

VIGILANCE IN ELECTIONS

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Election Watch

Election Watch is an awareness building programme sponsored by Lok satta aimed at enlightening the citizens on the need for a healthy and democratic election process in India with an objective of bringing reforms in the electoral system. It aims to promote voter awareness and participation; to ensure better and informed choice of candidates; to improve the quality of public debate; to focus attention on the need for key governance reforms; to monitor and improve the polling process.

Lok Satta has organized a highly successful Election Watch during the 1998 parliamentary election. In 35 parliamentary constituencies across the state of Andhra Pradesh, common platforms were organized with wide public participation and intense media coverage. "Know your candidate" and "Enroll and Vote campaign" were launched effectively. In the light of that experience **Election Watch 99** has been chalked out with clarity and precision on a much larger scale through out the state.

As part of the Election Watch campaign, Lok Satta has prepared a comprehensive Election Watch manual (our R & D cell has compiled information from various sources and we proudly submit that this is the first of its kind in the country) outlining all the proposed activities and presenting information about the election process in easy to understand language. We have distributed 10,000 copies of the manual across the state to our local groups and volunteers. Efforts are underway to distribute 30,000 more copies all over the state in the next 30 days.

Why Election Watch?

Political parties have become autocratic leaving the members no role in selection of candidates. Hoodlums and criminals are entering politics to secure their ill-gotten wealth and shield their crimes. Politics has indeed become the last refuge of the scoundrel. The law abiding citizens have become cynical about any improvement in the political process and have become increasingly indifferent. Democracy cannot be meaningful without citizens' involvement. Vigilance is the price of democracy and only an involved citizen can be vigilant. **As Eleanor Roosevelt said "nobody can hurt you without your consent"; it can also be said "nobody can marginalize you without your cooperation"**. We hope our Election Watch programme will enlighten and empower the citizen to gradually bring about a difference in the tone and tenor of the elections.

Keeping in view the Legislative Assembly Elections in December 1999, a nine-month programme was chalked out to cover all Assembly constituencies in all 23 districts of Andhra Pradesh. A broad based State Election Watch committee with a hands on core group was constituted to guide and monitor the Election Watch activities. Election Watch committees, constituting credible non-partisan citizens from various walks of life, were formed in all participating districts. The following activities were taken up (some in process):

1. Verification of electoral rolls to ensure enrollment of eligible voters and deletion of ineligible and bogus names.
2. Prescreening of prospective party candidates to bring pressure on parties not to nominate those with corrupt and criminal antecedents.
3. 'Enroll and vote' campaign
4. Campaign for simple reforms in electoral process at the Election Commission level
 - i) completion of distribution of voter identity cards and making them mandatory for voting
 - ii) universal electronic voting
 - iii) mandatory re-polling if tendered votes (proof of bogus voting) exceed a fixed number or percentage in a polling booth
5. Campaign for common electoral rolls for local government elections and Assembly and Parliament elections
6. Pressure on parties to select candidates through democratic process according to members' choice.
7. 'Know Your Candidate' collection and wide dissemination of information on party candidates – including their political history, antecedents, finances, views etc.
8. Common platforms for public debates at the constituency level to improve the quality of debate and facilitate informed choice. (As this article is going to the press, we are trying to organize a televised debate between the two main contenders in Andhra Pradesh, modeled after the US presidential debate, which will be a first in the entire country – aimed at improving the overall quality and content of political discourse, while eliminating personal invective.)
9. Citizens' monitoring of polling process to check malpractice.

Due to the dissolution of Parliament and advancement of the Assembly Elections, Lok Satta decided to implement those parts of the Election Watch programme, which would set the ball rolling for eventual reforms in the electoral system.

Verification of Electoral Rolls

Getting the citizens involved was our first objective, since we firmly believe that no reform in favour of people is possible without participation by the people. It was important to design a programme of involvement and awareness nurturing each other.

Lok Satta chose verification of the Electoral rolls as its opening activity as we felt that checking out the voter's list for their names is something that ordinary citizens can relate to easily. With people's active participation this verification of names could be achieved at the local level itself. Verification of electoral rolls also has a direct bearing on fair elections and good governance.

The simple procedure of getting the people to examine the electoral rolls and finding their names and those of their family members and neighbors gives the people a sense of participation and involvement. More over, being very much a part of the locality, they can all help in updating of information regarding those who have moved away from the neighborhood or died. Lok Satta's

role in this effort is aimed at bridging the knowledge gap (about the enrollment process) and to act as a facilitator in the over all verification effort.

This process involved procurement of electoral rolls of constituencies and printing and supplying of Form 6 (for inclusion of name) and 8B (for deletion of name) to the district committees. In neighborhoods with strong volunteer units, volunteers and residents worked together in the verification process. (Electoral rolls are available to all citizens at MRO's offices, at Municipal offices and may be purchased for a price of Rs.0.95/- per page or Rs.1.35/- for 2 pages). Forms 6 and 8B were however subsequently revised and in the name of simplification made very lengthy and complex by the Election Commission.

Election Commission's programme of special revision of Electoral rolls in April and May was complemented by Lok Satta's team of volunteers. On the first day of the special revision the following irregularities were reported¹ :

- Late arrival and early departure of staff at designated centers
- Non-availability of forms
- Non-availability of acknowledgement forms
- Refusal to supply forms on grounds of residence in another area
- Insistence on furnishing details of neighbors etc.
- Long queues due to shortage of counters
- Acceptance of claims from minors
- Wrong allocation of voters to distant polling booths
- Retention on names of dead persons or migrants
- Ambiguity about location of designated centers

The irregularities noted and reported by our volunteers were very well received and attended to by the office of the Election Commission. Our volunteers have assisted the citizens in filling up of forms and in many instances supplying the forms (where the EC failed).

Lok Satta printed and supplied nearly 5 lakh forms across the State and succeeded in directly enrolling approximately 5-6 lakh voters and deleting approximately another 4 lakh voters from the rolls (the most acceptable and effective source for deletion of names proved to be the death register). In one instance we have uncovered a person's name on the rolls, who died 50 years ago. Approximately 2200 volunteers across the state participated in the electoral rolls verification process, which has yielded positive results but fell far short of complete success.

Our sample surveys show that the errors in electoral rolls in urban areas are often in the range of 30-40 %, and in rural areas are 10 %. It requires sustained massive mobilization of the public to cleanse the electoral rolls. The process will be resumed after the elections with a push for simpler enrolment procedure and emphasis on providing voter identity cards for all before the year 2000.

¹ A detailed report of our electoral rolls verification exercise along with other election watch committees will be made available after the elections.

Weeding out the Corrupt and Criminals elements

As long as money, muscle and criminals are the factors in winning elections, democracy is a farce and elections are meaningless. Our second activity is to see that the people are involved in the screening of potential candidates that the political parties would field on their behalf .

We have prepared and displayed public service messages in all mainstream media (TV, Radio, Films and News Papers) asking people to come forward with specific allegations along with verifiable evidence (such as history sheet, rowdy sheet or charge sheet) against any potential candidate. We have ensured complete confidentiality to the reporting public and asked them to write to postbox No. 100 (easy to remember). The response from the public should be in four parts giving personal details (optional – excepting for constituency) of the informant; details of the candidate; his/her criminal/corrupt record along with supporting evidence.

The massive media campaign planned had to be down sized due to financial constraints. However with enthusiastic volunteer support we were able to produce three short films for TV (Gemini and ETV) and the theatres highlighting the undesirable texture of many potential candidates; and how we the public can prevent such elements from becoming our representatives in government. Paper advertisements across the State in popular dailies (Vaartha, Eenadu, Hindu and Hindi Milap) have requested valuable information regarding potential candidates with criminal records. The response has been very encouraging. Although we are far from achieving our goals, it is heartening to share with you that quite a few potential candidates with criminal records had been dropped from active consideration though the sure winners are still retained.

This campaign against criminalization of politics has evoked a very enthusiastic response from all sections of the public throughout the state. The issue has been brought into sharp focus by Lok Satta's campaign in every village and hamlet of the state and there is intense debate on the role of criminals in politics. Lok Satta started receiving responses from the public (addressed to P.O.Box No.100, Hyderabad-500 004). At present about 100-125 letters are being received every day. About 10-15 % of these contain specific information regarding criminal antecedents of potential candidates. As a result of the campaign, all major parties in the state have been forced on the defensive and were compelled to publicly declare that they will weedout criminals from their ranks.

A twenty member screening committee is formed to scrutinize(scrutiny in process) impartially and judicially the confidential information received from the public and activists from all over the State about such undesirable potential candidates. After a careful scrutiny we may take up the matter of further action with such individuals themselves, and the supporting political parties.

After exhausting all other options, Lok Satta places before the public at large the information it received from concerned citizens and advises the public to vote judiciously. Initially we thought of screening the candidates at the local level itself but due to resource constraints and the possibility for intimidation forced us to take it up only at the state level. The screening committee at the state level consisted of Mr.T.N.Seshan, the former chief election commissioner, Mr.N.N.Vohra, the author of the Vohra Report, Mr.K.R.Venugopal, former secretary to the prime minister, Justice Lakshmana Rao, former chief justice of Allahabad and Andhra Pradesh

High Courts, Mr.Narendra Luther, former chief secretary to the govt. of A.P. along with other eminent personalities.

While this whole campaign will not eliminate criminals from politics overnight, we expect that induction of new criminals will cease and there will be gradual and significant reduction in nominations of candidates with a criminal record.

The criteria for scrutiny and suggested disqualification could be any of the following:

Criminal Record

- a) Conviction for offences listed under sections 8, 8A and 9 of Representation of the People Act, 1951.
- b) Charges framed by a competent court after preliminary inquiry – in respect of offences listed under sections 8 and 8A of RP Act, 1951 – until they are acquitted.
- c) History sheets opened against convicted persons under S.O 733, 734 and 736 of A.P.Police Standing Orders.
- d) Rowdy Sheets opened against persons classified as rowdies under S.O. 742 of A.P.Police Standing Orders.

Corruption Record

- a) Specific allegations on the floor of the Assembly or Parliament, and the explanations of the individual concerned.
- b) Specific allegations in the press with supporting evidence and the explanations of the individual.
- c) Conviction in a court of law for corruption, misappropriation, embezzlement and cheating.
- d) Charges pending in respect of above offences.
- e) In case of a public servant (present or past), any disciplinary action taken or pending against the person.
- f) In case of a public servant (present or past), departmental inquiries pending or complete.
- g) The assets of the person before entering public office or politics and the current assets along with known sources of income.
- h) The individuals current income, expenditure and lifestyle patterns.

Common Platforms

As mentioned earlier Lok Satta has organized a common platform in 35 parliamentary constituencies during Election Watch 98. This time we are planning to organize these platforms in all the 42 parliamentary and 294 assembly constituencies across the state. These platforms will be organized in a structured manner with an impartial moderator. Our goals in organizing these common platforms are multi-fold as listed below:

- a) These platforms will promote common public debate on important issues.
- b) Will help in moving away from the current practice of political parties indulging in massive mobilization of public for campaigning.
- c) To encourage and promote people who can articulate on policy issues to come into public life, there by improving the overall quality of our legislators and also legislative debates.

People's vigil on Polling Day

A call for volunteers from college students, concerned citizens, youth associations and women's wings has been registered across the State to help ensure free and fair polling. Lok Satta is organizing a one day training programme for 30,000 volunteers with regard to Lok Satta's general goals, with immediate reference to the election process and their important role of vigilance in elections. They will monitor the polling process and alert the district committees of any malpractice, which in turn will publicize the matter with corroborating evidence.

There are 60,000 polling booths spread over 294 assembly constituencies with an average of 200 per constituency. A team of 5 volunteers will hopefully cover 10 polling booths spread over 3-5 villages, which means that about 100 volunteers will be needed per constituency. Ideally groups of 100 volunteers will be divided into twenty teams of 5 each, but in reality it will be decided as per the local conditions and constraints. At least 30,000 volunteers are needed to help on the polling day and to pursue the verification of electoral rolls after the din of election subsides. The training for the volunteers is scheduled to begin on the 15th of August.

"Know your Candidate"

Once the nominations phase is over and all the candidates are known, Lok Satta will make efforts to get the candidates fill in a fact sheet about themselves outlining their personal data, political history, assets, views on major policy issues etc. Lok Satta will not verify the fact sheets filled by the candidates and will make every effort to publicize these sheets (in case of non-compliance the same will also be publicized).

Go out and vote campaign.

On the eve of the elections, a simple but important aspect of the election watch programme will be once again reiterated through a concerted media campaign. The media campaign will stress the importance of coming out to vote and **voting for the right person** (in addition to wide dissemination of information gathered about the candidates). In cases where the voter has to choose between the devil and the deep sea, we urge the voter to still come out and invalidate his/her vote. This serves the twin purpose of preventing impersonation and simultaneously sending a strong protest message to the political parties against fielding such unsuitable candidates.

Conclusion:

Although we can't claim to have achieved all our goals, we are pleased to have played a modest but significant role in spreading awareness and effecting positive action not only from the general public but also from the political parties. Our experience has been quite enriching and gratifying and we are glad that other like minded groups are attempting to do the same in different parts of the country. After the current elections are over, we plan to evaluate our efforts, experiences and results and look forward to implementing sounder strategies for achieving wider governance reforms through public pressure.

LOKSATTA

Lok Satta is a democratic people's movement with open and participative membership with a tiered structure controlled by members. Membership is open to all except those who have a corrupt or criminal record, or those who have leadership role in political parties. There is provision for voluntary organizations and institutions to become members without losing their identity or autonomy. Lok Satta has 21 district units with a membership of nearly 100,000 and reaches approximately 10 % of the state's population- mostly the literate sections of the society. Millions of unattached, but concerned citizens find in Lok Satta a credible platform to voice their yearning for better governance and democratic reforms.

Lok Satta's primary objective is to pursue fundamental governance reforms, which are specific, practical and broadly acceptable to the wider public. Our approach is scrupulously non-partisan with focus on institutions and not on individuals. The accent is on tangible action and people's participation to bring about measurable results and not on general slogans. The general public, the opinion makers and decision makers – all form parts of the constituency addressed by the reform movement. The advocacy therefore is inclusive, accommodating core concerns of all sections of the population, without in any way undermining their specific sectarian or local agendas. The movement steers clear of all traditional ideological debates between the left and the right. Only democracy rigorously defined broadly by the five principles i.e. **Freedom, Self-Governance, Rule of Law, Institutional self-correcting Mechanisms and Empowerment** form its core agenda and ideology.

While the goals are national, grassroots activism and organization building are confined largely to Andhra Pradesh for logistical reasons. However vigorous efforts for consensus building and networking among voluntary social action groups, movements, individuals and institutions within the State and all over the country with shared concern for the future of our democracy are underway.

In its 21-month existence, Lok Satta has largely focused in mobilizing ordinary citizens to assert collectively with knowledge to obtain better public services ranging from birth certificates and ration cards to voter enrollment and driving license. The People's Charter, released as a practical guide to citizen's and the local citizen's vigilance groups combined with the brand image acquired by Lok Satta have helped in the emergence of a strong platform capable of enforcing accountability in government machinery. In addition, six local goals of governance reform have been identified and pursued with vigor and clarity. Lok Satta's powerful advocacy and campaign for these reforms – Right to Information, Citizen's Charters, Empowerment of Local Governments, Empowerment of Stake-Holders, Universal access to primary education and Speedy Justice through rural courts – have yielded partial results already. In this backdrop, Election Watch movement is proving to be an important milestone in the evolution of a strong People's movement for governance reforms.

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