

SVEEP in India: Idea, Intention and Implementation: An Analysis

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Abstract

India though a ne democracy in comparison to Western Democracies, but its innovations are a matter of immense interest, especially in the realm of elections. SVEEP is one such innovation started in 2009. Electoral activism emerging with Mr. T. N. Seshan in 90,s changed the entire gamut of electoral process. Now SVEEP is earning popularity day by day and also contributing in raising the voters turn out and their education about electoral process. Now voter registration and voting process all are being smoothed to the benefit of the voters. This will ultimately strengthen Indian democracy and contribute in the nation building. There is, however, still scope to raise the polling percentage by indulging in State specific study. SVEEP, election and democracy are closely interwoven.

Keywords: Systematic Voters Education and Electoral Participation program (SVEEP), Election Commission of India (ECI), Electronic Voting Machine (EVM), Voters Verification and Paper Audit Trail (VVPAT), Electoral Photo Identity Card (EPIC), District Election Officer (DEO), Electoral Process, Election, Democracy, Part XV of Indian Constitution.

Introduction: "MY VOTE MATTERS....."

India has undergone 17th elections for her House of People in 2019. Being the second most populated country in the of Nations at the world stage, it can feel pride for her democracy, as the largest number of voters participated in this election, shown in the following table: 1

Electors	Voters			Voters Turn Out %
General (Including NRIs)	Service	EVM	Postal	
910150346	1800388	611876971	2807427	67.4

The figures shown above are sky high. To conduct election for such a populace is a gigantic task. To sponsor a drive to educate and enlighten the voters at such a massive scale is a stupendous exercise. SVEEP is a natural corollary of electoral activism in India, aiming at augmenting the voting percentage in the country. On the economic front, India wants to raise her GDP and enter the category of developed nations. But her voting percentage being low like any backward country does not perturb it. India, a multi party democracy and a country adopting first past post electoral system (in this system, voters vote for a candidate of their choice and the candidate obtaining maximum number of votes, is declared elected), mostly governments are formed on the basis of 30 – 35% of popular votes. Some 30 – 35% voters don't use their right to vote".2 So formation of a majority based government is a distant phenomenon. In fact all these are really very interesting phenomena for any keen observer.

Methodology and Review of Literature

The celebration of SVEEP in the educational institutions, its coverage in print, electronic and social media prompted the author to speculate deeply on the issue at hand. Personal experiences, observations, interactions with the stakeholders, discourse among the peer groups comprised bulk of the ideas of the paper. Moreover primary and secondary both sources have been studied. The inductive method has been applied to write this paper.

The topic for analysis undertaken is merely a decade old. The beginning of 21st century began with the spread of tools of information and communication technology which aggravated year by year. The field of higher education also fell into its ambit. Hence major source of information and study diverted to websites from books. The present paper has sought help from various online sources. Study of the Data available at ECI website is a great help in this study. For theoretical deliberation and discourse, books on constitution of India, Democracy, Election by various authors like D D Basu (Introduction to Constitution of India), Subhash Kashyap (Our Constitution), J R Siwach

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(Dynamics of Indian Govt. and Politics), Jean Baechler (Democracy An Analytical Survey), Pant Gupta Jain (Rajniti Shastra Ke Aadhar) , Oxford Dictionary of Politics, *Dr Mahesh Bhardwaj (Dainik Jagran)* etc. proved to be very informative. Besides, NCERT books of civics for intermediate standard also enriched to the knowledge.

Objective of the Study The objective of the present paper is to analyze the innovative program and practice of the ECI, called SVEEP. The paper also aims to analyze its correlation with free and fair election and its role in establishing a healthy democracy. All these would ultimately accomplish the task of nation building, a dream India's freedom fighters cherished. The paper aims to study all these aspects with a profound sense of curiosity so that the innovations of Indian polity could be manifested.

Electoral Machinery Democracy as a form of governance is sustained by free and fair elections at regular intervals. To conduct elections, an agency to perform this very task is needed. Thus Election Commission is: "a non partition body which determines election procedures and district boundaries and oversees the conduct of elections".³ Apart from holding elections, it is equally desired to chalk out the rules to decide winners in elections. Here arises the concept of "Electoral System: any set of rules whereby the votes of citizens determine the selection of executives and/ or legislators. Electoral systems may be categorized in several ways. The most useful is probably a three way division into plurality, majoritarian and proportional system. For national elections plurality systems are found in Britain, United States and India. Majoritarian systems are found in France and Australia. There are many proportional systems in the democratic world. They differ widely and there is no agreed criterion whereby one may be judged as better than other".⁴ Term franchise is used widely in the realm of electoral process. "Right of people to vote and elect their representatives to make laws for them is called franchise (derived from old French word Franc that is free)".⁵

Constitutional Provisions Part XV of Indian Constitution deals with "Elections". Article 324 and 326 are of special significance in this regard. Former article focuses on composition of Election Commission and conduct of elections while the later one provides for adult suffrage. To read with article 324(1) "The superintendence, direction and control of the preparation of the electoral rolls for and the conduct of all elections to parliament and to the state legislature of every State....shall be vested in a Commission".⁶ Further to read with article 326 "the election to the House of People and Legislative Assembly of every State shall be on the basis of adult suffrage".⁷ Here every citizen is entitled to be registered as a voter at attaining the age of 18 years and unless disqualified otherwise on the ground of non residence, unsoundness of mind, crime or corrupt or illegal practice. Thus "Election Commission of India is an autonomous constitutional authority responsible for administering election process in India. The body administers elections to the House of People, House of States, and Legislative Assemblies in India, and the offices of President and Vice President in the country."⁸ This body derives its authority to operate from article 324 and Representation of People Act 1951.

Constitutional provisions regarding elections are confined only to these words. But Indian Polity has undertaken several innovations in its seven decades old journey such as Judicial Activism. Judicial Activism followed by Presidential Activism which in turn was followed by Electoral Activism, are feathers to Indian Democracy. Since the arrival of Shri T N Seshan as 10th Chief Election Commissioner (12 December 1990 – 11 December 1996) Indian electoral system witnessed a new chapter in Indian democracy. He redefined and reinterpreted the role of ECI by addressing the issues not touched upon earlier. Continuity of this spirit later on manifested in form of Systematic Voters Education and Electoral Participation program, SVEEP. Initially, regarding EVM, there were some hiccups in its use in elections but "in 1992, Parliament inserted Section 61A in the Election Rules 1961 and validated the use of EVM. The Supreme Court has issued directives for using VVPAT to ensure accuracy and fairness in EVM".⁹

Idea, Intention and Implementation of SVEEP

SVEEP is a unique program launched by ECI in 2009, aimed at educating the voters in country, difficult to find in elsewhere in the world. Chief objectives of the program can be discerned as the following:

1. To educate the voters and citizens
2. To spread and increase awareness among them regarding electoral process
3. To promote literacy of the voters regarding poll process
4. To raise voters participation in voting that is voters turn out

In fact "SVEEP is a program of multi interventions through different modes and media designed to educate citizens, electors and voters about electoral process in order to increase their awareness and participation in electoral processes. SVEEP is designed according to the socio economic, cultural and demographic profile of the State as well as the history of electoral participation in previous rounds of elections and learning thereof".¹⁰ SVEEP program primarily endeavors to ensure and build participative democracy by motivating all the bona fide voters to cast their vote and take an informed decision while casting their votes. Now a shift is taking place via SVEEP, voting which was supposed to be the rights of voters is deemed as their duty to be performed.

Commendably, District Election Officers have developed separate pages at the official website to address and cover the SVEEP program where host of information and activities are floated and disseminated from time to time to the benefit of all stakeholders, poll personnel, voters and citizens (likely to become voters). Information like number of Parliamentary and Assembly Constituencies in a district, number of total voters (male, females and others), name of BLO (Booth Level Officer, most important functionary at the grass root level), name of polling station, various awareness activities like slogans encouraging voters to vote, voter awareness rallies, voting pledge etc. are shown at this website. Uploading videos on portals of District Election Officers to educate voters on casting vote on EVM and verifying the votes via VVPAT, registration process to enroll as voter via online and offline mode, to search name in voter list, to find out polling station etc. deserve mention. Special drives are launched by DEO to prepare EPIC. Under SVEEP, Online and Offline, both the modes to get EPIC are taught to voters. Accessible Election, a workshop like activity by some District Election Officers, is a laudable step under SVEEP which aims at facilitating electoral process more accessible in pursuing the ECI mission to "leave no voter behind". Under this drive, accessible registration process for citizens to make them voters, to make them aware with the use of Information technology, to make access to polling stations, including EVM and VVPAT, voters education outreach etc are discussed with the functionaries of elections. At times Voter Corner is also developed, containing following information:

Voters Corner

1. Online Voters Registration
2. Track your Registration Status
3. Offline Forms for Registration in E Roll
4. Know your Polling Booth
5. Know your BLO
6. Electoral Roll
7. Search in Electoral Roll
8. Register Complaints
9. Voter Helpline No 1950

SVEEP is trying to convert the electoral process from a mechanistic one into a spirited one, from an imposed task into a festival one, from a passive voter into an active voter, from an apathetic voter into an aware voter. Ideal polling booths are created. Polling booths are equipped with facilities like, special provisions for physically different persons to cast vote, providing ramp, drinking water and shade to voters, welcome of voters with flowers, special treatment for expecting or lactating female voters, sick voters and old age voters, beautification and decoration of polling centers with balloons etc. The Motto of SVEEP campaign is: "Greater Participation for a Stronger Democracy".¹¹

Agents of Transformation

Educational institutions from primary to higher, all are the active agents of this SVEEP campaign. Besides, social media platforms, print and electronic media and website of ECI and SVEEP are also major forerunners of this campaign. Play, Songs, Slogan, Poster, Signature Campaign, Pledge to Vote, Speech, Essay, Run for Vote, Rally by Students for mass awakening, etc. are the means adopted to awaken voters. Some catchy slogans under SVEEP drive are:

1. Your Voice = Your Vote
2. Ruke nahi thakne nahi = Not to Stop, Not to Exhaust (motivating voters)
3. Pahle matdan phir jalpan = Voting First, Breakfast Later (activating voters to cast vote)
4. Loktantra ke sarthi hai hum vote dalne niklenge kadam = We are the Vanguard of Democracy, We will Step Out to Vote (asking voter to shoulder responsibility as the vanguard of democracy)
5. Ghar ki chaukhat laangh ke vote dene jana hai = Cross the Doors of House, Cast Vote (MOTIVATING FEMALE VOTERS TO CAST VOTE)
6. Jagruk matdata banega loktantra ka bhagyavidhata = Aware Voter, Writer of fate of Democracy (sensitizing voter for strengthening democracy)
7. Yuva hone ki jimmedari loktantra me bhagidari = Responsibility for being Youth, To Participate in Democracy (sensitizing youths)

All these slogans aim at sensitizing, educating, enlightening and awakening the voters to bear responsibility to cast vote and thereby to flourish Indian democracy. Moreover Electoral Literacy Clubs are created in educational institutions "to engage school students through interesting activities and hands on experience to sensitize them on their electoral rights and familiarize them with the electoral process of registration and voting. Through ELC, ECI aims at strengthening the culture of electoral participation among young and future voters".¹² Voter Awareness Forum is another innovative idea of ECI to educate adult population in governmental, nongovernmental, private organizations and corporate. Chunarv Pathshala aims to serve the same cause among the community members among the rural areas.

SVEEP focuses on raising voters turn out in elections in general but in particular it also emphasizes on increasing gender ratio, sometimes the youth ratio and sometimes the marginalized strata of the society (depending on demography of a particular constituency) in election.

Voting percentage in India is shown in the following table:¹³

Election Year	Lok Sabha	Voters Turnout %age
1951	First	44.87
1957	Second	45.44
1962	Third	55.42
1967	Fourth	61.04
1971	Fifth	55.27
1977	Sixth	60.49
1980	Seventh	56.92
1984	Eighth	63.56
1989	Ninth	61.95
1991	Tenth	56.73
1996	Eleventh	57.94
1998	Twelfth	61.97
1999	Thirteenth	59.99

2004	Fourteenth	58.07
2009	Fifteenth	58.19
2014	Sixteenth	66.44
2019	Seventeenth	67.40

Analysis of this table on Voters Turn Out, a major concern of SVEEP, contains following highlights

1. Turn out of the voters kept on fluctuating in the last 17 elections of House of People, the highest being in 2019 as 67.40% and the lowest in 1951 as 44.87%.
2. SVEEP campaign began in 2009. In that year voters turn out was 58.19, which further rose to 66.44 in 2014 and thereafter 67.40 in 2019. So initially a remarkable hike of 8.25% was noticed but subsequently it somewhat remained stagnant. From 2014 to 2019, a slight increase of mere and meager .94% (less than even 1%) is discerned in spite of massive efforts which demands further research.
3. SVEEP can focus on augmenting the poll percentage. The highest turn out "in 2019 election emerged from Lakshadweep 85.21%. In this election, in addition to Lakshadweep, 7 more States, Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, Manipur, Nagaland, Tripura and Puducherry recorded 80% plus voting".¹⁴ It means more efforts to raise poll percentage can yield dividends.
4. In 2014 election, in all "7577 male candidates fought elections, 481 won while meager 668 females contested the election and only 62 won.

Females needs to be encouraged to contest polls due to two reasons:

- a. As their success % (9.28) as candidates in election is higher than that of the males (6.34) in 2014. This trend continued in 2019 also. In 2019, out of 7322 males, 465 won (6.35%) and out of 726 females 78 won (10.74%)". Again the success % of female contestants is greater than males.
 - b. And also because females number as contestants in election is quite insignificant, compared to their male counterparts.
5. In voters turn out, males had an upper edge over the females, (67% against 65.54%) in 2014 but in 2019 a good signal appeared as the women overtook men (67.18% females against 67.02%) in voter turnout.
 6. In 2014, total NOTA votes were "6002942 (5994418 EVM and 8524 ballot paper) and in 2019 it was 6522772 (6500500 EVM and 22272" ballot paper).¹⁵ Thus awareness among the voters is at rise. It can be interpreted in two ways:
 - a. On positive note, Number of NOTA votes are negligible in totality of all votes cast. It means voters still show faith in their politicians.
 - b. On negative side, in NOTA votes'%, there is a jump of 92.03% from 2014 to 2019.

Interplay of Democracy, Election and SVEEP

Democracy has earned the status of a universal value, both as a system of governance and also as a way of life, all over the civilized world. "Democratic regime is natural to man".¹⁶ "Sustainable parliamentary democracy depends on a healthy electoral system and clean, fair and free elections.....the biggest revolution since the independence of the country was the adoption of universal adult suffrage...".¹⁷ In fact "democracy and free and fair elections go together because they are two sides of the same coin".¹⁸ This presupposes universal adult franchise and free and fair electoral process which in turn needs a specific body like Election Commission, to accomplish this task. Foundation of a successful democracy depends on participation of voters in elections. But participation of voters in elections should be high in number, there should be representation of various segments of the society in the elections, voting should be issue based, not otherwise, citizens should be empowered to register as voters in voter list, voters awareness program should be undertaken, a well trained and sensitive polling machinery should be there to conduct the elections smoothly and efficiently. SVEEP is dedicated to exhibit many of these tasks. Thus democracy, election and SVEEP are interwoven

together and their interplay ensures the very first ladder of the task of nation building. India under the leadership of ECI is comprehensively performing these tasks. It is constantly indulged in strengthening democratic process through facilitating the electoral process by preparing active voters via SVEEP.

Suggestions

1. Voters turn out, which is 67.40% in 2019 election for House of People, needs to be further raised because in some States it is 80% plus. So that mark of 80% plus voters turn out can be attained at national level as well. For that a State specific study needs to be undertaken as to why some States could achieve this lofty poll percentage and others are lagging behind.
2. Moreover India needs to adopt "One Country One Election" practice. Initially from 1951 to 1967, elections were held together for House of People and Legislative Assemblies. "NITI Aayog, Law Commission, and other Assessment Committees have also advocated the initiative of holding House of People and State Assemblies elections together".¹⁹ The benefits of this practice of "One Country One Election" such as saving tax payers money, saving time, continuity in the governmental policies and programs, developmental orientation etc., must be brought to the cognizance of the voters through SVEEP.
3. Encouragement and motivation of voters to go to polling station to cast vote should be treated as the first phase of SVEEP whereby voting quantity needs to be aroused. In its later phase, SVEEP should emphasize on positive voting, voting by applying one's own mind, better, a voting on the basis of issues, (education, health, employment, infrastructure, foreign policy, environment etc.) on the basis of performance of the then Government in power, away from anti incumbency, caste, religion, region, gender, greed, money, populist measures etc. "In country, vote politics seems to revolve around three scales, first caste, second religion and third anti incumbency".²⁰
4. Time and again sanctity and integrity of EVM is questioned. EVM is tamper proof, this message needs to be propagated immensely through SVEEP and mock poll exercises among the voters even before actual polling, should be adopted to earn the faith of voters.
5. Female participation as contestants and winners in elections needs to be addressed and augmented as their number as representatives is quite marginalized from beginning to the present. Thus SVEEP, by encouraging females to contest election, can address this gender imbalance and serve a social cause also.
6. Today India is immensely populated, (some 2/3 population below 35 years) by youths. Participation of such a large population in polls is crucial for the destiny of Indian democracy. SVEEP, flagship program of ECI, must focus on this major chunk of electorates by educating and encouraging them to vote in high number in order to reach her goals.

Observations

Indian polity has witnessed three major chapters in its journey, the Judicial Activism by way of "Basic Feature Theory, PIL and Collegiums system from 70,s onwards", Presidential Activism, by way of return of Postal Bill by President Shri Zail Singh from 80,s onwards and Electoral Activism with the CEC Mr. T. N. Seshan from 90,s onwards. Electoral activities initiated by Mr. T. N. Seshan earned India global credits. ECI has tried to sustain this spirit further. SVEEP commenced in 2009 was a natural corollary of this electoral activism which is likely to benefit Indian voter and consolidate democracy here. Moreover, more use of technology by the ECI in performing various activities, is a laudable step. Website of ECI, SVEEP, National Voters Service Portal, voterportal.gov.in, are online means to serve the purposes of SVEEP. All these are loaded with information to educate voters. Various mobile applications are available at the website of ECI such as Candidate app, Nodal app; Voters turn out app, Booth app etc. "The new technological tools have enabled the Commission to bring in more efficiency, widespread reach, and accountability in the conduct of free and fair elections in recent times".²¹

Conclusions

SVEEP is a unique contribution of India to the democratic horizon whereby elections and voting are not mere mechanistic exercise rather a positive move to strengthen democracy. This further fulfills the task of nation building by ensuring the participation of the maximum voters that too from all quarters of the citizenries in voting. Voting on the basis of issues is further a welcome and healthy desired dream to consolidate Indian democracy. It must happen at the earliest. SVEEP proving to be a boon should move to accomplish this task. By educating and equipping the voters with the electoral process, SVEEP aims to attain a participatory democracy in India. Voting is now a right as well as a duty of a voter. Electoral process is now transforming, from a burden like act into a celebration. To conclude with ecisveep.nic.in/gallery/image: "Pledged to Vote: The Steel Frame, An Iron resolve, A Firm democracy".

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