

## How well conceived is PM's idea of simultaneous polls?

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The Prime Minister Modi last week reiterated his agenda of "one election" for the country for Lok Sabha, State Assemblies and even at other levels. He justified the idea on two counts. One, as polls are happening for various levels at different time point, they are coming in the way of development. Second, the present schedules of polls involve a lot of expenditure even unnecessarily. But then why he has to say that "it is not a matter of debate, but a requirement for India"?

If these two are the only reasons for the PM to pursue the idea of simultaneous elections, what stops him to correct both the concerns now itself with two initiatives. Both these two suggestions are much simpler. They yield quick results, without adverse implications that simultaneous polls imply. First, cut down the duration of the poll process. Second, initiate change in model poll codes.

Why poll schedule is staggered over such a long period in the last couple of elections, for example. Until 1998 general elections were held within three phases. In fact, when the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> general elections were held in five days, why the 2019 general election was held in 7 phases stretched over 39 days despite the country is far better equipped than ever before. Our PM today could do even better and hold the next general election in one or two phases and only in one week. Why we need a poll campaign of more than two weeks? Thereafter, the duration of elections to State Assemblies whenever due will get reduced to a fortnight. Also, if the PM corrects the precedent of Union Ministers campaigning in State and civic polls across the country, the government functioning becomes focussed. This one initiative alone will reduce both the concerns of PM by half.

Schedule of General Election 1977-2019		
Year	Days	Phases
1977	5	2
1980	4	2
1984	5	3
1989	5	2
1991	27	3
1996	11	3
1998	23	3
1999	29	5
2004	21	4
2009	28	5
2014	36	9
2019	39	7

All that it requires is will of the party-in-power and then, second, modify the election code. Codes were set by political parties. They had agreed together with the Election Commission. These could be changed now in no time without any amendments as Morarji Desai did in 1977. These codes in fact have saved the grace of the elections in India. We should not lose out on their sanctity. We need to modify them going by experiences. Regarding the expenditure, it is multiplying because of spending by political parties and their candidates, in violation of the codes and norms of level playing. This too could be sorted out by parties, with the ruling party taking the initiative, in no time before the next general election. In fact, today PM Modi is in the best of control to address these concerns.

Instead of taking these initiatives, why he wants to go down as the one who denigrated democratic traditions and roots of the country. Even more important, there are any number of studies over the years which had brought out that development has not been matching and equitable because of centralisation and lack of representative character of elections and the campaign model we are stuck with. Even in this respect, the PM could do wonders and much easily by changing the poll practices and the way candidates canvass. There is no evidence of PM or BJP or the Governments or the EC initiatives to explore alternative ways to overcome the two problems that the PM considers as compulsions for simultaneous polls.

Going into the two excuses cited by the PM for simultaneous elections surprising revelations could not be avoided. First, 40 to 65 percent of election time total expenditure in the country is by the party-in -power and its candidates. What the Election Commission formally spends works out hardly to 12-15 percent. Since I was the one who has been estimating the poll expenditure in the last twenty-five years I know what I'm talking. If the PM is worried about poll expenditure, he has the best of opportunity to correct without destabilising.

Second, contrary to viewing the frequent elections as a hindrance for the development, the reality is other way. It is because of frequent elections that development ideas are proliferating and the incumbents are in hurry at least close to polls to implement and showcase too. The argument otherwise is used more as an excuse for the lapses in implementation of incumbents or to pre-empt criticism of the opposition leaders. More obviously this excuse of staggered polls coming in the way of development is a ploy of leaders of incumbent parties to vitiate the poll process with more doles and populist inducements to

voters. Also model code is not a hindrance for ongoing functioning or even to take on emergency issues of governance. If so codes can be modified to make them inclusive.

But, on the other, Hyderabad municipal elections last fortnight signalled what could be expected of simultaneous polls. Eight union ministers and as many leaders in power from other states descended on Hyderabad to campaign, some in special flights, pushing both the contesting local candidates and the local concerns and issues to background. Now that the poll is over who is responsible in the wards and will be representing?

In the pyramid system of democracy the roots matter more. In 1960, New York Times correspondent in New Delhi wrote, "***The Most Dangerous Decades***" contending India will fall apart after Pandit Nehru. It was based on his insights into the functioning of the Parliament and State Assemblies. In response to that book I wrote in 1968 the "***Politics of Leadership in India***" where in I questioned the logic of that author Selig Harrison and argued that Indian democracy is not limited to Parliament and the State Assemblies but the grass roots at the village and district level governance is far more critical. In fact, the first Chief Minister of Gujarat Balwantrai Mehta deserve credit for his foresight in 1957. It was based on his report that the three tier system of governance and panchayat raj was adopted in India and his ideas were based not only on what the Mahatma Gandhi advocated about village Republics but Srimannarayana, later Governor of Gujarat who all pro-founded grass roots democracy as foundational. I continue to hold to those views for sustaining the trajectory of democracy, development and governance. But, unfortunately, the political parties ensured last few decades that their "remote influence" is far more on local democratic institutions than the other way. And that is the beginning of declining trends in governance.

On the other the adverse implications of simultaneous polls are many more. Most shattering includes threat to federal character and regional development, snubbing of local and new leaders and regional and local parties all across the country. And above all, it dilutes representative character of elections by parties and facilitates hegemony of a few and concentration of political power. Simultaneous poll is good only for such centralisation and to consolidate a regime of control and command.

PM Modi got a rare opportunity today to do what none of the Prime Ministers earlier tried. That is provided he really wants to cleanse not only the electoral system but also establish an equitable development in the country. His idea of "local vocal" should be a reality. He will go down as Ataturk Mustafa Kamal of India beyond decades by taking to socio-political transformation. That cannot happen without bringing sanctity in our elections and poll campaigns. And take to decentralisation and restore the idea of India of Republics, where representative character of elections is a priority. This cannot be with reversing campaign model itself. Why election campaign, for example, need to be solo. It could as well or better be by candidates campaign together. This obviously implies redefining the very idea of an election so that it does not remain a "battle ground" between parties and leaders. Politicians should not become paranoid of polls as if they are an end in themselves. Political parties need to be limited to legislatures at two levels and make elections at other levels as party-less. Modi being the most popular Prime Minister, he should reconsider his idea of simultaneous polls and take to these initiatives. The reasons are far more compelling and consequential. My forthcoming book, **"Next Big Game Changer of Elections"** describes this unique opportunity at length. Let cooperation and coordination model be the way to lead the nation, not "control and command" model by "winning an election at any cost".

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