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Discussion On One Country-One Election System In India

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(1) Abstract

The concept of “One Country-One Election” is a unique proposal for political, economic, and administrative reform in a large democratic country like India. Under this idea, all the elections of the Center and the States will be held simultaneously, which can make the electoral process simple, time-saving, and cost-effective. This idea tries to reduce the frequent model code of conduct, election expenses, and administrative hassles during elections. However, serious questions have been raised on the constitutional, federal, and political aspects of this model. This article deeply analyzes various dimensions of this subject such as benefits, challenges, criticisms, and real-life examples. This article presents every aspect fairly to decide whether this idea is a boon or a bane for India.

(2) Introduction/Explanation

Democratic Structure and Electoral Process of India

India, which is the largest democracy in the world, operates under the federal structure of the Constitution. The Constitution gives the Centre and states the right to run their governments independently. Elections to the Lok Sabha, state assemblies, and local bodies are held at regular intervals. Under the current electoral system, elections are held at different times.

From the first general election in 1952 to 1967, elections to the Centre and states were held simultaneously. But after 1967, this system broke down due to the fall of governments in many states and early elections. Since then, elections to the Lok Sabha and assemblies have been held at different times.

The emergence of the concept of "one country-one election"

"One country-one election" means that elections to the Lok Sabha and all state assemblies should be held at the same time. Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his government have taken up this idea with great vigor. In 2018, the issue was discussed in Parliament and a committee was formed. The idea claims to bring many reforms in Indian democracy, but its implementation faces many constitutional, administrative, and political challenges.

What is the state of election expenditure in India?

According to the Centre for Media Studies (CMS), the total expenditure by various political parties for the 2024 Lok Sabha elections was around Rs 1,00,000 crore.

CMS is a non-profit organisation that works towards accountable governance and equitable development.

Election expenditure limits for candidates: The election expenditure limit for candidates for Lok Sabha seats in larger states is set at Rs 95 lakh and Rs 40 lakh for assembly seats, and Rs 75 lakh and Rs 28 lakh respectively in smaller states.

Political party expenditure: Currently, there is no expenditure limit imposed on political parties during elections, allowing them to spend unrestricted.

The price of a vote in India in the 2024 Lok Sabha elections was around Rs 1,400 and the total expenditure reached around Rs 1 lakh crore.

Promoting schemes: Government advertisements, especially before elections, often act as a campaign for the ruling party.

The central government spent Rs 3,020 crore on advertisements between 2018-19 and 2022-23, with the highest expenditure in election years being Rs 1,179 crore in 2018-19 and Rs 408 crore in 2022-23.

Comparison with previous elections: During the first general elections in 1951-52, candidates initially spent only Rs 25,000, which has now increased to Rs 75-95 lakh (300 times increase).

Additionally, the total election expenditure has increased six-fold from Rs 9,000 crore in 1998 to around Rs 1,00,000 crore in 2024.

Transparency measures: Political parties are required to submit annual contribution reports to the Election Commission of India (ECI) for donations above Rs 20,000.

They are also required to submit annual audited accounts (AAA) and election expenditure reports within 75 days after the election.

Funding sources:

The majority of political funding comes from corporate entities and businesses, creating a strong nexus between donors and politicians.

Committee formation:- An eight-member committee was formed at the national level for one country-one election. In which former President of India Ram Nath Kovind was made the chairman of the committee. Senior advocate Harish Salve, Union Home Minister Amit Shah, Congress leader Adhir Ranjan Chaudhary (although later he wrote a letter refusing to be a part of this committee), Gulab Nabi DPA Party, NK Singh former chairman of the 15th Finance Commission, Dr. Subhash Kashyap former Secretary General of Lok Sabha, Sanjay Kothari former Chief Vigilance Commissioner and other intellectuals were included. According to the notification, Union Law Minister Arjun Ram Meghwal will attend the meetings of this committee as a special invitee member. While Law Ministry Secretary Nitin Chandra will be the secretary of the committee. According to the work assigned to the committee, it will examine all the constitutional provisions that will need to be amended to conduct simultaneous elections.

Before preparing the report on One Country One Election, this committee researched the election process of 7 countries.

South Africa: Here voters vote simultaneously for both the National Assembly and Provincial Legislature. However, municipal elections are different from provincial elections. On May 29, elections were held for the new National Assembly as well as provincial legislatures for each province in South Africa.

Germany and Japan: Committee member Subhash C Kashyap supported the German model of constructive vote of no confidence in addition to the process of appointment of Chancellor by the Bundesstock. He supported the process of Japan. In Japan, the Prime Minister is first selected by the National Diet. After that the Emperor puts his seal. He advocated adopting a model similar to the German or Japanese model.

Sweden: This country adopts a proportional electoral system. That is, political parties are assigned seats in the elected assembly on the basis of their votes. They have a system where elections for the Parliament (Riksdag), county and city councils are held at the same time. These elections are held every four years on the second Sunday of September. While elections for municipal assemblies are held once every 5 years on the second Sunday of September.

Indonesia: Indonesia has been holding simultaneous elections since 2019. Here both the President and Vice President are elected on the same day. Voters cast a secret ballot and dip their fingers in indelible ink to prevent duplicate voting. Indonesia held simultaneous elections on 14 February 2024, which is being called the world's largest single-day election, as about 200 million people voted for all five levels - President, Vice President, Members of Parliament, regional and municipal members. After all the analysis, the committee headed by former President Ram Nath Kovind, formed to consider one country one election, submitted its report to President Draupadi Murmu on 14 March 2024. This report is of 18626 pages. This panel, formed on 2 September 2023, prepared this report after 191 days of research after discussions with stakeholders and experts. The committee suggested to extend the term of all the assemblies till 2029.

The five main recommendations of the committee constituted under the chairmanship of former President of India Ram Nath Kovind were as follows:-

- 1 The term of all state assemblies should be extended till the next Lok Sabha elections i.e. 2029.
- 2 Hung Assembly (no one has majority) In case of no confidence motion, fresh elections can be held for the remaining term.

3 Lok Sabha-Assembly elections can be held simultaneously in the first phase, after which local bodies (municipal bodies) elections can be held within 100 days in the second phase.

4: The Election Commission will prepare a single voter list and voter ID card in consultation with the state election officers for Lok Sabha, Assembly, local body elections.

5: The Kovind panel has recommended advance planning of equipment, manpower and security forces for conducting simultaneous elections.

Former President Ram Nath Kovind said that if the proposal of one nation-one election center is implemented, it will encourage the election process and will also prove helpful in the economic development of the country. Former President of India Ram Nath Kovind is the chairman of the high-level committee constituted to consider the possibilities of holding simultaneous elections in the country. The committee was constituted by the Government of India in September 2023. Former President Ram Nath Kovind, while addressing a tribal organization's program in Kolkata, said that when this proposal is fully implemented in 2029-2030 or thereafter, voters will not have to go to the polling booths every year for one or the other election. This will also boost the country's economic development, as the country's GDP growth rate will increase by 1.5% from the current 7.23%. Imagine that if 1.5% points are added to the current GDP, it will not take much time to reach the figure of 10% (GDP). Then our country will be among the top three-four economic superpowers of the world.

If candidates have to ask for votes from the people every year, then they will have to explain why the promise of development was not fulfilled? Due to elections being held every year, people sometimes shy away from going to polling stations.

On the issue of one country-one election, the politics of different states is clearly divided into two parts. If we talk about Bihar, then along with the constituent parties of the National Democratic Alliance, the newly formed Jan Suraj Party is also in its support. On the other hand, there is the Grand Alliance, which does not accept this idea at all. Its biggest constituent party, the Rashtriya Janata Dal, is raising the issue of equal education and medical system etc. parallel to this by putting up posters at various places. There is a discussion within that this system will prove fatal for the existence of regional parties. It is a different matter that the issues of Lok Sabha and Assembly elections are different, but there is a possibility of issues and their impact on the election result if elections are held simultaneously. Deputy Chief Minister Samrat Chaudhary says that the Congress, which had no objection to being in power at the Center and in the states through simultaneous elections from 1952 to 1967, is today standing in opposition. Development work gets disrupted due to frequent elections and there is an additional burden on the security forces. The government's expenditure increases. Bihar BJP State President Dr. Dilip Jaiswal believes that political stability can be ended by this system. Prashant Kishor, the architect of Jan Suraj Party, is also of the same opinion, provided that the intention of the Centre behind this arrangement is correct. The fear of the opposition is actually about this intention. Congress is calling this a ploy to divert the attention of the public from important issues like inflation, unemployment and right capacity, while the Rashtriya Janata Dal fears that this arrangement will increase the constitutional threat. State spokesperson of Rashtriya Janata Dal, Chitranjan Gagan says that through this, the intention is to make the Centre very powerful as well as establish a dictatorial system. Till 1967, if simultaneous elections were held, then there was no constitutional compulsion for it, although in the later days, due to some reasons, mid-term elections had to be held in many states. Because of which this tradition was broken. Benefits of One Country-One Election

1. Reduction in election expenditure

Election expenditure in India is the highest in the world. About Rs 60,000 crore was spent in the 2019 Lok Sabha elections. If these elections were held along with the assembly elections, about 20-25% of the cost could have been saved. Repeated campaigning by the Election Commission and political parties leads to excessive expenditure of money. Election expenditure in countries like the US is less than in India because they conduct simultaneous elections. Separate elections to state assemblies and local bodies cost thousands of crores of rupees every year.

2. Improvement in administrative efficiency

1 During elections, a large number of police and administration are engaged in election duties, which affects other work.

2 Government policies and development work come to a halt due to the model code of conduct.

3 If simultaneous elections are held, the government machinery can function uninterrupted for five years.

4 In 2018, elections in four states (Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Rajasthan, and Telangana) disrupted the government machinery for months.

5 Before the introduction of the bill, the Union Law and Justice Ministry said that since independence, the Election Commission has conducted more than 400 elections to the Lok Sabha and assemblies. Now we are going to bring the concept of one country one election, a high level committee has prepared its road map. This will increase administrative efficiency, reduce election related expenses and promote policy continuity.

3 : Political stability

1 Due to frequent elections, political parties are always in election mood and are unable to focus on making long-term policies.

2 Simultaneous elections will increase the chances of formation of stable governments at the Center and in the states.

4: Increasing voter participation

1 Frequent elections tire voters and reduce voter turnout.

2 The average voter turnout in the 2019 Lok Sabha elections was 67%, while in the assembly elections of some states it fell to 50%.

3 Simultaneous elections will make voters more motivated and active.

5: Focus on development work

1 Due to frequent elections, the focus of governments remains on electoral gains and losses rather than development work.

2 Simultaneous elections will enable governments to focus on policies and schemes for five years.

Challenges and disadvantages of one country-one election

A. Need for constitutional amendment

1: Amendments will have to be made to Articles 83(2), 85, 172, 174, and 356 of the Constitution. Article 82 (A) will be added through constitutional amendment, so that elections to Lok Sabha and state assemblies can be held simultaneously. At the same time, amendments will be made to Article 83 (tenure of both houses of Parliament), Article 172 (tenure of state assemblies) and Article 327 (power of Parliament to make laws related to elections to assemblies).

A provision will be made through the bill that the President will issue a notification on the date of the first meeting of the Lok Sabha after the general election. The date of issuance of the notification will be called the appointed date. The term of the Lok Sabha will be 5 years from the appointed date. If the Lok Sabha or the Legislative Assembly of any state is dissolved prematurely, elections will be held only for the remaining term.

The objectives and reasons of the bill state that it is based on the recommendation of the High Level Committee on One Country-One Election headed by former President Ram Nath Kovind. The Kovind Committee had also recommended the country and the states to conduct elections as well as local bodies elections. However, no decision has been taken in this regard in the Union Cabinet meeting on 12 December 2024.

2: If the government of a state falls prematurely, how will the elections of that state be conducted?

3: In 1991, after the premature fall of the central government, there was a need to hold elections. Something similar has happened in the general elections of 1996 and 1998. Due to the premature fall of the central government, there was a need to hold untimely elections.

B. Impact on federal structure

The Constitution of India is based on a federal structure.

1: If elections to the Centre and states are held simultaneously, it may reduce the autonomy of the states.

2: States like Tamil Nadu and Bihar, where regional parties are strong, may see it as interference by the Centre.

C. Diversity across states

1: All states have different social, political, and economic conditions.

2: Issues in North and South India are not the same, but holding simultaneous elections can ignore these differences.

D. Impact on smaller parties and regional parties

1: The dominance of national parties in Lok Sabha and Assembly elections can be detrimental for regional parties.

2: All regional parties may face difficulties under this policy. All other small and big regional parties like Aam Aadmi Party, Jannayak Janata Party, Janata Dal United, Rashtriya Janata Dal, Biju Janata Dal, Samajwadi Party Bahujan, Samajwadi Party, Indian National Lok Dal, Trinamool Congress, Telugu Desam Party, DMK and AIDMK may face difficulties.

E. Practical problems

1: If a government falls before the completion of its term, it will be difficult to hold elections across the country.

Praise and Criticism

Praise

1 Prime Minister Narendra Modi: He called it a "transformational reform". On August 15, the Prime Minister said that frequent elections were creating obstacles in the country's progress.

2 NITI Aayog: Called it a means of administrative efficiency and saving expenses.

3 Election Commission: Supported the idea, saying that it will simplify the process.

Criticism

1 Regional parties: Consider it an attack on the federal structure and independence of the states.

2 Opposition parties: Call it an attempt to serve the interests of the ruling party.

3 Constitutional experts: Consider it against the spirit of the Constitution.

Conclusion

Because 47 political parties had given their opinion to the Ramnath Kovind Committee formed on one country one election, out of which 32 parties supported it and 15 parties opposed it. The opposing parties have 205 Lok Sabha MPs, which means that it is difficult for the Constitution Amendment Bill to be passed without the support of the India Alliance. But still the idea of "one country-one election" is an important and far-reaching proposal for election reform in India. It can provide administrative efficiency, economic savings, and stability. It is necessary to ensure that the country's federal structure, diversity, and democratic values are not harmed in this process.

For this, a two-thirds majority is necessary for the Constitution (129th Amendment) Bill to be passed in both the houses. According to the current situation of the Lok Sabha, the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) currently has 292 seats out of a total of 543 seats. A figure of 362 is required for a two-thirds majority. At the

same time, the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) currently has 112 seats out of 245 seats in the Rajya Sabha. At the same time, special support of 6 nominated MPs is also required. While the opposition has 85 seats. 164 seats are required for a two-thirds majority. According to sources, the central government now wants to build a consensus on the bill. The government can send it to the Joint Parliamentary Committee for detailed discussion. However, it is imperative to take into account the constitutional and political issues associated with its implementation.

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