

# Op-ed: Are the people always right?

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Nothing is a better window to the Aam Aadmi Party's conduct in its 49 days in power than this passage from Arvind Kejriwal's book, "Swaraj".

"Is democracy all about casting your vote once in five years and then letting these parties and their leaders rule the roost? This cannot be a democracy. There is something wrong somewhere. The basic problem in our country is that there is no democracy. We want democracy. The politics of voting once in five years is no longer acceptable. The people want a direct participation in power. The people shall take decisions, and politicians and officials will have to implement them."

Essentially, this is an argument about direct democracy. All democracies in modern times have been indirect. Citizens elect their representatives periodically, and the representatives act on their behalf for a specified period. A partial exception is Switzerland where, as Kejriwal puts it, "if 50,000 people...sign a petition and ask for a law, it has to be presented as an act of Parliament".

Kejriwal's critique that representative democracy is insufficient is right. In recent times, India's politicians, wooing the electorate at the time of elections, have behaved quite badly between elections. But is Kejriwal right that the elected representatives and officials should simply implement what

the people want? That assumes the people are always right. Are they?

Consider the village of Subalpur, West Bengal. Last month, the elders of the village discovered that a young Hindu woman of the village fell in love with a Muslim man, and wanted to marry her. After considerable journalistic investigation, The Wall Street Journal reported (February 21, 2014) that the "village chief and 12 others dragged the 20 year old woman to a shed and gang-raped her ... She and her suitor were then tied to a tree overnight ... and the village council fined them the next day."

The people on the whole disapproved of the woman's conduct and supported the move of the village chief and his supporters. The fault of the young couple was that they defied the traditional practice of arranged marriage. Moreover, a Hindu woman fell in love with a Muslim man.

Are such examples rare? All of us who have studied, observed, or lived in India, would say that such things might not happen every single day, but they are not entirely uncommon. We know that village councils and khap panchayats have repeatedly disapproved of the transgressions of the existing traditions and punished such behaviour brutally.

"Transgressions" could be about young people defying the practice of arranged marriages, Dalits acting in an "uppity" manner, sometimes even young women having cell phones. Reflecting on the rural misery of Dalits, Ambedkar called villages an utter cesspool.

Are cities any better? In principle, they should be. In practice, they often are not. Some of Delhi's urban neighbourhoods have targeted people from the north-east; others in northern and western India have historically attacked Muslims; and in the early 1990s, in Muslim-majority cities of Kashmir, the Hindu minority was singled out.

Indeed, the problem is not confined to India alone. In American cities until the 1960s, violent prejudice against African Americans was not uncommon, and until the late 1920s, the lynching of African-Americans in the southern cities of the US was both popular and common.

In Indonesia, lynchings remain widespread even today. In Switzerland, Kejrival's democratic paradise, anti-Muslim prejudice has of late become quite prevalent.

These examples illustrate a larger point. To believe that the people are always right is too romantic a notion. Popular sentiment has nearly always been accompanied by popular prejudices: against women, against minorities, against the differently skinned, against the underprivileged.

Democracies must, of course, represent popular wishes. But democracy is also a battle against popular prejudices and a fight for higher universal principles. Democracy is not equal to mob rule. The sooner AAP can understand this, the less costly its future mistakes will be.

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