"Pathways for Electoral Reforms in India."

INTRODUCTION

In Navin Chawla's book, Every Vote Counts, he shares the story of a polling station set up in the village of Banej in Junagadh district, Gujarat, for the 2009 election. Located in the heart of India's only lion sanctuary, it was set up for a single voter – Pujari Bharatdas Dashandas. A presiding officer and two other officials travelled through almost 40 kilometres of dense jungle, accompanied by a couple of police officers presumably to keep the lions at bay. [1]

This one voter, despite not being reached out to by any candidate, determined to vote without fail, captures the soul of Indian Democracy -the belief that every citizen, regardless of their economic or social background, geography, holds the same right to shape the nation's destiny. This is a classic representation of civic participation, but beneath this lies an uncomfortable truth: India's biggest festival of Democracy, namely the elections in India, however vast and vibrant, are often marred by money, power, criminal influence, and moral decay. [2]

We are an evolving nation with a knotty societal structure. In such a scenario, the task of achieving a valid representative government is often complex and challenging.

The title "Pathways for Electoral Reforms in India" implies this very quest — it signifies a journey of continuous improvement, a search for practical and ethical ways to strengthen the foundation of Indian Democracy.

The word "Pathways" suggests that there is no single solution, but rather a series of coordinated steps involving the Legislature, the Executive, and the Judiciary, supported by technology, intent, and ethics, and guided by the principles of the Constitution, that can lead India toward cleaner and more credible elections.

"Electoral Reforms" refer to regular political reforms, changes in practices, the adoption of new trends, and the transformation of culture that reinforce trust in the system and process, with transparency. [3]

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[1] *Every Vote Counts: The Story of India's Elections*/Navin Chawla/Harper Collins Publication India/2019/Page1
[2] *ASS'N FOR DEMOCRATIC REFORMS (ADR), Analysis of Criminal Background, Financial, and Other Details of MPs and MLAs (2024), available at https://adrindia.org*
[3] *GOV'T OF INDIA, Report on Electoral Reforms in India (Ministry of Law & Justice 2023).*

Thus, this essay explores both the present scenario, the problems that weaken Indian elections and the concrete pathways that can uphold the democratic spirit envisioned by the drafters of the Constitution.

Elections in India are not just a political event; they are a grand democratic festival—an epic exercise of people's will- stretching from the snowy Himalayas to the dense forests of Chhattisgarh. Every five years, the Election Commission of India (ECI) orchestrates the world's most extensive democratic process, mobilizing over 98.6 Cr voters across more than a million polling stations in the last Lok Sabha elections. However, beneath this nobility lies a deeper reality: however strong it may appear, there are weak spots.[4]

SNAPSHOT- EVOLUTION OF ELECTIONS IN INDIA

For many, it remains unacceptable that a nation of 125 billion has evolved from paper ballots to digital governance in just 70 years. The first general election in 1951–52 chose to adopt universal adult franchise despite widespread illiteracy.[5] Over the decades, electoral reforms introduced Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs), VVPATs, Voter ID cards, and the Model Code of Conduct to ensure transparency and fairness.

The inclusion of regional parties, coalition politics, and digital campaigns has redefined participation and the face of multicultural Democracy. The women's audience surged, accessibility improved, and so did the reach. Polling has now reached even remote and conflict zones, such as Chhattisgarh's Bastar region, where officials brave rough terrain to uphold Democracy.

India's elections have evolved from inked fingers in polling booths to digital dashboards that track millions of votes in real-time. However, the citizens have always been the pulse of the election.

Each phase—manual, electronic, digital—reflects not just progress in process but progress in participation.

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[4] *ELECTION COMM'N OF INDIA (ECI), Statistical Report on General Elections to the 17th Lok Sabha (2019), available at https://eci.gov.in*
[5] *GRANVILLE AUSTIN, Working a Democratic Constitution: The Indian Experience (Oxford Univ. Press 1999)*

Today, in India, 5-7 Assembly elections take place every year, marking the celebration of Democracy. [6]Elections in India are all about holding one's nerve amidst criticism and odds, yet reaffirming the idea of itself.

PATHWAY TO ELECTORAL REFORMS:

The Challenges:

India's electoral system has globally surprised its critics and faces the most formidable challenges possible in a multi-religion, lingual and culturally diverse nation. The first challenge is the political resistance, driven by the desire to control the power and money involved and stay involved in the affairs that influence policies for ulterior motives. The challenge is to control the M's: Money, Muscle and Morality.

Money, power, and undisclosed political donations continue to distort fairness, while the criminalization of politics weakens public trust, with over 40% of MPs facing criminal charges. Inner-party democracy and transparent funding are often disguised as selfish interests.[7]

In conflict zones like Chhattisgarh's Bastar region, security threats and logistical barriers test the Election Commission's resilience.

Technological reforms, such as EVMs and VVPATs, have always been in the News, criticized by the losing party and accused of manipulation. [8]Digital misinformation, fake News, and false narratives have emerged as a new-age threat.

Meanwhile, voter coldness, especially in urban areas, reduces participatory strength, adversely affecting the outcomes of elections, especially in narrow margin wins.

The Election Commission's limited enforcement powers and concerns over its autonomy further complicate the execution of reform. They are often thought so pro-government. The image reform is something that should be focused on.

Underlying constraints—ensuring logistics, funding within constitutional limitations and legal bindings—make large-scale, impactful transformation slow and complex.

The Way Forward:

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[6] *https://www.drishtiias.com/daily-news-editorials/simultaneous-elections-in-india*
[7] *ADR, supra note 3.*
[8] *Inside India's Electoral Machinery: From EVMs to VVPATs, Indian Express (May 2024).*

To strengthen Democracy, India must focus on transparency, institutional independence, digital accountability, and voter inclusion, ensuring that reforms are not merely a formality but a conscious call for the benefit of the masses, thereby empowering citizens.

The pulse for any election is transparency, accountability, and inclusion. Disclosure of Political Funding through state-supported or publicly disclosed mechanisms is paramount to control the illegal methods used to coerce voters, money laundering, and control black money. [9]

Decriminalization of politics requires withholding candidates with serious charges and establishing fast-track courts. [10]

Citizen Awareness Programs, Redesigning the Election Commission, a Selection Mechanism, Training, and Creating a Pool of Willing and Qualified personnel should be the actionable steps to ensure the achievement of the desired outcome.

Carefully crafted One Nation-One Election policy within the constitutional ambit and legal framework, with clarity and communication of the purpose to be made publicly available after due deliberation and discussions. This will ensure resource optimization and the rise of responsible politics. Voter Education drives to build trust in the system cannot take a backseat.

Technology-aided reforms, including blockchain-based remote voting, biometric verification, and cyber-secure EVM audits, safeguard against digital misinformation.

Fake News and the Spread of misleading promises should be scrutinized.

Mechanism to include Migrants, Disabled Voters and Remote voting to ensure depth in participation to be considered.

Public disclosures of inner party democracy and moral code of conduct should be vigilantly followed.

Ultimately, electoral reforms must not only modernize processes but renew faith in institutions, ensuring that India's elections remain the truest reflection of the people's voice.

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[9] *OBSERVER RESEARCH FOUND. (ORF), Reimagining Electoral Reforms for the Digital Age (2022).*
[10] *ADR, supra note 3*

THE CONCLUSION:

We are a resourceful nation and not short of ideas. Political discussion and talks of reform happen on every 'nukkad'. However, what complicates the scenario is the presence of vested interests, inertia, and complex realities. The key challenges lie in ensuring political will, financial transparency, technological trust, and institutional independence.

True reform will come not when the rules change—but when the culture of accountability and participation deepens.