

One Nation, One Election

No Solution to Ailments of Present Electoral System

D Raja, General Secretary, CPI

The making of the Constitution commenced with a clear awareness of the immense diversity of our country and the need to address and accommodate the same while upholding the principles of justice and equality. The road towards democracy was embarked upon with a strong sense of representation and recognition. Universal adult franchise was one of the early expressions of this vision.

Similarly, a clear division of subjects between the Union and state governments was designed to aid the democratic expression of national and local aspirations. The democratically elected government operating within a federal setup becomes the legitimate medium to pursue the Constitutional vision. It is in this context that Dr Ambedkar identifies the centrality of free and fair elections, conducted at regular intervals both at the Union and state levels. To ensure the undertaking of this process smoothly, he firmly argued for the establishment of the Election Commission of India as an independent as well as permanent body. Article 324 of the Constitution precisely enshrines this value.

Unfortunately, contradictory to this Constitutional value, Prime Minister Narendra Modi is the staunchest cheer leader of One Nation, One Election. This needs to be called out for what it is a frontal assault on the inclusive essence of the Constitution.

A committee chaired by former President Ramnath Kovind, has been appointed to examine the possibility of the execution of this nefarious plan. It is evident from the composition and mandate of the committee that the recommendations have been formed already and the entire exercise led by Ramnath Kovind is only to give some legitimacy to an otherwise authoritarian whim.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's obsession with 'oneness' is not hidden from anyone. From one nation, one tax to one nation, one election it is anybody's guess whether this monolith drive has any end. Sometime back, the Law Commission of India invited views from stakeholders on holding simultaneous elections to state assemblies and the Lok Sabha and they are yet to submit a report. The question arises that when the Law Commission of India is already examining the subject, what is the need for a separate committee? It is, as said earlier, only to provide legitimacy to the move.

Shrewdly enough, the questions posed by the Law Commission makes a unilateral assumption of a priori consensus on holding simultaneous elections where none exists. Similarly, the government constituted committee in probability will go on to produce a report that echoes the Prime Minister's views that have been aggressively expressed several times. This prompts us to delve deeper in the issue and examine what caused elections to Lok Sabha and state assemblies separately and whether it is desirable to hold them together.

In our current electoral system, democratically elected state governments have the right to continue in office till they enjoy the confidence of the assembly or till the expiry of their term, that is, five years. When our Constitution was being framed, Dr Ambedkar and other leaders preferred responsibility of the government over its stability. The proposal to have 'One Nation, One Election' attempts to homogenize the opinion of the people of different states, as expressed in elections to state assemblies, with their opinion vis-à-vis the Union as expressed in the elections to the Lok Sabha.

In such a scenario, responsibility and accountability will be the victims as political parties will meet the people only once in five years. If we follow this in practice, if the Lok Sabha is dissolved post a no-confidence motion or no coalition reaching a stable majority, all state assemblies will have to go through elections, regardless of whether a stable government was formed in the state or not. This is insulting the mandate people gave to the parties of the state and goes against the fundamentals of representative parliamentary democracy.

It is being argued that after the inauguration of our republic, elections to assemblies and Lok Sabha were being held together. Everyone knows that but the caveat here is that why the cycle of simultaneous elections broke in the first place. The government formed by the Communist Party of India in Kerala after the second general elections in 1957 was one reason that the cycle broke. The CPI ministry was one of the initial victims of the Article 356 of the Constitution and elections were held for the Kerala Assembly in 1960, separately from the General Elections. In the elections for Kerala Assembly held in 1965, again separate from the general elections, no party could prove majority and elections were held again in 1967, along with the general elections. This process was natural given the nature of electoral democracy and how people exercised their franchise. Elections were neither imposed, nor denied to bring the state assembly in synchronization with the Lok Sabha elections.

After 1967, other forces emerged on the political horizon that challenged one-party rule in most states. The dominant party lost power in as many as eight states. The results produced by the 1967 elections were evidence of greater penetration of democracy and political parties that channelized emerging aspirations of the people fared better than the dominant party in the Union in

many states. In other words, the break from the cycle of simultaneous elections was entirely democratic and legitimate form of the will of the people. This break itself is evident enough that in a federal parliamentary democracy, holding simultaneous elections for the House of the People and state assemblies may have a restrictive effect on the franchise and verdict of the people, as different states may throw different results unaligned with the results for the Union.

Post the demolition of the Babri Masjid, four state governments were dismissed by the President citing failure of constitutional machinery. Though the CPI is in opposition of President's rule on a principled basis, many have demanded President's rule in Manipur looking at the complete collapse of administration in the state. The proposal being pushed has no mechanism for dealing with such a situation, except to perpetuate un-democracy in the states.

One major reason being offered for the desirability of 'One Nation, One Elections' is financial. Heavy premium is being posed on the idea as it will save the expenditure involved in holding elections by thousands of crores of rupees. Election expenses from the State are those involved in setting up polling booths, payment of TA/ DA to personnel, transport arrangements, purchase of ink, etc. It is being argued that holding simultaneous elections will significantly reduce, or may halve these expenditures. However, data sourced from the Election Commission of India tells us very clearly that electoral expenses are not simple variables and should be studied carefully before making such sweeping generalized remarks.

For example, in Andhra Pradesh, simultaneous elections took place in 2014 and the average cost per assembly constituency was Rs 1.66 crores. In another large state, Madhya Pradesh, elections to the Lok Sabha and state assembly were held separately and the combined cost was Rs 1.43 crore per constituency. Simultaneous elections or separate, the difference is small and 'One Nation, One Elections' is no panacea for electoral expenses or malpractices, except that it curtails people's democratic franchise.

Further, 'One Nation, One Election' is also going to have fixed costs that may outweigh the financial prudence argument. To hold simultaneous elections, the procurement of EVMs on an unprecedented scale itself is a large expenditure apart from their safe storage for a five years period. It is illogical to keep the EVMs locked for five years when they can be used to conduct elections in different states and local bodies, just for the sake of saving money which is not guaranteed at all. What our country needs are comprehensive electoral reforms aimed at free and fair elections, not Narendra Modi's shallow solutions. One reason being cited is reduced expenditure on account of political parties,

without considering available options like state funding of elections as recommended by the Indrajit Gupta Committee.

We must put an end to institutionalized corruption in the form of electoral bonds and should frame better laws to curtail money and muscle power in elections. A few enthusiastic supporters have also expressed the far-fetched expectation that 'One Nation, One Election' will reduce the instance of hate speech, since fewer rallies mean fewer instances of hate speech. The claim is only worthy of ridicule since instead of recommending stringent punishments for those who indulge in hate speech, it aims to curtail the number of interactions people have with political leaders. The bias of media houses is damaging the free flow of information that needs tackling, not homogenizing elections.

It is disturbing to see that the Union government has completely morphed into a political party perpetually concerned about elections. The majority of 2019 is being abused to turn our democracy into an electoral autocracy. For all the claims of sweeping changes, all of Narendra Modi's grand designs have been spectacular failures and have unleashed great misery upon the people. Demonetization destroyed our economy and the faulty GST has caused the demise of hundreds of small producing units. Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his party have ably shown their concern for elections and democratic franchise in the case of Jammu and Kashmir where people are without any democratic representation from 2019 itself.

Coming together of parties with secular, democratic and patriotic values has made the BJP restless. INDIA has got under Narendra Modi's skin. BJP can see the threat to its continuation in office from the unity of democratic people. 'One Nation, One Election' and changes in the manner Chief Election Commissioner is appointed, taken together, are not BJP's answer to any of the ailments of the present electoral system. It demands comprehensive electoral reform including proportional representation and level playing field to the political parties. One Nation, One Election is a desperate attempt of BJP to remain in power and continue with trampling democracy.