

Will the idea of 'one nation, one poll' work in India?

PARLEY

The proposal will undermine the federal structure by pushing the regional parties out

Last week, when Prime Minister Narendra Modi convened an all-party meeting to discuss the idea of 'one nation, one poll', several parties stayed away, calling the idea "anti-democratic" and "anti-federal". In a discussion moderated by Anuradha Raman, Tiruchi Siva and Jagdeep S. Chokkar speak of the implications of the proposed move. Edited excerpts:

When Prime Minister Modi floated the idea of 'one nation, one poll' yet again and invited the Opposition for a discussion last week, many prominent parties, including the DMK, stayed away from the meeting. What are your concerns?

Tiruchi Siva: One of the reasons the ruling party puts forth [to hold simultaneous elections] is the huge expenditure involved in the election process. In a democratic country, it is the right of the people to exercise their franchise. It is the discretion of the people to elect or unseat a government. Citing expenses incurred in elections is not such a big issue in a country as vast as ours.

Our main contention is that as long as we have Article 356 in the Constitution, which allows any State government to be removed by the Central government, how can you be sure that the Centre will not unseat a State government for its own personal reasons by using Article 356 if simultaneous elections are held? What will happen to the remaining tenure of that elected Assembly? As long as Article 356 is in the Constitution, no State government is assured its full term of five years. Will somebody give us an assurance that Article 356 will be removed from the Constitution?

Some argue that simultaneous elections will be long-drawn, drain manpower, that the role of money is questionable, and that the Model Code of Conduct will stall government activities. How valid are these reasons?

Jagdeep S. Chokkar: Well, are we trying to get the cheapest possible democracy or are we trying to get the most effective and representa-

tive democracy? I think it is wrong to put a monetary value on democracy and elections.

The point on the issue of expenses is, who spends this money? The money that the Government of India and the Election Commission spend, which is public money, is minuscule compared to the money that political parties and candidates spend. If political parties and candidates want to reduce expenditure, they can do that. Nobody is asking them to spend that money. They spend this money because no political party is internally democratic.

The Model Code of Conduct only says that if the government wants to introduce a programme or a policy which may have a bearing on the result of the elections, it has to seek clearance from the Election Commission. There are a number of cases where the Election Commission has given such permission. The Model Code does not say that all existing schemes should be stopped. So, to say that development stops because of the Model Code is strange. The reason is that parties which are in power think of development programmes in the last six months or three months before the elections.

Then there's the point about the government machinery getting caught in the election process. Every State has two elections every five years — one for the Assembly and one for Parliament. Today, elections to a small and remote State Assembly are considered to be a referendum on the national government, so much so that the national government and the political establishment gets into that election. A State election should be fought by the people of the State. Why should Ministers of the Central government and the Prime Minister go to every State to campaign? As a matter of fact, a case can be made that the Minister who takes an oath to fulfil his ministerial duties to the best of his ability for five years and then goes on electoral campaigns violates the oath of office which requires him to do his work as a Minister. If there are people required to campaign everywhere in the country, let them not be made Ministers. If elections are held in one or two States, why should the administra-



tion in the remaining States stop functioning?

The Law Commission, a Parliamentary Standing Committee, and the Election Commission have supported this idea in principle.

TS: Adding to what Mr. Chokkar said, till 1967, simultaneous elections were in vogue. The situation changed after that. All the reasons Mr. Chokkar gave are valid. You see, in a democratic country, an election is the core thread through which people can express their views about the government. At other times, the government has the upper hand. Saying that a few crores being spent on elections is a waste is not a valid argument.

Then I come to the Lok Sabha. In 1977, the Lok Sabha's term lasted only for three years. In 1989 it lasted only for two years. In 1996, the 11th Lok Sabha lasted for 18 months, and the 12th Lok Sabha lasted 13 months. Even the Lok Sabha cannot be assured of a full term. And if the Lok Sabha is dissolved and the State governments are stable, what is the solution to that?

Does the proposal display a contempt for the parliamentary system and the federal arrangement?

TS: Yes, there is an apprehension that it is so. What is the urgency when there are so many issues to debate? There are serious concerns about the federal structure and its

Are we trying to get the cheapest possible democracy or are we trying to get the most effective and representative democracy?

future against the backdrop of this proposal.

JSC: Part VI of the Constitution concerns the States. The States have an independent constitutional entity and existence. They have their own rhythm of elections. To forcibly change a constitutional entity's natural progression is unconstitutional. And as has been said by Siva, it is a violation of the federal structure. So, one, there is independent constitutional existence, and two, there is the famous *Kesavananda Bharati* judgment in which a 13-judge Bench said, yes, Parliament does have the power to amend the Constitution, but that power does not extend to the point where the basic structure can be changed. The basic structure has been defined variously by several Supreme Court judgments. And in all those descriptions the federal character of the Constitution is a permanent component and prevents Parliament from amending the basic structure of the Constitution. Therefore, I maintain that even if all parties agree that simultaneous elections should be held, it is unconstitutional and it will not stand the test of judicial scrutiny. It is against the spirit of democracy and it should not be done.

If the party in power wants to

have absolute control over all the States, it should move a formal proposal to have a presidential form of government. I have no problem with that, but that should be discussed in that form and not through this devious and circuitous way.

How unfair is this proposal to smaller parties and particularly regional parties?

TS: Importance to States was accorded only after the emergence of regional parties. Till then, the national party dominated. After the emergence of regional parties, importance was given to local issues, and regional importance, of course, gained momentum. That cannot be sought to be undermined or underestimated in the future. If a simultaneous election comes through, the national party may take that as a sign for a simultaneous verdict. There are chances that the prevailing situation will help a party to remain in power at the Centre and in the States. This proposal will undermine the federal structure by pushing the regional parties out.

JSC: Absolutely. I feel that this is perhaps one of the unstated intentions. To get rid of all the minor parties, so to say, is to get rid of the Opposition. Regional parties will lose out because it will be argued that we are also voting for Parliament and for national issues. So, should the voter be voting on national issues in the State elections or on regional issues?

I had written a piece with Sanjay Kumar for your newspaper [in 2016] where I had said that [from the 1989 general election onwards], out of 31 instances where elections for State Assemblies and Parliament were held simultaneously, in 24 cases the same party was voted for the State Assembly and Parliament. So, the chances of voters voting together for the same party for the State and the Centre are high.

Even when the Congress was in power, and during Indira Gandhi's time, there was a proposal for a presidential form of government, though the slogan of 'one nation, one election' was not used. So, it is a fact that any party which finds itself in a rather strong position feels like perpetuating its rule. But that does not mean that it is democratic.

The third issue is that in the last

three years, there have been a number of discussions on simultaneous elections. And this government, even before Parliament meets, calls a meeting of the political parties on this issue. This makes me wonder whether it is a diversionary tactic of the government so that people don't think about other issues.

What do you have to say about electoral bonds brought in by the NDA government to ensure transparency?

JSC: It is ironic that there is a limit on the expenditure that a candidate can incur during elections but there is no limit on the expenditure that a party can incur. What is the source of income of political parties? Nearly 70-80% of the income of parties on an average is from unknown sources. And now, on top of that, we have this new scheme called electoral bonds. This is a blatant way of converting black money into white. Data show that in 2017-18, 95% of the bonds were received by the party in power. Now, this is a way of choking the funding to all Opposition parties, big or small. And if funding to all Opposition parties is choked, obviously other parties will be unable to function. That's why we are in the Supreme Court and the matter is under the consideration of the Court. Our contention is that it is against all the apex court's judgments on transparency. I mean, the whole exercise of making electoral bonds a Money Bill, which it is not, is questionable. There are many things wrong with electoral bonds and they will make the election expense issue even more opaque.

I repeat, election expenses are not an issue. If political parties are going to be truly democratic in their internal functioning, they have to stop choosing candidates on their winnability quotient, the exact definition of which is not known to anybody, but we do know that money and muscle power form two very important parts. Till that is corrected, the election expenditure issue is not going to be sorted out.

TS: I would like to know how much money can be saved by holding simultaneous elections. We will oppose the move and continue to do so. The government cannot paralyse the best practices which have been followed so far.



Tiruchi Siva is a DMK member in the Rajya Sabha from Tamil Nadu



Jagdeep S. Chokkar is one of the founding members of the Association for Democratic Reforms



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SINGLE FILE

BIMSTEC, a viable option

Unlike SAARC, it provides an opportunity for economic, cultural and social cooperation in the region

RADHIKA CHHABRA



S. Jaishankar's first foreign visit as External Affairs Minister to Bhutan might be indicative of the government's attempt to rekindle India's 'Neighbourhood First' policy that started with Prime Minister Narendra Modi inviting SAARC leaders to his swearing-in ceremony in 2014.

The shift of focus from other regional initiatives such as SAARC to BIMSTEC in the past five years can be attributed to the inability of SAARC to foster regional cooperation and make progress. Regional cooperation under SAARC saw no progress, as indicated by the fact that the group has not met since 2014. Further, the summit stood cancelled in 2016 because it was boycotted by India, along with three other member states, owing to terror attacks in India allegedly sponsored by Pakistan-linked operatives. This prompted the Indian government to shift its focus to BIMSTEC to enhance regional cooperation, as manifested by the BIMSTEC state heads being invited to the oath-taking ceremony of the incumbent Modi government.

The Indian government, however, needs to be cautious in its approach toward BIMSTEC, otherwise it may meet a fate akin to previous attempts at cooperation in the region. Indeed, the trajectory of regional cooperation is driven by the nature and success of previous attempts at regional cooperation because there tends to be an acquiescence to the way states interact in a region. This is not to say that states will interact only in that manner. As seen in Europe, the relationship dynamic has changed time and again over the decades.

Regional initiatives in Asia, like SAARC, have been defined along the tangents of strategy and security more than they have been along economic, cultural and social lines. This can be attributed to contemporary geopolitical concerns and the mistrust that exists among the countries that are party to these organisations. Nevertheless, it is likely that looking towards BIMSTEC for regional economic, cultural and social cooperation may prove fruitful. This is because it does not include Pakistan, which has been an impediment to SAARC's success and has kept the group's relational dynamic focused on security and strategy. Further, China's absence in BIMSTEC could mean that there may be fewer obstacles hindering the achievement of the organisation's mandate. This is because bilateral and contentious issues will be excluded from the group's deliberations, especially given that India and China have conflicting world views and sometimes clash on regional goals. As the renegotiation of SAARC remains unattainable, BIMSTEC might be a viable option for India to maintain its foreign policy discourse. However, New Delhi will have to take into account the fact that in Asia, economics and politics have historically been deeply integrated, and not fall into the acquiescence trap.

The writer is a researcher with Observer Research Foundation



NOTEBOOK

Drought teaches people the value of water

Tamil Nadu has become receptive to the idea of water conservation only now

T. RAMAKRISHNAN

Twelve years ago, I asked the then Agriculture Secretary of Tamil Nadu whether his department was undertaking any programme to promote the concept of water conservation without compromising on yield. I had just returned from the U.S. where I had seen people conserve water in different ways. I told the officer that in Minnesota, the place of origin of the Mississippi river, farmers were taking to sprinkler irrigation in a big way.

The officer clearly did not like my question, nor did he like the U.S. example. He curtly replied that his department was doing everything it could. The implication was that he did not need a lecture on water conservation.

The officer's attitude was not an isolated case. Around the same time, I went to Mayiladuthurai in Nagapattinam district in

Tamil Nadu and asked a relative whether he would be receptive to the idea of water conservation, even while maintaining the same level of yield. The relative, a post-graduate and a resourceful farmer, shrugged off the question. "We are used to utilising water in a particular way, whether there is enough water in the Cauvery or not. This is how society has been treating water for thousands of years," he replied. Would people be willing to change their ways even after experiencing droughts and trying times, I wondered.

Thankfully, changes do happen. Over the last couple of weeks, I have been in touch with farmers from different regions in Tamil Nadu. The State is now facing a severe water crisis. I broached the subject of water conservation with them, just like I did with the State Agriculture Secretary and my relative more

than a decade ago. I was in for a pleasant surprise with the relative. The tables had turned. This time he gave me a lecture on how to save water while raising paddy. He is an avid practitioner of the System of Rice Intensification (SRI), a method of cultivation involving less water and seeds. The spell of drought that the Cauvery delta had faced seven years ago had convinced him of the idea of using water efficiently. He realised that he could no longer rely on the "traditional" practice of using more water than what was required.

R. Muthukumar, a young farmer of Tiruvannamalai district, which is not known to be a water surplus area, said he could not spot anyone who was interested in concepts such as SRI six or seven years ago, despite the groundwater in their lands going down steeply. But this has changed, he said. Now the

people in his village are interested in knowing about the various ways in which water can be conserved. Drought teaches people the value of water.

Micro-irrigation is gaining currency in several parts of Tamil Nadu due to a host of factors including the support from the State government. Sugarcane, banana, coconut, and vegetables like brinjal and tomato are being raised through this method. Drip irrigation for sugarcane is becoming popular in many parts of the State.

This is not to say that the problem has been solved. There continues to be enormous scope for efficient utilisation of water. But in a moment of crisis such as this, the silver lining is that no one now, whether a farmer or an officer, scoffs at the idea of water conservation.

People are waking up to reality now, and hopefully it's not too late.

FROM THE HINDU ARCHIVES

FIFTY YEARS AGO JUNE 28, 1969

Forward trading in scripts

The Union Government has banned with immediate effect forward trading in shares at all stock exchanges. A notification has been issued to this effect today [June 27, New Delhi] in the Gazette of India Extraordinary. The existing contracts entered into upto the date of the notification and remaining to be performed are permitted to be liquidated in accordance with the rules, bye-laws and regulations of the stock exchanges concerned. It is explained that this step has been taken to curb the unhealthy trends that have lately developed into the shares and securities business. If they are allowed to continue unabated, there is a danger to the health of the stock market and to the investment climate, particularly at a time when there is a revival of public investment interest in the capital market. The Central Government has, therefore, banned forward trading in shares to prevent undesirable speculation.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO JUNE 28, 1919.

Cholera in Calcutta.

In reply to a question on Cholera among the Rangoon passengers, the chairman of the Calcutta Corporation said [in Calcutta]: On the afternoon of the 13th June [Friday] the Port Health Officer reported to me through telephone that there was a large congregation of passengers for Rangoon by the B.I.S.N. Company's Steamer at Nos 7 and 8 jetties and that a number of cases of cholera had occurred. These cases were removed to the hospital. He considered this as a serious menace to the health of the city and suggested that the segregation station at Surinam should be at once utilised for the accommodation of these passengers. This was arranged by the Health Officer working in concert with the Port Health Officer and the next day arrangements were completed for accommodating these passengers.

CONCEPTUAL Futarchy

POLITICS

This refers to a form of government where voters get to vote on the values that need to be upheld by their government, but the best policies that need to be adopted in order to achieve these popular values is decided through the means of prediction markets. It is believed that prediction markets, where investors bet money on the future outcomes of various policies, can offer better policy ideas than regular democracies where politicians decide the policies of the government. Futarchy was first proposed by American economist Robert Hanson who summarised the idea as "vote on value, but bet on beliefs" in a manifesto released in 2000.

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