

Arvind Kejriwal May Be Liberal India's Darling, But He Isn't the Solution We Need

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Arvind Kejriwal's coinage, *Kaam ki rajniti* or politics of 'doing', is actually a moniker for the politics of welfarism. It is also the new political mantra and is being seen as an escape route from Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the Bharatiya Janata Party's vice-like grip.

The Aam Aadmi Party chieftain, however, is not its first practitioner. Among today's leaders, Modi is perhaps its most preeminent exponent. Was it not the dazzling multi-layered hyper-nationalistic track in the BJP's 2019 campaign, played as interlude to the NDA government's microeconomic deliveries like gas cylinders, rural homes and toilets, electrical lampposts till the last house, bank accounts, Ayushman Bharat etc.?

Has Naveen Patnaik not followed this model? Did not Nitish Kumar, too, do so and is he not again projecting his return to this style of working? Has not Mamata Banerjee toned down political antagonism directed at the BJP and Modi, instead focusing energy on making her performance as chief minister more visible than the ubiquitous 'blue' in every government property, new or old?

In October 2015, Arun Shourie labelled the Modi government as "[Congress plus cow](#)". His ire was essentially against pursuing the same economic policies. His anger was two-fold; first, Modi was pursuing the same policies as Manmohan Singh's regime. Second, he was not doing it half as smartly, because he was picking a fight every other day and not taking people along with it.

By the same reckoning, would it be wrong to dub Kejriwal as 'Modi minus Hindutva'? After all, his 'kaam ki rajniti' is also chiefly about electricity and water freebies, education, health etc. So is the Delhi chief minister likely to become the new darling of liberal India - after all, he does not spew venom like BJP leaders despite reciting the *Hanuman Chalisa*. To cap it off, in doing so, Kejriwal appears more honest than the *janeu dhari Shiv bhakt*, Rahul Gandhi.

Did not Kejriwal navigate the Modi-Shah trap of Shaheen Bagh more astutely than the Congress did in the years it pandered to soft Hindutva? The problem, however, is not with all this, but with the fact that the AAP leader has given no indication that if the opportunity arises, he will be inclined to roll back any of the policies that vitiated India in recent years.

The worry is over the possibility of Kejriwal emerging as an alternative, not in the immediate future though, to the ferocious and majoritarian politics without providing an ideological difference, but merely by toning down the offensive rhetoric. In an India under such a leader, minorities - religious, social and intellectual - will breathe easier, although there would be no reversal of the damage caused over the past three decades to the inclusive fabric of the nation.

There is a danger of AAP slipping into apolitical welfarism. While this may be good for socially stable

countries with little internal strife, the Indian socio-political matrix is far more complex as the insecurities of various minorities have to be eventually addressed. Given Kejriwal's and his party colleagues' strategic silence and sidestepping of issues during this campaign, the danger exists that the party may not address these issues for fear of upsetting majoritarian voters, a part of whom turned their back on Modi for a plethora of reasons.

Unlike other non-BJP parties, AAP has no past, no history, except the decade that began with the anti-corruption stir and the preceding years of civil society activism that fetched Kejriwal a Magsaysay Award. This ensures that the Delhi chief minister is not committed to even token secularism, the way Congress and other centrist or Left-of-centre parties are.

Not having a past provides for him the elbow room to be ideologically pragmatic, because the only commitment he has is to *kaam*. What makes this brand of politics more worrisome is the decision to bank on the advice of the confirmed ideological agnostic, Prashant Kishor. India is at a stage where defeating the BJP cannot be the sole objective.

Instead, there is a need to reclaim the republic and this cannot be done by staying quiet on Article 370, triple *talaq*, the demonisation of anti-Citizenship (Amendment) Act agitators or students of Jawaharlal Nehru University. The worry is that in the pursuit of *kaam* and securing successive mandates because of success in this area, these excesses will be condoned.

Even in its defeat, the BJP has communicated to the victor emphatically: don't mess around or challenge my ideological template. It is difficult to visualise AAP, in its present orientation, stepping out beyond the political framework built by the BJP. This suits the Sangh *parivar* leadership because it believes that eventually, many political parties shall emerge which all will be upholders of (Hindu) India's ancient lineage and symbols.

The sight of Kejriwal or even Rahul Gandhi stressing fundamental values or Hindu cultural heritage while publicly participating and popularising religious rituals will gladden the RSS leadership. This has happened from the time Indira Gandhi began temple visits, a gesture reciprocated by the organisation by opening a dialogue for collaboration during the Emergency.

AAP's political progression, then, will not unnerve the RSS. Already, the *sarkaryavah* or general secretary, Suresh 'Bhaiyyaji' Joshi, has declared that the BJP singly does not comprise, or represent, Hindu society and that opposing the BJP does not mean being at odds with Hinduism and the Hindu view of the nation.

Yet, Kejriwal's offers a whiff of fresh air. But those willing to reclaim the republic will have to widen the opening and say what requires saying, and not chew words because these may be politically risky to articulate.

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