

Nothing better could be expected without change in the scope of poll campaigns

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Why 2024 general election should be of seven phased and stretched over 45 days when the country could have as well in two phases and within two weeks? In fact, until 2009 we had general elections within five phases and within thirty days. Is the poll process now going to be any harmonious, are our voters going to be any better informed and candidates be with better credentials? There is evidence that such long stretched campaign results in free and fairness of elections anyway? Ground realities in fact are contrary for any such expectations now.

But stakeholders in elections seem to like long duration poll schedule. For, political parties could collect more money, media earns much more and gains on TRPs, for pollsters it is bonanza time, and for many voters, it is season of doles and cash unasked for. Even more, the incumbent governments like it for multiple reasons. The campaign for 2024 general election has even started well before a formal notification.

No initiative or talk of poll reform over the years seems has made any difference to better the credibility of polls or the outcome of polls. We now have ample data on scope of campaign and source of funding at micro and macro levels and as to profile of those who contest and get elected. For examples, in the outgoing Lok Sabha there were hardly twenty members who had got elected with their own money. Earlier, the main source was more by their party now for most the source was corporates. Obviously that determines their preoccupation and priorities.

And yet there is no pursuit in the country from any quarters as to what has been the trend in campaigns and the kind of campaign that the media, parties, leaders, candidates and cadres are taking and their implications on

representative character and beyond polls not just on children, school education but also on the kind of new India we aspire for. This also determines whether we ever could restore the pride of a Republic. Instead of promoting collaborative and cooperative culture, should we promote prejudice, animosities, conflicts between castes and communities. Elections are viewed more as a battle ground or a war situation between enemies when it is contest for a tenure between neighbours or colleagues or even cousins.

Talking about how much high is being spent election to election cannot be avoided but even more relevant in the campaign should be for what, by whom, whose money it is all and who is benefiting more directly. This is far more important for everyone to know and be sensitive about. Only that could address the gap in aspirations and accomplishments, between grantees and ground realities. Our poll concerns and campaigns are missing the core of the considerations before the nation and to catch up with missing or mismatch aspects.

Nothing better can be expected of polls without change in the nature of campaigns. Without such a change even simultaneous elections make no difference. But this is not even referred by Kovid Panel. The trend in campaigns now is from bad to worse. The correctives cannot be deferred further. The way we coped with Covid-19 and changed outlook and approach towards life and living should as well also be in the context of elections and the way campaigns are conducted by stakeholders including the social media with some responsibility and accountability.

There is no indication that any one is taking up as part of campaign the idea of "simultaneous polls" that is being proposed (with 100 days of formal campaign) despite direct implications in so many respects for representativeness of polls, nor is there any indication of a discussion on "Model Code of Conduct" as it is being attributed many criticisms. That the MCC at the outset was the result of consensus that political parties themselves had reached seems is forgotten. The campaign now need to include more such changes.

Also, there is no one taking up as a part of campaign the way doles and the like lures are being proliferated by parties and candidates. Nor is there any reference to increase number of those in contest with criminal records in courts for years waiting for judicial judgement, including those on bail. Then, there is the issue of continued reliance on poll symbol ignoring individual credentials of candidates.

Reversing the trend in our electoral practices, more specifically in the nature and scope of poll campaign, is urgent. Campaigns with full of fake narratives, fallacies and promises little to do with ground realities is what should bother the activists about poll campaigns. The scary aspect is the implications of Lok Sabha election campaign on municipal and panchayat elections. Since I have been spending more time in my village after sixty years in New Delhi I am even more concerned of this trend gaining ground flowing from the kind of campaigns that our elections are preoccupied. Or, are we conceding an end for the era of “We the People”.

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