

How to avert electoral roll goof-ups

D. Karthik, Contact: karthikeyan.di@hindutamil.co.in



Voting in the 18th Lok Sabha elections has been conducted in a single phase in Tamil Nadu and Puducherry. There have been debates about the Election Commission's goof-ups in announcing the polling status during voting. However, the issues such as removal of voter names from the electoral list and lesser voter turnout in Chennai have not got due attention. One cannot help but raise the question how the Election Commission plans to resolve these issues that crop up in election after election.

How names are left out

In the parliamentary election held in Tamil Nadu on April 19, about 1.88 crore voters (30 per cent of the total electorate) did not exercise their franchise. There

are many people who went to the polling booths with necessary documents, but returned disappointed after finding their names missing on the list.

If a voter does not exercise his/her democratic right to vote, it is treated as a personal matter of the voter concerned. But who will respond to the grievances of the voters, who go all the way to the polling stations in the hope of finding their names on electoral lists but return without voting as their names are not found on the list?

A volley of questions are raised in this context: How can the name of a person living in a house for years together and voting in multiple elections, be deleted from the voter list? What is the basis on which an election officer removes voter names? How does the Electoral Registration Officer (ERO) approve name deletions?

As per the Election Commission of India's rules, a voter name can be deleted if Form 7 is received from family members of the voter. The Electoral Registration Officer has the power to delete a voter name voluntarily if the voter has died or relocated to some other address.

Even if there are such reasons for voter name deletion, the Booth Level Officers (BLOs) must undertake a field visit for verification, say the EC guidelines which also recommend that a notice be given before deleting the name of a voter. But the ground reality is that it is not possible. According to the Election Commission data, the names of 12.45 lakh voters have been deleted during the period of January 2022 to January 2024 in Tamil Nadu. The reasons cited for the deletion of names were death of voters and change of residence location.

Who is responsible?

Many voters living at particular addresses and voting in elections for a long time complained on the day of election that their names were missing and sought reasons for the deletion of their names. This shows that no field survey had been done before name deletion. So, to stall these hassles in the future, the provisions pertaining to issuance of notice before deletion of voter names and 'field inspection' must be enforced compulsorily.

As far as voter name deletion is concerned, political parties have as much responsibility as the Election Commission has. When the Election Commission makes changes in the voter list, the details about the changes will be given to booth committees of the political parties. When the parties don't investigate the details and object to deletion of names in case of need, voter name deletion becomes easy and unchallenged.

On the day of election, BJP state president Annamalai alleged deletion of one lakh voter names in Coimbatore. It is tantamount to self-incrimination when political parties make such allegations during or after elections.

However, the voters too are to blame. Of course, they should ensure that their names are present in the final voter list. But how can a voter residing at the same address for years together and voting continuously be expected to take pains to check if his/her name is in the final voter list? What will provoke him/her to suspect that his/her name would be deleted?

Sliding Chennai voter turnout

Chennai, the Capital of Tamil Nadu, is again under fire for low voter turnout. The state's polling average this time is 69.72% whereas Chennai's average is 56.08%. The difference is 13.64 %. Chennai's voter turnout had never exceeded, nor come closer to, the state's voter turnout.

In the parliamentary elections held in the last 20 years in Tamil Nadu, 2004 witnessed 60.6% voter turnout, 2009 -73.1%), 2014 -73.7%) and 2019 -73.3%. In these elections there were differences of 13%, 10.3%, 11.9% and 10.8% between the state average voter turnout and that of Chennai respectively. An exception was the 2006 Assembly election when Chennai recorded 64% voter turnout and the state's average voter turnout was 70.8%. It was only at that time that there was a single-digit difference between Chennai voter turnout and that of the whole state.

Data shows that voter turnout is low not only in Chennai but also in metropolitan cities such as Bengaluru, Mumbai, Kolkata, Hyderabad and so on. There are scores of people living in houses on rent in cities. When they often change houses for reasons related to education, job, convenience and rent increase, they drag their feet on getting their names on the electoral list changed from their old areas to the new. They are also unwilling to visit their former areas where their names are actually in the voter list for the purpose of voting. There are also problems such as adding name in the voter list in Chennai and then going to the home town to enjoy consecutive holidays declared for the election season, adding the name to the voter list both in the home town and Chennai.

Such problems can be resolved by preparing an accurate electoral roll. Linking Aadhaar number with voter ID number can be a good solution. Several services provided by the government have already been linked with Aadhaar number. So, voter ID number can also be linked with Aadhar number. Former Chief Election Commissioner N. Gopalaswamy has also advocated this point. This solution will ensure one vote for one person.

As Aadhaar number is insisted on for issuing death certificates in local bodies, the names of the dead can easily be deleted from the electoral rolls. When one changes home address in an Aadhaar card, based on that Aadhar change, a voter's name can be transferred to his/her new area of residence. The Election

Commission staff can contact the voter at the mobile number registered in Aadhaar.

At present voter ID number is being linked with Aadhaar number on a voluntary basis. The Election Commission and the union government should take necessary steps to make it mandatory. This may help in simplifying the electoral rolls and increasing voter turnout in the future.

Translated by V. Mariappan.