

India, Delhi elections : Lessons for the left of the Aam Aadmi Party Campaign

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The Delhi elections are over. As we await the results, it is perhaps time for the left to do some serious reflection on the AAP campaign. A number of Exit Polls suggest that the AAP is poised for victory, or at least that it will become the party with the highest number of seats, while the Congress is facing a near total wipe out.

The Exit Polls :

Poll conducted by	AAP	BJP	Congress	Others
ABP News-Nielson	43	26	1	0
India Today- Cicero	38-46	19-27	3-5	0-2
News 24- Today's Chanakya	48	22	0	0
India TV-C Voter	35-43	25-33	0-2	0-2
News Nation	41-45	23-27	1-3	0-1
India News- Axis	53	17	0-2	0
Datamineria	31	35	4	0

The exit poll is not the final result, and there are clearly variations. But out of seven, only one put the BJP ahead of AAP. Five predict an absolute majority for AAP. It is certain, that AAP has not only smashed the Congress, but has also made significant inroads into votes received by the BJP not only during the parliamentary elections, but also the last assembly elections. Last time round, BJP came first, with 31 seats, followed by AAP with 28, the Congress got 8, and the Akali Dal, the Janata Dal (United) and independents got 1 each.

Today's Chanakya had also carried out a caste and community based exit poll. This threw up interesting figures. While only a small proportion of Muslims have voted for or admitted to have voted for the BJP, here the principal loser is the Congress. While the exit poll gave 8% of the share of Muslim votes to the BJP, the Congress fared little better, with only 12%, while the AAP gets 71%. What is remarkable, however, is that the AAP has an absolute majority of Scheduled Caste votes (55%), and a lead in every other segment compared to the BJP - including Brahmins, Baniyas and Punjabis. It is in this context that we should look at certain of the actions of the AAP and of Kejriwal.

The AAP surge has also wiped out another party—the Bahujan Samaj Party, which had polled just under 3 per cent votes in 2008. In 2013, it fared very badly. And since then, AAP has consolidated

the Dalit vote.

The Politics of AAP

AAP emerged out of the anti corruption movement. Arvind Kejriwal felt that only a movement on the streets was inadequate, and wanted to contest elections. This was not supported by everyone, and the movement effectively split. The Anna Hazare led movement had focused entirely on corruption. Moreover, there had been suspicions of links between what was being called Team Anna, and the BJP. It is worth remembering that while the congress was in the central Government, BJP provincial governments also had major questions about corruption and their role in such corruption. Like the media, which in the run up to the elections of 2014 highlighted Congress inspired corruption and played down the rest, Team Anna did something similar. Mohan Bhagawat, the RSS leader, claimed that Anna Hazare's anti-corruption movement was actually supported by the RSS. A few months later, when Team Anna launched a Voter Awareness programme, it dropped its secular mask altogether. Led by Kiran Bedi, they campaigned hand in hand with a number of Hindutva outfits, such as the Manav Utkarsha Sewa Sansthan, formed and led by Rakesh Kumar Premil and Ram Kumar Yadav, prominent Sanghis of Fatehpur subdivision of Barabanki district, where the campaign started [1].

So Kejriwal's call to the movement to float its own electoral wing did not go down too well with that section of the movement, including Hazare himself, who were collaborating with the Sangh Parivar. Regardless of Kejriwal's point of origin, this put him on a collision course.

The discourse of the Aam Aadmi Party was clearly not a socialist or working class discourse. This was often seized upon by the left, as for example in 2014, when CPI(M) General Secretary Prakash Karat excoriated AAP for being in favour of neoliberalism. Writing in the party journal « People's Democracy », Karat quoted AAP ideologue Yogendra Yadav as saying that the new party wanted « an alternative not just to the Congress or the BJP but also the Left ». Karat pointed out that AAP leader and former Delhi chief minister Arvind Kejriwal had told a CII meeting that the government should not do business and this should be left to the private sector. « This refrain of 'government has no business in business' and all should be left to the private sector is typical of the neo-liberal outlook which prevails around the world, » the CPI-M leader said.

But in order to contest elections, on what they perceived as an Aam Aadmi discourse, they found it necessary to go beyond a one point campaign over corruptions. And it soon became evident that the AAP campaign was de facto to the left of the CPI and the CPI(M).

At the same time, it is possible to argue that Kejriwal and the other AAP leaders were far more alive to the reality of caste in India and its implications, than were orthodox Communists from the undivided CPI and its principal heirs. This was symbolised by Kejriwal's choice of the broom for his election symbol.

There are many who have ridiculed or criticised Narendra Modi for his Swachh Bharat campaign. But not all have understood the compulsions behind it. Where did he begin his campaign, and what were his aims ? It is seldom remembered that Gandhi's South Africa period had seen him campaign for community toilet cleaning, which he felt would break up many deeply held casteist values. For Modi, the former RSS Pracharak, this was killing two birds with one stone. He could take a "Gandhian" weapon, so that his major opponents would be disarmed. And he would pose his government, and especially himself, as a voice of the Dalits. How better to do it, while working overtime for a capitalist rightwing regime deeply steeped in Brahmanical politics, than to take this as a symbolic gesture ? And it worked, to a considerable extent. He started his campaign from the

Valmiki dominated slum. This was no accident, though local residents complain that it was a sham, as they were kept away by the police so that the VIP sweepings could be performed in peace.

But election analyses, for example in Haryana, have shown that the BJP trumped its opponents because it had received the biggest chunk of the Dalit votes, most of them being Valmikis. So the ploy was based on an assessment of what had been achieved. The limits of such gestures should however be kept firmly in mind. With a Brahmanical Hindutva force in the ascendant, token gestures are all that will happen. Meanwhile, real oppression of Dalits is set to get as new lease of life. As Sociologist Abhijit Kundu, on whose analysis the foregoing is based, reminds us, the very day Modi's stunt in the Dalit area was shown globally, a young woman was burnt to death in Tamil Nadu for marrying a Dalit man [2].

And in Delhi, Modi came up against a major problem. The basis of the so-called Modi wave was a combination of on one hand massive bourgeois support, far surpassing anything the Congress had received in the 2014 elections, and on the other hand a balancing of the aspirations of the young, urban or urban-oriented and modernising voter (47% of India's voters are below 35) with the agenda of Hindutva, the last being both Modi's own firm conviction as well as the force that motivated the cadre base of the RSS-VHP. Within the framework of rightwing bourgeois politics, where the battle was between a Modi-led Sangh campaign and a Sonia-Rahul Gandhi duo led Congress campaign, the latter totally tied up in corruption issues highlighted by the media, and responsible for the economic devastations that had hit the poor, the battle was without a serious contest. But in Delhi, the AAP posed a different kind of challenge. In the first-past-the-post election system in India, we remember the votes our favourite party has obtained only when it has lost. Only the anti-BJP commentators took pains to stress that the BJP got a majority of seats with only 31% votes. In Delhi, the BJP swept, with 46.1% votes. But the AAP had also increased its votes to 32.9%.

And the AAP represented a similar combination in certain ways as the Modi-led BJP, but with two important differences. First, AAP also had youth, including urban middle class youth. The present writer had been in Delhi for a week during the 2013 assembly elections, and the AAP volunteers were everywhere. They were very often young, articulate, and aspired to clean politics (which at that moment tended to mean non-Congress politics) but without the communal hatred baggage projected by Modi.

And the AAP, as a result of the rupture between the Hazares and Kiran Bedis and Kejriwal and his supporters, was moving in a direction that involved looking at socio-economic issues from a less abstract way, without automatically assuming the complete domination of neoliberalism, pace Prakash Karat.

The Left and AAP

Indeed, the Left has had a dismal record in connection with neoliberalism. While its advocates like Vijay Prasad are busy serving up warmed over Popular Frontism, that strategy has meant accepting neoliberalism. Between 1992 and 1998, the left first "tolerated" a minority Narasimha Rao government, which pushed through the first stages of globalisation's agenda in India, and then took part in a United Front Government in which P. Chidambaram was the Finance Minister, and in which capacity he delivered what has repeatedly been called the "dream budget", removing the 40% Income Tax slab, reducing corporate taxes, increasing FII investment limits and laying the grounds for the first round of disinvestment in Public Sector undertakings. The left voted for these measures. None of these prevented the predictable rise of the BJP, culminating in Vajpayee's NDA government.

Not recognising its folly, or better, not having any alternative, since waging serious class struggle

was never an option, the left went on combining de facto genuflections to neoliberalism, above all wherever it was in government, like in West Bengal, with rhetorical anti-neoliberalism coupled with support for the Congress as the lesser evil in 2004, when after the elections it allowed the UPA government to be formed with its support, and went on supporting it through a deepening rightwing thrust [3]. The result of this, as well as the result of state level full throttled support to neoliberal capitalism in West Bengal, was the utter rout of the left in its decades-long bastion [4].

The AAP, with what can be called a petty bourgeois hegemony and orientation, nonetheless grasped that to win elections it had to have a wider agenda than just being against corruption. It was also able to understand that there was a need to distinguish itself from Hindutva. Indeed, Hazare and many of his supporters, like Bedi, had been Modi cheerleaders for a long time before Bedi took the final plunge. Comrades of Radical socialist along with other activists in the social movements in Gujarat had crossed swords with them over such issues [5].

This was done in two ways. First, from 2013 onwards, AAP had a social agenda. The promises like clean drinking water, opposition to inflated electricity bills, support for autorickshaw drivers, etc brought it real gains. And on getting into government, within the 49 days that he was there, Kejriwal took certain measures. These included an order of the audit of power distribution companies, a certain amount of free water for houses with metred water, the scrapping of FDI in retail, thereby blocking companies like Wal-Mart from moving on into Delhi ; and an FIR against Mukesh Advani, one of India's most powerful capitalists.

The AAP manifesto for 2015 went further. It called for state provision of equitable access to higher education, community involvement in school education, the expansion and strengthening of the public health system, filling up vacant posts for doctors (40000 and paramedics and nurses (15,000), etc.

It could be argued that pre-election promises are a dime a dozen. But if we look at promises made by others, the difference becomes clear. In its 34 years in West Bengal, the Left Front did not open a single new government hospital in Kolkata. Instead, it started privatizing parts of existing hospitals through the so-called PPP model [6].

Finally, the AAP put forward a definition of secularism not often followed by the left. While the Left has condemned the BJP (rightly) for using sadhus and religious figures of all kinds in its election campaigns, it has all too often roped in religious figures from the minorities for the same electoral purposes. For the same reason, much of the Indian left has been unable to take a categorical stance against minority fundamentalism, not realising that in south Asia, a minority on one side of the border becomes a majority on the other, and they feed each other. So when AAP declared that it did not desire the support for it declared by Bukhari, the Shahi Imam of the Jama Masjid, for it wanted support from all Indians regardless of their religious orientation, it was breaking with a long tradition. And in doing so, it also cut the ground from beneath the BJP and its claims that its opponents were anti-Hindu, pro-Muslim, etc, without entering the field of communal politics.

The Lessons for the Left

After what we have already discussed, the lessons for the left are not difficult to understand. The AAP is not a model for the left. There are no reasons to forget some of the other dimensions of the AAP. Because of its "post-ideological" pretensions, in fact it has at times taken very bad stances. One has only to remember the racist treatment of Africans when the AAP was in government. Moreover, at the all India level, this model simply cannot work, since the foundations of AAP were the anger of a very specific over governed population - the electorate of Delhi. For decades they had been forced

to choose between the Jan Snagh/BJP, and the Congress. The rise of AAP was in the context of a city, the rise of repeated civil society movements (not only the anti-corruption movement, but also the anti-rape movement after 16 December 2012).

But the rise of AAP shows that social movements and political parties need new kinds of interconnections. A revolutionary Marxist politics does not mean a dogmatic repetition of the resolutions of fifty or thirty years back, under changed circumstances. A new generation of working people have grown up in India. Remember, 47% of the voters are under 35. Around 18% are aged between 15 and 24. Since people get voting right at 18, this means there is now a substantial body of electorate which has no memory of the Soviet Union or its collapse, and which has seen the violence of neoliberal capitalism but does not see old style commandist ("Stalinist") communism as an option either. There have emerged various kinds of movements, in different parts of India. And they are increasingly rejecting the assumption that THE PARTY knows best. They do not even see one party as *the party*. Nonetheless, Marxists do have real gains to bring to such movements. To do so, however, they need to be parts of the movements, rather than the people on outside who keep telling the movements that these are all irrelevant or secondary, and the real thing to do is to follow the decisions of the last party Congress.

On the other hand, a revolutionary Marxist intervention in social movements can only be correct if it starts by defending the fundamental interests of the toilers. Which is where the lessons of the AAP are so valuable. Even if in a purely empirical way (as we do not know what went on inside the AAP, let us assume, as a worst case scenario, that nobody consciously proposed leftwing policies, even though it is known that many leftists joined or campaigned for the AAP), the AAP decided to take up social issues that matter to the poor, without first looking over its shoulders to see whether the Congress would agree. The Left, to be a credible left, has to abandon entirely the tried and tested way to disaster, which is called united front, but which is really a front with the bourgeoisie. A real united front is a united front of working class parties, a front, under today's changed scenario, of working class parties and mass organisations and social movements. The AAP interacted with local communities, built itself through the induction of grassroots activists. Through all that period various kinds of leftists made critical comments. Without disagreeing with all of them, our stress here is on what we need to learn from the AAP experience.

Finally, the AAP showed that defence of minorities need not mean alliance with or mutual patronage between, secular parties and minority community religious figures. As the West Bengal elections come nearer, and as one sees the BJP whipping up Hindutva fanaticism on one hand and the TMC move equally in the direction of seeking to polarise the electorate by protecting Muslim communalism, there is bound to be (indeed there are already clear signs of) heart burn within the left, and by that one does not only mean the CPI(M), but also forces to the left of the CPI(M). Some of them too find it objectionable if Muslim communalists are in any way targeted. While secularism in India has to clearly identify Hindu communalism as the primary threat, and while if it is a matter of actual defence of minorities attacked by Hindutva forces, as have happened not only in Gujarat, but in Madhya Pradesh, in Odisha and elsewhere, one may find oneself resisting the hooligans and armed killers side by side with members of minority communal organisations (as distinct from persons of majority and minority origin fighting together), this does not mean we should not expose minority communalism for a dangerous and wrong politics ; and it certainly does not mean orienting to minority communalism in the hope of a few short term recruits or a few votes. Let us note that the BJP brought in MPs from all over the country, Modi campaigned personally in a big way, and huge sums were spent in the last few days trumpeting the achievements of the Central Government. In other words, while it is true that the ruling class wants Modi, will back Modi, it does not mean that the game is so completely over that struggles do not matter. What the AAPs surge, regardless of the exact result [7], shows is that for the left, the road ahead lies in overcoming sectarianism, fusing

with mass struggles, taking up seriously basic issues affecting toilers, being militantly secular, and completely rejecting the bourgeois parties –not merely the Congress(I), but each and every one of them. As the CPI(M) congress nears and sections express dissent with the Buddhadev Bhattacharjee line, it is for them to recognise that that is not enough. A fuller rethinking is necessary if they want the left to be meaningfully left. Meanwhile, for the far left, if it really believes that the Sangh is a fascist force, then overcoming sectarianism and forging an alternative left instrument is essential.

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<http://www.radicalsociologist.in/articles/national-situation/681-lessons-of-the-aam-aadmi-party-campaign-for-the-left>

Notes

[1] For further information, see BJP's Team B

<http://www.openthemagazine.com/article/nation/bjp-s-team-b#.TzgSdcSRIRk.facebook>

[2] [young woman burnt to death.](#)

[3] On this, see on ESSF (article 1037), Kunal Chattopadhyay and Soma Marik, [The Left Front and the United Progressive Alliance](#) and Kunal Chattopadhyay and Soma Marik, 'Elections and the Left in India', <http://isreview.org/issue/66/elections-and-left-india>

[4] This process was charted in the second of the two articles cited in the foregoing note, as well as in Soma Marik and Kunal Chattopadhyay, ['The Defeat of the Left Front and the Search for Alternative Leftism'](#).

[5] ['A Letter to Anna Hazare regarding his Reported endorsement of the Narendra Modi Government'](#).

[6] For this I am indebted to the unpublished Ph D thesis of Amrita Bagchi, 'The Decline of Public Healthcare in Calcutta', Jadavpur University.

[7] Including the fear of massive EVM tampering expressed by a section. See Nivedita Menon, 'BJPs bravado on exit polls – do they know something about EVMs that we don't?', in <http://kafila.org/>