

What about the Aam Aurat?

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In Indian politics, a month is clearly a very long time. In mid-December the [Aam Aadmi Party](#) – which as a fledgling political group had just done remarkably well in the [Delhi Assembly polls](#) – created both excitement and optimism that it could provide a new, different way of doing politics that would be accountable and connect with common people's concerns. Of course the party in Delhi benefited hugely from the general dissatisfaction and rejection of both the Congress and the BJP, and the sense that it provided [a clear alternative](#) that was not mired in the tired and unsatisfactory politics of the two major parties. That was enough in many eyes (including my own) to compensate for the lack of a clear programme of its own beyond ending corruption and cleaning up public service delivery, as many observers hoped that these would develop over time in a progressive direction. And there has since been the emergence of something like an AAP wave in at least some cities and other urban centres in different parts of the country.

But just a month later, there are many reasons for disquiet. It is not just that, as many commentators have noted, both the Chief Minister and his Cabinet colleagues seem less inclined to deal with the quotidian but necessary issues of governing the country's capital through reforming and using the existing administrative structures than to continue in agitation mode. It is not even the disconcerting threats to close down the centre of the city just before Republic Day through a [dharna](#) on the completely unjustified demand of suspending three police officers, at least one of whom was simply doing his duty rather than responding only to the current political leader. These are certainly causes for concern, but there is a more significant worry.

The most compelling reason for the growing wariness about the Aam Aadmi Party among many people who may have voted for them and supported their rise is the growing evidence of very retrograde patriarchal attitudes to women that dominate among the party's most well-known leaders, and have particularly defined the recent actions in Delhi.

Some of this was already evident in videos made of earlier speeches by the party's young face in Uttar Pradesh, Kumar Vishwas, who plans to take on Rahul Gandhi in his bastion Amethi in the forthcoming general election. In these videos, Vishwas is seen and heard to make sexist and objectionable statements about women in general, and about Sania Mirza and her husband in particular – which he has subsequently defended as being made in a light-hearted way to amuse his audience. But a more recent overtly colour-prejudiced remark about nurses from Kerala could not be dismissed as easily, so he was forced to apologise for it, albeit half-heartedly. The underlying attitude behind these statements is one that is all too familiar among men in India, but that does not make it any the less unpleasant for most women in the country.

Others had already pointed out that even the [Party's manifesto](#) for Delhi contained nothing that addressed many of the concerns of women, beyond a general promise to ensure their physical security on the streets. But remarkably, thus far even this most essential issue has not been given the serious attention required by the newly installed government. The problems of daily insecurity faced by women and girls in Delhi and

throughout the country are multi-pronged, but the extensive public discussion after the horrific gang rape incident of December 2013 should have provided the new state government enough ideas about the necessary steps to take. So far at least, very little seems to have been initiated on this crucial front.

Instead, the pattern seems to be to deflect attention from inadequacies on this front by shifting the attention to issues that are tinged with some notions of morality rather than physical safety, and then to blame some variety of “outsiders” for the current insecurity of women in the city. The entire unfortunate incident in Khirki village with Minister Somnath Bharti can be seen in this light. After yet another gang rape, the immediate question should have been how a woman (this time a foreign tourist) could be raped in the heart of central Delhi, just a short distance from the New Delhi railway station, in a poorly lit and deserted road without anything to ensure the safety of a pedestrian.

But this was not the reaction. Rather, the issue was diverted into one of drugs and sex trade, as if rapes occur only because there are prostitution rings. Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal has been quoted as saying that “if you don't arrest drug and sex offenders...this is where tendencies of rape begin.” This betrays such a lack of understanding of the various factors that drive rapes (many of which are committed within homes by people known to and often related to the victims) that it is breathtaking. It is also surprising, given that the AAP was actively involved in many of the street protests and demonstrations that sought to sensitise the people of Delhi after December 2013, that its own leadership remains so insensitive on this issue.

Following this deeply problematic line, Somnath Bharti indulged in what must rank as one of the more shocking acts ever publicly engaged in by any elected leader, committing multiple crimes: of racial profiling of African women, humiliating them publicly without cause or prior investigation, and even encouraging mob violence that could have had very serious consequences for the women. He led a vigilante mob consisting not only of some local people but also AAP volunteers and media teams to break into their homes in the middle of the night, without any investigation or search warrant, and forced the hapless women to undergo intrusive and insulting medical tests (which incidentally cleared them of any suspicion of drug use). The women have since complained that they were molested by Bharti's supporters and of course the real danger of even greater violence against them is very obvious in such an appalling situation.

Quite apart from the obnoxious targeting of African women alone, the basic flaw in Bharti's approach to this is the completely wrong understanding of the case even if this is indeed a case of sex trafficking. It should be obvious to Bharti as a lawyer that those who have been trafficked are victims, not offenders, and must be treated with care and sensitivity. To treat them as criminals rather than people in need of protection not only misses the point, it even compounds the actual crime.

More to the point, this approach underlines the fundamental patriarchy of AAP's approach to the physical security of women. Bharti has subsequently claimed that he has done this with the best intentions, apparently “risking his life” (not those of the women he exposed to mob violence) to protect the ma-behen-betis of the neighbourhood. But no woman anywhere can be protected by a false sense of morality that allows the public humiliation and exposure to violence of any other

woman. To respond to an act of violence against a women not by taking measures to improve protection but by inflicting rough violence on another group of women is the justice of the Taliban or the khap panchayats. In the context of an increasingly violent city, such responses by those who are meant to instil confidence among women only add to the sense of isolation, fear and even despair.

Among the many disappointments provided by AAP so early into its tenure, this has surely been the most significant. But it is chillingly of a piece with its leader Yogendra Yadav's reported statement that the party is open to a "dialogue" with the [khap panchayats](#) of Haryana on the issue of dishonour killings and on whether laws should be amended to prevent marriages within the same gotras.

According to [an NDTV report](#), when asked whether the AAP supported the Haryana Khaps' demand for amendment to Hindu marriage law to prevent marriages within the same 'gotra' or clan, Yadav said, "No, we would invite them to an honest democratic dialogue. I would say the future generations should have a little more voice than those which are fading away. Once that dialogue is established and the entire Jat community feels the definition of 'gotra' should be expanded, why not?"

This statement shocked many who had certainly expected better of Yogendra Yadav himself – but it is even more shocking because it suggests that women not only in Haryana but across the country cannot hope that a force like AAP will fight against the many different and stifling forms of patriarchal oppression that continue to reduce their freedom and inhibit their empowerment.

In such a context, reforming the police is but one of the many challenges that women face. It seems that reforming the political discourse itself – including the leaders who promise a "new politics" without taking on board the rights, needs and aspirations of half the people – is an even greater challenge.

So in this Aam Aadmi Party, is there really any room for the aam aurat?

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