

QUEST FOR SWARAJ

From Subjecthood to Citizenship

The promise of Swaraj beckons the future of India

It challenges us to recover the true spirit of Swaraj. It invites us to redeem an old pledge. Swaraj was never merely liberation from the colonial rule. Swaraj promised nothing short of self-rule: people's control over their destiny, power to decide on matters concerning their well-being, to direct the apparatus of power and hold rulers accountable. Swaraj is about rule by the people, not by netas or babus.

Sixty-five years after Independence, the promise of Swaraj is yet to be redeemed. Democracy has been reduced to a tiresome routine that involves electing the rulers once in five years, while being subject to indifference and indignity at the hands of politicians and bureaucrats in between. Political parties are not mechanisms for finding and airing people's voices; all of them have become election machines. These machines are designed to catch voters and use them as fodders to convert money into power and power back into more money. At best these parties hold out an illusory promise of "Good Governance", but that is no substitute for self-government. The very idea of Swaraj is receding from our collective consciousness.

India's future asks this question to all of us: shall we allow the idea of Swaraj to disappear, to disintegrate, to dissolve from our collective consciousness? Or, are we audacious enough to re-imagine, re-integrate and re-build the idea of Swaraj for our time?

From Popular Protest to People's Power ...

This audacity marked the origin of popular protest in our country against massive corruption in high places. The Janlokal movement began as an expression of popular anger born out of the helplessness and frustration of ordinary citizens in the face of corrupt and unresponsive regimes. Soon the movement became a symbol of people's power against the political establishment.

A wide-spread anger with the visible corruption of politicians and the bureaucrats led to identification of the root cause of corruption. It was not long before corruption embedded in policies and the corruption inherent in the system was identified. It's victim, the ordinary citizen, is not free of the taint of corruption either. Gradually protest against corruption sought new tools; opposition was accompanied by a search for

alternatives. An agitation that began with remedying an institution has evolved into a movement that has taken up the challenge of reforming the entire system.

This moment offers an opportunity for this movement to look back at its own roots and also to look ahead to its future direction. The Janlokal movement draws its inspirations, ideas and icons from our freedom struggle. It belongs to the tradition of patriotism which saw the 'world as one family'. It has drawn its sustenance from people's struggles for popular control over natural resources in the post-colonial era. Thus it has to build upon traditions of popular struggle as well as constructive work. The quest for Swaraj for the last person defines the ideological horizon for this movement.

... and now on to transformative politics

This journey has brought us today to the doorsteps of mainstream politics, for politics is the centre stage of the present system, the stage where the system is made and unmade. Over the years, this stage has lost its sheen and has become the site for an unbridled pursuit of narrow self-interest. This puts off and scares the best elements in our society, who decide to stay away from politics. This sets off a vicious cycle: corruption drives good citizen out of politics; their absence in turn makes the political arena worse than before.

Someone has to break this vicious cycle and accept the challenge of stepping on to this stage. The experience of Janlokal movement has taught us that we cannot make any big or enduring change in the system if we turn our back to politics. If politics serves as a shield for all that is unholy in our public life, an attempt to cleanse the system must begin with politics. Someone must stand up to this unholy nexus and build politics of selfless service to the country.

We are not giving up the movement and the path of struggle in order to enter politics, narrowly construed as the game of winning elections and acquiring power. Rather, we enter politics as one more step in our struggle. We do not enter politics to acquire and exercise power; we do so to dismantle monopolies of power and return this power back to the people. It is our firm conviction that movements for social transformation must combine popular struggles and constructive work with electoral politics.

Politics is not an optional activity. If politics is about maintaining or changing the given balance of power, then it is not

confined to what the states and governments do; all the spheres of our life – administration, police, judiciary, economy, society and even family – are implicated in politics. We have only two options: either we determine the course of politics or allow politics to determine the course of our life. Those who wish to shape the course of history in the light of their ideals do not have an option except for politics.

The idea of Swaraj: our worldview

The idea of swaraj is the cornerstone of our politics. We envision a world where every country, every province, every village and every locality enjoys freedom within its own sphere, where every individual and community can decide on matters concerning their well-being, where demos rules over the governmental apparatus, where community is its own government. We dream of a world without coercion or violence among state, community and individual, where different faiths and cultures live in harmony, where happiness of one is not secured at the cost of unhappiness of another, where each person and community can lay claim to only as much as may be available to everyone else and to future generations, where the relationships between and among nations and between humans and nature are marked by mutual respect and friendliness. We look forward to a state of affairs where each person and society gets to understand, introspect and redefine oneself.

Such a vision presupposes basic transformation in the prevailing system. It would entail:

- That people hold the reins to government and administration, that central government may control only minimum necessary powers and resources, that maximum possible decisions are taken at the level of village or neighbourhood, that people's voice must trump in-between elections too and that public opinion and popular legitimacy must have supreme respect;
- That economic and developmental policies

must suit our context and needs, that what people need must be determined by them, not by experts and officials, that our development must not imitate models from outside, that instead our path of development must be guided by pursuit of equality and the needs of our last person, that we must seek a sustainable balance of development with nature and environment, that we must prevent the growth of monopolies, that we must not allow the logic of capital, market mechanisms and profit motivation to be the sole drivers of our economy;

- That all social hierarchies based on accident of birth must go, that gender and caste inequalities must be attacked forthwith, that affirmative action is needed for those social groups who have suffered from discrimination and disadvantage, that all religions and sect enjoy equal respect and none may be allowed to dominate others, that the interests and rights of the minorities get special protection; and,
- That swaraj in ideas and cultures be pursued, that everyone should receive equal opportunities for quality and relevant education, that linguistic diversities be preserved, that unequal treatment of languages must come to an end, that indigenous and peoples knowledge be respected and preserved, so that we can stand on our feet while we learn from the world.

Swaraj as peoples self governance: our policy vision

This vision needs to be translated into specific policies after extensive and informed discussion. Embracing politics entails taking a position on all the major questions of our time. At the same time politics also mandates a duty to listen to all sides and to set up a dialogue with everyone concerned. We accept this responsibility in all humility. We shall take up all the major contested issues in the country and provide a platform for informed and open-minded dialogue with the people and especially, with the younger generation. Here we have identified a few of these issues and indicated our initial position, subject to dialogue and debate.

1. There should be an independent, powerful and effective Janlokpal at the Centre and Janlokayuktas at the States to deal with corruption. There should be an effective mechanism for bringing back the black money deposited abroad.
2. There should be broad-ranging electoral reforms, including reforms to eliminate the role of money and muscle-power, to provide the right to reject and to institute the accountability of representatives through the right to recall.
3. The locus of decision-making should be shifted to, or proximate to the people. As far as possible, power and the resources required to execute that power, must be transferred to the village or ward level. Only those powers should be left for upper tiers that cannot possibly be exercised by local communities. People must be consulted directly on key national decisions. Citizens must be consulted on any decision that affects their life or livelihood.
4. Broad-ranging and fundamental administrative, police and judicial reforms need to be initiated so that the interface of the common citizen with public functionaries is not marked by bribes, delays and indignity. All public functionaries should be made accountable to the people.
5. The right of local communities to land, forests, water and all natural resources in their area must be recognized. The state must not acquire land barring exceptional circumstances. Private monopolies in natural resources must be not be permitted.

6. The state must provide free, equal and quality school education to all children. The powers and resources of executing this responsibility must be transferred to the gram sabha. Inequality in educational opportunities between the rich and poor, the urban and the rural or government and private schools, must be eliminated. No student must miss out on higher education for want of resources. Education for-profit must not be permitted. Education must impart knowledge, skills for employment, self-confidence and focus on creating a good human being.
7. The state must take the responsibility of universal health-care. Public hospitals must be equipped to provide complete and free treatment of every kind of disease. The local gram sabha or ward sabha must have the power and resources to run a local hospital. Alternative medical systems and local health traditions must get their due along with allopathy.
8. The future of the country continues to be tied with having a future for village India. Therefore, the distribution of national resources must be proportionate to the population between urban and rural India. Plans for rural development must be made by those who live in rural India and not in the capital cities. All public facilities and functionaries must be under the effective control of the gram sabhas.
9. India's future must have room for agriculture and farmers. This requires that farmers should be able to earn reasonable profit on agricultural yield. Employment opportunities apart from agriculture must also be available in the villages. These objectives mandate transfer of significant proportion of national resources to local communities for this purpose, so that they can make their own plans and remunerative prices do not lead to price rise in foodgrains.
10. The state must accept responsibility for full employment, and appropriate wages for all work. We believe society needs to take care of the elderly, destitute and disabled amongst us and the government to commit adequate powers and resources to the gram sabhas to execute this effectively. Safety-nets are also needed for the interests of unorganized labour.
11. There need to be effective mechanisms in place to stop female foeticide and violence against women. Girls in rural areas must be provided special opportunities to study. The prior approval of the women of the local community be taken before any liquor outlet is allowed to be set up anywhere. One-third of seats in Parliament and legislative assemblies must be reserved for women.
12. There must be effective mechanisms to stop caste-based violence and harassment. Educationally disadvantaged communities must get special opportunities. The system of reservations for Dalits, Adivasis and OBCs must be supplemented by affirmative action for the poor and other disadvantaged communities. In order to ensure that the real benefits of reservations flow to the deserving, those persons, families and communities within the reserved categories who have hitherto not benefitted from reservations must get priority over the well-off. There should be special provisions for the extremely disadvantaged Dalits (Mahadalits), the most backward OBCs, particularly vulnerable adivasis and NT/DNT nomadic communities.
13. Effective mechanisms should be in place to protect the Muslim community from suspicion, indifference, backwardness and discrimination. It should be ensured that Muslims, especially backward Muslims (pasmanda) enjoy equal opportunity in education and employment. Management of waqfs should be handed over from the government to local communities.

Movement rather than a party: our organizational vision

We need an organization to implement these dreams and policies – an organization that would look like a political party, but not behave like one, a party that belongs to the people and not its leaders. The image of the political party is at its worst today—most of them being victims of individual control, the tyranny of their high-command and specific families. It is virtually impossible for the common citizen, especially women to make their way into these hierarchies in a straightforward manner. The rank and file of the party usually has no role to play in formulating the policies of the party. While these parties accumulate wealth and muscle-power in the name of elections, often even their own workers, let alone ordinary citizens, have no clue of the income or expenditure of these huge sums. In order to distance ourselves from this routine image of the political party, we have a number of special provisions for members of our party.

1. Any citizen of this country should be able to bring a complaint of corruption or the violation of its code of conduct against any member of the party. This will be investigated by the Ombudsman, a Lokpal of the party, comprising retired judges, fully independent of the party leadership. The party will have to abide by its decision.
2. Candidates for elections will be chosen not by the party leadership, but by the party workers at the local level, in an open convention, with participation of local people. The candidate thus will be chosen by the people.
3. The organization will maintain complete transparency in its income and expenditure statements, making public unaudited statement of all sources of donations and expenditures.
4. There will be one-third reservation for women at all levels of party functionaries as well as candidates.

5. Students and young people are expected to play the principal role in the party and so, there would be no need for separate student and youth wings of the organization.
6. The party will be built bottom-up, with all 'top' party officials and committees being elected by those at the 'bottom' and will be accountable to them.
7. No person will serve more than two terms in one position.
8. All complaints about inner-party elections, as well as functioning, will be referred to a committee specially constituted to look into it. This committee will oversee the redressal of grievances as well as maintenance of inner-party discipline.
9. The party will maintain a special relationship with like-minded social movements and will respect their independent identity. All members of the latter will be considered to be Associate members of the party and will have voting rights in the process of selecting candidates for elections.
10. As a rule, the party will respect difference of opinion amongst its members, apart from a minimum ideological consistency. The associated movements and organizations will be free to adhere to their constitutions and carry on their policies and programmes independently as well.

Politics as ethics: our code of conduct

Politics as we know it carries the risk of moral lapse, of the gulf between words and deeds, of long-term principles being compromised for the sake of short-term success. It is hard to guarantee otherwise. Yet, with a constant self-awareness on these questions and maintaining continuous and open discussion on these issues, the movement can perhaps keep its ethical profile different. We have devised a code of conduct for members of the party, by which they can be assessed and investigated by the ombudsman as indicated earlier. Any member of the public or a party worker is empowered to bring a complaint about any office-bearer or candidate on the following grounds:

1. An involvement in any kind of corruption (including the giving or receiving bribes and tax-evasion)
2. An organized use of violence in political work or having a criminal record or image.
3. Involvement in any action or organization that spreads untouchability, caste or communal hatred.
4. Any kind of exploitation or ill-treatment of women; a reputation of having a poor moral

character.

5. Drug or alcohol addiction leading to being a social nuisance.
6. Non-declaration or false declaration of assets and income.

There will be additional provisions for elected representatives (equivalent or upwards of Zila Parishad members, including MLAs and MPs). These will also be under the purview of the Lokpal of the party for purposes of investigation.

1. The representative will not use any of the usual trappings available to government functionaries—cars with red lights or sirens, unnecessary security etc.
2. The party will decide which part of the income and perks of the office would be availed to live an ordinary middle-class existence.
3. The representative shall not utilize any discretionary privilege (like MP's quotas) or use symbols of institutionalized corruption like the MPLAD Scheme.

And finally, ours and yours

The quest for Swaraj demands action, it demands sacrifice. The resolve to preserve the idea of Swaraj demands integrity, industry and inner strength. What goes by the name of a party is for us an organization embodying these virtues.

Politics is not merely a duty of despair, but the determination of turning the ideal into the real. Politics is about discovering the light of hope in the heart of darkness. Politics is the bridge that connects knowledge to social reality. Politics is about shaping ideas, building public cultures and indeed, creating a people. Not for us though, a politics that begins with elections and ends with state power. For us, politics is as much about struggle and creativity. Not for us, a politics limited to the external world. For us, politics is as much about an encounter with the inner world-- our homes, our minds, indeed our inner selves.

Politics is our yugdharma, the imperative of our contemporary. We have stepped into politics to protect and promote the endangered dharma of politics. We have entered politics with a dream and a resolve for a better world, a better country, a better society and indeed a better self.

'We' includes you as well. We, the People, shall fight. We shall win!