



DR. Ranbir Singh

**ONE NATION, ONE ELECTION: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS**

Asst. Professor- Faculty of Law, Agra College, (Dr. B.R. Ambedkar University, Agra) Agra (U.P.) India

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E-mail:singh.ranbir3178@gmail.com

**Abstract:** *The idea behind “one nation, one election” or ONOE as a means to synchronize the elections to both the Lok Sabha and state legislative assemblies (so voters can vote at once for national and local representatives) has recently received increased attention as an alternative solution to frequent elections, increasing electoral spending, the paralysis of policy caused by model code of conduct restrictions on politicians, and the strain on administration. Advocates claim that simultaneous elections will help reduce electoral expenses; allow governments to be more effective; and stabilize politics. Opponents claim that simultaneous elections could potentially violate federalism, eliminate localized issues, and require significant changes to Indian constitutional law. This research provides a critical analysis of the historical development of the idea of synchronized elections; the constitutional structure of India with respect to the concept of simultaneous elections; the advantages and disadvantages associated with the concept of synchronized elections; and whether the idea of synchronized elections is feasible in India.*

**Key words:** One Nation One Election, Simultaneous Elections, Electoral Reforms, Federalism. Critical.

**Introduction-** India is one of the worlds largest democracies and conducts elections in its many jurisdictions on an ongoing basis. Due to the constitutionally mandated term lengths for each level of government (and how they are dissolved) the timing of elections varies from time-to-time among these jurisdictions; including Lok Sabha, State Legislative Assembly elections as well as Municipal Corporation and Panchayat elections. This recurring nature of election cycles in India has generated a lot of discussion about whether or not it would be desirable to conduct all elections within the country on a synchronized schedule.

A key component of this argument is the idea of “One Nation, One Election.” The proposed legislation would create a uniform national schedule for holding elections. Proponents of the idea have argued that the cost associated with the regularity of elections will greatly outweigh any perceived benefits. They point out the huge financial burden on local governments, and the tremendous administrative and political burdens placed upon them. Opponents of the idea see the potential for the federal character of Indian politics to be weakened by holding simultaneous elections for all jurisdictions. Additionally, some fear that the ability to express themselves through local democratic institutions could be diminished if all elections are conducted under the same national umbrella. For this reason alone, a thorough review of the merits of this proposal is warranted.

**Endorsement of Union Cabinet on One Nation, One Election-**The Union Cabinet of India has very clearly shown that it supports the “One Nation, One Election” (ONOE) proposal, and believes this is an important electoral reform initiative for promoting effective governance, reducing public expenditures associated with elections, and increasing democratic participation. The cabinet is proposing to simultaneously conduct all national and state legislative body elections; this will restore the pre-independence era practice of holding one general election to elect all legislative representatives. In supporting the ONOE proposal, the cabinet has demonstrated a commitment to improving the organization of elections while maintaining democratic participation.

The concept of conducting simultaneous elections has been debated for many years among Indian scholars, lawyers, and parliamentarians. Additionally, the Election Commission of India, the Law Commission of India and various Parliamentary Committees have considered the possibility of synchronizing elections. It was not until recently that the Government of India created a High Level Committee on Simultaneously Elections to study the feasibility of having concurrent elections, assess what would be needed constitutionally to implement such an approach, identify potential obstacles, and consult with stakeholders across all sectors of politics. Following numerous meetings and discussions with a wide array of stakeholders, the High Level Committee delivered its final Report recommending that ONOE be implemented in stages through Constitutional and Statutory Reform.

Based on these recommendations, the Union Cabinet accepted the Report and agreed to endorse the simultaneous election proposals. The cabinet believed that repeated elections imposed substantial financial burdens on the treasury and diverted administrative machinery away from developmental projects. The deployment of security personnel, poll workers, and government officials for elections throughout the year



resulted in negative impacts on governance and service delivery. The Cabinet stated that if there were a single election period for all offices at every level of government, there would be a more efficient use of taxpayer dollars and less repetitive expense for both the Election Commission, political parties, and candidates.

Further, the cabinet noted that the constant cycle of elections results in the repeated application of the Model Code of Conduct (MCC). When elections are held in different parts of the country at different times, MCC is repeatedly invoked resulting in temporary restrictions on announcing and implementing new policies and programs. By synchronizing elections across the country, MCC applications would occur much less often and thus interruptive to governance would be minimized allowing governments to develop policies and programs without interruption.

A third rationale provided by the cabinet to support ONOE is the enhancement of political stability and long term governance. Frequent elections tend to create incentives for politicians to take short term actions to gain electoral advantage rather than taking longer term strategic approaches. Synchronizing elections would give elected governments more consistent and predictable terms allowing them to develop longer term plans and policies. This stability would lead to better governance outcomes and create a more favorable environment for investment and economic growth.

Additionally, the cabinet stated that there would be administrative benefits to conducting all elections at once. Conducting elections necessitates deploying large numbers of poll personnel, teachers, civil servants, and security forces. The continued requirement to deploy these groups for multiple elections creates a tremendous burden on administrative systems and negatively impact normal functioning of government. If all elections were conducted concurrently, the number of times these groups had to be deployed could be greatly reduced enabling greater efficiency within public institutions. Further, the Election Commission could optimize their electoral infrastructure including EVMs, VVPATs, polling stations, logistics etc., because they would not have to prepare for separate elections at different times.

By accepting the ONOE proposal, the cabinet acknowledged that implementing such an approach would require significant amendments to the Constitution as well as agreement amongst political parties. Specifically, the cabinet understood that provisions related to the duration of office of members of Parliament (Articles 83 & 85) and State Legislatures (Articles 172 & 174), as well as those related to dissolution of these bodies (Article 356) may require amendment. The cabinet again reiterated that any changes to the Constitution must be done in a democratic manner involving consultation with State Governments, political parties, constitutional experts and other interested stakeholders.

Finally, the cabinet expressed faith that implementing ONOE would result in stronger democratic participation through reduction of voter fatigue. At present voters are called upon to vote in elections at multiple levels at different times resulting in decreasing interest in voting and increasing campaign fatigue. Consolidating elections into a single cycle may increase voter knowledge and participation while making voting easier for citizens.

However, at the same time, the cabinet made it clear that they do not intend for ONOE to diminish India's federal system or its democratic diversity. Rather, the cabinet assures that safeguards will be built into any ONOE framework so that states retain sufficient autonomy and regional issues are appropriately addressed during elections. The government indicated that they are willing to enter into broader based consultations in order to deal with federalism-related concerns about representation and constitutional propriety.

Thusly, the union cabinets approval of One Nation One Election represents a major milestone towards comprehensive electoral reform in India. The cabinet sees synchronized elections as a way to promote efficient governance, decrease electoral spending, ensure continuing policies, and strengthen democratic institutions. However, they also acknowledge that implementation of ONOE will depend on constitutional legitimacy, political consensus and thoughtful implementation. Thusly, approval of ONOE represents both support for synchronized elections as well as commitment to achieve electoral reform through democratic discourse and constitutional methods.

**HISTORICAL CONTEXT-** Simultaneous elections were conducted in India during the first four general elections held in 1951–52, 1957, 1962, and 1967. During this period, elections to the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies were conducted together.<sup>1</sup>

The cycle was disrupted after several State Assemblies were dissolved prematurely in 1968 and 1969. Subsequently, the Fourth Lok Sabha was dissolved before completion of its term in 1970, leading to separate election schedules.<sup>2</sup> Since then, India has experienced staggered elections due to varying political



circumstances, coalition governments, and constitutional provisions allowing dissolution of legislatures before completion of their terms.

The idea of restoring simultaneous elections was revisited by the Election Commission, the Law Commission, the Parliamentary Standing Committee, and more recently by the High-Level Committee chaired by former President Ram Nath Kovind.<sup>3</sup>

**REVIEW OF LITERATURE-** The Law Commission of India in its 170th Report (1999) recommended simultaneous elections to reduce election expenditure and improve governance efficiency. However, it emphasized the need for constitutional amendments and political consensus.<sup>4</sup>

The Parliamentary Standing Committee on Personnel, Public Grievances, Law and Justice (2015) supported phased synchronization of elections and observed that frequent elections adversely affect developmental activities due to repeated enforcement of the Model Code of Conduct.<sup>5</sup>

The Election Commission of India has repeatedly highlighted the logistical burden of conducting elections at frequent intervals. The Commission noted that synchronized elections could optimize the use of security personnel, polling staff, and electoral infrastructure.<sup>6</sup>

The Law Commission's Draft Report (2018) examined legal implications and concluded that simultaneous elections are constitutionally feasible but require extensive amendments to Articles 83, 85, 172, 174, and 356 of the Constitution.<sup>7</sup>

Recent studies have been conducted by scholars such as Suhas Palshikar and M.P. Singh. The studies demonstrate a concern for federalism and representation. According to these authors, the differences between national and state issues are substantial, and concurrent elections may influence voters' preferences for choosing their national representatives based upon national issues, rather than local issues.<sup>8</sup>

**BENEFITS OF ONE NATION, ONE ELECTION- 1. Reduction in Election Expenditure:** The cost of frequent elections is high for all three of the stakeholders in this process: government agencies, political party organizations, and candidates. Concurrently conducting elections can greatly reduce the public expense associated with election polling, security deployments, and the administrative effort needed to manage an election.<sup>9</sup>

**2. Better Governance:** The continuous application of the MCC will continue to impede development and public policy. Holding simultaneous elections will decrease the amount of time that development efforts and policy-making are delayed.<sup>10</sup>

**3. Efficient Utilization of Resources:** Many civil servants, teachers, and law enforcement officers have to leave their jobs for extended periods of time because they have to work at polls during elections. By holding elections at the same time, many of those positions won't be vacated as frequently.<sup>11</sup>

**4. Increased Voter Participation:** Simultaneously running all elections will probably cause voters to turn out better since it decreases voter fatigue and makes voting easier.<sup>12</sup>

**5. Political Stability:** Conducting all elections at the same time might create stable governments and decrease political uncertainty created by constant campaigning for elections.<sup>13</sup>

**6. Reduction in Black Money:** Simultaneous elections can possibly lower excessive campaign expenses. Simultaneous elections may make campaign finance disclosure more transparent and therefore accountable.<sup>14</sup>

**CHALLENGES AND CRITICISM-** However, there is strong political and legal resistance to this proposal. Opponents argue that simultaneous elections will undermine India's federalism and emphasize national issues over regional ones. In addition, voters may place greater emphasis on national leaders and parties rather than state-specific issues. This could put regional parties at a disadvantage and result in less representation for regional interests.<sup>15</sup>

In addition to undermining regional interests and federalism, another problem facing simultaneous elections is that of logistically coordinating them. For example, if a government loses its majority prior to completing its term, mid-terms, unstable coalitions, or constitutional crises could disrupt the election schedule. Furthermore, conducting nationwide simultaneous elections would necessitate large-scale logistical preparations including the purchase of electronic voting machines, voter verifiable paper audit trail systems, large numbers of security personnel, and large numbers of poll workers; all of which would occur on a massive scale never seen before.<sup>16</sup>

**LEGAL AND CONSTITUTIONAL HURDLES-** Implementing ONOE would require comprehensive changes to the Constitution. Articles 83(2) and 172 stipulate that the Lok Sabha and State Assemblies will serve a five-year term unless dissolved early. Likewise, Articles 85 and 174 provide for the



President/Governor to dissolve legislatures based upon specific criteria. To coordinate elections, each of these articles would need to be changed.<sup>17</sup>

Additionally, rules concerning Presidential rule under Article 356, no confidence motions, and early dissolution would need review. Given that any changes made to federal matters would likely require approval by at least half of the State Legislature under Article 368, obtaining political consensus between the Center and States is perhaps the largest barrier to implementing ONOE.<sup>18</sup>

**GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE-** Some countries hold simultaneous elections with various degrees of success. South Africa holds national and provincial elections concurrently while Sweden holds both national parliamentary and local/regional council/municipal elections simultaneously once every four years. Belgium also conducts synchronized elections in some contexts; however, India's unique federal framework, population size/demographic composition, number of political parties, and Constitutional framework differ from these other countries. While international examples may serve as a guide, they will not be replicable within the Indian context.<sup>19</sup>

**POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS AND WAY FORWARD-** One potential way forward is through a staged roll-out. Rather than attempting to synchronize all elections immediately across the country, states may group themselves into clusters and synchronize elections over multiple election cycles.

Alternatively, introducing a “constructive” vote of no-confidence -- where a government can only be ousted when an alternate government is simultaneously elected -- would eliminate premature dissolutions and allow for continued coordination of elections.

Prior to implementing ONOE, extensive consultations must take place with State Governments, political parties, constitutional scholars, and the Election Commission. Additionally, significant investments will be required in developing new electoral infrastructure (including EVMs/VVPATs), manning those systems with sufficient personnel etc. Regardless of how reforms are implemented -- whether through increased administrative efficiency or through improved democratic representation/federal autonomy -- they must balance both considerations equally.

**CONCLUSION-** The idea of One Nation One Election represents one of the most significant electoral reforms ever proposed in modern-day India. ONOE offers much promise in terms of reduced expenditures, enhanced administrative efficiency, ongoing governance, and optimized use of resources. However, ONOE also poses several critical questions related to federalism/ representation of regional interests, constitutional feasibility, and practical implementation.

Ultimately, transitioning to simultaneous elections must occur through widespread political agreement/constitutional revisions/institutional protections. Rather than proceeding with immediate implementation, a gradual and collaborative approach to reform is far more reflective of India's democratic nature/federal structure. Ideally, the goal should be to enhance democracy while ensuring that enhanced efficiency does not come at the expense of either constitutional principles/guarantees or representative governance.

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