

# EC for all-party meet on EVMs

Tribune News Service

NEW DELHI, March 28 - Concerned about the 1.5 lakh electronic voting machines (EVM) costing Rs 75 crore and lying idle all over the country the Election Commission plans to have a discussion on the subject with all political parties in the country next month.

The Chief Election Commissioner, Dr M.S. Gill, has included the item in the agenda for discussion at the all-party meeting to be held on April 12 after having sought response from them on the possibility of using these machines in select constituencies like in urban areas and those with high literacy.

Many of these machines are lying with the Chief Electoral Officers in distant states and the commission plans to bring them to some central points for upkeep and maintenance.

The commission had in December 1995 sought an opinion and among the recognised national parties the Congress and the Communist parties had appreciated the idea with some suggestions while the Janata Party had opposed the same.

The Samata Party did not express any opinion while raising a number of questions and the BJP did not reply till the end of 1995, the time limit set by the commission.

The Congress said it had no objection to use the EVMs provided the operation was demonstrated to acquaint the voters in the marked constituencies and the legal aspects were examined before arriving at a final decision.

The CPM commented that the EVMs could be used in highly urbanised areas with high literacy and suggested meetings with political parties to work out the modalities.

The CPI asked the commission to identify the constituencies in advance and publish them and also educate the voters as to how to use the

EVMs.

The Janata Party while strongly supporting the use of EVMs in constituencies where the literacy rate was higher, suggested to have a rule to this effect.

The Janata Dal was against the use of the machines on the grounds that even in urban areas a large number of voters were illiterate.

Among the recognised state parties, only six filed in replies with the Telugu Desam (NTR) welcoming it. The Asom Gana Parishad termed its use in select areas as discriminatory, while the AIADMK expressed reservation stating it was not in a position to accept any proposal.

The commission in its agenda notes for the upcoming meeting with political parties suggested that the success of the machine depended mainly on the intensity of the training received by the persons who handled them at polling booths and counting centres.

Apart from the spread of literature, manuals and handbooks, the commission suggested intensive training in the use of EVMs for commission officials, CEOs/DEOs, Returning Officers, Contesting candidates, their agents and electors.

The commission suggested that constituencies had to be identified first for the use of EVMs in the entire constituency and not a part of it.

The EVMs were produced by the Electromics Corporation of India Limited and the Bharat Electronics Limited which could be used for the conduct of elections in which one person had to be elected out of many contenders.

The machines were capable of being used in constituencies where the number of contesting candidates was upto 64 and with the help of a special gadget which could be kept with the commission only, it was possible to ascertain, if necessary, the manner in which a particular elector had voted or not.

This special gadget had been made

to overcome an objection raised before the Supreme Court that the high court, trying an election petition, would not be in a position to take into account the tendered votes after rejecting the vote cast by an impersonator. This additional gadget would be operated only on a direction by the high court, the Commission said.

The machines were capable of retaining the memory of the votes recorded for a period of three years and its introduction would result in saving of paper and cost of printing. It would also end the use of ballot boxes and other stationery items and reduce the cost on security.

The commission said one machine could record as many as 3840 votes and at present there were about 8 lakh polling stations. Normally each polling station had 1,000 electors. With the introduction of EVMs it was possible to raise this limit of electors per polling station.

Apart from it, there were a number of measures to counter rigging, prevent bogus votes after close of polling and security of vote once cast.

The EVMs were used for the first time during the Kerala Legislative Assembly elections in May 1982 and then in another 10 constituencies in 1982-83, including difficult tribal areas of the North-East.

The machines could not be used after 1983 as the Supreme Court ruled in the election appeal arising out of an election petition relating to the Parur Assembly constituency in Kerala that there should be specific provision in the law providing for the use of EVMs in elections.

On the recommendation of the commission, the law was amended by Parliament in December 1988 empowering the commission to use voting machines in such constituencies as it may specify. The amended provision came into force from March 15, 1989 and even a technical experts committee examined the machines and recommended its use without delay in May 1990.

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