

## Can we expect a " New India" without reforming polls and parties?

Dr N Bhaskara Rao

Primepost, July 20, 2021

Prime Minister may not have been allowed to formally introduce his new Cabinet in the Parliament on Monday but he made an earnest effort to have a good Cabinet of Ministers. He explored for a fortnight by consultations and searching the available talent out of sitting Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha to put together 78 for the Union Cabinet of Ministers. He ended up with 90 percent of them as corrupts, 42 percent with criminal cases, and 31 percent with "serious criminal cases". This is according to the latest affidavits filed by members of parliament themselves. These criminal cases include attempted murder, creating communal disharmony, electoral violations, etc. Why such a situation has arisen? Is it not time to ponder about this helpless scenario?

This situation also reminds why the country is not able to accomplish all that our constitution envisioned and why the development, democracy and governance remain riddled and going down in independent global rankings. The helpless situation reminds me of a popular film that I saw in my childhood, *Pathala Bhiravi*, where everything happens as dictated by a selfish fakir whose life is in a parrot hidden somewhere. Similarity, today anything and everything in the country in whatever context boils down to polls and parties, and more specifically, the kind of electoral practices that we are stuck. But The Prime Minister has the best of options today to do something about it such a way that the country remembers him much beyond his tenures as most popular leader.

There were more than six high level committees in the last five decades which had come up with much needed reforms in our electoral practices and functioning of the parties. But no government dared to do anything and no leader pursued as a national concern and agenda. V M Tarkunde Committee (1974/75), Dinesh Goswami Committee (1990), Justice V R Krishna Iyer Committee (1994). Justice Kuldeep Singh bench of Supreme Court (1996), The Law Commission's Report (1998). And then Justice M N Venkatachaliah (2000) committee to review working of the Constitution. All of them made significant suggestions.

They all concluded that without electoral reforms the country will not come out of the bottlenecks it is stuck. An independent analysis of happenings since 2000 brings out in no uncertain terms that the country is on a nose drive course. How can we reverse the trend, it is a compulsion today to wriggle out? No prime minister in the near future is likely to be in an envious position as Narendra Modi is today to take the plunge no other leader dared. In my forthcoming book next month, "**Next Big Game Changer of Elections**", I describe the compulsions for reversing the trend and suggest simple more than a mind-set formula. Only Nine critical correctives are summed up here.

**First**, criticality of candidate cannot be dodged. The more the number of candidates, the less representative the winner. It is essential that contestants are pre-qualified. A local one should be better than a far away one.

**Second**, poll schedule for the country cannot be as it suits the incumbent in office. If we could have poll in 3 or 4 phases decades ago, we could have now in one or two phases. And polling could be completed in one week or in a fortnight. That is good enough to reach out voters.

**Third**, why campaign should be solo everywhere and all the time? Do not we want the elected government as one of every one cutting across the parties? Why not candidates address at least some public meetings together? Why should a campaign be a "fight" between candidates in a constituency?

**Fourth**, should polls be corporate funded, or crowd sourced? Now they have already become corporate funded as per the affidavits of contestants to ECI. Can we expect them to be representatives of people? And winners are obligation free? Polls in the earlier decades were crowd funded mostly. That is best bet to ensure the government of "we the people".

**Fifth**, let codes be the basis for the polls. The existing codes lost out their relevance. They require to be revised and repositioned and contestants take with on that basis. violators should be disqualified from contesting.

**Sixth**, independence of ECI should never be in doubt, appointment of commissioners should be from out of a panel, not selected by the home minister or even the pm. The appointees should not be in obligatory terms. ECI should come under RTI and take to suo motto option more often.

**Seventh**, why polls should be parties centric? Why media, citizens and academics not consulted same way. Today even functionaries of parties do not know what the constitution of their party stands for. But that is the basis for their registration with ECI. They should fall in line of codes and regulations as a precondition for registration and symbol allocations, if we still think that symbols should continue.

**Eight**, the phenomena of incumbency is tricky. But sets the phase of polls. Morarji Desai understood and tried to limit the scope of incumbency. Once again incumbents are going untamed, short sighted and unconcerned of the lessons.

**Ninth**, counting of vote should not provoke, divide and cause conflicts locally and put doubts about privacy of vote. It is better results are put out at constituency level as several years ago, instead of booth wise as at present.

Each of these correctives has significance in making polls free and fair as provided by the constitution. These are interlinked. These need to be debated, not to be ignored or deferred again. Only then the country can catch up and ensure an independent election mechanism and a more responsible governance. And, when we could have a more reflective cabinet of Ministers.

.....

(Dr N Bhaskara Rao is a Delhi based public policy analyst and author of books, the first one in 1967, ***"The Politics of Leadership in an Indian State"***.)

<https://www.primepost.in/new-india-without-poll-reforms/>