



Reality check

Simultaneous polls pose too big a legal and logistical challenge to be implemented now

Chief Election Commissioner O.P. Rawat's view that it is not possible to hold simultaneous elections to the Lok Sabha and the State Assemblies soon is a realistic assessment of the humongous task ahead of the Election Commission before it can embark on such an ambitious venture. Mr. Rawat has, in particular, ruled out the possibility of holding elections to the Lok Sabha this December along with polls to the Assemblies of four States. In addition to the basic requirement of a legal framework under which the extension or curtailment of the term of any Assembly is constitutionally permissible, simultaneous elections would demand a massive increase in the number of electronic voting machines (EVMs) and voter-verifiable paper audit trail (VVPAT) units. Mr. Rawat has pointed out that altering the term of an Assembly needs an amendment to the Constitution. Moreover, ensuring the availability of VVPATs everywhere poses a logistical challenge. Mizoram is due for elections in December, as the term of the Assembly ends on December 15. This will be followed by Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan, with the terms of their Assemblies ending on January 5, 7 and 20, respectively. A new batch of VVPAT units is expected only by the end of November, and it takes a month for first-level checking, rendering the possibility of using them in the next round of elections remote. The logistics are bracing, too. Simultaneous elections will require the use of 24 lakh EVMs, needing the procurement of 12 lakh EVMs and an equal number of VVPAT units, according to its estimate. These figures ought to give pause to the clamour to hold simultaneous Assembly elections with the next Lok Sabha polls.

It goes without saying that a wide political consensus, as well as legislative cooperation from various parties at the Centre and in the States, is required for holding simultaneous elections. It is natural that parties that control legislatures constituted in recent months or years would resist any curtailment of their tenures, while those in the Opposition may prefer simultaneous polls if it means Assembly elections being advanced. Bharatiya Janata Party president Amit Shah has written to the Law Commission favouring simultaneous polls, giving a fillip to the idea. The crux of the argument in favour of the concept is that the country is perpetually in election mode, resulting in a lack of adequate focus on governance. The second contention is that scattered polling results in extra expenditure. The question before India is, in order to address these two issues, can legislature terms be curtailed without undermining representative democracy and federalism? Given the procedural and logistical challenges that holding of simultaneous elections pose, it would be far more productive for political parties to focus on basic electoral reforms and find ways to curb excessive election expenditure.

A long campaign

Indonesian President Widodo raises eyebrows with his choice of running mate

With Indonesian President Joko Widodo and his main challenger Prabowo Subianto announcing their running mates for the April 2019 election, the stage is set for an extended campaign. These will be the fourth direct presidential elections since the end in 1998 of the three-decade-long military-backed dictatorship of Suharto. Both candidates are expected to unveil their road maps to give a boost to job-creation and reduce inequality in the largest economy in Southeast Asia. Equally, in a country with the largest Muslim population and also one whose population is extremely diverse, the two campaigns are shining a light on the larger struggle for pluralism. Mr. Widodo, from the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle, is seeking a second term, and his choice of Ma'ruf Amin, a conservative Islamic cleric, as running mate appears to be aimed at averting the alienation of the more orthodox sections. A Muslim of Javanese descent, Mr. Widodo, referred to as Jokowi, was the target of a social media smear campaign in the 2014 elections, suggesting that he was an ethnic Chinese Christian and a member of the banned communist party. This attempt to tap into the resentment against the small but influential minority community is believed to have narrowed his victory margin. Four years ago, too, his rival was Mr. Prabowo, of Gerindra. An economic nationalist, he has denied the accusations against him of human rights violations while heading Indonesia's special forces — charges that led to a ban on his entry into the U.S.

The electoral face-off between Mr. Widodo and Mr. Prabowo comes also against the backdrop of a highly charged gubernatorial race in Jakarta in 2017. The incumbent at that time, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, had succeeded Mr. Widodo when he became President in 2014 and was considered his protégé. Mr. Purnama, a Christian, narrowly lost the election after a hard-fought campaign in which headline groups accused him of blasphemy. He was subsequently imprisoned on the charge. Mr. Prabowo and his running mate, Sandiaga Uno, had campaigned for Mr. Purnama's rival at the time — but Mr. Widodo's running mate, Mr. Amin, was a witness in the blasphemy trial. Differences between the moderate and headline sections could get exacerbated ahead of the 2019 elections, particularly given the polarisation in a two-way contest. The onus is clearly on President Widodo and Mr. Prabowo to ensure that the airing of contrary political opinion does not cross the limits of civility and decency in this fledgling democracy. But Jokowi, as the candidate whose victory in 2014 inspired optimism about a break from politics-as-usual, perhaps has the greater responsibility to resist a tilt to appease headline and intolerant opinion.

Always a peacemaker

As Foreign Minister, Leader of the Opposition and Prime Minister, Vajpayee tried to repair ties with Pakistan



SATINDER K. LAMBAH

Atal Bihari Vajpayee's Pakistan policy was an open book. He wanted improved relations with Pakistan without sacrificing India's interest. He wanted the people of the two countries to live in amity and friendship as good neighbours. Vajpayee had been pragmatic in respect of his Pakistan policy. On a visit to Pakistan as Foreign Minister in February 1978, he was asked how he reconciled his commitment to the Shimla Agreement to his earlier position that it was a stab in the nation's back. He said amidst laughter, "I am trying to forget my past and I urge you to do the same." Earlier, immediately after taking over as foreign minister in March 1977, he assured the Pakistan Ambassador that there was not going to be any change in policy towards Pakistan as the existing foreign policy "was based on more or less national consensus". This reflected both pragmatism and statesmanship.

A domestic consensus

It can be considered as a master stroke for both the then Prime Minister, P.V. Narasimha Rao, and the then Leader of the Opposition, Vajpayee, when in the 1990s the former persuaded the latter to lead the Indian delegation to the UN Human Right Commission meeting in Geneva, which was

then discussing issues related to India and Pakistan. By this single act alone, they both showed to Pakistan and the rest of the international community that India spoke in one voice on its relations with Pakistan. It resulted in a profound victory for India. It was satisfying as the High Commissioner to Pakistan to watch this development.

Years later, as Prime Minister, Vajpayee made two visits to Pakistan. The much publicised visit by bus to Lahore on February 19, 1999 was overshadowed by the Kargil attack a few months later. The Lahore visit, however, had a positive impact on public opinion in both countries at that time. The bus service between New Delhi and Lahore inaugurated during his visit was to facilitate cheaper travel for the people of the two countries. As the then Foreign Minister, Jaswant Singh, informed Parliament, "The bus journey captured the imagination of the people of India, of Pakistan, indeed, of the world."

The Kargil war, however, did not prevent Vajpayee from inviting General Pervez Musharraf to India, resulting in the Agra Summit of July 2001. Earlier, in his January 1, 2001 message — the famous "musings from Kumarokom" — Vajpayee had stated that it was time to resolve the Kashmir problem of the past and that "India is willing and ready to seek a lasting solution of the Kashmir problem". People in Kashmir still emotionally remember his musings.

Vajpayee made his second visit, as Prime Minister, to Pakistan in January 2004 to attend the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) Summit. Af-



AP/PTI

ter strenuous negotiations, in the bilateral joint communiqué issued at the end of the visit, President Musharraf gave the assurance that he would not permit any territory under Pakistan's control to be used to support terrorism in any manner. This was an important commitment by Pakistan which was made possible because of Vajpayee's resolve to improve relations, despite the setback in relations as a result of Kargil and the failed Agra Summit. This commitment paved the way for bilateral negotiations to be resumed between the two countries.

Vajpayee's visits to Pakistan have to be viewed in the context of similar visits by other Prime Ministers. Interestingly, nine out of 14 Prime Ministers of India never visited Pakistan during their tenures. Most visits by Indian Prime Ministers to Pakistan took place when the Prime Minister's party enjoyed an absolute majority in the Lok Sabha — for example, Jawaharlal Nehru, Rajiv Gandhi and Narendra Modi. Even Shastri had a majority in Parliament when he undertook the visit to Tashkent and had earlier made a transit halt in Karachi to meet Ayub Khan. The exception to this is Vajpayee who,

even though he led a coalition government, visited Pakistan twice.

No sign of weakness

Several reminiscences of meetings with former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee resonate. During my tenure as High Commissioner in Pakistan, while on a visit to Delhi, Prime Minister Narasimha Rao asked me to brief the Leader of the Opposition. As always, Vajpayee was warm. Supportive of improving relations with Pakistan, he told me to go ahead with the suggestions. His sane advice was that whenever a proposal was made, it must be ensured that the other side did not mistake it as a sign of weakness. He added that as Foreign Minister he had encouraged travel and trade between the two countries — to those, he said, you could now add tourism.

Later in July 2001, when I was Ambassador in Moscow, I was called to Delhi when preparations were being made for meeting General Musharraf in Agra. I attended preparatory meetings at the Prime Minister's Race Course Road (now renamed Lok Kalyan Marg) office. Vajpayee calmly listened to all view points and was in favour of a consensus decision to move forward. The deliberations in Agra, however, did not succeed.

Attentive, gracious

When he appointed me as Special Envoy for Afghanistan, just after my retirement from the Indian Foreign Service, in the aftermath of 9/11, his directive was to find a solution to the Afghanistan issue and see if it could also help Pakistan to change its attitude towards India.

Prior to Vajpayee's departure

A chronicle of collaboration

There has been a long-standing Carnatic tradition in the church which goes back to the time of Tyagaraja himself



SRIRAM V.

The emergence of a raging controversy around a Carnatic singer who recently announced a concert dedicated to Christian songs is an issue to ponder over. He was hounded — subjected to abuse on the phone and on social media — till he cancelled the programme. Another group of eminent artistes was accused of helping proselytisers in their task when they sang Christian songs set to Carnatic tunes.

Falsehood and abuse

It soon gave rise to fake news. It was said that the songs of poet and composer Tyagaraja had been plagiarised, with the word 'Rama' changed to 'Jesus'. Nothing could be more false than this. The similarity of lyrics in just one song does not make for concrete proof; all the artistes accused of this falsehood have denied such a charge. The propagators of the false claim have not been able to back their allegations with any evidence either.

There was more to come. Old photographs that showed a prominent Carnatic artiste in the company of a well-known Christian priest

made an appearance which fuelled demands that the performer ought to be stripped of all awards and titles for having committed such a heinous offence. The artistes concerned were subject to vile abuse. Some Sabhas upped the ante — based on hearsay — by deciding to boycott these 'tainted' musicians. What they chose to conveniently ignore was that these performances had been recorded five years ago and were all along on YouTube. Nobody cared to take note of this.

A rich association

What is the threat they have posed to Hinduism? How can this music, which is predominantly Hindu, be used this way is a prominent question in many minds. Forgotten in the midst of all this is the fact that there has been a long-standing Carnatic tradition in the church and which goes back to the time of Tyagaraja himself. The composer's contemporary, Vedanayagam Sastriar, created songs and operas in the Carnatic style. Some of the tunes are very closely modelled on Tyagaraja's songs. 'Sujana Jivana' (Harikamboji) has a parallel in 'Paravama Pavana'. At this point in time it is impossible to state who borrowed whose tune and made it his own.

The works of Sastriar, such as the 'Bethlehem Kuravanji', continue to be performed by his descendants as 'Kathakalakshepams'

in various churches. Since the time of Sastriar, there have been several Carnatic music exponents in the Christian community, and who propagate the art in the church.

The interest of Christians in the art form was encouraged and nurtured by many traditional artistes. The 19th century composer, Samuel Vedanayagam Pillai, had all his songs vetted by Gopalakrishna Bharati, the author of 'Nandan Charitram'. Tamil scholar Meenakshisundaram Pillai, had all his songs vetted by Gopalakrishna Mutt, Melagaram Subramania Desikar, were Pillai's close friends. In the late 19th century, the lineages of Tyagaraja and Dilshitar saw merit in A.M. Chinaswami Mudaliar, a Roman Catholic, and taught him what they knew. When Rao Sahab Abraham Pandithar convened the first ever Carnatic Music conference, in Thanjavur in 1912, helping him was Harikesanallur Muthiah Bhagavathar.

In the 1930s, Pandithar's son, A.J. Pandian, set about composing Christmas carols in Carnatic style. Muthiah Bhagavathar, who would later compose many songs in praise of Devi and Shiva, helped in their tuning. The work was praised by Kalki Krishnamurthy, and Pandian was asked to present his music in the form of an orchestra at the Music Academy's December festivals in Chennai, in 1935 and 1937.



GETTY IMAGES

In 1918, Rev. H.A. Popley began a Summer School of Music to teach Christian men and women; P. Sambamoorthy became a lecturer here, in 1924. A year later, he became its vice principal, eventually rising to become its principal. Nobody saw anything amiss in an orthodox *panchakaccham*-clad scholar teaching his art to Christians. D.K. Pattammal did not feel out of place in joining this school to further her knowledge of music. For that matter, the prima donna of our art, Veena Dhanammal, saw merit in Calcutta's Gauhar Jan and Abdul Karim Khan and taught them some songs of Tyagaraja. These were even released as gramophone discs.

More examples

Not many know that the Tamil Isai Sangam began life in the parish hall of St. Mary's Co-Cathedral in Chennai. In the 1950s, K. Narayanaswami Iyer, grandson of Patnam Subramanya Iyer, turned composer. His works, compiled as New World Songs, include pieces in

praise of Christ.

In the world of films too, there were productions set to Christian themes. Papanasam Sivan composed the music for a song in *Gnaasoundari* (Citadel Pictures). P. Leela (to many, the voice of the Narayaneeyam), sang 'Enai Aalum Mary Matha' in *Missamma*. M.L. Vasanthakumari sang a similar piece, in chaste Carnatic style, for the film, *Punyavati*. If anything, the impact of film songs would have been more widespread than any Carnatic concert featuring Christian songs. Ten years ago, Sister Margaret Bastin, a nun, made a fantastic presentation on the life of Karaikkal Ammaiyar at the Music Academy.

Times were different and nobody saw the need to raise a hue and cry, which is why the present outcry does not make sense. Started by fringe elements and milked for what it is worth by publicity hounds, the controversy now has only obscured the facts. It is high time that those who perceive threats to Hinduism from these songs pondered over the facts and initiated course correction. And if they thought that Carnatic music is the means by which other religions can attract people, they are grossly overestimating the reach of this niche art.

Sriram V. is a historian of Carnatic music and Madras. He is the Secretary of the Music Academy, Chennai

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Letters emailed to letters@thehindu.co.in must carry the full postal address and the full name or the name with initials.

Calamity and response

If the inundation and large-scale destruction in Kerala is not an emergency, then I wonder what kind of havoc should occur for the Central government to declare it a national emergency (Page 1, "PM Modi announces ₹500 crore aid", August 19). Is there some reason why it has not been declared an emergency that the general public cannot fathom or is it sheer callousness?

H.J. MOHAMED,
Chennai

■ If the Central government has decided that the quantum of relief to be given to Kerala is to be just ₹500 crore, so be it. It may have its reasons as no less than a Prime Minister himself was a party to this. Rather than use this as a reason to become upset and attack the Centre, we should move on, especially as support and aid are pouring in from other quarters. The people of Kerala should not forget that the rest of India is alive to and aware of their plight and

will ensure that they do not come to grief. Large numbers of people from the State and who have settled abroad, especially in West Asia and in the West, are responding to their distress. Relief and aid will flow in soon. There have been magnificent gestures of support and aid by governments in the United Arab Emirates and Qatar. The UN Secretary General and the Pope have also expressed support. The fact that the UAE released a statement that said, "The people of Kerala have always been and are still part of our success story in the UAE. We have a special responsibility to help and support those affected", conveys much. We should be patient and calm.

ARUN MATHEW,
Dublin, Ireland

■ It is immaterial whether it is officially declared as a national calamity because the rest of the nation is responding in an overwhelming manner, with financial and material assistance pouring in. More

than sensational monikers, the State needs all the help it can get to rehabilitate affected people and assist them in rebuilding their lives. Post-disaster relief and rehabilitation demand enormous resources which the State cannot raise on its own. Tourism, one of the major revenue-earners, will take a hit for some time. The State, on its part, has to re-examine its land and water management policies as extreme weather events might become frequent in the days to come. There have to be ready and efficient rescue protocols. A voluntary and trained civilian force that can handle disaster management and which will assist the armed forces in rescue operations must also be put in place.

V.N. MUKUNDARAJAN,
Thiruvananthapuram

■ Loss estimates following a huge natural calamity are too complex a job to be termed accurate and realistic. Aerial surveys by non-specialists do not help one to guess what the damages are. Disasters

are not occasions to draw mileage. What is important is that contractors who will be allotted relief-related projects should also be warned not to exploit the situation and remember the spirit of their mission.

SIVAMANI VASUDEVAN,
Chennai

■ Once the flood waters recede, the people should not simply go back to their normal lives ('Ground Zero' page — "Trial by water", August 18). There appears to have been no study of environmental engineering especially when it comes to people and ecosystems. There should be discussion about the desilting of dams and the impact of deforestation. Studies have to be carried out to find models in all districts that can handle floods as well as ensure the conservation of water resources.

N. VENKATASUBBARAO,
Badrachalam

Joy of fountain pens

The photofeature, "Inkable Ink" ('Framed' page, August

19), of a pen-making legacy of pre-Independence vintage in Rajamundry, now Rajamahendravaram, in Andhra Pradesh, was riveting especially when children today think of only tablets, computers, smartphones and ball pens. I remember reading a report of an eminent school in Kerala switching back to the good old "fountain pen". What is even more interesting is that another established school in Hyderabad has still not allowed its students to use ball pens. Fountain pen manufacture should be thought of under the "Make In India" programme. It is heartening that the good old ink pen still survives.

N. NAGARAJAN,
Secunderabad

CORRECTIONS & CLARIFICATIONS:

Editing error: The Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan's party name is Tehreek-e-Insaf and not Tehreek-e-Taliban as mentioned in a report, "15-member Cabinet in Pak." ('World' page, August 19, 2018).

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