

The Cruel Dilemma of Political Reform

Dr. Jayaprakash Narayan

It was the summer of 1975. As a lad of 19, I was holed up in the Boys' Hostel of Guntur Medical College following with avid interest, the arguments of Shanthi Bhushan on behalf of Raj Narain in the Allahabad Court Case.

Some months prior, the President of the United States, Richard Nixon, had just resigned over what now seems as a relatively minor infraction in the obstruction of justice and abuse of power. The mightiest elected office in the entire world had been humbled under the cloud of impeachment.

Indira Gandhi was unseated by the court. Two weeks later, on the ominous day of the 25th of June, Emergency was clamped on India. This was the reaction to a very similar threat. The loss of power. A country had been jailed, it was unbearably offensive. Such was the national shock that a single arbitrary act by an individual could strip the sovereign citizen of civil liberties in a constitutionally free and democratic nation, that if Lok Nayak Jayaprakash Narayan had suggested that committing collective suicide by leaping off the 3rd floor balcony would magically undo this horrendous status, many of us would have gladly jumped.

Those were the days when we thought Indira Gandhi was the villain. And we naively believed that her removal from power would magically transform India. There was indeed a change of guard in May 1977, but when the sheen and euphoria wore off the Gandhian revolution, all that remained was the angst of too little change. Liberty was restored in full measure, but in other respects of what India could have been, the denouement was a dud.

This shaped my vision for this country. Of what it is and it should be. Of avoidable suffering and unfulfilled potential. This took me right through the doors of Civil Services, but the anger and hurt of the Emergency never dissipated.

Over the years, it dawned on the nation that there are no easy answers to our political and governance crisis. No quick fixes. Established parties have some strengths and many weaknesses. They themselves are victims of a vicious cycle in an evolving democracy.

It is this recognition that led to Loksatta working with both the NDA and the UPA over the years. This political engagement drove the reform agenda of the country for over fifteen years. The results are there for all see.

- 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
- Local Courts law enacted in 2009.
- Autonomy of cooperatives through the 97th Constitutional amendment.
- A sound Lokpal Legislation.

A few more reforms are in the pipeline.

- Law on judicial standards and accountability.
- 120th amendment on National Judicial Appointments Commission.
- Service guarantee law providing for citizen's chargers with penalties.

And most recently on the divisive issue of Telengana, Loksatta has amply demonstrated its capacity to provide intellectual leadership and work with all major political parties in proposing a win-win solution for all sides. Indeed, the road map proposed by Loksatta has formed the sole basis for the amendments to the AP reorganization bill and is supported by both the Congress and the BJP.

Given the plurality of India and the compulsions of its electoral system, Loksatta has always believed that if reasonable standards are met in terms of political behavior, we should work with other parties to further a common agenda, viz, democratic reforms, public participation in politics and government, and improvements to quality of life and governance.

In retrospect, we have witnessed significant change over the years. In 1996, most young and middle class Indians never bothered to vote, and took pride in their electoral marginalization. Now more and more people are voting eagerly. In those days, the elites rejected and shunned politics. Now many successful, influential Indians are recognizing that good politics is critical to the nation's future, and are willing to play a constructive political role. Loksatta has argued over the years that politics is a noble endeavor. We have been an important influence in changing the attitude of our society toward politics and political participation.

We have never treated politicians and parties as untouchables. We worked with parties and governments with dignity, openness and integrity, and on our terms. It is this engagement that is central to our successes in improving our democracy.

We founded Loksatta Party in 2006, as we 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. But if these parties fail to respond to people's urges, they will be eventually marginalized, and new political forces will replace them.

For any ethical, reform party, there are formidable obstacles. In a First Past The Post (FPTP) system of democracy, the threshold for electoral success is very high. In the best of the times, it is an uphill battle for new political parties to taste instant electoral success. For parties like Loksatta, which are trying to usher in a new political culture and which are not dependent on money, muscle power, caste, religion, region to mobilize voters, the challenge is even more acute.

While public esteem for Loksatta is very high in Andhra Pradesh, the perception that they might not be in a winning position is preventing votes from converting into seats. This is the primary reason for Loksatta's lack of electoral success. The best example is the relative performance of MIM versus Loksatta in Hyderabad city in the 2009 elections. While the total number of votes polled for MIM is roughly the same as that of Loksatta in the city, its votes translated into 7 assembly seats while, Loksatta managed to win only in

one constituency.

Once a party voluntarily eschews money power, freebies and sectarian politics, the road to electoral success is thorny and steep. This is compounded by an electoral system that is hostile to new parties and honest ways.

This contrasts with the spectacular electoral success of Aam Aadmi Party in Delhi. It has caused much hope that it can be repeated in other parts of the country including AP. A careful examination will reveal the key factors that influenced AAP's success:

- The location. Delhi, an area with 3 times higher per capita income of AP
- The nature of the demographic. A highly urbanized electorate that is (relatively) not polarized on the basis of caste, region, or religion
- Most importantly, and in an unprecedented manner, the media owned AAP's agenda. They gave it phenomenal, consistent and positive coverage, almost to the exclusion of others.

All the above factors created an immaculate climate in Delhi, and set the stage for AAP's stunning electoral debut. Unfortunately these factors simply don't exist elsewhere. In the 2009 elections, Loksatta polled 10-12% votes in Hyderabad and much less in other parts of the state, proving that a combination of higher per capita income (a sign of increased awareness), and urbanization are critical for the spread of new political culture.

In this hostile climate of primordial loyalties and caste equations, influence of money and liquor, and freebies on offer, and in a first past the post system, it is excruciatingly difficult to translate in the short-term our support base into a legislative mandate. A people plagued by the fear of wasted vote and potential leaders immobilized by the perception of winnability self-fulfill their prophecy.

I have no doubt that eventually all of India will respond the same way as the Delhi voters responded. But India is a prismatic society, and exists in several layers of time and social and economic development. While the trajectory of positive change is evident everywhere, the timing of maturity and fruition varies from place to place. In about two election cycles, most of India will most likely embrace new politics.

In the interim, we should evolve strategies to persuade those voters who agree with us, but are voting, for other parties because of fear of 'wasted' vote. And we need to trade our moderate, wide-spread voting base for concentrated pockets of voting that will give us legislative presence. Once electoral success is assured, many capable leaders who can inspire confidence in voters will be ready and willing to take the responsibility of playing a catalytic role for change at the constituency level.

It is this logic, backed by evidence that compels us to seriously consider strategic alliances and tactical adjustments. And this belief in strategic alliances without compromising our core values while furthering our agenda and with clear red lines drawn, behooves us as a responsible flag bearer of a multi party democracy to collaborate. Albeit on our terms.

That is why we extended a hand to AAP as our first choice. Alas, they are wedded to a monopolistic regime.

It is convenient for the well heeled elite to make politics an intellectual exercise, but reality requires of politics, at best, to reconcile conflicting interests. At worst, to alleviate dire and soul crunching poverty, rampant exploitation and denial of human rights and create opportunities for education, healthcare and employment. It is called good governance. It's not glamorous or spiritual. It is simply practical for progress of the country.

Let us examine our terms then. The alliance must be synthesis driven with a clear commitment to clean politics, diversity and good governance. In particular, they must sign on our economic, education, healthcare, anti corruption and decentralization agenda.

We have a history of driving reform through elected representatives of all hues. Campaign reforms and decriminalization of politics were passed by the very politicians we love to hate.

It can be done. It has been done. We did it.

And that said, if your opinion is that no compromise is the only acceptable solution, we respect that although we do not agree.

Having painted the political landscape, we now have a choice between the 2 middle of the road parties. The Congress and the BJP. We will measure them against our yardsticks for a possible alliance.

- Dynastic. This unabashed feudal despotism has a profound impact on Indian polity. Indian democracy has degenerated to party democracy. The 91st Amendment, which we gifted to the country has craftily been abused by party lords to control the elected representatives' thinking. Our goal should be to steer parties away from dynastic politics and towards internal democracy.
- Money power. Vote buying and illegitimate spending. Except LSP and AAP, no one is untainted. There's no black and white anymore and we are already looking at hues and shades. We should push for increased accent on legitimate campaign as opposed to vote buying.
- Freebie culture. As the primary source of appeasement instead of offering true economic growth, these are temporary palliatives to address poverty as opposed to building infrastructure, education and jobs.
- Sectarianism. Divisive and vote bank based politics that exploits regressive social cleavages like caste, region, religion and language. We should recognize that caste and region are as pernicious as religion in dividing people.

While the Congress flunks miserably on all measures, the BJP passes muster on the first and third measure and to lesser degree on the second.

What if we then super impose our "Do Not Cross" line on the last measure and lay down our "Must Deliver" agenda items to extract guarantees for the nation?

Our bounden duty as political party is to moderate the extremes and enrich the agenda for growth and development. When a major party is actually departing from its sectarian and divisive communal agenda and changing it's trajectory in making economic development as the vehicle in this election, the time is ripe to help deliver our vision for the country.

Even Gandhi collaborated with the Ali brothers and their Khilafat movement. Is he judged by that radical dalliance or by the freedom he helped win? We live in a society, not Utopia.

We are a work-in-progress nation at best and cannot afford zero sum games. Loksatta's call to action then, is to turn the least averse option into a good outcome for the nation, not stand by and watch the years fritter away for the citizens of India.

It is widely accepted in all mature democracies, that a programmatic pre-poll alliance or electoral adjustment is ethical and will be validated by a people's mandate as opposed to a post poll tie up, which could be viewed as unethical and opportunistic and will be perceived as lacking the mandate of the public

At this point of time though, Loksatta is not sure if other parties will agree to the framework that is proposed above. As a responsible political party, we owe it to the public to explore the potential for such an alliance or adjustment and the exercise must be performed in a sincere and honest manner.

Alliance partnerships don't necessarily color all partners in the same shade. Indeed, if an alliance partner advocates politics of sectarianism and hatred, we will walk away and won't look back. We reserve the right to judge them on the basis of conduct and hold them accountable.

Any alliance will be on our terms, or not at all. We will not act desperate but we do reserve the right to negotiate. And that said, if your opinion is that no compromise is the only acceptable solution, we respect that although we do not agree.

Loksatta's prerogative will always be to cater to the nation's requirements of it at any given time. We will not subjugate that prerogative that to any parochial demands for the party.

I will close by admitting that it was an arduous journey for me. I urge my fellow Loksatta travelers to ponder deeply upon this and evolve a practical strategy to further new politics and promote public good. You are a rare and precious lot that have the courage to not just practice politics but do so within Loksatta. I have not let you down thus far.

Keep the faith.