

After the results of the UP assembly polls, EVMs are in focus. Losers claim EVMs were "rigged," while ECI swears by the safe and tamper-proof system. Critics say the core issue is democracy and the transparency of the electoral process.

# Blame it on the machines

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**I**N early 1997, when I was the Chief Election Commissioner of India, the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) criticised the Election Commission. In 1977, the Electronics Corporation of India was asked to develop an Electronic Voting Machine. Subsequently, Bharat Electronics was also involved. Machines worth Rs 75 crore were manufactured to an Indian design. In 1982, they were tried in 50 polling booths in Kerala. Legal challenges arose and further efforts to use the machines were given up. Later, they were tried in a few small constituencies in Sikkim. The political parties and the EC did not have the will to push this great idea forward.

In 1997, the CAG criticised the Election Commission for letting this money to go waste. I was not willing to accept criticism of the Commission. We examined the problem and decided to go forward, using the EVMs in selected constituencies in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Delhi. I went to Jaipur, where we put the machines in the market square. We asked housewives who were shopping to try them. All of them liked the machines.

A minister from Madhya Pradesh said that if these machines were installed in villages, illiterate people would not be able to use them. I said the machine is friendly and neutral to both, the literate as well as the illiterate. Even in the paper vote, we have the name, the party symbol and the box for putting a cross. The machine too has all these. Instead

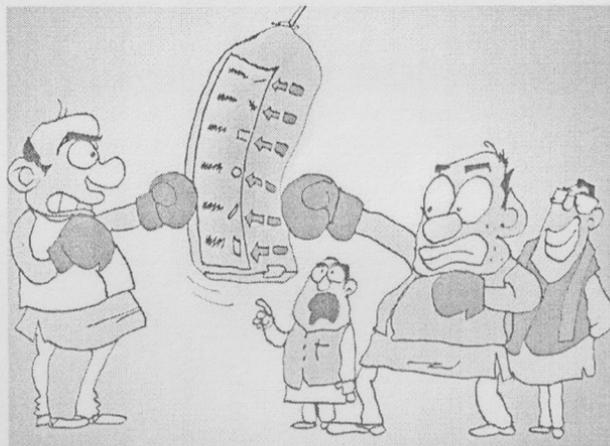


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of marking, we press a button. We used the EVMs in the historic November 1997 election in these three states. The test was a success. After that, I pushed the use of EVM to the state level. Everywhere people were happy.

One remembers the Delhi election. Sahib Singh Verma was the Chief Minister and the Bharatiya Janata Party lost badly. Sheila Dikshit came in for the first time but the BJP did not object to the result of even a single polling station. That was a test of fairness. Political parties had begun to see the fairness of this remarkable machine. No boxes to be stolen, no ink to be poured into the

boxes, no spoilt votes. Rapid counting and results by mid-day.

I observed that the EVM had removed all the quarrels, accusations and tensions of the Indian elections. Such was the miracle of this new technology. I had conducted paper elections as a young Collector. Nobody accepted the results. Counting continued for days and days. T.N. Seshan, my predecessor, took a week as the process of continuous mixing, rebundling, and physical counting continued. Officers were kept locked in for days and days. How many complaints were heard then.

We rapidly expanded the use of EVMs, quickly moving to entire states and

many states together on a single day of polling. It is natural for losers to have doubts and to challenge the results.

Before introducing the machines, I held meetings with all the 52 recognised political parties and accepted their suggestions and ideas. Some leading political figures wanted machines in their constituencies and I was happy to oblige. However, when the worthies lost they complained.

The complaints were on two fronts. First that that technology could be fiddled with. I invited the losers, called the MDs and engineers of the ECIL and BEL and cleared their doubts. The second was invariably a legal challenge. The late Jayalalitha challenged the EC in the Madras High Court, Chief Justice Bench. After a long and full hearing, the challenge was dismissed. Incidentally, later she asked me if I had been annoyed at her challenge. I answered, "No, after all if the Election Commission lectures the country, the citizens too have the right to challenge us."

In later years, challenges were made in the Karnataka, Delhi and Kerala High Courts, perhaps elsewhere too. All have lost the argument against the EVMs and the courts have gone to great length to ensure that the Indian citizen is not cheated by the EVM.

The system settled down and became the envy of the world. As CEC, I was shown a Canadian machine that they thought I would buy. I told them your machine is too expensive, and too complicated even for your citizens. The credit goes to ECIL and BEL that our machine is inexpensive, simple to use, robust and

cannot be easily damaged. We carry it to high mountains and the desert on camels and elephants, across rivers. It has never failed and the world knows it. What is more the world admires India for this achievement. Don't knock it down.

Twenty years have passed since the EVMs were first used in November, 1997. We have held untold state elections and many Parliamentary ones. All parties have won and lost and the habit of complaining after a loss had almost disappeared, till this current controversy. In August 2009, the Commission once again invited one and all, to demonstrate the flaws of the machine if any. No one won the "swayanvar".

I am surprised at the broad and vague accusations being levelled now. The present challenge is from those who lost heavily in Uttar Pradesh. Some others fearing a loss in the coming city elections, are perhaps doing a *peshbandi*. Accusations against this remarkable reform of the national election system, should not be made casually. However, we are a democracy and if any questions are raised legally or technically, the Election Commission must respond. I am sure the Commission will be only too happy to respond to any legal challenge, in order to remove any doubt. If anyone can bring up a credible technical question, this too the Commission will happily examine, as has always been the policy and practise of the Election Commission of India.

The writer is a former Chief Election Commissioner of India