

Delhi Assembly Elections: Change or status quo?

Prem Singh

The search for any ideological content in the Delhi Assembly elections scheduled to be held on 5 February 2025 would be like shuffling in a haystack for a needle. But this ideological void does not appear to create any serious worry to people in the country's capital and the centre of power. This is despite the fact that Delhi/NCR is home to a great number of important citizens: serving and retired government bureaucrats/officials, jurists/legislators, intellectuals, journalists, personalities associated with literature-art-culture-education, civil society activists, labour leaders and various NGO leaders.

In a healthy democracy, election time is, or should be, much more than a time to frame strategies for grabbing power. It should rather be a useful time for ideological churning among candidates/parties/voters. But such healthy possibilities within a democracy has been out rightly rejected in corporate India and its carrier corporate politics. In Delhi Assembly elections' campaign, the only pitch one can hear is the noise of announcements regarding freebies and distribution of cash/kind to voters. The present Delhi Assembly elections in this sense can be termed simply as a naked competition for power.

From the electoral point of view, this is the second term of the ruling Aam Aadmi Party in the Delhi Assembly. In the 2013 elections, before the 2015 assembly elections, the AAP government was in power in Delhi under the Chief Ministership of Arvind Kejriwal. At this long time, the Bharatiya Janata Party had a general majority in the Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD). In the 2022 MCD elections, 134 members of AAP and 104 members of BJP were elected. That is, there was no big difference in the number of members of both the parties. The BJP government has been in power at the Center and the Lieutenant Governor of Delhi, nominated by the central government, has a direct say in the running of the government and ruling system of Delhi.

It would not be wrong to say that from 2013 till now, AAP and BJP have been sharing power jointly in Delhi. Therefore, it would not be correct to say that the BJP government replacing AAP will lead to a drastic power change in Delhi. This is to say that the status quo will continue even after any possible victory of the BJP.

At one time, the vote percentage of Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) in Delhi had reached 14. In the 2008 assembly elections, two of its members were also elected. But the BSP's vote base was almost wiped out by the popularity storm of AAP. Communist parties in Delhi, meanwhile, have remained dependent on "Kejriwal-kranti" throughout this period. No other party or alliance, including Owaisi's All India Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen (AIMIM), is in a strong position in the election field. Congress is the largest party in Delhi after BJP and AAP. Therefore, any serious change of power in the Delhi Assembly elections 2025 would mean only the formation of a Congress government. However, this will not happen whether someone says so or Congress wishes for it. This can happen only when the voters of Delhi decide to exercise their vote with the intention of a real change of power against the ongoing status-quo.

In its election campaign, the Congress is reminding Delhi-ites of the legacy of Sheila Dikshit, the Chief Minister of Delhi for three consecutive terms before the 2013 elections. The IT Cell of Congress has promoted the message on social media that it is entitled to take credit for Sheila Dikshit's legacy, hence, Delhi-ites should vote in its favour in the elections.

It is true that the present day structure of Delhi is mainly the contribution of Sheila Dikshit. But some progressive and secular intellectuals do not see any substance in the Congress' claim of Sheila Dikshit's legacy. They are actively arguing that it is important to bet on Kejriwal again in order to prevent the victory of BJP in the Delhi Assembly elections. They are especially trying to convince Muslims and secular voters not to waste their votes by giving it to the Congress.

However, according to election data experts, out of the 9 seats won by the Congress in the MCD 2022 elections, 7 seats were from Muslim-dominated constituencies. It can also be noted that Muslims, especially women, participated for the first time as citizens, breaking away from the shackles of religious identity. This was in the protest organized in Shaheen Bagh from December 2019 to March 2020 in Delhi against the Citizenship (Amendment) Act 2019 and the brutal lathi charge by the police on the students in the Jamia Millia Islamia University campus. Congress, as a political party, openly supported that protest movement whereas the ruling AAP in Delhi was busy with the usual communal manoeuvrings during that entire time frame.

The progressive and secular intellectuals probably like to believe that they will convince Sonia Gandhi-Rahul Gandhi that letting go of the Delhi Assembly for Kejriwal would not be a bad exchange for a Congress-led government at the Center in the next Lok Sabha elections, by the strength of the India Block. They might have also cited the support declared by some member parties of the India Block to AAP.

In the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, the vote percentage of the Congress in Delhi was 22. It was the second largest party after the BJP (56 percent). The vote percentage of the AAP was 18. But in the Delhi Assembly Elections 2020, the vote share of Congress fell from 24.7 in 2013 to 9.7 in 2015 to just 4.3 percent. There are also other factors for this debacle of Congress in the electoral politics of Delhi. But in this the directives of progressive and secular intellectuals have been an important factor.

These are the people who strongly opposed the then Congress government in favour of the anti-corruption movement, Anna Hazare-Arvind Kejriwal and Aam Aadmi Party, saying that there was an atmosphere like the freedom movement in the country; and the third revolution was about to happen. As a result, the agenda 'Modi at the Center' and 'Kejriwal in Delhi' was firmly established. However, it soon became clear that it was only a counter-revolution; and because of it the grip of communal fascism tightened upon the national and social life of the country. The co-travellers of that counter-revolution are still seen hiding their face in the "Kejriwal-kranti" to defeat the fascism of RSS/BJP. Even now they have no objection to Kejriwal's pro-corporate and open communal politics. They also have no objection to the fact that AAP has continuously widened the canvas of the far-right and extreme communal politics on a national level in collaboration with BJP. One can only regret this extreme level of ideological misconduct.

(The writer associated with the socialist movement is a former teacher of Delhi University and a fellow of Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla)