

Propositions for Our Republic at 100 in 2050

Dr N Bhaskara Rao



Published by

Dr N Bhaskara Rao

A-60, Freedom Fighter Enclave, Neb Sarai,

New Delhi – 110068

Preface

I think the next couple of years (2021-23) are crucial for our country as a Republic to stand out. After 70 years of our Republic, there are crucial trends and issues that need to be addressed to lift the country to newer heights. I bring out this summative monograph for an introspection on the basics of our democratic foundations. My forthcoming three books deal with these fundamentals at length. But time will not wait.

Over the last fifty years (1970-2021), I have been a close observer, researcher and an analyst of politics and public policy making in the country. However, I still wonder whether any independent voice has emerged over the years with much needed adjustments required to address our Constitutional vision. Of course, we do have several brilliant critics from different perspectives. How can we expect anything different even in next 30 years, without re-looking into the functioning of our political parties and the way we view the elections? More importantly in this process, how do we make centre stage "We, the people". These are some questions I summarise and raise for further consideration.

Dr N Bhaskara Rao

Contents

Page No.

Next big game changers, ten propositions	1
Pros and Cons of Simultaneous Polls	4
How well conceived is the idea of simultaneous polls?.....	8
Is our Republic of "We, the people" or of "We, the parties"?..	13
Better parties to rediscover themselves and reposition.....	17
Good governance and equitable development with activism? ..	23

Next Big Game Changers: Ten propositions to lift India to newer heights

As I am about to complete sixty years as research based analyst in the power corridors of New Delhi and writing books on governance issues, I have come to the conclusion that next big game change in India, in the Republic, is not possible without dramatic shifts in the paradigm of the trajectory of Democracy, Development and Governance.



The common denominators between the three are Political Parties and Electoral System. That is without political parties coming under checks and balance and elections without yielding representation, nothing better could be expected in the country. But it is a compulsion that we need to rejuvenate the Republic as it approaches 75 years so that the country could expect to have Good Governance at least by the time it is hundred in 2050.

The shift in the paradigm in both the cases, the political parties and the elections, is possible, if we could take to ten basic practices. They do not need to wait for structural changes. Most of these could be part of Model code of ECI, which the Supreme Court had already confirmed legal standing. I refer to them here only in nutshell. My more recent books on corruption involving citizen, “Citizen Activism in India”, “Sustaining Good Governance”, “Rejuvenating the Republic” and “The Third Eye of Governance”, discussed these propositions at length.

The first, is reminding political parties of their very justification and jurisdiction. Despite cautions by Mahatma Gandhi and the constitution makers, political parties have polarised the balance of power idea inherent

in the political system we have adopted. The process of their registration and eligibility criteria need to be revisited now for a renewal, by the Election Commission of India.

The second, transparency in governance is as important as mass media are for the democracy. The Right to Transparency Act of 2005 need to be revived and kept out of being meddled by successive governments.

The third, poll campaigns should be based more on “crowdfunding”, not corporate funding as at present. The present trend need to be reversed. This one resolve will make magical difference.

The fourth, why should candidates campaign in solo? Why not candidates reach out voters and appeal together. The campaign should be in a spirit of coexistence as volunteers for public service and in a spirit of “we work together” after the poll.

The fifth, news media sources should offer free time or space as an obligation to serious candidates in assembly and Lok Sabha polls. The ECI should work out the modalities as in the case of AIR and Doordarshan.

The sixth, candidate should be local and the nomination should be endorsed by more number of local voters (than at present) spread across the constituency. (Even if it requires a legal change).

The seventh, political parties could nominate candidates (for symbol) if only they are adhering to their own party constitution as to internal democracy.

The eighth, canvass of candidates and parties and their offers or propositions to voters should be limited to a manifesto or written claims in public domain including the ECI.

The ninth, elections to local panchayats (*zilla parishad, mandal and village panchayats*) should be on non-party basis (without party nomination/ symbols), on individual basis, even if some contestants had party links (as before decades ago).

The tenth, decisions of an incumbent – Government has to be within the poll codes. All contestants should endorse RTI, the Act Guaranteeing Services Delivery (which many states have passed).

These changes will have lasting and larger impact than, for example, simultaneous polls, which may be good for consolidation and control and command of a regime, not for restoring the civilisational heights that India is known.

Most of these do not need any change in the laws. By taking to these, Prime Minister Narendra Modi will remain a reformer beyond decades and a leader who changed the face of India for good.



Pros and Cons of Simultaneous Polls

The fact that the Prime Minister has been endorsing the idea of simultaneous election for a couple of years, is clear that the Government is determined to push ahead. As a result today there is wide



spread expectation that the country may go for simultaneous poll in 2022. Are we ready for such a dramatic shift? The idea of simultaneous elections has its pros and cons. On the face of it, the idea is appealing. Particularly, because election codes of Election Commission curtail powers of the incumbent government, which in turn means under the present system government get restrained from some executive powers, which may result in deferring implementation of some on-going schemes.

In fact, the arguments against simultaneous elections include that it amounts to adopting Presidential form without declaring so and that it facilitates one-person domination without country opting for such a system formally. This also means diluting Federal system in favour of centralisation. This reflects homogenizing the country instead of bringing equity, sustaining plurality and promoting local and regional leadership.

‘One election’ leads to ‘one leader’

We should not ignore completely that India is a country of many states under a Federal structure. As such, how can there be ‘one election’, unless it could be “one leader’ as well for the country! How can any deny the fact that “one nation, one election, one leader” is not good either for the democracy or for the inclusive development of the nation. Similarly, it is not good for the Federal system and for assuring free and fair elections.

The idea of simultaneous elections should not deprive the states of having a popularly elected government on their own. Or, deprive a majority government to wind up when and if the ruling party in New Delhi loses majority and goes for a midterm poll. That should not mean states to

dissolve assembly and go for elections irrespective of its five-year tenure. Simultaneous election should not offer yet another opportunity to the Federal government to impose Presidents Rule in States.

The core of argument for simultaneous elections is that a considerable expenditure is involved for conducting elections, as at present. In addition, it is also argued that Development process gets impeded because of model code of the Election Commission of India.

Poll expenses are of concern

More specifically the reasons given for simultaneous polls are that frequent polls hurt the economy and slows the development. Yes, elections do cost but it has to be weighed against democratic system that we adopted. The ECI deserve praise for its superb job of conducting polls in India at least cost to the Government. What should bother the country is what the candidates and the parties spend and, even more, the kind of inducements they offer to the electorate every time and in a competitive way. This is what should worry the nation more. Also, it is important to remember that what is spent on polls in the country in all is much less than what the union government and the state governments spend on unproductive publicity and advertising yearly with all kind of claims and promises.

Regarding development. Yes, going by the poll code certain limits are on the incumbent. But the cause to worry is the way the leaders and parties accuse each other and tend to vitiate the governance process. The model code by itself does not impede the development. Even assuming it does, it could be modified once the parties come to an understanding and also abide by it so that the essential and on-going public services and projects are not effected. It is the incumbent who has to demonstrate, not to succumb to vote getting compulsions.

Transparency Missing

So far, since the time of Republic, 108 times popularly elected government in states were removed to impose President's rule. Only a few times, it was due to fact that House could not elect a leader in the normal course. Most of the times President's rule was imposed at the discretion of the leaders of the Federal government or its agent in the state, the Governor. Transparency in the process was missing and suo-motto announcements has become a practice. Instead of curbing such practice, the idea of simultaneous elections amount denting the very democratic roots and going against political plurality desirability for tackling social diversities.

Instead, the need of the time is to find alternate ways of conducting elections at all levels, with least cost and in a free and fair way and a re-look into poll time codes. Second, find ways of curbing misuse of the government machinery by the incumbent party to its poll advantage. The question that we also need to debate is whether we go for one agenda and one leader driving the poll process, which means local concerns, issues and interests becoming secondary.

The distinction between elections at different levels get blurred when voters are required to vote simultaneously. These questions need to be looked into from both feasibilities under Constitution and desirability as well as to Democracy and Development. From both these criteria simultaneous election could be reasonably pursued if and only when we formally adopt a Presidential system.

Prioritize Real Issues!

Prime Minister Modi is in 'cloud nine' situation today to afford a head on with real issues of political reforms, some of which he did refer to in his several speeches. The debate for simultaneous elections should not push under carpet again now the more important and long pending poll

reforms. There are many issues that need to be dealt. **The first**, is to consider proportional representation of elections in place of first-past-the post system that we had experienced nearly seven decades. A debate on this is more pertinent. **Second**, bring political parties under a regulatory frame and into transparency regime by bringing them under RTI.

Third, the Prime Minister and Chief Ministers should be elected similar way as the speakers of Parliament and Assembly. **Fourth**, the Whip system on the floor of legislatures should be limited to exceptional situations. **Fifth**, even more urgent, curb poll expenditure by the government, by political parties, by candidates themselves and come up with compliance mechanisms as to ceiling on expenditure including by curtailing duration of poll process.

Several Parliamentary Committees have gone into these aspects over the decades without being followed up. Simultaneous elections in India, 'one nation, one election' notion is antithesis to good governance, on ground.

Electoral Reforms, first

“One election” idea undermines regional parties, local leaders and regional agenda. It promotes prospects of one leader, one party, and chances of misleading by pepping up passions and populism. Certain key persuasive instruments that are available today for “consensus manufacturing” country-wide were not there during 1952-67 when we had simultaneous polls. Instead, India would be better-off if it pursues the political reforms first. Simultaneous election idea is easy to get adopted but it has doubtful and difficult implications. The basic poll reforms, on the other hand, are difficult to push through but has durable positive implications to parliamentary democracy and Federal system that we have adopted.

How well conceived is the idea of “one election” for the country?

Prime Minister Modi reiterated repeatedly his agenda of "one election" for the country for Lok Sabha, State Assemblies and even at other levels.



He justified the idea on two counts. One, as polls are happening for various levels at different time point, they are coming in the way of development. Second, the present schedules of polls involve a lot of expenditure, even unnecessarily.

Correct the Concerns

If these two are the only reasons for the PM to pursue the idea of simultaneous elections, what stops him to correct both the concerns now itself with two initiatives which he could take now. Both these suggestions are much simpler. They yield quick results, without adverse implications that simultaneous polls imply. **First**, cut down the duration of the poll process. **Second**, initiate change in model poll codes.

Why is the poll schedule staggered over such a long period in the last couple of elections, for example? Until 1998 general elections were held within three phases. In fact, when the 7th and 8th general elections were held in five days. Why were the 2019 general election held in 7 phases stretched over 39 days despite the country being better equipped than ever before? Our PM today could do even better and hold the next general election in one or two phases and within one week. Why do we

Schedule of General Election 1977-2019		
Year	Days	Phases
1977	5	2
1980	4	2
1984	5	3
1989	5	2
1991	27	3
1996	11	3
1998	23	3
1999	29	5
2004	21	4
2009	28	5
2014	36	9
2019	39	7

need a poll campaign of more than two weeks? Thereafter, the duration of elections to State Assemblies whenever due will get reduced to a

fortnight. Also, if the PM corrects the precedent of Union Ministers campaigning in State and Civic polls across the country, the government functioning becomes focussed. This one initiative alone will reduce by half both the concerns of PM.

All that it requires is **will** of the party-in-power and then, second, **modify** the election code. Codes were set by political parties. They had agreed together with the Election Commission. These could be changed now in no time without any amendments, as Prime Minister Morarji Desai did in 1977. These codes in fact have saved the grace of the elections in India. We should not lose out on their sanctity. We need to modify them going by experiences and sanctify. Regarding the expenditure, it is multiplying because of spending by political parties and their candidates, in violation of the codes and norms of level playing. This too could be sorted out by the parties, with the ruling party taking the initiative, in no time before the next general election. In fact, today PM Modi is in the best control to address these concerns and also implement.

Why Denigrate Democratic Traditions?

Instead of taking these initiatives, why does PM Modi want to go down as the one who denigrated democratic traditions and roots of the country. Even more important, there are any number of studies over the years which had brought out that development has not been matching and equitable because of centralisation and lack of representative character of elections and the campaign model that we are stuck with. Even in this respect, the PM could do wonders, much easily and quickly by changing the poll practices and the way candidates canvass. There is no evidence of PM or BJP or the Governments or the EC taking any initiatives to explore alternative ways to overcome the two problems that the PM considers as compulsions for simultaneous polls.

Going into the two excuses cited by the PM for simultaneous elections, surprising revelations could not be avoided. First, 40 to 65 percent of election time total expenditure in the country is by the party-in-power and its candidates. What the Election Commission formally spends works out, hardly to around 15 percent. Since I was the one who has been estimating the poll expenditure in the last twenty-five years, I know the fund. If the PM is worried about poll expenditure, he has the best of opportunity to correct without destabilising and waiting.

Development Ideas Proliferate because of Elections

Second, contrary to viewing frequent elections as a hindrance for the development, the reality is other way. It is because of frequent elections that development ideas are proliferating and the incumbents are in hurry at least close to polls to implement and showcase too. The argument otherwise is used more as an excuse for the lapses in implementation of incumbents or to pre-empt criticism of the opposition leaders. More obviously this excuse of staggered polls coming in the way of development is a ploy of leaders of incumbent parties to vitiate the poll process with more doles and populist inducements to voters. Also model code is not a hindrance for ongoing functioning or even to take on emergency issues of governance. If so, codes can be modified to make them inclusive.

But, on the other, Hyderabad municipal elections recently signalled what could be expected of simultaneous polls. Eight union ministers and as many leaders in power from other states descended on Hyderabad to campaign, some in special flights, pushing both the contesting local candidates and the local concerns and issues to background. We have been seeing in such situations to what extent the winners are responsible in the wards and representing the poor.

In the pyramid system of democracy the roots matter more. In 1960, New York Times correspondent in New Delhi wrote, "**The Most Dangerous Decades**" contending India will fall apart after Pandit Nehru. It was based on his insights into the functioning of the Parliament and State Assemblies. In response to this book, I wrote in 1968 the "**Politics of Leadership in India**" where in, I questioned the logic of that author Selig Harrison and argued that Indian democracy is not limited to Parliament and the State Assemblies, but the grass roots at the village and district level governance is far more critical. In fact, the first Chief Minister of Gujarat Balwantrai Mehta deserve credit for his foresight in 1957. It was based on his report that the three tier system of governance and panchayat raj was adopted in India and his ideas were based not only on what the Mahatma Gandhi advocated about **village Republic**. Shriman Narayan, later Governor of Gujarat, who also profounded grass roots democracy as foundational. I continue to hold to these views for sustaining the trajectory of democracy, development and governance. But, unfortunately, the political parties ensured last few decades that their "remote influence" is far more on local democratic institutions than the other way. And that is the beginning of declining trends in governance.

Threat to Federal Character

The other adverse implications of simultaneous polls are many more. Most shattering includes threat to federal character and regional development, snubbing of local and emerging leaders and regional and local parties all across the country. And above all, it dilutes representative character of elections by parties and facilitates hegemony of a few and concentration of political power. Simultaneous poll is good only for such centralisation and to consolidate a regime of control and command.

PM Modi got a rare opportunity today to do what none of the Prime Ministers earlier tried. That is provided he really wants to cleanse not only the electoral system but also establish an equitable development in the country. His idea of "local vocal" should be a reality. He will go down as Ataturk Mustafa Kamal of India beyond decades by taking to socio-political transformation. That cannot happen without bringing sanctity in our elections and poll campaigns. And take to decentralisation and restore the idea of India of Republics, where representative character of elections is a priority. This cannot be with reversing campaign model itself. Why do election campaign, for example, need to be solo? It could as well or better be by candidates campaign together. This obviously implies redefining the very idea of an election so that it does not remain a "battle ground" between parties and leaders. Politicians should not become paranoid of polls as if they are an end in themselves. Political parties need to be limited to legislatures at two levels and make elections at other levels as party-less. Mr. Modi being the most popular Prime Minister, he should reconsider his idea of simultaneous polls and take to these initiatives now. The reasons are far more compelling and consequential. My forthcoming book, **"Next Big Game Changer of Elections"** describes this unique opportunity at length. Let 'cooperation and coordination' model be the way to lead the nation, not "control and command" model for winning an election at any cost.



Is our Republic of "We, the people" or of "We, the parties"?

Recent developments in the country make me wonder where we are heading as a Republic of India. What do we make out of Political party leaders threatening the standing of the judiciary, political parties dictating the character of legislatures without inner party



democracy, political parties committing the country with long term implications without coming under any accountability laws, news media of the country coming under increasing domination of political leaders? Are political parties above the law and overlords of the State, much beyond the designated institutes without having any standing under the Constitution? Have we ever debated this thickening dilemma? Or, it too is being pushed under carpet in the weight of "conflict of interest" of political leaders? More often one gets doubt these days whether political parties have forgotten that their registration and recognition is on condition of their adherence to the Constitution of India. Some could even say that the way the parties are indulging in is no less than a betrayal of the Constitution. Can we expect to accomplish the objectives of the Republic without reforming the political parties? Mahatma Gandhi envisioned perils of party dominated democracy seventy years ago--before the parties proliferated, penetrated and polarised the nation.

Sukumar Sen's Initiative

Political parties should be thankful to Sukumar Sen, the first Election Commissioner of India. Despite that Constitution of India has not even referred or specified any role for political Parties, it was his initiative that gave certain recognition to political parties. But that was based on parties submitting a constitution of their own for the functioning of the party,

including procedure of electing the party functionaries. This, the ECI could do as it was constitutionally empowered to conduct free and fair elections for a representative form of government for the Union and at the States of India. For that, Sukumar Sen recognised the political parties by allocating symbols for those parties who had registered along with a constitution of their own and obligation to confine to ECI rules and regulations for conducting the party affairs within the frame of their own Constitution. This Constitution of the party is expected to indicate the specifics on internal democracy. That includes the frequency and modalities of organising the political party. And yet how many political parties are adhering to whatever their party constitution had indicated about electing the functionaries of the party. In fact, there are parties even 135-year-old ones, postpone inner party elections again and again and reducing the party to one of nominated all across and of a single family and yet dictating priorities and policies. Many office holding functionaries in parties today do not even know that their party has a constitution and what it claimed as its objectives when registered with ECI.

Balwant Rai Mehta's Suggestion Ignored

And yet elections to other than Legislative bodies are also being conducted on the basis of political party affiliations and endorsements despite these were not expected to be on party lines. In fact, that was what the Balwantrai Mehta Committee in 1957 had suggested. The consequences of having elections at these other levels and other bodies, like cooperatives, school and temple committees too on party basis, have led to a decline in democracy, participative development and in inclusiveness of governance in the country. In the process, political parties have become power grabbers or seekers rather than integrators and for public service. The distinction between political parties has become blurred. They are at the most viewed as "leftist" or "rightist" without larger public knowing what that means. Political parties are no longer healers. Some even argue that parties today expedite divisive course and have

become “wheeler – dealers”. It is because of political parties the elections have become primary source for sustaining and multiplying the problems of the country. They have become stumbling block more in achieving the cherished goals of the Republic. The rise of political parties has been at the cost of the constitutionally provided institutions and to ensure checks and balances. In that pursuit, citizen has been reduced as a dependent with doles that parties thrust upon, unconcerned of the consequences.

Full of those with ‘deviant record’

Everyone knows now how the Assemblies and the Parliament are full of those with "deviant record" and riddled in conflict of interest. Their number has been on increase, not on decline. The sole responsibility for such a disgusting trend are the political parties themselves. Officially there are around 4000 recent past and present legislators against whom court cases are pending for long, including on charges of murder, rape, etc. And when the Supreme Court takes initiative to expedite these long pending court cases, the leaders gang-up to scuttle or side-line the process. If so many with criminal background and on bail are nominated by the parties to contest each round of elections, how can we expect to get out of this cycle. Instead of going for a "checks and balances" system, the parties checkmate, ensure and demolish balance of power between pillars of the State in favour of a "majoritarian rule", as if that ensures a better form of the government. Parties are constantly engaged in blatant criss-crossing of the elected reps from one party to another as and when despite anti defection laws. And the incumbent party keep accusing the predecessors for failures even after being midway of tenure in power. By multiplying political parties, votes are being split for minority governance. Nor has the representative character of our legislatures shown any signal for citizen concerns and agenda. On the contrary, declining trends are too obvious, threatening the very fundamentals.

Command & Control

The modus operandi of political parties has been control and command rather than consult, coordinate and cooperate. And by reducing citizens as passive in the name of "welfare", the empowerment and entitlements are reduced to by party affiliations, as if the rights of citizens are at the *marzee* or mercy of the party in power. Good governance remains a distant dream because of political leaders. Political parties have reduced the span of public concern and priorities specific to an election. Political parties have forgotten that elections are for a tenure, contestants are voluntary for serving **all** the people inclusively and to set good precedents for the successors. But what we witness today is just the opposite.

Can we expect to rejuvenate the trajectory of democracy, development and governance without a rationale in the functioning and a responsible role of political parties.



Time for political parties to rediscover themselves and reposition for an inclusive India and rejuvenated Republic

It is time political parties recall that they exist to facilitate a representative form of government, as trustees for a government. “Of, By and For the people”, it was with such a premise they



were recognised at the outset by the Election Commission of India (ECI). The Republic survives and sustains to the extent political parties uphold the basic premise of the Constitution, "We, the people". But over these seventy years political parties have gone much beyond as if they are an end in themselves without coming under any specific jurisdiction and checks and balances framework.

Mahatma Gandhi envisioned and suggested that Congress party should better convert itself into a service organisation rather than continuing as a party with command and control outlook. Instead of taking cognisance of Gandhi’s wisdom we have come a long way and ended up with more political parties taking to super power culture and becoming the final arbitrators of the priorities and future of the country.

It is time for political parties to rediscover themselves and reposition such a way that Republic gets rejuvenated and "We, the people" becomes the basis and prime mover of the nation. That should become the outlook and approach of political parties, instead of a control and command preoccupation. In 2000, the eleven member Constitution Review Commission with Justice Venkatachaliah recommended that political parties be brought under a checks and balances regime. Realising the ambiguity about role of parties, even the Law Commission had suggested bringing political parties under legal jurisdiction. But nothing happened over the years.

My Propositions

I have been advocating for some years that **the State should be viewed as of six pillars**, instead of three (judiciary, executive and legislative). While the media is already viewed as the forth pillar for long, we now need to view the **civil society as the fifth** and the political parties as the sixth. And an equilibrium between these six pillars is what should constitute the State, each with responsibilities and accountabilities. But political parties, without coming under any such regime, have acquired command over every other systems and institutions.

Bring Party Constitution to Centre Stage

Despite constitutional silence, political parties have become super power centres and final arbiters of public policies, priorities and futures and even dictating the model of representation as it suits them. It is high time that all such suggestions are heeded and taken cognizance. More specifically, political parties should take a relook at their own party constitution submitted to ECI years ago and resubmit with updates. ECI should call for that and give time for this until end 2021. Party functionaries should thereafter confine to that document submitted to ECI.

Partyless Polls for Local Bodies

Political parties should come together and liberate local governance from party based elections with symbols, even if the contestants at that level have party affiliations. “Work together” culture of political parties is even more essential at local levels. And party based elections cannot assure such sensitivities and culture.

Why Continue with Whip System?

Whip system has outlived in legislatures. Without limiting relevance of Whip practice representative form cannot be retrieved. Those elected to legislative bodies take oath in the House as individual members, not as affiliates of any political party. At the most, whip could prevail in contexts

of survival of governments. Change of party, on whose symbol got elected, should forthwith disqualify the member for the rest of the period of that House.

Avail RTI

Why should political parties deprive themselves from benefiting from a wonder they had themselves come up two decades ago. That is the Right to Information Act (RTI). Contrary to apprehensions, RTI could help parties to revive themselves. They could exempt from the Act certain functions to do with electoral strategies. It is time for them to reassess pros and cons of transparency specific to their consolidation and future prospects. Sue motto information and initiatives should become hallmark of parties, including on funding of the party. And declaration of any conflict of interest should be fundamental to contest an election.

Abide by Model Codes

Election codes are devised by political parties themselves with an understaffing to abide by. They could modify when any particular provision of the code becomes a stumbling block to the fundamentals of free, fair and transparency in elections. Parties and their nominated candidates should adhere to codes as a compulsion. And parties should indicate rational for nomination of their candidates.

It is time to give up poll symbols

Poll symbols had helped the electoral democracy take roots. But it is time now to reconsider the relevance. Symbols perpetuate the grip of political parties on the electorate at the cost of merit of individual contestants and interests of individual constituencies. Also, as we gear up for e-voting, we should give up symbols. The country has come a long way.

Should Support Elected Government

Once a party is elected, the bills passed should be supported by all other parties until the next election is declared. Or at least should not come in the way of their explicit initiatives. But the elected party and its leaders should not go on pointing or raking up the predecessor in power as responsible for all kind of situations to cover up own performance or shortcomings.

Parties Should Work Together

Political parties and leaders should demonstrate that they can work together even during poll campaign and after the election, by way of consultation, coordination and cooperate. It is time to revive bipartisanship and make it evident in the legislatures and outside. If they continue opposing each other all through and on all matters of governance and development, how can they be inclusive. And how can the country ever achieve cherished goals for which parties exist with promises of all kind.

Elected representatives are not employees. Political parties should think why should elected representatives who are volunteers to serve for a term or tenure should be on "a monthly salary" like any "employees". And keep demanding and increasing their entitlements? They should of course be reimbursed expenses, extended all facilities to serve the people, of the constituency.

Good precedents will go a long way

The incumbent, the party in power, will not remain so for ever and is bound to become a predecessor sooner or later. Leaders in power should be concerned and compete in setting good examples to the successors for higher deeds. The incumbent should restrain from meddling with ECI appointments. Only confident and futuristic leaders could afford such a challenging course.

Think beyond polls

Political parties exist not only to fight elections but to do something good for the country. And to people, all the people. But today they are solely preoccupied and engaged in contesting elections, as if that is means and end. They consider winning somehow and at any cost. But Parties should be known for a cause, a mission, and difference they made or making, much beyond control and command tactics.

Elections should become routine

Today the countries which are rated high on democracy, development and governance and on happiness indicators are the ones which go to national elections far more frequently and where the governments change more often and yet they kept up with their lead on global standing. That is because they take elections "as a matter of routine" and view them as come and go, and forget the differences once a poll is over. This is not possible in India without restoring independence of the ECI and its stature and that is in the interest of every party. It is difficult to transit to such higher levels, but a popular leader like Prime Minister Modi could take the country to newer path. That is what in fact he has been talking about. He can do that If only goes beyond compulsions and constraints of a political party and elections, and of course rhetorics.

Think Beyond Populism and Polarising

Political parties and leaders should take the country beyond popularism, and a divisive course. Instead of relying on such a course, they should focus on implementation and impact aspects of their initiative. Only a strong and visionary leader, who wants to be remembered irrespective of how long in power, can afford and take such challenging course.

Reboot for a lasting difference

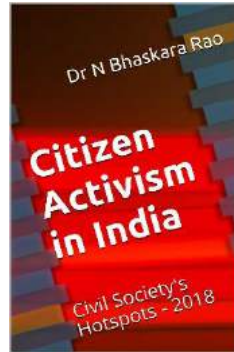
Political parties should reboot their potential to make a lasting difference in accomplishing the cherished goals of the Constitution makers. This is not possible without repositioning themselves under a checks and balances regime. The people cannot expect to get over the problems sustainably without political parties being truly inclusive, democratic, decentralised and transparent. All that is not possible without political parties giving up "solo view" of themselves all through and the electoral process becoming free and fair and the incumbent party should eschew control and command strategies.

The recent panel that the Vice President of India has formed to rejuvenate the functioning of the Parliamentary bodies is timely and should seize these aspects too.



Can we expect good governance and equitable development without citizen activism?

Prime Minister's idea of "andolan-jivi", as outlined on the floor of Parliament on February 11, 2021, deserve to be deliberated larger implications. In that context, two recent observations of Supreme Court reminds about simmering citizen activism in the country, as 2020 ended after a series of agitations across the country and by multiple sections. These judicial reminders are both to those in power and the citizen groups with equal significance to take note.



On December 7, 2020, two judge bench of Supreme Court reminded that "political speech cannot be ground for Penal action" and that "political speech relating to Government policies requires greater protection for preservation and promotion of democracy". Earlier, in 2018, three judge bench of Supreme court including the Chief Justice, reminded while hearing arrest of five activists, that "dissent is the safety value of democracy". Taking pressure cooker view of citizen voice, the justices advised the authorities "not to allow pressure cooker burst". it was a visionary observation. Farmers agitation of January 2021 was not the context for both these judicial observations.

Disregarding Dissent, Apprehensions

Had the Government taken note of these observations, it would perhaps have not pushed through contentious bills in the Parliament one after another in the name of reforms disregarding (or managing) dissent and apprehensions, particularly of stakeholder citizens. In this process the party in power might have temporarily tightened the grip but in the process they have also raked or provoked citizen activism. Reasons for

this "taking granted view" despite judicial reminders, are multiple and they are not to do with any one political party. It is important that the phenomena is understood better and beyond the farmers protests around New Delhi.

Political Bickering Different

First, citizen dissent is not necessarily same as that of political party. And yet the leaders in power dub apprehensions of even stakeholders as motivated or as instigated by the parties in opposition. Discrediting, dissent and agitations as misguided or mislead or anti-national or parasites (*tuckede tuckede gang lead*) and such humiliating provocatives, has become a routine response. And fail to reason out and succumb to the advise and cautions of judiciary about right to dissent and protest. Government's insensitivity, more often deliberately and refusal to differentiate the interested citizen groups from political parties. This has become a phenomena no matter which party is in government. Without coming out of this fix of political leaders, citizen concerns and dissent can never get fair positioning.

Citizen Activism Considered Threat

Second, a continuing phenomena is not to concede that citizen activism is essential and that it makes a difference in realising developmental goals. Instead, citizen activism is viewed by interested political leaders and as a threat and as undesirable. A number of studies even the government sponsored ones have indicated over the years that lack of local participation or citizen involvement is a reason for not realising many of the targets and goals of development schemes.

Representative Character Declines

Third, decline in representative methodology being followed and character of the elected, has pepped up citizen activism in the country. Also, decline in reliability of grievances redressal sources and mechanisms.

Despite hype by the government these redressal channels remain exaggerated. The more the gap in this regard the more the motivation and compulsion for citizen activism. But this aspect is more often ignored conveniently by those in power even when isolated examples remind the significance of citizen involvement as in the case of Swatch Bharat or tree plantations.

Taking Citizens for Granted

Fourth, another undercurrent for government taking "granted view" of citizen is dependency syndrome that successive governments have perpetuated. This is both by the government at the Union and in the States and as if in competition. They push citizen into a regime of **free-bees** and doles, even more provocatively prior to periodic polls, such a way that political parties wish citizens remain in their grip, which means keeping citizens passive to the extent of being under dope.

Citizens' Feedback

An ethnographic analysis of over 125 citizen agitations during 2018-20 in over 30 cities, brings out why these agitations tend to get viewed as "obstructive", when in fact they are for a common cause by stakeholder citizens. Because there is no scope for orderly gatherings or meetings in a civilised way, some agitations do send out such signals. Once value of citizen's feedback is realised and recognised, citizen groups will be provided with facilities for holding the meetings more decently, respectably and responsibly. My 2019 book, "Citizen Activism in India", is based on first ever such field research and analysis of where citizen agitations take place and with what consequences.

For years for example Jantar Mantar in New Delhi has been a busy venue for citizen arguments, sit-ins and protests, some days crowded with more than a couple of different groups protesting with altogether different agenda. And it has become a place of recognition of citizen cause in view

of the kind of attention the venue gets particularly from the news media. Dharna Chowk in Hyderabad is another example. In the absence of such venues many cities witness agitations in front of collectorates, secretariat, assemblies, etc. Peoples Plaza on Neckless road in Hyderabad was an initiative some years ago towards offering a more respectable place for citizens to come together for a more civilised ways of deliberating, dissenting and disseminating a cause or concern.

Interesting Interlude

But 2019 witnessed an interesting interlude! Two political leaders who included the beneficiaries of Jantar Mantar in Delhi and Dharna Chowk in Hyderabad, thought that by depriving these avenues to citizens any further they could curb or snub or make citizen agitations difficult by closing down these venues for such activities. No sooner some other cities too followed. In Hyderabad the Dharna Chowk was shifted to outskirts so that more citizens cannot attend and will not get the attention. It was intervention of the court and even the Human Rights Commission that saved the situation and reversed and that in no time triggered more such venues cropping up of Dharna Chowks in many other cities like Vijayawada.

Agitations for Attracting Attention

Why do agitations of citizen groups think of road *roko* or to interrupt rail traffic? When they fail to get attention of the public, press and the authorities or and response of concerned, easiest way for them was to take irresponsible ways however risky that may be ending up often in police firing. But, if on the other, citizens are provided with venues where they could get some minimum facilities and also could get the attention and also an orderly engagement or consultations and even negotiation becomes easier, they would not think of such locations. For example, if the government would have allowed farmers early days of the agitation in November to congregate at Ramlila Maidan, in Delhi, perhaps the need to

provoke farmers by police with barricades, and such other clashes outskirts of Delhi vitiating an amicable atmosphere could have been avoided. Instead, the government offered but after failing of water cannons Burari ground which the agitating farmers viewed as a trap to encircle them was offered. Nasik to Mumbai long march earlier was another example of ill-treating agitating farmers by deliberately depriving them with minimum facilities. As a consequence of not having proper place, citizen tend to intrude or avail academic campuses or grounds. That is how today academic campuses have become agitational grounds interrupting academic discipline and roping in students into agitations.

Designate a place for activism

Peoples plaza in Hyderabad was supposed to be an early organised venue for citizen activism. If religions, businesses and such other interests are provided space or venue, why are citizens not with specific places to meet as and when and interact more peacefully, more responsibly without interfering with civic life. And instead of spreading agitations into four or more different places, the local authorities should designate a place for citizen conclaves. This was what a Supreme Court on February 2021 indicated so that agitations do not interrupt rights of others. But these should not be away from prominent places where public, news media and the authorities could promptly get to know. And, attention to the concerns could be expected. This way the government could reach out agitating citizens and even engage them into negotiations.

A new phenomena in recent years is the party or its groups

While in power, taking to agitational course by preoccupying the space that citizens were using has become too frequent. In the last two years ruling parties and Chief Ministers of five states, for example, themselves took to street demonstrations. In 2018 the ruling party in Delhi State took to agitations a few times for all kind of differences with the Union government.

Public spaces like PW Grounds which are hitherto availed by citizen activists are being converted into places for worship or statues of local political leaders or and then declare the public place as a public park and then make encroachment easier for local political *dadas*. And thus deprive citizen of public venues. Thus space for citizen is shrinking in many cities. And yet the same time India is witnessing unprecedented citizen activism signalling a new turn in setting public agenda and in public policy making.

The way Parliament functions is more important

Prime Minister Modi while laying the foundation for the Central Vista in New Delhi last fortnight said that the new Parliament consolidates democracy in India. But what sustains democracy is the way Parliament functions. But even more, for deepening democracy is when citizen activism is allowed full play to rejuvenate and sustain the Republic of India. This is what the Supreme Court's periodic reminders on significance of citizen activism. **Citizen activism on its own does not threaten or destabilise but consolidates and sustains. Political Leaders are made and unmade curtesy dissent and agitations. Some leaders, like Narendra Modi, stands out for their exemplary skill to dissent, agitate, campaign and demonstrate the power of agitations over a decade.**

We, the People

Justice P. N. Bhagwati, proponent of Public Interest Litigation (PIL) idea decades ago and before he had become the Chief Justice of India, envisioned about citizen activism as early as in 1976 and warned that "Indian people are very patient but despite their infinite patience, they cannot afford to wait for 25 years to get justice ...there is limit of their tolerance....". That was said 45 years ago. I was fortunate to be an associate of Justice Bhagwati much later (1993-96) when he was the Chairman and I was the national convenor of India's first Social Audit Panel.

The way citizen activism is gaining ground last couple of years, thanks to farmers in particular, can we expect revival of a regime of "We, the people" from 2021? **With citizen activism, political parties could come under moderation and also under a checks and balances regime. Which, in turn, will result in a free, fair and for more representative elections. That is why I have been arguing to view civil society as the Fifth Pillar of the State.** This is what a Delhi Court has reminded now. Granting bail to activist Disha Ravi on February 23, 2021, Special Sessions Judge in Delhi observed that, "dissent is legitimate right" and that "citizens are conscience keepers of Government.



Dr N Bhaskara Rao

India's quest has been his concern and pursuit

Dr Rao's motivation has been Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru's advise (1961) "not to look for a government job, but work for the country" after graduation and the President Dr Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan's reminder to him at Rashtrapati Bhavan lawns (1962) on futility of education without wisdom.

The Republic by the time of hundred, that is 2050, should regain its glory and legacy such a way that the third generation Indians are empowered, engaged and experience from the trajectory of development, democracy and governance. This continue to be Dr Rao's pursuit. His first book, "*Politics of Leadership in an Indian State*" was of 1968. His latest ones expected now in 2021 include "*The Third Eye of Governance*", "*The Next Big Game Changer of Election*", "*Rejuvenating the Republic*"