



Redefining Politics

As part of the Praja Rajyam program to create a new political culture, Lok Satta teams toured six districts of Srikakulam, Vishakapatnam, Vizianagaram, Mahboobnagar, Nalagonda and Guntur in the month of February. In all, nearly 40 public meetings, road-shows, and intellectual symposiums were held in the districts.

Praja Rajyam is a campaign by Lok Satta to infuse new blood into old politics. The focus of the Praja Rajyam program lies on motivating and educating youth, involving them in politics, getting them to participate and through them creating a new political culture. Panchayati Raj training programs are being conducted to train 10,000-15,000 young men and women.

This program has elicited extremely positive responses from the youth everywhere. Apart from redefining the very nature of politics from one for private good to one for public gain, the Praja Rajyam program also focuses on four other important constituents of Lok Satta's message:-

- 1) Education- Every child irrespective of her caste, class or social status, must enjoy the opportunity for vertical mobility. Quality education and accessibility is a fundamental human right which cannot be denied or ignored.
- 2) Healthcare- Reasonable quality healthcare must be available to all citizens at zero cost. No person or family must suffer or be denied healthcare due to economic inability.



- 3) Skill Promotion for employment - Many youngsters today are unemployable for want of



Road Show at Vinukonda, Vizianagaram District.



Public Meeting at Srikakulam District.

skills for productive work. Each youngster in working age must be given the skills to play a rightful role in wealth creation.

- 4) Rural Incomes- Market vagaries and low productivity are depressing rural incomes. Fair and democratically managed markets, autonomous co-operatives, post-harvest infrastructure and value addition through processing are the keys to rural prosperity.

Lok Satta believes that politics is a noble endeavor and one that impacts all spheres of life. Even Mahatma Gandhi when questioned on his involvement in politics said, "If I seem to take part in politics it is only because politics encircles us today like the coil of a snake from which one cannot get out, no matter how much one tries. I wish to therefore wrestle with this snake."

Our founding fathers gave us a noble Constitution which guaranteed universal adult franchise and fundamental rights to all from the beginning. Contrast this with the first written constitution in the world's oldest democracy, the US, which ignored the slave trade and denied women's rights. It needed a civil war, 70 years later, with enormous bloodshed to liberate the blacks, and a prolonged struggle to give women the right to vote in 1920's, 140 years later. But our people have been robbed of their republic and the need now is for a new political culture to reclaim this lost republic for the people.

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Rural Milk Cooperatives

For decades now in the name of people, colossal damage has been done to the rural and agricultural sector by successive governments. This disquieting feature of Indian politics and public policy has undermined agriculture extensively. Most rural credit institutions are extremely weak. Farmers are forced to borrow from usurious money lenders and fair markets are unavailable in most states. The marketing committees that do exist in these states are sources of political patronage and corruption.

The unconstitutional, vice-like grip of politicians and bureaucrats over farmers' cooperatives was very nearly repeated in Andhra Pradesh (AP) in February. The whole incident of the dairy cooperatives in Andhra Pradesh is a good illustration of corruption, incompetence, malice and gross perversion of the Constitution perpetuating rural poverty.

The Constitution clearly guarantees the fundamental right of citizens to form and run cooperatives [19(1)(c)] and to carry on any trade or business [19(1)(g)]. The state has ignored this constitutional liberty for decades, and controlled the cooperatives in a most brazen and arbitrary manner. In time, corruption and incompetence of government bureaucrats led to collapse of most cooperatives, forcing some rethinking. Various committees such as the Brahma Prakash Committee (1990), the model cooperative law (1991), the Vaidyanathan Committee (2005) and several other expert reports have always emphasized on the need for autonomous, democratic and professional management of cooperatives free from government control.

In 1995, AP was the first state to enact the Mutually Aided Cooperative Societies Act (MACS Act), recognizing the constitutional liberty of cooperatives in respect of societies which do not have government share capital and do not seek government assistance. Out of the 11 district cooperative milk unions, eight district unions and about 5000 primary milk societies chose to be registered under MACS Act. The results over the past few years have been stunning.

The dairy cooperatives under MACS Act more than doubled

their turnover in five years, and profits and net worth soared. The farmers get the highest price (Rs.195-225 per kg of fat), and profits are shared by members as price difference and bonus. The cooperatives provide other free services – artificial insemination, feed, veterinary care, and medical facilities for the families. In contrast, the dairy cooperatives which remained under government control collapsed, their losses mounted, and they are under liquidation. Farmers are forced to sell milk to private companies which formed cartels and offered lower price (Rs.175 per kg fat). The government-controlled dairy federation is a white elephant with large, over-paid, inefficient staff and endless corruption. The federation offers even less price than the private companies and both provide no other services to farmers.

Given this backdrop, the AP government took an extraordinary decision in February. A Government Order (GO) was issued in an attempt to bring all the successful, well-functioning dairy cooperatives under MACS Act under the repressive 1964 Act. Overnight all elected managements were dismissed and bureaucrats overtook the 5000 cooperatives at primary and district levels.

The government, under whose control and watch all district unions collapsed, claimed that their intent was to improve the financial performance of dairy cooperatives and serve farmers. The Cooperative Development Foundation along with Lok Satta decided to protest the GO. Thanks to an independent judiciary and a written Constitution, the hapless farmers won the battle. The High Court granted a stay on the ordinance that the newly-created regular societies be superseded and status quo maintained in the case of the eight MACS.

Though the unconstitutional, undemocratic ordinance was stopped due to timely protests and intervention, it is shocking to note the political games states continue to play for control and corruption in this day and age. The loss in any case is the farmers' who have much at stake, and this loss often marks the difference between life and death for them in times of distress.

MUMBAI Events

Dr. Jayaprakash Narayan along with representatives of Lok Satta Maharashtra Chapter, who have launched the 'Vote Mumbai' campaign for political and governance reforms in Mumbai, met with representatives of the Times of India on 23rd February 2006 at Mumbai. A presentation on the 'Vote Mumbai' campaign was made to a packed hall comprising some of the key players in the city's governance.

'Vote Mumbai' is an independent platform of NGOs to campaign for major structural reforms in Urban Governance. The suggestions made are a deeply researched, well thought-out response to the failure of urban governance in Mumbai.

The presentation focused on assessing the meaning and nature of democracy in India with reference to democratic ideals, institutions and practice. Then it moved to presenting the current situation with the help of a few statistics to place the magnitude of the challenge in perspective. The presentation then moved onto pressing for a case for comprehensive urban reforms, the agenda for urban reforms in Mumbai as suggested by the 'Vote Mumbai' Campaign, and steps necessary to attain these reforms.

The comprehensive presentation presented the views of various stakeholders such as (a) Special

Interest Groups like the environmentalists, heritage protection groups, etc. (b) City bureaucrats (c) State bureaucrats (d) Parastatal agencies like Maharashtra Housing and Area Development Authority (MHADA), Mumbai Metropolitan Region Development Authority (MMRDA) etc. (e) City politicians (f) State politicians (g) National politicians (h) Opinion leaders (i) Media (j) Business community (k) Multi / Bilateral agencies (l) Infrastructure players (m) NGOs (n) Community based organization (o) Urban middle class (p) Urban poor. These stakeholders were well represented in the meeting.

The presentation went onto the holistic solution proposed and concluded that it can lead to a win-win scenario for all these stakeholders with their diverse opinions and expectations. A similar discussion on 'Vote Mumbai' was also held with representatives from the All India Association of Industries

(AIAI) in the evening.

The Vote Mumbai proposal would be circulated amongst varied stakeholders, communities, opinion makers, decision makers, politicians, etc. for debate and improvement. The campaign is in essence an upturning of the equation to ensure that power flows from the sovereigns of this nation to its citizens and has far deeper implication than just the improvement of Mumbai governance. It also possesses the seeds for rejuvenating our nation.



The Jessica Lal Case: Time for an independent crime investigation

The acquittal of Manu Sharma, son of a politician and main accused in the Jessica Lal murder case along with the other accused, including Vikas Yadav - another politician's son (also facing another murder charge), has left the country outraged. Weeping pictures of Sabrina Lal, Jessica Lal's sister were splashed across newspapers. The mockery of justice in what was apparently an open-and-shut case with over 50 eye witnesses reportedly present during the incident, flabbergasted the nation.

Reports on the failure of the police to submit concrete evidence before the trial court during the proceedings of the Jessica Lal murder case, resulted in lakhs of Indians standing up to voice their ire and demanding that justice is meted out. A leading television channel has started a campaign to amass public support to demand a fresh trial. Fingers have been pointed at the manner in which the Jessica Lal investigation was carried out by the police, and explanations in this regard are being sought by the commissioner of police. Blogs are abuzz with heated discussions on how the Indian police and judicial system have collapsed.

Sadly the story of justice delayed or denied is not a singular occurrence. While the judgment in the Jessica Lal case has made headlines, thousands of such stories often go unheard. With witnesses turning hostile, cases endlessly running into years, police-politics nexus; people are left with little to hope for.

The most important feature of the police in India is the high degree of centralization of functions in a single police force. Police functioning has become increasingly complicated and highly specialized. In the absence of specialization, the police forces have to deploy more resources and time to achieve the same results in any given area of work.

As the government of the day has complete powers over the crime investigation machinery as well as the legal authority to drop criminal charges against the accused, crime investigation has become a play thing of partisan politics. By law the police officials are supposed to be independent in discharging this function. However once the police officials can be controlled by their bosses and

elected politicians through a mechanism of transfers, postings, promotions and disciplinary action, it is impossible to insulate this function from the rest.

It is therefore vital to create an independent wing of police force fully in charge of crime investigation and functioning under the direct control of independent prosecutors appointed as constitutional functionaries. The criminal courts should hold the prosecutors and the crime investigation police force accountable to them in their overall functioning. Only when crime investigation is thus insulated from the vagaries of politics can there be any fairness and justice to ordinary citizens.

The tragic Jessica Lal case, and the powerful emotions the terrible failure of justice system aroused, can yet serve a positive purpose of cleaning up our criminal justice system. Leadership is about converting a tragedy into an opportunity for true nation-building. The solutions to our failed criminal justice system are not difficult to identify or implement. Independent and professional crime investigation, strong checks against sloppy investigation or obstruction of justice, better forensic capabilities and sophisticated tools for evidence-gathering, strong and enforceable laws against perjury, a popular movement to spread awareness of the importance of truthful evidence in courts, improved recruitment to ensure competent and honest judges, procedural reforms to eliminate delays in courts, systematic measures to weed out corrupt policemen and judges, a better system of justice which actively seeks truth, and political reform to prevent criminals and money bags from capturing power and corrupting everything vital - all these must be put in place.

All this will not happen in one day, or even in the life of one government. But we need to begin the process in right earnest. The President of India has promised to look into the Jessica Lal case. All of us – the citizens – owe it to ourselves to reshape our police, politics and judiciary. Voicing our dissent at the court's verdict and campaigning for a new trial is only the beginning.

Annual Status of Education Report

The Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) was published last month by Pratham, a reputed civil society organization. Pratham conducted a nation-wide survey of school-going children in 509 rural districts (data from 485 districts have been used in this report). 20,000 volunteers participated in this massive exercise, and assessed the elementary education outcomes on a large, randomly selected sample in 9521 villages. In Andhra Pradesh, the survey was conducted in 22 districts by Lok Satta.



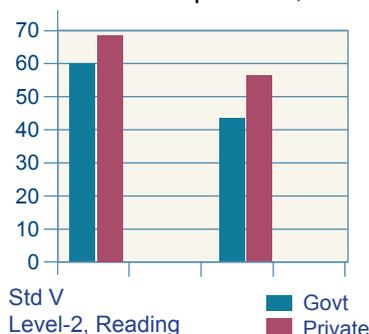
The data collected by ASER reveals the true picture of our elementary education. Though the survey covers school children in the 6-14 years age group, it helps to highlight the state of secondary education in the country and Andhra Pradesh. The findings of ASER 2005 are mixed. Positive evidence of increased allocations to, and emphasis on, school education through various programmes like Sarva Siksha Abhiyan is evident. Mid-day meals are improving enrollment and retention in schools.

Nation-wide Estimates

Though 93.4 % of all children (6-14 years) are at school, the ASER study estimates as many as 14 million children in the age group of 6-14 are currently not in school. The overall situation however has improved. 75.1% of all children are in government schools, and 16.4% are in private schools. About 3% are in madarassas and alternate schools.

Lowest rank Out-of-school children			Highest rank Out-of-school children		
Rank	State	% Out-of-school children	Rank	State	% Out-of-school children
1	Goa	0.3	14	Andhra Pradesh	7.4
2	Kerala	1.6	15	Orissa	8.9
3	Karnataka	1.9	16	Jharkhand	9.8
4	Uttaranchal	2.0	17	Rajasthan	10.4
5	Tamil Nadu	2.7	18	Bihar	13.5

But learning levels of the children in schools reveal a far more distressing picture. 34.9% of all school-going children in 7-14 year age group cannot read even a short, easy paragraph (level 1; Std 1 level difficulty), and 51.9% cannot read a simple story (level 2; Std 2 level difficulty). Even in the 11-14 year group, 31% children cannot read the level-2 passage. While private schools fare better than government schools, the difference in outcomes is not high. While over 65 percent of children (Std II-V) in government schools cannot read a level-2 passage, over 52 percent of children in private schools too cannot read! The problem, it is clear, transcends beyond the usual public sector vs private sector performance debate.



Comparison of government and private schools

(Based on % Std. V children who can read and solve written numerical sums)

Also disheartening are the performances in Arithmetic. Over 41% of children (7-14 years) cannot do a simple two-digit subtraction; over 65% of children cannot divide a three-digit number. Even among the children in 6th and 7th standards, 40% in government schools and over 33% in private schools cannot do a simple division. For a country which prides in its technical manpower pool, proficiency in mathematics and ability to provide back-office services to the world, this is an alarming situation.

Andhra Pradesh State Results:

The ASER study estimated that 92.6% children in the age group of 6-14 were enrolled in schools, when compared to the national average of 93.4%. Of this 71.8 % were enrolled in government schools, 19.6 % in private schools and 1.2 % in others.

While only 28.6 % children in the age group of 7-14 were able to read short sentences of level 1 difficulty, it was shocking to note that the percentage rose to 61.8% of students in 7-10 age group while faced with sentences of level 2 difficulty.

The top five districts in the state in terms of reading abilities were Vizianagaram (13.95%), Krishna (21.7%), Prakasam (22.5%), Chittoor (27.2%) and Nellore (28.15). Medak ranked as the district with lowest percentage, with 75.4% of children in Std V who were unable to read even level 2 sentences.

Arithmetic		Arithmetic	
Top- 5	% std V cannot solve division	Bottom 5	% std V cannot solve division
Vizianagaram	23.4	Medak	76.2
Krishna	27.9	Karimnagar	69.6
Chittoor 62.5	31.0	Rangareddi	68.5
Adilabad	34.8	Warangal	68.2
Kurnool	35.4	Mahbubnagar	62.5

Performance of top five and bottom five districts in state

Of 184 primary schools visited, it was revealed that nearly 3.8% schools had no teachers present. The average percentage of teachers present in school hovered at 78.7%. The study also revealed that nearly 20% of schools (Std I-VIII) had no provision for water/toilets.

Lessons

Though people in India are on par with our counterparts in the world, our education system remains appallingly poor. The productive potential of a majority of the population is wasted resulting in low productivity, lack of skills, and massive unemployment; all this despite years of education.

Nevertheless positive changes can be noticed. ASER shows that the debate on education is now moving a few notches up, and is focusing on outcomes. A few practical steps can dramatically improve school education. First, at the very minimum, we need State Testing Boards and a National Testing Board to regularly monitor education outcomes and provide invaluable data. These Testing Boards could adapt the best practices from elsewhere to suit our conditions. NCERT has already developed both the "National Curriculum Framework", and "Minimum Levels of Learning", both of which can form the basis for evolving sensible criterion-referenced assessments across the country. ASER 2005 has provided an invaluable tool to improve school education and will be conducted on an annual basis until 2010.

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