

Interview with Mr. U.P.S. Madan, State Election Commissioner, Maharashtra¹

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Mode: Physical



Introduction for Mr. Urvinder Pal Singh Madan:

Mr. UPS Madan is the 6th State Election Commissioner of the State of Maharashtra in India. He retired as the Chief Secretary of the State and worked as the Special Advisor to the Chief Minister before joining as State Election Commissioner in September 2019. Hailing from Punjab, Mr. Madan has a very long experience in administration, having worked on various important posts in the State and Central Government. Mr. Madan also brings with him a rich experience in the field of elections, having worked as Chief Electoral Officer of Maharashtra from 2004-2007 where besides conducting general elections of the State Assembly, he was instrumental in conducting the delimitation exercise for all the Parliamentary and Assembly Constituencies of the State.

The State Election Commissioner is the senior-most authority on elections in the state, both those of the municipal corporations in urban areas, and municipal panchayats in rural areas.

¹ Transcribed from audio recording; lightly edited

Q. I came up with four factors that I think might have contributed to this, and I wanted to get your views on it. One was voter education in the country. One was the independence of the election commission and how the body is highly centralised. I think that might contribute to the robustness of the system. It is the introduction of EMVs and the fourth I thought was the process of voter registration and that that whole process and how well that happens. So one by one you can go through these and you can tell me how you think these contribute since you have so much experience.

A. To my mind, the last point that you said is the most important processes. The difference is that the processes for elections are so very defined and so manly laid out that things can't go wrong. I mean, if somebody follows those instructions which are very detailed, is like DIY of anything. But now there are so such simple detail that ABC D or 1234, So similarly for also there are handbooks for the returning officer. The handbook for the candidates. The handbook for the ERO Electoral Registration officer there a handbook for the staff who is sitting there in the in this thing and accounting everybody. So every stakeholder in the whole election process has a very clear idea of what he or she is supposed to do. And that, to my mind, is the most important part that the things don't go wrong and because the system is so perfect and well defined. Therefore, the credibility of the system and the people who are involved in that also increases because if things go wrong, then the credibility of the entire machinery goes down. But if they're going as per order, you can't find fault. Yes, this was the rule, and this rule has been followed to the T. Then nobody questions your action or your authority or something. So to my mind that the process is because they are not because they are simple processes. They are so well defined and so minutely defined in thorough detail. That is the key.

Yes, autonomy is very important. And, uh, fortunately, the commission had been pretty independent. Of course, the independence of the autonomy changes from time to time from people to people, government to government. But yes, that is one of the key reasons. So the other reason which you said are raise awareness to an extent I would still say that we have not reached that level of awareness because of our level of literacy education that is one and to the vastness. The area is huge. The numbers are so large that it's difficult to reach every voter and directly if you want to. But yes, still, a lot of action has been taken in this regard and it has achieved results. Use of technology has helped a lot, which you may add as a as 1/4 point of one of the points can be expanded, Expanded said. It is one of the the tool which we have used. But in every respect. We are using different kinds of Softwares for our elections, right from registering your name in the electoral roll. So now it is available online. So you can just there is an app there is. I mean, you can go to a computer, you can go to your cell phone or whatever. You can register your name. You can change your address you can do whatever you want. So right from that stage, the use of technology is there. So searching of the names you can search your names where in the electoral your name appears at what number? It is your polling booth. So you can you Can you find the address of that? Uh, all those details are available at just a click of so and then when the actual elections take place. At that time.

Also, the reporting from the local field staff to the highest office. It's now through computerised system. So immediately you get to know the commission sitting in Delhi would find out within minutes what is happening in even the remotest village. Because fortunately

now, uh, the the Internet has reached WiFi has reached almost all areas. There may be some exception, but almost all areas of the country. So this use of technology has helped in maintaining the efficiency of the system and thereby creating more credibility of

Q. Oh, I know. At the central level, there's a programme that they have called SVEEP for voter education. Is there something similar like that at the state level, and if so what? What are the things that they do to improve voter literacy.

A. So again, at different stages of the election, the first stage is to ensure that everybody who is eligible for registration should register his or her name in the road. So 18 years is the age for 18 years. Age has to do that. So we take different actions apart from the normal routine ads in the in the newspapers. Or now we use different, uh, electronic systems. Even that chatbot and the social media, which has become very popular, particularly among the youngsters. So since the target group is there those teenagers who are 18 or close to becoming 18 or 19,20? So we are. We are tackling through this system through for social media to approach them through instagram through Facebook through chat or through whatever means are available. And we have also developed an APP on a phone smartphone which has several features right from finding names to submitting expenditure statements by the candidates nomination by the candidates, etcetera. So we we even approach the educational institutions because most of or almost all of these 17, 18 years old are or should be studying in some college or school school. So the best way is to approach through the school or college. So we approach the universities. We tell them that you create that awareness every year or every semester. You create some kind of awareness programme that this is what you are supposed to do. We have, in fact, convinced several universities in master who have accepted a small kind of foundation course as as one, chapter or whatever as an introductory, this thing on democracy so that people understand not only for what is the system of elections, why it is so important, how we are supposed to use this, et cetera. So what are the rights and duties of the people, the candidates, the elected representatives, etcetera. So learning about the democracy is important at that age because

the moment you become voters, you are as powerful as any 60 years old or 80 years old. It was in the same boat, And, uh, you are more aware about the world around you because you are the latest born in this world. So all the younger generation is smarter than the older generation, without any exception at that time. So, uh, through this kind of awareness through the university and colleges. It has helped been getting our enrollment done at the right time. Otherwise, earlier. They used to, in many cases until 25 26. People are not enrolled either because of lack of awareness or just lethargy and the systems again. Earlier the system was You have to go to some tail office which might be in rural areas some 50 kilometres away from your village. Fill a form which is running to three pages, attach several documents. Give it to the officer concerned. Then you don't know what happened thereafter. Whether your name appeared or not. Now the system is online. You can track your replication where it has reached and you finally get to know this is your number. This is your card. Everything is so awareness plus systems has helped them in that.

Q.So we are. We are using all these tools now to create awareness and try to make the system more efficient about cases of electoral fraud. What do you think are the factors that reduce those? I know EV have played a big role in that. And do you think there is anything else you can expand on that.

A. So again, a lot of action has been taken by the Election Commission of India and to ensure that these kind of violations are reduced. So, again, the best way is, number one use of, tools, electronic tools, videography. There are cameras fixed in CCTV in the polling station and outside polling stations. There are squads nominated to follow wherever there are those election meetings or rallies, etcetera. So there are special officers whose job is only to only to see what is happening around. Is somebody distributing money? Is somebody giving some statements which are a violation of law or something other happening? Any violation So immediately we get reporting from these squads and action can be taken the moment the political parties and candidates know that somebody is watching closely, so automatically, the violations come down. We have we have another app which we have created for this, that even public. There is an app on the phone. If any member of the public finds some violation to put on on that, So details reach to the search centre system whereby you get to know that, and then you can ask your machinery that OK, this report has come from such and such place. So you go and verify. So this is the only way that your vigil, your supervision is more intense, then automatically. When the message goes down, things become easier to. And secondly, of course, fortunately, our laws are pretty stringent about these elections. There can be criminal action against the person who is doing it. There can be disqualification against the leaders of the candidates or the political people activists who are doing that distribution of money, which is which had, or even to an extent. Now there are these squads and police. They have confiscated huge amounts of roads and pro probes of rupees where cash is being distributed. They check the vehicles which go and find cash of cash going in. Confiscate that. So these kind of actions have resulted in keeping these activities to the lowest possible. This is still happening, and it's not possible to totally eradicate it with the human mind. They find ways and means of sort of, uh, ignoring, getting themselves saved from this.

Q.But have the instances reduced in recent years of things

A. like this, they have said with more and more of the use of these, technology and, uh, super supervisor systems they have reduced, but again, it's like it's it's a cat and mouse kind of game. We find one way to control something. They find another way to sort of circumstance that so you find you have to then address that so it will continue. But it's it's not, uh, as this thing, which used to be earlier, the free for all kind of situation. So it's very much under control and any other factors that you said about technology and supervision, supervision with technology, both these have to be together. So very close vigil and supervision, the squads, the people power people asking people to report these incidents and technologies. Both these have helped to control this to a great extent.

Q. And, uh, can you give us an idea of what the magnitude of elections are at the state level? For example, how many polling booths how many police are deployed?

A. uh yes, I I can speak about Maharashtra since is one of the largest states. So you can get a feel of that in other states. So we have, uh, uh, 28 municipal corporations. We have, uh, around 230 municipal councils. There are about 100 nagar panchayats. So these are three urban local bodies of different levels. The nagar panchayat is the lowest level, which is just a large village. So the moment the village starts going beyond its limits. So it's declared as a nagar panchayat, council municipal council is in between, and the municipal corporation is the largest, then in, uh, rural local body the zilla parishad is at the district level, the district Council is the highest, then panchayat samiti at the tehsil level and then at the village level there is the gram panchayat. So these three in rural three in urban. So these are the so, As I said, in urban, there are 23 200 plus and, uh, 100 in in, uh, uh, zilla parishads. There are 34 zilla parishad.

And then there are each parishad has about eight panchayat samitis on an average, and there are about 28,000 gram panchayats, and so each gram panchayat has, uh, around seven to 13, uh, seats. Municipal councils have maybe 60 to 100, uh, seats. Corporations have up to 236 seats. Like BMC has 236 So there are different number of candidates, so there are many candidates. So there are, uh, about altogether. Uh, there would be around, I would say, um, about three lakh candidates through there are about nine crore voters in Maharashtra and roughly 1000 voters per polling booth. So you can calculate the number of polling booths which each polling booth has a staff of around 7 to 8 persons who are on election duty. The polling officers, um, and there is a police, some kind of security police force. Home guards, others. So normally, 5-6 persons there per polling booth. So you can imagine the amount of the number of people or staff involved in the whole process so lacks of polling goods and lacks multiplied by all. This number is huge. It's mind boggling. And obviously because the population no other country but in China, where nothing take place so we can leave it aside. And I'm talking about democracies. So in democracies, we are the largest, and, uh, these are absolutely numbers. Which one is true? And there is also then the polling agents of the candidates, the political parties. So each party can give one polling agent. So if there are four different parties, there can be four or five polling agents. So similarly for counting, there are each candidate can give his counting agent. So the number of people involved in the whole exercise is huge, and therefore the expenditure also is huge by the government, uh, machinery. So, like one election say Lok Sabha election or Vidhan Sabha election of the entire state of Maharashtra I think it's about 1000 crores spent only by the government, right? The amount of money which is spent by the candidates and the parties, that is several times on that. So So that's the kind of numbers we have. The number of staff involved. The number of amount of money spent a number of vehicles involved because each for each poly booth, some vehicle has to go to deliver the material there a day before that, then has to bring back the material, take it to the counting centre, then counting happens. The material back to the store the store in. So there are then those squads, flying squads and supervisory officers need vehicle, so you can imagine the number of vehicles which are required to be used. A number of EVM, which are used on each polling booth. There have to be minimum two EV MS

because one even if there is 1000 or 800 votes which require one machine is enough. But you have to have one more extra for So this is the kind of magnitude of it. Yeah.

Q. How much in advance do you start planning for deploying all these people and the whole before elections?

A. It takes a lot of time. But I said because of the systems in place, the things become much easier because you don't have to start from scratch. There is already a chart prepared. You know how many like, uh what? What is there in the whole process? The the inputs, the number of booths. This is one factor. OK, so you fix the number of booths first. These are my polling booths. So because your booths are not so you know how much staff roughly plus minus is required per booth. So many people, then some supervisory staff, some extra surplus staff. Because if you are deputing, let's say one lac people on duty. It's very likely that out of that some number, some percentage, either because of somebody's health issue. Somebody's somebody's mother died from the last minute, and somebody's wife ran away with somebody else and all kinds of reasons, so they don't appear there. So you have to have some extra buffer that OK, if one lakh is required, so one lakh 10,000, we have to for 10,000 people of this kind of replacement. So, uh, this is known number of vehicles also is known. So these EV MS how many a BM required? So all these basic material Plus, of course, there is material that there are those that you put them in earlier. They used to be in with the small stick we used to put that. Now there are, like you just market their markets much easier. So you need marker. You need seals.

You need pencils and rubbers there. If you see the list of material, there is a very, very long list, right from the paper clips to rubber bands to the some kind of papers, slips, forms, uh, needle and thread, so that it can be sealed in the once the AM is there. It has to be put in a cloth bag. Then it has to be stitched sealed with that. What is it called? Lak. So is a is a huge and everything is detailed. That's why I first find I said the processes. There is a detail of everything. These are the, uh, 56 items. So many rubber bands. So many pins. So many clips. So many. This, this this so before, Uh, a few days before the actual election. There is staff at every district, every cail. Which makes those different bags. That OK, this polling booth, This is the entire staff of list. So it's put in one bag, then another, then another. So all those are bag bags put kept in a in a big ground with pulling numbers marked on this number. This number. So those teams come, they pick up their give acknowledgment receipt that yes, we have taken our material. They count. I mean, first they have to count check of the chair, and then take that, Put it in the vehicle, take it there one day in advance. So those kind of systems are in place. And therefore, uh, things move smoothly.

Q. Right now, you're working in the state Election Commission, but you used to be involved with the centre as the CEO. So what are the differences you see in the state election centre.

A. Hardly any difference, because the basic election system is same. Whether you conduct election of an MLA or an MP or a gram panchayat member, the highest and the lowest, the basic system is the same. In fact, the machinery is also the same. It's the same collector right down to the village kotwal. Same machinery does everything for MPs election also and gram panchayat election also, and the same set of rules are there. So there is no change. So it doesn't make a difference whether you are sitting in the Election Commission of India or in the Election Commission of the State. Basic principles, basic systems are actually it's only the laws which we work under some laws, not all again. The election laws are more or the same. There is a representative of people act there. So we have the same provision in different state acts here. So that way there is no difference and that that was the whole purpose of the government in the Constitution. If you read all those provisions which are there for the Election Commission of India, they said, the same will apply to the state Election Commission. So everything is similar on the same lines.

Q. I just have one last question. Which was, What do you think are the Other current challenges that still have to be tackled in the election machinery

A. There are several. right from, uh, the first one of as a registration. Still, we are not getting 100% eligible people registered. Despite all our awareness campaigns, efforts again awareness as well as people are really concerned about it. Election a large number of and more so in cities to digress a little. If you see the polling percentage, it's highest in the smallest area and the lowest in the biggest area. So in a village you may get 90% votes. In a city of Mumbai, you get 45% votes. So that's the kind of interest level in elections. So the first thing is registration of voters. Second thing is, uh, correct voter list. There are several flaws. Despite the best efforts, there are several flaws in the voter list you might have experienced. He would have experienced too much more. Somebody's name is not there, despite that person had registered his or her name. But when he goes for the polling thing, his name is not there or the name is wrong. Some other. Uh, these things are wrong. Uh, the address is wrong. Or father name? Husband. Name is wrong. So something is wrong. So, uh or his instead of a constituency is registered in B constituency, So the purity of electoral roles is extremely important. So that's one which is still a lot of efforts have been made. I would say things have improved more because of use of electronic tools, because now the system brings up double names, one person having names in six different places. There are many such cases, and that can lead to duplicate voting. So now we put through the system. The system picks up that this name is appearing 10 times in this constituency only or in this district. So I mean, technically, everything is now possible because it's everything is in soft data data. Data crunching is easier. So it's possible then one has to actually manually check that OK, because generally there are people with the same name, same father's name or husband's name, or same age, more or less same age. And we checked, in fact, a few times that Yes, there is nothing wrong with two different people so many common names. So So, uh, second is electoral purity of then, uh, third, is this, uh, proper conduct of elections that there is no violations of code of conduct? There is no use of money, power, muscle power, et cetera. So that is then what I said Right here people turn out because if you if you really want to have a representative

government, then maximum number of people should vote. Ideally, 100% should vote in. In some countries, you must have read when you researched voting is compulsory, and if you don't vote, you are fine. But in India, it's not. It's optional. So, ideally, as I said, everybody should vote, but it doesn't happen.

The average voting percentage is about 60% So how to increase that? That's still one factor which is troubling us and then, uh, creating credibility that nobody after losing should say that the EVM was flawed or was manipulated. So whichever system we use it should be so transparent. It should be so correct and exact that nobody should be able to question Hey, it should be peaceful. You might have been reading recently the election local body elections, elections. I don't know how many people have been. 90 people have been killed and the elections are over. People are getting so a lot of violence which takes place in some elections not always, but in some election. So how to control that? So the elections are peaceful, The elections are fair. That's the very basic This thing is they have to be fair and free election. So we still have to make a lot of efforts to achieve that goal.

Q. I think that brings me to the end of my questions.

A. One issue which I haven't explained. And you didn't ask How are the wards or the constituencies created?

Q. Called Delimitation?

A. Yes, yes, yes, yes. So that's an exercise which is also done by the state election commission. At the central level for MLAS and MP S election, there is a separate commission delimitation commission which is appointed periodically. Last commission was appointed in 2004-5 after 30 odd years. So next commission again is expected after another 30 years. So 2034 but instead, uh, elections for local party elections. Before every election, a fresh delimitation is done. The reason being the geography or the physical boundaries of the municipal area or rural areas. They change very fast. Uh, the the corporation area keeps on expanding villages added in the new areas. Come up, uh, grant villages added to some council, come back to the rural areas. These kind of things happen very often. So every five years before elections, delimitation exercise is done by the state election commission. So the process starts from that. So the actual process of election, which you asked in between starts about six months prior to the actual election day. So first we make delimitation, which is a very detailed exercise, then the reservation of seats for different castes or gender. Because now in in local, all local bodies, 50% reservation is for women. For every category scheduled caste, scheduled tribe, OBC is also added so and open. So in all these four categories, 50% of women So then reservation is done. Then electoral rules are finalised, board wise or polling booth wise, and then the actual uh, announcement of, uh, election or polling, which is about a month before the actual poll and then counted. So this is the whole sequence of uh, electoral process, which is which I can just before the Election Commission.

Q. What must be the situation, before the Election Commission was formed in 1994.

A. then it must be chaos. because there was there was no nobody, nobody watching. So it was with the with the collector. For many years, the election didn't take place because nobody was interested or how it was conducted. Nobody saw that or questioned That and sometimes after a body came into existence, it continued many years. After five years period was over. Now it's not possible. The moment five years is over. That day you have to hand over whether the new body has come or not. Ideally, as per the Constitution requirement, a new body has to be in place elected body before five years. But in case something doesn't happen or a body is dissolved prior to that, the administrator has to be appointed so nobody can continue is a So the whole body was gone. They have gone the moment five years period was over there. So before 30 years when they are not there and without technology, it was in God's hands.

Also training of staff is a huge exercise. See,as I said,uh, the large number of staff there are a few black people who are involved in the whole process. So though there are written down instructions for everyone, but still everybody does not go through that, uh, the whole manual you don't read. Even if you read, though it is in such simple words, you still may not understand. There are all levels of understanding, different levels. Everybody is not brilliant, So a detailed training is given at every stage to the whole staff at different levels. In tehsil office, in collector office, all these people are brought together either from the office or sometimes they engage even retired officers who have worked in this thing. Some seniors who have done work in that for several years, some some other officers. So they come and give training to take training class. And there are several rounds of that at different stages. So there are normally 3 to 4 different training sessions where each and everything is explained minutely. Handling EVM also is not very simple. How to open an EVM how to start it, how to there is a process before the actual polling starts. There is a test run when the polling agents of the candidates come or the candidate. If somebody wants to come,come there. So they they start the machine. Some 10 votes are whole dummy votes and they actually then see whether it shows the correct result or not. Then everybody signs that yes, this is fine. Then again, it is erased, sealed back and then put for operation. So how to do each of these things? So there is a demo which is done in the training course before even distribution of EVMs. The EVM are tested whether they are fine or not. So again, there is a class for that. This is how it should be seen. So for every activity there is a training session which is done in detail for such lakhs of people. And it's a huge exercise. But this is part of the processes, I said, because in India these processes are in place. Therefore things happen. So all the states have commissions in in 100% in many states, uh, in some cases gram panchayats are still with ballot boxes.But urban areas almost all states are now areas no. So so technology has reached to that level that we now for, uh, gram panchayat member, the nomination is done online. You can imagine the level of So So that's the level of technology which has helped, uh, making things smoother, easier and more efficient and less time consuming. So all the benefits of technology which we otherwise sort of experience in day to day tools are used for the next year, and we get the same benefit.

Q. Just one last thing. Would it be possible for me to get some kind of statistics from your office for the last election we had in 2019? If I want to use that as a case study, so like numbers of exact numbers of how many people voted and voted turnout and things like that,

A. Yes that should be easy to provide.

Q. I think we're done then. So thank you so much,