# NCAER Podcast: Ringside

## Episode 1: Transcripts

Topic: Lok Sabha Polls 2024: How EC Prepares for World's Biggest Democratic Exercise

Guest- Dr SY Quraishi, Former Chief Election Commissioner, India

Host: Pradip Bagchi

**Host**

Hello and welcome to Ringside, the NCAER podcast. I am your host Pradip Bagchi. Today's episode is about the Lok Sabha polls and how the Election Commission goes about it.

2024 is being called the Year of Elections. Globally more voters than ever across 64 countries and the European Union, comprising nearly half of the world's population, have voted or will be voting.

India is now in the midst of Lok Sabha polls, billed as the biggest democratic exercise in the world with nearly 97 crore voters this time. Voting will be held in 7 phases for the 543 Lok Sabha in 1.2 million polling stations across the country.

So, how does the Election Commission go about this massive exercise? To discuss this, we are happy to have with us former Chief Election Commissioner of India Dr S Y Quraishi. He was the 17th CEC during 2010-12. He brought in several electoral reforms like setting up an Expenditure Control Division and a Voter Education Division in the Commission. This was to control money power and increase participation among voters. His latest book- India's Experiment with Democracy-The Life of a Nation through its Elections—has just been released.

Dr Quraishi, welcome to **RINGSIDE….**

**Guest:** Thank you very much

**Host:** Lok Sabha elections are indeed a mammoth exercise. And more importantly, everything needs to go as per plan. No goof-ups are permissible. So how does the Election Commission prepare, leading to the announcement of the dates. What is normally the lead time?

**Speaker:** India's election is the biggest election in the world. And I would add that it is not only the biggest election, it is the biggest management event of any kind in the world. And we have been doing it for the last 70-75 years with clockwork precision. As you rightly said, we allow for zero error. And when I say zero error, it means zero error. What I mean is that 99.9% good election will be a bad election for us. It has to be 100% without any question because even 0.1% bad election will mean thousands of people have been left out. They have been denied their voting rights. So, there is no scope for any mistake.

Fifteen million or one and a half crore government servants conduct this election and without error. The beauty is that the same civil service, the same government servants who are normally looked down upon as inefficient, lazy and corrupt and what you call them contemptuously 'babus', same bureaucracy delivers a perfect election every time. And now we have developed this art and science of conducting election to perfection. As a result, we are able to do it so efficiently every time. I often say that we are almost on autopilot. Our machinery is so well-trained that there is no question of any mistake. There is no allowance for any mistake. And they are able to conduct this massive exercise with credibility and with clockwork efficiency.

**Host:** The other thing that comes to my mind. How does the EC arrive at certain figures- like the number of polling stations, no of central forces required state-wise?

**Speaker:** First of all, we have to enlist the voters in the electoral roll. So that is the first exercise. And Election Commission every year updates the electoral rolls by going door to door. We knock on every door and find out if there is any addition to the family, who would like to be added as a voter, whether there has been any change in the sense that somebody has shifted or there has been a death in the family, so they have to be eliminated from the rolls. So for updation of roll, we go to every house, door to door, every year. So that is how we get to know how many voters we have to deal with.

And as you rightly mentioned, 97 or 98 crore is the figure given for this year. Now, how many booths will we require for them? So that is a decision, again with experience we have taken from time to time, based on how much time it takes for one person to vote. We have to see how much time will be required in a polling booth to start at 8 AM and finish at 5 PM. If we find that at 5 PM, there are still 200-300 people waiting, that means the size of the polling booth has to be reduced. Initially, it used to be 1500 per polling booth. Then we

reduced it to 1200 per polling booth. In some places, where the turnout used to be 60%, we take that into account. But if the turnout is 80%, that means many more people will have to come. There we have to reduce the size of the polling station. We have to see that polling station should have the number of voters who can be accommodated till 5 PM. If population has increased and turnout has increased, we make two booths out of one. The number of booths keeps on increasing. This time it is 10.5 lakh polling booths. It was less than 10 lakh last time. But in last five years, the number has increased.

We also classify all of our booths into three categories. One is the normal booth which is peaceful, quiet and 'no-problem' booth. Then there are sensitive booths where there has been a history of violence or possibility of violence in the next election. And then there are hypersensitive booths where the chances of violence are much more than others, based on our experience and history.

Also a normal booth of yesterday can become a sensitive booth today depending on the character of the candidates. Suppose there is a high-profile candidate, a top leader, the booth suddenly becomes sensitive, or if it's a man with criminal background, with many criminal cases pending, it will become sensitive. Hypersensitive booths require more security. Based on this classification in three categories, we decide how much of security is required. We lay down a norm.

Then the third thing we do is to call the home secretary to negotiate with him how much paramilitary forces he can provide. Because he has to see where the paramilitary forces are deployed, how many are available and how many have to be withdrawn from deployment. On that basis, once he gives us 'X' figure, we see whether with that figure, we can cover all the sensitive and hypersensitive booths. If we cannot, we circulate the force to second phase, third phase and fourth phase. So same force is deployed again and again and that is what determines the number of phases.

**Host:** Dr Quraishi, the EC has been campaigning for more people to participate in voting. But reports quoting data suggested that only 38% of the teens in the 18-19 age group have registered as voters. This also comes at a time when parties see youth as a big constituency. How do you see it and what could be the possible reasons?

**Speaker:** Well, you have raised a very good question. In fact, I have some communication background. My PhD is in communication. When I joined the

Election Commission in 2006, and saw the figures of voter turnout, in many places it was as low as 20-25%, particularly in metros and big cities, which is not acceptable to me. And there are pockets where traditionally the turnout has been low. I thought we needed to address it.

There are two ways of increasing the turnout. One is motivation and education. The other is compulsion. Make it compulsory. So there used to be a demand. Everybody was expressing concern about low voter turnout, especially the politicians. But the solution which they were offering of compulsory voting was not acceptable to me because I believed in the power of motivation and persuasion. So, I proposed in the Election Commission that we should set up a voter education division. Now, the Election Commission did not find the idea very attractive because they said that our job is to conduct elections, manage elections and not to educate. Educating voters is somebody else's job, like of the media, of the political parties.

But I did not agree with that at all. And I said that low voter turnout is surely a matter of the Election Commission's concern because that raises the question of legitimacy of the representative. Suppose only 20% of people have voted and 10% have voted for Mr Bagchi. So for us, you are a winner. But with 10%, question can be raised that 90% of the constituents have not voted for you. Are you a real representative of the constituency? But it is not your fault if 80% people did not come out to vote. If the turnout was low.

Therefore, my solution was that we will set up a voter education division, have all kinds of educational programmes, motivational programmes and bring out the people. And this was in 2010 October. My first election was Bihar election and we tried it and it worked wonders. Bihar recorded the highest turnout in history. Also, we targeted women and youth. The turnout of women was remarkable. More women turned out to vote than men although the absolute number of women is less than of men. As you know, the gender ratio is adverse. Today, more than half the states, 17 of all the states, have more women turning out than men, which is a big achievement. Also, at that time, the gap between men and women coming to vote was 10 percentage points with women coming out less. Now, that gap has been wiped out.

The second target of attention for us was the youth, particularly 18-year-olds. So, first we studied the problem. We did professional study through a professional organization-- knowledge, attitude, behaviour and practice study.

Why is it that something is for your good and you are not availing of it. Now, youngsters look forward to becoming 18 so that they get a driving licence on which they will drive a motorcycle and drive it rashly at that or watch adult movies. They were conscious of the importance of 18 years, but for the wrong reasons. The real reason, which is political empowerment, they were not concerned about. We investigated that. Why is it that they are not bothered? We found that many of them did not know that qualifying age to become a voter was 18. If they knew that, they did not know on what date you have to be 18, which is 1st of January. And some of those who knew that, did not know what is the procedure to enrol. And if they knew all that, many of them were cynical of politics and politicians. They used to say, 'sab neta chor hain' -all politicians are corrupt- which is a dangerous statement, a wrong statement. In fact, India has become a great power, thanks to political leadership only. Therefore, these things we needed to address vis-a-vis youth.

In our voter education programme, we started operating in colleges, universities. We even involved school children. We appointed 25,000 brand ambassadors for universities. We involved national icons with our former President APJ Abdul Kalam, who was very popular among the youth. We got him to record a video of appeal to youth to register and come out and vote on the voting day and vote honestly. This programme has been such a tremendous success that in every election, we are getting better and better results.

**Host:** Related to this.. since we are talking about turnout, the other thing is there are two categories of people, especially migrants, across the country. The EC has something called Form M for the migrants from the Kashmir Valley. And they get to vote from wherever they are. So how about something like that for thousands of migrants. They go out and their voter registration is at their native places and they don't get to vote because on the voting day, they may not be there. They may be somewhere else outside their state. And the second is urban population, urban centres, particularly. You see a lot of professionals are there, who do not have their own homes, and they live in rented accommodation, and don't get that incentive to get a voter I card. They think today we are here, there years down the line, I may be posted somewhere else. So this is one area again, how do you think it can be made convenient and possible for them to vote?

**Speaker:** Well, let me first deal with the first part--Form M that you talked about. That was only applicable to Kashmiri migrants. And I read in the paper

only today that it has been done away with. Because earlier, they could vote from anywhere. Now that they have settled somewhere, they have to register there. But that was the local specific problem. Let's forget about it for the moment.

Now talking of migrants in general all over the country, that is a serious issue. But at the same time, there seems to be a lot of ignorance. The law is that wherever you are resident for more than six months, you have to register yourself as a voter. So even a student, who comes for a year or two years or three years, can register wherever enrolled. Earlier the procedure was difficult that you had to get yourself struck off from your old place. Somebody had come from Trivandrum to Delhi and asking him or her to go and get the name deleted is very difficult. That was cumbersome and many people would therefore keep away from all this. We made it easy. It was about 15 years ago. We made it simple that in your new place, you fill up Form 6 which is for a new voter and mention your old address and old electoral roll number so that we will get it struck off ourselves. You can't make it simpler than that.

Similarly for migrants. The fact that, you know, they don't have to go back to their hometown to vote because voting facility is now available to them where they are currently resident for more than six months. And then you say the educated people who are in a rented place. That doesn't matter. All you have to do is to prove that you are a citizen of India and some witness in the neighbourhood has to certify—'yes, I know this guy and he sleeps under this tree or outside this shop every night'. So even that is good enough for us to give a voter ID.

**Host:** Talking about technology. Today we talk about Digital India and all that. I remember long time back, we read a book by Macpherson on democracy, where he talked about digital democracy. For example, do you see a situation in future where people can actually need not go to a polling station and vote. By sitting at home, they can log on to their computer for maybe some OTP-based, log in-based procedure by which they can cast their vote. Has this idea been ever explored by the EC?

**Speaker:** Oh, it has been discussed hundreds of times in EC and ruled out for the simple reason that even a simple EVM, which is a standalone machine, which does not take instruction from outside … The telephone in your pocket and mine is more dangerous because it is communicating with the whole world. It is getting instruction from all over the world. Even the fact that our

EVM is an innocent standalone machine … even that is still questioned after 20 years of its introduction. So, in a situation when even simple technology, most trusted technology which cannot be manipulated is questioned, how will people accept internet voting? Some people demand. But for every person who demands internet voting, there will be 99% who will be suspicious of it. So we are not looking at introduction of internet voting in the near future. Some day, it might happen. Every other day, we see news of how people are getting defrauded. That's why at the moment, technology for remote voting is not yet ripe or acceptable when they don't even trust the simple EVM.

**Host:** Dr Quraishi, since you talked about EVM, actually I was also coming to that because it's also linked to the digital thing, and questions are being raised about EVMs in some quarters. And they also argue that even countries like the US and UK do not use EVMs. In fact, there's a petition in the Supreme Court which is asking for a 100% match with VVPATs- the paper trail. Then there's the other side of the argument that as a machine even if it can be hacked, but the EC drill is such that it cannot go undetected. Before polling, it will be caught. And number two, since it is on such a massive scale, hacking cannot be done. How do you see this controversy about EVM?

**Speaker:** Actually, the controversy about EVM, I'm shocked to see, is so ill-informed. For instance, I've heard it hundreds of times. Even USA doesn't use EVM. So why do we use it? This statement that even USA doesn't use (EVM) is wrong. Because USA is different from India. It is totally decentralized. We have a single federal Election Commission of India. In USA, the election is conducted by counties at the local level. And there are over 10,000 or so. There are 10,000 systems, 10,000 laws. And in those 10,000 counties, thousands of them use EVMs of some kind or the other. And thousands of them do not use any EVM. To say that even USA doesn't use is wrong statement. Because thousands are using. So, that's wrong.

**Host:** As I mentioned earlier, you had the expenditure control division to check money power in elections. And today, the EC has a cap of spending like Rs 95 lakh for Lok Sabha constituency, except in some states like Arunachal and Sikkim and all that, and Goa. But still we all know that money plays a role. What else do you think can be done, I mean, to check the role of money?

**Speaker:** Well, you know, it is true. Number one, let us be clear that the law prescribes that there should be a limit on expenditure. And the intention of the law is that there should be a level playing field. Even the poorer people, people

who are not so well-off should be able to contest so that it is not a level playing field only among the rich, which is why the concept of a ceiling on expenditure is provided for in the law.

Now, second misconception is that the Election Commission of India decides that ceiling, which is wrong. It is decided by the government through the law ministry. Of course, the Election Commission may make a recommendation which they may accept or not accept. But on that basis, the ceiling is fixed.

Third is that 95 lakh is too low. And it should be rationalized. I still today have not found the answer what is the rational limit. Because there are people who say 95 (lakh) is too much and there are people who say 95 is too little. So, who decides what is rational? And in fact, interestingly, there is another interesting figure as to how to arrive at the rational figure. Now, if 95 (lakh) is the limit, after the election, all candidates- winner or loser-- will have to submit their account of expenditure. And on average, the entire lot will show only 40 lakh or 50 lakh as their total expenditure. Although 95 lakh is the limit, they are showing only 40-50 lakh as their expenditure. So, if now there is demand for rationalization, I will not raise it from 95 to 2 crore. I will bring it down from 95 to 40 lakh because that is what you are showing.

In fact, Mr. Atal Bihari Vajpayee once had made a very significant statement that the figure given for expenditure is all bogus**.** Therefore, in such a situation, there needs to be a serious debate and expenditure has to be brought down. And personally, one suggestion which I make is, that the logic for having a ceiling on the expenditure provided by law is very solid and very genuine.

Now, at the same time, there is no limit on expenditure by political parties. You can spend 95 lakh, but your party can spend 5 crore or 10 crore on you. So what happened to this concept of ceiling? It disturbed the level playing field altogether. It is totally negated. Therefore, there should be a ceiling on political party expenditure also. That has been our suggestion for a long time.

**Host:** Since we are talking about level playing field and model code of conduct, which actually tries to ensure that the level playing field is there, it becomes a subject of intense discussion many times. But how do you think, for example, the advent of social media, has changed the scenario? Because today, the campaign goes on and on until the time of voting through social media. There is talk of some voluntary Code of Ethics for social media, but do you think it can work? Or how do you think it has completely changed the way campaign is done these days?

**Speaker:** Well, you know, you have raised a very, very important question because with social media explosion, the ground reality has changed drastically. As you know, we have been doing a multi-phase election for the last 25-30 years. And the only reason why we do it in multiple phases is the need for security, which every political party demands. Every party says bring paramilitary forces from outside the state. Now because of 6-7 phases, forces take five, six days to move from one place to the other.

Secondly, social media spreads hate speech, fake news, rumours. So, it is doing a lot more damage. In any case, we have made election peaceful by 100 other ways. Even if we stop deploying paramilitary forces, we can still conduct peaceful election with so many things which I could detail out if there was time. But I would say it is better now in the new given circumstances that instead of two and a half months for the election process to be over, let us finish the election in one month in one phase. Because hate speech, social media we cannot control.

In multiple phase elections, social media plays havoc. So if it is a single phase, havoc of social media will be limited enormously. And I think time has come when we should do the election in one day and be done with it.

**Host:** Thank you, Dr Qureshi for your insights. It was great talking to you about India's election process.

**Speaker:** Thank you! my pleasure, thank you very much.

With that we come to the end of this episode. Please stay tuned for more from NCAER podcast -Ringside.

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