

INDIAN POLITICS HAS HAD THREE-AND-A-HALF MASTER NARRATIVES — SECULAR NATIONALISM, HINDU NATIONALISM, JUSTICE FOR THE LOWER CASTES AND REGIONALISM. THE AAP SEEKS TO GO BEYOND THAT. THEREIN LIES ITS PROMISE AND ITS CHALLENGE.

INDIA HAS DONE EXCEEDINGLY WELL AS AN ELECTORAL DEMOCRACY. IT IS ACTUALLY AN ELECTORAL WONDER. POLITICAL SCIENCE WOULD NOT HAVE PREDICTED THE SURVIVAL OF DEMOCRACY IN INDIA. IT GOES AGAINST EXISTING CANONS OF THEORY. WHILE THE ELECTORAL DIMENSION HAS BEEN A GREAT SUCCESS, INDIA'S DEMOCRACY HASN'T DONE VERY WELL BETWEEN ELECTIONS. THE BATTLE FOR DEEPER DEMOCRACY IS PRIMARILY ABOUT HOW TO MAKE THE INDIAN POLITY MORE RESPONSIVE AND ACCOUNTABLE BETWEEN ELECTIONS.



ARCHANA MASIH/REDIFF.COM

## Ashutosh Varshney

The Brown University professor and author discusses India's improbable democracy with Archana Masih

Political scientist and writer, Professor Ashutosh Varshney's fourth book *Battles Half Won, India's Improbable Democracy* is a scholarly insight into the deepening of India's democracy.

The book argues that India has done exceedingly well as an electoral democracy and is an electoral wonder, but Indian democracy has not done very well between elections.

"The battle for deeper democracy is primarily about how to make Indian polity more responsive and accountable between elections and the AAP is plugging into precisely

this problem," says Varshney, the Sol Goldman Professor of International Studies and Social Sciences, Brown University, Rhode Island.

An alumnus of Jawaharlal Nehru University, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and a former professor at Harvard, the Uttar Pradesh-born Varshney is a leading scholar on India.

On a recent visit to Mumbai for the launch of his book, he spoke to *India Abroad* about the emergence of the Aam Aadmi Party, the challenges before the Congress and the Bharatiya Janata Party and why the 2014 election is one we have not seen in a long time.

*Battles Half Won, India's Improbable Democracy* mentions four democratic upsurges that India has seen. Are we seeing India's fifth democratic upsurge with the emergence of AAP?

I think so, but it is an upsurge of a very different kind. Its promise is that it seeks to undermine the conventional categories of politics.

Indian politics has had three-and-a-half master narratives — secular nationalism, Hindu nationalism, justice for the lower castes and regionalism. The AAP seeks to go beyond that. Therein lies its promise and its challenge.

This upsurge is essentially tapping into urban anxiety. The rural potential of the AAP-led upsurge is still to be assessed, seen and judged. With the exception of Haryana, it remains urban.

The urban excitement is no longer in doubt. The urban middle class is coming back to electoral politics.

Has AAP gone too far as demonstrated by last week's protests in Delhi? Should they not be focusing on governance? Are they committing a big mistake and undermining democracy?

Even Mahatma Gandhi, India's best protestor ever, argued that civil disobedience had to be exercised with wisdom and caution — and infrequently.

Kejriwal is not wrong to say that Delhi's police should be under the Delhi government, but is this the right method of realizing that objective?

One must question the approach, while agreeing with the objective.

How do you see the party evolve?

The book argues that India has done exceedingly well as an electoral democracy. It is actually an electoral wonder.

Political Science would not have predicted the survival of democracy in India. It goes against existing canons of theory.

While the electoral dimension has been a great success, India's democracy hasn't done very well between elections.

The battle for deeper democracy is primarily about how to make Indian polity more responsive and accountable between elections.

The AAP is plugging into precisely this problem. What is its biggest ID today? Bring the normal functioning of the Indian polity closer to citizens.

It can be called citizenship-based politics.

The first instinct of Indian political parties between elections is to ignore issues that have no electoral value, howev-

er important they may be otherwise.

Indian democracy is heavily weighted towards rural India because that's where the numbers are while urban problems have been ignored.

The AAP is certainly taking the right steps towards making democracy deeper.

Elections are a very important constituent of modern citizenship, but citizenship is not only about voting. The AAP is turning 'between elections' issues into election issues.

How far can citizenship issues can be turned into long-time electoral issues remains open to judgment.

Do you believe the AAP could have a lasting impact in Indian politics?

It has a reasonably developed political philosophy, what it needs is an economic philosophy. Until it comes up with a good economic philosophy, its long-term potential will remain open to question. A well thought economic philosophy is what every serious political and economic observer is waiting for.

To expect it to deliver an economic blueprint so quickly will be unrealistic, but we are waiting for that.

Ramachandra Guha recently tweeted that 'we have too many person-and-family-centric parties already. Even the BJP has become a personality cult. Kejriwal must keep groupies at bay.' If the AAP has to continue to do things differently, what does it have to be cautious about?

AAP leaders are average citizens of India. This is not a party born out of political pedigree, this is a party born out of citizen interest and citizen activism.

It has broken the mould.

Any mass movement needs trusted lieutenants, but in order for it to not repeat the mistakes of conventional political parties, it has to make sure it doesn't generate family, religion, caste-based patronage and continues to mobilize people on issues it holds dear.

Otherwise, it will fall into clientelistic democratic politics, which India has had quite a lot of.

Its beginning is promising, but a great deal of its struggle lies ahead.

From protest to governance is a big transition.

Will it compel parties like the Congress and BJP to reframe their political agendas, and the manner in which they approach voters?

Certainly the two leading political parties are feeling a sense of threat.

Whether it is going to be a long-time impact on how political parties function will depend a lot on its performance in May.

In May, it must deliver a minimum of 15 to 20 seats. If it gets 30 to 40, it will easily be the 3-4<sup>th</sup> largest party and will change the politics of this country.

With 15 to 20, it will have an impact.

With less than 10, people will say we don't have to pay attention now.

Won't its performance in Delhi impact its national ambitions?

## ► Page 00

Unless they commit a blunder in Delhi, most people are ready to give them a chance.

You don't judge a government in three months.

The urban middle class felt so marginalized and is responding very well to the AAP.

At the moment May looks promising for the AAP.

Do you think it erred in a populist manifesto that may eventually be economically unfeasible?

Arvind Kejriwal's book *Swaraj* has a fairly developed political plan especially towards decentralization and a reasonably interesting argument about why government schemes for mass welfare do not work.

He is opposed to NREGA, his claim is that funds should be untied and people should decide how to use their funds.

This is a fairly developed and coherent plan for changing the politics of the country, but there is very little there about economic policies except some statements about the *chota vya-pari* (small trader).

He says government harasses the small businessman, but that is connected to his conception of how government has been utterly corrupt.

His belief is in the people's capacity of governing themselves, but I think they are overdoing it.

You can't go to people with referenda all the time.

That actually undermines governance, it does not promote governance. You can't have national level referenda all the time.

He is very enamored of Swiss democracy, but Switzerland has 8.014 million people, Delhi is twice as large, Mumbai is two-and-a-half times larger.

The idea of referendum is not invalid per se, but should be infrequently used, when there is profound doubt about an important policy.

The cell phone referendum about whether they should form the government was a very smart political move because they didn't have the mandate. But you can't do it all the time.

Has Kejriwal become the biggest challenger to Narendra Modi, more than a dispirited Congress?

The Congress won an unexpected large number of urban seats in 2009. In 2014, the Congress was expected to lose those urban seats to the BJP.

If the AAP wins 30 seats, then it is very likely that 25 of those would have gone to the BJP.

Therefore, the BJP's sense of threat is real because the urban vote was almost certain to go to Mr Modi.

The Congress had some kind of rural strategy, but its urban strategy wasn't clear at all.

The AAP's rise does hurt the BJP. The assumption was that the Congress was going to decline, but the assumption was also that the Congress loss would be the BJP's gain.

That equation has become very complicated.

Has Kejriwal stolen Modi's thunder?

Kejriwal has become a symbol of urban middle class hope.

Modi had become one and now another symbol has emerged, which means that in this next election whatever happens in rural India — it will remain a Congress versus BJP versus regional parties fight — in urban India, the contest has changed as of now.

Television, which basically addresses urban India, is driven by urban interest and is run by urbanites — at least on TV it will be Kejriwal versus Modi. But we know it cannot



ANINDITO MUKHERJEE/REUTERS

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ing election.

The social bases of parties will radically shift.

The Congress in its own estimate knows it is losing. If suppose it drops below 100 and the AAP rises to 70 or 80 it will be truly revolutionary.

That means in the next election, they might be the second largest party.

It will start gobbling the Congress space and the future of Indian politics might begin to look like the BJP versus the AAP.

We can't rule out those possibilities because we don't know how big the wave is.

As of now, 30 to 40 will be a very big achievement; 15 to 20 will be quite respectable. Less than 10, the enormous enthusiasm we've seen will dissipate.

The AAP has surely captured people's imagination and is attracting members in droves.

There is a wave currently in evidence. How big it will become will determine its long run future.

In the short run it is changing discourse, changing expectations, forcing political parties to readjust their strategies and it is causing a threat most of all to Mr Modi.

The threat is not that Mr Modi will drop to 100. The threat is Mr Modi will not reach 180.

Therefore, one must not be surprised that the Congress

be the all India or the rural story.

But a proviso must be added — when waves emerge in politics, conventional political analysis is knocked out.

1977 defied all categories, 1989 under V P Singh also to some extent.

There have been waves in regional spaces — N T Rama Rao, the Asom Gana Parishad in Assam — waves are exponential.

Conventional analysis cannot deal with exponential drives.

If at all, it is a bigger wave, then why restrict the prediction to 30 to 40?

Even with 30 to 40 they will transform politics. If it is bigger, then it will be an electoral revolution, a critically realign-

Delhi's Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal, right, leader of the Aam Aadmi Party, with Urban Development Minister and fellow AAP leader Manish Sisodia during a protest in New Delhi, January 20. Kejriwal and his supporters launched a sit-in against the city police last week, creating traffic chaos.

appears to have a soft attitude towards the AAP because it already assumed that it is going to be a loser.

If the Congress is going to lose, they would want that Modi doesn't cross 200 and become so formidable. It seems the AAP can stop that as of now.

Modi and the BJP are still the front runners. One should remember that. It cannot be ruled out that they will get to 180, but the odds have lowered.

Why do you think the Congress, which seemed to be firmly on the comeback trail in May 2009, lost its way so badly?

Part of it is that any party that rules for so long, unless it has a leader like Nehru or Gandhi is likely to become arrogant and lose touch. That's the nature of power.

That's why incumbents unless led by someone of that stature should not be in power for more than two terms.

Many polities have a constitutional limit, like America has a two-term limit for President.

Parliamentary systems typically do not term limits because you can have a mid-term election. Parliamentary systems are especially prone to incumbent arrogance and disappearance of trust.

Why has the United Progressive Alliance<sup>2</sup> become a totem for many Indians of the worst government India has ever had?

The other part of the problem is the Congress' inability to resolve organizational issues. The new, rising India is not willing to accept dynasties as a basis for rule.

Dynasties are fundamentally anti-modern.

The aspirations of the new urban India that does not have political pedigree — the consciousness of that India has to be brought into political calculations now.

Rahul Gandhi did bring new people in Youth Congress and NSUI (the National Students Union of India), but he has been unable to reform the Congress. The mainstream of the Congress party is still a relic of the old era.

I don't think populism has been the undoing of the Congress. The Congress was trying to become a party of social welfare because secularism — the earlier ID — had become weak.

So the Congress was trying to reinvent itself with a num-

## ► Page 00

ber of welfare schemes, some of which are necessary.

But corruption and arrogance on one hand along with the inability to rejuvenate the organization are the bigger problems.

Nothing has hurt the Congress more than the inability to handle Robert Vadra, symbolically speaking.

When Vadra was attacked by the AAP (the Aam Aadmi Party), so many people were offended that the Congress party came out in his defense.

What does Vadra have to do with the party? Unless the party is the property of the family.

Couldn't the party have distanced itself from that? This shows the abject dependence of the party on the family today.

If only those close to the family rise, then it is the end of a modern party. This is a way to undo a modern party, not build one.

You write in *Battles Half Won*, India's Improbable Democracy that India's democratic success is primarily a consequence of politics. Leaders and parties made democracy. In a country so disillusioned by politicians — don't you think Indians can argue that their present leaders have failed our democracy?

In the initial years, leaders stabilized Indian democracy.

The two leaders that towered over the political landscape were Gandhi, Nehru and the teams around them.

Politics made the Indian nation.

If India had followed the European notion of nation building — one language, one nation — India in 1947 would have been 28 nations or more.

Gandhi is original in many ways. His originality lies in conceptualizing a nation that could accommodate every group — this notion of unity in diversity, which to some is a sign of India's weakness.

The Hindu nationalist conception in its pure form is very European. From their early literature to (Lal Kishenchand) Advani's notion in 1991 — that India is a Hindu nation. This is not how Gandhi conceptualized India. His task was how to turn a civilization into a nation. That project wasn't possible with a 'One Nation, One Language' formula.

Indian identity had to be conceptualized as a layered identity or as a hyphenated identity.

Indians were Marathi-Indians, Bengali-Indians, Tamil-Indians, Gujarati-Indians, Muslim-Indians, Hindu-Indians — it could not be an undifferentiated India.

Then Nehru lent his prestige, charisma and personality to building institutions — showing up in Parliament regularly. Not attacking judges when they invalidated governmental orders or laws. Not imposing chief ministers. Not imposing state presidents, which were elected positions.

Charan Singh defeated Nehru on agriculture policies in 1956-1957. There was a vote within the party and Nehru lost the vote.

While his record is not impeccable, it is a remarkable record. He basically had democratic instincts and was committed to democratic principles.

Those leaders were born out of the freedom movement and brought a level of com-

mitment to Parliament and politics, which is not what can be often said about the leaders of today.

Politics made the nation, consolidated the nation and institutionalized India's democracy.

In the last 20 years, there has been a lot of disillusionment with leaders, but democracy also has self-correcting mechanisms.

Now you have so much excitement about the AAP, maybe it will dissipate, maybe it will not.

In any case Mr Modi was generating a lot of excitement. Modi is both a very exciting and polarizing figure.

A lot of disaffection and anxiety generates alternatives. The fact that it is an open-ended process and alternatives can emerge, which saves democracy.

There will always be disillusionment. Even under Nehru there was some.

There's a sense that democracy is not a

Therefore, it remains the worst system until all other alternatives have been examined.

It is the best system we have for running human affairs.

So Indian democracy has a mechanism to repel extremist politics of any kind?

Right. There will be some on the fringe always. The system allows freedom to conduct that kind of politics also.

What the system does not allow is violent extremism.

You can find violent insurgencies, but the way Indian politics deals with them is very interesting.

Firstly, faced with a violent challenge to the Nation State, the modern polity responds to it with counter-insurgency.

But over and above that India does two distinctive things: It throws economic resources into the region of disaffection to wean the base of the insurgents away. At



ADNAN ABIDI/REUTERS

Narendra Modi, the BJP's prime ministerial candidate, is both a very exciting and polarizing figure, says Professor Ashutosh Varshney.

system for encouraging individual brilliance, it is about team work, about building coalitions, making compromises.

Even Nehru had to do that. Kejriwal will have to do that.

Modi's campaign has been strikingly devoid of anti-Muslim rhetoric.

After the kutta pilla incident (when Modi had likened how he felt after the riots with how he would feel if a puppy came under the wheels of his car), it has been several months since he said something horrible about the Muslims of India.

It is the result of democratic constraints. He has to make compromises.

It is often said that democracy is the worst form of government until all other systems have been considered.

Disappointment and self correction are both built into the democratic system.

Sometimes, the pangs of disappointment are very deep and quite long, but self-correction is always likely to be on the horizon.

least it tries to do so.

Three, and this is absolutely distinctive and only democracies can do that: It keeps a channel of dialogue open with insurgents and persuades them to run for office.

Nothing strengthens Indian democracy more than insurgents running for office and accepting democratic parameters.

So even though they are typically opposed to the party that runs the government, if they win it strengthens the system.

If you only had military means to deal with insurgents, it's possible that you might just break up, it is possible that your democracy could be undermined — but you don't do that in India, you follow a three-fold approach.

As a result, violent extremism is always pushed to the sidelines. It is bottled up in certain parts.

Naxalism is on the wane now, will it rear its head again? Yes. Will it be able to capture India? No.

Will the RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh) capture India? No.

Will the BJP (the Bharatiya Janata Party) capture India? It may, but in its ideologically moderate form. Not in the ideologically pure form.

The Congress is the prime Left-of-centre party now, not the CPI-M (the Communist Party of India-Marxist).

While the BJP is the prime Right-of-centre party.

If the BJP was ideologically pure, it would have an anti-Muslim rhetoric in its campaign. Their every ideological text says that Muslims are disloyal to the country and they partitioned the country. This is in the DNA of pure Hindu nationalism.

Advani was the last politician to try that at the national level. He could not become the PM of India, (Atal Bihari) Vajpayee could.

The only way to describe Vajpayee is that he was ideologically moderate. Later, Advani himself became a moderate.

In fact, in the Modi vs Advani fight, Advani was the moderate.

Now Modi's campaign has been devoid of anti-Muslim rhetoric. There are disturbing things like the appointment of (former Gujarat minister of state for home) Amit Shah in UP, but Modi has not associated himself with the Muzzafarnagar riots.

The MLAs (the accused in the Muzzafarnagar riots) were honored in Agra before Modi arrived (for his election meeting). He did not share the stage with them.

In every party there will be struggles, you can't get rid of the ideologically pure. But the issue is whether the ideologically pure can dominate.

In the Muzaffarnagar riots, it seems the local wings of the BJP were involved.

Modi cannot have a strategy called riots in India as a way to win elections. It just cannot work because the middle class that was adoring him was doing so for his governance and growth record.

He's trying to reinvent himself. He will politically hurt himself if 2002 becomes the definition of Modi again.

At this point the Congress has every reason to paint Modi in 2002 colors while he has every reason to reinvent himself as a governance man and leave 2002 behind.

In your book you write that the only cleavage that has the potential to rip India apart is the divide between Hindus and Muslims. Has this division become deeper in today's India?

After 1947, the most anxious moment was the 1990s. Nothing promotes polarizing anxieties more than rioting.

India now has a different kind of problem and that is the discrimination against Muslims. For example, Muslims can't get flats — discrimination and everyday biases have to be fought.

That is true of Dalits as well except that they are politically more powerful. It is a suffering that Muslims share with Dalits and the lowest OBCs (Other Backward Classes).

My argument in the book is that India in all probability — not certainly — has gone beyond the riots era now.

Riots will not disappear, but the frequen-

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cy and deadliness will certainly decline.

Instead of riots, India is likely to see hi-tech terrorism and everyday discrimination.

Many Indian Muslims feel that Indian society does not treat them fairly. They have some concern about riots after seeing what happened in Muzaffarnagar, but I don't think it wakes them up in the middle of the night.

The '80s and '90s were truly alarming. That was truly an anxious moment in the history of the nation. It was the worst moment for Hindu-Muslim relations after 1947-48.

Even Modi's arrival in power, should it happen, will not easily reproduce the 1990s.

Only riots and mass incarceration can produce the kinds of anxieties that Indian Muslims and a lot of liberal Hindus felt in the 1980s, 1990s and in Gujarat in 2002.

It is not that Muslims of India love the prospect of Modi coming to power. What I am saying is that if he does come to power he will certainly produce greater anxieties among the Muslims than they currently have about the functioning of the polity.

But it won't match the depth of anxiety that they had felt in the '80s, '90s. Those were existential threats.

Existential threats are different from anxieties. I am making a distinction between existential threats and anxieties.

Modi will also have to figure out how to redefine his relations with the Muslims. So far, his language is very coarse, but he has not demonstrated anti-Muslim virulence since the kutta pilla episode of July.

That showed a certain coarseness of language, it seemed like he was equating Muslims with animals and he should be critiqued for that, but I don't think he meant to express virulence.

He has been trying to check himself since his last victory in December. He has come on the verge of saying sorry, but he pulls back. He is trying to redefine his relationship with the Muslim community, but it is not happening yet.

It can't be that the Muslim community has to redefine its relationship with him. It has to be a two-way process.

A leader has to make a greater attempt and make gestures of conciliation.

If he doesn't want to say sorry, then he has to express regret, but the regret has to be primarily to the Muslim community of Gujarat.

You say in your book that as Gandhi is the father of Indian nationhood, Nehru is the father of democracy. Nehru and his policies invite most criticism, especially among the young? Why?

The young generation of India sees Nehru through the Nehru family, which has become extremely unpopular. The Nehru family has produced no one like Nehru.

Indira Gandhi developed seriously authoritarian proclivities, but I don't think one can claim that Mrs Gandhi was corrupt. Maybe she was, maybe she wasn't, we don't know.

The biggest critique that political science has made of her is her authoritarianism. The Emergency colors her forever.

Rajiv had a very short stint, we don't know what he was capable of. He did generate a lot of energy, but it quickly dissipated and by the time Bofors happened, he lost his base so rapidly that someone like V P Singh could throw him out. The Congress' seats were halved from 1984 to 1989.

Since then we have his widow who at least has two victories to her credit, but the idea that the Government of India has been run primarily according to the wishes of 10 Janpath offends people.



People in Bombay vote in the 1967 national election beside posters advertising the political visions of Indian statesmen Pandit Nehru, who had passed away by then, and V K Krishna Menon.

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IS DESCRIBED AS A 'LEAP IN THE DARK' BECAUSE  
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PRACTICED DEMOCRACY.  
BALLOTS WENT ON CAMEL BACKS TO  
THE FARTHEST HAMLETS OF RAJASTHAN AND ON  
BOATS TO SOME OF INDIA'S ISLANDS.  
THE 1967 POLLS AFTER NEHRU WERE A NEW  
KIND OF ELECTION. 1977 WAS A TURNING POINT,  
SO WAS 1998-99.  
WE SHOULDN'T SAY 2014 ELECTION WILL  
CONSTITUTE A HISTORIC NOVELTY,  
WE SHOULD SAY IT WILL CONSTITUTE A NOVELTY  
OF RECENT TIMES.

Rahul generated a lot of enthusiasm in 2009, but he hasn't had a single major victory since 2009. That he has not been able to reform the Congress party is an indictment.

But what hurts people most is dynastic impulses and corruption under a family-ruled Congress party — and Nehru has borne the brunt of it.

Secondly, Nehru's economic policy was flawed. Whether

post 1991 models were available in the 1950s is a different question.

In my book I make the case that these models were not available and Nehru was not the only one practicing central planning, almost every political leader was doing the same and had distrust of market forces.

The world had just come out of the Great Depression and the Soviet Union in a matter of 30 years of planning had become a superpower.

So, the space for market-based models wasn't there and you can't blame it entirely on Nehru, but it is true that India only saw a 3.5 percent growth rate during the Planning era — and the father of planning was also Nehru.

Nehru was the father of Indian democracy, a great patriot and someone who contributed massively to the building of the nation after Gandhi's death. All these go in his favor.

As a political scientist I cannot be blinded by how the Nehru family has functioned, but just as Gandhi can't be judged by his descendents, why should Nehru?

The judgment of the young generation should be different. It is wrong to judge Nehru through the dynasty. Also, Mrs Gandhi was not Nehru's successor. Lal Bahadur Shastri was.

She was Shastri's successor, she ran for office and defeated Morarji Desai. She also ran for the Congress presidency during Nehru's time and was president for a year.

It is unfair to judge Nehru from the prism of his descendents.

Do you believe the India that goes to the polls in April is a different India than the one that went to the polls five years ago? What has changed? What has not changed? Is this an election that has never been before?

Of the 760 to 800 million voters, roughly 150 million will vote for the first time. That itself is very distinctive.

Secondly, if the urban middle class returns to voting, that will be another electoral novelty.

The middle classes voted vigorously in the 1950s, '60s, '70s and they propelled India's freedom movement. But their disenchantment began with the rise of the OBCs in Indian politics.

I am not suggesting in any way that OBCs don't have a middle class, but India's middle is predominantly if not wholly upper caste; predominantly if not wholly Hindu; predominantly if not wholly urban.

The return of middle classes to electoral politics will not be a historic novelty, but a novelty for the last 20 odd years.

So 150 million new voters, the likely return of the middle class to electoral politics and a party which is going beyond the three-and-a-half master narratives of Indian politics: First, secularism, which has been abused so much that that narrative has lost its appeal; secondly, Hindu nationalism; thirdly, justice for lower castes; regionalism as a semi fourth.

The AAP is breaking free of all these. It is obviously causing a great deal of excitement.

You can't say that this is an election you haven't seen ever, but this is a kind of election we have not seen in a long time.

What were the other elections that can be seen as a turning point?

India's first election in 1952 is described as a 'leap in the dark' because no poor country of this size had ever practiced democracy.

Ballots went on camel backs to the farthest hamlets of Rajasthan and on boats to some of India's islands.

The 1967 polls after Nehru were a new kind of election. 1977 was a turning point, so was 1998-99.

We shouldn't say 2014 election will constitute a historic novelty, we should say it will constitute a novelty of recent times.