

## **Voices, Votes and Visibility: Electoral Reforms and Media Influence in Contemporary India**

Dr MILI SAHU

*Asst. Professor, NSCB College, Sambalpur, Odisha*

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Dr PUSPITARANI BARDHAN,

*NSCB College, Sambalpur*

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### **Abstract**

*Elections become the backbone of a democratic political system especially in India due to its long history of colonial rule. After independence the priority of Indians had to elect their representatives to enjoy their sovereignty. The first general election conducted in 1951-52 and that onwards the election process has undergone through various transformation by use of electoral reforms. India is having its vast territory and differences among the people; so, there is always need of changes and adaptation for smoother functioning of every organ of the political system. With this the role of media plays an important part to modify the behaviour of electors. Apart from that the electoral reforms not only address and reduce the problems such as criminalization of politics, use of money power during the election, manipulation of voters but also increase of hope and trust among public for the democratic institutions and political parties. The influence of television, social media, Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, YouTube and digital campaigning has reframed electoral strategies and political communication. Media is there for reinforcement of democratic engagement by providing transparency and creating voter consciousness. With this it has raised concerns regarding misinformation, paid news, and media biasness. To promote informed citizen engagement, there is need of electoral changes in Indian scenario. Hence, this article has analyzed subsequent domain of electoral reforms in India in recent years. It also evaluates the evolving role of media in the electoral process.*

**Keywords:** *Elections, social media, Indian Politics, Young voter, Electoral Reforms, Media*

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### **I. Introduction**

Elections are the cornerstone of every form of democracy. A famous quote given by Abraham Lincoln, 'The ballot is stronger than bullet'. In India, elections serving as the primary system through which citizens exercise their political freedom. Immediately after independence, formation of Election Commission of India to conduct elections so that the people to choose their representatives. Free and fair elections are the foundation upon which our Indian Constitution relies with provision of Articles 324 to 329 has been incepted and is primarily supervised by the Election Commission of India, which is a constitutional body for conducting electoral process (Bhattacharya, S. 2022). India's democracy characterized by free and fair elections to become as an example for the world systems. The electoral process of India set a benchmark with this it faces draw back also. To strengthening the democracy, it has to realize its full democratic potential. From candidate representation to fund allocation and implementation during election programme and campaigns, significant reforms must be ensured and taken place for transparent, and fair electoral system. (Kumar, 2020, p. 45). By the time, the electoral system has faced numerous challenges, including electoral malpractices, criminalization of politics, excessive use of money power and muscle power, voter apathy, the influence of identity politics, lack of moral in politics, Non-Voters, Casteism / Hate Speech and Religion / Communalism. These issues need electoral reforms by which transparency, fairness, and efficiency can be maintained. Due to changing political dynamics, technological advancements and the growth of media influence in electoral politics needs serious reforms in election process. The media, often described in the writings of Dr. B.R Ambedkar, as the "fourth pillar of democracy," plays a crucial role in shaping electoral outcomes. Media appeared to be a powerful tool for political mobilization, opinion formation, agenda-setting and manipulative organ during election.

This paper explores the relationship between electoral reforms and the role of media with a particular focus towards Indian context. It examines important electoral reforms, analyses the constructive and disruptive roles of media and figure out their combined impact on democratic governance.

## **Key Electoral Reforms**

In India there are various committees and commissions to examine the electoral system, election machinery as well as election process and provided recommendation and suggestion. These are termed as Electoral reforms and this refer to changes suggested by the election commission to adopt in the election procedure to improve its functioning and ensure the process of election fair and transparent. In India, we figure it in various phases such as –

a) Reforms in election process(1950-60s)

In 25<sup>th</sup> of January, 1950 under article 324 the first reform had conducted by establishing Election commission of India. This has created a transparency and conduct of election in a proper process. Next thing is ensuring Universal Adult Franchise by giving political rights to citizens and the eligible age was 21 years and above. There were also the Representation of the People Acts 1950 and 1951; these acts regulated the electoral role and seats and conduct of election, disqualification of candidate and settlement of election problems. There were other provisions also like preparation of electoral rolls, delimitation of constituencies, introduction of election symbols and the conduct of first general election.

b) Reforms in election process(1970-80s)

This period addressing to involve more people in the political process the voting age which is earlier 21 years has been reduced to 18 years through the 61st Constitutional Amendment Act, 1988 apart from this there was increase in number of proposers, use of electronic voting machines, adjournment of poll in case of booth capturing etc had been seen. The government also establishes electoral reforms committee to check and improve the election. There were election laws to regulate the election process and taken measures towards electoral malpractices.

c) Reforms in election process(1990-2000s)

This period has ensured the electoral reform because of the National front government headed by V.P. Singh appointed a committee on electoral reform under chairmanship of Dinesh Goswami. The committee recommendations were listing of names of candidates, disqualification for insulting the National Honour Act, prohibition of sale of liquor, time limit for by-election, holiday to employees on the polling day, prohibition of arms, voting through postal ballot etc. T. N. Seshan (1990-96) under his leadership election commission many measures enforced to deal with the electoral malpractices. New initiatives like Elector's Photo Identity Cards (EPICs), regulation of election expenditure, EVMs use, Judicial interventions, and also MCC made the process of election more reliable and efficient to ensure the transparency and fairness.

d) Reforms in election process after 2000s onwards

This is the recent scenario which is also known as the 21<sup>st</sup> century evolution, where we witnessed many changes and innovation like Nationwide use of EVMs begin with 2004 Lok Sabha election, supreme court also gave a judgement to disclosure of candidate information in 2002, use of Voter Verified paper Audit Trail (VVPAT) in 2019 nationwide, the option NOTA (None of the above) in 2013 also adopted, there is also strict monitoring of election expenditure and political funding, voting rights to citizens of India living abroad, online enrolment in the electoral roll, increase of security deposit, photos of candidates on EVMs and Ballot papers, in 2017 limitation on cash donation, in 2018 introduction of electoral bonds and allowed foreign funding included in the reforms. .

Some other measures have taken by ECI such as:

- Election Management through Use of Technology –Elections have seen increased use of technology through mobile apps for voters, online grievance redressal, social media monitoring, and real-time reporting in recent years. To overcome the challenges such as logistical inefficiencies, human error, electoral malpractices, and delays over conduct of election; the use of technology in election management has emerged as a tool to strengthen the integrity and effectiveness of the election.
- Use of Media for disseminating Election Information –The media has been used for spreading information related to election. This is the easy and cost-effective way to provide information. The political organizations used this as a means so as to election commission to target the citizens to provide verified and real information.

The study shows that the objectives of electoral reforms include various things such as enhancing voter participation during election process, ensuring electoral integrity, strengthening democratic accountability, preventing criminalization of politics, reducing the influence of money power, proper check and balances. Therefore, the need of electoral reforms important for sustaining public trust and confidence in democratic institutions and ensuring elections should embody the true voice of voters.

### **Role of Media in the Electoral Process: -**

Increased Social Media usage in recent time among majority of people leads to active participation in political process. The dominance of youth can be visible in the process because most of them are young voters. This is showing that younger population statistics are more engaged with social media and political content online. Online platforms like WhatsApp, Instagram or YouTube can disseminate the information easily and quickly to them. This seems to be a medium of information spreading tool to the voters regarding political knowledge and information. Simultaneously, daily online media usage could influence levels of political views. Voter participation in 2024 elections showcases that high civic engagement among the voters. Where, social media as a 'Campaign Tool' used by the political organization and recently by the citizens to give their opinion and suggestion. There are traditional methods used by the political organizations but now social media became a tool. The influence of social media increased so much that it influenced the voting behaviour and citizen's participation. Finally, the mechanisms of social media enhanced users understanding of party objective manifesto and helpful for candidate's selection and learn about policies and programs.

The function of media in electoral process has shaped the election procedure in times such as: -

a) **Media as an Informative Agent**

As "fourth pillar of democracy," the media contributes significantly to transparency, accountability, and public awareness. The information provided by media always leads the citizens aware about the situation and scenario of political activities.

b) **Media as a Watchdog during election**

Investigative journalism and election reporting contribute to political accountability by scrutinizing political actors and institutions. Media helps to check each and every step taken by the political organizations and the election process. The voters and their behavioural changes, political parties and their propaganda, the process of election etc going through a surveillance due to media and journalism.

c) **Media and Voter Mobilization**

The Election Commission has contributed to increased voters participation in recent elections by media organizations and media campaigns. This plays a vital role in encouraging voter participation by creating awareness campaigns, election coverage, and voter education initiatives. Media contributes to voter mobilization by spreading awareness about electoral processes like voter registration, polling dates, voting procedures ensure by ECI and the importance of participation of voters during election.

d) **Rise of online social networks and digital Campaigning**

Twitter, Instagram, WhatsApp, Facebook, and YouTube are the social media sites use by the Political organizations to reach voters directly, spread their messages, and attract supporters. The political parties and candidates use social media for the propaganda and electoral campaigning.

Advantages of Media/ online platform in Elections: -

The recent growth in the use of social media platforms has significantly reshaped electoral politics by transforming how content is spread, campaigns are conducted, and voters are engaged. When used carefully, online platforms offer several advantages that strengthen democratic participation and electoral outreach. This is helpful for- Wider reach and accessibility to the citizens, cost-effective campaigning, direct communication with voters, enhanced voter awareness and mobilization, targeted and personalized outreach, strengthening participation.

All these have deliberately showed that the use of online platform can ultimately became the means of political mobilization. However, the increase use of social media platforms has brought in serious challenges to electoral integrity. These challenges raise concerns regarding the issues like-spread of misinformation; polarization and hate speeches; media bubble; Foreign and corporate influence; paid news etc.

The unregulated flow of political content and the difficulty of enforcing electoral norms in digital spaces have raised concerns for election due to the rise of these challenges to the management authorities.

The guidelines for social media conduct, pre-certification of political advertisements and collaboration with digital platforms to curb violations provided by the ECI and its implementation of various laws regarding these issues. Despite its risks, social media and digital campaigning have become integral to modern elections, significantly influencing voter behavior and the democratic process. The Election Commission has attempted to regulate paid news through monitoring committees and certification mechanisms, but enforcement yet to be remains a challenge.

### **Media and Electoral Reforms:**

As a facilitator of reforms by spreading awareness about electoral laws, voter rights, and subject of regulation media itself requires regulation to prevent misuse during elections, media plays a dual role in electoral reforms with course of time. The success often depends on responsible media behavior and effective media functioning requires a robust electoral framework with provision of reforms in election process. The

impact of electoral reforms and media intervention has significantly shaped Indian democracy. Positive outcomes include increased transparency, higher voter awareness, and improved election management. However, challenges such as media sensationalism, misinformation, and regulatory gaps persist. Democracy requires a balance between freedom of expression and regulatory oversight with media contributes through constructively to electoral integrity for a healthy environment in election.

Solutions to eradicate the problem in election process, media ultimately become a helper. With the use of digital voting, state funding and simultaneous election reforms will able to solve the problem and provide transparency. This reduces significance of traditional voting methods because of its popularity and cost effectiveness. Some concerns figured due to the malfunctioning and misuse of digital voting like cyber security, privacy and digital divide in rural India, this need to be addressed. The political organizations and political parties sometimes involved in cases that use of money in a wrong way to attract the voter and manipulate them in election period. It is to curb by using state funding of elections. This will help to eradicate black money and corruption in the democratic process.

Maintaining a simultaneous national and state election will reduce the electoral cost and keep political calendar more in sync. (Verma, A. K. (2023)[X]. This statement shows that the proper use of money and to control the misuse of fund only be possible after transparency in the electoral system. Simultaneous election may create fatigue and unfair advantage to the ruling political party said by some of the critics but this will help to use state resources properly and to influence both the national and local election to make it more transparent and fairer. This also helps to reduce electoral fatigue and unnecessary misuse of power.

## II. Conclusion

In recent years, India has made its electoral system strong through institutional reforms, technological innovations, and judicial interventions. Media, particularly digital media, has expanded the scope of political participation and accountability among the political process and participants. The study find out that with the proper use of online media platform, the ECI deal with various issues easily and effectively. Both the electoral reform and media platform became integral part of democracy. New challenges like misinformation, paid news, and media polarization need urgent solution to make the election procedure clearer. These challenges threaten the election process to be ethical and fair. In India, with the help of electoral reform there are implementation of Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs), Voter IDs, EPIC, VVPAT, NOTA, MCC etc. However, the rise of criminalization of politics, vote-buying and mafia in the systems of elections made it more serious in recent time to use media with sensibility. Despite of various technological advancements, serious socio-political issues, the caste-based voting, criminal elements in elections are also need to be taken care of. There is need of new electoral reform with combination of the technology and online social networking. The voters, participants and the political institutions all together work on the election process to ensure the democratic values of the country.

Therefore, during election and after election it is duty of the system to bring electoral reforms, media reforms, and promotion of digital literacy among citizens. The strong democratic institutions, ensuring transparency in political funding, regulating digital platforms, and fostering responsible media practices are essential for electoral democracy in contemporary era because coordinated efforts by the state, media, civil society, and citizens can provide elections as truly purposeful.

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