

Postpone elections; prefer fighting Covid

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Jagdish Batra

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As the second wave of the Corona pandemic subsides, fears of an impending third wave have been expressed by experts. Dr. Randeep Guleria of the AIIMS, New Delhi has rightly remarked that if the people at large do not go by the Corona-appropriate behavior, we can expect the third wave within six to eight weeks. We know only too well that the majority of people in our country go by the ‘chalta hai’ mindset and pay least regard to reason and logic, and so we seem to be inching towards the dreaded scenario of a third wave.

The governments at the Centre and in the states are doing their bit to create awareness about the danger of disregarding the warning bells, but these seem to fall on deaf ears. More than the advertisements in newspapers or on the television, it is the ground reality that requires urgent attention and that is precisely lacking today. The pandemic of the century has caused loss of life of lakhs of people apart from rendering incapacitated a larger number. The nauseating sight of masked faces maintaining distance of six feet and washing hands too often is indeed sickening and the sooner we are out of this state of health emergency, the better it would be for the society and the country. Health, therefore, should be our primary concern at this stage, particularly because the available health infrastructure is too inadequate to tackle it. It is in this light that we must consider the second ‘wave’ of elections due in 2022 in Punjab, U.P., Manipur, Goa, Himachal, Gujarat, etc., for which the political parties are gearing up.

We shall again see reckless leaders frantically organizing rallies across the length and breadth of this vast land, and the gullible and equally careless followers of leaders gathering in large numbers at places creating chaotic conditions. Even though in the recently held elections in West Bengal, the Election Commission cut down on campaign timings, it did not really help much. In fact, the EC should have banned total physical campaigning, allowing only virtual mode. But it is doubtful if all political parties would have consented to it fearing the inaccessibility of digital mode to all voters, but more than that missing out on the emotional tempo that builds up with a sea of supporters in favour of a party – a sight too tempting to shun for them.

Why can't elections be postponed? It is not within the power of the Election Commission to cancel an election but under Article 324 of the Constitution, it can postpone by upto six months elections once the schedule for such elections has been announced. Even though

there is no specific legal provision, yet in a compelling situation that is no less in gravity than a full-fledged war against an invader – an invisible in this case – or a natural catastrophe like a tsunami overrunning the entire country – and that is the sweep of the Coronavirus – the Election Commission can postpone elections.

Another scenario is the state of Emergency declared by the central government under which elections can be postponed upto one year, and after the lifting of Emergency, for another six months. Such a provision has been invoked earlier in case of states like Jammu and Kashmir, Punjab and Assam due to the rise of militancy there. The term ‘Emergency’ has had an appalling connotation since 1975 but this is a constitutional provision which can be invoked in the dire situation prevailing now. The crux of the matter is whether it is the Election Commission or the Central Government with their prerogative to postpone elections, the country must be spared the forthcoming elections for at least a year. Let the politicians realize that in the long run, the sound health of the voters is most essential to allow the working of democracy at large.

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