

Political Parties and Populist Policies in Contemporary India: Some reflections on AAP

Sumona DasGupta

There appears to be little definitional clarity around the term populism. Though the use of this term has proliferated in the last decade, in common parlance there appears to be a pejorative connotation associated with it and mixed views about how populism is connected with democracy and democratic institutions. In this paper we move away from a value laden understanding of populism as an ideology and stay with an understanding that resonates the most easily with an Indian context - namely any policy that is redistributive in nature and as such favours the common person particularly those in subordinate positions over the elite typically represented by large business and financial interests. The contrast between the people and elite in terms of strategies, movements, policies, organization is perhaps the only way the term populism can retain its analytical usefulness without getting bogged down in polemical discussions as to whether populist movements/policies represent the ideological right or the left, whether it is authoritarian or democratic in its origin, whether it represents a movement or simply a discursive style.

This paper will examine selected populist policies launched in contemporary India by a party that grew out of a popular movement against corruption namely the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) which by its very name creates an implicit contrast between the 'people' and the elite. By focusing on some of its key populist policies we seek to gain a deeper understanding of how a movement "for the people" transitioned into a political party which then had to make policies that were seen to be pro "aam aadmi" and what this populism implies in terms of democratic decision making and longer term impacts on the economic and political front.

The use of the term populism has a long political history which is outside the purview of this paper. We observe that the term regained popularity in the last decade or so where it appears to have been used to denote either an ideology (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2012), a form of movement organization (Taggard 1995), a policy orientation (Weyland 2001), a discursive style or form of communication (Shilas 1972; Laclau 2005).

Given the different ways in which this term has been used over the years the question is: does it retain its analytical significance? Perhaps the only way it can, is to use it with an oppositional concept. If populism comes from the people and implies in its most rudimentary sense anything (a programme, a movement, a policy) that champions the common person the oppositional concept is that of an unfairly dominant elite. In other words it acquires analytical significance only when applied to cases in which contrasts between the virtuous people and the unfairly advantaged elite shape movement, strategy, organization, mass response, the composition of support and the policies pursued (Subramanyam 2007).

What this would mean in practical terms is that it would involve an element of redistribution and reallocation either in terms of political power or economic resources. Politically in its democratic form populism is critical of anything that mediates the relationship between the people and their leader or government and as such it favors more direct rather than mediated forms of democracy such as referendums and popular initiatives which has been adopted in some states of the US for instance and of course in democracies such as Switzerland. In its authoritarian version populism can revolve around a charismatic ruler who claims that he embodies the people's will to consolidate his own power like many Latin American leaders (Peron, Chavez). In this authoritarian incarnation that centres around a personality the term populism is often used pejoratively to criticize the leader/political figure for playing into people's fear or enthusiasm rather than having their long term interests at heart.

In terms of economic redistribution the term populism is used to denote policies that involve redistribution of resources and wealth in favour of the less privileged. This could range from progressive taxation to more direct schemes such as free health services for the poor, cash benefits, all manner of subsidies, loan waivers etc. Here the criticism is that such populist policies prioritize short term popularity over long term economic considerations of debt or inflationary pressures.

Using this lens of populism in this paper we look at a relatively new political party (Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) which in fact grew out of what at least appeared to be a populist movement and see whether the AAP storyline helps sheds light on the relationship between populism and democratic institutions. Indeed the case of AAP seems to be almost a textbook case of populist politics as defined by the post Marxist Latin American thinker Laclau in his influential book *On Populist Reason* published in 2005. Laclau believes that at certain historical moments multiple antagonisms are at play which may or may not have something to do with class consciousness. As a result of these antagonisms people are compelled to assume a new identity – Laclau calls this empty signifier or floating signifier - that transforms them into political actors. When people identify with this floating signifier it gets filled with political content and what we get is a distinctly populist political mobilization (as opposed to a revolutionary one). The floating signifier does not represent an ideology but any ideology including totalitarian ones can don the populist garb – hence its link to any ideology at a given moment is contingent. Instead of an ideology he sees populism as a form of construction of the political that dichotomizes the society into two levels- the bottom and the top with the bottom mobilizing against the top. The driver of such a mobilization is what he calls the “logic of equivalence” where a number of disparate demands – security, healthcare, education, water, housing which would earlier get channeled to the state administration independently – now acquire a collective form and articulation and universal significance. When people’s demands keep rebounding off the government machinery and remain unfulfilled for long this new identity is formed in opposition to a common enemy. In the case of AAP the empty signifier or floating signifier was the new identity of the citizen who would no longer be a passive victim of a corrupt elite (Laclau 2005).

The social dichotomy that Laclau considers central to populism was in evidence right from AAP’s pre history as an anti corruption movement where the “Aam Aadmi” whose interests were not finding representation among the elite political establishment was mobilized against the latter. So the common enemy becomes corruption. The symbol of that common enemy is the political elite. Here we note that by designating the victim as “aam aadmi” it taps into the class divide without however activating class politics (Sampath 2015). So Laclau’s term the empty signifier or floating signifier is very much in evidence because after all who is the aam admi? It could be the daily wage labourer, a banker, even a Bollywood star. This is because the idea of people as Aam Aadmi “floats.” On one hand it denotes the bottom of the pyramid at another the population as a whole – every single Indian whether rich or poor will also identify as part of the Indian people (Sampath 2015). This is why AAP has support across classes and from both Left and Right.

In April 2011, a civil society movement was born in the backdrop of big ticket corruption scandals that came to light during the Congress-led UPA regime. A group of activists from varied backgrounds had come together to demand the enactment of the Jan Lokpal Bill –Under the banner of India Against Corruption, Indians rose up in protest against the government of the day, demanding the Jan Lokpal be passed immediately. Spanning over two years, across hundreds of cities, towns and villages, lakhs of people mobilised themselves for this cause. Protest marches, gheraos of politicians, social media campaigns. Led by social activist Anna Hazare, thousands of people in several locations sat on fasts on three separate occasions to

build support for the Jan Lokpal Bill, and pressure the government into acting on people's demand. At the end of the third and final fast, despite all efforts of the IAC, the Parliament had still not come around to passing the Jan Lokpal.

That's when one section of IAC activists, led by Arvind Kejriwal, decided that the only way to rid this country of corruption was to join politics, enter government and clean up the system from within. Thus began the journey of the anti-corruption protest towards the political revolution called the Aam Aadmi Party.

The birth of the AAP on 2nd October, 2012 was a watershed moment in India's political history. It suddenly opened the doors for common citizens, who had been watching the decline of the country's politics and governance from the sidelines, to become a part of a political party. There were no barriers to entry that had caused traditional political outfits to become family fiefdoms or communal organisations. Women and men, old and young, poor and rich – all were welcome as aam aurats and aam aadmis in this new party. The AAP pioneered the crowd-sourced model of electoral fundraising in India with small donations running the party right from the beginning. With the promise to end corruption from the system and put forth a model of alternative politics, the AAP made its grand entry.

The first election AAP decided to contest was the Delhi Assembly election of December, 2013. The first issue the AAP took up in Delhi in the run up to the Assembly election was of fraudulently inflated electricity rates and water bills. The AAP launched an agitation against the ruling Congress government, against its collusion with power distribution companies and the water tanker mafia which catapulted AAP into a political force that could take on the powerful political class on behalf of the people.

On the back of a surge of popular support, the AAP made a spectacular debut by winning 28 (out of 70) seats in the Delhi Assembly. After consulting the people of Delhi on government formation, the party formed a minority government with Arvind Kejriwal as Chief Minister on 28th December, 2013. After failing to pass the Jan Lokpal Bill due to a lack of numbers in the Delhi Assembly, the AAP government resigned in February 2014 to seek a fresh and full mandate. Despite losing all seven Lok Sabha seats in Delhi in the 2014 Lok Sabha elections that was held before fresh assembly elections to Delhi could be held the AAP was quickly back on its feet. Despite the 2014 Lok Sabha victory of the BJP in the Delhi assembly elections the AAP had won 67 out of 70 with a record vote share of 54%.

Populism gravitates towards popular self-rule and the Aam Admi Party styled its philosophy to restore power to the people and realise the promise of Swaraj enshrined in the Constitution.

AAP defined politics as an interactive process, a constant dialogue. Soon after the Delhi assembly was dissolved in November 2014 the party launched the Delhi dialogue, a participatory process of drawing up the party manifesto by forging a partnership between the party and the citizens of India with their lived everyday experience which could be brought to the table along with the views of professionals and experts. It drew up a 70-point actionable plan for all sections of Delhi's population – youth, women, traders, businesses, entrepreneurs, rural and urban villages, safai karmacharis, minorities, unauthorized and resettlement colonies, JJ clusters, RWAs, housing cooperatives and group housing societies. The aim of the Delhi Dialogue was to create an action plan for a Delhi that would reflect among other things the

aspirations of people from all walks of life with its emphasis on employment, high quality education excellent healthcare to all, safety of women, more roads, transport and traffic systems, affordable electricity and clean drinking water to all its citizens, and a Delhi where the citizen is made an equal stakeholder and voice in the city's progress. AAP came up with a 70 point action plan following the Delhi dialogue which was to form the core of its policies.

The populism of the AAP was manifested in multi faceted ways and some of the ones we will focus on are

1. Delhi Janlokalpal Bill
2. Swaraj Bill
3. Reduction of electricity bills
4. Water as a right
5. New government schools
6. Higher education guarantee scheme
7. Education reforms
8. Healthcare provisions
9. Women's security force
10. Land reforms
11. No FDI in retail
12. Freehold Of Resettlement Colonies
13. Regularization And Transformation Of Unauthorized Colonies:
14. Affordable Housing For All:
15. In Situ Development of Slums
16. Dignity To The Safai Karamchari

We will conclude by highlighting policies/actions of the AAP where the internal tension of populist politics played out because for each instance there was a learning about the relationship between populist politics and democratic institutions.

- a. Methods of direct democracy: The favored forms of political action for populist politics is referendum and other forms of direct citizen action. AAP's version of direct citizen action took the form of initiating a series of sting operations where every citizen was encouraged to use a smart phone to "catch" corrupt officials. This backfired when the party started doing internal stings on one another leading two prominent members Yogendra Yadav and Shazia Iilmi to resign. Another method of direct democracy AAP used was to seek the people's verdict as to whether they should form a minority government after the elections of 2013 but this same consultation was not in evidence when CM Kejriwal decided to call it a day after 49 days of governance. The new party was discovering that direct democracy and direct action had its limitations and that populist politics could not be applied in every instance.
- b. Populist politics manifests through a politics of impatience, rejection and accusation sometimes directed at foreigners and ethnic others. The most controversial example of this was the midnight raid of January 2014 in Delhi's Khirki extension where AAP's then law minister with TV cameras turned on asked the police to enter the building without a warrant and question four Ugandan women he claimed had been indulging in drugs and prostitution. The entire affair showed in no uncertain terms the dangers of populist vigilantism and the racist and violent tendencies it can unleash.
- c. Populist politics mock and even regard as fundamentally flawed any attempts at exercising political power. Transparency becomes not a means to an end but an end in itself. The obsession with transparency as an end in itself also meant that inadequate

thought was being given to the long term economic goals of the party and the disagreements regarding this was probably responsible for the delay in drafting the party manifesto.

- d. The assumption that populist politics is inherently participatory also turned out to be flawed because as the party grew in strength Arvind Kejriwal became more and more the centre around which the party revolved. In the TV ad Kejriwal is clearly portrayed as a savior and his centralized style of leadership has increasingly come in for criticism in a party that championed devolution of power.
- e. Populist politics harbours a distaste for bureaucrats. Srirupa Roy in her ethnographic study of AAP's politics has shown how all problems were seen as having a simple solution by way of just getting the concerned official to follow what was already there in the rule book. Result is a very simplistic approach to politics.

The basic tension that we see in the way AAP politics is played out is the tension between what Margaret Canovan (1999) calls redemptive politics and pragmatic politics. AAP came into power by playing the card of redemptive politics- the politics of impatience with existing legalities and institutions of democracy even if they are legitimately constructed and favouring instead the idea of people's power. Once in power however it had to negotiate pragmatic politics and found that it could not throw rule of law and institutionalist politics out of the window altogether. A populist party like AAP remains deeply conflicted because on one hand they decided to form a political party and contest elections while on the other hand they questioned the very enterprise of politics. In conflating politics with the politician and assuming that the "people" were a singularity who spoke with one voice their several fissures appeared in their brand of populist politics which is in evidence especially in their second innings at government formation following their spectacular victory in the Delhi assembly elections of 2015.

However despite the amorphousness of the aam aadmi and the tensions between redemptive and pragmatic politics the AAP did manage to signal a new imagining of politics that looked as representation as a democratic project. It asked society to imagine a new collectivity with a shared preference for a reasonable provision of basic public goods in a manner that is not haunted by leakages and corruption, and governance that is accountable and transparent. Its appeal lay precisely in its cry for a public order in which citizens could have entitlements and enjoy access to daily necessities like food and water, health and education, electricity and transport; where they did not have to pay bribes for ration cards and driving licenses; and where they enjoyed at least minimal security. This was a different sort of claim, quite regardless of the party's inability to effectively deliver on any or all of these. But the very articulation of these needs and preferences of citizens in this way signaled, however briefly, possibilities of different types of claim-making and citizen-making in Indian democracy.