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One Nation, One Election: Rationale and Repercussions behind the Synchronization of India's Democratic Process

^a Maria Micheal Nithyn A, ^b Joseph Rohith D

^a Assistant Professor, Department of History, Sacred Heart College (Autonomous), Tirupattur, Tamil nadu -635601

^b Guest Faculty, Department of History, Captain Williamson Sangma State University, Damalgre, Meghalaya -794105

ABSTRACT:

In the second decade of the twenty-first century, India's political and administrative structure has experienced a substantial shift from government variety to homogeneity. Following the principles of "One Nation, One Tax" under the Goods and Services Tax (GST) and "One Nation, One Curriculum" in the New Education Policy (NEP) 2020, the "One Nation, One Election" model aims to standardize elections for the Lok Sabha, State Legislative Assemblies, Municipalities, and Panchayats. Discussed between 1951 and 1967 in the early years of the Republic, the concept has been brought back to encourage fiscal discipline, administrative effectiveness, and government stability. The Law Commission, NITI Aayog, and the High-Level Committee, which was chaired by former President Ram Nath Kovind, have all fervently supported it, pointing to the potential for cost savings, policy consistency, and efficient administration. However, some argue that such uniformity will weaken India's federal nature, politicize power, and erode regional representation. Articles 83, 85, 172, and 174 of the constitution would need to be amended in order to carry out this plan, which would present challenging legal and practical issues. Coordination of elections also has the potential to undermine democratic diversity by masking local issues with national themes. This paper critically analyzes the justification, suggestions, and implications of the "One Nation, One Election" notion in light of the broader conversation about India's developing democratic culture and the historical connection between federal pluralism and unity.

Keywords: Simultaneous Elections; Federalism; Electoral Reforms, NITI Aayog; Law Commission; Constitutional Amendment, Governance, Indian Democracy

Introduction

In the second decade of the twenty-first century, there has been a major change in India's political and administrative landscape. A major shift in governance occurred during this period, from a dispersed and varied approach to a more centralized one. Unity and uniformity across various administrative sectors have become more important in the government's vision, which represents the idea of a coherent national identity in policymaking. One of the most notable instances of this change was the introduction of the Goods and Services Tax (GST) in 2017, which abolished the indirect tax structure. The concept of "One Nation, One Tax" was reflected by the GST, which replaced many provincial and federal levies with a unified tax structure. The idea of "One Nation, One Curriculum" was also promoted by NEP 2020 in an effort to harmonize educational standards across the nation. The NEP attempted to standardize learning outcomes, curricular structures, and guiding concepts across the country, despite education being on the concurrent list. It underlined the dedication to creating an educational system that prioritizes comprehensive learning, basic literacy, and the blending of national and provincial interests in order to achieve a common national vision. This tradition of consistent governance has been maintained by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who has consistently pushed the idea of "One Nation, One Election" in his recent remarks. This concept seeks to synchronize the Lok Sabha, State Legislative Assemblies, Municipalities, and Panchayat elections, which are now held at different times. The idea's justifications include reducing the disturbance that periodic elections generate, keeping taxes cheap, and ensuring smooth, continuous governance without requiring frequent Model Code of Conduct compliance. The approach recommends a single election day on which all voters cast ballots at the same time, bringing about administrative efficiency and political stability. But there is also a great deal of debate on this idea. Its proponents claim that it will improve governance, cut spending, and boost policy consistency. Critics warn that this harmonization could undermine the federal nature of the Constitution, restrict state authority, and marginalize regional parties. As a result, the debate mirrors the greater conflict between federalism and centralization that has continued throughout India's political development.

In reality, throughout the second half of the twenty-first century, the government has actively worked to advance a culture of consistency in administration, governance, and policymaking. In order to achieve the concept of "One Nation" in all of its administrative and political ramifications—whether through electoral, educational, or economic reforms—the main objective has been to simplify India's heterogeneous matrix into a more unified and uniform structure.

Call for Synchronous Elections

One of the largest democracies in the world, India has almost 900 million eligible voters. Aligning and synchronizing election dates is not a new phenomenon. After the Constitution was approved in 1950, the Lok Sabha and state assemblies met concurrently every five years until 1967. However, this was disrupted by events such as the formation of new states, reorganizations of assemblies, and the dissolution of administrations. The Franchise Committee study from 1932 was the first to propose simultaneous elections and a unified electoral roll as a means of achieving efficient governance, and this concept is still pertinent in discussions today. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's remarks revived the dormant debate about the synchronized polls, notwithstanding the historical background. "India's dynamic democracy has also become centered around frequent elections, which impedes governance irrespective of the political party in power at the State or the Center," he said. The prime minister's statement sparked a nationwide commotion and was sharply criticized by the opposition parties.

Recommendations of NITI Aayog

The pro-government agency cited the 1999 Law Commission Report, which resulted in a discussion paper co-authored by NITI Aayog member and former chairman of the Prime Minister's Economic Advisory Council Bibek Debroy. The working paper states that the new electoral system need to be implemented in time for the Lok Sabha election in 2024. It emphasized that during the past 30 years, there has never been a year without elections for the State Assembly, the Lok Sabha, or both. The government is prohibited under the Model Code of Conduct from starting any new programs, development projects, or policy decisions until after the elections. Advocates of One Nation, One Election argue that this deadlock halts the state machinery and leads to what is frequently called "policy parallel."

Law Commission and Recommendation for Constitutional Amendment

According to the Law Commission of India's April 2018 working paper, holding simultaneous elections would necessitate at least "five constitutional amendments." The significant financial savings the government may realize is the primary motivator behind this plan. The Election Commission of India estimates that the 2019 Lok Sabha elections alone would cost more than ₹15,000 crore, without including the expenses of political parties and candidates. The Election Commission of India typically spends between ₹300 and ₹1,000 crore to hold state assembly elections, depending on the size of the state. An estimated ₹30,000 crore was spent on the Lok Sabha and state assembly elections in 2012–13 by the Election Commission of India, state governments, and candidates. Studies suggest that scheduling elections concurrently could reduce these costs by 25–40%, potentially saving anywhere from ₹7,500 to ₹12,000 crore each election cycle. These funds could subsequently be used to social development projects.

Opposition and their Criticism

The opposition, however, argues that because regular elections provide people more chances to voice their opinions, they can be beneficial in a democracy. India's concession of regional autonomy, which can lead to power concentration, was the primary cause of the opposition. Furthermore, this suggests that elected politicians must engage with citizens more often while in office and be held accountable. Important local issues may be overshadowed by more important national issues if polls are held simultaneously, therefore separate elections also assist keep local and national issues apart. In terms of electoral strategy and spending, regional parties in particular would struggle to compete with national parties, which is the reason for this concern. Given the importance of local issues and voters in state assembly elections, regional parties are unlikely to support simultaneous elections. "Undemocratic, against federalism" was how Congress described this strategy. Regional parties like the DMK condemned the adoption of the recommendations as an effort to undermine federalism, while the Trinamool Congress condemned the synchronized polls as a "Hidden agenda to turn the nation into dictatorship."

Constitution of High-Level Committee

The differences led to the creation of a high-level committee for simultaneous elections in September 2023, which was presided over by former Indian President Dr. Ram Nath Kovind. The other notable committee members are Amit Shah, Gulam Nabi Azad, and Harish Salve. The Committee conducted extensive discussions to gather views from many parties. Of the roughly forty-seven political parties that submitted their thoughts and suggestions, thirty-two were in favor of simultaneous elections. The High-Level Committee consulted extensively with a number of political parties on this issue. The Committee received 21,558 responses from people nationwide after publishing a public notice in newspapers in every State and Union territory. When simultaneous elections were approved by 80% of respondents. The Law Commission of India Chairman, four former Chief Justices of India, twelve former Chief Justices of significant High Courts, four former Chief Election Commissioners of India, and eight State Election Commissioners were among the legal experts invited by the Committee to meet in person. In order to get their opinions on the financial implications of asynchronous elections, it also conducted interviews with prominent economists and business associations such as CII, FICCI, and ASSOCHAM. These experts underlined the economic need for simultaneous elections, given the impact asynchronous elections have on inflation and the overall slowdown in economic growth.

Recommendations

Before submitting its 18,626-page report on simultaneous elections, the High-Level Committee, which was established on September 2, 2023, underwent 191 days of study and significant stakeholder and expert talks. The Committee made an effort to ascertain whether it was possible to hold the State Legislative Assembly and Lok Sabha concurrently. In order to conduct synchronous elections, a number of structural amendments to the Constitutional framework were also suggested. The committee reiterated the detrimental consequences of ongoing elections and the policy gridlock they cause. It cited a study that showed simultaneous elections improve the quality of government spending, raise investments, decrease inflation, and spur economic growth. The Committee proposed implementing One Nation, One Election beginning with the 2029 Lok Sabha elections. To accomplish this goal, the committee suggested significant constitutional amendments.

- Article 83 of the Constitution states that we must establish the duration and tenure of the House of People.
- Article 85 of the Constitution outlines guidelines for Parliament sessions, prorogation, and dissolution, emphasizing that dissolution should not occur due to vague or ambiguous reasons.
- Article 172 of the Constitution concerns the duration of state legislatures.
- Article 174 of the Constitution addresses Parliament sessions, prorogation, and dissolution.

The Committee recommended holding simultaneous elections for the Lok Sabha, all State Assemblies, and municipal administrations within 100 days. The disintegration process will be employed to accomplish synchronization and post-constitutional transformation. Legislative body members are currently elected to five-year terms. This implies that if a legislature were deadlocked at any stage, it would not be in sync for the subsequent simultaneous election. In order to solve this issue, the Committee recommended that in the event of a hung legislature or municipal body, a new election be held for a shorter term. The shortened term would be equivalent to the remaining five-year cycle in the case of simultaneous elections. This suggests that if a new election is held two years after the simultaneous poll, the term of a state legislature or Lok Sabha will only be three years. This method aims to align all elections every five years. The Committee suggested implementing a single electoral roll and EPIC card to cut down on agency redundancy and duplication. It recommended granting the Indian Election Commission the authority to create this roll in collaboration with State Election Commissions. This consolidated electoral roll will need to be implemented by a constitutional modification, which the Committee pointed out would also need to be ratified by at least half of the states.

Conclusion

The federal framework of the Indian administrative system is one of the important elements that can be compromised by implementing the previously outlined recommendations. Policy paralysis discourse can also be a major problem in synchronized elections. The legislature's breakup and reduced tenure year put us at risk of reverting to the paradox of inefficiency and policy gridlock. Even if the implications of the synchronization are disregarded, there are a number of challenges in putting the changes into the election system into practice. The abstract plan's feasibility and workability are criticized by administrators and political theorists as a "Half Made Model." Throughout history, the concept of "Oneness" and how it has been applied to policymaking have led us right into chaos. The National Education Policy and the implementation of the GST have already angered political parties and even Indian individuals. In a same vein, "One Nation, One Election" can hinder the country's advancement if it is implemented without a solid plan.

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