

# Kejri Redux, or Modi Resplendent? A Capital Tale of People Power

## The Needle's Eye



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An Arvind Kejriwal win may not be the best thing Delhi deserves as a 21st-century symbol of a resurgent India, but it will present Narendra Modi with the semblance of opposition. The Congress party has all but abdicated this position

I felt a deep sadness as I listened to the hysteria over the suspicious donations that went into the Aam Aadmi Party's coffers ten months ago. The shouting was all about campaign financing. It broke out five days before voting in the Delhi assembly election, and it completely drowned out all talk about what the nation's capital really needs: a government that cares, and works.

I remembered movies from the early 1980s like *Sparsh* and *Chashme Baddoor* and the Delhi they showed – wide, tree-lined streets, civilised traffic, and an air of being a national capital. Back then I was told Delhi had the highest ratio of road surface to total area. Today it has more vehicles on its roads than all the four other big cities combined and is one of the world's most polluted cities. Its citizens suffer from chronic upper respiratory-tract infections and it has one of the country's highest rates of asthma in children.

The U.S. Embassy, which does its own air-quality checks in Delhi, purchased 1,800 air purifiers so President Barack Obama and his entourage could breathe during their recent trip.

Yet, neither AAP, nor the Bharatiya Janata Party, or the Congress Party, chose to spell out clear steps to fight Delhi's environmental crisis in their manifestos, other than a cursory mention of

the sewage-clogged Yamuna river. The BJP's 'vision' document, long on promises, was released just four days before the election. The Delhi Sustainable Development Summit this week boasts a galaxy of world speakers, with not a single agenda item on how to rescue the choking capital city.

Delhi hardly does India proud. It has passed through many hands over the centuries. It is probably the only city in India that has seen power and pelf, and plunder and pillage, on an epic scale during its seven or eight incarnations. It now lies sprawled like a spent harlot on a flophouse bed, with a flyover here, a new Metro line there, and a footbridge elsewhere tossed at it like a callous bauble. Delhi has become somewhat of a fiction. It has grown amoeba like into parts of Haryana, Uttar Pradesh and even Rajasthan. The Ministry of Urban Development cites 2011 census data to declare that the National Capital Region now covers more than 34,000 sq km, 20 cities and towns, and has a population exceeding 46 million, twice that of Australia's.

That is one of the world's biggest urban agglomerations, and it is sucking in migrants every day, never mind the BJP's description of North-easterners as 'immigrants', a gaffe for which Modi apologised. In the teeming concrete rabbit hutches that dot the NCR, your do-

mestic helper will most commonly speak atrocious Hindi heavy with the sibilances of Bangladesh's Sylhet and Mymensingh districts. And yet this Saturday's Delhi election has seen a sordid race to the bottom in populism. Instead of tackling permanent traffic gridlock that forces the prime minister to ride a helicopter within the city, the Narendra Modi government cut petrol and diesel prices just days before the election. A simple step like banning car sales to anybody who cannot offer proof of an off-the-street parking spot could be-

gin to turn the tide.

A huge number of Delhiites live in 'unauthorised colonies' like Sangam Vihar. There, and in giant glorified slums like Aya Nagar, residents own homes on 50 or 100 sq metre plots with no water or sewage, waiting for a vote-hungry chief minister to 'regularise' them. No wonder all this seems not to matter to the less privileged voters in Delhi. If you saw the vast crowd that gathered to hear Arvind Kejriwal speak in Trilokpur on Tuesday, you would begin to understand the logic of the perverse fas-

cination his AAP holds for the voter despite being the most dysfunctional political formation in India's history. Kejriwal has promised 20,000 litres of free water to every household per month in a rapidly desertifying city where ground water is now perilously low. He will cut electricity bills by half and wants private-sector power companies to "wriggle out of expensive and unsustainable power purchase agreements".

The BJP threw all its heavy artillery into the battle in the final days, with Modi himself leading a pack of senior ministers in last-minute rallies. Opinion polls seemed to tilt the verdict in favour of Kejriwal's AAP despite the BJP's mobilisation of thousands of Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh volunteers, leaders from key 'migrant' states like Madhya Pradesh, and panna pramukhs tasked to meet every voter on the list. If Kejriwal returns to power with a clear majority, it will be a silent citizens' revolt against the machinations of both the Congress and BJP governments in power at the Centre. Delhi's legislature was kept in suspicious 'suspended animation' from February 14 last year when Kejriwal's minority government resigned until November 5, when it was dissolved and fresh elections called by President Pranab Mukherjee.

A Kejriwal win may not be the best thing Delhi deserves as a 21st-century symbol of a resurgent India, but it will present Modi with the semblance of opposition. The Congress party has all but abdicated this position, and former environment minister Jayanthi Natarajan's untidy exit from the party shook, but did not awaken it from the deep coma it slumbers in. The once-powerful Congress Working Committee has met just twice in the past eight months, once just after the May 16 general election results and then last month. The voluminous post-mortem report on Congress's catastrophic defeat authored by former defence minister A.K. Antony is gathering dust.

One senior Congress leader I spoke with said everything rested with the Sonia-Rahul Gandhi leadership. Was there no possibility of a revolt by restive second-rung Congressmen? No, he said, while pouring scorn on 'Saint Antony' and his investigation. Did this, and Congress's utter marginalisation in the Delhi election, mean that the party had been obliterated? Nothing was forever, the senior politician laughed. "Everybody said Hitler, and Lenin, and Castro, and Mao were forever. Were they?"

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