The Aam Aadmi Party's win in Delhi: Dissecting it through Geographical Information Systems

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A preliminary look at the electoral performance of the fledgling Aam Aadmi Party in Delhi state using Geographical Information System (GIS) tools allows us to make some qualitative conclusions that could have a bearing on the AAP's political strategy going forward.

Much has been written about the victory of the Aam Aadmi Party in the Delhi assembly elections that any further attempt to seek reasons for their rather spectacular debut (matched only by the likes of the Telugu Desam Party and the Asom Gana Parishad in the recent past in Andhra Pradesh and Assam respectively) risks the possibility of superfluousness.

I venture to argue that there are indeed certain aspects of the AAP's electoral "triumph" - winning second place in a three cornered fight featuring two established parties of a historically bipolar political system - that has not been better explored in the commentariat so far. And perhaps which merit a closer look from the social scientist's point of view.

This short piece will seek to place some of the reasons for the AAP that haven't been thoroughly explored - how did the poor in Delhi vote generally? What geospatial advantages did the AAP enjoy in their choice of Delhi as the arena for electoral experimentation in the first place? What was in the agenda of the AAP that encouraged voters to seek an alternative to the mainstream duopoly? And lastly could these details determine what strategy the party adopts vis-a-vis government formation, as it grapples with that idea even as this article is being written?

The best answers to such questions could be arrived at from survey information featuring detailed election based questionnaire and which is typically prepared by organisations such as the Centre for Study of Developing Societies. But I also suggest that with tools such as geographical information systems (GIS), an informed opinion can be arrived at to answer some of the above questions. That is the purpose of this article.

Using GIS shapefiles of electoral constituencies and allied information available in the public domain, a number of informed conclusions can be made. The constituency wise winner-loser information, vote shares and the presence/absence of a winning candidate
turnover is seen in Figure 1. As can be seen, there has been a massive turnover of winning candidates away from the Congress in the 2013 elections (51 seats saw the incumbent party defeated). The Congress effectively lost a vote share of close to 16% from 2008, marking a clear anti-incumbency effect in Delhi. The BJP, while managing to win the highest vote percentage of all political parties, also lost a substantial 3%, but the AAP actually capitalized on the vote share of the extant third force in Delhi, the Bahujan Samaj Party which also lost nearly 10% of its voteshare since 2008, as well.

**Figure 1: Winners and Runners Up** (Click on polygons to view more information; saffron for BJP, blue for Congress, green for AAP, brown for JD(U), white for independent):

Where did the AAP win the most? Although the constituency maps showing the winners give a good idea of the areas where the AAP managed a strong performance, a better indicator of the party’s performance is a GIS maps that charts the vote shares of the party across Delhi. Figure 2 helps us do that.

**Figure 2** (Click on polygons to view more information, lighter colours mean lower vote shares); AAP Vote Shares in all constituencies:

It is clear that in the relatively rural and more far flung (from the urban agglomeration) areas in west and north-west Delhi predominantly, the AAP’s vote share was lower than in the urban concentrations of south, central, east and even some places in northern Delhi. The ability of the AAP to mount a door-to-door campaign, promising alternative forms of governance driven by innovative ideas such as “constituency based manifestos” and other measures were responsible for their successes in these urban agglomerations, which invariably have high densities of population (See Figure 3). The caveat is that this effort of the AAP did not pay it much dividends in localities that have a high degree of minority concentration (predominantly Muslims) in North East Delhi. It is evident that the minority population has voted for the Congress seeking to support it as a bulwark against the rise of the BJP (See Figure 4 for Vote Shares of the three parties across parliamentary constituencies).

**Figure 3:** AAP Vote Share vs Population Density (thousands/ sq km) (Note population density information for two constituencies, Mehrauli and Delhi Cantt could not be calculated using GIS tools because of their peculiar alignment and so these are excluded from this chart).

**Figure 4:** Vote Share of parties across parliamentary constituencies in Delhi Assembly (BJP+ includes BJP & its alliance partner, Shiromani Akali Dal)
A class profile of the voter base of the AAP party is also possible to locate geo-spatially. An intensity map of the constituencies based on the number of jhuggies (slum clusters) in them and matching them with the vote percentage of the AAP shows that constituencies with a high number of slum clusters invariably voted for the party (Figure 5). Except in two constituencies in south-east Delhi, where the BJP fielded candidates known for their work in the slum clusters and some areas in the minority concentrated North east district, the AAP did well almost in all the constituencies which had a high number of jhuggis.

Figure 5: AAP Vote Shares and concentration of slum clusters (Click on polygon to view details; Thicker borders for constituencies mean more jhuggies, lighter colour means lower AAP Vote%). Data for slum clusters were obtained from this location.

The AAP’s support base

That brings us to the question whether the general perception of the AAP as a middle class (right-of-centre support base as the economist Prabhat Patnaik puts it) is accurate. To a great extent, it is true that the primary activist base of the AAP is drawn from the middle class - from professionals, rights activists, teachers, and even students participating in higher education (as noted from anecdotal evidence and media reports). The reason why the AAP managed to tap a activist base from these segments had been due to extensive media coverage of its anti-corruption agitations, and the fact that the Indian media has of late catered to the interests and opinions of the middle class.

But that does not explain how the AAP could manage the support of the poor – primarily from the jhuggies – which feature a population largely characterised by those working in the informal sector (construction work, migrant labourers, domestic help, contract jobs and so on). Traditionally in these areas, it is the local patron (or the pradhan) who decides a number of things – welfare services, ration cards, water supply among others (See Jha et al 2007). The local patron is an important person, always sought to be cultivated by either of the two big parties and is invariably the “village head”, the caste patriarch who decides political support of a large section of his “clients”.

By embarking upon a campaign that sought to equate the lack of adequate services to the jhuggies to that of corruption – perceived by the poor as their everyday effort to effect a bargain for themselves – the AAP managed to circumvent the traditional patronage
networks and reach out to the poor directly. Many a member of the working poor that this correspondent spoke to, in the run-up to the elections, were impressed with the rhetoric of the AAP to cleanse politics, and by that they didn’t mean an abstract drive against corruption or “decentralized democracy”, but the ability to do away with the culture of greasing palms and paying obeisance to local patriarchs. This reason for support goes beyond considerations of low cost of services, which the AAP promised the poor once they come to power and which is quoted as the main reason why the poor opted to vote for the AAP.

Adopting a canny symbolism – the choice for the name of the party (“the party of the common man”, its symbol, “the broom” and fielding candidates based on a mix of reputation as social activists or those who have a local presence – the AAP managed to swiftly overcome its newcomer disadvantages. And it managed to do so without taking recourse to particularism – “identity politics” based on caste, religion or “kulak” identities – but a discourse that appealed to a multi-class base.

Among the middle class, the professionals saw the need for a non-corrupt force as they have been unable to relate to “political society” created by the BJP and the Congress at one level, and have been dismayed with the crony capitalism engendered in the policies of the two parties favouring big business (See Maidul Islam’s intuitive article on the AAP’s middle class support base). Also, as Maidul Islam says,

the AAP also finds support in a section of the traditional middle class that is linked to the public sector, petty shop owners, small merchants and the professionals (doctors, teachers, lawyers, journalists), which is exasperated with the existing political parties on everyday issues such as inflation, and the lacunas in the public delivery system, power tariff, water supply, urban infrastructure etc. Moreover, under a neoliberal regime, the old contract between the state and the people has been redefined with the social welfare schemes targeting mainly the poor and not including this section of the middle class which emerges from the public sector, small trade and the professions. In a world where the public sector is rapidly vanishing to make way for the corporate, sections of this old middle class are now looking for a political alternative that could articulate their grievances.

Sections from these classes formed the activist base of the party, even as support accrued from the aforementioned poor. In a sense, this is an uneasy coalition. While portions among the former would prefer the AAP to be a right-of-centre party that focuses on “good governance” – maintaining law and order, curb excessive government spending and deliver limited but effective public services to a "consumerised" society; the latter would seek the AAP to replace the parties that provides them limited goods and services, but allows them to live a more dignified life through savings, low inflation and better delivery of welfare
services. If the AAP would want to retain the support of the latter, it has to go beyond a limited agenda that would satisfy the former and it will be easier said than done.

Thus far, the party has been coy in laying out an outright vision document that delineates its position in the political spectrum. It is indeed led by political strategists and leaders who include some with a history of being involved in “socialist” politics, social movements and even strains of Marxism-Leninist politics apart from Arvind Kejriwal himself, who represents the middle class activist base of the party. But it has avoided portraying itself even as a radical social democratic party, unwilling to let the contradictions between sections of its leadership and its activist base intensify into differences. Its support has been determined immediately not through any clear positioning on policy and ideological issues beyond political decentralization and “good governance”. This in a sense helped it electorally but they might not have such a luxury of "ambivalence" when in government.

Lastly, the AAP, despite its spectacular success, has not managed an absolute majority. In one way, forming a minority government would be akin to drinking from a poisoned chalice. Having to depend either on the Congress – to whom they were virulently opposed to and sought to build an alternative against – or on the BJP - which regards the AAP as a hindrance in its quest to re-emerge as the premier national party - heralds a Hobson's choice for the party. The party has played its cards well though. By seeking the BJP and the Congress’ opinions on its pet themes of alternative governance, the AAP has tried to put the ball into their court on the question of support to form a government. It has also created an image of the AAP as not being power hungry and also forced the BJP to eschew Machiavellian support-garnering ways (“horse trading”) to form its own government (the party is merely short by four MLAs from attaining a majority government).

The AAP’s assessment could be that more votes could accrue in its favour from the poor - those who have stayed with the Congress, particularly from the minority community - as it would be seen as the lead opposition to the BJP. But that assessment presumes elections to be held in the very immediacy. The prospect of immediate elections, does not arise, and it seems logical that the Election Commission would consider holding them alongside the Lok Sabha elections, which is due latest in six months, if indeed the Lieutenant Governor decides to extend President's Rule. This intervening period and specific political equations in national polls does not guarantee a repeat of the multi-class support that the AAP received in the assembly elections in December. Going to elections six months from now, after refusing to form a government may present the AAP with a new opportunity cost.

In sum, the AAP must seek to form a government, not out of any attraction towards power, but to preserve the mandate that the multi-class support base offered it. And the party must utilize even a minority government to offer the kind of relief that the urban poor have sought from it, despite the challenges it faces from having to rely on support from the Congress party (as it turns out, the party has offered to support the AAP even going to the extent of endorsing some of the 18 points of the agenda circulated by the AAP and
suggesting that the rest of the demands are mostly executive decisions that are the prerogative of any new government). In other words, the reading of the verdict is that the AAP must not shirk its responsibility to the new support base it garnered. Will the party, which has thus far made every move with utmost precision, manage to rise to the occasion as the mandate demands? It remains to be seen.

**References**