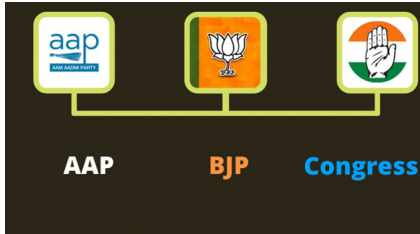


By Sidharth Mishra



As the campaign for February 8 assembly polls in the national capital is peaking, the narratives dictating the political fight is having a roller coaster ride. At the beginning of the campaign, Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal claimed that this was the first poll in the electoral history of Delhi that votes were being asked for the development done in the past five years.

This claim was received on a derisive note by both the opponents, the Congress and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Former chief minister Sheila Dikshit's son Sandeep Dikshit has released a flurry of videos claiming that it was her mother who should be credited for 'developing' Delhi and the voters rewarded her twice in 2003 and 2008 voting her back to power.

Dikshit also claims that she would have made it for one third time too had the Anna agitation not created a 'false propaganda' about corruption in Delhi government. In fact, he goes a step ahead and seeks vindication for the 'false charges' levelled against his late mother. The Congress has lynch pinned its campaign on the development work done during the Dikshit era.

The BJP has been more aggressive in retorting Kejriwal's claims with the its members of parliament and Delhi unit president Manoj Tiwari organizing visit to schools to show the 'real' dilapidated status of education infrastructure. BJP's IT cell has bombarded the social media platforms raising questions about claims of development.

This raises the pertinent question what is development and how it needs to be defined in a

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Sunday, 02 February 2020 04:16

political context. Aam Aadmi Party's (AAP) definition of development is best enumerated in a speech which Delhi minister for power, PWD and health Satyender Jain gave addressing party workers soon after filing of the nomination papers.

Jain as head of infrastructure departments should have lined up the projects executed by his government but instead, he harped on subsidies extended by his government arranging free travel for women in buses, free pilgrimage for elderly citizens, free water supply and also almost free power supply. In his local pamphleteering also, he talks about the boom barriers, steel benches, air conditioners and laptops given to the residents' welfare associations of various cooperative group housing societies in his constituency – Shakurbasti.

Can the work done by Jain his constituency pass off as development. His rivals on the other hand claim it to be a case of bribing the voters. Between the extreme definitions, AAP's work, if the definition of socially deprived could be stretched to cover the middle class and the lower middle-class populations, could be said to be a case of social welfare.

Can development and welfare go hand-in-hand? This is the dilemma faced by the voters of Delhi today. While free bus rides may have been given to women passengers but in the last seven years Delhi Transport Corporation (DTC) has been able to add just one bus to its fast depleting fleet. While there may be no money being charged for water supply, the fact remains that water coming into the taps in the households of the national Capital have failed quality tests.

Therefore, it would be wrong to say, as Kejriwal claims, that development is the poll agenda. The agenda in the real terms is subsidies extended by the government in the various civic services it provides. He tasted waters in 2015 promising free power, water and wi-fi and won the polls handsomely.

To Kejriwal's credit he has also been able to somewhat deliver on this count too and would expect his voters to payback be reelecting him. But will he be able to deliver on infrastructure if he continues to be persistent in using the public funds by subsidizing the cost of services.

The experience of the past five years shows, it's unlikely as the government during this period failed to build even one new college, school, hospital or for that matter add buses to the DTC

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fleet. The progress of the metro expansion has slowed down and for long the Signature Bridge stood as a symbol of stalled development.

However, both Kejriwal and Amit Shah, who is commandeering the BJP campaign in the city, from their own experiences realise that immediate benefit matters more to the voters than social good. Thus, the increasing 'Shaheen Bagh' quotient in the BJP's campaign.

The Muslims have a fair share in city's electoral vote bank. Agitating Muslims in Shaheen Bagh, BJP hopes would wean away such Hindu voters who have enticed by the freebies.

Arvind Kejriwal on the other hand is resisting going to Shaheen Bagh and expressing solidarity with the minorities, lest it annoy the Hindu voters. Congress, which has so far remained a minor player, is using both the cards of development done during the Dikshit regime and also standing with the Muslims to woo them back to their fold from the apron strings of Aam Aadmi Party (AAP).

The Muslim voters for sure can influence outcome on eight to 10 seats. The Congress leadership is hoping that it would get a good chunk of them. That still would not be enough for BJP to get the adequate number of seats to form the government unless Hindu voters decide in en masse to desert Kejriwal.

Thus, the tone and tenor of Amit Shah's public discourses is getting more aggressive by the each passing day and Arvind Kejriwal is pouring all the vitriolic at his command. But for sure, in this melee of accusations and counter-allegations, development has been left far behind in the campaign narrative.

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