Electoral Reforms in India: Issues and Challenges
Zakir Hussain Naik
Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science,
Govt. Degree College Ramban, PO Chanderkote, Ramban, Jammu and Kashmir, India.

Abstract: India is the largest democracy in the world where people enjoy free and fair elections. The heart of India's democratic system witnesses in regular elections with participation of the largest electorate in the world. In order to safeguard the core values of democracy in this dynamic scenario, it is imperative to have a free and fair electoral process with the greater participation of citizens. But the blemish of corrupt practices eclipses the lunar rays of our electoral process. Today, the question of electoral reforms arises due to growing deterioration in electoral politics and there is a dire need to strengthen the electoral system of our country, so that the true potential of a democratic system could be realised Trust and confidence of citizens in electoral system is essential for strengthening democracy. In this paper the attempt has been made to highlight the total happenings in present day electoral exercise and also suggested some remedial measures for the electoral system of India.

Keywords: Democracy, elections, corrupt, electoral system, political party and election commission.

I. Introduction
One of the most important features of our democratic framework is ‘elections’ which are held at a systematic period of time. Electoral system is an official decision-making process where citizen select candidate to hold the public office. The purpose of electoral reforms is to introduce free and fair electoral system for accompanying impartial elections. Election are the backbone of our democratic system that confers the right to elect our representatives and such a system of governance is expected to ensure the welfare of the common masses. Political parties are indispensable in parliamentary democracy, and the elections in India have a long history; it has election system at three levels; central, state and local elections as promoted by our federal structure.

II. Electoral system in India
India has the distinction of being the largest democracy of the world and elections form the integral part of it. While politics is the art and practice of dealing with political power, election is a process of legitimization of such power. Democracy can function only upon this faith that elections are free and fair and not rigged or manipulated. They are effective instruments of ascertaining popular will. The elections are not being held in an ideal condition because of the enormous amount of money required to be spent and large muscle power needed for winning the elections. While the first three general elections (1952-62) in our country were by and large free and fair, a noticeable decline in standards began with the fourth general election in 1967. Over the years, Indian electoral system suffers from serious problems. The election process in our country is the progenitor of political corruption. The distortion in its working appeared for the first time in the fifth general elections, 1971 and multiplied in the successive elections especially those held in eighties and thereafter. Some of the candidate and parties participate in the process of elections to win them at all costs, irrespective of moral values. The ideal conditions require that an honest and upright person, who is public spirited and wants to serve the people, should be able to contest and get elected as people’s representatives. But in actual fact, such a person has no chance of either contesting or in any case winning the election.

III. Issues in Electoral Politics of India
Indian democracy is facing many problems and challenges in conducting free and fair elections. The major problems which come in the way of electoral process in India are: money power, muscle power, criminalisation of politics, booth capturing, communalism, casteism, and sectarianism.

Money Power: Money power plays a very destructive role in working of periodic elections. It leads to all round corruption and contributes mainly to the generation of black money which rules at present our country. A prospective candidate in each constituency has to spend millions of money towards transport, publicity and
other essential items of election campaign. In recent years the election expenses have increased beyond any limits due to the desire on the part of every political party to spend more than their rivals in the fray. Elections in Indian are becoming increasingly expensive and gap between the expenses incurred and legally permitted is increasing over the years. Only those people can participate in elections as a candidate who has a lot of money, because today vote is not a mean of public opinion; it is being purchased.

Muscle Power: Violence, pre-election intimidation, post election, victimisation, riggings, booth capturing are mainly the products of muscle power. These are prevalent in many parts of the country and this disease is slowly spreading throughout India. By using violence, the criminals are able to achieve success at elections for their benefactors.

Misuse of Government Machinery: It is generally observed that government in power at the time of election misuse the official machinery to further the election prospects of its party candidates. The misuse of official machinery takes different forms, such as issue of advertisements at the cost of government and public exchequer highlighting their achievements, disbursements out of the discretionary funds at the disposal of the ministers, use of government vehicles for canvassing etc. The misuse of official machinery in this way gives an unfair advantage to ruling party at the time of elections which leads to misuse of public funds for furthering the prospects of candidates of a particular party.

Criminalisation of Politics: During election period, newspapers are usually full of information about the number of criminals in the field sponsored by every party. The reason of the criminals behind entrance to politics is to gain influence and ensure that cases against them are dropped or not proceeded with. Political parties tap criminals for fund and in return provide them with political patronage and protection. Rough estimates suggest that in any state election 20 per cent of candidates are drawn from criminal backgrounds: Mafia dons and other powerful gangsters have shown that they can convert their muscle power into votes often at gun point. Voters in many parts of country are forced to vote for the local strongman. Tickets were given to the candidates with criminal records even by National Party. Our politics have been corrupted because the corrupt and criminals have to entered it, criminalisation of politics has become an all-pervasive phenomenon.

Non-Serious Candidates in Political Parties: In recent years there has been a steady increase in the number of candidates in elections. The number of candidates has swelled due to the participation of Independent candidates. They contest elections light heartedly and lose their deposits. Non-serious candidates are largely floated by serious candidates either to cut sizeable portion of votes of rival candidates or to split the votes on caste lines or to have additional physical force at polling station and counting centres. The multiplicity of candidates causes inconvenience to election authorities in the management of elections. The voters also feel difficult in identifying the candidates of their own choice and this affects the sanctity of elections.

Casteism: Many political parties in India are lending strong support from certain caste groups resulting in struggle among political parties to win different caste groups in their favour by giving offers to them. Political parties determine policies and programme as well as the nomination of electoral candidates on caste considerations at all the levels. Candidates therefore selected not in terms to accomplishments, ability and merit but on the appendages of caste, creed and community. Ultimately caste becomes the deciding factor on selection of candidate.

Communalism: Politics of communalism and religious fundamentalism in the post independence period has led to a number of separate movements in various states and regions of the country. Communal polarization has posed a threat to the Indian political ethos of pluralism, parliamentarianism and federalism. Despite the adoption of principle of secularism as a constitutional creed, the spirit of tolerance that is essential for a secular society seems to have completely vanished from the body politics of India. The dynamics of national and state politics of the last decade is a mute witness of the clashes and conflicts between the so-called secularist and the communalist. Unfortunately there is a tendency to play upon caste and religious sentiments and field candidates in elections with an eagle eye on caste equations and communal configurations.

Lack of Moral Values in Politics: There has been very sharp erosion in the ideological orientation of political parties. Party dynamics in India has led to emergence of valueless politics much against the ideals of the father of the nation, Mahatma Gandhi, who suggested that the Congress party should be disbanded after the achievement of independence and its members should engage themselves in the service of people. While Gandhi taught us tremendous selflessness, self sacrifice and service, to the people, such inspirational values, the democratic norms and institutions have been destroyed systematically over the last years of the working of the Constitution. In the process, both the politicians and political parties have lost their credibility, the ultimate value that should bind them with the masses. Due to degeneration of leadership, parties have been entangled in power struggle for the sake of personal ends. The Gandhian value of the spirit of service to the nation has become completely extinct from the present day politics. The money and muscle powers are the basic evils that pollute and defile the process and motivate participants to resort to mal practices in elections. This leads to the decline of moral values in the arena of electoral politics. A game can be fair only if the players are honest and true to its spirit.
IV. Steps taken by the Government

The reports of election commission of India from time to time and a number of discussions at various level have categorically pointed out the defects in electoral system and some useful suggestions, yet the problems remaining to be as critical and challenging as ever. The Joint Parliamentary Committee on Amendments to Election Law (1971-72), the Goswami Committee Report of 1990. The Constitution Bill 1994 and the Representation of the People (Second Amendment) Bill, 1994 (passed by Parliamentary), the Election Commissions Recommendations in 1998 and Indra Gupta Committee Report of 1998 etc. produced comprehensive set of recommendations regarding electoral reforms. Few reforms have been implemented but a lot has to be done. The whole country is now expressing serious concern over anti-social and criminal elements entering into the electoral arena. The EC has taken several new initiatives in the recent past as a use of state owned Electronic Media for broadcast or telecast by political parties, checking: criminalisation of politics, providing with electoral identity cards, streamlining the procedure for registration of political parties and requiring them to hold regular organizational elections, a variety of measures of strict compliance of Model Code of Conduct for providing a level playing field to contestants during the elections, and so on. In India, the EC has established a set of guidelines known as the Model Code of Conduct that must be obeyed by political parties and candidates in the run-up to an election. These guidelines are intended to ensure that the ruling party at both national and state levels does not misuse its official position to gain an unfair advantage in an election. There is a pervasive feeling that something is wrong with the way elections are conducted in India. Now, time has come to provide some hard rules and laws in our Constitution to keep away those anti-social evils from electoral system of India.

V. Suggestions

Following suggestions should be taken into consideration for making electoral system free and fair:

1. Election Commission must have independent staff of its own so that the efficiency and impartiality in the electoral process could be maintained.
2. The EC which is an autonomous constitutional body should not work under the pressure of Executive and legislative body.
3. Political corruption should be stopped by providing funds to genuine candidates through political parties whose account should be auditable. Candidate involving in corruption should be disqualified.
4. For having a true and real democracy the registration and recognition of political parties should be fair and without any kind of influence and pressure.
5. Mass Media should play a non-partisan role in election and as a safeguard of democracy.
6. Every voter must be perfectly free to vote without any fear of consequences and without being unduly influenced anybody.
7. Election expenses of each contesting candidate are fixed by Election Commission of India and should be keenly observed the same during election campaign, so that the corruption and electoral violence could be eradicated.
8. Strictly apply the model code of conduct and punish those who violate it. Prompt action should be taken by the judiciary, if any kind of violation is detected during elections.
9. NOTA option in the electronic voting machines; the option of “None of the above” should always be there on the Electronic Voting Machines to protect the identity and right of the voters
10. It is suggested to Election Commission of India to link UIDAI (Aadhar) card along with attestation of biometric traits of voters at the time of voting should be made compulsory for exercising votes; this will prevent fake and proxy voting.
11. VVPAT—Voters verifiable audit trial is a method that provides feedback to voters. It is independent verification printer machine and is attached to electronic voting machines. This system will bring further transparency and will restore the confidence of the voters.

VI. Conclusion

The Election Commission has brought a number of creditable electoral reforms to strengthen democracy and improve the fairness of elections but still corrupt and criminal practices have taken place in the elections at several places. There is need of sincere and genuine efforts by all side; especially political parties should be neat and clean in this matter. The main problem is not lack of laws, but lack of strict implementation of these laws. In order to eradicate these unfair practices in election, there is a need to strengthen the hands of Election Commission and to provide them more legal and institutional powers. The recent debate for simultaneous elections should be taken forward in a positive direction and this needs some practical measures, so that the elections for Parliament and state Assemblies could be conducted simultaneously. This is an idea where all political leaders must deliberate on this reform and evolve a common consensus. It will surely end the negatively impacting administrative and developmental activities in the poll bound states /regions and the larger governance process in general as well.

References