

INDIAN INSTITUTE OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION
Karnataka Regional Branch
Bengaluru

Report of Prelude Conference on “One Nation One Election”

The **Karnataka Regional Branch** of the **IIPA**, in association with the **Department of Political Science** of **St. Joseph’s University, Bengaluru** organized its **Prelude Conference** on the theme, “**One Nation One Election**” (**ONOE**) on 28 September 2024.

Introductory Remarks were made by **Mr. S. Ramanathan, Chairman Emeritus** of the Branch. He stated that the concept of “**One Nation One Election**” refers to the idea of holding simultaneous elections for the elected bodies in India, the Lok Sabha, State Legislative Assemblies as well as Local Bodies. The objective is to reduce the frequency of elections, minimize election-related expenses, and promote stability in governance. The concept has been discussed and debated by political parties, expert bodies like the Law Commission, and constitutional experts. The Union Government has expressed support for the concept, but implementation remains a work in progress, he concluded.

Rev. Dr. Victor Lobo, Vice-Chancellor of St. Joseph’s University delivered the Inaugural Address. He recalled Mahatma Gandhi’s views in *Hind Swaraj* on Parliamentary Democracy and elections. He also stated that the concept of ONOE should not serve to divide the nation.

The **Keynote Address** was delivered by **Prof. Sandeep Shastri**, Director of Academics at Nitte Education Trust, Bengaluru. Prof. Shastri presented the contours of the debate on “**One Nation One Election**” and looked at its wider implications.

Firstly, ‘**One Nation, One Election**’ has at its basic premise, the need to have common elections for the Lok Sabha, and State Legislative Assemblies. By implication, the logic of choice at each of the levels of government is assumed to be the same. Evidence from the last decade, proves otherwise. The voters have often been making distinctly different choices at the national and state level, he pointed out.

Secondly, in his view, the focus needs to be on the autonomy of the two political spaces and the need for the voter to exercise their judgment independently when it comes to a national election and a state level election.

Thirdly, given that India is increasingly becoming an ‘*election-only*’ democracy, the right to vote and its exercise assumes critical importance. If it is to be exercised only once in five years, it gives the Indian voter a more limited ‘tool of participation’.

Prof. Shastri argued that a better option appears to be ‘**One Nation Two Elections**’. If the Lok Sabha election is held in the first year, the elections to all State Assemblies and local bodies should be held in the third year of the five-year cycle. A ‘**One Nation Two Elections**’ framework could possibly permit the voter to make a clear call when it comes to the Lok Sabha polls and Assembly polls. The Cabinet decision has called for a nation-wide debate on the issue and the jury is still out on the matter, concluded Prof. Shastri.

The Keynote Address was followed by a **Panel Discussion** where the following Resource Persons gave their respective perspectives on ***One Nation One Election***:

Prof. P.E. Somaiah, Head, Dept. of Political Science, St. Joseph's University, Bengaluru went into the pros as well as the cons of the proposal.

In his view, the arguments in favour of ONOE were as follows:

- (1) Holding simultaneous elections reduces the substantial recurring expenditure incurred by both the State and Central governments.
- (2) Money saved by simultaneous elections, can be effectively used for public welfare and development.
- (3) Simultaneous elections streamline the electoral process, reducing the strain on governance and administration caused by frequent elections.
- (4) The frequent tendency of the entire administrative machinery becoming standstill during elections, can be checkmated by simultaneous elections to Lok Sabha and State Assemblies.
- (5) The mass-scale transfers of officials and the disruption caused by the code of conduct during separate elections can impede the smooth functioning of government machinery. This can be mitigated through synchronised polls.
- (6) Holding simultaneous elections can lessen the role of money in politics by reducing the frequency of election campaigns and associated expenses. Campaign finance regulations can be more effectively enforced by the ECI at a national level, ensuring a level playing field for all parties and candidates.
- (7) The '*one nation-one election*' concept aims to reduce the divisive impact of regionalism, casteism, and communalism in mobilising voters. By focusing on national issues and promoting a unified electoral agenda, simultaneous elections can help transcend narrow interests and foster a sense of national unity.
- (8) Simultaneous elections can potentially increase voter turnout at the national level by reducing voter apathy and increasing the significance of each electoral exercise.

Prof. Somaiah then presented the arguments against ONOE:

- (1) *One Nation One Election* goes against the spirit and reality of diversity in politics, society, and all aspects of life in the country, and is at odds with federal nature of the polity.
- (2) Simultaneous elections may undermine the principles of federalism by centralising the electoral process and potentially overshadowing regional and local issues with national issues.
- (3) *One nation one election* reflects the idea of a unitary country with one polity, one process and one character.
- (4) Simultaneous elections will give unfair advantage to national parties and will result in rhetoric over national issues –and non-issues - overshadowing regional and state-specific issues in the elections.
- (5) Constituent States, especially those governed by non-dominant parties at the national level, may feel marginalised or inadequately represented in a synchronised election system.

- (6) National parties could gain an undue advantage over regional parties, undermining the federal spirit enshrined in the Constitution.
- (7) Frequent elections at different levels of government help maintain accountability among elected representatives and ensure regular opportunities for voters to express their preferences and opinions.
- (8) Synchronising elections may reduce the frequency of electoral accountability checks and limit the responsiveness of elected officials to the evolving needs of their constituents.

Prof. Somaiah concluded by stating that India's political system is worked by its political parties and if a large number of them do not support the ONOE proposal, it may not be effective and successful, if it is just forced on the people. The Indian electorate is seasoned and matured enough to judge what is beneficial and apt for them.

Prof. V. Anil Kumar, Head, Centre for Pol. Institutions, Governance and Development, at the Institute for Social and Economic Change, Bengaluru offered several arguments why he was opposed to the theme. In his view, frequent elections bring out the vibrancy of Indian democracy with its multiplicity of discourses. ONOE smacks of uniformism and conformism and will result in plebiscitary elections. In his view, it is difficult to argue in favour of a single election, across the States and across the different levels of the government. If at all we need to protect the diversity of the nation, it would perhaps be better if we respect the present system of multiple elections, he said.

This is the case even if democracy and multiple elections are relatively expensive and time and effort consuming, continued Prof. Anil Kumar. In the interest of longer-term survival of democracy, and in the interest of federal interests—the interests of federal diversity and the interests of the third tier of the government—and in the interest of better legitimacy for the democratic legislative process in the country, the change toward the one election for the entire country may not help the matters. This is besides the role of big money in elections. If big business can influence one big electoral battle and purchase the big election through its media and money power, we would be jeopardizing the political interests of the 1.4 billion people for the sake of homogeneity, uniformity, and economy, concluded Prof. Anil Kumar.

Dr. Sindhujaa Iyengar, Deputy Director, Centre for National Security Studies, M.S. Ramaiah University of Applied Sciences, Bengaluru focused on the constitutionality of ONOE, by making three submissions:

- (1) There is a concern that withdrawal of consent – given by the States to the Union to implement the single election system – would not be easy. This is because just as constitutional amendments are required to introduce ONOE, they would also be required to withdraw the system if the States change their minds. The accommodation of processes by which States are permitted to change their minds is non-negotiable given India's federal tenets. Protection of withdrawal of consent is an important enabler of federalism, she said.
- (2) In the contemporary world, non-traditional national security concerns carry the same importance as traditional national security issues. In a democracy such as India, Electoral Security is a crucial facet of non-traditional security. Hence, India

cannot keep breaching the sanctity of her elections. Whereas electoral tinkering at the level of gerrymandering is one thing, to convert a federal electoral system into a Unitarian one is another scale altogether. Further, the precedent set by ONOE may open the floodgates for further attacks on India's electoral system.

- (3) The ONOE Committee Report had recommended 15 Constitutional Amendments effected through two Amendment Acts. However, the debate on Constitutional Amendment should not be restricted to questions of *which Articles and what amendment* language. The larger question is a fundamental one – *When should the Constitution be amended?* Amendment is a tool to bring the letter of the Constitution in line with its spirit. It has been established in and reiterated since the Keshavananda Bharti judgement that the spirit of the Constitution – its “Basic Structure” – cannot be amended. Federalism was held as an element of the Basic Structure, thereby rendering it unassailable. This renders ONOE *void ab initio* for its unconstitutionality, concluded Dr. Sindhuja Iyengar.

Dr. Aradhana Talwar, Faculty, Department of Public Policy, School of Social Sciences, Ramaiah University of Applied Sciences, Bengaluru, looked at the concept of ONOE from a Policy perspective, by raising two pertinent questions: *Is there a conscious Policy Design in it? Have its Policy Outcomes been thought out carefully?* It appeared to her that this had not been done.

Mr. T.M. Vijay Bhaskar, IAS (Retd.), Chairman of the Branch presided over the Prelude Conference. He complimented all the speakers for sharing their views on the subject and enlightening the audience with their views and arguments, both for and against. He mentioned that in addition to the advantages of the proposal already mentioned, simultaneous elections would reduce the need for raising campaign funds both by parties and candidates and probably reduce corruption for raising electoral funds. Simultaneous elections may also ensure that elections to rural and urban local bodies are not delayed for various reasons and are held regularly on time. On the other hand, he felt that holding local body elections after 100 days amounted to making it Two Elections and in that case was closer to Dr Shastris idea. There could be loss of control by voters over elected representatives and a corresponding reduction of responsiveness of Government towards public opinion if the proposal was implemented, especially when there is no provision to recall elected representatives. Both the advantages and disadvantages had to be considered while taking a final decision.

Dr. Roshni, Faculty, Department of Political Science, St. Joseph's University welcomed the guests and gathering. **Dr. D. Jeevan Kumar**, Secretary of the Branch proposed a vote of thanks.

Below: Photographs of the Event

Photo 1: (Below) **Inauguration of the Prelude Conference**

Seated left to right are **Dr. D. Jeevan Kumar**, Secretary of the Karnataka Regional Branch of IIPA, **Rev. Dr. Victor Lobo**, Vice-Chancellor of St. Joseph's University, Bengaluru, **Mr. T.M. Vijay Bhaskar**, IAS (Retd.), Chairman of the Karnataka Regional Branch of IIPA, **Prof. Sandeep Shastri**, Director of Academics at Nitte Education Trust, Bengaluru and **Prof. P.E. Somaiah**, Head, Department of Political Science at St. Joseph's University.



Photo 2: (Below) A Section of the Audience



Photo 3 (Below): Chairman of Karnataka Branch, Mr. T.M. Vijay Bhaskar (fourth from left); Secretary, Dr. D. Jeevan Kumar (fourth from right); Treasurer of Branch, Prof. Madhwaraj (at extreme left) are seen with Faculty of Political Science of St. Joseph's University with Student Volunteers.

