ONE NATION, 173 M VOTERS

Indians got the vote even before they got citizenship

TO BE PRECISE, 173,213,635 VOTERS aged 21 years or above. That was the total on the electoral rolls published, constituency by constituency, between the first week of September and 15th November, 1951, about a year before independent India's first general election. The 1951 Census counted 180,307,684 adults, so this meant that 96 per cent of adult Indians had been recognised as legitimate voters.

"In the light of these figures, it must be conceded that the enrolment of voters was reasonably satisfactory." This is the dry way in which Sukumar Sen, the first Chief Election Commissioner (1950-1958), sums up one of history's most stupendous achievements in his February 1955 report on the first elections.

It is important to recognise that the decision to go for universal adult suffrage in India was made by political consensus well before Independence. In fact, the Nehru Committee (headed by Motilal Nehru, whose secretary was his son Jawaharlal), appointed by an All Parties Conference to determine the shape of a future constitution, recommended adult suffrage as early as in August 1928.

Elections limited to electorates determined by elite metrics like property ownership, tax payments, literacy and community had been held during British rule. They were held mostly in the nine British-ruled provinces. Most of the 552 princely states that joined the Indian Union had either no elected bodies or severely restricted franchises. There were strong arguments made against universal suffrage both on grounds of the enormity of the challenge as well as the illiteracy of vast swathes of India. In the end, all these arguments were rejected by the Constituent Assembly.
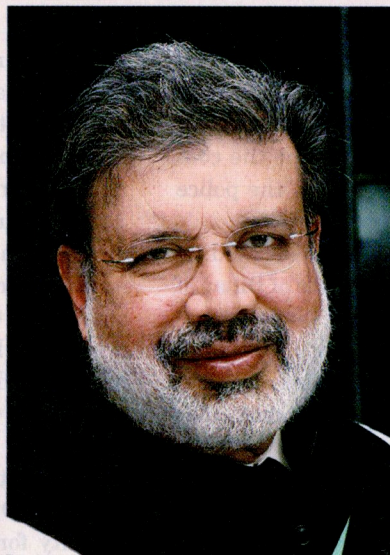
Work on preparing the electoral rolls began in November 1947, in the chaotic period immediately following Partition. The task involved a house-to-house survey at the village level. Every Indian, male or female, rich or poor, got the vote before they even got their citizenship under the yet-to-be adopted Constitution. Preparatory work was completed even before the full codification of electoral laws. So dramatic was this achievement that other post-colonial countries sent

A Pew survey said Indians are the least sceptical about democracy

representatives to study our work, and Sen himself headed an international commission that supervised elections based on the Indian model in the Sudan in November-December 1953.

Sen says India's "vast cooperative venture" could not have been possible without the enthusiastic participation of every individual and organisation. This is echoed by Israeli historian Ornit Shani, whose book *How India Became Democratic: Citizenship and the Making of the Universal Franchise* narrates the story. "Everyone understood it and fought for it."

At a Carnegie Endowment talk in Washington DC last month, Shani credited an "extremely small but competent group" of bureaucrats led by Constitutional Adviser B.N. Rau, who supervised the Constitutional Assembly Secretariat's franchise branch. (Rau and S.N. Mukherjee, the chief draftsman, were the principal architects of the Constitution, but their contributions have been largely forgotten in the rush to deify B.R. Ambedkar). "They had a lot of autonomy to make decisions," Shani said, and this was emphatically backed by Jawaharlal Nehru, who overruled the doubters.

Interestingly, a Pew Research survey published in March said Israelis and Indians are the least sceptical about democracy worldwide. "Only 3% of people in Israel and 2% in India are politically unaffiliated. In both countries, roughly one-in-ten hold negative views of democracy (11% in Israel and 8% in India)," the report said. **BW**

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