Electoral Process In India: A Brief Overview

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Abstract: Indian electoral process is one of the complex democratic processes in the world. This article provides concise overview about the importance of voting and various types of elections held at national, state and local levels by giving a brief instance of Lok Sabha elections held over the years. It examines various challenges that hampers the country's free and fair electoral system. Additionally, it explores several committees and commissions along with some reform initiatives taken by the government and the Election Commission of India to conduct smooth or free and fair election. Key reforms including the introduction of VVPAT (Voter Verifiable Paper Audit Trail), Model Code of Conduct for the political parties and candidates are highlighted. This article concludes with some suggestions towards potential electoral reforms on the future of Indian democracy and further policy development.

Key words- Election, Electoral Challenges, Electoral Reforms, Voting.

Introduction

India, after more than 200 years of struggle for freedom, secured its independence on 15th August, 1947. To ensure India's welfare and accountability the Constitution of India was made after spending 2 years, 11 months and 18 days by the members of Constituent Assembly. It was adopted in 26 November, 1949 and came into force in 26 January, 1950. Article 1 of the Indian constitution states that India is a sovereign, socialist, secular, democratic and republic nation. Election is a high practice of democracy by the citizens for the well being of the nation. It is a process through which people select their representatives or political leaders for the proper implementation and execution of public laws. Article 324 of Indian constitution grants an independent body called the Election Commission of India for conducting and controlling election process in the country. India's first general election was held in 1951 on the basis of Universal Adult Franchise. In the article 326 of the Indian constitution it was stated that all citizens above the age of 21 irrespective of their caste, race, religion, class etc. can participate or vote in elections and this was called the system of universal adult franchise. In 1989, by the 61st constitutional amendment the minimum age of voting or universal adult franchise was reduced from 21 to 18.

Importance of voting

India is known as world's largest democracy. The Constitution of India provides multiple righs to its citizens. It also provides duties that every citizen is responsible to perform and voting is one such example. Elections are conducted so that citizens can select their eligible political representatives by casting vote on behalf of them. Every single vote matters and a single vote can be a deciding factor of society's present as well as future welfare. Elections reinforce stability, legitimacy and accountability in the performance of political community. Electoral process is a complex and competitive process that facilitates discussions of

public issues, public opinion and legitimacy of political agendas. Also, election process validates the worth of every single citizen in nation building. Election also paves the way that evaluates or scrutinizes the political leaders in terms of their activities, abilities, moral, social background and their upcoming agendas towards uplifting the society. Voting right is a powerful tool that every citizen hold through which they can shape the entire structure of a nation. Election process ensures transformation in the society from a failure in governance to a success in governance with efficiency and accountability.

India after independence conducted its first general election in 1951. India's first general election was a challenging experiment. Low level of literacy, political awareness and no prior experience of voting among the citizens and government became a challenging factor in the process of election. India constituted its first Lok Sabha in 1952 and Jawaharlal Nehru became the first Prime Minister of India from the political party Indian National Congress. Indian National Congress ruled for several years as single dominant ruling party. In 1989 Lok Sabha election, it was for first time that no party gained a majority. The Janata Dal party formed the National Front govt. with support from Bharatiya Janata Party and Left parties. After so many ups and downs Congress came in power by forming United Progressive Alliance with support from Left parties in Lok Sabha election 2004 and Dr. Manmohan Singh became the Prime Minister of India. In 2014 Lok Sabha election BJP came in power as single large majority party and Narendra Modi became the Prime Minister of India. In 2024 Lok Sabha election, again no party secured majority. Narendra Modi from BJP has become the Prime Minister for the 3rd time in a row and this time heading a coalition government allied with Telegu Desam Party and Janata Dal of Bihar. The ups and downs in the formation of government by different political parties indicates how important every single vote is. Every single citizen by sincerely participating in the voting process can contribute to the social upliftment and transformation.

Types of Elections

India follows a parliamentary form of government consisting the President and two Houses of Parliament called the Lok Sabha and the Rajya Sabha. The members of Lok Sabha are elected by the citizens directly and the members of Rajya Sabha are elected indirectly. India is culturally, geographically, socially the most diverse country, hence having a provision of federal structure, meaning distribution of power between the centre and the states. In India, to implement and execute laws in all parts of the country people choose their representatives from the centre, states and also from their local authorities both directly and indirectly by participating in election process. There are many types of elections conducted in India for electing the political leaders from the centre, the states and from their respective local authorities.

1) Lok sabha election

Lok Sabha election also known as general election is conducted in every 5 years to elect the members of Lok Sabha. At present it has 543 seats filled by elected representatives directly elected by the citizens of India from their respective Lok Sabha constituencies. To form a government, a political party needs to secure a majority that is at least half of the total seats of Lok Sabha. If a party secures more than half of its total seats of Lok Sabha it can form a government of its own political party. If a party can not secure majority then it can form a coalition government by making an alliance with other political parties. The leader of the winner political party is appointed as the Prime Minister. The president on the advice of the prime minister appoints the other minister that forms the council of ministers.

2) Rajya Sabha Election

Rajya Sabha, also known as the Upper House of the Parliament has maximum strength of 250 seats out of which 12 members are appointed by the President from the field of art, literature, science, culture etc. and 238 members are are elected by electoral college consisting the members of the State Legislative Assembly through a system called proportional representation by a single transferable vote. The maximum duration of Rajya Sabha is 6 years and one-third of its members retire in every two years.

3) State Assembly Election

Similar to the Lok Sabha election in the union level State Legislative Assembly elections are conducted in the state level in which the citizens directly vote for the members of the assembly from their respective legislative assembly constituencies. The Governor appoints Chief Minister from the political party that ensures majority of votes or seats in the election. If no party secure majority, two or more party can make alliance to form a coalition government.

4) President's Election

The President of India is the head of the symbol of the nation-state and a crucial part of the Parliament. A candidate for election of the President must ensure approval of 50 proposers and 50 seconders from any members of the two houses of the Parliament to get the nomination. The President is indirectly elected via an electoral college consisting the elected members of Lok Sabha, Rajya Sabha, State Legislative Assemblies and union territories of Delhi and Pondicherry through ballot paper that contains the names of all candidates. The voters select the candidates as per their preference in sequence which is known as the system of proportional representation by means of single transferable vote. The candidate ensuring highest value or number of preference becomes the President of India.

5) Local Body Election

There are two types of local body governance in India. One is known as Panchayat in which elections are conducted in village level that felicitate democracy and decentralization process through which people from very grass root rural level can raise their voice and representation for their rights. There are three levels of Panchayati Raj, Gram Panchayat at village level, Panchayat Samiti at block level and Zilla Panchayat at district level. The election in gram panchayat is typically conducted on non- party basis and its members are elected directly by the citizens from the village. Block level panchayat and zilla panchayat elections are held on a party basis having more political influence.

Another local body governance is called Municipality corporation which is responsible to maintain law and order at metropolitan cities with more than one million population. To conduct election, the areas that fall under a particular metropolitan corporation are divided into several wards. People directly elect one councilor from their respective wards. The elected councilors create a committee and the head of the committee is called Mayor. The election of mayor is conducted both directly and indirectly. In direct election of Mayor, the people select their Mayor by voting him/her directly. In indirect election, the Mayor is selected by directly elected councilors among themselves.

Electoral Challenges

India is a diverse country with different cultures and ideologies. India is a democratic nation and election is an integral part of practicing democracy. Ensuring free and fair election can be a pillar of legitimate democratic power. Over the years, several challenges are seen that impact the efficiency of India's electoral system.

During elections money power becomes biggest influencing factor. Large amount of money and resources are used on election campaigns and candidates. This creates an uneven situation where candidates with huge financial amount enjoy more advantage over others having less. In many rural areas, due to illiteracy, lack of political awareness, lack of information and unfair media coverage many people are unaware of their political representatives and their civic rights. In such a situation, people often become clueless in deciding the eligible candidate by their own. By taking advantage of this situation political members often provide them free bies to win their favor.

Due to India's social cultural diversity the identity politics is often seen in electoral scenario. People often favor voting on the basis of their caste, religion and regional sentiment. People are also influenced and triggered by the politicians on caste or religious perspectives. The tolerance that is crucial for nation's secularity seems vanished away.

The criminalization of politics and politicization of criminals has increased in form of corruption and violence. Many people with criminal background and corruption has landed on the field of politics. Huge erosion in the moral value is seen among politicians who deteriorate the autonomy of functions of the Election Commission by impacting on its ability to conduct free and fair election.

Technical barriers are also seen in many polling stations during elections. Due to lack of proper infrastructure it becomes challenging to conduct elections smoothly. Lack of efficiency in providing timely and fair access to electronic voting machines in many polling stations creates various tensions during elections.

Electoral Reforms

Electoral reform have been a topic of discussion over the years. Various committees and commissions have examined our electoral system and proposed several measures regarding electoral reform. Joint Parliamentary Committee, Tarakunde Committee, Dinesh Goswami Committee, Vohra Committee, Tankha Committee etc. are some committees that gave inclusive recommendations regarding electoral reform. Due to the changing socio-economic scenario it becomes difficult to bring all the recommendations of such committees in practice.

After independence, the voting was done via ballot paper. In 1989, a provision was made to vote via a machine called Electronic Voting Machine that saves the cost of printing ballot papers, saves the time and was designed to record votes accurately. In 2013, a system for using the Voter Verifiable Paper Audit Trail was introduced to ensure accuracy and transparency of voting. The VVPAT is designed connected to EVM in such a way which ensures the voters that their vote has been correctly recorded in favor of the candidate of their choice. The recommendation by the Election Commission for the use of voter's photo identity card for voting is a dynamic solution to check bogus voting.

Another initiative taken by the Election Commission of India for the smooth functioning of elections is the implementation of Model Code of Conduct. It was imposed for the first time in Kerala Legislative Assembly election in 1960. It came into effect in Lok Sabha elections from 1962. Model Code of Conduct is a set of instructions or guidelines to be followed by political parties and candidates to prohibit any conduct that may regulate unfair political gain . For instance, after the announcement of the Model Code of Conduct by the Election Commission of India, no candidate or political party can continue their election campaign and they can not influence people on the basis of religious, communal, regional etc. sentiments. It comes into effect from the day when the Election Commission of India makes the official announcement regarding the election schedule and it continues till the date of announcement of election result. If any member of a political party or a candidate is proved to be violating the guidelines of Model code of conduct, then the Election Commission of India can temporarily or permanently ban the candidature of that particular candidate.

Conclusion

In spite of various reform and initiatives taken by the Election Commission of India, there are several drawbacks in the electoral system of India. Lack of political awareness, poverty and communalism, ineffective technology, mass media, corruption etc. are some basic pillars of electoral problems that fuels the malpractices in elections. To further enhance the electoral system, several initiative and impactful reforms can be considered. Implementing partial or full state funding and enhancing transparency in electoral funding, donation and other expenditure can be an effective measure to tackle ill practices and negative political influence such as money power and corruption. A strict restriction should be imposed upon the candidature of a person having criminal background and corruption. Every voter must be free to vote without any fear and pressure of any kind. The mass media should be non-partisan and strictly prohibited from spreading news that hamper people's communal or religious sentiments. Mass media should not influence people towards the personal party interest of any political party. So, though the Election Commission of India enjoy the highest power during election and is working to ensure free and fair election, it is difficult to bring complete fairness in electoral process unless the voters, civil societies and political parties understand their accountability. That is why creating political awareness and civic education programmes such as providing knowledge about their rights, duties, importance of voting and good governance to all including the youth and elderly people is very important to gain inclusive political awareness and successful fair and free elections.

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