

## A Misplaced Trial: Delhi Municipal Elections 2017

RAMA DEVI, BHIM REDDY

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Rama Devi ([ramadevisingh87@gmail.com](mailto:ramadevisingh87@gmail.com)) is a doctoral student at Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology, Guwahati. Bhim Reddy ([bhim.hydr@gmail.com](mailto:bhim.hydr@gmail.com)) is a fellow at Institute for Human Development, New Delhi.

*Aam Aadmi Party's shift from the politics of spectacle into tangible politics did not bring quick rewards in the Delhi municipal elections, but AAP may hold promise yet. Local civic issues, including the track record of the Bharatiya Janata Party that was in office for two terms, took a backseat in these polls, obscured by the scale and intensity of BJP's campaign around the popularity and policies of Modi, which simultaneously denigrated and delegitimised AAP. Even as AAP failed to match the BJP's "Modi-momentum," many among the poor appreciate AAP's implementation of measures that affect their quality of life.*

The recent Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD) elections assumed an unprecedented significance among local body elections. This was also reflected in the number of opinion and exit polls conducted by leading organisations, and the media attention around these polls. Remarkably, civic governance and policies of the recent past or an agenda for the future did not figure prominently during the election campaign and in the media trials.

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) won these polls for the third time in a row, winning more seats than it had in its previous term, despite poor performance in terms of functional outcomes during its two terms in office. The Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), which swept the 2015 assembly elections defeating the Congress, has been on trial since this local body defeat for failing to overthrow the BJP. The critique of AAP has been carried out without gauging parties on concrete aspects of governance and delivery.

The BJP won spectacularly in the MCD polls held on 23 April 2017. It won 181 wards out of the 270 that went to poll (there are 272 wards in total). These wards are divided into three sub-corporations with 104 wards each in South and North MCD, and 64 wards in East MCD. Once again, BJP retained power in all the three corporations, after being in power for a decade now. AAP contested civic polls for the first time and secured 48 wards. The Congress party, which ruled the state for three terms, between 1998-2013, managed to win 30 wards. Others, including the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), Janata Dal United (JDU), Samajwadi Party (SP), Indian National Lok Dal (INLD) and independents won 11 councillor posts.

In terms of the change with respect to number of seats that parties and independents held during the last tenure, BJP improved its tally remarkably from over 150 seats to 180. AAP won 48 wards in its debut. The strength of both the Congress and BSP declined from 90 to 30, and 15 to three respectively. The number of independents who won seats also reduced.

Just going by the numbers, this result would mean an increased faith in the BJP that was ruling the civic bodies and a reasonable acceptance of AAP. But the media, political commentators, and BJP itself (for obvious reasons), are largely interpreting the results as a loss of credibility for AAP and its chief, the Delhi Chief Minister (CM) Arvind Kejriwal, on the one hand, and as an increase in popularity of Prime Minister (PM) Narendra Modi and his policies, on the other. Such an interpretation of the results naturally followed the debate foregrounded during the run-up to these elections. Local issues and agendas, including the track record of the party holding office, took a backseat. These issues were successfully obscured by the resources at the BJP's disposal and the scale at which it managed to create a storm around the popularity and policies of Modi, while at the same time denigrating and delegitimising AAP.

How did the BJP strategise its election campaign to successfully beat both anti-incumbency and its main rival AAP? The following discussion is based on observations of the campaigns and interactions with people in three wards of East Delhi, where two were won by the BJP and one by AAP.

## **'Modi Can Do It' Strategy**

Two campaign slogans of the BJP best capture the script that the election followed. One is *naye chehere, naye urja, nayi udaan* (new faces, new energy, new flight) and the other is *tumse na ho payega, Modi se hoga* (you cannot do this, Modi can do it; or you are incapable, Modi can do it).

The first slogan projects the BJP's team that would lead the local body as one that is fresh in Modi's era, unlike the old BJP team that did cause disappointment. The denial of tickets to outgoing candidates was also presented as an action against those who were non-performing and corrupt. Thus, the "new faces" absolved the party of its poor performance and alleged mismanagement in the civic bodies. BJP took the potential risk of old candidates shifting parties or contesting as independents. But the gains, as it turned out, outweighed any such loss. The Delhi BJP chief's promise, after winning the elections, that Delhi would be "garbage-free" in the next three months is a vindication of the BJP's poor governance of the corporation. But the campaign was manoeuvred in such a way that AAP was held responsible for the state of affairs.

The second slogan declared Kejriwal incapable as against Modi who can get the job done. It is strange that the state's Chief Minister and the country's Prime Minister are pitched against each other in a local body election. Yet, knowing its potential, BJP engineered its campaign aggressively in this direction. BJP leadership started the process of portraying

Kejriwal in a poor light much earlier. His complaints against the central government and the lieutenant governor of Delhi (LG) were interpreted as excuses for administrative incompetence and as a politics of “negativity” and “confrontation.” The same script was replicated at the local level as well. AAP and Kejriwal were attacked on several fronts especially in failing to curb “corruption” in general, and even within the party’s rank and file, citing corruption charges against AAP members of legislative assembly (MLAs) and ministers. Given the lack of clarity on the jurisdiction and functions of MCD and state departments, issues within the ambit of MCD were shown as the state government’s failures. The electoral ambition of AAP in Punjab and Goa was negatively interpreted as Kejriwal’s greed for power.

On the other hand, Modi was presented, in line with the larger narrative, as a bold and honest Prime Minister in action, fighting enemies both within and outside the nation by waging war against terror, corruption, and black money. He is the one leading the country on a developmental path and bringing honour to the nation, while it was AAP which emerged with the slogan of anti-corruption, Modi is shown as its real champion. Adventurous decisions, particularly, the “surgical strike,” demonetisation, and the BJP’s decisive victory in Uttar Pradesh’s assembly elections, the recent banning of red beacons (interpreted as putting an end to “VIP culture”), etc, are repeatedly invoked to validate the powerful image of Modi. This image was paramount, and was foregrounded all through, including invoking the famous Modi slogan *Har-har Modi, ghar-ghar Modi*, among others. Though these were local-body elections where the candidate has a significant influence, the names and merits of the candidate were not prominent in BJP’s campaign. In rallies at the ward level, slogans raised in praise of the Prime Minister and the party put the candidate into the background. It was not uncommon to find BJP voters who did not know the name of the party’s candidate. Many whom we interacted with took pride in claiming to support the BJP’s candidate solely for Prime Minister Modi. It is also depicted as an act of gratitude and support to the selfless man’s pursuits in the nation’s interest; a moral obligation; and a service to the nation.

Besides, BJP also made a conscious move to reach out to the growing population from the Purvanchal region in Delhi by elevating the popular Bhojpuri star actor and singer Manoj Tiwari as the Delhi party chief. This population was considered to be a significant factor in the last parliamentary as well as assembly elections. Tiwari was actively engaged in this campaign, besides, reportedly, fielding around 10% of the candidates hailing from this region. Further, the manifesto promised to construct ghats meant for *chhath pooja*, which is an important festival for Purvanchalis.

Finally, it is the resources at BJP’s disposal that made the whole “Modi can do it” campaign very effective. Here, AAP was no match both in financial and human resources. This was visible in BJP’s impressive rallies organised with main leaders leading them, campaign material like hoardings, ads in metro trains and radio, the number of saffron-cloth clad volunteers assisting voters near the polling booths, youth on bikes mobilising voters,

deploying vehicles to shuttle voters between their homes and polling booths, etc. Only Congress candidates could match the BJP's resources in some wards, which was visible, for instance, in the number of volunteers engaged by compensating them monetarily. Human resources, particularly, active support and participation of male youth, appeared decisive for the BJP.

All parties and candidates had their strategies and all of them, including BJP, promised to act on issues in the locality, but the BJP's strategy with Modi as a protagonist eclipsed other campaigns and issues.

## **Tangibility of AAP**

The dynamics in a local-body election may not allow AAP, a new political formation, to display a similar success as it did in the 2015 assembly polls. One should consider the possibility that it may not have swept the local polls even if they were held in 2015. The Congress party, for instance, could not manage to get a majority in two municipal elections while it was in power at the state level. The intense micro-management in a local body election necessitates a certain level of organisational structure and members in every locality. Financial resources can partly substitute for this or strengthen it. On both these fronts, AAP was visibly deficient.

The articulate middle-class volunteers that it had during the 2015 elections seem to have considerably disowned AAP. In general, the middle-class's disillusionment with AAP was perhaps inevitable for two reasons. Its dramatic emergence raised unclear and high expectations across sections. It delegitimised the whole political spectrum and promised a corruption-free politics and governance with no concrete idea for people as to what "anti-corruption" activity a government could engage in. Some visible action against crime and corruption would have helped in shaping the government's image. But not having the police under its control made it appear toothless. Second, the dominant discourse against welfare policies, including, entitlements and subsidies, draws opposition from upper- and middle-classes. AAP suffers dissent from these classes for its subsidy on water and electricity, interpreted as "freebies" and "appeasement politics."

Though AAP emerged out of a politics of spectacle, the politics it is practising is mundane, engaging with everyday *bijli-pani* (electricity-water) issues. Amidst the tussles with the union government and with the limited power that Delhi state government has, it has been making consistent efforts to deliver on its poll promises. It is working on the ground in the poor localities, where these tangible measures by the government are echoed the most. It is acknowledged for keeping up with the promises, especially of free water supply (up to 20,000 litres per household per month) and subsidised electricity (50% subsidy for consumers of up to 400 units per month). Often, women and Muslims among the poor, who supported AAP, invoked the exact amount of money they are exempted from paying because of these schemes. Other notable interventions that have significant recognition among the

poor are provision of medicines free of cost in government hospitals, newly opened *mohalla* clinics in the locality, improved infrastructure in government schools and restraining fee hikes in private schools. It is also true that vulnerable groups like vendors and auto drivers are disappointed with AAP for its inability to contain the excesses of the police and MCD officials, including extortion.

On the whole, however, it is remarkable that people across party lines in these localities recognise the efforts of AAP. There were instances when people who voted for BJP mentioned that they actually wanted to vote for AAP but were influenced by others. It appeared that despite having widespread appeal and recognition among people, AAP failed to consolidate the support and translate it into votes.

To conclude, the BJP successfully set the campaign at a supra-local level, away from civic issues and governance and rode on intangible promises. AAP could not change the course of the debate. Its political engagement with everyday issues of the poor, however, has brought it widespread appreciation, which holds promise for its future.