to his village and has dedicated the rest of his life to making his village and country a better place. He has led a number of anti-corruption movements in India over the last three decades, which have resulted in legislation such as the Right to Information (RTI) Act and the creation of a Lokpal (ombudsman). The Indian government has recognized AH's contribution, and awarded him the Padma Shri (India's fourth highest civilian award) in 1990 and the Padma Bhushan (India's third highest civilian award) in 1992.

We interviewed AH for two main reasons. First, we wanted to bring a native resister's perspective to the issue of corruption and we could not think of an individual better suited to this endeavor. AH has spent more than 35 years of his life fighting corruption at all levels—village, state, and country—in India, and we believe his vast experience will assist organizational scholars in understanding the process of fighting corruption.

Second, AH fights corruption using techniques which are closely associated with Indian culture and civilization. For thousands of years, Indian civilization prided itself on its yogis and their non-violence, as well as extraordinary skills such as the ability to meditate for hours and live on a diet of one grain of rice a day. AH epitomizes the life of a yogi with his relinquishment of worldly desires for wealth and power. For example, when Dr. Rashedur Chowdhury (RC), who made the initial contact with AH, visited him in Ralegaon Siddhi in

December 2015, he observed that AH lived in an ordinary room in a temple with no belongings other than a bed. RC further noted that people came from far and wide to pay homage to this man and his extraordinary work and achievements. Even though his health is now deteriorating, visitors happily wait for many hours to see him. RC's conversation with the people of Ralegaon Siddhi also revealed their belief that AH had brought enormous development to the village over the last three decades. The villagers believed that AH had been able to eradicate corruption in their village. This had resulted in better irrigation, an improved water storage system, and better schooling for the village, which many neighbouring villages lack.

AH's lifestyle and world view resonate with his non-violent protests against corruption, making him a corruption crusader in India. Thus, this interview with AH may allow organization scholars to appreciate a yogi's perspective on corruption. More specifically, we draw the attention of organizational scholars to the concepts of sacrifice and righteousness discussed by AH during the interview. We understand that AH bases these concepts on his interaction with people in the grassroots of Indian society, and feel that they will allow organization scholars to better understand the fight against corruption in some parts of the world.

### **Interview**

Although RC made the initial contact with AH, the actual interview was later conducted by Dr. Sourindra Banerjee (SB) via a Skype call. The interview was conducted in Hindi and translated into English.

**SB.** Why did you choose to fight corruption?

**AH.** When we started rural development work in Ralegaon Siddhi, five people who were involved with this development work completed their PhD in rural development in 12 years. These people found that corruption had percolated to such depths that doing

development work had become difficult. Not even 10 paise was being used for the development of the village out of the one rupee that was being allocated for the development of the village. This led to the question: if only 10% of the allocated amount is used for development, then how will development happen? So I began the anti-corruption movement. The percolation of corruption in development work forced me to fight corruption. People weren't able to get their work done. Work could not be done without bribery so I started the mass movement called Bhrastachar Virodhi Jan Andolan (People's Movement Against Corruption). The issues of both development and corruption need to be addressed for the country. Using Bhrastachar Virodhi Jan Andolan, we put pressure on the government to pass the RTI legislation. We also pressurized the government to pass other laws such as the change in office delay rules, the change in transfer laws, etc., which hindered corruption to a great extent. This helped common people to get justice. So both of these are important: development work and the fight against the percolation of corruption. That is why I chose to address both these issues.

**SB.** Which form of corruption hinders the development of India most: bribery, fraud, or nepotism?

**AH.** Nepotism is the biggest hindrance to development. Nepotism is the reason behind fraud.

If nepotism is absent then bribery and fraud cases will be absent. So I think it is necessary to eliminate nepotism first and then bribery and fraud will end automatically.

**SB.** Why did you choose to fight corruption from a rural area?

**AH.** My life has been deeply influenced by the teachings of Mahatma Gandhi. He said that to change the country, first change the village. Until you change the village, the country will not change. The development which we are seeing today is exploiting petrol, diesel, rock oil, and coal, which are causing pollution. This pollution is the major cause of the increase in diseases. Even new hospitals are unable to cope with the rise in diseases. On the other

side, due to the exploitation of natural resources, the temperature is rising. This results in the melting of ice from the Himalayas and the melting of glaciers, which are causing a change in sea level. A change in sea level threatens cities beside the sea. That is why in the villages we are working on energy sources that do not exploit nature. We are doing development using the gift of nature. We store rain water and use this rain water to recharge the ground water level. This has developed agriculture in our village. It has resulted in the generation of employment and food. Gandhi said that to change the economy of the country, the economy of the village has to be changed. So for economic development it is extremely important not to exploit nature. Proper planning and execution will lead to sustainable development, otherwise they will lead to destruction. That is why I believe that the development of villages is vital.

**SB.** How did the teachings of Mahatma Gandhi and Swami Vivekananda help you in your fight against corruption?

**AH.** Mahatma Gandhi used to say “move to villages” and Swami Vivekananda used to say that there should not be any difference between the poor and the rich. They should be equal. So we carried out our rural development using the ideas of Mahatma Gandhi and Swami Vivekananda. But then we saw the percolation of corruption in development work. This raised the idea that if we only talked about development and if there was percolation of corruption then development would have no effect. So we started our fight against corruption. Wherever we saw corruption we tried to eradicate it by pressurizing the government through mass movements. For this we toured the Maharashtra several times. We established Bhraastachar Virodhi Jan Andolan in 33 districts and 252 blocks. Our organization became the medium through which we initiated our fight against corruption. This created a lot of pressure on the government. The pressure on the government resulted in laws like RTI, the change in office delay rules, the change in transfer laws, the

gramsabha (village decision-making body), etc. These laws put the brakes on corruption. Our fight for a Lokpal (ombudsman) gave us visibility on the national stage. Corruption in the Congress government was very high so we started an anti-corruption movement in Delhi. This inspired the entire nation to stand against corruption and millions of people protested with me on the streets of Delhi. The government felt pressurized and the Lokpal legislation was passed. So our fight against corruption started first in Maharashtra and then we fought for the whole nation. In Maharashtra, as I started the fight against corruption, six cabinet ministers were forced to resign and 400 officers were suspended. This created a positive atmosphere among the people of Maharashtra. This gave a lot of strength to the people of Maharashtra. This resulted in people organizing themselves into groups to fight corruption and the movement grew stronger. So the teachings of Mahatma Gandhi and Swami Vivekananda helped me start the development work but the realization about the percolation of corruption made me start the anti-corruption movement.

**SB.** The World Bank has provided guidelines for lowering corruption in countries. I will read out the guidelines and you can tell me your views about them. First, government employees should be paid a higher salary.

**AH.** Paying a higher salary is not a good idea. A salary should be paid according to the needs of employees. Our constitution says that the gap between rich and poor should not increase, rather it should decrease. If government employees are paid more while others in society remain poor, it will create inequality in society. To achieve equality in society, salaries should be paid according to needs.

**SB.** Second, transparency in government expenditure.

**AH.** Transparency is very important. Corruption increases due to a lack of transparency.

When the World Bank provides funds to countries, the people of that country should know what economic support the World Bank is providing to the people. The people of the

country should know how much money was provided, how that money was spent, and what work was done by spending that money. This has to happen because in a democracy the people are the rulers. All public representatives and government officials are servants of the people. So the servant has to inform the ruler how much money was provided, how that money was spent, what work was done by spending that money, and how the ruler was benefited by the expenditure.

**SB.** Third, the removal of red tape will lower corruption.

**AH.** The removal of red tape is also important. Both transparency and the removal of red tape are important. I fought for the RTI Act because it makes government officials answerable to the people of the country. The people of the country have the right to know because they are the rulers. People have the right to know how much money was allocated by the government, how that money was spent, and what work was done by spending that money. The RTI Act has put the brakes on corruption. The amount of money spent on government offices does not provide the output which justifies the money spent on them. This low output shows that there is corruption in government offices and it also wastes funds which could be used for development. For every piece of work, we find the expenses are higher than the output coming from the government offices. All government officials claim to serve the nation. The Bhagavad Gita talks about nishkam karma [selfless service]. I say to government officials, if you cannot do nishkam karma then don't do it. Draw the appropriate amount of salary that you need to cover your expenses. But do not draw more salary than the work you do. The output of government officials will increase if they are paid in accordance with the amount of work they have done.

**SB.** Fourth, government welfare benefits should be paid to individuals through cash transfers.

**AH.** There is limited transparency in government welfare benefits. Transparency is very important. Use new technology to transfer the welfare benefits directly into the bank



accounts of individuals who need it. This will ensure that the welfare benefits reach the right individuals. What the individual does with the money is the individual's decision. Due to the percolation of corruption, now the money does not even reach the right individuals. So this direct transfer of subsidies into individuals' bank accounts should happen. There should also be a system of online monitoring which monitors the sums of welfare benefits allocated by the ministry, how much welfare benefits reached the village, and how much was utilized for what work. This online system should be accessible by ministry officials and the people of the village.

**SB.** Fifth, new technology should be used to reduce corruption.

**AH.** Now the world has lots of technology. It is important to use such technology to curb corruption. Our panchayat (village-based local government) has only 2,000 people. All the houses in our village are served through an online monitoring system. The system keeps track of whether people in the village have paid their rent or have paid their water bill. All information is maintained online. This brings transparency, which is very important. The village school has 80 computers. Every class has digital projectors so that the teacher does not use chalk anymore. Every class also has CCTV. New technology improves the education of children. New technology should be utilized more.

**SB.** Why did you select hunger strikes as a means of protest? How effective are hunger strikes?

**AH.** Hunger strikes have several benefits. But not every man can do hunger strikes. Not every hunger strike will be as successful as Anna Hazare's hunger strike. To do a successful hunger strike, the person who does the hunger strike should have a righteous character. He should have good conduct and clear views. He should have led an impeccable life. His life should be a life of sacrifice and should be tolerant to insult. If these five things are present in a person, then that person's hunger strike will be

successful. If the person doing the hunger strike has a bad character then no one will pay any attention to his hunger strike. People will criticise this person. Mahatma Gandhi used to do hunger strikes. He was a man of righteous character, good conduct, and clear views. He led an impeccable life, a life full of sacrifices. He was tolerant to insult and always followed the path of truth. He never left the path of truth. The objective behind hunger strikes is that when a person's soul is in pain others around him/her should become empathetic. So when Mahatma Gandhi did hunger strikes, the people of the country became empathetic. Seeing Mahatma Gandhi's soul in pain evoked empathy among the people of the country. When I did a hunger strike in Delhi, seeing my soul in pain evoked empathy among the people of the country. Millions of people came into the streets to join me in protest. Young and old joined me in the protests. Therefore, the objective behind a hunger strike is to put your soul in pain, which evokes empathy from others.

**SB.** Will the Lokpal (ombudsman) help in reducing corruption?

**AH.** Government officials work in a hierarchical system. Above the Block [composed of several villages], there is the Chief Development officer, above whom is the Commissioner, and above whom is the Secretary. Sometimes there can be corruption starting at the top which makes the whole hierarchy corrupt. In such a situation, it is very difficult to control corruption. Hence, the creation of the Lokpal is necessary because even the Chief Minister of a state will be accountable to the Lokpal. To establish accountability, I started my fight for a Lokpal. The law has been made but the government is reluctant to act on it. The current government has been in office for one and half years but has not yet implemented the Lokpal. The government fears that the Lokpal will create too much transparency. But transparency is the right of the people. People should unite and fight for transparency. Transparency is our right and we must get it. The government is afraid of transparency, hence it has not been ready to create the Lokpal. When I fought for the

Lokpal, I united people and the government was forced to constitute the law on this.

Similarly, the government was not ready to make RTI and when I fought for eight years the government constituted the law.

**SB.** Some might say that individuals enter public bureaucracies without being corrupt but have no option but to conform to the norms there. How would you deal with this phenomenon?

**AH.** This is not true. No one can deny the fact that the power of the chair is such that even when ethical individuals occupy it, they start behaving in an unethical way. But it will not happen with every man. A man of principle will always think that he has to serve the nation and society. He will never get involved in any corrupt activity. Members of the Indian Administrative Service, Indian Police Service, and Indian Foreign Service are permanent officials of the government. The government cannot remove them from their jobs, the government cannot stop their salaries, the government cannot stop their perks; instead, the government can only transfer them from one part of India to another as a punitive measure. These officials are afraid of transfer. To avoid transfer, these officials get involved in corrupt practices. The revolutionary freedom fighter Bhagat Singh was not afraid to sacrifice his life for his country [he was convicted and hanged by the British during India's freedom struggle] and these officers are afraid of a transfer. If these officers are ready for a transfer, then no one can force them to act in a corrupt manner.

**SB.** Some would say that nothing can be done about petty corruption until top government officials stop being corrupt.

**AH.** It's right that people in lower positions are afraid to take action against a corrupt person at the top. In such a situation the ruler has to wake up. The ruler means the public. If the public is aware and if they get organized they can take action against the corrupt person at the top. A mass movement has great power within it. Actually, such corrupt officials are

afraid of slander. They know that if they get the label of being a corrupt officer then they will be defamed. So a mass movement is necessary to build pressure against government officials. Just look at me: I possess nothing. I live in a temple. I have a bed to sleep in and a plate from which to eat. I do not have any wealth, I do not have a bank balance, and I do not have any money. Yet I was able to organize a mass movement which created such pressure on the government that six cabinet ministers were forced to resign and 400 officers were suspended. But this cannot be done by everybody, in particular by people who have families, children and parents. As a young man, I decided that I would not marry and I would spend the rest of my life as a bachelor. The decision to remain a bachelor is a difficult decision for others. It is my expectation that if in the population of 125 crores [1.25 billion] just 638,000 people, since our country has 638,000 villages, are ready to make sacrifices for our country then we will do much better. Just 638,000 people have to make sacrifices for our country. You are able to see several grains of corn on a cob because one grain has sacrificed its life and gone under the soil. If that one grain did not go under the soil, then we would never see a cob full of grains. The sacrifice of that grain is needed for other grains to flourish. At the age of 25, I decided that I wanted to be that grain which would sacrifice itself. So now you can see cobs full of grains. For the 638,000 villages of India, we need 638,000 such grains for the villages to flourish. But unfortunately, we are not finding those 638,000 grains. Most people think why should they sacrifice their own lives by going under the soil for the benefit of others? But those corn grains who do not go under the soil are eventually crushed in a grinder for manufacturing cornflour. Those who do not sacrifice their lives for others are eventually crushed under the pressure of family commitments. We have a shortage of people who will help our country to develop. Our country has nature's gift of abundant sunlight, water, and fertile soil. We just have a famine of minds.

**SB.** You were arrested multiple times. Did you not get afraid and think of leaving activism?

**AH.** Not at all. I vowed at the age of 25 that as long as I lived, my purpose would be serving society and country and I would die while serving my community, my village, and my country. So I was never afraid. The mission of my life became serving my society and country till I die. So when the government put me in prison, my perception of going to prison was that this was an ornament made of gold or silver which I could wear with pride. Just look at Gandhi, Bhagat Singh, Sukhdev, Rajguru, and millions of people who went to prison for Indian independence. For them, going to prison became their ornament which they wore proudly. I never felt bad for being sent to prison. Once, a judge handed down a wrong sentence to me. But I did not oppose the wrong sentence. I said that I had faith in the judge and the judiciary. I also asked him to send me to prison. Then the judge said, “Considering all the good work you have done all your life and considering your age, I can pardon you provided you sign a bond stating that in future you will not speak against any minister.” I said, “I live in a free country. I am not a slave. I will never sign a bond; send me to prison.” Then I was sent to prison, and the whole nation stood up in my support and protested against the judgement. The protests were so strong that in a day I was pulled out of the prison and released. Hence, I think there is nothing to be afraid of with prison. People like me who go to prison for our society and country should wear going to prison as an ornament. You should be ashamed of going to prison if you have stolen something or have killed someone. If you are going to prison for the betterment of society, then going to prison is your ornament.

**SB.** It is also argued that in developing countries, government employees have such low salaries that petty corruption supplements their low salaries. This petty corruption helps government employees to make ends meet.

**AH.** The first thing is that people who indulge in taking bribes even after receiving a salary have clearly forgotten their death. People have to remember that they have to die one day, they have come empty-handed and will have to leave empty-handed. Alexander the Great ruled the world but when he passed away he went empty-handed. People who are drawing a salary and taking bribes have forgotten this. If they remembered this, they would not accept bribes while drawing a salary. They would not involve themselves in bad Karma. They would think about how they could do good for the society and the country.

**SB.** Does corruption hamper democracy?

**AH.** Absolutely. Corruption hampers democracy. Democracy means “of the people, by the people, and for the people.” Corruption hampers the democratic mechanism and it creates threats to democracy. That’s why I have been fighting corruption for 35 years: to safeguard the democracy of India. From 1857 to 1947, in the fight for independence, millions of people sacrificed their lives. Our dream was to remove the Englishman and bring democracy to the country. Although Englishmen were sent back to their home, democracy was not achieved. We are still fighting for democracy in India. After 35 years of fighting, we have achieved some success but not complete success. Corruption is an obstacle to democracy. It creates a threat to democracy.

**SB.** Do you think the previous Congress and government took adequate steps to address the issue of corruption?

**AH.** No, the steps taken by the Congress government were not enough. People drove them out of power because corruption increased in the government. Several ministers became corrupt. The evidence of corruption also clearly came out. Inflation increased due to growing corruption. The rise in inflation made living difficult for the common people. People did not want such a corrupt government. Therefore, they drove the government out of power and they elected another political party to form the government.

**SB.** Do you think the current BJP government is taking adequate steps to address the issue of corruption?

**AH.** We have not seen anything yet. Our people are hoping for achhe din [good days] to come. They are hoping for achhe din because they have been promised achhe din by the BJP government. I have not seen any reduction in corruption. Even today, work cannot be done without paying bribes.

**SB.** Do you think Delhi's Aam Aadmi Party government is taking adequate steps to address the issue of corruption?

**AH.** Arvind [Kejriwal, Chief Minister of Delhi] has good views. We have worked together in the past. But now he is the Chief Minister in the government so he has to work with different types of people. Some of the people surrounding him and joining his party might not have high integrity. It is not always possible for the party to do background checks due to a shortage of manpower. However, Arvind himself is a man of high integrity. He has plans to reduce and end corruption. We fought together against corruption for many years and he was actively involved in the movement.

**SB.** What is the involvement of youth in the fight against corruption?

**AH.** We see a high level of involvement of the youth in the fight against corruption. We saw this in the movement which took place in Ramlila Ground in Delhi. And we have seen this in the last 35 years of anti-corruption movement in Maharashtra. The youth want to say something passionately but they are directionless. When our movement took place in Delhi, Ramlila Ground, at that time our youth, college students, young men and women contributed to the movement. How should they start working for society and the country, and how do they cover their living expenses while working for society and the country? These are important questions for them. Without these questions, the youth can become a massive force to fight corruption. The youth of this country does not want corruption.

**SB.** Is there a difference in corruption between rural and urban areas?

**AH.** The word “corruption” has the same meaning in rural and urban areas. The types of corruption are different. For instance, the corruption in villages involves siphoning of development funds. There is so much percolation of corruption that the development of villages does not happen. In the city, for example, there is corruption in roadworks. The amount of money that should be spent on road construction is not spent. This causes potholes in the roads within a year. Therefore, both are different types of corruption, but “corruption” means the same in both villages and cities. Our country is constituted of villages and cities. We will have to pay attention to end corruption in both cities and villages.

**SB.** How can the man in the street make corrupt government officials and politicians accountable?

**AH.** First, he should be a man of principle. Second, he should have both a social and a national perspective. Third, he has to know that he is the ruler of the country. He should understand the above three. The condition today is that no one feels that they are the rulers and nor does anyone convey this information to them. Like in Delhi, where I led the Lokpal movement. The movement created awareness among people and it did make a vast difference. Once people were made aware they began to speak. Corruption did not vanish but the movement made a huge difference. Corruption did not end but the people became brave. In various places people started coming forward and drove the movement further. So it is necessary to build this attitude among people. People have to realise that they are the rulers of this country. Why did corruption start? From 26 January 1950, the people became the rulers of this country. The government exchequer belongs to the people of this country. But we did not become aware that we are the rulers. It was the work of the ruler to monitor where his money was invested, what his expenses were, but the ruler did not



see this. He sent his servants to do this, like Members of the Legislative Assembly, Members of Parliament, etc. The ruler sent his servants and slept. And now, slowly, the government exchequer is getting empty. So the ruler has woken up. There would not have been any theft if the ruler had been awake all the time. So now we will have to wake up the ruler.

**SB.** The purpose of this interview has been to understand your views on corruption and the actions you think should be taken. Are there any issues we did not discuss which you think we should have? What are those issues? And what are your thoughts about them?

**AH.** Many new issues have arisen in recent times. One thing that is extremely important is that until we eliminate corruption we will not be able to ensure a bright future for our society. If we want to shape our country's future we need to make sure that we will not be involved in corruption at a personal level and nor will we let others get involved in any corrupt activity. Every person in India must do this. Like I have done in my life. I am not corrupt and I have not let others become corrupt. If every person implements this in their life then then we can eliminate corruption.

## **Conclusion**

The organization literature views corruption negatively (Nielsen 2003, Mckinney and Moore 2003; Uhlenbruck et al. 2006). Some of the negative analyses that the organization literature puts forward in its regard are that it erodes respect for the law, that it makes the public cynical, that it makes economic transactions costly, that it impedes development, and that it has a corrosive impact on the long-term economic health of the country which it affects (Nielsen 2003, Mckinney and Moore 2003; Uhlenbruck et al. 2006; Gordon and Miyake, 2001; Galang 2012; Torsello and Vernard 2016). Organization scholars have suggested that a strong regulatory framework and effective law enforcement are key drivers in the fight against corruption (Torsello and Vernard 2016).

In his interview, AH agreed with this view. He identified that the percolation of corruption impedes development, harms the future of the Indian economy, makes it difficult for people to have their work completed by government officials, and makes younger people lose faith in the law. AH also ardently believes that a strong regulatory framework coupled with transparency, accountability, reduced bureaucracy, and advanced technology is needed to fight corruption. The objective of his activism has been to encourage the adoption of new and effective laws such as RTI and Lokpal.

Furthermore, AH stresses certain concepts which have been overlooked by organization scholars. He argues for the need for sacrifice and righteousness among the leaders in our societies if corruption is to be combated. He emphasizes that leaders have to rise above selfishness, worldly desires, and greed for wealth and power and make sacrifices in order to purge society of corruption. Such behaviour would evoke empathy among the other members of society that in turn will encourage more people to join the movement for the elimination of corruption.

These concepts of sacrifice and righteousness have been deeply ingrained in the Indian culture and civilization and invoked by India's leaders for centuries. To name just a few examples, Gautama Buddha, King Ashoka, Swami Vivekananda, and Mahatma Gandhi all used these concepts to mobilize people in India. So, too, does AH utilize them to organize people at the grassroots of Indian society and bring them together in the fight against corruption. We argue that the concepts of sacrifice and righteousness deserve attention from organization scholars and must be researched further if the literature on corruption is to be enriched.

**Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

**Acknowledgements**

We are grateful to Aamer Valiulla and Aman Trigunait for helping us in conducting this research.

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