

13th Annual National Conference on Electoral and Political Reforms

Date and Venue: 30th April, 2017 at Panjab University, Chandigarh

Background Note

Session: Impact of Media on Elections & Governance

The Press is often referred to as the “Fourth Pillar” or “Fourth Estate” of Democracy because of the notion of the media as a watchdog, as a guardian of the public interest, and as a conduit between government and the governed.

Media plays a crucial role in shaping a healthy democracy. It makes us aware of various social, political and economic activities happening around the world. It is like a mirror, which reflects the bare truth and harsh realities of life. The Press is an important player on the political stage. Journalists are often feared by politicians because they have succeeded in uncovering corruption, the abuse of power and assorted malfeasance. Policies have been changed, reforms initiated and corrupt politicians and officials ousted partly because of media exposes.

Media reminds the politicians of their unfulfilled promises at the time of elections. The exhaustive coverage by TV news channels during elections helps people, especially illiterates, in electing the right persons. This also compels politicians to abide by their promises in order to remain in power. The media also exposes the loopholes in the democratic system, which ultimately helps the government to fill the vacuums of these loopholes and to make the system more accountable, responsive and citizen-friendly.

Changing Role of Media and the Culture of Paid News

Unfortunately, increasing commercialization has created stiff competition in media and in order to outdo each other, media houses are not focusing on responsible and serious journalism but openly resorting to “sensational and cheap journalism,” besides promoting the “Paid News” culture. What is even more disturbing is that now most of the media houses in India are under the control of a few vested business and political interests. Hence, the democratic interests of the many are being undermined by the private selfish interests of the powerful few. It may sound far-fetched but it would not be wrong to say that nowadays, most of the media houses’ main purpose is not to serve democracy, but to generate maximum profit for a handful of people.

Influence of Digital and Social media, Mobile Phones and Big Data Analytics

The 2014 Lok Sabha elections have changed the way elections were contested in India. It was the first time that digital and social media made such a great impact on the election process. Since, a large segment of the voters is spending an enormous amount of time online, the Internet is playing an important role in influencing their decisions. Social media sentiment is one of the key focus areas for big data analytics. Political candidates use it as a medium to interact with their voters. If a candidate wants to understand public opinion in a particular electorate, he/she can directly ask the general public to SMS their views and get a peek into the overall opinion using big data. Analytics can also be used to fetch public opinion under specific demographic categories.

The Prognosis

In this session, we request our panelists to enlighten us with their views on how Media can enhance its credibility and accountability in the current scenario and play its role as the watchdog of Democracy more effectively. How the new forms of Media, including Social Media, Mobile and Big Data can be used to enhance awareness regarding criminalization of politics and financial opaqueness in political parties.

- Aparna Lal
Sr. Program Associate (Communications), ADR