

An Open Letter to the Chief Election Commissioner



The Gadfly Column

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(The blogs of the author of this article, a retired IAS officer of the Maharashtra cadre, can be viewed at www.vramani.com)

Dear Chief Election Commissioner,

Congratulations on the successful conduct of elections to the Himachal Pradesh and Gujarat Legislative Assemblies. You had expressed concern over the lacklustre turnout of voters in urban constituencies in these elections. As one who has, while in government, conducted and supervised elections, I feel the reasons for this lower turnout in urban areas (which may also be the case in some rural areas) may lie in the process of voter enrolment as also in the inability of certain sections of voters to access the polling booths where they are required to cast their votes.

The eligible voter's name may not figure in the electoral roll at all. The responsibility for the voter's name being excluded from the electoral roll has to be laid squarely on the electoral registration machinery. Certain categories of society are highly prone to exclusion from electoral rolls. These include the urban homeless, sex workers, trans people, women (single, widowed, abandoned, divorced), highly stigmatised caste groups like manual scavengers, persons with mental illnesses, Adivasis, particularly vulnerable tribal groups, denotified tribes, differently abled persons, uncarved for elders and those from

minority/disadvantaged communities. The electoral registration machinery has been found wanting in reaching out to these vulnerable groups. Excessive reliance on relatively junior staff for undertaking voter registration without adequate checks and balances, superficial verification of house addresses, arbitrary decision making and ingrained stereotyping of groups makes members of these groups susceptible to exclusion.

The absence of names from the electoral roll is often detected only when the person goes to the polling booth on the day of voting. Names of voters in the electoral rolls are not arranged according to house numbers, as required by the relevant rules, which, apart from making the detection and deletion of ghost and duplicate names easy, would also enable the voter to easily locate her name in the electoral roll. Voters can check their names on the website of the state/Union territory by querying by electoral photo identity card (EPIC) number or by name on the National Voters' Service Portal (NVSP). This approach is beset by a number of problems.

Since 2018, electoral rolls have been published as image PDF files with CAPTCHA protection. To look up her name in the electoral rolls, the voter should know her assembly constituency

and part number, something she is often not aware of. The part number of voters can change with delimitation of constituencies, with consequent changes in the voter serial number as well. Names can also appear in parts other than where they should be, due to wrong addresses in the electoral rolls. Since the online electoral rolls are image documents, text can only be searched by scrolling the voter records one by one. I do not think such an exercise is feasible for the common citizen, with limited access to the internet, who may have neither the time nor the energy to go through what is a gruelling exercise.

When citizens apply for inclusion, deletion or corrections to voter records, they generally receive no intimation of the status of their application. Names of lakhs of voters have been deleted in the past without intimating the voters concerned. Wrongly recorded addresses in the electoral rolls lead to deletion of names at the time of inspection by the block level officer (BLO) responsible for updating the rolls at the field level. Wrong updating of records can result in both deletion of names of valid voters and creation of duplicate entries of the same name. Removing names of dead people from electoral rolls also requires, apart from intimation by relatives of the

deceased, use of digitised records of births and deaths by the electoral registration machinery. When people shift residence and register afresh as voters in new locations, their names at the old addresses are not always deleted.

Three areas need the urgent attention of the Election Commission of India (ECI) and the election machinery. First, revision and updating of electoral rolls needs far more attention from the electoral registration authorities. BLOs need to be trained more professionally. Assistance of local residents, including resident welfare associations and public-spirited citizens, needs to be enlisted proactively to identify and register/delete voter names, rather than relying only on local influential persons, who may have their own axes to grind.

Second, in this era of digitisation, software tools need to be employed more imaginatively to update electoral rolls. Searching by EPIC number on the NVSP is easy, but the software lacks the capability of searching by names, in the absence of a "fuzzy" search feature. Improved data entry software made available to the electoral registration machinery would enhance efficiency in detection of duplicate records. Above all, to ensure complete transparency in maintenance of electoral rolls and public verifi-

ability of all decisions regarding enrolment, updates and deletions, the ECI should maintain two bulletin boards online for each assembly constituency - the first would be the official master electoral roll up to the time of the last update and the second would detail all transactions relating to voter records, these being accessible to and verifiable by members of the public.

Third, since the ECI is seriously considering allowing online voting for non-resident Indians, the same facility should be made available to resident Indians who have migrated to other areas of the country but whose names are still on the electoral rolls of the areas they have migrated from. The elderly and infirm may also need to be allowed to vote online.

Finally, a word of caution on the linking of Aadhaar numbers to voter IDs. The ECI will need to be extremely vigilant to ensure that the linking of Aadhaar numbers to voter IDs does not lead to large-scale deletion of voters (as has happened in the past in Telangana) or to attempts by governments or political parties to target and manipulate voters on the lines of the Cambridge Analytica pattern.

Wishing you all success in the firm, impartial conduct of all future elections.

Sincerely yours,

