



## *The challenge of building a national liberal political alternative*

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Indian political liberalism has been blossoming in the last few years but is still very fragile. The demand for freedom is still largely confined to the fringe of India's mainstream political debates. The mantra of socialism refuses to die out despite the success of economic liberalisation. Indeed, India's politicians continue to preach socialism as they practice their ugly mix of statism, crony capitalism and corruption.

The idea of freedom as the most basic political good is still struggling for relevance in a nation where over six decades socialism has created a strong culture of relying on the government for everything. And there has been very poor communication. As a result most Indians simply don't understand what freedom means, mixing it with democracy or even independence.

Freedom never came in a silver platter. It has had to be fought for and won. By each generation. Today it is our turn, and we must give battle to socialism and corruption irrespective of whether we win or lose. Sadly, Indian liberals have not recovered from the demise of the Swatantra Party in 1974. They are fragmented and seemingly incapable of combining together to lead India to freedom.

But there are good tidings. It is possible, even likely, that a national liberal political front will take shape in India in the next few years. Let me tell you about this good news.

### **My lost decade**

At this stage I need to introduce myself briefly to you. I worked as an Indian bureaucrat from 1982 to January 2001. I now do similar things in Australia. Like most Indians of my generation who were encouraged to take up science and technology in their school days at the expense of the liberal arts, I had only a feeble understanding of economics, political science

or political philosophy when I joined the Indian civil service. I therefore assumed that (the socialist) policies set by the government were well researched.

But dissonance soon arose. For if these policies were so good why was there so much corruption, inefficiency and waste? Public money was being destroyed and entrepreneurship choked. There was a great disconnect between highly talented bureaucrats on the one hand and pathetic results on the other.

Therefore, from 1984 to 1999 I studied economics and management and sought answers to this riddle. In 1998, at age 38, while completing my PhD, the haze finally cleared. When it did, it became also clear to me that the required reforms must start from the top. A political mandate was needed. Another thing became clear: that we need to stop pointing fingers at others and take responsibility for our country. We must *become* the leaders we want to see.

The Swatantra Party had died without a trace, and it was not possible to join existing corrupt or communal political parties. So I determined to establish a liberal political party, knowing very well the challenges involved. Between 1998 and 2000 I met many Indians across the world to advance the idea of a liberal political movement. Most people I met were cynical, without much hope. But I kept trying.

During this process many shortcomings of Indians became clear – our lack of leaders (or rather, the lack of citizenship); and among the few ‘leaders’ we have, the lack of strategic thinking. No Rajaji did I find. I also found that our industrialists and businessman live solely for themselves. They are happy to bribe their way though the corrupt system. The country means absolutely nothing to them. No JRD Tata did I come across.

And failure dogged my steps. Finally, after three failed attempts, not yet being a persistent leader, I grew disheartened and gave up. That was mid-2005.

### **Freedom Team of India**

But by December 2007 I was back in business, with a totally different approach. What happened?

As I worked within the government machinery while living in Melbourne, it was impossible not to think of India and its colossal waste of human resources. I learnt how an effective governance system looks like and wanted to transmit this learning to India. So I kept writing the book I had started in 2005. This book, *Breaking Free of Nehru* (published by Anthem Press in 2008 and now available as a free e-book at <http://bfnsabhllokciti.com/>), is more a political pamphlet than a book.

In it, after much reflection, I proposed the concept of a Freedom Team of India (FTI).

The idea behind the Team is simple. It aims to bring together at least 1500 outstanding liberal leaders who are willing in-principle to contest elections. After policy agreements are achieved, such a team could give serious battle at the hustling to corrupt socialist forces and ultimately deliver freedom and good governance to India.

Started as an electronic group in December 2007, FTI it has now begun to take serious shape. In July 2009 FTI (<http://freedomteam.in/>) was registered as a not-for-profit organisation.

FTI has placed itself squarely in the classical liberal mould, steering away from conceptions of social democracy or libertarianism. Over 80 excellent leaders have joined so far, although not all may contest elections in the end.

One thing that distinguishes FTI from efforts like Lok Satta or Jago Party is this, that it will *not* launch a political movement until all ingredients are in place. That includes leaders, agreed policies, funds, and local supporters. There is little point in making a Quixotian assault against misgovernance by trying to win a handful of seats. There must either be a full-fledged national alternative, or nothing.

Given the great importance of building a support base, FTI has floated the concept of Adharshila – of liberal groups across India to take the liberal message to the people and undertake a wide range of activities.

I believe that the strategy chosen by the Team offers a real chance to change the corrupt Indian political landscape. The good news is that those who have joined the team so far are

truly excellent people. I am gaining confidence by the day about the possibility that India will finally get its national liberal political party in the coming years.

Of course, this is a herculean challenge and FTI needs all the support it can get. It needs serious commitment from all Indian liberals. You can either join as a leader or help find someone to join it. If you can't do either, then please support it in some other form or shape. If you have any questions please write to me [sabhlok@yahoo.com](mailto:sabhlok@yahoo.com).

I look forward to your interest. In conclusion I would also like to invite you to read my draft manuscript entitled, *The Discovery of Freedom*, at <http://discovery.sabhlokcity.com/>. This book, when finished, will complement *Breaking Free of Nehru*.