

'COMMENTARAO' IN "THE TELEGTAPH" OF

September 2 2015

Tough act to follow

- Possibilities of the AAP model if used in governing other cities

Commentarao - S.L. Rao

Most Indian cities are badly governed. Can the Aam Aadmi Party be a model for their better governance? Delhi is the national capital. Residents include the highest constitutional authorities, a huge bureaucracy, major public and private corporate headquarters, embassies, the international and local media, and many others. The city requires a secure and attractive environment. As the capital it must display the best of India. While the laws might make it a "state" it is unlike other states.

Delhi is almost entirely urban. Surrounded by states like Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, Punjab and others, it is a corridor city with large migrant and floating populations. It is also a magnet for other Indians for employment, for lobbying with government departments, or just for visiting the historic and powerful city. Given the disparities in the population in age, cultural, educational and socio-economic factors, it has significant challenges. All Indian metropolitan cities face these challenges in greater or smaller measure.

The Delhi government has limited authority to govern and make laws. It cannot do so on public order, police and land. The principal agencies of change in Delhi are the Delhi Development Authority, the Municipal Corporation of Delhi, the New Delhi Municipal Council, the Cantonment Board and the police. Some of them have elected members who might belong to a party in opposition to the one ruling the state. Each agency functions autonomously, and reports to the Central government. Accountability to citizens is vague and so is supervision. Other cities have faced the same issues: multiple, sometimes overlapping, agencies, no coordination or direction, different state and municipal ruling parties.

About 49 per cent of the Delhi population, nearly 73.5 lakh people among 1.5 crore, live in slums and unauthorized colonies. Only 7.5 lakh Delhiites enjoy all civic amenities. Half are not connected to secure water and many live in homes not electrified, or not legally so. Government schools have absent teachers, poor quality teaching and poor sanitation. Health services are poor for them. Drainage is almost non-existent. Houses and roads often get flooded with stinking drain water. Corruption is rife at all levels and for all services. Other cities face these problems too. Their state governments give little support but collect much of

the state revenues from them.

Arvind Kejriwal realized, after his India Against Corruption morphed into the AAP, that these slums and colonies would be his bastion, not the middle-class and traders who flocked to the IAC meetings. The poor wanted improvement in living, not speeches on good governance or budget deficits. Every major city has similar populations and challenges. Their underclass is unhappy and ready to be mobilized.

The AAP government has been about six months in power after the 49 days earlier. Has it delivered on promises? Can it be a model for other cities, also badly governed, corrupt, needing better roads and garbage clearance? Could local citizen movements in Bangalore, Mumbai or Chennai follow the Kejriwal route to leadership and reform?

The AAP government has announced free water supply to small users, halving power prices for small users. When retail onion prices rose to Rs 70 a kilogram, the government is subsidizing the prices to Rs 30. The cost to government of these measures is not known. The AAP claims (without evidence) that the low-level corruption that affects the majority has now almost stopped.

Kejriwal is a self-confessed anarchist. His governance style is confrontation, with the Centre, the media (that built him) and others. Serial confrontations with the Central government for more authority over the police, bureaucratic appointments, municipal bodies are an almost daily occurrence. Kejriwal asked the prime minister to help, but attacks him for not giving powers. He has moved from being a media-handling prodigy to a grump. Can new city leaders benefit their cities by continuous confrontations with their state governments for more resources and autonomy for their cities?

Bangalore, for example, has abysmal public services (roads, pavements, traffic management, garbage collection and disposal, violent crimes against women and children, a forever under-construction metro project. The Bangalore Agenda Task Force and the Bangalore Political Action Committee were movements led by professionals to improve Bangalore. They have not captured governance nor reformed the city. Nor have other metros with similar movements. Do they need a Kejriwal-type anarchist leadership?

The IAC was a mass agitation. It tapped into the public disgust at the large-scale thefts of public money and the deterioration of their city. Scams under the United Progressive Alliance reinforced the anger. Anna Hazare was a Kejriwal puppet leader whose simplicity of dress and speech made him seem Gandhian. A former soldier, in his seventies, he cleaned his village of Ralegaon Siddhi of corruption and alcohol consumption, improved its literacy and higher education, introduced better agricultural practices that brought prosperity to the villagers. Hazare was a scourge for corrupt Maharashtra politicians. There are such local leaders in other states too. A wannabe city leader looking to transform his city's governance will need to import such a person and build his visibility on such a reputation.

Leaders like Kejriwal can rise from among professional people in other cities. But they must be fiery activists, loud, brash, and even offensive in consistently demanding city reform. In

Chennai, Mumbai, Bangalore and other metros, there are such concerned professionals. They use reason, not passion.

Kejriwal was an income-tax service officer who joined Aruna Roy to agitate for the Right to Information Act. He received the Magsaysay Award and learnt methods of public protest. He and Kiran Bedi, a professional police officer from Delhi, brought Hazare to Delhi to become the IAC's face. Kejriwal understood media manipulation. The anti-corruption protest agitated the media. Kejriwal got extensive television coverage and benefited from the proximity to Hazare's halo. He was always with Hazare on TV, often speaking for him. The public identified him with Anna Hazare.

The IAC's agitation was for getting a strong legislation for a lokpal. Once Hazare faded from the scene after a long fast, Kejriwal became its sole public face. He soon converted it into a political party. The lokpal was soon forgotten. Anna Hazare was not seen nor heard. Bedi went with Anna Hazare. Aruna Roy was not connected. In time Kejriwal also broke with his powerful supporters - the Bhushans and Yogendra Yadav. Any urban professional wanting to lead his city must have this ruthlessness, strong cynicism about causes and know when to drop them. He must be brutal in discarding colleagues who are no longer relevant to a revised purpose.

Kejriwal was now a self-described anarchist politician. He wooed the large numbers of people in Delhi's unauthorized colonies and slums. They fell for his promises of regularizing their status, providing housing, free water, cheap electricity and less of the corruption that affected them daily. He promised to (illegally) redistribute to consumers the "regulatory assets" of Delhi's electricity distribution companies. The illegality of the expropriation never bothered this former income tax officer. Such grand promises by a 'saintly' leader would be believed. In Delhi it ultimately got the AAP overwhelming votes. New urban leaders need *chutzpa*.

The 2014 Delhi elections made the AAP the largest party. With support from the publicly despised Congress, Kejriwal formed a government. He resigned after 49 days for specious reasons. The AAP's overwhelming majority in the next elections was helped by the Bharatiya Janata Party discarding a tried leader (Harsh Vardhan) for a brittle and uncharismatic Bedi.

The anti-corruption movement had attracted many lakhs of well-meaning sincere people from the urban middle class. They deserted Kejriwal after his frequent confrontations and grand promises. The large vote block of the poor remained.

The Kejriwal model calls for hard work over years in building a self-image of sacrifice and honesty, with ruthlessness, cynicism, and the ability to use and discard people. It needs the confidence to abandon issues in favour of other more relevant ones. Urban professionals will donate, march, and support but they are too soft to copy Kejriwal.

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