

Simultaneous Elections in India: A Critical Analysis of the Committee Recommendations

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ABSTRACT

Since participation of each member of the society in governance is unachievable, a liberal democratic form of government, which allows a means for peaceful change through the election process, brings us closest to that ideal. In liberal democracy, therefore, elections and voting are universal phenomena. Elections to Parliament, legislature and executive have become so significant because of their role in the establishment and operation of the government and their impact on the lives of the people placed under their care. Elections provide the executive and legislative branches with the representative character they must have that reflects the will of the people. The best thing about democracy is undoubtedly a large turnout of people voting in elections. The primary aim of the paper is to critically comment on the different committee reports and recommendations on the issue of Simultaneous elections in India. The process of synchronisation of electoral processes has been the subject of rich debate and discussion, with questions raised related to the consequences for the federal structure of the country. In this research paper, I will explore the issues, concerns and possible ramifications of this proposal, and the intricate relationship between electoral synchronisation and federalism.

Keywords: Simultaneous Elections, Synchronisation, Challenges and Election Commission

Introduction:

Elections form the basis of representative democracy and give people the chance to elect their representatives and to hold their governments to account. Elections are held in India at various levels of government such as the Lok Sabha, State Legislative Assemblies, Panchayats and Municipalities periodically. This electoral system is in tune with the federal and democratic nature of the Indian Constitution, but the regularity of the elections has given rise to an ongoing controversy over the financial burden, administrative hassles, deployment of security forces under the guise of elections, disruptions to governance, and the effective implementation of the Model Code of Conduct. In this context, the idea of simultaneous elections, often referred to as “One Nation, One Election”, has become one of the most prominent electoral and constitutional reform discussions in modern Indian politics.

The concept of simultaneous elections to the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies is not a new one in India. The first four general elections (1951-52 to 1967) were held more or less simultaneously with the elections to the State Legislative Assemblies. But this electoral year got disrupted with the premature dissolution of some State Assemblies and Lok Sabha, leading to a gradual drift in the election timelines. The Election Commission of India has highlighted that the first four general elections were concurrent –

with Lok Sabha and State Assemblies – and this is a point to consider when discussing the present-day debate on synchronised elections.

Election means “the act of choosing; choice; the act of selecting one or more from others.” Hence appropriately, “the act of choosing a person to fill an office or employment, by any manifestation of preference, as by ballot, uplifted hands or viva voce; as the election of a king, of a president, or a mayor. The word 'election' is defined in Black's Law Dictionary as the act of choosing or selecting one or more from a greater number of persons, things, courses, or rights. The option of an alternative. The Representation of the People Act, 1951, defines the term 'election' as "an election to fill a seat or seats in either House of Parliament or in the House or either House of the Legislature of a State other than the State of Jammu and Kashmir". Democracy and free and fair elections go hand in hand.

Laws Relating to Elections:

The Representation of the People Act, 1950:

The Act deals with the allocation of seats in and the limitation of constituencies for the House of the People and the Legislatures of States, the qualifications of voters at such elections, the preparation of electoral rolls (the manner of filling seats in the Council of States to be filled by representatives of Union Territories) and matters connected therewith.

The Registration of Electors Rules, 1960:

These Rules have been formulated by the Central Government along with the Election Commission in exercise of powers under Section 28 of the Representation of the People Act, 1950. The rules provide the details for the preparation of electoral rolls, and their periodic updating and revision. The procedure for the registration of eligible electors and the issue of voter ID cards or electoral identity cards with the photograph of the voter is provided in the rules. These also contain rules regarding who is included and who is excluded, and any corrections that are needed. These rules thus empower the Election Commission to prepare the photo electoral rolls, which will contain the name, photograph and other particulars of the electors.

The Representation of the People Act, 1951:

The Act provides for the conduct of elections to the Houses of Parliament and to the House or Houses of the Legislatures of each state, the qualifications and disqualifications for membership of those Houses, the corrupt practices and other offences at or in connection with such elections and the decisions on doubts and disputes arising out of or in connection with such elections. According to the Act, all doubts and disputes arising out of the elections or in connection with the elections will be dealt with in accordance with the provisions of this Act. All disputes can be raised in the High Court of the respective State. These issues are not election issues, but issues that can be raised after the election.

The Conduct of Elections Rules, 1961:

The Central Government, in consultation with the Election Commission, have framed the Conduct of Elections Rules, 1961. These contain the detailed rules for each of the various stages of the conduct of elections, including the issue of the writ notification for the conduct of elections, the filing of nominations and the scrutiny of the nominations. It also deals with the withdrawal of nominations by the candidates. These rules also apply to taking the polls and counting votes. Lastly, the rules for the constitution of the Houses based on the results are also included.

Model Code of Conduct (MCC):

The Model Code of Conduct (MCC) is a set of norms that prescribe several do and don'ts which political parties, contesting candidates, party(ies) in power have to strictly adhere to in the process of elections. The MCC has been developed with the consent of political parties who have agreed to abide by its principles and to respect and observe it in its letter and spirit. The purpose of the Model Code of Conduct is to ensure fair elections for all parties involved and a level playing field throughout the elections. It also contains provisions to prevent the misuse of official machinery and power by the ruling party to ensure fairness in elections.

Simultaneous Elections:**Meaning:**

Federal democracies, which often have multiple levels of government at the national and subnational levels, are particularly challenged by the frequency of elections. In the past decades, India has also been grappling with the same issue, with hundreds of state assembly elections taking place. These frequent elections come at a high cost in terms of money and administrative work, and also cause inconvenience to citizens, political parties and the government. This has led to a discussion on the need for 'One Nation, One Election' – simultaneous elections.

There is no specific definition of the term simultaneous election. Experts have given several terminological definitions of Simultaneous General Elections.

Sugato Dasgupta et al. define Simultaneous General Elections as General Elections that are held at the same time for several types of elections at once.

Shugart:

He said that "Simultaneous General Elections are general elections held at the same time to elect office holders at the national and regional levels, related to parliamentary and presidential candidates for countries with a presidential system of government". From these definitions, it can be concluded that simultaneous general elections include several different elections at the same time, both in terms of scope and the positions to be filled.

Simultaneous Election –Indian Scenario:

India is the world's largest democracy with more than 968 million eligible voters. The nation conducts elections for various levels of government, such as the Lok Sabha, Rajya Sabha, state legislative assemblies, and local governments. The foundation of India's electoral system is rooted in its Constitution, which outlines a federal structure, clearly dividing powers between the central and state governments. In the past, a number of high-level committees have considered a range of electoral reforms, including public funding of elections, the right to recall legislators, and moving away from the first-past-the-post voting system to proportional representation. Of these, the 'One Nation, One Election' initiative, which proposes to align the election cycles of the central and state governments, has received the most discussion, with the goal of improving governance and decreasing the expense and frequency of elections.

The electoral process was synchronised in the early years after Independence, with elections to the House of the People and the State Legislative Assemblies being held simultaneously in 1951-52, 1957, 1962 and 1967. This synchronicity was first broken when some Legislative Assemblies were dissolved early in 1968 and 1969. Later, the Fourth Lok Sabha was dissolved before its term ended and elections were held in 1971. The first, second and third Lok Sabhas were the ones that served their full five-year term. Article

352 extended the tenure of the Fifth Lok Sabha till 1977. Later, the Eighth, Tenth, Fourteenth, Fifteenth, Sixteenth, Seventeenth and Eighteenth Lok Sabhas were able to complete their five-year terms.

Recommendations of Various Committees on Simultaneous Elections:

1. The Franchise Committee Report of 1932:

The Franchise Committee Report of 1932⁹⁸, looking into franchise issues, suggested that the franchise for the Assembly should be the same as for the provincial councils, as it involved the preparation of only one electoral roll. The Franchise Committee Report of 1932, therefore, gives a historical background to the idea of simultaneous elections and emphasises the efficiency, convenience and coherence that can be achieved by synchronised electoral cycles.

2. Election Commission of India First Annual Report in 1983:

In its first Annual Report in 1983, the Election Commission recommended that the elections for the House of the People and the State Legislative Assemblies be held concurrently. Seven compelling reasons for holding simultaneous elections to the House of the People and State Legislative Assemblies were expounded, which are as follows:

1. Considerable savings on the colossal avoidable administrative and other expenditure incurred on account of holding of separate general elections (Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies).
2. Significant savings by revision of electoral rolls for the House of the People and the State Legislative Assemblies at the same time rather than twice in two separate operations on a countrywide basis.
3. Civilian officers and staff, numbering around twenty-five lakh, and a few lakh police personnel are deployed every time for two to three months for the conduct of elections, which seriously impacts their normal duties.
4. The entire administrative machinery of the country slows down significantly during elections, be it Lok Sabha or Assembly elections, and all other normal activities and functions of the Government, including developmental activities, are put on hold. These create a lot of hardships and sufferings for the common man. This goes on for approximately two months during the conduct of each general election (Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies)
5. There are significant pressures before the notification calling for a general election to make wholesale changes, especially at the district level, which are not allowed under the broad guidelines issued by the Election Commission, and changes in the administrative setup, including transfers, that become necessary in the normal course.
6. Due to the separation of general elections to the House of the People from the State Legislative Assemblies, there is a duplication of expenditure by the candidates contesting the elections and political parties, which leads to the pumping in of huge resources, which indirectly impacts the money supply in the economy. Moreover, through such delinking, the candidates contesting the parliamentary elections require more funds and resources to contest the election in a wide area without the support and co-operation of the companion candidates of the assembly segments. This also, it is suspected, tends to make it difficult for candidates to stay within the ceiling for election expenses.

3. National Commission to Review the Working of the Constitution (NCRWC) Report, 2002:

The National Commission to Review the Working of the Constitution, presided over by Shri Justice M.N. Venkatachalaiah, in its Report, also noted the need to revive simultaneous elections.

4. Parliamentary Standing Committee Report (2015):

The Standing Committee on Personnel, Public Grievances, Law and Justice, under the Chairmanship of

Dr. E.M. Sudarsana Natchiappan, made a systematic study of the matters involved in holding elections in 2015. The Committee presented its report on 'Feasibility of Holding Simultaneous Elections to House of People (Lok Sabha) and State Legislative Assemblies' on 17th December, 2015. The committee emphasised the need for holding simultaneous elections. The Committee noted that the holding of simultaneous elections to the Lok Sabha and state assemblies would reduce:

The huge cost of conducting separate elections.

1. The policy paralysis that results from the imposition of the Model Code of Conduct during election time; and
2. Impact on delivery of essential services and (iv) burden on crucial manpower that is deployed during election time.

5. Law Commission Reports Recommending Simultaneous Elections:

The Law Commission of India has, at various times, discussed several matters concerning the conduct of elections. The Commission has recommended in its reports of 1999, 2015 and 2018 (draft) the practice of simultaneous elections to eliminate the burdens of asynchronous elections on citizens, political parties and government authorities.

1. 170th Law Commission Report (1999):

In May 1999, the Law Commission, headed by Justice B P Jeevan Reddy, presented its 170th Report. The Commission had said: "This annual and out-of-season election should be ended. The elections to the Lok Sabha and all the Legislative Assemblies should be held simultaneously as it was earlier. Indeed, we cannot imagine or anticipate all the situations and eventualities that may arise, whether on account of the use of article 356 (which of course has come down significantly after the Supreme Court decision in S.R. Bommai v. Union of India) or for any other reason, but the exception should be the holding of a separate election to a Legislative Assembly and not the rule. The rule should be 'one election once in five years for Lok Sabha and all the Legislative Assemblies'.

2. Law Commission 180th Draft report, 2018:

The Law Commission of India, under the Chairmanship of Justice B.S. Chauhan, was called upon to study the issue regarding holding of simultaneous elections to the House of the People and the State Legislative Assemblies by the Department of Legal Affairs. The Commission considered legal and constitutional issues concerning simultaneous elections. The 180th draft report of the Commission on "Simultaneous Elections" was released on August 30, 2018. The following are some of the key recommendations in the draft report by the Commission:

The Commission Observed That Simultaneous Elections Would be Beneficial and Would:

1. save public funds;
2. lessen the strain on the administrative setup and security forces;
3. Make sure that government policies are implemented on time; and
4. Make sure that the administrative machinery is working on development projects rather than campaigning.

Need for Changes in the Constitutional and Legal Framework For Conducting Simultaneous Elections:

The Commission said that the current system of the Constitution does not allow for simultaneous elections. For simultaneous elections to the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies, there is a need for

appropriate amendments to the Constitution, the Representation of the People Act, 1951 and the Rules of Procedure of the Lok Sabha and State Assemblies. The Commission also suggested that the constitutional changes must be ratified by 50% of the states.

Working paper by NITI AYOJ, 2017

Working paper on "Analysis of Simultaneous Elections: What, Why and How" 2017 deliberated upon the proposal to conduct elections to the House of the People and the State Legislative Assembly, simultaneously analysing the existing constitutional provisions, financial and logistical implications related to it. It indicated the desirability of holding simultaneous elections on more than one account.

The Sixth Member High-Level Committee, chaired by Shri Ram Nath Kovind, Former President, 2024, has submitted its report. The report of the Six-Member High-Level Committee under the Chairmanship of Shri Ram Nath Kovind, Former President, 2024, has been submitted.

The Union Government had set up a six-member High-Level Committee in September 2023, headed by Shri Ram Nath Kovind, the former President, to "examine and make recommendations for holding simultaneous elections" in the Lok Sabha, State assemblies and local bodies. The panel was assigned the task of suggesting specific amendments to the Constitution and any other legal changes necessary to enable simultaneous elections and other related aspects.

The Committee has made the following major suggestions and recommendations:

The Committee has suggested that a simultaneous election be conducted in the country. The Committee has observed that a climate of uncertainty is created by regular elections. Simultaneous elections will bring stability and predictability in governance, as it will minimise disruption and policy paralysis. Conducting elections simultaneously will increase voter turnout and reduce costs. In addition, simultaneous elections lead to better government spending, increased investments, lower inflation and higher economic growth.

Amendment of Article 82A:

The Committee recommends that Article 82A of the Constitution be amended to give the President the power to declare an "Appointed Date" for the simultaneous elections to the House of the People and Legislative Assemblies.

State assemblies going to the polls after this date would synchronise their terms with the Parliament, facilitating simultaneous elections.

Term Synchronisation:

In the event the recommendations are accepted and implemented after the Lok Sabha elections in 2024, the first simultaneous elections could be held in 2029.

- Alternatively, if targeting the 2034 polls, the appointed date would be identified after the 2029 Lok Sabha polls.
- States whose elections are to be held between June 2024 and May 2029 would have their terms concurrent with the 18th Lok Sabha, though it may lead to some state assemblies having terms of less than five years as a one-off.
- States such as West Bengal, Tamil Nadu (2026), Punjab, Uttarakhand, Uttar Pradesh (2027) and Karnataka, Chhattisgarh, Telangana (2028) would have their election cycles aligned.
- The government elected after the 2024 polls would decide on the starting point for implementing simu-

ltaneous elections, either targeting 2029 or 2034, based on their preference.

- The committee recommended that fresh elections be held only for the "unexpired term" (the remaining term) in case of premature dissolution of Parliament or a state assembly, until the next cycle of simultaneous polls.

This provision protects the overall time frame of simultaneous elections from the impact of a hung House or no-confidence motion.

The Local Body Elections are to be synchronised with the general elections.

Parliament is recommended to pass a law, possibly by introducing Article 324A, to ensure that the elections of Municipalities and Panchayats are synchronised with General Elections.

This law would set the conditions for local bodies and synchronise their election cycles with the national electoral cycles.

Electoral Roll Preparation and Management:

- The Committee suggests amending Article 325 of the Constitution to enable the Election Commission of India (ECI) to prepare a single electoral roll and the Elector's Photo Identity Card (EPIC) applicable to all tiers of government in consultation with State Election Commissions.
- The electoral rolls for Lok Sabha are prepared and maintained by ECI and the electoral rolls for local bodies are prepared by SEC.
- The Committee stresses the need for harmonisation between the ECI and State Election Commissions (SECs) to avoid duplication and protect the rights of voters.
- Logistical arrangements and expenditure estimation:
- The Committee calls for the ECI to submit detailed requirements and expenditure estimates for simultaneous elections.

The Committee recommends the ECI and SECs to prepare detailed plans and estimates to facilitate smooth logistics arrangements.

These plans should include equipment requirements, staffing and security.

The impact on governance and development is:

The Committee emphasises the need for certainty in governance for good decision-making and continued development.

It highlights the role of synchronised elections in averting policy paralysis and fostering a conducive environment for progress.

The Union Cabinet headed by Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi accepted the recommendations of the High-Level Committee on Simultaneous Elections headed by former President Shri Ram Nath Kovind on 18th September 2024, and the simultaneous elections will be implemented in two phases. The first phase of the elections to the Lok Sabha and the Assembly will be held concurrently. The second phase of the elections will be held for local body elections (panchayats and municipalities) within 100 days of the general elections. To implement the concurrent elections, a common electoral roll for all elections will be prepared. The government will start detailed discussions across the country and will also form an implementation group. The government has announced that it will introduce three Bills in Parliament to introduce simultaneous elections. Out of these, two Bills include amending the Constitution to put in place the government's plan to hold simultaneous elections for the Lok Sabha, state assemblies and local bodies in a phased manner.

Conclusion:

Governance with democratic principles is the most important aspect of Viksit Bharat. Democracy is possible only based on the people's trust, which is created and tested periodically by elections to determine the will of the people. In view of both the long- and short-term implications of the elections and their manifestations for the future of democracy, there is a need to take a closer look at the administration of elections in India and at the election process as a whole.

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