

# India: AAP victory and the challenges of a new politics

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Let me say it once again, the AAP victory cannot be understood outside the post-ideological moment. I have argued earlier on Kafila (here and here), that one of the key features of AAP was its post-ideological character – one that moved relentlessly beyond many verities of 20<sup>th</sup> century ideologies and binaries like state versus market, or religious/communal versus secular and so forth. To reiterate, this formation represents the spirit of the moment that is itself post-ideological.

But it is also time perhaps, to underline that post-ideological does not mean post-political. At least, not any longer. There is no doubt that a politics of AAP is gradually and clearly coming into view – but it is a politics whose edifice is being built from the bottom up. It does not derive from any settled ideological blueprint that comes ready-made – a blueprint around which a politics is then sought to be constructed. That was the project of all 20<sup>th</sup> century ideologies, which had already divided the world into neat camps and made the divisions into permanent battle lines. Ideologies became repositories of Truth – universal and unchanging, taking away from politics the very contingency and fluidity that defines it. Ideology, in other words, was fundamentally anti-political. In parenthesis, it may be relevant to point out that that is why, perhaps, Marx himself celebrated the Paris Commune by underlining that the workers “had no ideals to realize, no blueprints to which the world must conform”; they merely had to set free the new forces that were challenging the old order. Socialism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was not yet an ideology in that sense.

Politics, once freed from the shackles of ideology, liberates itself also from the party-apparatuses that embody them. That is when it reconnects with life itself. In fact, politics ceases when ideology takes over. Politics must take place only by interrupting / disrupting the ideological moment. It is therefore always an adventure – open ended and without the comforts provided by ideology.

This politics sans ideology has rightly left behind the carping ideology-warriors – not caring even to respond to their smug and self-satisfied ‘critiques’. This politics has rattled not only the ideology-warriors of the Left but also of the the economic and cultural Right. Witness the cultural rightists of the Hindutva brigade desperately trying to paint this self-professed nationalist, waving the national tricolour, as a ‘traitor’, a Pakistani agent (remember Modi’s ‘AK-49’ speech in Banaras), as anti-national (see the video of Hindu Mahasabha leader Omji who has threatened to kill Kejriwal). There is clearly something deeply discomfoting about this nationalism that unsettles the Hindu Right. Similarly, witness the warriors of the economic right, Surjit Bhalla and Tavleen Singh, unable to decide whether to rant against Kejriwal or praise him. Bhalla of course, was trying to convince us that it was ‘advantage BJP’ all the way, till he discovered ‘Dilli ko gussa kyon aayaa. Like the ideology-warrior that he is, Bhalla is keen to separate out the ‘economic performance’ of the Modi government from the list of issues that may have affected what is clearly a vote against the Modi

government. He thus zeroes in exclusively on 'love jihad', 'haramzade' and such other matters as factors responsible for BJP's unprecedented defeat. (On a different level, I too would like to believe these issues had some effect). Tavleen Singh has long derided 'Kejriwal's nautanki' and predicted the "end of the road for Kejriwal". She too comes out more nuanced now than ever before, conceding that though she is 'far from being a povertarian', she is 'sickened to see shiny malls rise out of squalid slums' or 'see the finest private hospitals and schools sit beside government schools and hospitals that are a public disgrace'. One is not sure what to make of this change of heart but it is perhaps not correct to rule out a genuine rethink on the part of these two commentators. If the AAP victory could make right wing ideology-warriors re-examine even a few of their assumptions, as it has prompted many on the Left to do, it will be no mean achievement.

### **Beyond the 'Secular' versus 'Communal' Divide**

One arena where such a stance of the Aam Aadmi Party was evident was in the sphere of what has been called the secular/ communal question. This is by far the most difficult issue to deal with. In the heyday of secular-nationalist hegemony, this never managed to become a politically or electorally salient issue. But since the mid-1980s, and especially since the mobilization for the demolition of Babri Masjid began, liberals, leftists and secularists of all hues have been fighting a rearguard battle, conceding more and more ground to the Hindu Right.

To the sinking secularist morale, the rise of Dalit and Backward Caste politics in the early 1990s appeared like a straw they could hang on to. It was hoped that the Dalit-bahujan discourse of caste could be used as an effective counter to the homogenizing discourse of Hindutva. Even though the BSP was not averse to alliances with the BJP whenever it felt the need to do so, secularists, leftists and liberals of different hues did not give up hope. OBC politics, especially in the form of Samajwadi Party in UP and the Janata Dals in Bihar, took on the mantle of secularism and did indeed show some guts in the initial phases to take a firm stand against the politics of the Hindu Right. Very soon, however, that degenerated into another version of Congress politics that the BJP labelled 'vote bank politics'. This politics was fundamentally about making periodic symbolic gestures about minorities and minority rights without actually taking any steps in the direction of addressing their substantive issues. Periodically, you could show the minorities the fear of the RSS and make them fall in line. They became a hostage of this so-called secular politics. For the OBC parties this strategy could work as long as a Muslim-OBC alliance was assured – for that could be a winner in numerical terms. However, effectively that amounted to surrendering to the Hindutva brigade by allowing it to set the terms of politics. The division of the political space along Hindu-Muslim issues basically meant a reordering of the terrain. This was Hindutva's turf and sooner or later, if it could manage a majority-minority divide, they would be sure to win. And they did manage it this time.

For any party or political formation wanting to avoid the pitfalls of that secular-communal or majority-minority political division, the challenge was huge. It had to be nothing less than the changing of the political terrain itself – taking the battle to another terrain where the majority of Hindus (that is also to say, the poor) could make common cause with the majority of Muslims (also the poor). It was the fashioning of a new discourse where economic and 'class' issues were brought to the fore without recourse to the clichés of 'class politics'. This was a new discourse of a specifically urban politics that could draw in everyone – including the Dalits, the poor Muslims and the poor non-dalit Hindus – on issues of infrastructure and good government. The audacious rejection of the appeal of Imam Bukhari to Muslims to vote for AAP was an element of this understanding. The fact that the Bukhari's appeal was widely believed to have been orchestrated by the BJP itself, shows how deeply BJP politics is invested in this secular-communal game. This game has over the decades suited both sides of the secular-communal divide making the Muslims (and

minorities in general) hostage to this brand of politics.

A word here about the Kejriwal as a 'believer' that came across, once again, yesterday at the speech delivered by him at the swearing-in ceremony at Ramlila Grounds. He invoked God - uparwala - repeatedly when he talked about the massive victory of AAP. 'This kind of victory, this performance cannot be due to any human effort' he said, much to the derision of Facebook radicals for whom nothing really is at stake except their own purity. In my understanding, Kejriwal's invocation of 'the universe' and 'uparwala' has to do with the stupendous nature of the task that confronts anyone who wants to deal with the vexed inter-religious issue that one is confronted with in India. That was how Gandhi - Kejriwal's spiritual ancestor - too fashioned himself once he came to India, though he too had been close to becoming an atheist when in London. How do you convince millions, if you do not yourself believe, that the task of inter-community unity is nothing short of divinely ordained? How do you address the believer if you are not yourself one? This is not simply an instrumental use of religion. My sense is that Kejriwal has himself begun to believe that this is a divinely ordained task where he and his cohorts are mere nimittas, as he put it at the swearing-in - the medium or the modality - of a larger purpose.

But the difficulty does not end here as AAP's own experience shows. The Trilokpuri violence for example, did not show AAP in a particularly good light as far as intervening in the situation was concerned. Neither the local AAP MLA nor other AAP activists could 'afford' to be seen standing in defense of the minorities who were clearly the wronged. Now, I do think that AAP tried in other ways to make up for it but that really is not of much help, if one loses the ability of standing on the side of the wronged, simply because it might be electorally damaging. One has to be able to delink and identify at least some level of politics that is not determined by the electoral calculus. Can we think today of a Mahatma Gandhi undertaking a lone trek for communal harmony or sitting on hunger strike demanding that the violence be stopped? Perhaps there are no Gandhis among us today. But we can think of another model where we have a network of organizations and outfits, relatively autonomous of each other - not all of whom have to be sensitive about electoral results. As a matter of fact, that is to some extent how the Hindutva organizations function, where BJP is only the electoral-parliamentary wing as it were. Of course, we do not need an RSS replica but it is useful to think of other levels of organizations that maintain their own autonomy of the electoral-parliamentary party and act in tandem when necessary. This requires a different imagination of the party-form itself.

### **'Development', 'Populism' and the Popular**

The change of terrain discussed above could be effected because the appeal was not a simple 'class' directed one. Kejriwal's (and AAP's) discourse was not positioning itself as a the sworn enemy of the rich and of business. It was rather, suggesting that it is not business itself that is the enemy of the poor but certain practices of big corporations and government that lead to the loot of the commons.

This issue is important because, in the coming months the really big battles will unfold around questions of 'development', 'reform' and the economy more generally. 'Populism' has generally been a term of abuse in elite circles and carries the connotation of pandering to the 'people' and all their 'illogical demands' without any consideration. As illiterate media anchors are fond of asking: where will the money come from? (paisa kahan se ayega?) Do we have any name yet, in either the hallowed discipline of economics or of any other social science, that describes the pandering to corporate capital and the elite (malls, freeways, luxury living) and all their illogical demands? These demands, we know, can include anything from demanding the most fertile, multi-cropping land for setting up their industry at throwaway prices to doing away with environmental clearances even though an

ecological disaster stares us directly in the face. Yet, neither social science disciplines nor media anchors have found a word to describe this madness. Not one of them has to my knowledge cared to ask: where will the resources come from? Who will pay for our polluted air and depleting water resources?

(It seems that promoting the interests of the poor is 'populism' and promoting the interests of the rich, 'development'!)

There is one term that has acquired some popularity lately, namely crony capitalism. But that is grossly misleading, for it conveys the idea that there is something like a clean capitalism as well that functions according to the rules of the game. True, not all capital is like the Ambanis and the Adanis but all capital functions by influencing government decisions on taxation, finance, labour laws, environmental clearances, land acquisition and so on in ways that are not above board and transparent. A better term for this tendency perhaps would be corporate-cronyism, i.e. acting as capitalist buddies. Once again, in parenthesis, I should add that I distinguish here between two kinds of businesses – capitalist and noncapitalist – and not all businesses function like corporate capital. I shall return to that issue in a moment.

One thing that Kejriwal was clear about in his swearing-in speech was that in the last brief stint in office, they had realized that there was no shortage of money. He did not add but I suppose that if one were to compute all that goes in 'leakages' and pay-offs to corporations, or in giving special privileges to them, one would find a very different picture emerging

There are some matters where AAP's 2015 election Manifesto makes a refreshing break from corporate-cronyism, which, in conjunction with neoliberal wisdom, decrees everything a commodity. It is refreshing therefore to read that: "Water is not a commodity or an economic good...AAP has an important concern in the context of the right to water being part of the fundamental right to life." (p. 14) Thus, it says, AAP's water pricing policy will remain tied to its commitment to providing universal access to potable water to all citizens. For those of us who need to be reminded, in many countries like Italy almost the entire water supply has been privatized and an attempt was also made by the CPI(M) led government in Kerala to privatize water in 2006-7. In Bolivia, the massive movement against the privatization of municipal water in 2000 led to the legendary Cochabamba Water War, following which the government had to reverse the decision. Here is what a recent report by Emily Achtenburg says about the fallout of the struggle that followed the sale of the municipal water company to the US-based transnational consortium, Bechtel. It needs to be also remembered that this idea of selling the municipal company SEMAPA to Bechtel was done "in exchange for debt relief for the Bolivian government and new World Bank loans to expand the water system." Thus, says, Achtenburg:

"This iconic struggle crystallized a growing demand for popular control of Bolivia's natural resources, leading to the Gas Wars of 2003 and 2005, the overthrow of two neoliberal presidents, and the subsequent election of Evo Morales and the MAS (Movement Towards Socialism) party as a "government of the social movements." A second water revolt—this time by neighborhood organizations in the sprawling indigenous city of El Alto—ousted the French multinational Suez company from the recently-privatized La Paz-El Alto water district. Bolivia's new constitution, enacted in 2009, proclaims that access to water is a human right and bans its privatization."

AAP's recognition of water as a fundamental to the right to life thus connects itself to this cutting edge 21<sup>st</sup> century politics. It is part of the global recognition that businesses and corporations cannot be allowed precedence over people's livelihoods and control over the natural commons.

It is trifle amusing, therefore to read two former World Bank Directors warn AAP (in The Hindu) of

the 'negative consequences' of its 'populist' economic agenda. "It must backtrack from its populist promises made during the campaign that are bound not to be fulfilled" opine the wise men of the World Bank. Perhaps these gentlemen and the neoliberals in general, need to remember that this is not the 1990s, the decade of neoliberal ascendancy. We are in the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and the battle that is currently on, is over regaining popular control over the natural commons - for starters.

It is important to remember that Kejriwal was responsible for stalling the surreptitious bid by the Delhi government to privatize water in 2005. It was as an RTI activist that he had managed to get all the relevant information and make the matter a public issue. As can be seen, the video below, uploaded in May 2011, details the way the World Bank was dictating not just the privatization of DJB and intervening in support of PricewaterHouse Coopers. Scandalous as it is, it also shows the extent of work done in making this expose.

The AAP Manifesto's concern with water thus, is not simply a throw-away line of cheap 'populism'. No less than 6 pages of the Manifesto are devoted to the detailed plan that the party has regarding water. Clearly, Kejriwal has not stopped thinking about water since 2005 and every bit of the discussion in the Manifesto reveals detailed homework and is not simply a 'promise made during the campaign' as our World Bank officials seem to think.

This is not the place to go into an examination of the AAP manifesto or its larger vision but we can say that there are issues that the party has clearly thought through, drawing on the long years of research and alternative policy thinking done by organizations and institutions working in different fields like education, health, alternative energy, waste management and sewage disposal. This is perhaps why the BJP insisted on calling AAP an 'NGO party' - for its has thought about issues that political parties are not supposed to concern themselves with.

All this is fundamentally different from the so-called 'Development' slogan of the BJP and the Congress, both of whom have completely swallowed the neoliberal common sense of corporate-cronyism: the pernicious but powerfully peddled logic that without corporate capital the world would be heading toward extinction; that the God of Capital must be propitiated at all costs - else the world would simply die of underdevelopment! The reality of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is just the reverse. Capital and businesses will have to function not as God/ gods but as players in a larger universe where the rules of the game will apply to them as much as they will to anybody else. If that means that the business elites have to do without 27 storey Antillas, so be it.

**Aditya Nigam**

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\*<http://kafila.org/2015/02/15/aap-victory-and-the-challenges-of-a-new-politics/>

Also see the author's March 7<sup>th</sup> piece "Reading the power struggle in the AAP":  
<http://kafila.org/2015/03/07/reading-the-power-struggle-in-aap/>