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Delhi, public services, the AAP, social movements and the public

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1. Introduction: New Delhi and the Indian context

India is the second largest country in the world with a population of 1.3 billion. It is still classified as a lower middle-income country with GDP per capita around $2000 per head – half the level of Sri Lanka, but still higher than Bangladesh or Pakistan. It has a system of liberal democracy with regular elections at national, state and city level. There is a wealth of social movements, including many who have campaigned actively on public service issues such as water, energy and healthcare, as well as many NGOs who are used as sub-contracted service providers as alternatives to public provision through democratic state bodies. Its trade union federations are formally linked to political parties of the left or Congress, which weakens their ability to act autonomously or in unison.

The current BJP government is a right-wing, religion-linked nationalist party whose politics are described as 'Hindutva' because they identify the true Indian identity as Hinduism. Economic policy is very pro-market, as shown by the current plans to privatise the wholesale market for agricultural produce, which has led to a battle with farmers. It is also seeking to suppress centres of dissent, including attacking academics at Jawaharlal Nehru University who are seen as too left-wing, and barring the OSF from operating in India.

India can nevertheless be considered as providing opportunities for political and economic support for public service narrative change: partly because of its active social movements and partly because the electoral system provides recurrent opportunities for change. Three specific developments show this potential in relation to PSSP:

- the development of PSSP in Delhi, discussed in detail below
- the commitment to developing public healthcare system in the state of Chattisgargh, which took a hospital back into public ownership a few years back, the Advanced Cardiac Institute in Raipur, as part of a commitment to develop public health with public funding, and to challenge the central government's extreme pro-private push and policies[2].
- the BJP's losses in state elections in April/May 2021, partly as result of Covid poor performance and the use of pro-PSSP narratives. For example the left (Marxist) parties in Kerala, through the LDF coalition, retained their control of the state, in part clearly due to its relatively good management of Covid. The parties "became a more traditional welfarist party rather than a communist one working for the revolution. …. The party used the two devastating floods and the COVID-19 pandemic to showcase itself as a *maai-baap* government that was too focussed on providing free feeding centres, ration kits, pensions for the old… A large section of the minorities became apprehensive of rising Hindutva politics and considered the Left as a viable option in the fight against the Right'.[3]

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[2] Sulakshana Nandi, a scholar-activist of the People's Health Movement (PHM) <sulakshana@phmovement.org> is carrying out a study with TNI . https://docs.google.com/document/d/1nXzIbyv_oZv30ZkYakP-obn1-lTRaJo-oWmnvUeUpj4/edit?usp=sharing

[3] Staff, Swarajya. 2021. 'Explained: What Post-Poll Survey By Lokniti-CSDS Tells Us About Recent Assembly Elections In Assam, Kerala'. Swarajyamag. 12 May 2021. https://swarajyamag.com/news-brief/explained-what-post-poll-survey-by-lokniti-csds-tells-us-about-recent-assembly-elections-in-assam-kerala.; Cleetus, Burton. 2021. 'The Changing Nature of the Left in Kerala'. *The Hindu*, 10 May 2021, sec. Comment. https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/the-changing-nature-of-the-left-in-kerala/article34522344.ece.

Delhi is one the biggest cities in the world with over 28 million people. In 2015 the two established parties, Congress and the BJP, were completely defeated in the Delhi elections by the newly-created Aam Aadmi Party (party of the common man), led by Arvind Kejriwal, who first became known in India as leader of a huge national anti-corruption campaign in 2011. The AAP and Kejriwal moved rapidly to provide universal and improved public services and halted privatisations, including in healthcare, schools, water and energy. In February 2020 the AAP won the elections again, by a similar landslide. [4]

This is a dramatic example of how a city in a developing country, can use its revenues to develop universal public services. It has clear relevance for dominant narratives about such services being unaffordable, or beyond the capacity of LMIC countries; or about 'corruption' being an insoluble systemic problem. It is also a case where the narratives over public services are used by a progressive party to win elections and gain power, and then implement improved services through public sector delivery, rather than CSOs using narratives as a campaigning tool to pressure other parties and governments to make concessions.

The electoral potential of public service narratives was expressed by voters after the 2020 election:

- "We benefitted from Kejriwal's pro-people policies – subsidised electricity, water, and the free bus service for women";
- "AAP stands for issues that concern us, be it healthcare or improving the condition of government-run schools in Delhi,"
- "This is the beginning of a new India. People are becoming alert and don't want to cast their votes on Hindu-Muslim issues but on development and employment. Those who work for public will be voted into power." [5]

2. Schools

Kejriwal won the Feb 2020 elections in the city for the 2nd time running, and campaigned heavily on schools: "We've worked hard to improve our schools, the education system. Who will take care of the education of your children if you vote for any other party? Just give it a thought".

> "Kejriwal has ploughed nearly a quarter of his government's $5.8bn (£4.40bn) budget into education - the highest in India - and appears to have spent the money wisely. (His predecessors in Delhi spent up to 16% of the budget on education; and India's states, on average, spend 14.8% of their budgets on education). Investing heavily in education has helped change the gloomy image - slovenly and badly-run - of state-run schools in a teeming city of nearly 20 million people. "The assumption was only poor children go to these schools. The rich and middle class prefer to send their children to private schools," says Shailendra Sharma, an education advisor to Mr Kejriwal's government. "Anything free in India is perceived to be substandard." But this year, Mr Kejriwal's schools, mainly attended by the city's underclass and children of poorer migrants, have outperformed their more expensive and posh counterparts…. chosen simple initiatives to achieve a significant turnaround.

[4] Kazmin, Amy. 2020. 'Common Man Party Wins Landslide over Modi's BJP in Delhi Poll'. 11 February 2020. https://www.ft.com/content/d259d060-4bbb-11ea-95a0-43d18ec715f5.
[5] Kuchay, Bilal. n.d. 'Did Delhi Voters Reject Modi's Divisive Politics?' Accessed 3 February 2021. https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/2/12/in-delhi-kejriwals-pro-poor-policies-strike-a-chord-with-voters.

Classrooms have been renovated, toilets are scrubbed regularly, and playgrounds cleaned. Students and parents alike have welcomed a controversial decision to put CCTV cameras in classrooms to monitor children. Smart-looking desks, digital learning, well-stocked libraries, functioning science labs, and special theme-oriented classrooms have helped make the once-dowdy schools attractive places of learning.

"Government schools," says M Shariq Ahmed, principal of a "model" government school, "have now become a very liberating experience for students, who come from stressed backgrounds."….

Selected teachers have been sent on training and leadership courses at the National University of Singapore, and a leading Indian business school. Others have travelled to Finland and Cambridge in the UK to study school systems. More than 200 "mentor teachers" sit in classrooms and give feedback on five schools under their watch. The curriculum has been tweaked imaginatively - classes on "happiness" and business motivation have been introduced. Mega parent-teacher meetings are held in all schools several times a year, encouraging interaction between illiterate parents, first generation learners and teachers."[6]

In 2020 98% of students at Delhi's government schools passed the key CBSE test, compared with 92% at the city's private schools. "Delhiites have elected an honest government which has changed the city-run schools".

3. Healthcare

The city has introduced a universal 'free at the point of care' health service in Delhi, rejecting arguments that it should be a separate scheme for people on low incomes only. The scheme is described as "'Quality Health for all' for the people of the city, without any income criteria." [7] Between 2015 and 2020 the city has created 450 'Mohalla' clinics serving over 16 million people, aiming for everyone to be within 1.5km of a clinic, which is a key reason for their use.[8] The chief minister (mayor) Kejriwal has said that healthcare is a right, part of the 'right to life' under article 21 of the Indian constitution. Other states in India have started adopting the same model. [9] The clinics do high-tech tests with rapid results, using "a newly invented device that conducts 50 common medical tests from a single blood sample,", developed by a local engineer for the clinics, which is now being exported too.[10] The city is now creating a comprehensive "Health Information Management System (HIMS) covering all patient care services, hospital administration, budgeting and planning, supply chain management, and back-end services and processes. The entire system will be on the cloud and digitised and will enable citizens to avail information on one platform… The

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[6] *BBC News*. 2020. 'Why Schools Are at the Centre of Delhi Polls', 5 February 2020, sec. India. https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-51353525.

[7] 'What Is Arvind Kejriwal's "Health for All" Scheme in Delhi and How It Will Benefit You'. 2018. *The Financial Express* (blog). 17 January 2018. https://www.financialexpress.com/india-news/what-is-arvind-kejriwals-health-for-all-scheme-in-delhi-and-how-it-will-benefit-you/1018418/.

[8] 'Delhi's Mohalla Clinics Hold the Potential to Significantly Improve Access to Quality Healthcare'. 2015. *Economic and Political Weekly*, June, 7–8. https://www.epw.in/engage/article/delhi-mohalla-clinics-access-healthcare-poor-marginalised-residents.

[9] '"Mohalla Clinics Have Revolutionized The Delivery Of Healthcare In Delhi," Experts Laud Delhi's 450 Mohalla Clinics | Swasth India'. 2020. *NDTV-Dettol Banega Swasth Swachh India* (blog). 10 February 2020. https://swachhindia.ndtv.com/mohalla-clinics-have-revolutionized-the-delivery-of-healthcare-in-delhi-experts-laud-delhis-450-mohalla-clinics-41558/.

[10] 2016. 'Sick Throng Indian Capital's New, High-Tech Clinics'. Text. The Straits Times. 19 August 2016. https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/south-asia/sick-throng-indian-capitals-new-high-tech-clinics.

Delhi government will also issue an e-health card to the people, which will be a QR-based card to identify and track demographic and basic clinical details of every patient, by 2021[11].

4. Water

The city started providing free water supply for the first time to poor households without connections. Despite this, the water service's revenue increased, which Kejriwal attributed to "the AAP government's faith in people…Data shows that people have been saving water due to the scheme as they have restricted their usage to ensure they do not have pay much." [12] The free water policy has been challenged [13], but:

> "The right to water and sanitation draws its legal legitimacy from the right to life jurisprudence developed by the Indian Supreme Court and has been consistently upheld… people display a high level of human rights awareness including the right to water.18 They referred to the term 'haq' often during the interviews. It is a concept that predates the contemporary notion of human rights but takes inspiration from enlightenment ideas from Europe (Madhok, 2009). In common parlance, haqdenotes the rights of the masses and therefore it resonates with our interviewees. It is noteworthy that the concept of haq puts more weight on individual responsibility in securing rights than on holding the government accountable."[14]

Kejriwal (a former activist in the global campaign against water privatisation) now aims to improve the management of the water system to reduce waste of water and deliver a reliable 24/7 supply – but is outsourcing operation and management to contractors. Kejriwal denies that this is privatisation, and argues that this work was already outsourced.[15]

The city is also investing in repairing sewers and connecting poor areas to the sewerage system for the first time. [16]

5. Energy

Instead of privatisation, the AAP opted for investment in equipment, provision of lifeline tariffs for low consumers, and increasing connections by 20%. The result, according to Kejriwal, is that:

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[11] *The Hindu*. 2020. 'Residents to Get "e-Health Cards" by 2021: Kejriwal', 11 November 2020, sec. Delhi. https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/Delhi/residents-to-get-e-health-cards-by-2021-kejriwal/article33070187.ece.

[12] 'DJB Earned Rs 178 Crore More despite Providing Free Water: Arvind Kejriwal - The Economic Times'. n.d. Accessed 3 February 2021. https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/djb-earned-rs-178-crore-more-despite-providing-free-water-arvind-kejriwal/articleshow/50686013.cms?from=mdr.

[13] 'Free Water in Delhi: Here Is Why High Court Rapped Arvind Kejriwal's Flagship Scheme'. 2018. *The Financial Express* (blog). 25 May 2018. https://www.financialexpress.com/india-news/free-water-in-delhi-here-is-why-high-court-rapped-arvind-kejriwals-flagship-scheme/1180866/.

[14] Feyter, Koen De, Maheshwar Singh, Dominique Kiekens, Noémi Desguin, Arushi Goel, and Devanshi Saxena. 2017. *The Right to Water and Sanitation for the Urban Poor in Delhi*. Antwerp: University of Antwerp, Law and Development.

[15] 'Process to Provide 24×7 Water Supply to Delhi Has Begun: Arvind Kejriwal'. 2020. *The Indian Express* (blog). 26 September 2020. https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/delhi/will-make-water-supply-in-delhi-as-good-as-in-developed-countries-cm-kejriwal-6616698/.

[16] 'Despite Low Finance, Kejriwal Government Will Work on Water Supply Project: Raghav Chadha'. n.d. The New Indian Express. Accessed 3 February 2021. https://www.newindianexpress.com/cities/delhi/2020/dec/29/despite-low-finance-kejriwal-govt-will-work-on-water-supply-project-chadha-2242563.html.

"Delhi has the lowest tariffs, supplies uninterrupted and reliable electricity, and at the same time, discoms are turning a profit. [based on] zero tolerance to corruption, it has also been a result of smart economics, and an unprecedented investment in the power infrastructure of the city. The biggest impact of these reforms has been on the consistency of power supply, with most parts of the city receiving 24 hours uninterrupted electricity…….. our government announced a Lifeline Electricity scheme under which all Delhi households consuming 200 or less units of power will get a zero bill. Between 201 to 400 units, consumers will get a substantial subsidy upwards of 50%."[17]

6. Women's safety and buses

The safety of women in public transport has been addressed. Women now travel free on buses in Delhi, and buses now have official marshalls to provide protection for passengers.[18]

7. Alcohol consumption

The AAP now plans to reform alcohol consumption, by privatising all the liquor shops and lowering the legal drinking age from 25 to 21.[19] Currently, the public sector runs 460 out of 720 'booze shops' (liquor stores, off-licences) in Delhi (this is not unique, there are similar state ownership of liquor stores elsewhere e.g. in Canada, notably the province of Ontario, which includes the city of Toronto: the rationale is to control public use of alcohol and maximise public income from taxes and sales [20]). The state booze shops are prone to corrupt pressures from manufacturers to promote their own brands, and the state loses taxes. So the policy is expected to boost real city tax revenues, make drinking easier for young people, and eliminate an area of corruption by privatisation.

8. Creation of new participation mechanisms

The AAP has also created new participatory institutions in Delhi. It originally started to create a comprehensive system of participatory budgeting through *mohalla sabhas* (neighbourhood assemblies) , with transparent identification of all public assets and public officials responsible for service delivery, to be implemented through a Swaraj Act. This was however blocked by the Indian government.

The AAP then developed the *SMC mahasabhas* (School Management Committees' super assemblies), with 14,000 elected parent representatives alongside headteachers and representatives of the local members of the city council (MLAs); and with systematic training of parent reps to strengthen their ability to participate. This has created effective platforms for presenting grievances and demands, and also an "inclusion by politicization" of people, as well as framing the MLAs

[17] 'The Transformative Story of Delhi's Power Sector, Writes Arvind Kejriwal'. 2019. Hindustan Times. 14 August 2019. https://www.hindustantimes.com/analysis/the-transformative-story-of-delhi-s-power-sector/story-EpBaBzKrHBZRotHtNBD9gK.html.

[18] Singh, Dr Manvendra, and Harpreet Kaur. 2020. 'The Staccato Of Aam Aadmi Party (Aap) In 2020: An Analytical Study Of Its Hat-Trick'. *Clinical Medicine* 07 (07): 5.

[19] Pawariya, Arihant. n.d. 'New Booze Policy For Delhi: What Kejriwal Government Got Right, What It Got Wrong And How It Can Improve Further'. Swarajyamag. Accessed 23 April 2021. https://swarajyamag.com/business/new-booze-policy-for-delhi-what-kejriwal-government-got-right-what-it-got-wrong-and-how-it-can-improve-further.

[20] Wikipedia **Liquor Control Board of Ontario** https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liquor_Control_Board_of_Ontario

legitimacy not only by their election to the city council but also by their working with mobilised citizens. [21]

9. Support for farmers

The city has also shown support for the farmers demonstrating in the capital against the national government's new policies on agricultural funding. Kejriwal refused to let the government use Delhi sports stadiums to imprison demonstrators, and has helped find over a hundred protestors arrested by police [22]

10. Critique: a populist or progressive form of politics?

While the AAP has clearly made real positive improvements for the lives of people in Delhi in respect of schools, healthcare, water, energy, transport etc., it has been criticised by social movements and others for failing to adopt a more progressive way of doing politics. There is a visible improvement of people's lives, which is good, but this can be seen as a populist approach.

All progressive forces and groups supported AAP in both election campaigns, but 2015 and 2020 sounded quite different. In 2015, there was a huge hope among supporters that AAP would change the political processes in general, while in the 2020 election progressive movements were mainly united to avoid the BJP to win. In between, there was an internal power struggle in AAP, when Arvind Kejriwal embraced support from powerful people who were rather Hindu nationalist, non-feminist caste-proponents, who also brought resources to the party. Younger and more feminist opponents of this strategy were squeezed out, so that e.g. all five ministers are men.

Also, elements of privatisation have been allowed to remain in the system. While the reduction in the water tariff is important, the Delhi government still uses commercial actors: water ATM was introduced, sanitation is run by PPPs under private management, and the water quality issue is not adequately addressed.[23]

Kejriwal is now criticised for adopting a 'soft *Hindutva'* that is a soft version of the Hindu nationalism on which the rightwing nationalist party BJP is based; that he has let down those who believed in his original social movement campaign against corruption. Kejriwal has recently replied to these criticisms that "Our ideology is running an honest government that works 24x7 for the people. A poor man votes for employment, good education for his children and health facilities for his family. Ideology will not deliver that. Work on real issues affecting the common man will…. The AAP is a party of *deshbhakts* (nationalists). Every decision is aimed at nation-building and realising its tremendous potential". He argues that the AAP's original anti-corruption campaign and the current farmers' protest have both "have arisen out of people's disillusionment with the system, demanding that the system [should] work for people, instead of serving a few". [24]

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[21] Lama-Rewal, Stéphanie Tawa. 2019. 'Political Representation in the Discourse and Practices of the "Party of the Common Man" in India'. *Politics and Governance* 7 (3): 179–88. https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.v7i3.2122.
[22] Writer, Staff. 2021. 'We Will Trace Missing Farmers from Protest Sites in Delhi: Arvind Kejriwal'. Mint. 3 February 2021. https://www.livemint.com/politics/news/we-will-trace-missing-farmers-from-protest-sites-in-delhi-arvind-kejriwal-11612337189739.html.
[23] Part of this section is based on a critique by Madhuresh Kumar, former national convener of the National Alliance of Peoples Movements, a pan-Indian coalition of 300 grassroots movements for social justice & democratic development, in an interview with Satoko Kishimoto.
[24] Lakshmi, Rama. 2020. 'No Soft Hindutva, No Left Revolution, Kejriwal Establishing a New Centre in Indian Politics'. *ThePrint* (blog). 3 February 2020. https://theprint.in/opinion/no-soft-hindutva-no-left-revolution-

An analysis of the AAP's words and actions on the subject of political representation and participation since they won power in 2015 up to 2019, by Stéphanie Tawa Lawa-Rewal, presents the AAP as articulating a different 'left' populism from the BJP, and also shows that it has created a real and major institutional system for public participation.[25]

She argues that AAP rhetoric has treated 'the people' as a unified whole, contrasted with a corrupt political elite, and so the AAP will "put an end to 'VIP *raj* [rule], VIP culture'. This is thus different from the rightwing nationalist concept of the people, usually defined by contrast with some dangerous "other", and rather based on a more traditional left concept of the people as a socio-economic body, like the Marxist notion of 'plebs'. The AAP's use of "*aam admi* (the common man)" as the core concept also implicitly avoids other 'identity politics' classifications such as 'the poor', Dalits, workers, or women.

11. Conclusions

The case of the AAP policies in Delhi is relevant for understanding the processes of narrative change in relation to local material conditions (in Delhi), national political restructuring (the original AAP anti-corruption campaign); the practicality of developing publicly financed services in LMIC countries; the development of public participation and its relation to involvement of social movements; and the relationship between electoral parties, social movements and the public. As such it is of interest not only in other mega-cities in India but also in many other cities and countries.

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kejriwal-establishing-a-new-centre-in-indian-politics/358776/; Vij, Shivam. 2021. 'On 10th Anniversary of Lokpal Movement, Arvind Kejriwal Has Let down Those Who Believed in It'. *ThePrint* (blog). 5 April 2021. https://theprint.in/opinion/on-10th-anniversary-of-lokpal-movement-arvind-kejriwal-has-let-down/633821/ ; 'IAC's Goal Was to Display the Power of People'. n.d. The Week. Accessed 23 April 2021. https://www.theweek.in/theweek/cover/2021/04/08/iacs-goal-was-to-display-the-power-of-people.html ;

[25] Lama-Rewal, Stéphanie Tawa. 2019. 'Political Representation in the Discourse and Practices of the "Party of the Common Man" in India'. *Politics and Governance* 7 (3): 179–88. https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.v7i3.2122.