

Idealism and Collectivism Are Alive

A Report on Swaraj Samvad

MEENA RADHAKRISHNA

Vol. 50, Issue No. 16, 18 Apr, 2015

Meena Radhakrishna (meena.rkna@gmail.com) taught sociology at the Department of Sociology, Delhi School of Economics, Delhi University.

If the decisions arrived at the Swaraj Samvad are carried out effectively, Arvind Kejriwal may face one or both of these prospects in the coming months—A vast number of AAP members constantly agitating for swaraj from within, or en masse migration to an expanded political party born through the newly launched Swaraj Abhiyan.

A Swaraj Samvad (translated as dialogue for self-rule) was organised on 14 April 2015 in Gurgaon, Haryana, by Yogendra Yadav, Prashant Bhushan and his associates. It was a mammoth, 4,000-strong event, attended by members, non-resident Indian (NRI) volunteers and state leaders of Aam Aadmi Party (AAP). I attended the meeting from the beginning to the very end, and will try and give a report as well as my subjective assessment of the event.

Diverse Support For Samvad

First of all, and this is not insignificant to the main concerns of this essay, conspicuous by their presence were a fair sprinkling of women. So far, whenever I have interacted with AAP volunteers over the last year, they have been in concentrations which are almost 99% male. The first deliberate political statement of sorts thus was introducing the event by a Muslim woman, and then a Dalit woman (the day chosen for the Samvad was Ambedkar Jayanti). Throughout the day, women—leaders, speakers, announcers and moderators, were a constant presence on the stage.

Another interesting aspect was that the social section predominantly present, contrary to my own earlier understanding of the volunteers of this party, was *not* “young”, middle class or obviously professional looking. There were a large number of middle aged, grey haired, and “small town” participants, and moreover, on talking to them it transpired that they were not first time entrants into politics either. This was again in contrast to the volunteers I encountered on the streets of Varanasi or Delhi during elections. Those volunteers were mostly urban middle class professionals, in their early or late 20s, having their first brush with politics. (In fact, in an improvised group discussion on the street where they were campaigning, a 19 year old engineering student in Delhi had told me that he had “missed” the first Indian freedom movement way back, so he was not going to miss this one!)

In response to my remark on the admirable idealism of the young generation, I was also grimly told by one volunteer in this group that it was *my* generation, ie the generation of their parents which was lacking in idealism who had made such a mess of India (which they had inherited, and which it was their duty to free of its corruption and other ills). So, in a way, it was both surprising and encouraging to see a lot of older people present in this gathering.

All this, of course, merely proved that I have been very ignorant, and that AAP is fortunate enough to have an extremely diverse support base.

The Context of the Samvad

The main context for the Samvad was collective deliberation regarding the next step, after four founding members of AAP had been unceremoniously ousted from party's highest decision making bodies in early and then late March. There has been widespread speculation about the possibility of a final split in AAP on the day of the Samvad, and the launch of a new political party by Yadav and Bhushan.

As one read a subtext running all through the Samvad proceedings, or in fact just carefully listened to all the speeches by state leaders, it was increasingly clear that most of the volunteers and state leaders/members were neither willing nor ready for a new political party. Admiral Ramdas's and especially Lalita Ramdas's messages (both of whom were highly esteemed by the gathering) and videographed messages of NRI volunteers overwhelmingly rooted for a united AAP. In spite of the anger and pain at recent events, volunteers and state leaders wanted to attain the values of swaraj, but not by breaking the existing party.

Moreover, it was also becoming clear that there was very little possibility of reconciliation among *the leaders* on both sides of the divide. Yogendra Yadav and Prashant Bhushan's continuing bitterness and anger did stand out, and the electronic media has picked that up selectively, playing and replaying those clips where they are said to have "lashed out" repeatedly at Kejriwal about the happenings over the last month.

No Support For Split

Demands and suggestions which were raised bore out the conciliatory sentiment in different ways—for taking a referendum far and wide among members and volunteers before the next step is decided, as many could not attend; for remaining in the party and playing the role of watchdogs by organising "chowkidar committees" for vigilance down to the mohalla level on any ill-doings of the elected representatives; for remaining in the party and dwarfing the current leadership/exposing its undemocratic actions by the example of one's own genuine work among the people on principles of swaraj, and so on.

A final decision was reached in as democratic and efficient a way as one could hope for in a

gathering of 4,000 people. To come to a conclusion about the next step, the entire congregation was divided into groups from various states, and moderators appointed by the organisers, or chosen by the groups themselves. NRI participants requested for their own group, and one was announced from the stage, though I was not able to see how big this contingent was. In these groups, brief but vigorous and passionate discussions, lasting about 45 minutes each, took place among the participants. The agenda of the group meetings was discussion around three points, roughly worded in the following way:

1. Trust the current leadership as it would do course correction on its own
2. As far as possible, carry out struggle and campaign for swaraj and public agitations without leaving the party. Review the experience after some time
3. Quit the existing party and immediately launch a new one

A vote took place around these points in each of these statewide groups, and the moderators presented the majority opinion, along with suggestions arising from the discussions (though all the group moderators could not be accommodated, perhaps due to the paucity of time).

The same three points along with another option—"Don't know"—this time on a sheet of paper, were circulated to all the participants, and this time it was a signed vote.

The results were later announced, with an overwhelming proportion (70%) voting for option 2.

Roughly 25% voted for option 3, or favouring a new party. The rest included 1.5% (option 1) and about 3.5% "did not know".

A formal split was averted because the results finally generated enough evidence that the volunteers and state leaders wish to remain one for now. The vote for not letting go, and staying put, was as decisive as had been the trend of the proceedings the whole day. Interestingly, just before the final vote, Yogendra Yadav somewhat surprised the gathering by requesting the participants to vote for option 2, i.e. to not leave the party.

Based on the voting, a resolution was passed to set up Swaraj Abhiyan in order to strengthen alternative politics and promote the idea of swaraj, a movement which will take up issues of farmers and common people through protests and rallies.

Reform or Reorganise?

The point which has not been emphasised enough by the media is that a number of leaders' speeches made it clear that *they want to campaign for swaraj in this mode to reform the party from within*, and this they hoped to achieve by going out to mohallas and streets in all corners of the country, and by taking the message of swaraj.

So *far* from Swaraj Abhiyan being a non-political social movement, as has been claimed in sections of the media, this was a profoundly political move to reach lakhs of members and volunteers, educate them as to how swaraj has been violated by the current leadership in AAP, and in effect prepare the ground for a new party. Respecting the current sentiment among the volunteers for remaining in the party is a sophisticated strategy, as it will ensure that these crusaders operate right inside AAP, constantly agitating, watching out for any further violation of swaraj, bringing it to the notice of the public, demanding course correction. (After all, how many thousands of volunteers and members can Kejriwal expel, even if he expels the main leaders who organised Swaraj Samvad!)

Political Fallout for Kejriwal

There is another welcome and interesting possibility judging from the way the Samvad proceedings in effect progressed (where a collective verdict by volunteers and state leaders was allowed to prevail) even if these four or five leaders are going to be expelled: the considerable risk of another personality based political formation around Yadav and Bhushan may be averted, as happened around Kejriwal.

If “reform” does not happen in Kejriwal’s AAP in half a year’s time—the time mentioned by the Samvad leaders after which a review of this movement will take place—most volunteers will probably willingly steer towards option 3. If this author’s reading of the overall strategy is correct, by then the support base of the organisers of the Samvad would also have vastly extended through agitational means amongst new sections, eg farmers and women (including those amongst minorities and Dalits).

Either way, for Arvind Kerjriwal, there may be a formidable political challenge developing either inside AAP or outside. Perhaps both.