

Understanding the “Mango People”

Jayati Ghosh

Elections in India are similar to the apocryphal elephant whose reality is variously misinterpreted by blind men feeling different parts of it: they are subject to a myriad of often conflicting analyses, both before and after the polls. There is no dearth of pundits and pollsters – not to mention politicians themselves – to offer opinions on voting patterns, and some even make a living out of it.

Even so, the results of the recent Assembly elections in several states have generated some broad assessments that are common. First, there is a tremendous desire for change, especially among young first time voters who apparently came out in large numbers. Second, this desire for change is strongly directed at the ruling government and its dominant party, the Congress. Thereafter, analyses divert hugely, with some seeing these results as sufficient evidence of a “Modi wave” and thereby predicting a sweep by the BJP and its allies in the coming general elections, and others pointing to the emerging likelihood of a more fractured mandate with many different possibilities.

Nothing has attracted more attention than the hung Assembly in Delhi, which heralds the arrival of the newest kid on the political block, the [Aam Aadmi Party](#) (AAP). There is no question that it took the established parties by surprise, and probably may have surprised many of those who voted for it. But this is not the only reason that the Party merits serious attention.

There are reasons at many different levels to celebrate the remarkable electoral success of this newcomer. First, it indicates the spread and depth of the hunger for a non-Congress, non-BJP force in politics at both local and national levels. It is likely, as AAP members have claimed, that indeed their electoral showing would have been even stronger had more voters actually seen them as a credible alternative that would not involve wasting votes. In any case, the widespread feeling that more people have effectively been wishing "a plague on both houses", is forcing everyone to rethink their positions. This can have important implications for future political currents.

Second, the party has campaigned on a platform that is explicitly not based on identity politics in its various manifestations, but rather on the rights of citizens. The focus has therefore dominantly been on issues and policies to ensure equity and justice and decentralized and participatory development, not on personalities or social categories. Thus far, only the Left parties in India have consistently adhered to this approach. True, there have been incipient attempts at a personality cult of [Arvind Kejriwal](#), but it is to be hoped that such tendencies are suppressed in the future.

More importantly, the issues that AAP has taken up or has made into important parts of its manifesto are indeed those that are important for ordinary people. High and rising prices of essential goods and services; inflated electricity and other bills that come from inadequately regulated or audited private utility companies; lack of safety on the streets, particularly for women and girls; inadequate provision of basic needs like adequate housing, water, proper health facilities and good quality schooling for every citizen; high-handed and unaccountable behaviour of those in authority; corrupt practices at every level, including in the police and judiciary – these are problems that

most citizens of Delhi would identify with. Protests against these then have the potential to develop into a more spirited opposition to the loot of public resources and corruption under neoliberal crony capitalism.

Third, the emphasis on probity and ethical behaviour in politics is refreshing and has the potential to generate some changes in actual political practice, even if they do not transform the system (which is sadly still unlikely at present). It is already forcing a change in how the established parties behave. Even before the election, the BJP was forced to change its Chief Ministerial candidate in Delhi to put forward someone with a “cleaner” image. Subsequently, the BJP’s new-found coyness about taking power as the largest single party and somehow “finding” supporters through fair or foul means (something that both the Congress and the BJP have excelled at in the past) and the “pehle aap” minuets that have been occurring in Delhi are clearly reflections of the AAP effect. The recent sudden enthusiasm of the Congress Party for the [Lokpal Bill](#) can be similarly traced.

Fourth, AAP has provided examples of new ways of doing politics and creative forms of campaigning and mobilisation. It has been genuinely bottom up in terms of listening to the concerns of local residents and citizens to set its agenda and derive its manifestos, which have in turn varied according to the specific constituency. It has managed to inspire young people and others who were otherwise turned off the political arena and becoming cynical about electoral democracy. It has shown how the most traditional forms of campaign – door to door visits, small meetings in mohallas, sustained efforts of volunteers to take up particular issues and stick with them to see them through – can be more effective than the shock and awe methods based on lavish spending that the big parties indulge in. It has been enthusiastic in its use of new media that can be accessed by common people, for spreading the word and for mobilisation. Its use of symbolism has been creative and effective: the “jhadu” symbol that captures at once many different concerns and realities; the catchy slogans that are easy to understand but often multi-layered; the focus on a few simple but important issues that capture people’s imagination. There are clearly many lessons in all of this for other progressive political forces.

There is already evidence that this combination of features and the recent electoral performance of AAP has galvanised other potential “third alternative” forces elsewhere in the country, particularly in metro and other urban areas. Of course, the general elections in the country are only a few months away, and therefore the time is possibly much too short to enable too many clones to emerge or even for AAP itself to spread significantly beyond its existing base. Even so, to the extent that this possibility has some traction, this creates exciting potential for the future.

This does not mean, of course, that there are no problems or concerns with this recent political development. AAP is a new and as yet untried and untested phenomenon, very much still in the process of becoming. Many of its fresh-faced leaders are attractive precisely because they are political neophytes, but that does mean they lack experience and their capabilities and integrity have not really been tested. Naturally there are threats that come from its own character as well as the existing nature of Indian political economy. And because it has raised the ethical bar so high, the public will judge severely by its own stated standards.

The rough and tumble of Indian politics, with its essential requirement for coalitions and the often unpleasant quotidian realities of governing, are issues that AAP and similar forces in other places will have to contend with. Its wide and varied support base is at once a major strength and a potential weakness, as it relies on what may be contradictory and conflicting interests that will come out in the open once certain policies are actually acted upon. The origins of AAP in the anti-corruption movement similarly provide a complex base from which to grow: it can be disconcertingly easy to cross the line between morality and moralising, and the latter can then descend into rigidity and hypocrisy.

Most importantly, AAP must understand that thus far it has benefited from what it is not even more than what it is. Popular revulsion towards the major parties has been the driving force of its success. But the party needs to define itself much more clearly in terms of how it sees the alternative in programmatic and policy terms, particularly if (as is now being stated) it sees itself as a national force. The reason why people are becoming increasingly alienated from both the Congress and the BJP (and with similar binaries in several states) is not only because of the endemic corruption in both, although that is surely a big issue. The two parties have also shown themselves to be cynically manipulative of communal identities that divide people unnecessarily – and the BJP is certainly the more frightening in its explicitly majoritarian and patriarchal Hindutva agenda.

But the sense that they are two sides of the same coin is based on something deeper. Their real commonality is a basic acceptance and even reliance on a corporate neoliberal economic agenda that must necessarily deliver some of the adverse results that citizens are now reacting against. Both of these parties support a model of economic growth that relies on private corporate capital to “deliver” investment and economic activity, and therefore seeks to provide incentives to such capital in as many ways as possible. These incentives – in the form of explicit and implicit subsidies, tax giveaways, cheap loans that are not always repaid, access to underpriced land and other natural resources, and so on - then operate to generate growing inequalities and concentration of wealth and income, and create the conditions for crony capitalism and corruption to flourish. These incentives to capital simultaneously reduce the state's ability to deliver on its obligations to the people and therefore to ensure the basic social and economic rights of the citizens. The entire process also creates public disaffection that becomes a fertile ground for all sorts of divisive and violent politics and unpleasant social tensions to emerge.

Recognising this would force AAP and other parties like it to confront directly the fundamental economic processes that are generating the corruption, venality and inequality that they oppose. While this is still not explicitly recognised, it is likely to become evident soon enough, since many of the demands they make simply cannot be fulfilled in a neoliberal economic framework. Indeed this was amply confirmed by the recent [rejection](#) of their 18 point charter for Delhi by both the Congress and the BJP.

This makes forces like AAP natural allies of Left and progressive forces, if the latter are also open to changing realities and shedding past prejudices. Certainly, the current churning in Indian politics suggests that the time for such creative thinking may have come.

* This article was originally published in the Frontline, Print edition: January 10, 2014.