



Financing elections

Parties' accounts require auditing

TWO NGOs' revelation that the Congress and the BJP got Rs 2,008 crore and Rs 994 crore, respectively, as donations between 2004 and 2011 should not come as a surprise. Donations are commonly made with an ulterior motive as a quid pro quo. The ongoing political battle over coal block allocations should be seen in the light of the NGOs' claim that some of the companies engaged in mining have been making regular contributions to the two national political parties. Political funding is a grey area which has far too long evaded public scrutiny. Though the Election Commission has established an income tax cell to keep watch on politicians' income and requires contestants to declare assets, but no state agency tries to find out how their wealth multiplies or establish the link between black money used during electioneering and the source to catch tax evaders.

It is an open secret that political parties and candidates spend much more than the prescribed limit. Violations are not met with deterrent punishment. During the last Punjab assembly elections vehicles carrying unaccounted cash were seized but the cash owners were never caught. Once elections are over, criminal cases too are dropped. The use of cash and intoxicants to buy votes is a common practice. Elections have become so expensive that a party or an individual without the backing of moneybags cannot hope to win. The root cause of systemic corruption lies in the non-transparent political funding.

Despite some serious efforts, the Election Commission has not succeeded in stopping the entry of criminals in electoral politics. It can at least cut poll expenditure by reducing the period for campaigning and encouraging the use of the electronic media and common platforms for reaching out to voters. The law must provide for the registration of political parties, the maintenance of lists of members and an audit of accounts. Each payment must be transparent, accompanied by the donor's PAN number and income tax details. NGOs and social activists, meanwhile, have to keep up pressure on politicians to clean up the electoral system.