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## Common Man and the Common Political Discourse

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*ABSTRACT: The role of the common man in politics has shrunk over the years. AamAdmi Party (AAP) highlighted the issue of people's participation in politics in the garb of its common man rhetoric. However, with the gradual political decline of the party issues such as decentralization and popular participation no longer seem to ignite the public sphere. This essay contends that such issues need to be theoretically debated and discussed despite the reluctance of current political agenda to accommodate them. In this context, the elitist criticism to denigrate the common man's ability of increased political participation need to be theoretically countered.*

*KEYWORDS: Common, Man, Tyranny, Majority, Moral, Dictatorship, participation*

### **Introduction**

AamAdmi Party (AAP) after its meteoric rise has petered out rather unexpectedly. It sought to bring about a fresh approach to politics, a brand new political discourse and a host of relatively new political ideas. It made an extensive use of its common man rhetoric which has become a part of the everyday political discourse even after the party's fall from the grace. The common man rhetoric rested on insightful ideas concerning increasing decentralization and public participation in daily affairs of politics. However, unfortunately with the weakening of the AAP, the ideas underlying the common man rhetoric have stopped being issues of debate and discussion in the public space. This essay is not a political or moral critique or defence of the AAP but it is about the contemporary theoretical and practical relevance of these ideas of decentralization and public participation which need to be resurrected from the grave and made items of critical public scrutiny in the public sphere.

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## **Representative Democracy and the Issue of People's Participation**

The highlighting of the enhanced role of the common man in politics raised important issues regarding the limited nature of people's participation in our democratic system. In our representative democracy the role of the common man is confined only to electing their representatives. After electing their representatives the common man does not have any role in the democratic functioning of the government. Both Gandhi and M.N Roy questioned such a political system long ago terming it 'cabinet dictatorship' and 'party oligarchy' on occasions. It is pertinent here to mention briefly their objections here. Both of them were more or less of the same view about the modern democracy. According to them in a representative democracy the only political activity that the common people participate in is to elect their representatives who are projected before them as candidates of contending political parties. They do not play any role in selection of the candidates who are nominated by the parties. After the elections, the elected candidates represent the parties though they claim to represent the people. They take directions from their party rather than from the people who elected them. Thus after the election of the candidates the common man disappears from politics and loses his popular sovereignty. The entire situation thus, converts the slogan of popular sovereignty into a political myth. Gandhi made a plea for restoration of the ancient panchayat system in a self-governing village community and M.N Roy gave the plan for a grotesque system of party-less democracy. While the Gandhian alternative is anti-modern and therefore, unworthy of emulation in a modern, differentiated world M. N Roy's alternative is too radical to follow and exhibits ideological bias. Though we may disagree with their prescriptions it is difficult to deny that the criticism they made against the modern representative parliamentary democracy highlights valid points. Rousseau, the father of popular sovereignty in his masterpiece *Social Contract* observed long ago that in a real democracy is defined by the regular and continuous exercise of sovereign power by the common citizens. However, it has often been pointed out that such an idea can be implemented in a compact, small and homogenous community of Rousseau's time, not in large democratic systems of the modern type. The modern world still has tried to implement Rousseau's recommendation by inventing modern devices like referendum, initiative and recall. But it is generally felt that these democratic devices have workability in small nations like Switzerland. A country, as large and as heterogeneous and diverse as India can't offer a suitable political field for the operation of these democratic devices. But the frequent use of

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the common man rhetoric till recently brought into the domain of public debate and discussion the contention that real democracy is possible only when there is genuine decentralization of power at the grassroots level and the common citizens participate in the exercise of sovereign power on a continuous basis through methods such as initiative, referendum and recall. All these issues which were brought forcefully in the centre-stage of the political debate about mode and nature of democratic participation in our country have suddenly evaporated due to the political failure of AAP. However, such important issues highlighted by the proponents of the enhanced role of the common man in governance and politics should be intelligently debated and thought through.

There is indeed a valid reason for increased people's participation in our society that has developed certain distaste for politics and politicians. However at the theoretical plain voices were raised against the increased role of the common man in politics. Such elitist mentality must be countered head-on. Manash Bhattacharjee has provided a sophisticated theoretical critique of the politics of the common man. He dissected the brand of politics advocated by the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) and has argued that it has paved the way for the rise of a moral dictatorship of a tyrannical majority which supports the agenda of social conservatism. The politics of AAP is indeed problematic in various respects, but Bhattacharjee in his attempt to caution against majority tyranny and social conservatism has misdirected his criticism against those aspects of the common man rhetoric that rightfully challenged the elitist discourse of power.

### **Majoritarianism and its Limits**

Bhattacharjee (2014: 21) has argued that "the common man seems to be taking up the sovereign's role and vice versa, and both are out to discipline and punish the uncommon other. The government acting in the name of the common man seems to have provided a reverse legitimacy to the common man to act in the name of the government". Thus, Bhattacharjee has unequivocally held that the phenomenon of people acting as the government has led to majority tyranny. It is true that some people have been provoked by the political rhetoric of common man to claim themselves to be not only the source but also the embodiment of governmental authority. But phenomenon of majority tyranny in a democratic set-up can operate only if the majority successfully transforms itself into a self-conscious community, comprising individuals sharing similar identities and societal perspectives on various issues which set them apart from the minority. I believe that the

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possibility of existence or formation of such a self-conscious majority with more or less homogenous normative narrative is extremely remote.

Indian society is spilt up into numerous forms of identity based non-territorial social partitions which often shape societal perspectives of the individuals. Such inherently plural and multi-cultural nature societal set up provides little or no room for the rise of a self-conscious majority. A person sharing the majority view point on an issue may find himself to be a part of the uncommon other on another issue. A dalit castigating caste system in a progressive manner may also support the conservative Hindutva agenda of minority ghettoization. While his position on the caste system is likely to be shaped by his identity as a marginalized minority, his support of the conservative Hindutva agenda is likely to emanate from his perception of being a member of religious majority, which he may well believe to be legitimately privileged on account of its numeric strength. This blurs the boundary between majority and minority in Indian society. The common and the uncommon, thus, become flexible criteria depending on the nature of community attachments. In such a social setting the constituent parts of the body common have as much to lose as the constituent parts of the body uncommon if the common turns tyrannical. As a result, the currents of agreement and resistance offer checks and balances to each other within the domain of the common itself. The common men advocating particular dress code for the women are criticised and held in check by none other than the other common men with more progressive outlook. It is wrong to suggest that progressive nature of the latter makes them the uncommon other, as progressiveness does not constitute the absent basis of the common.

Today the “widespread resentment against State was that as an instrument of control through generalized laws and standardized rules which often ran contrary to the logic of specific situations, a system developed by which the officials of the State and politicians in power could grant, to the people, concessions and exceptions to the rules. This led to widespread corruption, on one hand, but also to a very different kind of politics. Economic behaviour primarily became rent-seeking and political behaviour reservation seeking, it means that the various interest groups demanded distribution of rights and entitlements on the basis of their membership to one group or the other.”

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## **Deconstructing a Common Sense Understanding of the Common Man**

Moreover, Bhattacharjee also seems to be oblivious of the importance of the forces which sustain moral dictatorship. Moral dictatorship is synonymous with a legitimate order of camouflaged domination created by qualitatively superior moral, intellectual, ideological attributes and factors controlling the socio-political superstructure. Therefore, the moral dictatorship of the common man is possible only if the common man is sufficiently empowered with moral, cultural and ideological resources.

The term 'common man' has remained a contested category due to its amorphous and fluid nature. "By definition the common man has no theory about himself. Unsophisticated as he is, he needs someone else to explain to him what he is like and, in fact, to discover his existence" (Kuhn 1944:18). But, despite having various contested meanings it would not be controversial to suggest that in common parlance, the term common is constitutive of certain common limitations, a fact which has roundly been overlooked by Bhattacharjee. The common man is endowed with neither moral infallibility nor invigorating intellect. Rather, it is the deficit of saintly purity and scholarly wisdom that makes the common man common or ordinary. This does not mean that the common man is invariably equipped with all kinds of moral flaws but he is never expected to act in a dispassionate and disinterested manner in pursuit of common good, being free from the preoccupation of narrow individual interests. Moreover, the common people across all sections of the society do not believe in a single, consistent ideology. Therefore, such common men devoid of moral supremacy, intellectual wisdom and ideological consistency lack the most basic resources to wield moral dictatorship over the uncommon other.

## **Exposing the Elitist Bias and Scepticism**

The current theoretical critique of the common man has surprisingly bypassed these core issues of the on-going debate and focused only on the stray instances when the rhetoric of the common man has been used to dismantle democratic rights. However, the critique's provocative silence on these issues is profoundly communicative. It has skilfully chosen the indirect route of tarnishing the generalized image of the common man to make him unfit for greater participation in democratic decision-making. The common man against the uncommon other and brands the former a repository of social conservatism. For Bhattacharjee, the common men are the "people who have the most 'common' attitudes towards social and

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cultural mores. The common man is the conservative brigade that makes up the nation's moral police" (2104: 21). Thus, he not only constructs a homogenous and monolithic image of the common man but also imbues that image with a necessarily negative and conservative character. Thus, his common man itself is a standing testimony to the desirability of an elitist, centralized, non-participatory democracy on the one hand and the negation of political empowerment of common man on the other hand.

Such cynicism of the common man is shockingly elitist. The portrayal of the common man is so uniquely uncomplimentary to the notion of common man and so aggressively cynical of the sensibilities of the ordinary citizens. Such a critique of the common man seems to be attempting to convince us that the shameful identity of the common man deserves to undergo moral cleansing. We have been told by such critique that common man is someone who invariably suffers from common societal prejudices and thus, incapable of embodying progressive liberal social values. In such a discourse "the common man continues to suffer the true thirst and the true hunger, both in body and mind, and in due time he will bring the parasitical scribes of culture to account. In that sense, a civilization is doomed when its guardians have ceased to be common men" (Kuhn 1944:34). This means that, political empowerment of the common man, in effect, becomes the empowerment of the forces of social conservatism. This is however the result of a long theoretical tradition from which even the Marxists can't claim to escape. Carl Friedrich (1940:353) has rightly pointed out "Marx and his orthodox followers built their view of man upon a basic division into the "elite," who are rational enough to perceive the facts, and the mass of men, who are deluded by interest and propaganda. Marx to be sure professed the strongest faith in the common man, but only after the "elite" had had a chance to mould him and his environment".

The case for increased people today rests on the "widespread resentment against State was that as an instrument of control through generalized laws and standardized rules which often ran contrary to the logic of specific situations, a system developed by which the officials of the State and politicians in power could grant, to the people, concessions and exceptions to the rules. This led to widespread corruption, on one hand, but also to a very different kind of politics. Economic behaviour primarily became rent-seeking and political behaviour reservation seeking; it means that the various interest groups demanded distribution of rights and entitlements on the basis of their membership to one group or the other" (Singh 2004:311). Such a situation leads to the system of elite patronage. The best way to move

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away from this system is to empower the common man so that they can themselves satisfy their demands in a legitimate way and do not feel the necessity to seek the political patronage from the traditional elites from the society.

As pointed out by Foucault, knowledge is a domain of power which must be seen as a productive phenomenon besides being a repressive one. Power brings into existence discourses and meanings which first constitute truth about subjects and then construct subjects in terms of this truth. Today, common men are not simply ruled and controlled by an elitist power structure but they are fashioned, integrated and activated by the elitist discourse of power in a manner that facilitates the reproduction of the elitist power structure. Bhattacharjee' analysis is representative of this elitist discourse of power that is now been questioned by an alternative paradigm of power. Therefore, his position reflects the elitist paranoia caused by the attack on the happy marriage between democracy and social elitism, the solemnity of which has so far been maintained with utmost sanctity. For him, if the sovereign embodies the figure of the common man and aspires to the status of the common man then sovereign power gains legitimacy as a representational symbol of populist rule. This implies that to guard against the possibility of populist rule the sovereign can claim to be anything but a common man. He may seek legitimacy from his lineage or political and academic training. But commitment to be as common as the common man means to embody all the social evils which are constitutive of the common man.

## Conclusion

The common man is not a primordial identity. Therefore, a man born common is not destined to remain common. He is not prevented from ascending to the top of the power pyramid where his commonness embraces power and gives power an inclusive dimension. Such an inclusive framework of power instead of promoting majority tyranny or moral dictatorship nourishes and strengthens democratic values. The rhetoric of the common man may be misused by a group of people to serve their vested interests. But such misuse must not be used as an excuse to derail the entire agenda of greater decentralization and democratic participation. During the great French Revolution, the Jacobins drew justification from Rousseau's theory to liquidate political parties and dissolve trade unions. In their hands, Rousseau's theory of general was transformed into a forceful defence of the right of the majority to impose its views on the minority. But such abuse is not considered a legitimate

conclusion from the theory of general will which provides the greatest basis of popular rule in modern times. Similarly, the misuse of the rhetoric of common man is not a legitimate outcome from the current discourse favouring the supremacy of the common man in politics. In the current situation we need to draw lessons from the following enlightening words of Carl Friedrich (1940:360) "Belief in the common man, when limitless and without restraint, destroys rather than maintains constitutionalism and democracy. But if we allow ourselves to be frightened into abandoning the belief in the common man altogether, if we become despondent and lose faith in ourselves, our plight is equally desperate. What we need is a balanced confidence in our power to operate a community of common men, by common judgments upon matters of common concern". Therefore, the proposed need to create transparent power relationships and more representative and accountable channels of authority through articulation of alternative principles of decentralization and participatory democracy should be countered with constructive scrutiny rather than elitist scepticism and bias.



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