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THE NEEDLE'S EYE Election Commission needs more rope to get to the bottom of it

Into the Poisoned Well

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Money is making Election 2019 go around. Currency with the public totalled ₹20.64 trillion on March 15, five days after the elections were announced. This compared with ₹12.48 trillion on March 7, 2014, two days after the previous Lok Sabha election was announced.

Where is the less-cash economy that demonetisation was supposed to usher in? Recall that in November 2016, cash with the public totalled ₹17.97 trillion — substantially less than today's level.

Not surprisingly, cash continues to be king in this election too, and every major party is swimming in money. Tuesday's cancellation of the election in Tamil Nadu's Vellore constituency, and the raid the same night by the Election Commission (EC) and income-tax (I-T) officials on the home of Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) candidate Kanimozhi, were sordid milestones. Inevitably, the I-T department has been accused of targeting only Opposition parties.

Perhaps the answer is to hand over control of all enforcement agencies, including the I-T department, to the election body, in line with its takeover of administrative machinery during the elections.

Despite running one successful election after another, the EC's powers seem strangely circumscribed in some areas like campaign spending and hate speech. One reason is that the process of nomination of election commissioners is an executive action — the law minister sends a recommendation to the prime minister, who passes it on to the president, the appointing authority.

If a collegium system — of the prime minister, the leader of the Opposition, and a senior judge of the Supreme Court — can appoint other supposedly autonomous officials like the director of the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI), or the Central Vigilance Commissioner (CVC), why not make EC appointments, too, multi-partisan?

The Supreme Court had to virtually order the EC to crack down on hate speech by candidates. The transgressions by Yogi Adityanath, Mayawati, Azam Khan and Maneka Gandhi were egregious. But there is much other abuse and vitriol that is going unpunished. A day after the four politicians were temporarily barred from campaigning, the court told the EC, "You seem to have got your powers back," to which the EC's lawyer responded, "We found we have powers."

No Cure for Seizures

This is amusing. But when it comes to cash and inducements swamping the elections, the EC seems to be fighting a losing battle. Even before votes have been cast in the second of the seven phases of polling, seizures of cash, gold, drugs, liquor and other contraband already total ₹2,500 crore — double the haul in the 2014 election.

The Supreme Court's order to political parties to disclose (in sealed envelopes) the buyers of electoral bonds by May 31 — after the election results — is small comfort for those of us seeking more transparency in political funding. The 'anonymous' bond-buyers are known only to the State Bank of India, the sole issuer, and the political parties.

Significantly, 10 days before the elections were announced, the government unveiled a fresh issue of three tranches of electoral bonds. The bonds, which have to be deposited in parties' bank accounts within 15 days of issue, will be sold in three spells from March 1 to May 15 — just before the final round of voting. The bonds will legitimise parties' expenditure on advertising and other 'official' election arrangements. Not surprisingly, the BJP has already cornered four-fifths of bonds issued so far.

Campaign finance is just another example of the circumvention and pre-emption of the Model Code of Conduct.

Consider the declaration of election dates. Elections 2014 were announced on Wednesday, March 5. The Manmohan Singh Cabinet used to meet on Thursdays. "We knew that the government was likely to announce several populist steps the next day," a senior election official told me. "But we went ahead, and the Cabinet meeting scheduled for the following day was reduced to a tea party."

Not this time though. Elections 2019 were announced, unusually, on a Sunday, March 10. The government had been in a frenzy of project approvals and inaugurations. The Cabinet, at its final meeting on March 7, approved huge spending plans. These included two 1,320 MW thermal power plants in Khurja in UP and Buxar in Bihar, and Prime Minister Narendra Modi rushed to lay their foundation stones on March 9, just pipping the poll announcement.

The spending spree wasn't the only thing racing against the election clock. On March 8, finance minister Arun Jaitley released a five-volume compilation of the prime minister's speeches titled, 'Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas'.

All Sugarcane & Honey

UP, where the BJP is fearful it will fare worse than in 2014, was the major recipient of last-minute manna. Modi made several dashes through UP in February and early March — to Amethi, Varanasi, Kanpur, Ghaziabad — and the day before the election announcement, a final splurge in Greater Noida.

One of the final decisions by the Modi Cabinet was to spend over ₹3,000 crore on relief for UP's distressed sugar industry. This hasn't helped much. One Reuters report said mills in UP, the largest cane-growing state, still owe farmers ₹10,800 crore. The farmers are important voters in the Saharanpur-Muzaffarnagar-Kairana-Meerut belt which voted in the first phase on April 11.

Nationwide, 50 million desperate cane-growers in six states are owed about $4.4 billion. Sugarcane votes matter in 164 Lok Sabha constituencies. How much money can sweeten their pot?

FILE PHOTO

Well, down you go

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