

# A Constructive Challenge to the Political Class

## The Aam Aadmi's Party

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The Aam Aadmi Party has emerged to break the logjam created by the bad faith of the political class in issues raised by the democratic social movements. It is an attempt to overturn politics from above by a mobilisation of people from below, not just on a pro-people agenda but by using methods which will entrench democratic citizenship in our political system. This article is a statement of intent from one of the founding members of the AAP.

The year 2012 has come to an end with the birth of a new political party which aims to be an alternative political instrument in the hands of the common man and woman and their movements. The Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) hopes to build active citizenship for major reforms in governance and policymaking. It has a vision document which is written in a simple language with a broad outline of the current situation in India and a set of priorities. It promises a new national agenda for 21st century India and commits itself to making a nationwide intervention in the next general elections of 2014. Its announced priorities include checking corruption, reversing centralisation of power, challenging discourses of power based on caste, region and religion, and putting an end to crony capitalism patronised by the major political parties. This new party has opened its political account by challenging both the major political alliances – the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) led by the Congress and the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) led by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), as well as their patrons in the corporate world, for their collective role in promoting corruption in India.

It is not insignificant that there has been no surprise expressed by the major political groups about the turn of events resulting in the formation of the AAP. They have treated it as a party which is a “media creation which was born in the OB van”. They have also claimed knowledge about the deepest impulses of the leaders of the new formation, which apparently is a hidden desire for political power. However, AAP’s opponents claim that it will not be capable of anything serious except occasional acts of “hit and run”

with sensational stories about politicians meant primarily for the consumption of the media and the middle classes. One former bureaucrat, who is now a Member of Parliament (MP) of the UPA, stated that the AAP leaders may need patience and persistent efforts for at least 20 more years before they see major electoral success. Some other regional parties have predicted that AAP will have no electoral future as they are ignorant about the complexities of Indian society and politics. In other words, for the adversaries this party is not going to be more than a marginal phenomenon without any effective electoral presence.

Such non-seriousness of the politicians is perplexing. Either this is a deliberate pose of denial or they are genuinely ignorant. The corporate class has been more realistic, with at least one major corporate leader approaching the media to stop the new party from getting much attention in future. Some others have publicly announced that they will stop all forms of support to individuals who may be associated with the AAP. The print and electronic media have definitely taken a serious look at the political and policy implications of the arrival of the AAP on the Indian political stage.

In any case, it is difficult to ignore the fact that along with their contribution in the Jan Lokpal movement during the last two years, most of the founder members of AAP are well-known activists in the national public sphere. Many are better known than most of the parliamentarians of the two major coalitions. They are recognised as long-distance runners and not as ambitious upstarts who have come together in a hurry to climb the ladder of power by cashing in on the popularity of anti-corruption movements. They have earned credibility through their work in campaigns for the poor and the environment, for peasant and worker mobilisations, in human rights movements, for judicial activism, in student/youth organisations, in the fields of education and media, and in political reform work. Their contributions are recognised in the making of a variety of new laws which have established the rights to information,

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work and education. The role of the AAP in exposing police failures during the protests against the gang rape and murder in Delhi, in raising electricity- and water-related issues in the national capital, active engagement in the farmers' protests in Maharashtra about the price policy of sugar cane, corruption in the non-governmental sector under political protection in Uttar Pradesh, and in forcing the resignation of BJP president Nitin Gadkari within the first 10 weeks of its birth, shows that superficial responses to it are wrong.

### Political Parties in Present-Day Democracy

It is relevant to underline that our party system is an essential part of India's political order and power dynamics. Furthermore, a good political party is often "five in one" for people and society – eyes, ears, mouth, mind and face. This is so because political parties provide vision, understanding and voice to the people through their perception, interpretation and projections of social realities. They also contribute towards building collective imaginations. Of course, they also strive for representation of the social groups and their needs, experiences and expectations. Political parties are also mirrors, motivators and mobilisers of citizen power. They are agents of political socialisation. They function as a platform for democratic citizenship. Our political parties are invariably also instruments of democratic nation-building. All parties have a social basis and political purpose in order to be viable. They have to achieve their goals for their constituents through constitutional processes including a policy orientation, organisation-building, a programme of action, constructive works, protest activities, electoral competitions and good governance. Thus, the birth of a political party is a significant episode in the life of a democracy.

On the other hand, parties are also formed, split and dissolved in any multi-party system. They also become sources of new oligarchies, injustices and inequalities. So a new political party is not necessarily always a major event in an evolving parliamentary democracy like India. In fact, making and breaking of

parties has become a much more frequent phenomenon since the 1990s due to the continuous decline in the appeal of all major political parties with the rise of "identity politics" (caste/region/religion) and of the "coalition government system" at the centre and several states. The declining interest of the younger, educated, middle class, urban citizens in electoral politics has also contributed to this. "Voting India" has also contributed by often providing fractured mandates.

It is in this context that the formation of the AAP on 26 November 2012 has received significant national attention from political observers, civil society organisations, the media and a variety of concerned citizens across the country. It is being recognised as a significant collective response of the community built up around the anti-corruption movement for better governance and healthy politics. It is an expression of the disappointment people have with the state of affairs even after two decades of liberalisation and six decades of developmental planning, the party system and elections, and bad governance. The new party is seen to be attempting to promote a new political culture encourage active citizenship. It is proposing to do this by combining two key democratic processes: (i) peaceful social mobilisation for reforms, and (ii) free and fair elections for representation in governance.

### Changing a Challenge into an Opportunity

There have been various interpretations about the emergence of the AAP, some around the pathology of India's present political culture and party system. The citizens feel increasingly marginalised in a party system, which is drifting towards systems of power that promote patron-client networks and subvert democratic imperatives. The need for a citizen-oriented party was being felt for some-time due to the growing disconnect between politicians, the major national and regional parties and the common people (*aam aadmi* and *aam aurat*). This disconnect has been growing with every successive election due to the increasing importance of vote banks, money and media power over what should be of

importance – the causes of the common people, the party workers and the party programmes. This disconnect is seen throughout, from the panchayats to Parliament. Further, the increasing nepotism and corruptibility of the present-day political elite makes them uninspiring, while the lack of transparency and the opportunism of the older parties have also contributed to distancing them from the people. This is a major crisis of democracy and it has created space for the rise of new leaders with integrity and of party organisations with commitment beyond their vote bank.

From another perspective, if we focus on the issue of corruption and the social basis of the anti-corruption activists, then it can be argued that there are a large number of "new Indians in the making" for quite some time who have been outsiders to the political system. They have felt the need to create a new discourse of democracy beyond the present parliamentary parties with their electoral pragmatism. This was getting reflected in icons, demands, engagements, organisations, and movements since the last decade of the 20th century.

The origins of this disenchantment with the democratic deficit of our politics are not new. They can be observed in at least four people who entered as "outsiders" and came to influence the national mainstream with amazing success – Rajiv Gandhi, V P Singh, Sonia Gandhi and Manmohan Singh. There are other examples of success at the regional level, like N T Rama Rao, Naveen Patnaik and Jayalalithaa. Some worked with the given apparatus. Some others forged new instruments. Whether the AAP and its leadership are the latest "outsiders" who have the potential of making a critical difference is a matter to be decided not now but in the coming few years.

The AAP has been recognised as a significant initiative for at least three reasons. One, the context of the announcement of the intention to form a party on 2 October 2012 and its inauguration on 26 November 2012; two, the coming forward of India Against Corruption (IAC) activists to form a party as the logical response of the anti-corruption movement in the face of a stubborn political

class; and, three, the uniqueness of the AAP's call for "Swaraj"-oriented reforms in the polity, economy and society through a citizen-centric political approach.

The new party is showing courage in working for a paradigmatic shift from representative democracy to a participatory democracy with shades of M K Gandhi, M N Roy, Rammanohar Lohia and Jayaprakash Narayan (JP) combined with the constitutional reforms introduced by the Rajiv Gandhi regime through the 73rd and 74th amendments on decentralisation. This call is quite timely as the fatigue about representative democracy has been reflected all over – from the recommendations of a number of national commissions, from the rural employment programme, to the reviews by the Communist Party of India (Marxist), Radical Humanists, the Sarva Sewa Sangh and the National Alliance of People's Movements (NAPM).

The formation of the AAP is a classic example of converting an overwhelming challenge from the establishment into a great opportunity, by a group of determined activists. It has to be recognised that there was a genuine nationwide concern about the future of citizens' protest movements against corruption when it was found that the political class is bent upon ignoring the moral imperatives and refuses to recognise the processes of civil disobedience like fasting and dharna.

With such a "betrayal", the Anna Hazare group-led movement was seen to be suffering a loss of direction as well as momentum. There was also widespread shock about the midnight police brutality to disperse those assembled, including the aged and women, to support Baba Ramdev's fast against black money at Ramlila Maidan. The mobilisation for Jan Lokpal led by Anna Hazare under the banner of IAC became a point of historical national convergence for a large variety of pro-reform individual initiatives, groups and movements which had addressed the systemic crisis of parliamentary democracy.

IAC and Anna Hazare had succeeded, for the first time since the JP-led student-youth based anti-corruption movement of 1974-77, in presenting a constructive

solution about the problems of failing governance and development deficits. There were dissenting voices about it, but this campaign was strong enough to get the Government of India and all political groups in Parliament to recognise and appreciate its need. It became politically difficult to disagree with Anna Hazare and the IAC. They had successfully created a rare moment of national awakening about the need of urgent reforms in governance. For quite some time, Jantar Mantar looked like an island of hope in an ocean of hopelessness. The subsequent backtracking by the government left everyone with the question about what is to be done next. No one had any answer as the whole Hazare-led IAC mobilisation was based on good faith about the intentions of the Manmohan Singh-Sonia Gandhi government to move towards good governance. The let-down created widespread disappointment among activists and concerned citizens.

After going through self-criticism and situational assessment in an open manner, the idea of moving beyond fasting and prayers and creating an instrument for effective political intervention became quite persuasive. It was presented as the only suitable response to the challenge from the political class who had questioned the legitimacy of the anti-corruption movements and were dismissively calling them just a handful of people shouting in the streets. They were charging all the anti-corruption voices with trying to interfere "illegitimately" with constitutional powers and the role of Parliament. How could a group of self-appointed "moralists" dictate to the constitutionally-elected people's representatives about what is to be done to address the problem of corruption? Would this not destroy the carefully-crafted democratic system and promote fascist and dictatorial tendencies? "Let them go to the people", enter the electoral process, get elected by the majority of the voters, was the refrain. Only then can they propose the Jan Lokpal and other new laws on the floor of the Lok Sabha and the Rajya Sabha. They further argued that it was irresponsible to call all peoples' representatives incapable and corruptible as it damages the foundations of our

parliamentary system which has no better alternative. Significantly, a number of civil society voices too joined this line of criticism of the IAC activists.

The new party has the prospect of widening, deepening and strengthening the movement against corruption by "walking on two legs" – active citizenship-based multilayered initiatives for basic reforms and voter-oriented political organisation for electoral intervention. The decision to enter the electoral arena has automatically taken the conflict about corruption and related issues to a much wider level. It makes every voter the part of the jury and every constituency is sought to be converted into the local "Jantar Mantar". This promises to be a more direct and deeper level of engagement to get the people out of "victimhood" through a conscious use of their citizenship rights and roles.

#### **From Anna to AAP: Continuity with Change**

Of course, some IAC activists, most prominently Anna Hazare himself, did not feel the need to respond to the challenge of the political class. They thought that it will not be wise to change the strategy of fasting and dharna even after the complete breakdown of dialogue with the government. They see the suggestion of politicians to enter into the arena of party-based electoral competition as a "trap" of the corrupt politicians. They see three grave problems – the issue of resources, the voters' new orientations, and the elected person's changed priorities. First of all, social movements can never have the financial resources to meet the expenses of the election process or neutralise the manipulative skills of the established political groups. Second, the politicians have polluted the election process where the ordinary voter often gets tempted to vote under the influence of material and parochial considerations and not based on issues of common good and public interest. Third, they further argued that, even if the candidates presented by the movement may succeed due to voter support, it would be near impossible for the elected representatives to remain disciplined and avoid the trappings of power.

As a result one of the most common questions posed to the AAP is: What are your differences with Anna Hazare when there is a common cause and a common challenge? Why not try for unity between all anti-corruption initiatives and icons before going to the masses?

This is certainly a very hard question which needs sincere and continuous effort till there is a satisfactory answer. But this is an internal issue for only the community of activists which forms the anti-corruption movement. It cannot be used by the political class to ignore the future implications of the arrival of a nationwide force of organised anti-corruption activists, including Anna Hazare, in the parliamentary field through different paths. Irrespective of the mutual distancing due to distinct strategies, it may add to the anti-incumbency factor for all such MPs who desire to get re-elected to the Lok Sabha in 2014. The culture of silence on issues of corruption and crony capitalism will be challenged by the new arrivals. They promise to make it very noisy and difficult for the status quo.

*Paisa se Satta aur Phir Satta se Paisa* (Getting power through money and then making money through power) is the ultimate goal of our politicians, according to the inimitable Anna Hazare. He has been referring to the failure of the JP movement to stay its course after the phenomenal electoral success of 1977 while JP was still alive. So Anna Hazare has decided to keep away from the new move and remain in his pursuit of creating a Jan Lokpal to check corruption through a party-less process of popular mobilisation. It is going to be a responsibility of the AAP to maintain a continuity with the goals of Anna Hazare. This can be achieved by engaging the Anna team in a meaningful dialogue. It has to be enhanced through unity in action. It will benefit both even if they have decided to get reorganised in two camps of “no-changers” and “pro-changers”.

### Tasks before 2014

A new party of the masses, by the masses and for the masses, committed to “politics from below” against the prevailing trend of a “high command system”, is an attractive idea but an equally difficult project.

This is more so because we are a nation with unity in diversity, and democracy is all about emphasising the diversities, and ignoring the unity, for the purposes of sharing power. So there will be masses for events and episodes including protests, fasts or festivals. But they get converted into interest groups and identity groups when there is a process of party formation or electoral competition. There have to be different systems of active membership and office-bearers at different levels and for candidate selection for the elections. This is necessary so that the AAP becomes approachable as a party for all people who feel excluded by the present set of political parties, as they are the citizens who need a new political party. It should also be inviting enough for common people as individual citizens – not as members of a primordial community or a modern interest group – as an electoral platform on the basis of its agenda and campaign system.

Of course, there are going to be partial engagements for the purposes of social movements and collective action by even such sections of society who otherwise feel attracted to the platforms of identity politics in the elections. The AAP has definitely made a positive beginning by putting its accounts online with details of all contributions received so far. This is their way of introducing transparency about its financial affairs, as most parties are blamed for accepting “bad money”. The bad money power can be eliminated by bringing in good money in party building and election processes if other parties too show the courage of openness about their financial matters. Similarly, decision-making may have to be restored to the local and lower levels by the higher committees of all parties if the AAP make a start. Unless we have participatory democracy within the political parties themselves, how can there be participatory governance in the country? This is among the more important issues raised from the AAP vision statement which could lead to a more widespread interrogation and reform of our polity.

Our society is going through a churn for quite sometime as the aftereffect of the Mandal-Mandir-Market triangle of the 1990s. It has had an impact on the

interrelationship between interest groups’ politics and identity politics, in favour of the latter. This must not allow us to ignore the problems of farmers, industrial workers and workers of the unorganised sections of our economy. Identity politics without complementary changes in the interest group-related policies only promotes the interests of the elite at the cost of neglecting the needs of the masses. There is a need to review the economic and political strategies which lead to jobless economic growth, an unpredictable rise in the prices of essential commodities, profitless agriculture and regionalisation of joblessness and of chronic poverty. It calls for a new economic direction beyond market-driven liberalisation and globalisation and without repeating the mistakes of the “quota-permit Raj”. The political economy of Swaraj – the approach of the AAP – has to be inclusive and reformist. It has to face the challenge of irresponsible global corporations and greedy native business houses without discouraging enterprise and innovative investors. The rural-urban parity in terms of remuneration, prices, basic needs and quality of life has to be integrated in the process of preparing the road map for transition to economic Swaraj.

At the same time, identity politics found a new relevance in the disadvantaged groups including women, dalits, the scheduled tribes, and the weaker sections among the minorities, for the deepening of democracy and they are, often, its new flag-bearers. The intersectionality of gender, caste, class, and language is playing an increasingly significant role in the grammar of Indian power systems. It has become more complex with the disturbing presence of pockets of regional deprivations within our republic. The AAP has to figure out ways and means to dismantle the present conjunction of uneven development and dominant caste democracy through new initiatives towards triple justice – economic, social and political – before going anywhere with the process of decentralisation, particularly in rural India.

So it is not surprising that women are urging empowerment by demanding one-third reservation in the state legislatures and Parliament. The results of 50%

reservation for women at the grass-roots level in the panchayati raj system are quite significant. But the major political parties are not inclined to take it any further. The AAP has promised to stand with the women's call for gender justice. Similarly, the phenomenon of dalit assertion for life with dignity deserves celebration and acceleration with emphasis upon realising the constitutional commitments. It cannot be accomplished by indulgence in constitutional tokenisms like "reservation within reservation" and "reservation in promotion". There is a nationwide rise in the levels of disaffection and resistance among the scheduled tribes as they remain trapped in marginality and poverty in most places. They have been at the receiving end of liberalisation and globalisation-driven investments in the hills and forests causing displacement and pauperisation. The AAP has to turn the tide in their favour by restoring the rights of ownership of natural resources including "jal-jangal-jameen" to the village communities. Otherwise the country will remain a helpless witness to an increasing overlap between the zones of tribal unrest and Naxal influence. The Maoist hold is a disturbing trajectory of the same problem.

### Minorities

Similarly, who can ignore the minorities' call for freedom from false cases and a just share in education, jobs and political representation? Earlier it was from the Sikhs and now it is from the Muslims. This has received added force after the findings of the Sachar Committee Report. It is another matter that the political representatives of the minorities are only looking at "forbidden fruits" like religion-based reservations. The country cannot find peace if we remain indifferent to increasing malfunctioning of the much-maligned system of reservations as it is getting interrogated on various grounds in the courts and elsewhere about its obvious limitations by a large section of the people who are supposed to be among the beneficiaries. We have benefited from the process of reservation as it has promoted the political capacity of the weaker sections through "a silent revolution" and acted as a safety valve in our

difficult journey towards freedom with democracy. Now the AAP has to take it beyond creating a self-perpetuating elite among the deprived and underprivileged sections in order to lead to mass emancipation and unity of all weaker sections which will in turn strengthen democratic citizenship and nation-building. If we fail in doing this, we will continue to confront a system of elitist identity politics based on vertical solidarities which make horizontal mobilisations of people increasingly difficult.

Each political party has to be active in three interconnected spheres – ideology, institutions and processes. Most of them are not. They are, more or less, getting obsessed with the fetish of vote mobilisation due to their one-dimensional pursuit of power through electoral equations. They are aware of the declining significance of parliamentary processes in the era of rolling back of the state under the pressure of economic globalisation. But they have drifted away from the common people due to their patron-client approach where the masses are either part of the vote bank or are of no interest.

There is a critical assessment of the key institutions of our republic in the vision statement of the AAP. It holds the present institutional complex responsible for six major deficits of the system –

the development deficits, governance deficits, legitimacy deficits, democracy deficits, citizenship deficits, and nation-building deficits. The alternative institutional framework that has been suggested be created on the basis of swaraj is one where the concerned citizens in a communitarian framework – the Demos – has to be at the centre of the scheme of things, with decentralisation as the key process of reconstruction. But the ideological world and the value orientation of the AAP is yet to be evaluated and appreciated by the people. It will need translating the general into the particular, and the abstract into the concrete.

There is a good possibility that the AAP will get a chance to be at least a catalytic agent, if not a perfect transformer, in creating new initiatives for better democracy, provided it keeps moving to establish living links with the "aam aadami" and "aam aurat" in a well-organised and time-bound manner, irrespective of the dismissive responses of the political class. People will make their choices on their own terms only with reference to the economic, political and social aspects of the programmes of the party and in comparison with the other parties, as the AAP gets in deeper contact in multiple ways with the people and their problems and expectations.

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