

## Indian Democracy: Role of the Election Commission

Being a first-past-the-post system where every head counts, where electoral numbers make all the difference in deciding the fate of a candidate in an election, the political parties in India have generally taken the populist route in this country in their bid to beef up their vote banks. They have often been found shielding the illegal immigrants/aliens who have somehow managed to get themselves registered as a voter in this country.

If we really mean to cleanse the electoral system in this country, such dangerous tendency among political parties should be discouraged and corrective measures need to be taken in all possible ways. We need to have a clearly laid down policy in this regard to pre-empt victimisation of genuine citizens of the country.

There has been a talk of issuing identity cards to citizens in the border areas to distinguish the infiltrators from the genuine citizens. There has also been a proposal to grant citizenship to all such illegal voters and start taking all precaution from now on to effectively tackle the immigration menace in this country. Our border security and intelligence gathering have to be more up to mark to ensure this.

The ECI (Election Commission of India) has taken a slew of steps in recent times to ensure free and fair elections. This *inter alia* includes introduction of electronic voting machines, photo identity cards, employment of central para military forces for curbing electoral malpractices, posting of external election observers, videography and photography of critical electoral processes and events including activities at sensitive polling booths on the eve of actual voting, setting up of permanent EPIC centres, round the year voter registration and more scientific delimitation of electoral constituencies. But still a lot needs to be done to further sanitise the electoral system in the country.

The very fact that distribution of electors' photo identity cards (EPIC) has still not been cent per cent in the country is a further reason to worry about. As the country gets more developed and internet penetration grows in the country, one should also give a serious thought to the

concept of 'on-line voting'. If we can pull it off, it shall not only be cheaper, but shall also be more effective and efficient as that would reduce the need for incurring huge expenses on making electoral arrangements including the deployment of massive polling personnel and para military forces almost every year.

Though EPIC has to a large extent prevented bogus voting, but it is still far from full-proof. Frequent reports of tampering with the cards and recovery of fake EPICs have given the tell-tale hints of the unholy practice that might exist. Hence, the need for making the EPIC more tamper-proof than it is now. The proposal of implanting some sort of bio-metric identification feature in the EPIC to reduce any scope for tampering or faking EPIC, needs to be given a serious thought.

There is also a need for further rationalising the polling booths. Still, the size of many polling booths is more than thousand and the same needs to be cut down to half to make the booth size more manageable. This would allow the completion of the voting process within the scheduled time during an actual voting rather than extending it beyond the stipulated time which has often come to be noticed.

Also, it should be seen to it that there should not be more than one polling booth in the same premises. Location of more than one booth in the same premises makes the task of security forces difficult in the eventuality of a law and order problem. Moreover, often voters have also been found to be at loss locating their booth at such multi-booth premises.

It is with this in mind that the ECI introduced the concept of Voter Assistance Booth (VAB) for multi-booth polling premises in the recent assembly elections. This has been taken very well by the people and was a great help to them. However, it was felt by many that the booth was not set-up properly and was often not visible to people. The people manning them need to be properly oriented and motivated before they are sent to do the job.

Also, one feels that such VAB can also be set up across the constituency at regular distance, irrespective of the number of booths in a premise as that would be of greater help to the voters who are not in a position to get such assistance if the premise comprises only one or two booths.

Introduction of alphabetically arranged electoral roll at such VABs has also been a good beginning and should be continued. Such electoral roll should also be there at the Permanent EPIC Centres which should actually be suitably renamed, e.g., as Permanent Voter Assistance Centre.

Further steps must also be taken to completely rule out the spectre of booth-jamming and booth capturing. The alleged practice of such a thing as planting dummy candidates and thereby having dummy election agents within the polling booth should also be guarded against.

ECI has taken a right step recently whereby it has stipulated that the election agents of the contesting candidates have to be from within the same polling booth areas and have also to be a registered voter in that particular area. This step was warranted because of the reported induction of imported goons as election agents by some political parties which would plant dummy candidates to have these goons masquerade as election agents within the booth premises thereby making it easier for them to engage in all sorts of illegal activities in favour or against a particular candidate.

The electronic voting machines are still not used in election to the local bodies which should be started immediately as the local body elections are the base upon which is built the edifice of electoral democracy. ECI should ensure that exemplary punishment is meted out to those who are directly or indirectly found to be involved in aiding and abetting electoral malpractices.

The very fact that it is easier to find out the voting patterns when elections are conducted through the electronic voting machines need to be given a serious thought as this is a retrograde development vis-à-vis the manual system wherein it was difficult to find out the same as the ballot papers of different polling booths were mixed before counting to pre-empt identification of voting patterns and consequent victimisation of the voters.

The Election Commission also needs to further tighten the noose on political parties to ensure that they not only adhere to the model code of conduct including sticking to the allowable electoral expenses during an election, but their accounts are also regularly verified and audited to ward against any ill-gotten money having its influence on our electoral system.

Even though ECI has been trying for quite some time to cleanse the system of people with criminal backgrounds/antecedents, the same should be done more effectively to purge the system from such people or their unwholesome influence. Laying down some sort of minimum qualification and experience for contesting candidates should also be given a thought.

One just hopes that some of these measures, if undertaken in right earnest, shall do a world of good to our fledgling democracy. The more we delay the more disservice we shall be doing to the people of this country at the expense of the democratic traditions and foundations of this country.

## Salient Points

- Political parties in India have generally taken the populist route for their vote banks.
- ECI has taken a slew of steps in recent times to ensure free and fair elections. But still a lot needs to be done.
- As internet penetration grows in India, concept of 'on-line voting' must be explored being cheaper, efficient and effective.
- Bio-metric identification be used in the EPIC to reduce tampering or faking of.
- Rationalisation of the polling booths is required to make it more manageable.
- Permanent Voter Assistance Centre should be equipped with alphabetically arranged electoral roll.
- EVMs should also be used in election to the local bodies.
- Exemplary punishment should be given for electoral malpractices.
- Adherence to Model code of conduct including sticking to the allowable electoral expenses and regular accounting with audit should be ensured.

## Glossary

**Spectre:** ghost

**Masquerade:** false outward show

**Purge:** purify

**Fledgling:** an inexperienced person