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### The Ideology of Suspended Animation

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The Aam Aadmi Party's claim to be a party with a difference rings hollow today. With its eyeon the assembly elections in Haryana and the Lok Sabha elections thereafter, it seems to be indulging in as much political opportunism as any other mainstream political party.

The Lieutenant Governor of Delhi put the Delhi assembly in suspended animation after the resignation of Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal on 14 February 2014.

The enormous hope that the Aam Admi Party (AAP) had ignited among people seems to be ebbing. The hope has not yet turned into ashes, but the enthusiasm for the party is on the wane. We are gradually returning to business as usual in Indian politics.

The emergence of the party generated hope among people who viewed the prevalent corruption-driven politics with complete cynicism. AAP held out the promise of a political alternative, offering corruption free and dynasty free participatory democracy spearheaded by gram sabhas and mohalla sabhas. AAP wanted officials to be accountable to the people and public accounts to be made transparent. "Remove corruption and bring about participatory democracy" was the battle cry.

The party achieved in the first round what had seemed impossible to accomplish. It fought the Delhi assembly elections in 2013 without black money and with disdain for ideology and formed the government. It claimed that no foreign funds accept those sent by non-resident Indians staying abroad were received by the party. AAP's accounts were in the public domain. The party's contempt for the existing VIP culture was applauded. It even made ripples among some long-standing politicians who appeared ready to trim a few of their privileges.

AAP's professed disdain for ideology, and the idea that it will solve problems as they arise without any preconceived perceptions appeared refreshingly attractive. Ideology was, we were told, an intellectual concept useful in writing essays, though Arvind Kejriwal has himself written a book on swaraj. The chief minister sang a song on *insaniyat* (humanism) immediately after taking oath at the Ramlila Maidan. The air was electrified with hope.

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That hope is no more; right now it is in suspended animation just like the Delhi assembly. The popular perception of the AAP government as a non-conventional and, possibly, risky political alternative still survives, but it is getting dimmer by the day.

### **Not Open to Criticism**

While the AAP leadership continues to repeat old slogans against corruption and scams blaming the political class, it considers itself lily-white. When the media brings out anything against them they dismiss it as pure fabrication. Their method is not to engage in an open debate but to call all charges against them as motivated and false.

For example, in a much publicised episode, a few African women living in Khirki Extension in New Delhi, allegedly accused of peddling drugs and indulging in prostitution, were chased by members and supporters of AAP, led by two ministers, in an act of vigilantism in the dead of night. Subsequently, these women were forced to submit themselves to narcotic tests. *Insaniyat* was forgotten while subjecting these women to such humiliation. That the results of the narcotic tests were negative, were of no consequence. The AAP leadership remained adamant, did not tender an apology to the women and claimed instead that their actions were fully justified. The fact that television channels were extremely critical of their actions was dismissed as motivated.

In addition, when some party members and well-wishers of AAP (including this writer) tried to raise this matter in a party forum, they were not only shouted down but also told "not to make a spectacle" before the media – though no media was present. This exposes the shallowness of AAP's commitment to participatory democracy and transparency. Presumably, like AAP government's present status in Delhi, participatory democracy and transparency should be kept in suspended animation according to party's convenience.

#### **Not so Different**

The non-conventional nature of AAP's governance was highly touted. However, AAP gave free water to those with water connections, just like the way Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) gave cheap grains in Chhattisgarh, the Punjab government promised free electricity to farmers, or the Congress promised cheap gas cylinders to the general populace. Almost all political parties and their leaders indulge in political patronage, be it Sonia Gandhi, Raman Singh, Mayavati or Jayalalitha. Arvind Kejriwal is also welcome to do the same. But this is by no means practising new politics. Nor is the disdain for VIP culture new.

Raj Narayan, who defeated Indira Gandhi in the 1977 general elections, bicycled to office as minister of the Janata Party government. More recently, Vasundhara Raje, the current chief minister of Rajasthan, travelled second class in a train and shared food with fellow passengers. Kejriwal's ministers travel in cars but without red lights. If only such sacrifices made for good governance!

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#### **Skewed Priorities**

As for good governance, many homeless people (reportedly 174) died in Delhi for lack of night shelters. The government had said that it would make 300 night shelters. A suggestion was made that government buildings like schools could be converted into night shelters in the meantime. This was not accepted. Who is then responsible for the death of the homeless? The AAP government certainly did not consider itself accountable. Its mantra lays emphasis on accountability of officials to the public and making government transactions transparent. It seems that its concept does not extend to issues such as extreme poverty.

AAP wants to favour participatory democracy over decision-making by elected leaders. In practice, there is no place for discussion much less dissent within the party. This is because the party has acquired a new and overriding objective since it came to power in Delhi. It aims to win as many seats as possible in the Vidhan Sabha elections in Haryana and in the Lok Sabha elections in 2014. It will not let its professed values of accountability, participatory democracy and *insaniyat* come in the way of achieving that objective. Populism, vigilantism and supporting local prejudices, even those of khap panchayats, are becoming its preferred ways of getting popular support.

This brings us to another crucial question; why has AAP kept its ideology under wraps? Ideology in real politics is all about acting on priorities. Like other political parties, AAP's highest priority is winning the forthcoming elections. Other things pale into insignificance, including ideology. That is why dealing with the death of the homeless on the streets of Delhi was not a priority for the AAP government.

Many people in Delhi are asking, should Kejriwal have resigned because his Jan Lokpal bill faced a hurdle in the assembly? Others want to know why his prestigious bill was never put in the public domain. The AAP leadership is particularly proud of using technology and social media to its advantage. So why is the Jan Lokpal bill missing from the AAP website? With Kejriwal putting in his papers, supporters who were looking forward to better governance are disappointed. And their hopes of getting cheaper electricity and water remain unfulfilled.

### A Party Like all Others

AAP is like all other political parties. Its talk of swaraj is yet another ploy in the game of electoral success. It is choosing to address every issue with the most populist position that prevails. Empower the mohalla sabhas, it says. Give power to the people. This also means that prejudices of the majority will be allowed to prevail without any protection of minority interests. Khap panchayats in Haryana are described as "cultural" organisations, which have traditionally served a useful purpose of sorting out social issues. What the party chooses to overlook is that khap panchayats promote the interests of land owning castes over the interests of the poor, lower castes and women. Honour killings are sanctioned to

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show that refusal to submit to its authority will not be tolerated. Khap leaders, who are proud of dictating such killings, are being invited to AAP rallies in Haryana.

What was exhibited in Khirki Extension by Somnath Bharti and his mob, was a mentality that is based on dominant prejudice and hatred of the "other". It was followed by a disturbing statement by Arvind Kejriwal that prostitution and drugs lead to rape. This sort of catering to prejudices of the majority may be convenient for electoral gains. Others might find collecting funds illegally equally convenient for electoral gains.

In the presence of corporate heads, Arvind Kejriwal reassuringly says that business is not the business of the government. Yet at the same time, he appears to hold the view that gas blocks in the Krishna Godavari basin should have been allocated to ONGC rather than Reliance Industries. Nothing is said about regulatory mechanisms. By keeping its ideology in suspended animation, perhaps only short-term electoral gains can be achieved by the party. How is it different from the opportunism of any other party?