

CMS Release

2018 Assembly Polls: More Vitiating Than Ever !

How free, fair and transparent are the assembly polls in 2018 in six states are? Given the money spent by parties and candidates, the kind of murky campaign they were engaged and the nature of violation of the Election a Commission's codes, this is an obvious question to raise.

The expenditure involved in these elections is twice or more the previous rounds. In this 2018 round of Assembly election in six states, anywhere around Rs 15,000 crores is estimated to be spent. Highest was in Telangana, as in its 119 constituencies, an amount of upward of Rs 5,000 crores was spent according to an estimation of Dr N Bhaskara Rao, who has been tracking poll expenditure in various elections for over two decades.

CMS has been tracking poll expenditure in India in various elections for nearly two decades. Their studies bring out that black money is still active, even after the demonetisation two years ago. Never before so much floating cash has been confiscated as in the last few weeks. In Telangana alone nearly 150 crores cash was confiscated, apart from another 25 crores worth of liquor, and such lures. Between all the states, the cash confiscated works around Rs 350 crores, half of it being in Telangana. This is expected to be not even ten percent of what was actually in circulation. Most of it was on account of public meetings and crowd mobilisation.

In Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh, the model of luring voters was different. In Madhya Pradesh quid pro quo with middlemen practice was far more than in Telangana and Rajasthan. But what was spent in these two states was similar, but almost double that of previous assembly polls. Despite this, no party made this menace as a campaign issue.

Worse is the kind of lures and freebees promised by parties to voters, as if they are unconcerned of its implications to the economy and electoral psyche. TRS first announced doubling unemployed allowance and old age pension from existing, but once Congress's party announced much more than that, TRS came up with revised offer in their manifesto of more than what Congress party offered. As if it was a bidding in an auction!

Poll surveys also created much havoc in poll scene in all the states going to polls this year. So many surveys and a much higher was spent for surveys even when their relevance is on vane. In all, surveys referred in news media and the ones not reported and the ones for candidate selection would involve around Rs 200 crores assuming they were in fact conducted in the field. In all, in these states over 200 field surveys were claimed or referred to in the last

three months. Half of them were by the parties in power in these States. Never before EC code was so blatantly violated by news media in Telangana about publishing poll surveys.

Election campaigns were also never so polarised as in this round on communal and religious issues, violating the fundamental feature of free and fair character of elections. Vengeance was more evident in the campaigns, than a debating spirit. "If this trend continues next few months for 2019 general election, threat to democratic roots are irreversible", Dr Rao feels. And yet no sane voice has emerged.

Without addressing poll expenditure, responsibilities of news media (particularly social media), parties and leaders taking to temple and religious route, elections cannot be expected to be free, fair and transparent. And it amounts to reducing democracy to an electoral farce, Dr Rao contends.

Dr N Bhaskara Rao who is a pioneer in poll studies in India of 45 years standing. He is author of NBTs "**Poll Surveys in News Media**", 2012 and his recently released SAGE publication "**Sustainable Good Governance, Development and Democracy**" explains how the trend is in reverse direction of good governance irrespective of who wins or loses. This book gives Rs 1,50,000 crores cost estimate of polls to legislatures (Lok Sabha and Assemblies) of India starting with 2019 Lok Sabha poll.

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