

## Two-decadal reforms of Lok Satta Movement and the Next Focus: An Introspection

Lok Satta emerged as a movement in a special context to meet the emerging challenges in the evolution of our democracy. The discourse until Lok Satta emergence was anti-political, dividing the society between “them” (those who were in power) and “us” (those who were unhappy with the outcomes of our politics and governance). Politics was treated as pejorative and most polite people shunned political engagement of any kind. Lok Satta for the first time has successfully argued that true politics is a noble endeavour, and the only substitute to bad politics is more politics and better politics. The second major contribution of Lok Satta is a robust, evidence-based, logical analysis and a creative, constructive approach to institutional reform to change the incentives in public governance. In other words, this was never seen as a fight between angels and demons. Lok Satta recognized that players in the state structure were as much victims as they were villains, and the way out is institutional reform to enhance their capacity to deliver, and strengthen accountability.

With this change in approach to addressing governance crisis, Lok Satta deliberately shunned the traditional Indian methods of agitation, bandhs, rastaroko and other obstructive, but eye-catching tools. Lok Satta always firmly believed that in a democratic republic, the freedoms we enjoy and the franchise we exercise are the only tools for bringing about transformation. These refreshing, rational and liberal approaches have helped in some way to shape our public discourse and achieve several significant, but insufficient reforms.

Lok Satta Party was founded in 2006, as Lok Satta sensed the need to create a platform for new politics, and to bring the youth, middle classes, and politically marginalized sections



into the mainstream. Only when these classes yearn for new politics will change be accelerated. Once these disenfranchised classes become vocal and play a creative role, established parties will be forced to change their ways and improve our democracy. In most societies that is how change happens. If reform parties gain sufficient traction, major parties will either respond to people’s urges, or

they will be eventually marginalized, and new political forces will replace them. Clearly, while Lok Satta brand of electoral politics is highly respected, the vote share is still too low to force systemic change.

In retrospect, Lok Satta has witnessed significant change over the years. It has been an important influence in changing the attitude of our society toward politics and political participation. Lok Satta never treated politicians and parties as untouchables. Lok Satta worked with parties and governments with dignity, openness and integrity, and on its terms. It is this engagement that is central to its successes in improving the democracy. In the last two decades, Indian politics has however become a spectator sport only during election time and it has moved far away from working for the nation and its people. As a result, there are millions of well-meaning citizens and particularly youngsters who have ended up becoming professional protestors with no meaningful outcomes.

Lok Satta was formed with a long term vision of political reforms towards nation building. Lok Satta has experienced that electoral politics have become an impediment in the journey to bring about a meaningful change. Over the past two decades, India has witnessed moderate economic growth, and a few governance reforms have been put in place. However in some other respects there is decline. Illegitimate

expenditure in elections has skyrocketed; creeping centralization has diminished the capacity of states to refashion instruments of governance; local governments have been completely marginalised; and education and healthcare for ordinary people are both expensive and of appallingly poor quality.

### Some of Lok Satta’s accomplishments:

- 👉 Disclosure of criminal antecedents of candidates, which finally led to the candidate disclosure law in 2003.
- 👉 Improvement in voter registration after years of struggle and relentless pursuit.
- 👉 Political funding law in the wake of Tehelka scam.
- 👉 Strengthening the anti-defection provisions.
- 👉 Limiting the size of the Cabinet.
- 👉 Right to Information Act
- 👉 National Health Mission
- 👉 Local Courts law enacted in 2009.
- 👉 Autonomy of cooperatives through the 97th Constitutional amendment.
- 👉 A sound Lokpal Legislation.
- 👉 Cancellation of 2G spectrum licenses, and competitive bidding of natural resource allocation.
- 👉 99<sup>th</sup> amendment of the constitution about NJAC (subsequently quashed by supreme court)

The time has come for all of us to take into account these changes over two decades, re-strategize and rejuvenate Lok Satta as **LokSatta 2.0**. Given India's complexity and current political and social realities, no federal government has the ability to engineer alone the kind of change that is required. The economic growth project is in jeopardy unless there is realistic hope of opportunity to participate in, and benefit from such growth for the 80% people who are on the margins of wealth creation. While states have more money and titular power, they have no capacity or flexibility to refashion instruments of governance to ensure better delivery. Lok Satta now has the wisdom from the past two decades to take note of the current context and sharpen its focus on governance reform.

Lok Satta will step away from the electoral politics for the time being until the conditions are conducive for Lok Satta brand of politics. Now it is time to introspect, nation's current

situation, the strategies needed to energize the nation, and Lok Satta strengths and opportunities. Lok Satta should play to its strengths for the best possible outcomes for the nation.

**Next Focus:**

**LokSatta 2.0** is re-aligning to bring about the desired outcomes at a faster pace. While we will continue to pursue our stated reform agenda, some of Lok Satta's immediate priorities in the changed context will be:

- a. **Strengthening and restructuring federalism to enable states to deliver**
- b. **Universal Healthcare and Quality Education**
- c. **Accountability to tax payers at local level**

This needs time, energy and support even more now on this journey to help transform India. ■