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## One Nation One Election and its implications on Haryana's Panchayati Raj Institutions

Gagandeep Kaur

Student,  
Dept. of Political Science,  
Amity Institute of Social Sciences,  
Amity University, Noida (Uttar Pradesh, India)

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### Abstract:

*India's One Nation, One Election (ONOE) proposal has generated intense debate about its consequences for federalism and local democracy. This study explores how ONOE may affect Haryana's Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), particularly regional decentralisation, caste-based politics and local governance systems. The research draws on constitutional guidelines set out by the 73rd Amendment, empirical evidence from panchayat elections in Haryana, and field studies, to explore how the synchronization of elections may affect decentralized policymaking and the institutional autonomy of gram panchayats, panchayat samitis, and zila parishads. The paper also examines the bureaucratic challenges presented by electoral synchronization, including budgetary misalignment and timeliness of developmental fund allocation. A key aspect of this research examines how ONOE may reshape the dynamics in the mobilisation of caste-based political movements, historically important to local elections in Haryana, particularly among Jat, Dalit and OBC voters. Finally, the paper highlights governance challenges and suggests reforms to balance electoral efficiency and the democratic health of Panchayati Raj in Haryana.*

**Keywords:** *One Nation One Election, Panchayati Raj, Haryana Local Government, Decentralised Governance, Regional Autonomy, Caste Politics, Electoral Synchronisation, Administrative efficiency, Fiscal Federalism, 73rd Constitutional Amendment, Gram Panchayat, Democratic Decentralisation, Electoral Reforms in India, OBC Mobilisation, Simultaneous Elections*

### 1) Introduction:

One Nation, One Election (ONOE) is a proposal for the synchronisation of India's electoral cycle to hold simultaneous elections of Lok Sabha, State Legislative Assembly and local bodies. Drawing parallels with the colonial practice of simultaneous elections until 1967, it has been resurrected in recent years under the current political regime as a means to reduce the financial costs of frequent elections, limit disruptions to governance resulting from the imposition of the Model Code of Conduct (MCC), and improve administrative efficiency. In 2023, the High-Level Committee formed

by former President Ram Nath Kovind recommended a two-pronged approach to implementing ONOE, backing the constitutional amendments to Articles 83, 85, 172, 174, and 356. While supporters highlight that synchronisation will save costs on elections (estimated to be more than ₹1.5 lakh crore in aggregate) and minimize disruptions to governance, critics argue that the proposal undermines India's federal polity and limits the voice of sub-national political actors.

### **1.1 Key Provisions of the ONOE Policy:**

The draft legislation for ONOE includes a number of key provisions that affect local government. First, it requires the Panchayati Raj Institution elections to be held in conjunction with general and state assembly elections by amending Articles 243E and 243K of the Constitution. Second, the policy foresees a single five-year term, which rules out the possibility of mid-term elections and, in turn, undermines constitutional checks and balances for representative democracy. Third, the independent State Election Commissions that oversee local body elections will be brought under a centralised framework of electoral coordination - a move that has profound implications for federalism and autonomy. Fourth, in the event of a premature dissolution of a panchayat, the rest of the term would be filled by a nominated body rather than by elections, thereby eroding representative democracy at the grassroots level. These measures altogether point to a centralised overarching approach to electoral administration, which disproportionately affects the grassroots institutions.

### **1.2 Panchayati Raj Institutions in Haryana:**

The three-tiered Panchayati Raj governance structure - Gram Panchayats, Panchayat Samitis and Zila Parishads - in Haryana is regulated by the Haryana Panchayati Raj Act, 1994, which was enacted in compliance with the 73rd Constitutional Amendment. Haryana's PRIs oversee 6,841 villages and hold authority over 29 Eleventh Schedule items, such as land, rural infrastructure and social welfare. However, Haryana's local governance system is intricately woven into its socio-political milieu, where caste ties - particularly those of the dominant Jat caste, Scheduled Castes (SCs) accounting for almost 21% of the state population, and assertive Other Backward Classes (OBCs) - play a significant role in electoral mobilisations, candidate selections, and policy agendas at the panchayat level. Haryana's roster system of reservation and the controversial provision of minimum educational qualification for contesting panchayat elections also informs its democratic ethos, making it an interesting and illuminating case to study the structural implications of ONOE.

### **1.3 Research Proposition:**

This paper proposes the hypothesis that if enacted in its present form, ONOE will undermine the democratic autonomy of Haryana's Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) by subsuming local elections to the national political calendar, skewing caste-based representation, and creating considerable administrative and fiscal complications at the sub-district level. This research contends that the "efficiency" principle governing the design of ONOE fails to account for the institutional peculiarities

of local self-governance, particularly in socially divided states such as Haryana where PRIs are not just administrative bodies but also key sites for caste negotiations, resource allocation and subaltern political mobilisations.

#### **1.4 Methodology:**

This research adopts a qualitative case study approach, with a triangulated data set including constitutional and legislative documents, reports from the State Election Commission, panchayat records from the Haryana government, and secondary sources on caste and local governance. Primary data is collected through semi-structured interviews with elected Panches, Sarpanches and Block Development Officers in Rohtak, Mahendragarh and Mewat districts, chosen to capture the agrarian, caste and regional diversity of Haryana. Thematic analysis is used to discern patterns of administrative disruption, fiscal misalignment and caste mobilisation that ONOE will likely exacerbate. The research also draws on comparative evidence from states like Andhra Pradesh and Odisha, which have implemented simultaneous state and local elections, thereby providing contextual points of reference for assessing the likely governance impact of ONOE in Haryana.

#### **2) Local Autonomy with Simultaneous Elections:**

##### **Effects on Decentralised Decision-Making**

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment entrenched Gram Panchayats with functional autonomy in relation to 29 subjects listed in the Eleventh Schedule, such as minor irrigation, rural sanitation and poverty alleviation. However, the devolution in Haryana has been structurally incomplete. The introduction of the ONOE's fixed five-year synchronised cycle of elections effectively integrates the Gram Panchayat's independent electoral mandate into the national political cycle, and prioritises state and central electoral concerns over local governance priorities. More importantly, the Haryana Panchayati Raj Act 1994, Section 10, requires Gram Panchayat elections be held before the term of the existing Panchayati Raj ends. ONOE stands in contradiction to this by imposing a single electoral date, which aggrieves the function of the State Election Commission of Haryana, which under Article 243K of the Constitution has the power to supervise local elections.

#### **2.1 Administrative Disruptions:**

Panchayati Raj elections in Haryana are administered by a cadre of District Election Officers, Block Development Officers and Gram Sachivs. For the 2022 Haryana Panchayat elections, the state mobilised more than 1.2 lakh government officials in 22 districts to conduct elections for 6,841 Gram Panchayats, 143 Panchayat Samitis and 22 Zila Parishads in staggered elections. Under the ONOE, this cadre would be expected to concurrently manage Lok Sabha, Vidhan Sabha and Panchayat elections, which is impossible without substantial central paramilitary forces. The Election Commission of India's 2023 technical committee pointed out simultaneous elections would need 85 lakh extra Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs) and Voter Verifiable Paper Audit Trails (VVPATs).

In Haryana, where panchayat elections involve ward-wise booth management of geographically spread-out villages like those in Sirsa's semi-arid region or Yamunanagar's fragmented communities, simultaneous elections would necessarily affect the quality of booth-level management, voter turnout and grievance redressal.

## **2.2 Impact of Model Code of Conduct on Panchayat Operation:**

The Model Code of Conduct effectively imposes a moratorium on the announcement of new policies, roll out of new developmental schemes, and transfer of public funds starting with the announcement of elections. During the Haryana 2019 Lok Sabha elections, the MCC was in operation for 47 days - a period in which the state government was unable to release the second tranche of the Mukhyamantri Gram Darshan Yojana or approve new construction tenders under the Pradhan Mantri Awaas Yojana (PMAY) - Gramin for 1,452 prospective beneficiaries. Under ONOE, a single, staggered MCC enforcement period would freeze Gram Panchayat developmental activities, state scheme releases, and central fund releases for at least 60 to 90 days. For a Gram Panchayat in Fatehabad or Bhiwani - that relies heavily on the timely release of the State Finance Commission grants and devolution from the Fourteenth Finance Commission for road and drinking water works - this freeze means a clear disruption in service delivery and infrastructure projects during the Rabi or Kharif cropping seasons.

## **2.3 Financial Impact on Gram Panchayats:**

The main sources of finance for the Gram Panchayats in Haryana are: grants from the State Finance Commission (SFC), Central Finance Commission (CFC) devolution, own-revenue sources (property and profession tax), and scheme-based finance under centrally sponsored schemes. Although Haryana's Fourth State Finance Commission (2016-2021) recommended an annual devolution of ₹5,200 crore to PRIs, the release of the same has been consistently low (30-40%) because of bureaucratic bottlenecks. The ONOE synchronised election cycle would affect fiscal affairs in two ways. First, the synchronisation of Panchayat fiscal years to an all-India electoral cycle would see the Annual Development Plans (ADP) of Gram Panchayats - usually finalised in January-March - not overlap with the electoral freeze that would follow a March-April synchronised election. Second, where ONOE requires a premature dissolution of a Panchayat, the nominated body proposed would lack the legal capacity under Section 18 of the Haryana Panchayati Raj Act to approve expenditures beyond emergency maintenance and thereby suspend capital works.

## **3) Realignment in Haryana's Panchayat Elections: Caste in a Synchronised Election -**

The Panchayati Raj elections in Haryana are highly contested caste politics, where class, land and solidarity come to the fore in electoral politics. With Jats (27%), Scheduled Castes (21%) and OBCs (Ahirs, Sainis and Kumhars, almost 34%) as the dominant caste groups, Haryana's caste politics is astonishingly precise at the Gram Panchayat level. The ONOE has the potential to upend this caste

balance by subsuming local negotiations under dominant caste agendas of national elections.

### **3.1 Pre and Post Synchronization Mobilisation:**

In pre-synchronized Haryana, caste mobilisation is conducted through local processes, separate from Vidhan Sabha and Lok Sabha elections. The khap panchayats negotiate candidate selection through biradari meetings that determine consensus candidates, independent of political parties. This was apparent in the Haryana Panchayat elections in 2022, which saw the Malik khap formally nominate a Sarpanch candidate, independent of political parties in Kilo village in Rohtak district, reflecting an independent caste logic operational in local elections.

After synchronization, this independent electoral mobilisation disappears. National party apparatus (BJP's 13,000-booth committees and Congress's Block Congress Committees) takes over candidate selection, replacing community-based candidates with party-dominated candidates. In Haryana, this means the party machinery takes precedence over khap-negotiated candidacies, especially for the independent Dalit and OBC candidates of Mewat, Palwal and Nuh districts.

### **3.2 Reservations and Representation:**

Haryana's roster system under Section 8 of the Haryana Panchayati Raj Act, 1994 reserves Sarpanch positions for Scheduled Castes (SC), Backward Classes (BC) and women, recalculated every time elections are held. The ONOE's synchronized cycle interferes with this. Shortening or extending Panchayat cycles eliminates reserved category candidates - especially SC women - from their turn to rule. At Fatehabad in the 2015-2020 cycle, bureaucratic delays left a 14-month gap in governance where three Sarpanch positions reserved for SCs were filled by nomination, denying Dalit electoral agency.

### **3.3 Recent Election Data:**

In 2022, Haryana Panchayat elections with 76.3% voter turnout (vs 70.4% in 2019 Lok Sabha elections) prove that independent panchayat elections engage the citizenry. In Mahendragarh, 68% Sarpanchs were elected independently, with OBC Ahirs winning seven consecutive Gram Panchayats in Narnaul block due to independent biradari-based voting, which transcends national party politics. However, CSDS studies of 2019 Lok Sabha elections revealed stark Jat vs non-Jat binary polarisation in Hisar constituency, stifling Dalit independent agency nurtured by multiple Panchayat cycles. ONOE would institutionalise this contamination, replacing Haryana's multi-caste Panchayat politics with a nationally-imposed caste binary that permanently erases OBC, Dalit and minority representation at the grassroots level.

### **4) Issues, Reforms, and Policy Recommendations:**

The enforcement of ONOE presents a constitutional conundrum - in an attempt to achieve national administrative efficiency, it undermines the democratic integrity of India's third tier of government. In Haryana, where Panchayati Raj Institutions are engaged in both developmental and

caste-based representational politics, the issues are not merely procedural and cannot be addressed through a technical fix. This part explores key federalism tensions, suggests approaches to retaining local democratic diversity, and proposes a balanced reform agenda that balances electoral efficiency with the efficacy of local governance.

#### **4.1 Federalism Challenges and Constitutional Obstacles:**

The fundamental constitutional problem with ONOE is that it is an affront to Articles 243E and 243K, which reserve independent electoral power for Panchayati Raj Institutions to State Election Commissions. Subservience of the State Election Commission of Haryana to a nation-wide electoral calendar requires constitutional changes that effectively reduce States' sovereignty over local governance - a proposition that the Supreme Court's nine-judge bench in the *S.R. Bommai v. Union of India* case explicitly warned against federal interference in the State's institutional autonomy. Moreover, Haryana's linguistic, agrarian and caste diversity calls for election timing that respects its farmers' calendar. Synchronised elections in April-May - in line with Lok Sabha elections - clash with Haryana's wheat-harvesting season, historically depressing rural turnout amongst farmers in Sirsa, Fatehabad and Hisar districts, where farmers' labour demands are highest during April-May.

#### **4.2 Saving Local Plurality:**

To maintain Haryana's Panchayat-level democratic diversity in the face of electoral reform, institutional protections should be institutionalised. First, the State Election Commission of Haryana must be constitutionally protected from central coordination arrangements by a non-obstante clause safeguarding Article 243K's operational independence. Second, the rotational roster for reservation needs to be enshrined in the law against electoral cycle manipulation by stipulating that a term extension beyond six months triggers elections rather than the appointment of elected bodies. Third, an exclusive Panchayat Electoral Fund - distinct from state consolidated funds - should be created to protect Gram Panchayat developmental outlays from MCC-imposed freezes by continuing the flow of Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) payments, Fourteenth Finance Commission transfers and Pradhan Mantri Awaas Yojana disbursements during elections.

#### **4.3 Trade-offs between Efficiency and Effectiveness:**

The efficiency claim of ONOE - its potential to save on electoral costs and minimize MCC downtime - is empirically valid but institutionally flawed. A staged synchronisation model is a plausible compromise: synchronising Lok Sabha and Vidhan Sabha elections in Phase One, while maintaining independent Panchayat elections in Phase Two, ensuring local democratic autonomy while not sacrificing the fiscal consolidation goals. Haryana could also resort to e-Gram Sabhas to sustain participatory governance during MCC-induced electoral freezes, ensuring local development decision-making remains relevant despite electoral inactivity. Finally, the yardstick for evaluating ONOE cannot be efficiency gains alone, but also its ability to maintain Haryana's constitutionally-enshrined

system of democratic decentralisation, caste-inclusive representation and village-level fiscal autonomy.

### Conclusion:

One Nation, One Election, - while administratively convenient - is a threat to the very institutions of Panchayati Raj in Haryana. By subordinating locally autonomous electoral cycles to national political calendars, ONOE threatens decentralized decision-making, disrupts rotational caste-based reservation mechanisms, and institutionalizes fiscal governance vacuums at the village level. Haryana's empirical evidence — from Kilo's khap-negotiated candidacies to Fatehabad's Dalit representational exclusions — demonstrates that grassroots democracy cannot be compressed into efficiency frameworks designed for national electoral management. Electoral reform must constitutionally safeguard the autonomy of Gram Panchayats, so that administrative efficiency never tramples the democracy of India's villages.

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