

**Why ceiling at all on poll expenditure of candidature.
Instead, implement ceiling on poll time expense of parties !**

Dr. N. Bhaskara Rao
Primepost, January 07, 2022

It is intriguing that on January 6 the Election Commission (ECI) increased ceiling on poll expenditure of candidates substantially at the instance of the Union Law Ministry. As if this is a big initiative, the Govt issued an "Extraordinary Gazette Notification". The ECI officials justified the increase in an anonymous press interaction claiming that the increase is "part of poll reforms", because of inflation and recent shift in campaign methodology "to virtual taking to large screens" and increase in the number of electorate. The ECI justified the increase based on suggestion by a three member special committee to review the expenditure about which never before any clue was given neither by ECI or the Ministry.

In the informal press briefing ECI maintained on Thursday that "the last major revision in the expenditure limit was carried out in 2014, which was further increased by 10 percent in 2020". Does it not mean that the ceiling is being hiked every election time? I said this intriguing because of two particular reasons. Firstly, review committees of the, govt as well as independent have been pointing out the urgency to curb election expenditure. Even more, the ECI's own data base on what candidates themselves have been submitting is much less than the ceiling of ECI. Even in 2019 the contestants, including the sitting members of Lok Sabha, claimed spending much less than the prescribed limit. And, in any case, no leader or party has requested now or more recently for any increase in the ceiling. And yet what has been increased now, as per the extraordinary gazette notification, is unusually high. The over all increase is by more than 35 percent! In the case of Assemblies it is increased from 28 to 40 lacs (20 to 28 lacs in the case of smaller states). In the case of Lok Sabha the increase now is from 70 to 95 lacs (54 to 75 lacs in the case of smaller states). These changes are with immediate effect including the five states now going to polls.

This move to substantially increase now the ceiling on poll expenditure of candidates is intriguing for multiple reasons. **First**, the ECI seems has forgotten to take cognizance of submissions of candidates to.... It of poll expenditure for each poll including the recent ones. If ECI goes by its own source, it should have reduced the ceiling now, not increased at all. **Second**, the claim that number of voters has increased as a factor for hiking the ceiling is nothing new, it happens between elections every time. In fact in 2022, the increase in the number of new voters since previous election is less in most constituencies, both in the case of Lok Sabha and Assembly. **Third**, if there is a shift in the trend in campaign to "virtual" as claimed, the expenditure would be less now, not more even assuming "large screens" are used as the ruling party experimented in recent elections. **Fourth**, while claiming last major revision in 2014, it acknowledges that the ceiling was increased by 10 percent in 2019. And yet with in three years the ceiling is increased now by over 35 percent. How come? It cannot be with out certain assumptions! **Fifth**, how this increase could be part of poll reforms. If that is the concern, "source of expenditure" is far more critical than a ceiling on expenditure aspect. **Sixth**, there has been constant criticism about ever increasing poll expenditure for a couple of decades with no serious efforts to curb poll expenditure. On the contrary, the ECI is going along with increase by successive govts. **Seventh**, with peak of second wave of pandemic and threats of canceling public meetings and poll mobilization, the expenditure on poll campaign should have been reduced but why an increase is facilitated?

The poll campaign scene in India has been going through dramatic change for over a decade with out any public scrutiny. A revealing finding from the data submitted to ECI by sitting Lok Sabha members in 2019, for example, that hardly 25 out of 537 sitting members had campaigned with their own money! The percent of sitting MPs whose main source was "corporate" had increased to 70 percent in 2019 from 30 percent in 2014. What does this mean? The percent of those sitting MPs who had used their "own funds" as per their own declaration has declined to 13 in 2019 from 25 in 2014. Even more astonishing is none of the sitting MPs claimed taking to "crowd funding" during their poll campaign? That is why, I insist that "source of funding" is far more critical that the amount of expenditure allowed or even spent.

It is obvious from this discussion that ceiling on poll expenditure of candidate is not making a difference. Only a fraction is declared and what actually spent by candidates is significantly higher than what they declare to ECI and that ECI is helpless and in any case it is not able to make any sense out of what contestants file to them, not even proactively. It is high time that ceiling on poll expenditure by candidates is removed all together and, instead, a ceiling on poll expenditure by political parties make sense and likely to make the difference on the over all poll scene of the country. And, equally important, source of funding is looked into and restraints are considered as a part of a serious urge for poll reforms. This present move to hike ceiling on expenditure of candidates is to tighten the grip of parties and of the incumbent, more specifically. It diffuses the grip of ECI further. With poll bonds and corporate contribution, political parties in power are becoming cash rich and super centric in their grip. In 2019, for example, parties collected 3544 crores but spent only 2040 crores.

My just published book, ***“The Next Big Game Changer of Elections in India”***, brings out that with out shift in the paradigm of our elections, nothing better or different could be expected in the status of the people and of the Republic. Hence, it is critical that poll expenditure and source of funding is taken far more seriously.

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(Dr N Bhaskara Rao is a research based public policy analyst of long standing with over a dozen published books).

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