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One Nation, One Election — Remedy Worse Than Disease

Context

- The proposal for **One Nation, One Election (ONOE)** aims to synchronise elections to the **Lok Sabha** and State Legislative Assemblies so they occur simultaneously.
- Proponents argue that this reform would reduce **election expenditure**, limit prolonged security deployment, prevent constant political campaigning, and reduce disruptions caused by the **Model Code of Conduct**.
- However, comparative global experiences and India's constitutional framework raise **serious concerns**.

Lessons from Comparative Experience

- In 2019, **Indonesia** conducted simultaneous elections for the presidency, national legislature, regional legislatures, and local councils.
- Intended to improve **administrative efficiency** and reduce costs, the election imposed immense strain on the electoral system.

- Nearly **900 poll workers died**, and thousands fell ill due to the heavy workload. Continued problems in 2024 led the **Constitutional Court of Indonesia** to mandate separate national and local elections beginning in 2029.
- Other democracies demonstrate that stable governance does not require synchronised polls. In **Canada**, **federal elections** and **provincial elections** occur independently.
- In **Australia**, synchronisation is structurally impossible because **state legislatures** serve fixed four-year terms while the federal House of Representatives has a shorter maximum tenure.
- Similarly, **Germany** maintains stability not through synchronised elections but through the **Constructive Vote of No Confidence**, which requires parliament to elect a successor before removing a Chancellor.
- Elections across German states remain deliberately **staggered**, reinforcing **federal autonomy** rather than national uniformity.

Electoral Systems and Democratic Safeguards

- Countries such as **South Africa** and **Indonesia** operate under **proportional representation**, which distributes political power across multiple parties and protects minority representation.
- India's first-past-the-post system operates differently. A strong **national electoral wave** could sweep both parliamentary and state elections simultaneously, weakening regional parties and reducing political diversity.
- The example of the **United States** offers limited relevance. Its **presidential system** separates the executive from legislative confidence, ensuring fixed electoral cycles.
- India's parliamentary system, by contrast, requires governments to retain the confidence of the legislature to remain in office.

Constitutional Design and Parliamentary Responsibility

- India's constitutional framework prioritises **executive accountability** over guaranteed stability.
- During debates in the Constituent Assembly of India, B. R. Ambedkar emphasised that democracy cannot maximise both stability and responsibility simultaneously.
- The Constitution reflects this choice. **Article 75** of the Constitution of India and **Article 164** of the Constitution of India establish **collective responsibility** of the executive to the legislature.
- Meanwhile, **Article 83** and **Article 172** prescribe only a **maximum tenure of five years** rather than a guaranteed term.
- Early dissolution therefore functions as a democratic safeguard, allowing voters to renew mandates when governments lose legislative support.

The Problem of Unexpired-Term Elections

- A central feature of the **129th Amendment Bill, 2024**, developed from recommendations of the committee chaired by the former president **Mr Ram Nath Kovind**, is the concept of unexpired-term elections.
- If a legislature dissolves early, the newly elected body would serve only the **remaining portion** of the original cycle.
- This arrangement creates multiple distortions. First, it **devalues the franchise**, as voters would elect governments with **truncated mandates**.

- Second, short-term governments may lack incentives for long-term policy reform, encouraging populism and policy drift.
- Third, the absence of a clear minimum residual term could produce a governance dead zone.
- At the state level, postponing elections to maintain synchronisation could prolong Article 356 of the Constitution of India (President's Rule).
- At the Union level, prolonged caretaker arrangements could conflict with the parliamentary meeting requirement under Article 85 of the Constitution of India.

Discretionary Powers and Risks of Abuse

- The proposed **Article 82A** allows the **Election Commission of India** to recommend deferring state elections if simultaneous conduct is impracticable.
- However, the amendment lacks clear criteria, time limits, and parliamentary oversight.
- A state government could collapse mid-term, be placed under **President's Rule**, and have elections delayed until the national cycle resumes.
- Even if rarely used, such provisions expand the **constitutional possibility of misuse**. As **Alexander Hamilton** warned in Federalist No. 59, the mere possibility of abuse can undermine constitutional safeguards.
- The Supreme Court Advocates-on-Record Association v. Union of India reaffirmed that constitutional validity depends on institutional design, not assurances of benign exercise.

The Cost Argument

- Supporters of ONOE emphasise the financial burden of elections, yet the costs remain relatively small. Parliamentary estimates place combined Lok Sabha and state election expenditure at roughly ₹4,500 crore, around **25% of the Union Budget and about 0.03% of GDP**.
- India's phased election model allows the Election Commission of India to rotate EVMs, VVPATs, and security forces, improving logistical efficiency.
- Conducting simultaneous elections nationwide may require **additional resources, weakening claims of administrative savings**.

Conclusion

- The ONOE proposal promises **administrative convenience, cost reduction**, and reduced campaign disruption, yet its constitutional implications are far-reaching.
- Synchronised elections risk weakening federalism, diluting **legislative accountability**, and altering the balance of India's **parliamentary democracy**.
- The system of staggered elections provides continuous **democratic oversight** and preserves the autonomy of states.
- Electoral frequency should not be viewed as an administrative burden but as an essential feature of representative government.

One Nation, One Election — Remedy Worse Than Disease FAQs

Q1. What is the main objective of the 'One Nation, One Election' proposal?

Ans. The 'One Nation, One Election' proposal aims to conduct elections to the Lok Sabha and all State Legislative Assemblies simultaneously to reduce election costs and administrative disruptions.

Q2. Which country's experience highlights the risks of simultaneous elections?

Ans. The experience of Indonesia demonstrates the challenges of simultaneous elections, where the 2019 election caused severe administrative strain and led to the deaths and illnesses of many poll workers.

Q3. Why does ONOE raise concerns about federalism in India?

Ans. ONOE raises concerns because it may truncate State Assembly tenures, which could weaken the federal balance recognised by the Supreme Court of India in *S. R. Bommai v. Union of India*.

Q4. What problem arises from the concept of 'unexpired-term elections'?

Ans. The concept of unexpired-term elections may produce governments with shortened mandates, reducing the value of the electoral mandate and discouraging long-term policymaking.

Q5. Why is the cost argument for ONOE considered weak?

Ans. The cost argument is considered weak because election spending constitutes only a very small percentage of India's GDP and Union Budget, making the financial savings relatively insignificant.

Source: **The Hindu**

The Need to Recognise 'Volunteer' Care Work

Context

- The Union Budget 2026-27 proposes to create a strong **care ecosystem** by training 1.5 lakh multiskilled caregivers in geriatric and allied care under the **National Skills Qualification Framework (NSQF)**. This step is important as India's demand for care services is increasing.
- However, the proposal highlights a contradiction. While the government plans to train new care professionals, it does not address the condition of over five million women already working in the care system.
- These include ASHA workers, Anganwadi workers and helpers, and mid-day meal workers.
- These workers provide essential health, nutrition and childcare services, but they are still classified as 'volunteers' rather than regular employees.
- As a result, they remain excluded from the formal care ecosystem that the government aims to strengthen.

Women Care Workers: A Shadow Labour Force

- Women such as Anganwadi workers, ASHAs, and mid-day meal workers form the backbone of India's health, nutrition, and childcare services.
- They play a crucial role in delivering welfare programmes across the country.
- Despite their essential role, these workers operate in uncertain and insecure conditions.
- They receive low honorariums, and lack formal employment contracts, paid leave, and maternity benefits.

- **Limited and Fragmented Support**

- Some support is provided through state-level honorarium increases, gratuity benefits, and national schemes like Ayushman Bharat and Pradhan Mantri Shram Yogi Maandhan. However, these measures vary across states and remain limited.
- India's care economy relies heavily on this large feminised workforce, yet the state continues to classify them as 'honorary workers' rather than formal employees.
- This limits their access to labour rights and social security protections.

Care Work in India: A Gendered Reality

- Care work in India reflects deep gender inequalities. According to the 2024 Time Use Survey, about 41% of women aged 15-59 spend 140 minutes daily on caregiving, while only 21.4% of men spend about 74 minutes

- **Care Work Viewed as Women's Duty**

- India's welfare system often treats care work as an extension of women's domestic responsibilities.
- Many women providing health and welfare services are labelled as 'volunteers', even though their work requires significant skill and effort.
- Because care work is considered '**natural**' for women, it is often undervalued and poorly paid.
- This creates a cycle where care work is not recognised as skilled labour, keeping a large female workforce in informal and insecure employment.

- **Neglect of the Existing Care Workforce**

- While recent policies aim to train new care workers, they do not adequately address the needs of the existing workforce.
- Current workers already perform complex tasks requiring community knowledge, coordination, and emotional labour, yet remain underpaid and unprotected.
- India's care workers are central to the functioning of the welfare state.
- Strengthening the care economy will require greater financial investment and a shift in societal attitudes, recognising care work as skilled labour deserving fair wages and protections.

Reimagining India's Care Economy

- **Ending the 'Volunteer' Label**

- India needs to move beyond classifying care workers as 'volunteers'.
- The Supreme Court's 2025 ruling in "*Dharam Singh vs State of U.P.*" stated that work that is continuous and essential to an institution cannot remain temporary indefinitely.
- This strengthens the case for converting such roles into permanent posts.

- **Transition to Formal Employment**

- With the Union Budget's focus on skilling, there is an opportunity to review employment norms in the care sector.
- The state can create transition frameworks to move workers from honorariums to fair wages and formal contracts.

- **Skill Development for Existing Workers**

- The proposed NSQF-aligned training programmes should also be extended to ASHA and Anganwadi workers, who already perform complex and essential tasks in the welfare system.

- **Recognising Workers' Rights and Voice**

- Care workers have long demanded dignity and recognition.
- The government should implement the '**Reward**' and '**Represent**' principles of the International Labour Organisation's **5R Framework for Decent Care Work**, ensuring fair pay and a voice in policy decisions.

- **Toward a Fair Care Economy**

- Strengthening India's care economy requires proper compensation, formal employment protections, and meaningful participation of care workers in decision-making.

The Need to Recognise 'Volunteer' Care Work FAQs

Q1. Why is the Union Budget 2026-27's care ecosystem proposal seen as contradictory?

Ans. The Budget proposes training new caregivers but ignores the condition of over five million existing care workers who provide essential services yet remain classified as volunteers without formal employment protections.

Q2. Who are India's major 'volunteer' care workers?

Ans. India's volunteer care workforce mainly includes ASHA workers, Anganwadi workers and helpers, and mid-day meal workers who deliver health, nutrition, and childcare services across the country.

Q3. What does the 2024 Time Use Survey reveal about care work in India?

Ans. The survey shows strong gender inequality in care work, with 41% of women spending about 140 minutes daily on caregiving compared to 21.4% of men spending around 74 minutes.

Q4. How does the Supreme Court's 2025 Dharam Singh judgment support care workers' demands?

Ans. The ruling states that work which is continuous and essential to an institution cannot remain temporary indefinitely, strengthening demands to convert honorary care worker roles into permanent posts.

Q5. What reforms are suggested to strengthen India's care economy?

Ans. Reforms include ending the volunteer label, formalising employment, extending skill programmes to existing workers, ensuring fair wages and social security, and implementing ILO's 'Reward' and 'Represent' principles.

Source: **TH**

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