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# The two-seat solution

One leader, one constituency should be a principle in electoral politics

**C**AN there be any rationale for allowing one candidate to contest from two constituencies? A prudent answer should be: none. Generally, prime ministerial or chief ministerial candidates do it as a safety measure. To be elected, they need to win one out of the two constituencies. However, if they win both, they need to resign from one, which forces a by-election. The BJP's PM candidate, Narendra Modi, is going to contest from two constituencies, Vadodara and Varanasi, in the coming Lok Sabha elections. He is not an exception. Indira Gandhi contested from two constituencies, Medak and Rae Bareilly, in 1980. In the 1999 Lok Sabha elections, Sonia Gandhi contested from Amethi and Belgaon. Akhilesh Yadav and Lalu Prasad also contested from two constituencies in the 2009 and 2004 Lok Sabha elections, respectively. And the list goes on.

The rule of limiting the candidate to contesting from a maximum of two seats was introduced in 1996 through an amendment to the Representation of the People Act (RP Act) of 1951. Before this law, leaders were allowed to contest from as many seats as they could. There are instances where supreme leaders of parties have ex-

ploited this flexibility. N.T. Rama Rao, actor-turned-politician and founder of the Telugu Desam Party, contested in multiple seats in all the four assembly elections of his political life. On his debut in 1983, he contested from Guduvada and Tirupati, winning both of them. In the next election in 1985, he repeated the feat in three seats, Guduvada, Hindupur and Nalgonda; retained Hindupur and relinquished the other two, imposing another round of elections there. Biju Patnaik, the veteran leader from Odisha, earned the dubious distinction of contesting the most

for re-election. Re-elections cost money. According to government records, in the 2009 Lok Sabha election, the per-constituency cost for conducting the poll was Rs 2-3 crore. The estimates for this year's Lok Sabha elections are approximately Rs 5 crore per constituency. By-elections cost more; unlike general elections, they don't have the economic advantages of scale.

This has not escaped the attention of the Election Commission and Supreme Court. In 2004, the EC had proposed to bar candidates from contesting from more than one constituency, or to bear

multiple seats. But apart from money, it is a waste of time for lakhs of voters. It is also not fair to upcoming leaders, who have to vacate space to so that the bigger leaders can get their second seats. This is a violation of principle of equality, bringing to mind the Orwellian saying: "All are equal, but some are more equal than others."

The only way out is to make a leader's candidature void if he or she files a nomination from more than one constituency. Like "one person, one vote", the principle of "one leader, one constituency" should also be followed. Indeed, Section 70 of the RP Act prevents a leader from holding on to more than one seat. So, there can be no rationale in allowing a candidate to file nominations from more than one constituency. An ardent fan of a leader or supporter of a party might get excited by the fact that Narendra Modi is contesting from both Gujarat and UP or that Rahul Gandhi may stand from both the north and the south. But one must spare a thought for the larger notion of equity and fairness.

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number of seats simultaneously, running for four assembly seats and one Lok Sabha seat in 1971.

The provision of allowing a candidate to contest from multiple seats is an absurd one. The absurdity is pronounced further when sitting members of the legislative assembly or the Rajya Sabha contest for the Lok Sabha or vice versa. There are innumerable examples in India where leaders holding the post of MLA/MP have contested for another election. Upon winning, they surrendered their posts

the cost of the ensuing bypoll. But political parties, particularly the major ones, are generally averse to any kind of electoral reform. So, not surprisingly, the Union government of the day rejected the proposal. Recently, there have been petitions in the SC to intervene in the matter.

The solution to this does not lie in asking the winning leader or party to pay for the by-election. A monetary penalty will not deter these so-called larger-than-life leaders from contesting from mul-

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