

# India - The AAP conundrum: Steering clear of doctrines

Saturday 18 January 2014, by [BIDWAI Praful](#) (Date first published: 9 January 2014).

That the Aam Aadmi Party represents something unprecedented in Indian politics is a truism. AAP is India's first party since the JP movement of the 1970s to have evolved from a civil society mobilisation. It's formally a regional party, but with unhidden national ambitions and a fast-growing presence outside its original base. Unlike most regional outfits, it has no crystallised caste, class, ethnic, religious or location-specific identity.

AAP claims to have no ideology or affinity to doctrines like socialism, secularism, liberalism or Hindutva. Ideology, it says, is "for the pundits and the media..." AAP is itself content to be "solution-focused". It deplores the "tendency to pin down political parties as Left, Right, Centre..." AAP is less about goals — barring eradicating corruption, its principal agenda—than process: popular participation to reduce the distance between people and politics, rulers and ruled.

This is a mix of positive and negative features. Take the positives. AAP has publicly rallied the normally apolitical middle class. It will willy-nilly eat into the BJP's votes. No party places as much emphasis as AAP on grassroots democracy, gram-sabha and mohalla deliberations, local ownership/control of resources like water, minerals and forests, and participatory decision-making, including referendums. This can empower people and give them a sense of ownership of politics, so lacking in India. AAP's social agendas like providing water, power, health and education are also welcome.

The negatives are AAP's silence on vital questions like poverty, inequality, communalism, and gender and caste discrimination; prevarication on affirmative action for the underprivileged; refusal to take a stand on Narendra Modi while mainly targeting the Congress; and ad-hoc policy-making unrelated to a broader vision.

Rejection of ideology, which alone can provide vision, is crucial here. Take the AAP government's first two decisions: to supply 700 litres of water free to each Delhi household daily, and halve electricity tariffs for monthly consumption below 400 units. Contrary to appearances, these don't favour the poor as much as the middle/upper-middle class, and duck issues of universal access and equity.

More than one-third of Delhi's households, typically poor, don't have piped-water connections, and will be effectively excluded. Little will be done to improve supply to water-deprived areas or break the water-tanker mafia's stranglehold. But 54 per cent of Delhi's water will continue to be wasted. A person only needs 50-60 litres daily. Giving 140 litres free to all will increase waste.

Take electricity. Private distribution companies (discoms) have been overcharging consumers through meter-tampering, cost-padding, etc. AAP should have ordered an audit, and then proceeded towards tariff reduction. Instead, it raised subsidies to discoms! Poor and middle-class people don't need 400 monthly units. Even an un-airconditioned three-bedroom home with a refrigerator uses 200 units. Halving tariffs for 400 units means subsidising the rich, but leaving 8 lakh poor families unconnected.

AAP's transportation policy is similarly warped: its minister opposes bicycle lanes and Bus Rapid Transit, which is superior to the Metro. AAP's "Vision" document talks of education and health unpardonably naively. It only wants to raise government schools' quality to that of private schools—not establish common schooling. Healthcare involves nutrition, sanitation, environmental safety, and preventive and curative medicine. AAP reduces it to hospitals alone.

Worse, AAP is bending to pressure to conform to "mainstream" positions. That's why Prashant Bhushan had to recant his sensible statements on Kashmir. As MNC executives, bankers and professionals join AAP, its composition and positions will become more elitist. Whether and how it will combine this with a grassroots orientation remains unclear.

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\* Thursday, Jan 9, 2014, 10:31 IST | Agency: DNA:

<http://www.dnaindia.com/analysis/column-the-aap-conundrum-steering-clear-of-doctrines-1947770>

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