

## [AAP has Decimated a Historic Mandate for Alternative Politics](#)

The AAP stung by its recent series of electoral losses is politically pulverised and in a state of total denial that it decimated a historical mandate for alternative politics and lost a golden opportunity to position itself as the principal opposition to the BJP. AAP's confrontational encounters and politics of antithesis have eroded their electoral base.

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The genesis of the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) in 2012 augured the beginning of a new bandwidth of alternative politics in the political spectrum of India. AAP embodied immense potential to challenge mainstream party politics which had dominated for more than six decades with few interruptions by anti-establishment parties that challenged the conventional political discourse. The political alternatives that disrupted the status quo of the Congress party dominance included the formidable Janata Party (JP) in 1977, an umbrella coalition of parties solely united with the purpose of dislodging the oldest-serving party in the country. The JP won a huge mandate and embarked upon witch-hunting leaders of the previous regime which combined with the lack of ideological grounding led to its downfall within two years. The experiments of alternative politics in India failed on most occasions due to the lack of a practical political vision, the utopian idea of self-governance and democracy, and the tendency to either get co-opted into mainstream politics or gradually fade into oblivion. The surfacing of AAP as an alternative was different from the earlier experimentations as it was rooted in a mass movement and wedded to the Gandhian philosophy with a vision of achieving *swarajya*. AAP's baptism in the anti-corruption movement provided it the foundation to build a sustainable organisation bottom-up with a primary focus on removing corruption from public life and writing a new grammar and syntax of democratic politics in India.

### **AAP's Electoral Record**

The electoral debut of AAP in the Delhi assembly elections in 2013 was a moment of reckoning for the fledgling party as it not only knocked off the deeply entrenched Congress party from power but also threatened to take over its political mantle. The party contested the general elections of 2014 in more than 400 parliamentary seats with the purpose of registering its arrival among the electorate in the country. Its performance was on expected lines, except for Punjab, where it surprised psephologists by winning four out of the 13 Lok Sabha seats and emerged as a major political player therein. The Delhi election in 2015 was a presidential contest of sorts between Arvind Kejriwal and Narendra Modi who had single-handedly brought the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to power in the centre in 2014. A replay of the "David and Goliath" fable, witnessed AAP not only take the winds out of the saffron wave but also generate a counter-wave that drowned both the BJP and the Congress. The AAP created electoral history by winning 67 of 70 assembly seats and forming the government in Delhi amidst celebrations including subaltern sections of society. However, the popularity ratings were short-lived as the AAP leadership got embroiled in unnecessary power tussles with the lieutenant governor of Delhi and state bureaucracy which snowballed into major politico-legal controversies. Populist measures combined with the shunning of VIP culture won accolades from the people. However, this sentiment was soon eclipsed by the confrontational style of AAP politics and

their political narrative turning antithetical to the functioning of Indian democracy.

The success of AAP in electoral politics seems to have been a false start and their electoral vision skewed as they not only lost the assembly elections held in Punjab from a pole position but also fared terribly in Goa with most of its candidates losing their election deposits. Before the party could come to terms with electoral losses in other states, it suffered an embarrassing defeat in the assembly by-election to Rajouri Garden constituency, with its candidate finishing behind the BJP and the Congress, sending a clear signal that the anti-AAP sentiment was running high in Delhi. The party dubbed the loss as an isolated event which they had prefigured as people were angry with the AAP Member of Legislative Assembly (MLA) vacating the seat to contest elections in Punjab. The AAP was overconfident about winning the municipal election polls, but it was once again trounced by the BJP, vindicating an anti-incumbency wave against the party and erosion of electoral support in Delhi, losing up to 27% vote share since the assembly elections of 2015. The AAP continued to be arrogant in defeat and reasoned that the landslide victory of the saffron party was due to the tampering of electronic voting machines (EVM) under the rhetoric of "EVM wave." The series of electoral losses suffered by the AAP is a clear-cut sign that the historic mandate won in Delhi elections, 2015 has been squandered and is bound to raise red flags and existential questions in the party forum. The self-contradictions in the political thesis of AAP have existed since the inception of the party and which have now developed into major fault lines after its brush with real politics. It, thus, becomes imperative to deconstruct the political discourse surrounding AAP and enquire into the reasons for the meteoric rise of the party and equally steep downfall given its stated aim "not to come to power; but to change the current corrupt and self-serving system of politics forever and make it strong enough to withstand corruption at any level of governance" (AAP 2014).

## **An Organised Hypocrisy**

The birth of AAP, as a political dispensation, is rooted in the legacy of "India Against Corruption" (IAC), a people's movement commandeered by Anna Hazare and a rainbow coalition of activists demanding the passage of the Jan Lokpal Bill in parliament towards ending corruption. A splinter group from the movement jointly headed by Kejriwal, Yogendra Yadav, Anand Jha, Prashant Bhushan and Shanti Bhushan decided to take a plunge into formal politics by forming a political party in 2012 fashioning its brand name after the common man. Hazare opposed the move and stayed away from espousing IAC's entry into direct politics as he feared that "elections require huge funds, which will be tough for activists to organise without compromising on their values and it would be difficult to ensure that candidates are not corrupted once elected" (NDTV 2012).

According to its founder-ideologue Yadav (2016),

*AAP was an inheritor to a long-standing quest not for creating a political alternative to the ruling parties, but... forging an alternative to the entire political establishment in the country. It was not about governing better than others; it was about changing the paradigm of governance with a new model of democracy and development with a new set of policies and vision that went beyond the inherited ideologies of the 20th century. The party was not just about winning the political game but changing the rules of the game and connecting politics to grass roots issues, struggles and movements. AAP was not just about creating a new party, but a new kind of party which would be a democratic, transparent and accountable instrument for democratic politics.*

AAP grounded itself as the political mouthpiece of the IAC movement and soon became a hub for principled and transparent politics with a focus on the common man and a people-friendly

alternative to the existing political establishment, populated with political dynasties and beyond the reach of ordinary citizens in the country. The popularity ratings of AAP soared in the north and party offices were opened all over India with people subscribing for its primary membership in large numbers. The inner party democracy and collectivity in leadership and decision-making became the hallmark of the party.

The party faced the first jolt to its political idealism after it came to power in Delhi in 2015 with absolute majority and Kejriwal took the route of the JP government in 1977 by capturing absolute control of the party. The founding members of the party who had objected to Kejriwal taking unilateral decisions, allotting tickets to tainted candidates, sidestepping swarajya, and cautioning against personality-cult politics were purged from the party. The undemocratic and uncivilised action meted out to senior members who helped found and establish AAP exposed the hypocritical nature of party politics. The party seemed to have faked the values of high morality and probity in public life to create a false perception among the people for political traction and electoral victory. The authoritarian and centralising tendencies of Kejriwal unveiled during this incident not only made him the supreme leader of AAP but also crushed inner-party democracy and dissenting voices in the party citadel. Their party base was further narrowed with a mass exodus of prominent people from different walks of life who had joined and supported the party with funds and political networking. The party quickly transformed from a people's collective with broad-based leadership to a mainstream party shepherded by a personality cult susceptible to the idiosyncrasies and insanities of its supreme leader.

The personality cult nurtured by AAP was unique as it went far beyond the distinction between *self-esteem and narcissism*, unparalleled in the history of Indian party politics. The extreme self-love of Kejriwal resulted in the party spending huge amounts of tax payer's hard-earned money on publicity and propaganda with his photograph towering over the party name and symbol. The content of the banners and posters put up by AAP in conspicuous places in Delhi was not only a waste of public expenditure but soon became a laughing matter when routine civic exercises such as cleaning of sewage drains and fixing potholes were listed as achievements of the AAP government. According to Paul Schroeder (2016),

*party politics has always involved considerable hypocrisy—particularly in high-stakes elections and a social-media drenched world, but there is a big difference between 'ordinary hypocrisy' and 'organized hypocrisy.' Ordinary hypocrisy doesn't keep a person from recognizing one's masks and casting them off, if need be. Authenticity can still survive beneath the surface. However, organized hypocrisy is designed precisely to keep the mask on regardless of the wearer's efforts to shed it.*

The party politics of AAP was bereft of hypocrisy initially but it escalated into an organised hypocrisy with the passage of time, given strong deviations in the political praxis of the party from its preaching of principled politics.

## **Politics of Antithesis**

Political parallelism, in comparative media system research, "refers to the character of links between political actors and the media and more generally, the extent to which media reflects political divisions" (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). The links between the press and political parties in contemporary India have become evident with a number of media houses openly supporting and advocating the policies of particular parties. The parallelism of AAP with Indian media could be traced back to the IAC movement, as a large section of the media was sympathetic and favourably inclined to the

agenda of a corruption-free India and power in the hands of the common people. The media played an important role in the rise and growth of AAP and unknowingly created a larger-than-life image of Kejriwal as a political leader who could change the destiny of the country, even comparing him to Mahatma Gandhi. The grand electoral success in Delhi and media fascination created an illusory superiority complex in AAP which on coming to power in Delhi resorted to confrontational politics with the BJP government in the centre, lieutenant governor of Delhi, municipal corporators, and state bureaucracy. The mediated confrontations with the government apparatus initially seemed to be immature and innocuous but soon turned diabolical and incessant, resulting in slowing the pace of development and governance in Delhi.

The confrontations with the BJP accusing them for the constitutional crisis in Delhi and breakdown of service delivery mechanisms escalated into a politics of paranoia. Kejriwal made a wild public allegation that Modi wanted to physically liquidate him. This opened a Pandora's box and the antithesis of public civility and moral propriety was unveiled in quick succession as ministers and party leaders were charged with legal misdemeanours in the fake degree (educational qualifications) case, domestic violence, inciting violence against foreigners, and sexual harassment. The holier than thou public image of AAP was sullied and its credibility took a severe beating among the people of Delhi. The party resorted to the odd-even car rationing scheme in Delhi to deflect the attention of the people from the political muddle it had got itself into and win brownie points with progressive policy engagement. The odd-even rule succeeded in stemming its declining popularity ratings and provided breathing space required for getting back in the business of governance and service delivery. However, the AAP government was censured by the Delhi High Court for not doing enough to improve the mass transit system in the city and control pollution, exposing the real intention of the party behind the car policy. The garbage pile-up crisis on the streets of Delhi; the spurt of mosquito-borne diseases; the astronomical legal fee payment in slander cases involving Arvind Kejriwal from the public exchequer; the Shunglu Committee report indicting his government for irregularities in appointments; nepotism; unauthorised foreign jaunts; and the recovery notice of ₹97 crore sent by the lieutenant governor of Delhi for party propaganda completed the AAP's politics of antithesis. The ambiguities in the governance story of AAP and its moral bankruptcy were fully unveiled creating a huge trust deficit among the citizens of Delhi which manifested in the electoral rout of the party in the recent municipal polls.

## Conclusion

The AAP stung by electoral losses is politically pulverised and in a state of total denial that it decimated a historical mandate for alternative politics and lost a golden opportunity to position itself as the principal opposition to the BJP. The AAP resembles a sinking ship with captain Kejriwal frantically seeking to keep his (Delhi) MLAs on board. The saner elements among Delhi legislators may soon abandon the ship to avoid drowning and join the BJP, a catch-all party, as politicians from different ideological standpoints leave their parent parties and join it in hordes. In the words of Yadav (2016), "the problem is not that AAP has abandoned the path of alternative politics; the real problem is that it has tainted the idea of alternative politics." The prophecy turned true as Swaraj India founded by him offered an alternative political narrative, but the voters in Delhi did not believe, and the nascent party suffered a major collateral damage. The AAP story makes for a suitable case study, as it not only presented an alternative political thesis, but also a politics of antithesis; chances are that it may end up as a "parenthesis" in the political history of India.

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