The Broom, the Muffler and the Wagon R: Aam Aadmi Party and the Politics of De-elitisation
Tripathy, Jyotirmaya

The Broom, the Muffler and the Wagon R: Aam Aadmi Party and the Politics of De-elitisation

Jyotirmaya Tripathy

Abstract

This paper explores the new alternative politics popularised by the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) as an antidote to the conventional politics that plague Indian democracy. It locates this politics not in an already constituted framework like other caste-, community- and class-based political parties, but as a performative construct articulated through the symbols of the broom, the muffler and the Wagon R. Contrary to the understanding that AAP leaders are fully evolved common men, it is proposed that their commonness was a product of these symbols. These representational devices are made to resonate among the people through a carefully orchestrated spectacle of de-elitisation. This process involves both disavowal of the elite Self and a kind of reverse mimicry of an irrational other. It is this strategy that successfully converts administrators, academics, lawyers, etc. into appearing as one of the common people. The paper argues that the characteristic features of the common man found among AAP leaders are not natural conditions but manifestations of what may be called self-othering.

Keywords: India, Aam Aadmi Party, Kejriwal, representation, elites, self-othering, symbols

Introduction

On an ordinary day in April 2014, in the run-up to India's general election, the people in the streets of Mumbai were pleasantly surprised by an unusual sight. Some of their adored actors from film and television, such as Ranvir Sheorey, Vidya Malvade and Ayub Khan, among others, were seen carrying placards in support of the Aam Aadmi Party (roughly translated as "Common Man's Party" and abbreviated as AAP) in various localities throughout the city (see Figure 1). Not that these actors were part of India's box office elite, but the fact that they had crossed the threshold that separated celebrities from their fans, for a perceived sense of social commitment, made the exercise a spectacle of sorts.

Jyotirmaya Tripathy, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology Madras, Chennai, India; jyotirmaya@iitm.ac.in. The paper has benefited from the modifications suggested by the anonymous reviewers. An earlier version of the paper had invited critical interventions from Uwe Skoda, Sudarsan Padmanabhan and Kaamya Sharma. I am thankful to all of them.

Whether such an exhibition was later converted into votes, or if the actors were doing this to publicise themselves and boost their own fledgling careers rather than the fortunes of the Aam Aadmi Party, is debatable. The most eye-catching element in this reality show was the posters which read e. g. "I am not Ranvir Shorey, I am an *aam aadmi*"[1] or "I am not Vidya Malvade, I am an *aam aadmi*", complete with the Aam Aadmi Party's symbol, the broom, through which they not only persuaded prospective voters to vote for the AAP in the forthcoming election but also established themselves as "common men".[2]

What is perhaps more intriguing and a little problematic in this parade is the representational act itself, which made these celebrity elites appear spectacularly ordinary. No one among the viewing public would have failed to note in the slogan the fact that these elites are not actually the average man or woman on the street, but have chosen to be so for the sake of the new idea of a corruption-free India. By no stretch of the imagination were these members of the entertainment industry the everyman of Mumbai streets, nor did they have any shared everyday life experience with the city's invisible folk. It need not be emphasised here that their commonness did not spring from their socio-economic condition or material lived experience, but through a set of dissimulative tactics, such as standing in the streets, as well as in their iteration through the slogan of commonness. This commonness, however, is unlike any other, because becoming common can be a choice only for the elites, from the vantage point of their privilege. For a celebrity, it is extraordinary to be ordinary.

The AAP as an alternative ideological formation has been discussed on television and newspapers, both in celebratory (Bidwai 2015) and critical (Srinivasa-Raghavan 2014) ways, as have its economic (or lack thereof) principles and consensual politics. Though the AAP is a fairly recent phenomenon, which explains the absence of critical literature relating to the party, what has been missing from the popular and journalistic discourses is the performative nature of the AAP and its construction and legitimation of certain political claims. As a cultural critic, I am interested in understanding the processes through which its ordinariness is achieved, sustained and made believable. The actors mentioned above are not the only AAP members to have come from a celebrity culture; in fact, the entire AAP leadership and think tank members came from a social life of privilege, and before the formation of the AAP they were all members of the cultural capital market.

---

1   The words *aam aadmi* can be translated as "common man".

2   Literally, the term *aadmi* is the Hindi equivalent of "man", as distinguished from *aurat* or "woman". However, in everyday conversations, *aadmi* is used in a gender-neutral way meaning "common man", the sense captured in "Aam Aadmi Party". The present paper, for the sake of convenience, presumes the same gender neutrality in its use of *aadmi* and "common man".

Figure 1: Ranvir Sheorey and others advertising for *Aam Aadmi* Party
Source: http://pages.rediff.com (for link details see list of references)

The present paper locates the foundation of AAP politics not in an already constituted party framework such as the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) in Uttar Pradesh, Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) in Bihar or Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi (VCK) in Tamil Nadu, each with a clearly defined constituency, but as a performative construct articulated through the signifiers of the broom, the muffler and the Wagon R. It is not that the AAP has officially claimed to be transmitting its ideas through these symbols (except for the broom as its election symbol); it is that these symbols have been the most visible manifestations of AAP's ethical and political difference. These representational tools are made to resonate among the common people through a carefully orchestrated technique of de-elitisation, or what we may call a process of self-othering. This process involves both the disavowal of the elite Self and a kind of reverse mimicry of the ordinary or subaltern other, i. e. the *janata* or "the public".

Here it is proposed that the characteristic features of the *aam aadmi* found among the AAP leaders are not particular situations or inherited conditions but exercises in de-elitisation. The first part of this paper, centred on the party symbol (the broom), engages with the utopian post-political politics proposed by the AAP, for which a movement from below is seen as an imperative. The second part deals with the performative nature of AAP ordinariness and problematises the iterative process of self-othering, which is crucial for the political project of ordinariness formation. This section will deal extensively with the semiotic possibilities of the muffler and its affective power over people. The third part concerns itself with the reconfiguration of the idea of the *aam aadmi* around the symbol of the Wagon R. The conclusion is intended to place the AAP's politics in the same conventional framework that it sought to replace, thus projecting its leaders not as missionaries but as professional politicians.

The broom and post-political politics

The AAP came into existence in late 2012 out of an anti-corruption social movement called India Against Corruption (IAC), which had been fighting for the introduction of the Jan Lokpal Bill ("Citizen Ombudsman Bill") in the Parliament, which was aimed at ensuring probity in public life, delivering transparency in governance and fighting corruption. When the movement did not succeed in the introduction of the bill, a group within IAC led by Arvind Kejriwal, a former Indian Revenue Service officer and winner of the Magsaysay Award (and the incumbent Chief Minister of Delhi), decided to form a political party, given that the extra-parliamentary nature of the movement had failed to achieve its goal. The objective was not just to introduce the Jan Lokpal Bill through political power, but more importantly, to usher in a new type of post-political politics.

If conventional politics in India is characterised by caste-, class- and interest-based affiliations, the approach AAP promoted went beyond this formula, at least theoretically. Instead, it offered to protect the common man's interest by fighting against corruption. The party ideologue Yogendra Yadav always harped (until his expulsion from the party) on the idea that the AAP was not a mere political alternative or a party with a difference but an attempt at an alternative to politics. As per the Party's vision document, the objective was to clean up politics from within and make it "a noble calling once again" (Aam Aadmi Party 2017a). This novelty was captured in the party's election symbol, the broom, which symbolised the "dignity of labour" and was presented as an instrument for cleaning "the filth which has permeated our government and

our legislature". The party believed that "the country needs a clean sweep of its corrupted mainstream political parties" (Aam Aadmi Party 2017b).

However holier-than-thou the above lines may seem, the political goal was to co-opt the voice of a large chunk of class-based voters who usually vote for the communist parties (and also the Congress Party), as well as caste-based voters who saw in the broom and the motto "dignity of labour", a possibility for their inclusion and a transcendence of the stigma associated with cleaning, sweeping and scavenging. Much more than BSP's elephant, the Samajwadi Party's cycle, RJD's lantern or the hammer and sickle of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) [CPI(M)], the broom was symbolic of a political experiment from below. Investing the broom symbol with political significance transformed it from a cleaning tool or even a metaphor of low social status into a potent vehicle for social and political transformation (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Aam Aadmi Party's election symbol
Source: http://www.aamaadmiparty.org (for link details see list of references)

The appeal of the party to the class voter was so visible and so unsettling to the CPI(M) that its General Secretary Prakash Karat accused AAP of imitating the leftist parties. The polysemous idea of the broom was also able to successfully appeal to the middle class, the young and the professional, who saw in the party a distrust of mainstream political parties and politicians in general while at the same time a commitment to the cause of disinfecting politics. Other founding members of the party such as Shanti Bhushan, Prashant Bhushan, Yogendra Yadav, Manish Sisodia, Gopal Rai, Sanjay Singh, etc. came from illustrious families or from an administrative services background, all apparently motivated by the dream of making India corruption-free. The slogan in one of the Party's election campaigns *jhadu chalao, beimaan bhagao* ("Swing the broom, get rid of the dishonest") captured that militant desire of using politics to clean up politics.

During elections, the party depended both on contemporary social media to attract the young, the middle-class and the students, and also on conventional campaign tactics such as rallies and public meetings. Door-to-door campaigns, *mohalla sabhas* or community councils, campaigns on cycles and on foot, and clean-up campaigns of streets and neighbourhoods attracted diverse members of the population: the young and the old, the educated and the uneducated, the male and the female, all equally motivated and driven by sincerity and social responsibility. Their campaign during the Delhi Assembly election of 2015 also involved such novel tactics as flash mob performances accompanied by Bollywood music, street plays, wall art, etc. It should be mentioned here that the AAP runs a practice centre for various styles of protests called Santosh Koli Centre for the Protest Arts, in Sunder Nagri in North-East Delhi (Brahmachari 2015). This is the same district from where Kejriwal, with Manish Sisodia and Santhosh Koli, ran the NGO Parivartan.[3]

It was both the lure of the AAP model of politics and the frustration with the current brand of conventional politics which enthused an otherwise indifferent, though at times restless, younger generation. For the general public, it was reminiscent of Gandhian *satyagraha*, and the slogan (printed on the party cap worn by members) "I want complete *swaraj*" made every AAP volunteer a *satyagrahi*.[4] This brought a sense of freshness to the way people imagined politics and politicians, and established AAP workers as *tyagi* ("one who sacrifices") rather than *bhogi* ("one who indulges"). In the Delhi Assembly elections of 2013 and 2015, the voters seemed to believe in the AAP mission: "Our aim in entering politics is not to come to power; we have entered politics to change the current corrupt and self-serving system of politics forever" (Aam Aadmi Party 2017c).

In his study of the masses and the state, Rajni Kothari recognised that to unite the masses and to bring alternative politics, a new class of people, the activists, would have to emerge from within the middle class. He was perhaps anticipating the AAP when he said that "it is from this convergence of a conscious and restless people and a conscientious and equally restless class of volunteer politicians (to be distinguished from professional party politicians) that the new grassroots movements" (Kothari 1986: 214) will take shape. With his thrust on the common man, Kejriwal could successfully transform

3   The word *parivartan* may be roughly translated as "change". This was the organisation mentored by Arvind Kejriwal and Manish Sisodia before they formed the AAP. It was based in Sunder Nagri of Delhi and dealt with grievances related to the Public Distribution System. The NGO lost its force and almost became inactive after the formation of the AAP.

4   *Satyagraha* is a Sanskrit expression consisting of two words, *satya* ("truth") and *agraha* ("insistence") and means "insistence on truth". A practitioner of *satyagraha* is called a *satyagrahi*. The term was popularised by Gandhi during India's freedom struggle and became a political practice of non-violent resistance. *Swaraj* literally means "self-rule", but during India's independence movement, Gandhi's use of the term was much more nuanced than formal and political independence from British rule and had connotations of self-liberation, self-realisation and self-knowledge, among others.

the mass from being merely passive voters, as mainstream parties believed, to citizens who are aware of their rights and responsibilities.

Spivak's rhetorical question *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (1985: 120–130) can be revealing here. The Congress Party always thought that its narrative was the only authentic forum of the common people, but in the process, it actually ignored them or (even worse) silenced them. Critically speaking, the AAP was not much different from the Congress Party in so far as its representation of the common man's interest was concerned, because like the Congress Party leaders, Kejriwal too came from an elite background. But in a politically conscious 21st century, the AAP story was more believable. Unlike many political parties that believe that too much democracy can undermine the principle of freedom (Nandy 1989: 11) and are driven by a certain fear of the people (ibid.: 23), Kejriwal went beyond this fear, invested citizenship in them and saw the future of India within the people rather than outside them. The moment of *jhadu* politics ("politics of broom" or "clean politics") had arrived; in popular discourses and street discussions, *jhadu* became a catalyst for that emancipatory politics.

If nationalism is a "deeply contradictory enterprise" (Sarup 1996: 149), the AAP politics was for everyone who desired to eliminate corruption. Kejriwal had said that the AAP wouldn't be guided by ideologies and that they were entering politics to change the system: "We are *aam aadmi*s. If we find our solution in the Left, we are happy to borrow it from there. If we find our solution in the Right, we are happy to borrow it from there" (Anju Sinha 2013). The problem with such an approach is that such politics simplifies the antagonistic dimension constitutive of the political (Mouffe 2005: 2). This universal consensus has a tendency to create institutions intended to reconcile conflicting values, though the objective of democratic politicians should be to create vibrant agonistic public spheres of contestation where different hegemonic political projects can be confronted (Mouffe 2005: 3). Mouffe was prophetic when she said that in contrast to post-political visionaries, what we are witnessing today is not the disappearance of the political in its adversarial dimension, but a conflict in the moral space. Although the we/they dichotomy continues, it is not defined in terms of political categories, but in moral terms; instead of right and left, we are faced with a struggle between right and wrong. The AAP's moral superiority and its dismissal of the other political parties as thieves (*sab chor hain*, "all are thieves") reveal this moral politics.

The AAP ideologues took it upon themselves to create a narrative that not only distinguished them from other politicians, but also made those other parties appear as residual colonial forces: "Before independence the common man was a slave to foreign powers […] There is a new master in our country today – the political *neta* [leader, JT]" (Aam Aadmi Party 2017a). By representing the *neta*s (political leaders) of other parties as agents of colonial legacy or

as comprador bourgeoisie, Kejriwal and his team promoted themselves as true postcolonial subjects and as the agents for real change, a change that had eluded India's *aam aadmi* for decades. In this account, the Congress Party (which was AAP's chief competitor in 2013) is not the postcolonial forum it claims to be, but is a space of mimicry where hierarchy is produced and maintained. By representing independence in 1947 as independence only for the elite rather than for the common man, the AAP limited the scope of India's freedom at midnight as a derivative discourse which has succeeded in making India's common men true subjects of postcolonial history.

It may be productive here to borrow from Benedict Anderson's (1991) idea of anticolonial nationalism as a derivative discourse. Anderson would propose that nationalism was conceived and conceptualised as an imagined community alongside the demise of feudalism and the rise of print capitalism. Even anti-imperial struggles in colonies were dependent on European models when the native intelligentsia (such as Gandhi and Nehru) received a European education. If such be the case, formal independence can promise emancipation from colonial rule and freedom of government, but can only deliver in terms of some administrative restructuring and catchphrases like *garibi hatao* ("remove poverty") to make people believe that they are indeed free. By creating a narrative of continuity that connects the present democratic regimes of India with the colonial administration, the AAP is not only derecognising 1947 as the radical turning point in Indian history, but also promoting the emergence of the AAP as that historical moment. In this new narrative, reminiscent of the subaltern collective's interventions into elitist history, Kejriwal and team appear as true protagonists of postcolonial resistance.

Chatterjee (1986), however, challenges this understanding of Indian nationalism as derivative discourse and suggests that this intricate relationship between anticolonial and metropolitan nationalisms is characterised by both dependence and difference. Drawing on Chatterjee's (1986) understanding, we may say that the AAP politics had an intricate relationship of both sameness and difference vis-à-vis the Congress Party's politics. Contrary to its claims of a radical alternative, the AAP was made possible by already existing political templates like the Congress Party's and its preoccupation with the common man. But while tapping the common man as its constituency, the AAP departed from the Congress Party's belief that the common man is only a receiver of freebies or development schemes, and invested in him the power to change and decide his future. If the form of this post-political politics was modelled on existing paradigms, the content of such politics was a radical revision of the common man's power and agency. In a way, the whole project of the AAP was to experiment with methods that challenge all kinds of electoral politics, except its own.

The muffler and self-othering

But how did this happen, and how could the AAP founders, by no means any less elite than leaders from other parties, convince people that they are one of them? Did people see them as more sincere than other leaders, or did they see in these leaders their own reflection as angry, restless or even helpless victims of a strangling system? Did these leaders capture the imagination by valorising certain acts of disobedience (Kejriwal cutting electricity metres in protest against high electricity bills) while using the language of rights and *swaraj*? Perhaps the single most likely reason why they were accepted as ordinary was cleverly orchestrated communication strategies of simulation and dissimulation through which they de-elitised and cast themselves as ordinary. Since Kejriwal was not a common man, he had to become one, and this becoming was not an event, but a sustained practice.

Kejriwal had to identify himself with the masses and also become one of them through a willing suspension of what constituted his privileged self. It required a careful re-vision of the elite self by distancing himself from all the trappings of privilege (such as a luxury car or entourage) and adopting certain types of behavioural traits, clothing, public persona, etc. Kejriwal knew that the *khadi kurta* (a type of clothing preferred by Indian politicians) had become a symbol of deceit, not least because a *kurta* is no longer a common style of dress these days, though recently some clothing brands have started marketing them as ethnic wear. But a complete break from the *neta*-complex was not such an alluring prospect, because the AAP *neta* had to re-establish himself as an honest *neta* like Gandhi or Anna Hazare. The AAP clothing thus had an inherently contradictory task: to affirm and deny *netagiri* ("ways of a politician") at the same time. In Bhabha's terminology (1984: 126) vis-à-vis post-Enlightenment colonialism, the AAP spoke in a forked tongue, which was crucial to its politics.

Shunning *kurta* did not mean a return to flashy suits (the kind used by Narendra Modi), because that is so unlike a common man. The common man prefers a short-sleeved shirt and sandals for commuting or walking to the office. If the common man dressed this way for comfort and convenience, Kejriwal had to invest political meaning in it so that its signification would not be lost on anyone. During his government job or later in his activist persona, Kejriwal often dressed formally. His conversion to the short-sleeved shirt and the excessive use of a muffler – a heavy scarf – during the winter (accompanied by endless coughing), what we may call political cross-dressing, added that ordinariness to his public image so much so that he became known as the muffler man. Kejriwal's commonness did not exist prior to the use of the short-sleeved shirt or the muffler, but was an effect of these extrinsic objects which

conferred upon him that unmistakeable ordinariness. The muffler was the most visible (because of its oddity) badge of simplicity and nearly phallic in its significance because Kejriwal's public persona was almost centred around the muffler, which in turn produced all those associations Kejriwal would be known for. Though a muffler is commonly used by people during winter, including the upwardly mobile, Kejriwal's style of pulling it over the head to cover the ears before making a knot around the neck made him appear distinctly ordinary (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: Kejriwal in his trademark muffler
Source: http://www.hindustantimes.com (for link details see list of references)

The muffler could also be seen as a process of condensation, in the Freudian sense, because all acquired characteristic traits of Kejriwal had been concentrated and projected onto the muffler. The best part was that Kejriwal appeared real and comfortable, and with his drooping shoulder and down-to-earth mannerisms, looked the part. His short stature and moustache also helped sustain the image of not being very distinguished, of being somebody who could just disappear into the crowd. If difference was written in the body of Rahul Gandhi or invested in Modi's jackets to make them stand out, Kejriwal's calculated sameness (being like others) made him different as well and endeared him to the voting public. Not just the clothes, but also Kejriwal's speaking style, at times reactionary and assertive and on other occasions helpless and meek, added to his qualities as an average man.

This performance may be called self-othering, when the elite self adopts plebeian traits which allow it to legitimate itself as a member of the other. Since there is already an existing difference (lineage, education, economic stability, etc.), self-othering can be achieved with external objects like the muffler and also by using certain physical features (e.g. a moustache) to establish a shared experience with the multitude. The identification we are talking about here is not because of any genuine desire to fade into the other, but a "curious rhetorical strategy" (Germana 2010: 81). Like colonial self-othering, when the coloniser fantasised about the innocent state of the native other, for Kejriwal, self-othering involved understanding the way the supposedly irrational unpredictable people behave. It was not about taming and objectifying the irrational other as in colonial discourse, but rather becoming the irrational other through external means and leveraging those adopted features to electoral advantage. If for the Congress Party, the mass was the contrasting image through which the party could define itself (i.e. by difference), the AAP strategy was to imaginatively reconstruct itself and immerse itself into the mass (by sameness).

Kejriwal achieved otherness by a conscious production of himself through what we may call reverse mimicry. If colonial mimicry was driven by a "desire for a reformed, recognizable Other" (Bhabha 1984: 126), reverse mimicry is guided by an equally strong strategic move towards an unrecognisable Self. If the colonial mimic man was intended as "a subject of difference that is almost the same, but not quite" (Bhabha 1984: 126), the AAP strategy was to recreate Kejriwal as a subject of sameness, but not quite. This reverse mimicry is highly ambivalent both in its theorisation and delivery and, like mimicry, often tends to produce slippages and difference. Though reverse mimicry cannot afford to sanction its contradictions consciously and must iterate its sameness every now and then, there is often some kind of incompatibility between the public performance and the inner elite core. This is a topic we will return to later. Reverse mimics are elite in taste and values, but subaltern in performance and public life. The strength of reverse mimicry is that while disrupting elitism, it legitimates itself as different and thereby worthy of unabashed devotion and trust.

Simon During believes that self-othering involves "finding a self as another or by identification with others" (During 1994: 47). Though During recognises that there is a difference between self-othering and becoming another, the two positions are very fluid and difficult to separate. Self-othering involves the appropriation of another experientially different identity, and this process involves strategies such as using common attire, speaking the common language, etc. The Congress Party's policy was the rescue narrative, whether in sloganeering or in schemes like the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act and National Food Security Act. In contrast, the AAP employed a "we can" narrative where the difference between the common man and the elite has vanished.

Borrowing from Judith Halberstam's study of James Bond movies and their raw masculinity, what she calls "prosthetic masculinity" (Halberstam 1998: 3), we may argue that Kejriwal's excessive use of the muffler (as well as short-sleeved shirt) with regular coughing to iterate his otherness is an experiment with prosthetic ordinariness. The muffler confirmed his image as the guy next door who hates politics as anybody else, but unlike others has taken it upon himself to rectify the system. Far from being an essential feature of Kejriwal's character, these prosthetics were producers of that commonness and preceded everything that is known about Kejriwal's character. It is not Kejriwal's commonness which made him wear a muffler or short-sleeved shirt or sport a moustache; it is these objects which produced his commonness. Will Fisher too has spoken about the prosthetic nature of Renaissance masculinity which centred around a man's beard, and how the beard was "one of the primary ways in which masculinity was materialized" (Fisher 2001: 184).

Butler's insights into gendered subject formation (1990: 33) may be useful here to trace the processes through which one becomes a subject. The instability at the heart of Kejriwal's commonness was because of what we may call a melancholic commonness (Butler 1990: 63), which is based on a rejection or loss of elitism and acquisition of common traits by a sequence of acts. His moustache or muffler was not just there, but performatively constructed as metonymic of commonness. But unlike in Butler's ideas, Kejriwal's identity was not pre-constituted by dominant social forces as in conventional sexed identity, but rather was chosen against those forces. His speeches were illocutionary acts which performed what they uttered. Thus, when he pronounced, "we have been cheated by all political parties", he was not describing any particular event here, but constituting himself as a common man.

This takes us to the heart of post-structuralist thought. In post-structuralist thought, there is no real or present which can be represented in the symbolic realm. Instead of reflecting such a reality, language as a chain of signifiers constructs this reality. Thus meaning does not take place in the mind of a modern/rational man through his ability to access the originary moment of truth, but happens within a signifying space, thus limiting one's ability to know things outside representation. It is within this space that specific understandings become established as truth. All these make the idea of Kejriwal as an *aam aadmi* a comforting delusion, because that *aam*-ness does not exist outside those devices like the muffler or the moustache. We can never know the man behind the muffler, because the man we know is already always made by the muffler. During a raid by the Central Bureau of Investigation in his party office recently, Kejriwal dared the CBI to raid his house, adding that they would find only mufflers. It is not only difficult to imagine Kejriwal without the muffler; it is almost impossible to do so.

The Wagon R and the new (un)common man

Unlike the broom and the muffler, which are easy to associate with the common man, the idea of a car (here the Wagon R) is a little more difficult as a metonym for an *aam aadmi*. If Kejriwal self-otherised himself to be a common man through various performative practices, he also helped transform the very idea of that commonness. In democracies, and India in particular, the idea of the common man has tremendous currency in terms of political dividends. But it does not mean anything specific at all; the common man can be anything, but very rarely an individual. As Pratap Bhanu Mehta says, "it is a rhetorical invocation and has been kept vague precisely so that most people feel part of it" (Misra 2009). For the Congress Party, it means disadvantaged or poor people from weaker sections who are in need of subsidies in general and specific schemes like food security or loan waiver schemes in particular. For the left parties, it may refer to those who have no source of income other than their labour, or all those who live a life that is sub-standard when compared to the national average. For the caste parties, it may refer to a specific caste or a constellation of caste groups. It is no surprise that all major political parties speak for the common man, as no party can be portrayed as being uncaring to the common man.

But the common man can also be one who is very discerning, and not oblivious to social realities, though he has no voice which can be heard by the powerful. The AAP was perhaps aware of this fact more than any other political party and was successful not just in convincing people to vote for the party but also in expanding the scope of the common man. The party pitched its politics away from the usual party lines: from the Congress Party, which patronised the *aam aadmi*; from the BJP, which was usually seen as a party for the Brahmins and *bania*s (trading class); from the Communist parties, which romanticised poor people and their own exclusive right to speak for them; from other caste parties, for whom the *aam aadmi* was a member of a backward caste. Since all of these concepts were limiting, the AAP had to address the concerns of a large section of people and create an expanded version of an *aam aadmi* narrative. With other symbols of the common man (the broom and muffler) in place, it did not take much time for the Wagon R to become another symbol of ordinariness. When compared to the cars used by leaders of other parties, Kejriwal's Wagon R appeared to be a very ordinary and humble machine. In a place like Delhi where wealth and power are to be found everywhere and an extravagant life-style is the norm, the Wagon R contributed to Kejriwal's charm, restraint and simplicity (see Figure 4).

When Modi addressed the material (jobs, development, etc.), Kejriwal spoke of ending corruption and bringing people back to democracy. His appeal was
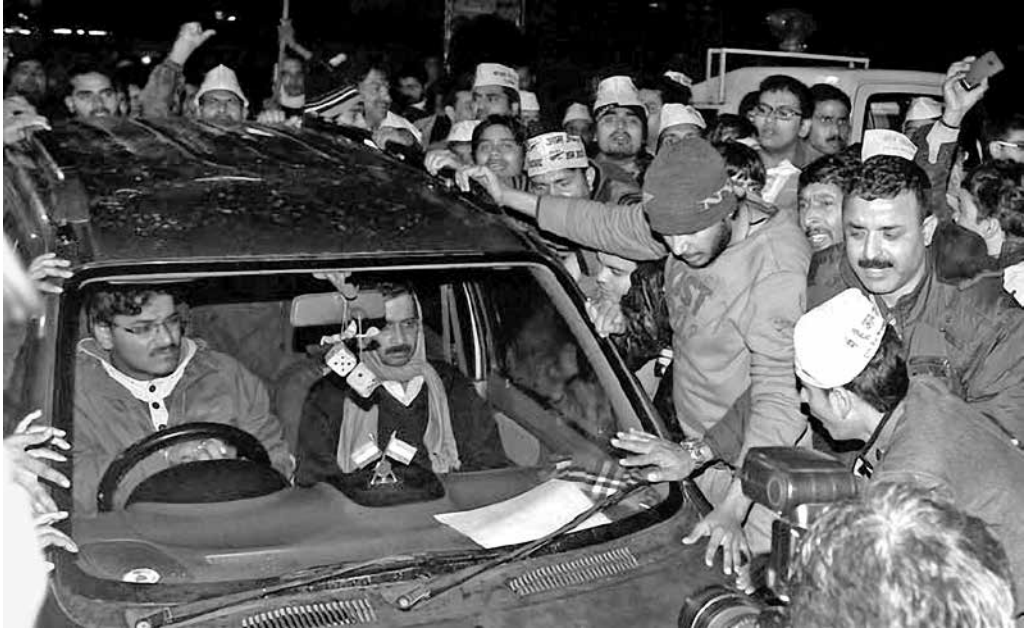
Figure 4: Kejriwal in his blue Wagon R
Source: http://www.ndtv.com (for link details see list of references)

more moral than material. In a way he de-materialised the idea of the common man and changed it from an ascriptive label to a self-identified one. Now the common man was anybody who believed in a corruption-free India, from the man on the street to corporate giants. This common man was not to be found exclusively in slums or caste villages, but everywhere. A common man was also one who expresses the hopes, aspirations as well as fears and anxieties of life, and this hope was concentrated on one man, Kejriwal who had no great lineage like Rahul Gandhi, no swagger like Modi, but was a personification of hope. At least that is how the AAP spokesperson Ashutosh (another high profile journalist turned AAP member) saw it when he titled his book *The Crown Prince, The Gladiator, The Hope* (2015) referring to Rahul Gandhi, Narendra Modi and Arvind Kejriwal.

AAP politics has been seen as a practice of social contract theory (Bhattacharjee 2013) where the sovereignty of the people ranks above the authority of the parliament. This is an idea of government where legislative proposals and decisions are discussed, debated and even overturned by the people. Though this is a romantic idea to say the least, particularly in a populous country like India with dividing lines across caste, class, language and ethnicity, Kejriwal experimented with street meetings and neighbourhood discussions, though many such experiments ended in chaos. Bhattacharjee however warns that precedence of people over party may lead to ideological inconsistencies and a pos-

sible takeover by majoritarian forces. Though Kejriwal tried to collapse the difference between the party and civil society, he created an idea of common people (including car owners) who are fed up with the political class and are clamouring for change.

Kejriwal's difference is also to be seen in a politics based on affect and emotions. If other politicians were seen as too scheming or too strategic, Kejriwal owned up to his mistake of quitting as Chief Minister in 2013 and asked for a second chance. Here too he was playing the common man, who makes mistakes and is honest and courageous enough to admit it. As Glencorse says, politics in India can be mindlessly emotional: "The same emotions that have been used to drive caste-based politics can also be used to drive an inclusive politics that inspires and galvanizes the hopeful, the non-corrupt, and the formerly fearful" (Glencorse 2015).

If he asked for forgiveness, he also practised it himself. During the course of his campaigns, he was abused, manhandled and slapped a few times in his public meetings. On one occasion, he went to meet an attacker in a gesture of forgiveness and reconciliation, and was a beneficiary of positive media coverage. When the photos of his swollen face appeared on television, everybody saw a leader looking physically vulnerable, yet dignified. It is this public display of vulnerability which took him closer to the common man. He was not just the mourned, but also a mourner who was mourning over the loss of faith in democracy. Butler has spoken about the political relevance of vulnerability as definitive of humanity: "Each of us is constituted politically in part by virtue of the social vulnerability of our bodies" (Butler 2004: 20). In Butler's theorising, grief is not a mere personal expression but is loaded with political significations. It is one way of establishing the experiential commonality with the *aam aadmi*. By appearing grief-stricken and intensely vulnerable, Kejriwal produced a new kind of affective politics which had its desired effect on an otherwise indifferent Delhi public.

Coming back to our old line of argument, how do we reconcile Kejriwal's self-othering with his use of a Wagon R, which may still be seen as a symbol of privilege? Ironically, instead of alienating him from the people, the Wagon R (rather than an Audi or Mercedes) brought him closer. The Wagon R was a car, without doubt, but not the type of car that one would associate with luxury and not one that created a disconnect with the people. What also distinguished him was the way Kejriwal sat in the front row alongside the driver. The sight of Kejriwal in the Wagon R front seat with his muffler covering his head created an impression of an average man. After taking over as the Chief Minister of Delhi, when Kejriwal did not abandon the Wagon R, the latter was no longer a mere vehicle; it was the symbol of a successful common man. For the people of Delhi, used to the luxury cars of politicians, the Wagon R was seen as a convenience rather than a privilege. When people saw police escort

vehicles following the Wagon R of the Chief Minister, the idea of the common man was complete. And the fact that the car was a gift by Kundan Sharma, a software professional and party member, established that Kejriwal was dear to everyone and had nothing of his own to flaunt. In a nutshell, the Wagon R made him more human and more believable.

Conclusion

If power is inevitably accompanied by slippages, so is resistance as offered by the AAP. Slippage is not something extrinsic to power structure that can be avoided; it is inbuilt into it. In the process of producing alternative politics, the AAP contaminated itself and replicated some of the practices (such as the high-command culture of the Congress Party or the authoritarian impulse of Narendra Modi) of the parties it rebelled against. Though the AAP leadership tried its best to contain its politics and behaviour within the representational regime it had created for itself, the slippages will soon become visible, with Kejriwal taking over as the Chief Minister of Delhi for the second time. The reverse mimicry will betray itself.

Whether there was any real Kejriwal behind these prosthetics (the broom, the muffler and the Wagon R) is anybody's guess. Suffice it to say that these signs float free of what they designate; in other words, what they signify is fluid and can be subject to spillage. Though this may appear to be in conflict with what I argue about the muffler, as a fixed symbol of ordinariness, what is significant to note here is the absence of the reality behind the representation. Though the signs of the broom, the muffler and the Wagon R have semiotic potential to disseminate meanings, they also point to the fact that they are the producers of an idea which may or may not exist. This complicates the whole idea of a stable Kejriwal self, determined to fight corruption; there is no core behind the language of the muffler. In this context, we may quote from Derrida, for whom "there is nothing outside the text" (1967: 163). If there is no access to Kejriwal, if we can know him only through his muffler, Kejriwal the person does not exist beyond signs. And if there is no stabilising force of Kejriwal authority, and if he is no more than a linguistic construct, the whole alternative politics or commonness he propagates is deprived of any meaning.

We will end with the 12 "commandments" found on the AAP website (Aam Aadmi Party 2017d). In fact, they read more like Napoleon's seven commandments in George Orwell's *Animal Farm* (2014) rather than Biblical dictums. In more ways than one, these AAP commandments warn us against high command culture, the use of flashing blue lights in official vehicles as well as living in luxurious houses, enjoying special security and everything that makes a

leader appear elite. Similarly, the party commits itself to gender equity and principles of justice, and is opposed to the use of bribes to obtain a place on a party ticket, and to the presence of criminals in the party or any kind of financial misappropriation.

Since the AAP's spectacular victory in 2015 assembly elections in Delhi, Kejriwal has expelled some of its founding members and ideologues (such as Yogendra Yadav, Anand Kumar, Prashant Bhushan) from the party. Many high-profile members quit the party before and after the Delhi election. A coterie has formed around Kejriwal and the high-command culture is safely in place. Dissent, a once-valued means by which the AAP had developed expertise and had a near monopoly, is a bad word now. Important members like Kumar Vishwas have been accused of taking bribes; another minister has been found to have used a fake law certificate; still another has been charged with cruelty and abuse of his wife. By now Kejriwal has moved to a proper ministerial apartment. There are many accusations of financial fraud in terms of donations to the party. Out of the 18 members of the National Executive, only one is a woman and apparently not a very strong voice in the party. The AAP has become another personality cult and Kejriwal himself has become another unscrupulous politician, something which became manifest in a videotape where he is heard abusing his party colleagues. A recent RTI[5] query revealed that the Kejriwal government has been spending 1.6 million rupees a day on newspaper advertisements highlighting its achievements. Kejriwal's insensitivity came to the fore when he continued with his speech even after a farmer hanged himself at an AAP rally.

Very symbolically, Kundan Sharma, who had donated to the party his Wagon R, which had become a part of Kejriwal imaginary, wants his car back, as he feels cheated by Kejriwal's performance. Another member, Sunil Lal, who designed the AAP logo (with the broom in it) wants AAP to stop using his design (which incidentally has the same colour code as India's national flag). This was Lal's response to the party's expulsion of leaders such as Yogendra Yadav and Prashant Bhushan and also for manipulating the concept of *swaraj*. It is not important at this stage to know whether the AAP returned the vehicle or stopped using the logo. What is more important is that the prosthetics are falling off and it remains to be seen if Kejriwal can still signify without these signs.

5   RTI or "Right to Information" was passed by the Indian Parliament in 2005 to ensure transparency in governance. It empowers the citizen to seek information about delivery of various services from public authorities.

References

Aam Aadmi Party (2017a): Our Vision, Aam Aadmi Party website, http://www.aamaadmiparty. org/our-vision (accessed 25 January 2017).

Aam Aadmi Party (2017b): Aam Aadmi Party Gets Broom as its Election Symbol, Aam Aadmi Party website, http://www.aamaadmiparty.org/news/aam-aadmi-party-gets-broom-as-its-election-symbol (accessed 25 January 2017).

Aam Aadmi Party (2017c): Why We Are Entering Politics, Aam Aadmi Party website, http:// www.aamaadmiparty.org/why-are-we-entering-politics (accessed 25 January 2017).

Aam Aadmi Party (2017d): How We Are Different, Aam Aadmi Party website, http://www. aamaadmiparty.org/how-are-we-different (accessed 2 February 2017).

Anderson, Benedict (1991): *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso.

Ashutosh (2015): *The Crown Prince, The Gladiator, The Hope: Battle for Change*. New Delhi: Harper Collins.

Bhabha, Homi K. (1984): Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse. *October* 28, pp. 125-133.

Bhattacharjee, Manash (2013): Aam Aadmi Party: Government of the Governed? *Economic and Political Weekly* XLVIII (52). http://www.epw.in/web-exclusives/aam-aadmi-party-government-governed.html.

Bidwai, Praful (2015): Indian Politics Has a New Moral Force. *The Guardian*, 11 February. http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/feb/11/indian-moral-politics-delhi-aam-aadmi-party-narendra-modi (accessed 5 October 2016).

Brahmachari, Goirick (2015): AAP, Left and their Cultural Tools: Reflections on the Delhi 2015 Campaign. *Economic and Political Weekly* L(8). http://www.epw.in/journal/2015/8/reports-states-web-exclusives/aap-left-and-their-cultural-tools.html (accessed 4 August 2016).

Butler, Judith (1990): *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge.

Butler, Judith (2004): *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. London: Verso.

Chatterjee, Partha (1986): *Nationalist Thought and the Postcolonial World: A Derivative Discourse?* London: Zed Books.

Derrida, Jacques (1967): *Of Grammatology*. Translated by Gayatri C. Spivak. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

During, Simon (1994): Rousseau's Patrimony: Primitivism, Romance and Becoming Other. In: Francis Barker / Peter Hulme / Margaret Iversen (eds): *Colonial Discourse / Postcolonial Theory*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, pp. 47–71.

Fisher, Will (2001): The Renaissance Beard: Masculinity in Early Modern England. *Renaissance Quarterly* 15(1), pp. 155-187.

Germana, Nicholas A. (2010): Self-Othering in German Orientalism: The Case of Friedrich Schlegel. *The Comparatist* 34, pp. 80-94.

Glencorse, Blair (2015): The Politics of the Common Man in India. *The Huffington Post*, 25 February. http://www.huffingtonpost.in/blair-glencorse/the-politics-of-the-commo_b_6723250.html (accessed 6 August 2014).

Halberstam, Judith (1998): *Female Masculinity*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Kothari, Rajni (1986): Masses, Classes and the State. *Economic and Political Weekly* 21(5), pp. 210-216.

Misra, Udit (2009): Who on Earth is a Common Man? *Forbes India*, 18 May. http://forbesindia. com/article/greyscale/who-on-earth-is-the-common-man/262/1 (accessed 8 July 2016).

Mouffe, Chantal (2005): *On the Political*. London: Routledge.

Nandy, Ashis (1989): The Political Culture of the Indian State. *Daedalus* 118(4), pp. 1-26.

Orwell, George (2014): Animal Farm, The University of Adelaide, https://ebooks.adelaide.edu. au/o/orwell/george/o79a/index.html (accessed 8 October 2016).

Sarup, Madan (1996): *Identity, Culture and Postmodern World*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Sinha, Anju (2013): Delhi Polls: The Difference the Aam Aadmi Party Will Make. *The Economic Times*, 4 December. http://articles.economictimes.indiatimes.com/2013-12-04/news/44757529 _1_aap-candidate-aam-aadmi-party-delhi-assembly-elections (accessed 23 September 2016).

Spivak, Gayatri C. (1985): Can the Subaltern Speak? Speculations on Widow-Sacrifice. *Wedge* Winter/Spring, pp. 120–30.

Srinivasa-Raghavan, T. C. A. (2014): AAP's Right Wing Morality and Left Wing Economics. *Business Standard*, 23 January. http://www.business-standard.com/article/opinion/aap-s-right-wing-morality-and-left-wing-economics-114012300315_1.html (accessed 6 September 2016).

Sources of figures

Figure 1: http://pages.rediff.com/photoalbum/preview/rediff-bollywood-photos/celebs-express-solidarity-to-aap-on-mumbai-streets/5950392/40457401/202510/5/ranvir-shorey-mudasir-ali-jaanissar-lone-sahil-multy-khan-shabbir-with-aap-team-members-rallying-to-express-solidarity-for-aap.html.

Figure 2: http://www.aamaadmiparty.org/news/aam-aadmi-party-gets-broom-as-its-election-symbol.html.

Figure 3: http://www.hindustantimes.com/india/kejriwal-bjp-s-enemy-cong-s-frenemy/story-as1YfSIdoYPWHAJk5daonO.html.

Figure 4: http://www.ndtv.com/india-news/want-my-wagon-r-back-says-uk-based-aap-supporter-to-arvind-kejriwal-75276.html.