

Delhi Statehood: Kejriwal Using Emotions To Woo Voters

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By Sidharth Mishra



Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) has released its campaign song for the upcoming Lok Sabha polls, which focusses on the statehood for the national Capital. This song makes amply clear that AAP supreme leader Mr Arvind Kejriwal has for now shelved his national aspirations and wants to focus just on Delhi. Given the abysmal performance of party in assembly polls in several states, Kejriwal knows that political survival is call of the hour.

In pursuance of this goal, Kejriwal has set an agenda which he hopes would make him reap rich political harvest. It is difficult to believe that Arvind Kejriwal, is asking for full statehood without understanding that its grant is only next to impossible.

He is making statehood into a sentimental issue, as he did in the case of the Jan Lokpal Bill during his earlier 49-day stint as the Chief Minister in 2013-14. He never implemented the promise of giving Delhi the public ombudsman. By raising the issue of statehood, Kejriwal is creating a counter to the anti-incumbency which his government may have generated in past four years.

The special status for Delhi emanates from it being the national Capital. The first demand for freeing the administration of the city from the apron strings of the Centre was made way back in the 1950s by Delhi's first chief minister Chaudhary Brahm Prakash. Delhi then was a category C state with a legislative assembly. Prakash was replaced by the Congress leadership for making the demand and Delhi was converted into a Union Territory in 1956 following the reorganisation of states.

Now coming to the central theme of AAP's campaign song – "Poorna Rajya" that is full statehood. Kejriwal is a sharp politician and has used the issue of statehood of and on, ever since he took oath of office in the spring of 2015, as a safety valve to gloss over his failures at

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governance. Having failed to get any relief from the courts on the issue of centre's supremacy in governance of Delhi, he is now talking of taking the matter to the people's court.

However, it must be noted here, that even though he is talking about freedom from Centre in matters of governance, he isn't conceding that his government may have failed to govern. His government splurged public money on advertisements claiming "Chaar Saal Bemisal" (unprecedented four years).

The AAP government's advertisement blitzkrieg was running neck and neck with the Centre's "Mumkin Hain" (it's possible now) campaign, often overlapping each other on the pages of the newspapers, which made hay till the poll panel announced the date for polls and the electoral code of conduct came into vogue.

Kejriwal had fought the 2015 polls on the "freedom" agenda that is freedom from paying power, water and wi-fi bills. But soon after winning the polls, right in the first meeting he had with the Prime Minister, he raised the issue of full-statehood. It was done, as mentioned earlier, as an act of political precaution than tool of governance.

The present governance model gives Delhi a cash rich state government. Elected city governments in Delhi may complain about not being allowed a free run, as in the case of other states but at the same time, it should not be forgotten that the pampered and prime status of Delhi is all thanks to the Centre's intervention.

Delhi's annual state budget today is almost Rs 40,000 crore. The sum is much bigger than the budget of several full-fledged state governments. In addition, the budget does not include the expenditure on Delhi Police, which is part of the Union Budget. Even the responsibility for pension liabilities of former Delhi government employees lies with the Centre.

Moreover, the Delhi government's budget only includes part funding of the three municipal corporations, remaining amount comes through their own revenue models and funding from the Centre. Delhi Government contributes no funds to the New Delhi Municipal Council and Delhi Development Authority (DDA). These civic bodies raise their own revenues and the shortfall is again met by the Central government.

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Given the situation, if Centre was to give full statehood to the national capital, along with control over the NDMC area, Delhi's Budget outlay would jump to at least Rs 70,000 crore. Where will the additional sum come from? The Aam Aadmi Party-led government knows that it was huge injection of capital from the Centre which allowed it to deliver whatever its claiming as its achievements in the advertorials issued in the newspapers.

As experts have pointed out, if Delhi Government lives within its means, it has unlimited fiscal autonomy, like any other state. However, this state of affairs is dependent on its positive cash balance. Once the city government spends beyond its means, it loses that autonomy and becomes a subordinate office of the Home Ministry, like other UTs.

Kejriwal knows fully well that he would never get "Poorna Rajya" thus he is demanding it; thus he wriggled himself out from a fast-unto-death in support of his demand. The present chief minister and as did his predecessor Sheila Dikshit, know well that if special status was withdrawn Delhi Government would become penurious. However, there is no harm in asking for it as long as it's not granted. Thus, the politics of having the cake and eating it too.

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