EDITORIAL

LOK SABHA ELECTIONS

he country is ready for Lok Sabha elections 2024 with a total of 102 constituencies in 21 states will vote on April 19 for the first phase.

The Indian elections indeed hold immense significance, representing a cornerstone of democratic processes in the country. With the Election Commission of India overseeing every aspect, the integrity and fairness of the elections are upheld. Established in 1950, shortly after India gained independence, the Election Commission operates independently to ensure that the electoral process is conducted transparently.

Led by the Chief Election Commissioner, appointed by the President, and comprising other members appointed by the government, the commission plays a pivotal role in shaping the democratic landscape of India.

The electoral process, marked by direct, secret, and universal suffrage for citizens above 18 years old, underscores the democratic principles enshrined in the Indian Constitution. The Election Commission works diligently to encourage participation from all sections of society, including women, minorities, and citizens residing abroad, thereby fostering inclusive representation in governance.

Democracy needs conscious, alert and aware voters

OMKAR DATTATRAY emocracy is often hailed as the cornerstone of modern political systems and backbone of a robust nation and system .What exactly fuels this backbone? It is the citizens themselves ,armed with civic and electoral knowledge and a deep understanding of their rights and responsibilities. In a contemporary society it is evident that a vast majority of citizens harbor opinions on their country's politics and electoral options. While many may hold strong political views ,how many citizens know about the nity-gritty of the electoral process, their rights and responsibilities? Electoral literacy is not merely about understanding how to cast vote it is about comprehending the entire electoral process. the authorities involved ,and the rights and responsibilities associated with being a citizen. It encompasses knowledge about electoral laws rules and regulations ,and the ability to make informed decisions during elections. This understanding is critical especially in the world's largest democracy with a population of 140 crore people .Electoral literacy serves as the bedrock of an informed and participatory democracy. In such a vast and diverse nation, electoral literacy emerges as an indispensible tool for citizens to navigate the intricate landscape of democracy. It equips citizens with the knowledge and understanding necessary to actively participate in the electoral process, make informed decisions and uphold the democratic ideals of representation and accountability. Electoral literacy encompasses the knowledge and skills required for meaningful participation in the electoral process. It includes understanding political structure, the voting system and the importance of civic responsibilities. The power of an informed electorate cannot be overstated .A informed electorate plays a crucial role in ensuring the smooth functioning of the democratic system . Equipped with knowledge and understanding ,these citizens can effectively assess their needs, comprehend the issues that hold the most significance to them, scrutinize candidates and make informed decisions during elections. A lack of electoral literacy can lead to voter anathy, poor decision making and manipulation by political parties. If citizens do not understand the electoral process, they might be swayed by misinformation or personal bias rather than making informed decisions based on candidates policies and records .Since ,India's first election in 1951 with a voter turnout of 45.7%, the electorate has witnessed remarkable progress .In 2019 ,voter turnout soared to an unprecedented 67.4%, marking a significant achievement bolstered by notable gender equality. Several factors have contributed to this milestone ,foremost among them the implementation of SVEEP by ECI in 2009. Serving as a flagship initiative, SVEEP focuses on voter education, awareness and literacy enriching the democratic fabric of the nation . Despite these advancements , concerns linger regarding escalating voter apathy, particularly among urban and young voters, prompting the ECI to advocate for a 75% turnout in the upcoming 2024 Lok Sabha polls .India's constitution laid an ambitious vision that every adult Indian, irrespective of gender formal education socio-economic status or geographic location .would possess the right to vote with each vote holding equal weight .The ECI has admirably transformed this vision into a reality. For a successful and vibrant democracy, there is need for conscious ,alert and aware voters who can choose the right repreentatives to rule for them. Therefore voter literacy is important and necessary ingredient of a successful democracy and so the voters should be conscious, alert and aware so that they are in a position to choose the right candidates who will rule according to the aspirations of the people who are the voters. We cannot think of a successful democracy without the voter literacy and so voters literacy is one of the essential requirements of the vibrant and successful democracy. The voters should be literate voters even though they may be uneducated and so voter literacy is the essential feature of the electoral democracy and therefore due stress should be laid on the conscious, alert and aware voters so that the voters are in a position to elect the right candidates of their choice so that their representatives will govern as per the wishes and aspirations of the voters. Thus for a successful, meaningful and vibrant democracy. we need conscious ,alert, aware and electoral literate voters Therefore required stress should be laid on the voters awareness and literacy so that the voters will choose the right candidates to govern in accordance with the wishes of the voters. Developing the practice of informed and ethical electoral participation is vital to investment in future of democracy. Under its flagship programme ,Systematic Voters Education & Electoral Participation -SVEEP the Election Commission of India carries out various interventions for strengthening and enhancing quality electoral participation .Election Commission of India is now rolling out its ambitious project Electoral Literacy Club -ELC for mainstreaming of electoral literacy in schools colleges and communities to promote electoral literacy in all age groups of the Indian citizens. In organizations such as government and non-government as well as in corporate , the ELC has assumed the name of Voter Awareness Forum -VAF and serves the purpose of imparting voter education to all employees within an organization .Voter Awareness Forum -VAF is an informal forum for generating discussions and awareness around electoral process, on the how, what and where of registration & voting through the medium of real-time activities. So we can say that our voters should well participate in the election process and take active part in the electoral process .The democracy needs and demands that the voters should be conscious ,aware and alert so that they actively participate in the electoral process . For the active participation in the electoral process, the voters should posses consciousness, alertness and awareness so that they take an active part in the elections and choose the representatives of their choice and in this lies the essence of democracy . For making voters aware and conscious, the election commission of India launches various programmes so that voters are made aware and conscious about their right to vote and such programmers also ensure that all eligible voters cast their vote without any fear and favor . So it is necessary that the voter literacy is given top priority so that the electors cast their vote without any bias and undue influence. Thus there should be voter awareness and literacy so that the voters will actively participate in electoral process and choose the representatives of their choice. It is needed most that the voters should be able to differentiate between the good and bad candidates and then make a right

rule according to the wishes of the voters.

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choice. To sum up we can conclude that the voter should be con-

scious, aware and alert so that the right candidates are elected who

Startup India, Skill India, and Stand-up India: Empowering Youth v/s Freebies

■ DR BHARTI GUPTA

he precursor to writing this article is the recent Mega event of Startup Mahakumbh 2024, held from March 18-20 at ■ New Delhi's Bharat Mandapam and Pragati Maidan, which exemplifies India's commitment to fostering youth financial empowerment, transforming them into creators rather than mere seekers of employment. With over 1000 promising startups from India and around the globe, alongside influential participants such as unicorns, international and domestic venture capitalists, corporates, and industry leaders, the event emphasized the Power of I4: Intellectual convergence, innovation, investment for growth, and international outreach. It provided diverse engagement opportunities for youth, including thematic pavilions, startup booths, pitching sessions, B2B meetings, mentoring sessions, masterclasses, keynotes, fireside chats, panels, networking opportunities, and platforms for future entrepreneurs. The expanse of the event can be imagined by the key features like 10 distinct pavilions focusing on AI & SaaS, Agritech, Biotech & Pharma, B2B & Manufacturing, Climate Tech, Deep Tech, D2C/Consumer/platforms, Gaming & Esports, Fintech, and Incubators/Accelerators.

In a rapidly evolving global landscape, the youth population stands as a formidable force for driving socio-economic growth and development. Recognizing this potential, the Indian government has initiated various schemes likeSkill India, Startup India, and Stand-up India. These programs are not mere promises of freebies; rather, they represent a strategic investment in building a more resilient and innovative economy by equipping the youth with the skills, resources, and opportunities needed to succeed in the 21st-century workforce.

Skill India: Skill India, launched on 15th July 2015, addresses the pressing need to enhance the employability of India's youth by providing them with relevant skills and training. The initiative recognizes that traditional education systems often fail to equip students with the practical skills demanded by the job market. Skill India aims to bridge this gap by offering skill development programs tailored to the needs of various industries and sectors.

Under Skill India, a wide range of vocational training programs are provided across sectors such as manufacturing, construction, healthcare, hospitality, information technology, tourism, and more. These programs focus on imparting industry-relevant skills, including technical know-how, soft skills, and entrepreneurship training. By equipping young people with the necessary skills, Skill India empowers them to secure gainful employment or pursue entrepreneurial ventures, thereby reducing unemployment and poverty.

Skill India also fosters a culture of lifelong learning and skill upgradation, ensuring that individuals remain competitive in an ever-changing job market. Through initiatives like the Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY) and the National Skill Development Corporation (NSDC), Skill India has made significant strides in enhancing the employability and earning potential of millions of Indian youth.

Startup India: Startup India, launched on 16th January 2016, is a landmark initiative aimed at fostering a conducive ecosystem for nurturing innovation and entrepreneurship in the country. Recognizing the transformative potential of startups in driving economic growth, job creation, and technological innovation, Startup India provides a comprehensive package of benefits and incentives to budding entrepreneurs. Moreover, Startup India promotes a culture of innovation and risk-taking, challenging the status quo and driving disruptive change across sectors.

One of the key components of Startup India is the simplification of regulatory processes and easing compliance burdens for startups. The initiative offers tax exemptions, faster patent examination, funding support through schemes like the Fund of Funds for Startups (FFS), incubation facilities, mentorship programs, and access to market opportunities. By providing a supportive environment for startups to thrive, Startup India encourages young entrepreneurs to pursue their ideas, take calculated risks, and scale their ventures.

The initiative has witnessed remarkable success stories, with Indian startups making significant contributions to sectors such as technology, e-commerce, healthcare, fintech, and agriculture. By fostering a vibrant startup ecosystem, Startup India not only fuels economic growth but also positions India as a global hub for innovation and entrepreneurship.

Stand Up India: Stand Up India, launched on 5th April 2016, is a flagship initiative aimed at promoting entrepreneurship among women, Scheduled Castes (SCs), and Scheduled Tribes (STs). The program seeks to address the historical socio-economic disparities by facilitating access to credit and support for aspiring entrepreneurs from marginalized communities. One of the key features of Stand Up India is the provision of bank loans ranging from Rs. 10 lakh to Rs. 1 crore to at least one SC/ST and one woman borrower per bank branch for setting up greenfield enterprises. By providing financial assistance and support, Stand Up India encourages marginalized sections of society to become entrepreneurs and create jobs, thus promoting inclusive growth. This scheme eventually empowers marginalized sections of society to become job creators rather than job seekers.

The above-said initiatives are different from promising freebies in that they focus on capacity building and creating opportunities for sustainable livelihoods rather than short-term handouts. By fostering entrepreneurship, skill development, and innovation, Stand Up India, Skill India, and Startup India empower the youth to seize opportunities, realize their potential, take control of their futures, and contribute positively to the nation's development.

The culture of providing freebies, while seemingly beneficial in the short term for certain segments of society, can have detrimental effects on the long-term economic growth and sustainability of a nation. Freebies often come at a significant cost to the economy in terms of distorted incentives, fiscal burden, crowding out of the private sector, inflationary pressures, interference with market mechanisms, generational debt burden, and dependency syndrome. A more sustainable approach to promoting economic growth involves investing in education, infrastructure, healthcare, and social safety nets while fostering an environment that encourages innovation, entrepreneurship, and productive employment.

Let us examine this in detail, Freebies often distort incentives by discouraging productive behavior and incentivizing dependence on government handouts. When individuals or groups receive goods or services for free, they may become less motivated to work hard, innovate, or invest in their future. This can lead to a decline in productivity and hinder the overall competitiveness of the economy.

Freebies require significant financial resources, usually funded through taxes or government borrowing. This places a heavy Fiscal burden on the fiscal health of the nation, diverting resources away from essential public services such as infrastructure development, education, healthcare, and social welfare programs that have a more sustainable impact on economic growth.

Excessive reliance on government-provided freebies can crowd out private-sector investment and entrepreneurship. When the government provides goods or services for free that are also offered by the private sector, it can undermine competition and deter private investment in those areas. This limits innovation, reduces consumer choice, and stifles economic dynamism.

Freebies can contribute to inflationary pressures in the economy, particularly if they are not accompanied by corresponding increases in productivity or output. As the government injects more money into the economy to finance freebies, it can lead to an increase in demand without a corresponding increase in supply, driving up prices and eroding the purchasing power of the currency.

Freebies often interfere with the efficient functioning of market mechanisms by distorting price signals and resource allocation. When goods or services are provided for free or at heavily subsidized rates, it can create artificial demand and distort market equilibrium, leading to inefficiencies and misallocation of resources. Financing freebies through government borrowing can saddle future generations with a heavy debt burden, limiting their ability to invest in their own future and stifling intergenerational mobility. Excessive debt accumulation can also raise concerns about fiscal sustainability, leading to higher interest rates, reduced investor confidence, and potential sovereign debt crises.

The provision of freebies can foster a culture of dependency, where individuals or groups become reliant on government handouts rather than taking responsibility for their own well-being. This dependency syndrome can perpetuate cycles of poverty and hinder social mobility, ultimately undermining the long-term resilience and prosperity of the nation.

In contrast to the freebie culture, empowering youth through initiatives like Skill India, Stand Up India, and Startup India offers numerous benefits like promoting self-reliance, Fostering economic Growth, Enhancing Productivity and Competitiveness, Reducing Poverty and Inequality, Encouraging innovation and entrepreneurship, Building Human Capital Instead of fostering dependency on government handouts, Empowering youth through skill development, entrepreneurship, and innovation promotes social cohesion and stabilityand encourages self-reliance.

Skill development, entrepreneurship, and innovation are essential drivers of fostering economic growth. By investing in these areas, governments can stimulate job creation, enhance productivity, and foster innovation-led growth. Empowered youth are more likely to start businesses, create employment opportunities, and drive economic dynamism, leading to sustainable and inclusive growth.

Empowering youth through skill development enhances their productivity and competitivenessin the job market. By acquiring relevant skills and training, young people are better equipped to meet the demands of employers and contribute effectively to the workforce. This not only benefits individuals by increasing their earning potential but also strengthens the overall competitiveness of the economy.

Empowering youth from marginalized communities through initiatives like Stand Up India can help reduce poverty and inequality. By providing access to finance, training, and support services, these initiatives enable individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds to break the cycle of poverty, create wealth, and improve their socio-economic status. This promotes social inclusion and reduces disparities in wealth and opportunity.

Startup India fosters a culture of innovation and entrepreneurship by providing a supportive ecosystem for startups to thrive. By offering incentives, funding, mentorship, and regulatory reforms, the initiative encourages young entrepreneurs to pursue their ideas, take risks, and scale their ventures. This promotes innovation, drives technological advancements, and creates new industries and markets, leading to job creation and economic diversification.

Skill development initiatives under Skill India help build human capital by equipping youth with the skills and knowledge needed to succeed in the modern economy. By investing in education, vocational training, and lifelong learning, governments can ensure that young people are prepared for the jobs of the future and can adapt to changing market trends and technologies. Empowering youth through initiatives that promote skill development, entrepreneurship, and innovation can contribute to social cohesion and stability. By providing opportunities for meaningful employment, economic participation, and social mobility, these initiatives reduce the risk of social unrest, crime, and conflict, fostering a more inclusive and harmonious society.

In the above-mentioned context, it can be therefore said that empowering youth through initiatives like Skill India,Startup India, and Stand-Up India offers numerous benefits, unlike the short-term relief provided by a freebie culture, these initiatives lay the foundation for long-term prosperity, resilience, and inclusive development and pave the way for developed nation.

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A decade of change and politics of performance

M.R LAL

hile releasing the Sankalp Patra of his party in its head-quarters, the Prime Minister asserted a significant point. He indicated the present tumultuous situation emerging globally and for India, he insisted on the need of a stable governa government that will be capable of fulfilling the as tions of its people and play a supportive role by helping the world recuperate. Similar was the situation that the Covid pandemic brought all over the world. While the developed world in the west sarcastically registered its skepticism on India's ability to help its population, which the west thought would face the worst level of calamity with the epidemic claiming lives; India had its leadership in Narendra Modi, who confidently with humility refused to import vaccines but under his leadership its efforts made it globe's most successful manufacturer of vaccines. While his regime decided to manufacture vaccines for India's humongous population, his move was in practice, a bold initiative that satiated his party's ideological stance of Swadeshi. His government firmly moved with its 'Vocal for Local' slogan. India's manufacturing sector received a fresh vigor and the boom was so tremendous that the defense sector also received an unprecedented reception from across the globe. During the pandemic, the government's Make in India movement was deeply impactful that the Indian subcontinent was vaccinated almost twice with the death rate being reduced noticeably. But the western world including the USA was seen literally limping and collapsing critically with millions dying. India's vaccine Maitri was received with great jubilation as it helped the needy countries with vaccines. And the value in focus was purely humanitarian. India's diplomatic exchequer received a fresh impetus and it came out of the perilous impact of the disease. While unveiling the Sankalp Patra his words have resonated for the need of stability. In a democracy a government without a clear majority would be a dis-

As he entered the national arena in 2014, there was unwavering doubt that had been lingering for long on the democratic efficiency of a multiparty polity. That the world thought it would be a lost case for India. Its democracy would fail to bless a single party with a majority. Probably this approach on the Indian scenario gave pundits across the world a giggle of satisfaction. Modi's entry

changed everything. India missed a hardworking leader with a vision and mission for decades. Those who came to hold the helm of affairs were confusingly held tighter by their coalition partners. The UPA regimes were surrounded by the party dynasty which confusingly pestered and disrupted the government under Manmohan Singh with its family hegemony. Modi had a variety of manipulative issues to deal with. And the most prominent one was to alter the image that the global media had awarded him; the image of a scoundrel, the one they villainously accused him for the Godhra riots. The US banned him and other countries had furrowed their brows as he took over. But he began his stint with a monumental mobilization for transformation, which the political pundits could not credibly predict. His decisions were historical and unprecedented. Starting from demonetization and stretching further by establishing a new GST regime, he remained in critics' eve for long.

Though these revolutionary initiatives invited voluminous criticism, the country was amazingly given a jolt as he succeeded in opening almost 50 crore new bank accounts, the segment of population that was left frozen from banking even after India's six decades of independence. Construction of about 12 crore toilets across the country had phenomenally helped a huge segment of the country's population, especially women. With his government's herculean distribution of cooking gas connection to 11 crore families, the scenario turned vivid safeguarded by transparency. This was the period he established a special clan of electorate that he fondly calls his government's labharthis (beneficiaries). Slashing intermediaries from almost everywhere, his first regime began a transparent system that a person could easily step into, if he was eligible.

Imagine how critical his decisions were! Never an ideologically sound BJP was perceived to have had the audacity to stitch an alliance with Mehbooba Mufti in Jammu and Kashmir. But the subsequent development in the most volatile Indian state proved his move in this regard was a well studied attempt to bring the situation of the state under control. Rest is history. From the abrogation of Article 370 to the bifurcation of the state for administrative ease to the peace that the region is now known for, the whole Jammu and Kashmir episode has surely become historic. The decade of his administration will be known to have boldly handled India's unreli-

bors witnessed a strong India retaliate their belligerence. Strongly defending our interests, his government strategized a massive offensive in the Doklam sector along the China border. Our soldiers bravely defended our area and China had to ultimately retreat. With Pakistan, India's air raid and the surgical strike across the border were evident enough to prove the government's interest that held the safety of the country supreme. Same was the case with separatist elements in the North East and the Communist hotspots in India. There was rarely a chance for anxiety. The government moved with great conviction and actions were taken with firm determination.

able neighbors China and Pakistan. Along the borders, our neigh-

Imagine the level of India's commitment for global peace. Narendra Modi did not hesitate to tactfully warn a warmongering Putin telling him the time was not of war. World appreciated his note which indeed India was eligible to make and it did without vacillating. India's attempt to stitch a peaceful framework of unity for the global community through its G20 Presidency was another instance. Its efforts outlined a strong and solid bond among nations that in future will consolidate ideal principles of peaceful coexistence, calculatingly pulling a world from more bloodshed and chaos. More importantly, the Ram temple at Ayodhya seems to hold an impact countless in magnitude, an impression that would go into history With millions of believers eagerly waiting for a grand structure housing the divine representation of their Lord. Avodhya temple and its consecration exposed his image beyond politics. By surrendering his conveniences to undergo a strict penance for eleven days for maintaining the Pran Prathishta's purity and divinity, Modi once again engraved his serene personality in the minds of his countrymen. While politics often plays its abrasive games, there is an indubitable conviction billows around.

That the government under his leadership holds effective plans for India, as the landscape as he describes is passing through the best of its time, the Amrit kaal. And the imprint of his imaginations for India is easily visible and its undercurrent seems to be real and begins to solidify as the election heat looms. A fractured alliance of the opposition is too feeble and frantically aggressive on his plans and strategies. Whatever, if the man who is maintaining a consistent upward momentum in popularity gives you a chuckle of surprise, there is a reason for you to study him seriously.

GI tags revitalize Kashmiri handicrafts and empower female artisans

■ KASHISH SAXENA

he hum of charkhas (spinning wheels) is once again vibrating through Kashmir's scenic valleys, as women artisans return to ancient crafts, thanks to Geographical Indication (GI) tags' new recognition and protection. These tags, together with progressive legislation, have revitalised Kashmiri handicrafts, ensuring their legacy for future generations. The recognition and protection provided by GI tags have not only restored traditional crafts, but also empowered women artisans who are the foundation of Kashmir's rich handmade culture. With growing interest and demand for authentic Kashmiri items, these artists are discovering new ways to demonstrate their skills and support their families. According to recent Ministry of Textiles data, the number of registered artisans working in Kashmiri handicrafts has increased by 25% in the last two years, with over 50,000 people now actively engaging in various facets of the business. This increase in artisan participation demonstrates the good influence of GI tags on the sector. Shazia Bano, an artist from a

small town in Kashmir, has been spinning Pashmina yarn since she was a youngster. For years, she struggled to make ends meet as the demand for traditional crafts decreased. However, with the recent spike in demand for GI-tagged Kashmiri products, Shazia's charkha has become a symbol of hope and success. "The GI tag has not only protected our heritage but has also provided us with a platform to showcase our craftsmanship to the world," she says with a smile. The economic impact of this revival is likewise substantial. According to a survey performed by the Kashmir Chamber of Commerce and Industry, the handicraft sector's revenue has increased by 30% since the introduction of GI tags for Kashmiri products. This increase has resulted in higher salaries for craftspeople, with average monthly earnings increasing by 20% over pre-GI tag levels. Government initiatives and progressive policies have played an important role in fostering this rebirth. Subsidies, training programmes, and marketing support have allowed artists to increase output while maintaining the uniqueness and quality of their products. Furthermore, initiatives to streamline the GI registration process and combat counterfeit products have increased consumer confidence in authentic Kashmiri handicrafts. The significance of GI tags extends from individual craftspeople to entire communities. As more women like Shazia return to their traditional skills, towns are experiencing a cultural rebirth. Younger generations are once again learning centuries-old techniques, ensuring that Kashmir's handcraft history thrives. The revival of Kashmiri handicrafts fueled by GI tags and progressive policies is a testament to the resilience of traditional craftsmanship in the face of modernization. As women artisans return to their charkhas and villages echo with the sounds of weaving and spinning, Kashmir's cultural heritage is being preserved and celebrated anew. With continued support and recognition, these timeless crafts will continue to flourish, enriching lives and connecting generations through the thread of tradition.

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