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## Reaching for the Stars: The Incredible Rise of Arvind Kejriwal

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Arvind Kejriwal, Chief Minister of Delhi. - FILE PHOTO: SHANKER CHAKRAVARTY

*Five years ago, Arvind Kejriwal was far from being the man of the masses he is today. The Hindu Centre's Senior Fellow **Vidya Subrahmaniam**, who as a correspondent with *The Hindu* followed Kejriwal's public life between 2006 and 2014, traces his rise from activism to political stardom.*

In the immediate afterglow of the Assembly election, everyone seemed to be smiling in Delhi. A friend out on his morning walk found strangers congratulating him on the Aam Aadmi Party's (AAP's) superhero-sized victory. He returned the compliment, aware that like him, they were ordinary citizens basking in the reflected glory of Arvind Kejriwal's brilliantly executed electoral coup.

As results poured in, television anchors, across channels, briefly forgot to be officious. The incorrigibly rude Arnab Goswami attempted poetry and watched bemusedly as the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) spokesperson and his

counterpart in the AAP warred and sparred in *shayari* (Urdu poetry). Visuals suggested a carnival-like mood on the streets.

Delhi did not erupt in such sheer joy even when the BJP's Narendra Modi broke a 30-year jinx to win a majority in the 2014 Lok Sabha election. The emotional, spontaneous response was reminiscent of 1977, when the all-new Janata Party unseated Indira Gandhi after the Emergency.

The AAP's victory was the sweeter for having come in the most exacting circumstances. Kejriwal had ceased to be Kejriwal since quitting as Delhi's Chief Minister in February 2014 — after only 49 days in office. He was *bhagoda* (deserter), and the more he strained to get rid of the tag, the more it stuck. In the Lok Sabha election of April-May 2014, the AAP punched above its weight and came to grief, winning only four of 400-odd seats it contested, all four in Punjab. Kejriwal himself had gone down fighting to Modi in the Varanasi Lok Sabha constituency. More crushingly for the AAP convenor's morale, his party's hard-won place in the National Capital Territory of Delhi had been usurped by the BJP.

Not just this. If in 2013, Kejriwal's main rival was the Indian National Congress (INC), led by the scam-tainted and battle-weary Sheila Dixit, one year later, he was up against the gargantuan Modi-Amit Shah factory that had produced an assembly-line of victories. Shah, the BJP president, would in fact boast to the media that he had overseen 40-odd small and big elections in his career and won all of them. The Prime Minister himself loomed large on the campaign; he stared out of posters, his voice boomed on radio and he was on television, 24x7, and also on the front page of every newspaper — both as full-size advertisement and as news. Though the BJP campaign had a nominal Chief Ministerial candidate in the former supercop, Kiran Bedi, there was never any doubt that the battle was always Modi's to be won.

### **The seige of Kejriwal**

In the event, the failure of the Bedi card — her campaign never took off — intensified the siege of Kejriwal. With the BJP marshalling the services of Cabinet Ministers and around 120 Members of Parliament (MPs), the odds piled up insurmountably against the AAP's founder: on one side were the country's Prime Minister, his ministers, his strategists, and the financial and administrative muscle they together represented, and on the other, Kejriwal and his band of rag-tag volunteers. Kejriwal tweeted: "In Mahabharata, Duryodhana had demanded soldiers from Shri Krishna while Arjun had just asked for Shri Krishna's assistance. Today BJP has the entire administrative apparatus with it. We have God with us."

In the end, it was truly a Mahabharata-scale victory for the man who believed he was Arjun fighting a righteous war, and whom Modi and Shah, with all their might and main, could not subdue.

The unbelievability of it all was bound to spawn dozens of bust-to-boom Arvind Kejriwal tales, as indeed it has. From rapid-fire buzzfeedism — typically along the lines of "ten things you should know about Kejriwal" — and heart-tugging tidbits about his family to long-form accounts of the man's struggle to reach where he has, the newest political sensation has had his life and career storified by a voraciously hungry media.

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I have an Arvind Kejriwal story too — and it is a story in many intertwined parts. Any Kejriwal retrospective has necessarily to start with his unputdownable spirit, and his astonishing and recurring ability to bounce back from failure and adversity. Even so, it is his political-philosophical journey that I personally find most riveting. It is a journey as riven with contradictions as it is full of surprises. Not only would the man who viscerally hated politics

and politicians himself become a consummate, on-the-ball politician in a matter of three years, he would also pole-vault from one to the other side of the ideas spectrum.

From leaning right as part of the Anna (Hazare) agitation to emerging as the natural leader of those on the margins — Muslims, Dalits and the economically poor — Kejriwal's transformation is truly one of a kind in politics. Equally remarkable is the fact that he has achieved this by transcending conventional ideological labels. Any other traditional party practising Kejriwal's politics would call itself secular-liberal. But the AAP rejects all such attempts to box it in.

The AAP's philosophical guru, Yogendra Yadav, views the party as a post-ideological phenomenon. Kejriwal himself refuted the suggestion that he was left-of-centre at a recent interaction with Barkha Dutt: "Our party does not adhere to any particular ideology, we are a solution-oriented party."

Is this a good thing? Yes and No.

Yes, because, ideology, in particular secularism, has become jaded and worn from overuse and partisan application. The AAP became attractive to voters precisely because it eschewed old shibboleths and opted for a new, modern idiom. A distinctive feature of the AAP has been its refusal to make community-centric promises; counter-intuitively, this has increased its appeal among beleaguered minorities, helplessly caught between right-wing attacks and 'secular' promises, and hungry for real, tangible empowerment.

However, ideological ambiguity can impair judgement between right and wrong. The recent erosion in the AAP's core membership is at least in part a consequence of the ideological permissiveness the party wears on its sleeve. The movement towards the BJP in particular suggests that sections of the AAP's cadre are unable to distinguish between the AAP and the BJP, between Kejriwal and Modi.

### **Eternal optimist and fighter**

But before going into this discussion, a look at Kejriwal the eternal optimist and fighter. I met Kejriwal sometime in late 2006. He ran an organisation called *Parivartan*, and had come to *The Hindu's* New Delhi office to meet a colleague. Slightly built and deceptively shy, he just smiled when I expressed surprise that he was 'the' Kejriwal who had won the Magsaysay award for his work in the field of Right to Information (RTI). A few days later, he called to ask if I could take him to meet my local MLA who had ordered the demolition of a shanty colony abutting a stretch of NH-24. The MLA greeted Kejriwal with a torrent of abuse and refused to halt the demolition. Kejriwal was taken aback but made it clear he wasn't giving up. I heard later that he had saved the slum cluster.

Over the following months and years, I saw Kejriwal mutate and evolve, taking on different forms and taking up different causes, with agitation always his preferred mode of communication. In March 2007, he and his now deputy in the Delhi Cabinet, Manish Sisodia, pitched a tent outside the office of the Central Information Commission (CIC) in protest against the Commission's 'mistreatment' of RTI appellants and its refusal to penalise errant Public Information Officers. The penalty provision was central to the success of the RTI Act and yet the CIC remained lax in applying it. For a month, the camp or, a kiosk, as Kejriwal and Sisodia called it, functioned as an 'alternative' CIC, collecting complaints and petitions from irate appellants. <sup>1</sup>

The protest fizzled out but Kejriwal typically picked himself up and was ready to go. He multi-tasked, raising RTI concerns, handing out RTI awards, holding *mohalla sabhas* (or neighbourhood brainstorming sessions; the forerunner to the more formalised *mohalla sabha* featured in the AAP manifesto and believed to be one of the

reasons behind the AAP's brilliant connect with the people) and doing all this while already contemplating ways to take up the transparency and anti-corruption fight to the next level.

The lesson Kejriwal learnt from being stonewalled by the CIC was that the Commission need to be headed by a pro-active officer with a strong commitment to transparency. The person he had in mind was none other than Kiran Bedi, his companion during the Anna agitation, and his principal rival and the BJP's Chief Ministerial choice in the 2014 Assembly election. By end 2009, he was in full campaign mode on the need to have Bedi as the Chief Information Commissioner.<sup>2</sup> Predictably, the campaign met with hostility, with Kejriwal having to answer accusations that he was lobbying for a friend and setting a dangerous precedent in the process. His response was that he had conveyed his request openly in contrast to supporters of other candidates who held private negotiations with the government. Later, he would ask friends how an open proposal could ever become dangerous. Kejriwal petitioned newspaper editors, roped in other big names, including Anna and film star Aamir Khan, to bat for Bedi. But all to no avail.

### **Establishing popular connect**

The year 2010 saw Kejriwal take the first steps towards full conversion to politics. One of his long-term projects had been to establish an institutional way to connect with people in order to address their everyday needs and grievances. This he did by the mechanism of *mohalla sabha* which operated on the principle that the residents of a neighbourhood were best equipped to decide how and where their quota of municipal funds should be spent. Kejriwal's organisation, *Parivartan*, invited journalists to attend the *sabhas* and watch for themselves how 'grassroots democracy' worked.<sup>3</sup> But there were few takers for the offer. Conditioned to look for star material, journalists saw neither Kejriwal nor his later-to-become famous *mohalla sabha* as worthy of their time. But unbeknown to them, and perhaps to Kejriwal as well, he had found the key to winning elections. In the interim after the 2014 defeat, when the AAP was thought to have self-destructed in Delhi, it had in fact kept its nose to the grindstone, reaching out to voters in far-flung areas and hearing out their demands and complaints via a network of *mohalla sabhas*. By poll time in February 2015, the AAP was battle fit and ready.

Kejriwal's other pre-occupation in 2010 was with finding a legislative solution to corruption. Towards the end of that year, the contours of an 'alternative' Lokpal Bill started to emerge. The unfolding of a dozen-odd scams — among others, 2G and Commonwealth Games — had rendered the time ripe for a 'strong' legislation targeted at VIP corruption. By this time, Kejriwal had put together the core team that later founded the India Against Corruption (IAC) movement. The IAC was the back office for the Anna Hazare-led agitation, which in turn played midwife for the birth of Politician Kejriwal.

### **From Baba Ramdev to Anna Hazare**

Interestingly, it was not Anna who was Kejriwal's first choice to lead the anti-corruption movement. That man was Baba Ramdev. It was Ramdev who, around November-December 2010, dashed off letters to Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and other politicians on the need for an effective anti-corruption agency. Others, including Anna, Kejriwal and Bedi, appended their signatures to the letters. Kejriwal's office released press statements in Ramdev's name. One such release, titled, 'Baba Ramdevji writes to PM on various scams', said: "In a letter written to Sonia Gandhi and Prime Minister, a group of citizens across [the] spectrum led by Baba Ramdev have demanded [the] setting up of an independent investigative and prosecuting agency. Other signatories to the letter include Anna Hazare, Arch Bishop Vincent of Delhi, Mallika Sarabhai, Swami Agnivesh, Arvind Kejriwal, Kiran Bedi, Devinder Sharma and Justice Tewatia."<sup>4</sup> <sup>4a</sup> (This was the core team that formed the IAC.)

Though Kejriwal was only a signatory to Baba Ramdev's letter, it was easily seen that he had drafted it. For, the letter was a near *verbatim* reproduction of Kejriwal's own thoughts on the need for a single overarching anti-corruption body to take the place of the plethora of 'mutually exclusive and contradictory' graft laws then in place. By December 2010, the first draft of the alternative Lokpal was already in place, drafted by the former Lokayukta of Karnataka, Santosh Hegde, and Supreme Court lawyer, Prashant Bhushan. Kejriwal wanted *The Hindu* to carry the story, which the newspaper did. <sup>5</sup> - But then only *The Hindu* did. Most newspapers did not want to touch the story; the name Lokpal, with a history going back to 1968, was enough to induce fatigue. I remember asking IAC member Devinder Sharma if they couldn't think of another name. "You can't expect newspapers to jump at something that is called Lokpal," I said. Neither I nor my counterparts in other newspapers had the faintest idea at the time of the coming Anna-Jan Lokpal tsunami.

Kejriwal had tried everything but was simply not getting the traction he required to make it to the big league. It was not that he was unknown; he had figured in *India Today's* list of future leaders and had been celebrated for winning the Magsaysay so early in his career. Yet, much more than fame on this scale was needed to get a mass movement surging ahead, which is what Kejriwal wanted for his anti-corruption fight. He had the grand idea but to market it nationally he needed a leader of towering moral stature and mass appeal. Baba Ramdev had a faithful following but he hadn't exactly set the cash registers ringing with his letters to the Prime Minister and others. Besides, Ramdev was controversial, very ambitious, and therefore unreliable.

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The search finally ended with Anna Hazare. Anna, who had stood on the margins during Baba Ramdev's leadership of the anti-corruption campaign, came to the forefront, and what happened next was an uprising so powerful that it shook the country and the government: Analysts called it India's Arab Spring while Anna himself announced that India was on the cusp of a second Independence.

Anna happened to Kejriwal, and to an India thirsting for inspiration and guidance, at a perfect moment. Anna might have well bombed at a different point on the country's timeline. He was 74, lived on meagre possessions in a village off Pune, and offered no material attractions to the young and the restless. In many ways, he was the antithesis of the 'me-first' generation. Yet, he arrived at a time of despair and disillusionment. The 2G and other scams had rendered the popular mood cynical and deeply anti-politics, and Anna, who had led a life of renunciation, and who saw politics as a cesspool, became the perfect foil for a political class seen to be venal and self-serving.

On February 26, 2011, Anna sent an ultimatum to Prime Minister Singh asking him to enact a Lokpal law on the lines of the Jan Lokpal, the name given to the Anna-Kejriwal-Bhushan version. He set a deadline of end-March, after which, he said, he would sit on a fast-unto-death at the capital's Jantar Mantar. The Prime Minister had not the slightest clue to the trajectory the threatened fast would take and he typically dithered on a decision, resulting in Anna sitting on a game-changing hunger strike from April 5, 2011.

Here starts Kejriwal's ideological journey — in large measure it was a journey from confusion to clarity but not completely so, as later developments would show. The Anna fast was a magnificent crowd-puller; the throbbing, pulsating audience seemed to grow in geometric progression, and television's relentless focus further magnified the spectacle. The young and the idealistic joined Anna in overwhelming numbers, but disconcertingly, so did

sundry *sants* and *babas* and lynch-mobs baying for political blood and instant, vigilante justice. Incendiary calls to “kill them”, “hang them” mingled with rousing strains of *brashtachar mitayenge* (we will end corruption). Anna himself sat against a large portrait of Bharat Mata and urged the crowds to shout *Vande Mataram* after him. If further proof was required that Event Anna had been appropriated by the right-wing, it came with the letter of support presented to the fasting savant by Ram Madhav, at the time the national spokesperson of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, and now a member of the BJP. [6](#)

Some of this was to be expected. Anna was experienced in watershed management, and under his supervision, his village, Ralegan Siddhi, had transformed from an arid, poverty-stricken and shortage-hounded place to one with abundant water and crop supply.

But on the flip side was his authoritarian enforcement of prohibition and family planning in Ralegan. Anna’s prescription for anyone found drinking in his village was to tie him up and flog him. In an April 2011 article in *Kafila*, Mukul Sharma wrote: “Anna stated that there is a pole in front of the village temple. Many people found to be taking liquor had to be tied up with it and flogged.” [7](#)

In an earlier article, also in *Kafila*, Mukul Sharma analysed the ingredients that went into Anna’s belief system: “Though developmental and environmental works form the core of his ideological structures, they include other important issues. A belief system of force and punishment, liberal use of Hindu religious symbols, strict rules and codes, evocation of nationalism and ultra-nationalism, ‘pure’ morality and caste hierarchies with marginalisation of women, Muslims and Dalits, form the core of his village regeneration.” [8](#)

Anna’s worldview was uncluttered by complications. He believed in a moral order where nationalists were defined as good and deviants were punished and made an example of. His reaction to the hanging of Ajmal Kasab, as quoted by NDTV, was: “It has taken too long to hang Kasab. He should have been hanged in the *Chauraha* (public square). A public hanging of Kasab would have been a lesson for anybody who causes loss of life in our country.” So, for Anna, it was in the order of things that corrupt politicians should get exemplary, deterrent punishment. His acquiescing in the “kill them”, “hang them” calls was a natural extension of this black-and-white view. This was also why he had no problems endorsing Modi, then Chief Minister of Gujarat, from the stage in Jantar Mantar. To Anna’s simple mind, Modi was a good person because he was not corrupt. It was only after activists questioned the unqualified good-conduct certificate that he added caveats about the 2002 pogrom. [9](#)

## **Fighting corruption**

Kejriwal too saw fighting corruption as an end in itself. Not just this. Like all anti-corruption crusaders before him, he was fixated on the Congress’s corruption. To an extent, this was understandable because the Congress was in power both at the Centre, where corruption charges dogged the Manmohan Singh Government, and in Delhi, where Shiela Dixit was a primary target. Both Anna and Kejriwal seemed oblivious to the fact that this blinkered approach gave an easy ride to the BJP and the regional parties, none of which could claim not to have been tainted by graft. Kejriwal’s value-neutral attitude was manifest in his uncritical acceptance of Baba Ramdev. When he first chose Ramdev to lead the IAC, I had asked him if he was aware of his Hindutva background. Kejriwal did not understand what the fuss was about, and said he thought he was secular. If Kejriwal subsequently turned to Anna, it was because he was a more credible leader.

Kejriwal was in no quandary over taking the support of the ‘right’ if that added heft to his anti-corruption fight. In April 2011, around the same time Anna began his fast, he attended a two-day anti-corruption seminar organised by the RSS-backed Vivekananda International Foundation (Prime Minister Modi’s key advisers come from the



same organisation). A prominent participant at the seminar was RSS pracharak and Hindutva ideologue K.N. Govindacharya. In a February 2014 interview to *The Economic Times*, Govindacharya claimed that Kejriwal had met him in 2011 “to synergise activities aimed at taking on the current status quo on corruption and related issues.” <sup>10</sup> By 2012, the process of transformation of Kejriwal had begun, aided by the feedback he was getting from the crowds. Nonetheless, he continued to back Ramdev right through Anna’s multiple fasts, and tweeted in his support as late as August 2012, when Ramdev himself went on a fast to demand the repatriation of black money: “It is not a Swami Ramdev or Team Anna issue; people must stand united.”

The first edition of Anna’s fast ended on April 9, 2011, following an agreement reached with the government on setting up a committee to examine the constitution of a strong, autonomous Lokpal. In an acknowledgement of the power of Team Anna, the committee took on board members from both the government and civil society. But the script was meant to unravel and it did: successive governments had turned Lokpal into a charade and this one wasn’t going to stand by and watch as a bunch of busybodies dug a grave for it. There was no question that the ministers on the committee would consent to an overarching body with blanket power to investigate and prosecute those in government.

More theatrics followed with Anna announcing a second hunger strike in the fall of 2011. The Manmohan Singh Government, already skewered for betraying the Lokpal cause, foolishly fanned the flames of public suspicion and anger by arresting the elder citizen just ahead of the proposed fast. When Anna finally walked out of Tihar Jail, it was in the manner of Pied Piper of Hamelin; a frenzied crowd followed him down the streets, morphing into a seamless stretch of humanity on millions of TV screens. The outpouring of support pushed the government to offer a further round of talks, which climaxed in the passage in Parliament of a vaguely worded resolution containing three of many demands insisted upon by Team Anna. The finale allowed both sides to claim victory.

Three days after the truce, on August 31, 2011, I met Kejriwal for an interview. The movement succeeded, he said, because it was helmed by Anna; people desperately believed him and endorsed the Jan Lokpal Bill, not because they had read and understood the text, but because it was Anna’s Lokpal. He talked of the innovative use the team had made of technology to attract volunteers. It was Kejriwal and his backroom boys who pioneered the concept of missed calls which allowed callers to express solidarity without spending money. A good section of the missed callers got pulled into the movement. In the 2014 Lok Sabha election, the BJP borrowed the technique to garner support for Modi.

The highpoint of the interview was Kejriwal’s categorical assertion that he would not float a political party. To quote:

“No, never. We don’t need to get into the system to fight it. We want to pressure the government and assert our rights as citizens. Everyone who has a dream need not get into politics.” <sup>11</sup>

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But this was far from being the cinematic 'The End'. A mere four months after the tumultuous Tihar episode, which many saw as a precursor to a mass mutiny, there were signs that the Anna movement had begun to lose steam. As quickly, as energetically and in as many numbers as people joined Anna, they also began to withdraw. The circus was showing the same tricks and the audiences wanted another distraction. Sure enough, the government caught the mood. On December 22, 2011, it introduced a Bill in Parliament that bore no resemblance to the Jan Lokpal draft.

Anna responded by sitting on another fast, this time in Mumbai. But it was a 'no show' from the people. NDTV quoted the Mumbai police as estimating the turnout at "not more than 7000".

There was no escaping the message, and Kejriwal pondered the team's future in a signed article he wrote for *The Times of India*. In the article, dated January 6, 2012 and titled, 'People should suggest the way ahead for Team Anna', Kejriwal all but accepted that the Anna movement had exhausted itself. The government was not going to agree to the Jan Lokpal, he said, because it believed that protests and movements did not translate into votes. "What should we do? Should Anna go for another fast? But the government has already indicated that if people participating in the movement don't translate into votes, they don't care." <sup>12</sup>

Nonetheless, in the article, Kejriwal stuck to his position that a people's movement was not meant to turn into a political party: "...we neither have the will nor the capacity." But to anyone who read the piece, it was already clear that for all his protestations, Kejriwal had begun to toy with the idea of his own political party. If non-political movements could go thus far and no further, what was the alternative? Kejriwal also found himself chased by the accusation that while he was a happy muck-raker, he didn't himself want to get into the muck.

One effect of the introspection was a distinct change in Kejriwal's approach to the use of agitation. The highs he experienced with Anna had not yielded tangible results. Yet, Kejriwal resolved in his mind that this was not the failure of agitation per se. Agitation would succeed if it had a locus standi; in other words, agitation had to be rooted in structured politics rather than being a product of civil society activism.

Six months after *The Times of India* article, Kejriwal himself sat on a fast unto death — ostensibly to demand the setting up of a Special Investigating Team to probe corrupt ministers but in fact to announce that he was now ready to take the political plunge.

The July 25 to August 3, 2012 fast, which saw worrying dips in Kejriwal's health, ended on a high note, with him making a stirring speech. The man who swore against politics and politicians, rallied and thundered as if born to politics. He spoke about experiencing first-hand what it was to be hungry: "My stomach spoke to me, I could not sleep and I knew that's how it must be for millions of destitute farmers in this country." Kejriwal said he thought invading the streets in large numbers would force the government to listen. It didn't. "Till now we pleaded, prayed and fasted. Now we have understood that we need to be present in Parliament and in the state assemblies to be heard."

### **Finding his constituency**

From an obsession only with corruption, Kejriwal was slowly and surely defining his future constituency: the poor and the oppressed.

There was a roller-coaster feel to the events that followed. On August 6, 2011, Anna disbanded his team. He hinted at a political alternative but quickly drew back, perhaps because he had an image to protect. The spilt that had



been in the making for months finally happened on September 19, 2012. Anna and Kiran Bedi were on one side, and on the other side were Kejriwal, Manish Sisodia, Prashant Bhushan and many others.

Kejriwal started out by depending on Anna to drive his anti-corruption protest. Less than two years later, he had outgrown the guru. Team Anna was now Team Kejriwal. And Team Kejriwal was by far the smarter, sharper team, a fact underscored by the name it chose for the new party: Aam Aadmi Party.

The move hit the Congress like a thunderbolt. Arvind Kejriwal had shown unimaginable dare-devilry in appropriating an idea that had formed the core philosophy of India's oldest and largest political party. And like the Congress, the AAP intended to be an inclusive party but without the corruption that had become the former's hallmark. Indeed, the name AAP was a clincher in so far as the kind of politics Kejriwal would practise. The choice of the name signalled an end to the equivocation that had marked Kejriwal's early career and that was reflected in his embrace of Baba Ramdev and other right-wing elements.

The transformation of Kejriwal was perhaps destined to happen. A fellow traveller on the Anna movement was Prashant Bhushan, who had a sterling record of fighting for the poor and minorities. He took up for Muslim boys framed in terror cases; he spoke for the Kashmiri people's right to self-determination. Anna and Prashant Bhushan represented opposite ideas.

The other decisive influence on Kejriwal was Yogendra Yadav, who joined him at the time of the formation of the AAP. Yadav was one part psephologist and one part political scientist, and brought with him a sharp understanding of history and grass-roots politics. In the end, it was Kejriwal's own instincts and the lessons he picked up from the Anna movement, including that corruption destroyed the soul of the poor, that gave the AAP its distinctive place in a political field packed with charlatans and peddlers of one or another kind of dogma.

The AAP can succeed — and has succeeded — only by being different, only by retaining its USP, which is to be agitational and dogma-free. Kejriwal's grassroots appeal is tied to agitational politics, and his choosing to show up at Anna's protest against the Land Acquisition Ordinance, within days of his own return to power in Delhi, confirms this. As Chief Minister in 2013, Kejriwal broke the mould in which Chief Ministers were expected to fit. The middle classes were disenchanted by this but his underclass core supporters identified even more with him. It was this core support that expanded to give him the huge 2015 victory. If convention demands that as Chief Minister he cannot himself participate in a public protest, he will and he has to overturn that convention to show his proximity to citizens and their grievances.

### **"A third kind of politics"**

The same compelling need to be unique informs the approach of Kejriwal and the AAP to issues of communal identity. In an interview to the Muslim portal, *TwoCircles.net*, Yogendra Yadav argued that the AAP represented a third kind of politics which skirted both "pseudo-nationalism" and a "bankrupt form of secularism" that formed the other side of "pseudo-nationalism." [13](#)

Yadav said: "The politics of nationalism wants to homogenise the country and see any acknowledgement of specific problems of a community as a deviation from and betrayal of nationalism." The so-called secular parties, on the other hand, reduced the concerns of Muslims to "questions of security and identity as if Muslims do not need water, as if they do not need electricity, as if they do not need education and health." Yadav's promise was that the AAP would uphold the Constitutional ideals of secularism, which meant "addressing the specific concerns of the Muslim community without appealing to the communal feeling."

The overwhelming response of Muslims to the AAP's "third approach" was evident in Delhi-2013, in Varansi-2014 and again in Delhi-2015.

On the campaign trail in 2014, I spoke extensively to Yadav on the AAP's rejection of ideological politics and how and why Muslims had become a valuable part of the AAP's core constituency. His answers were revealing. His point was that rather than take a stated "secular" position, the better route to secularism was through a diverse vote base. He said a far-reaching discovery the AAP made during Delhi-2013 was that "our support among Muslims and Dalits was disproportionately large." This realisation pushed the AAP towards secularism and social justice rather than the other way round. "This support is what anchors our ideology." Yadav said, emphasising that Muslim and Dalit support had come to the AAP despite the party's refusal to toe the intellectual line on identity and related issues. "By any textbook understanding of Muslim politics, we should have bombed."

Indeed so, as I saw for myself in Varanasi, the seat of confrontation between Kejriwal and Modi in the 2014 general election. Muslims of Varanasi converged around Kejriwal with a passion and energy that defied traditional perceptions of Muslim politics. Kejriwal made no concession to their religion. To the contrary, he took a dip in the Ganga and sat on stage among people who shouted "*Vande Mataram*" and "*Har Har Mahadev*". Muslims were unperturbed by this in part because this was Varanasi, Lord Shiva's abode, but more importantly because they were tired of the vicious cycle of overt pro-Muslim rhetoric leading to Hindu-Muslim polarisation. When a local Muslim don, Mukhtar Ansari, entered the fray, community leaders immediately saw through the game, and pledged not to allow communal feelings to split the vote. The mood was summarised by Ateeque Ansari, who had voted the don in the 2009 general election: "I tell my people to be Muslim at home and in the Masjid, but not in the polling booth."<sup>14</sup>

To be sure, Muslim support for Kejriwal in Varanasi remained only of academic interest, as Modi won the election. He had to. He was the Prime Ministerial candidate to Kejriwal's *aam aadmi*.

But the exercise showed the way ahead for parties with the guts to prioritise livelihood issues over communal canvassing.

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In the two years between the Anna movement and the founding of the AAP, Kejriwal had transformed from value-neutral politics to a politics distinctly left of centre, though he was loath to saying it in so many words. He also transformed from exclusively targeting the Congress, as all anti-corruption movements had done, to absorbing the full meaning and sweep of corruption. Kejriwal of 2011 was angry and naïve. Kejriwal of 2013 had got the full hang of political corruption: It was all pervasive and rooted in electoral funding, resulting in endemic dependence between political parties and big money, big business interests. The AAP, on the other hand, followed a transparent and non-corporate model of funding, which made it a stand-alone party with the moral strength to demand transparency

from its rivals. This is why Kejriwal was able to boldly name Mukesh Ambani and Gautam Adani. No one has done this, no one dare do this, with the exception perhaps of the communist parties. History will remember Kejriwal as the person who changed the course of the anti-corruption fight — from being obsessively Congress-centric to also including in its ambit the BJP and its corporate supporters. <sup>15</sup>

Today, as Kejriwal savours his phenomenal victory, he will surely do so knowing the pitfalls ahead. He has previously been accused of ‘authoritarianism’ — a complaint that was more vigorously expressed on 2015 election eve, and by seniors who had founded the party with Kejriwal. It would only be human if Kejriwal were to feel superior and vindicated by the size of his victory. The election had established Kejriwal as a leader beyond compare: He had the charisma, he had the votes, and he could win against Modi as he could against heavy-weight dissidents in his own party. But Modi stands as testimony to what can happen when the leader gets narcissist and delusional. The AAP’s resistance to ideological articulation also needs fresh examination. The reason this has not happened is because the party is mortally scared of falling into the communal-secular trap. This is an unfounded fear. It is a given that the AAP will not appeal to base communal instincts — this is not just enlightened politics, and therefore non-negotiable, it has fetched it handsome electoral dividends as is evident from the Muslim support to the party. If the AAP needs to talk with greater clarity and emphasis about the values and principles it stands for, it is more for reasons of internal cohesion. The AAP haemorrhaged badly in the months before the 2015 election, with sections from the core team defecting to the BJP. This signals a lack of communication with the cadre. Shazia Ilmi’s frustrations with the AAP’s leadership ought not to have led her to the BJP. Not because she is Muslim but because she should have learnt by being in the AAP that the BJP’s belief system is the polar opposite of the AAP’s. How could a founding member not know this vital difference?

Kejriwal is not a political scientist by training. But the various agitations he took part in, served as his training ground. Kejriwal arrived at the politics of inclusion not instinctively but by a long process of trial and error, during the course of which he learnt important life lessons. The AAP is a new party driven by refreshingly original ideas. It is powered by a volunteer force that is young, eager and willing to learn. Kejriwal owes it to them to tell them his own story, what the AAP stands for, and why certain core values are as important as life itself.

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