

BIHAR

## **Challenges in the Management of Electoral Rolls**

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The electoral roll is one of the most basic documents required for the conduct of any successful election. During elections and for their conduct, it is the most used, yet, strangely, the most abused, document which is put into public domain. Everybody is forced to use it, everybody loves to abuse it and, not surprisingly, nobody wants to own it.

The electoral roll has been evolving over a period of time. The nature and content of the electoral roll have been changing over the years. Entrusted, under Article 324 of the Constitution, with the task of superintendence, direction and control of the preparation of the electoral rolls for, and the conduct of, all elections to Parliament and to Legislature of every State and of elections to the offices of President and Vice-president held under the Constitution of India, the Election Commission of India has been alive to the requirements of improving upon the effectiveness of various tools used during elections. As a result, the structure and contents of the electoral roll have been regularly upgraded in order to enhance its effectiveness. It has remained the basic document for conduct of elections in India and maintaining its coverage, correctness and fidelity have remained the main challenge over this period.

That, in effect, sums up the story of the electoral roll as far as the challenges in its management are concerned. For any public document used as widely as the electoral roll, the main challenges are those of Public Acceptability and Accessibility. Without meeting these two basic criteria, no public document can be considered to be successful. As far as the electoral roll is concerned, it can be claimed without any hesitation that it has vast public acceptability cutting across all administrative units, social formations (including electors from the vulnerable socio-economic strata), political formulations, media and the civil society. Election after election the robustness of the electoral rolls has been affirmed. It is on the basis of these rolls that elections have been conducted successfully all over India ever since independent India gave itself a new Constitution. Great care is taken to ensure that the rolls are free of errors and aberrations. The vast electoral machinery charged with the task of preparing correct electoral rolls ensures that it is done every time with the

least possibility of errors. The successful conduct of various elections is living testimony to the fact that the electoral roll has played its part to perfection in the conduct of elections in India and has not failed even once.

But the road to preparing and managing electoral rolls of such acceptable level is paved with numerous challenges. These relate to the sheer size and volume of electorate, differences in administrative pattern as well as administrative units across the length and breadth of the country, lack of permanent machinery for continuous updation of the roll, lack of awareness among the electors/political parties, illiteracy among large number of electors leading to even inability to spell their own names, heavy incidence of elector migration, lack of knowledge of the correct procedure to be followed and last, but not least, technology related problems.

The first and foremost challenge is the vast numbers of electors for whom this roll is supposed to be prepared. As we all know, India has the largest competitive democratic system in the world. With its more than 1 billion population, India is required to produce an electoral roll for about 714 million electors spread across 28 States and 7 Union Territories. The magnitude of the problem can be gauged from the fact that the combined total population of the USA, UK and Canada is less than the total female population of India. The Metropolitan city of New Delhi alone has a population which is greater than the population of a country like Newzealand. Every sixth person on this globe is an Indian. When the magnitude of the population is such, the enormity of the effort required can be well imagined. In order to render the task manageable, a system has been evolved whereby this large number is split into workable units. Thus we prepare the electoral roll Assembly Constituency wise, Polling Station wise, so that each polling station has a total of about 1200-1500 electors. Even then the country as a whole has to prepare electoral rolls for about 8,28,804 polling stations. This is not an easy job. Because of different levels of skills, knowledge, competence, motivation and training of the Booth Level Officers (BLOs) entrusted with the job of preparation and updation of electoral rolls every year, the challenges are magnified. In spite of these differentials, the electoral machinery is able to prepare a uniform, standardized electoral roll for the whole of the country.

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The recent delimitation of Parliamentary and Assembly Constituencies across the country presented the electoral machinery with another opportunity to test the validity and reliability of the electoral roll data as well as the technical competence acquired in the field of roll management and database management. The massive bulk of the electoral roll for the entire country was successfully converted from pre-delimited Constituencies to post-delimitation Constituencies in a smooth transition. In the State of Bihar alone, electoral rolls for 40 Parliamentary Constituencies, 243 Assembly Constituencies and nearly 57,000 Polling Stations, spread over 38 Districts, 534 Community Development Blocks, 8463 Village Panchayats and 45,103 Revenue Villages was successfully converted from pre to post delimitation Constituencies. This was possible only because the electoral machinery in India has been able to develop technical expertise in handling of massive electoral database with the help of modern technology. As the Election Commission of India has been constantly guiding the States/UT electoral machinery and has been upgrading its level of expertise, software have been developed which are capable of handling this kind of a massive exercise with high level of competence. It is proof of reliability of the database, technical expertise of the machinery as well as robustness of the entire system.

Another challenge lies in the fact that everybody believes that the ownership of the elector roll belong to somebody else, in most cases the buck stopping at the doors of the Election Commission of India. People who cannot find their name in the latest electoral roll blame the Election Commission, political parties and candidates who did not bother to find discrepancies in the electoral roll during the 5 year period between two elections blame the Election Commission, media and civil society Organizations who did not bat an eyelid during the intervening period between two general elections also blame the Election Commission. We, the members of the electoral machinery, also reinforce this feeling in no small measure. But the basic point remains that neither the BLO nor the AERO, ERO, DEO or CEO want to own up the electoral roll for fear that they would be shown in poor light because of the obvious deficiencies in the electoral roll which are prominently focused upon at the eleventh hour, just before the election. The elector, who is primarily responsible, even legally, to initiate the process of his name being entered into the electoral roll is least interested in owning up the electoral roll. Political

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parties and candidates, for whom electoral roll is the most important thing in the world during election time, are least bothered about its health and ownership during the rest of the year/period. This, indeed, is one of the major challenges being faced in the management of electoral rolls in our country. Unless all the stake holders wake up to their responsibilities and concentrate upon ensuring the correctness and fidelity of the electoral roll during peace time, its credibility and acceptance can not be taken to the desired highest level. Electors will have to become aware about the legal responsibility cast upon them for getting their names entered into the electoral roll. It is strange that if somebody has to get a driving license or a passport, that person instantaneously takes the responsibility of filling up the requisite forms, depositing them with the prescribed authority, making all the required documents available and paying the requisite fee for it. The same person, however, feels that it is the bounden duty of the electoral machinery to visit him at his residence at the time most convenient to him, get the form filled up, collect all the required papers and then inform him that his name has been entered in the electoral roll. If a person has to get his driving license or passport renewed, he is again willing to take all the responsibility and do the running around for its renewal. But once he has got an Electoral Photo Identity Card (EPIC) issued, he feels that it is now his birth right to remain in the electoral roll for ever. It is a common sight on the screens of different television channels on an election day to find angry electors brandishing their EPICs in front of the television cameras, claiming that in spite of possessing the EPIC, how the crooked election officers have turned them into 'foreigners', meaning thereby that their names have been removed from the electoral roll 'without their knowledge' and 'under some conspiracy'. Everybody, including the electors and the media, forgets at that time that when the draft roll was published, the same electors did not think it important enough to check whether their names were there in the electoral roll or not. They postponed this insignificant, inconvenient and irritable activity for the day of the poll and believe that their names can not be removed from the roll under any circumstances. Having name in the roll is treated like possessing a piece of property- unless sold by you to somebody else, it is supposed to remain under your title and possession. So when the day of poll it is discovered that the name does not find place where the elector believes it should rightfully remain, all

hell breaks loose. And since nobody is willing to own up the electoral roll, the blame naturally is put on the Election Commission of India. Unfortunately, because of excessive publicity and media exposure to this kind of miniscule minority of cases it is this image of the electoral roll which gets stuck in the mind of the media-watching audience and this is the image which is conveniently reproduced whenever roll-bashing is required to be resorted to. Truth remains that such cases are neither representative nor do they reflect the true image of the electoral rolls. In this age of labeling and branding, however, this is the image of the electoral roll which has unfortunately been sought to be projected time and again. Fighting this distorted perception is one of the major challenges in the management of the Electoral Roll. It can be countered to a great extent by making the roll available to the electors during all times in a convenient manner-it should be available on the net for the net-savvy, it should be easily accessible to the literate in hard copy at conveniently located places and it should also be available for the illiterate elector in orally communicable format (may be through the BLO or some other non partisan functionary in a language which is intelligible to the illiterate elector). Also, it must come at either no cost or at an easily affordable cost.

Experience shows that in many cases it is the elector who is the least informed person so far as his status in the electoral roll is concerned. On the very day of poll he awakes from his slumber and starts running around in order to find out where he is enrolled. The situation is not so serious in rural areas where almost the entire village goes to only one or two polling stations. It is because of higher density of population in urban areas that the elector has to be helped out in finding the exact polling station where he is supposed to go for casting his vote. During recent times a number of voter friendly services have been launched in order to help the elector. Some of these are – setting up of telephone help lines/call centres, SMS based help lines which provide railway enquiry type information as also ATM-type touch screen information kiosks at conveniently located public places. Internet based search facilities are also provided. Under instructions from the Election Commission of India, another user-friendly initiative has been the setting up of help desks at polling premises having three or more polling stations. At these places alphabetical lists of voters are kept with specially deputed personnel who

help the electors in finding their names in the electoral roll. At each polling station, an alphabetical list of electors is also displayed prominently which makes the task of locating the elector's serial number in the polling station much easier. In this way the electoral roll is put into the public domain through the use of various media in a convenient and user-friendly manner.

The challenge of passing the litmus test of correctness is another major challenge associated with the management of electoral rolls. It means that the electoral roll must satisfy the following conditions:-

1. The electoral roll must have all the names which should have been in the roll. It means that all eligible electors' names must find a place in the roll, specially the weaker and vulnerable sections of the society. This is of particular importance because of the socio-politico-economic conditions prevalent in India and because of the past history of allegations that in some parts the weaker and vulnerable sections among electors are forcibly prohibited from voting or are made to vote against their free will.
2. No name should find place in the electoral roll which is not eligible for being included in the electoral roll. It means that no ineligible elector's name should find a place in the roll. This entails removal of all dead and shifted voters apart from ensuring that no non-citizen finds a place in the electoral roll.
3. There must not be any repetition or duplication in the electoral roll.
4. That all the particulars of the electors must be mentioned without any mistake. This becomes more important in spelling the names of electors, the names of their Father/Mother/Husband (as the case may be), date of birth, address etc. Since all names are proper nouns, it is only the elector who is in a position to decide whether his name has been correctly spelt in the electoral roll or not. Mistakes in the spelling of names, recording of date of birth/age and the correct recording of addresses have been some of the major irritants as far as the electors are concerned. Because of the hitherto used old techniques of writing the name of the elector in one language and then transliterating it into another (English, Hindi or some regional language), problems have repeatedly arisen in correctly spelling the names of persons or their addresses. This has

dented the credibility of the electoral roll to some extent. With the Election Commission of India having decided recently to have bilingual electoral roll database in Unicode, this problem is likely to be taken care of very soon. If that target is achieved, it will go a long way in removing one of the stigma attached with the image of the electoral roll in India. Technology has a major role to play in this regard.

Another challenge associated with the management of electoral rolls in India is matching the correct photograph with the elector's details of each and every elector whose name finds a place in the roll. Here again, because of the hitherto used old technique of keeping the electors' details and their photographs separately, mismatch in photographs used to be reported quite often. Earlier the electoral roll used to be a text roll in which the photograph of the concerned elector would not be there. The Election Commission of India, however, decided sometime back that for improving the quality as well as effectiveness of the roll it was necessary to switch over from the earlier text roll to the new photo electoral roll. As a result, we in India have a photo electoral roll now which is supposed to carry the photograph of each elector along with his details. This has greatly improved the credibility of the roll and has also been a great leap forward in the checking of electoral malpractices. The challenge now lies in having 100% photo coverage of the electors. In other words, the roll has thrown a challenge to the electoral machinery to be able to provide the actual recent photograph of each and every elector against his details. It is such a demanding condition that any error with regard to identity of the actual elector will immediately come to the notice of everybody concerned and it will provide an instant check of the electoral roll on the correctness parameter. No amount of explaining will be acceptable if the roll does not carry the photograph of the actual elector against his details. We must remember that **accountability is the best ability**.

One of the major challenges associated with the management of electoral roll is transforming the existing system of service delivery. It has been touched upon briefly in the earlier paragraphs relating to accessibility and acceptability of the roll. For improved service delivery, we have to take care of all the back-end and front-end processes. While there must be e-readiness, complete with connectivity, power availability, hardware, software, error-free database, trained human resource, round the clock service delivery centres and

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a financially viable operating model, the credibility of the roll must be of such a high order that every institution/service provider is automatically tempted to refer to the roll as the mother document. There are indications that the electoral roll prepared under the directions of the Election Commission of India is fast gaining acceptance as an authentic, reliable document and that many service providers are relying upon it for verification of identity of a particular person. This document is being widely used for establishing one's identity for obtaining a mobile sim card, for opening of bank accounts and document for proving identity during air/rail travel by e-ticket holders. It will gain wider credibility once the local level officials start insisting upon verification of different beneficiaries under different government programmes with reference to the electoral roll. It is universally accepted that most of the beneficiaries of government programmes like NREGA, Old age pension, Indira Awaas, BPL ration card etc. all need to be ordinary residents of the area in which they claim one of these benefits. Naturally, they ought to have been included in the electoral roll of the concerned area. If the local Revenue/Development Officer (BDO/Tahsildar etc.) start insisting that only those persons will be recommended for benefits under government sponsored schemes who are enrolled as electors in that area, the use and acceptability of the electoral roll will go up many fold. This needs to be incorporated in the instructions issued by various Ministries/Departments of the Central/State Governments for identification and selection of beneficiaries under various government sponsored beneficiary oriented schemes.

The correctness and fidelity of any document is determined best when it is made easily available in the public domain and is thrown open to public scrutiny. Our electoral roll also faces the same challenge. Although the roll has always been available in the public domain for scrutiny, the Election Commission of India has recently taken further steps in this direction and has instructed that the draft electoral roll as well as the final photo electoral roll shall be put on the website of the respective CEOs/DEOs (with link to the ECI website) on the date fixed for its publication. This will come with search facility for the user. Apart from ensuring standardization and bringing about uniformity in the electoral rolls throughout the country, it is a giant leap forward in the direction of making this document open to public scrutiny from day one of its existence. It will provide a centralized electoral database with on-line database management system, eliminating in the process the possibility of mismatch with EPIC as now the EPIC database will not be separate from the electoral database. It is also in conformity with the long tradition of maintaining utmost transparency with regard to the electoral roll in India. For

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the electoral machinery, it is a challenge to achieve this target with unfailing regularity every year.

Commission has introduced the institution of Booth Level Officers, popularly known as BLOs, who are supposed to cover one or two Polling Stations and are charged with the responsibility of maintaining the electoral roll in good health. They are expected to be custodian of the electoral roll of the part area concerned and ensure their continuous fidelity and correctness. This is a mammoth task which they have to carry out along with their regular duties. This is tight rope walking for the BLOs - balancing between responsibilities as a BLO and duties as an employee of their parent departments.

House-to-house survey that the BLOs have to carry out is a time taking and strenuous job. In the absence of a separate election cadre at that level, officials of various departments function as BLOs and simultaneously continue to work at their original post. At present, since more or less each department is facing performance pressure, requests to exempt their employees from election work keep pouring in. The BLOs generally complain that they do not have enough time to complete the roll-related job and that it affects the quality of the electoral roll. Relieving BLOs of their original responsibility even for a limited period would pose problems for the parent department of the BLOs and its possibility is remote. Time is, therefore, ripe to consider options of either having a separate cadre of BLOs for election related work at the Polling Station/Gram Panchayat level or of engaging unemployed/retired persons on part time basis. It may go a long distance in ensuring dynamically sustained and continuous rectification of the roll. It has to be kept in mind that the electoral roll related work has become a perennial activity spreading almost throughout the year. In such a situation not having a permanent, dedicated work force to ensure the correctness and fidelity of the roll throughout the year will definitely dilute the effort.

With the computerization and standardization of the database comes the accompanying risk of data security and data safety. Various issues related to database administration, control over access, protection against hackers and attackers, provision of networking and continuous power availability, training inputs etc. are also cropping up. Another major issue is that of editing and audit of database at each step. It is a fact that when most of the work is software driven, humans start taking things for granted. It is assumed that any computer generated data will automatically be error-free. This gives rise to complacency and scrutiny of data, which otherwise would have been a regular feature at the work place, is assumed unimportant, even unnecessary. But in absence of human scrutiny the fidelity and correctness of data can not be ensured. There

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are numerous examples when blind faith in the efficacy of the computer has bred trouble and wrong, incorrect data has been thrown up. This is another challenge which has to be constantly remembered. It must also be kept in mind that few good things are accidental, most are results of continuous effort. The gap between mediocrity and excellence is the difference measured by two things – indifference and determination.

For ensuring robustness of the electoral roll data and its validation certain analytical tools are used. These include age-cohort wise consistency between general population and electors, sex ratio analysis including total population, male population and female population comparisons, as well as comparison of rate of growth between general population and elector population etc. These are tried to be used at both macro (State/District) level as well as micro (Ward of a town, Village, Polling Station) level comparison. This validation against census data imparts additional credibility to the electoral roll.

Electoral roll is a unique resource. Electoral roll management like other management, benefits from analysis, planning and consultation. To understand and apply electoral roll management principles, we must know not only how to use it, but also what problems are encountered while using it and what causes those problems. From this base we can learn to improve the effectiveness and efficiency through better management inputs. It is a process which must fit our national style, circumstances and requirements. It takes a very strong commitment to achieve this objective. The electoral machinery has to live up to the faith of electors of each and every socio-economic, religious and cultural group - both collectively and individually- by producing a perfect roll, ensuring that each citizen has an equal role in determining the composition of the Government which shall run the affairs of the State.

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