

**Every Vote Counts: The Story of India's Elections**

**Navin Chawla**

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The book *Every Vote Counts* is an attempt to analyze the election process in India and how the Election Commission despite of all hurdles successfully manages to conduct these polls. The author argues that muscle and money power is becoming influential in Indian elections and so is the role played by social media. Author presents first hand experiences as Chief Election Commissioner going from one state to another in the vast nation to depict the enormous challenges to conduct polls at various stages in India. This book gives a clear picture of the credible electoral system being the core of democracy. It highlights the central role of Election Commissions as being fiercely independent bodies. The chapters in the book include a kaleidoscopic account of the efficiency of the electoral machine – the subject of study in management schools globally. The most important aspect of the book is that it shows how remarkable it is that the Indian elections always have been held on time without delay. The book helps all the ignorant citizens who don't realize the importance and power of their own votes. The author did not find any information available on how Indian elections had been conducted earlier so wanting to help researchers and the future Chief Election Commissioners (CECs), he wanted to offer his acquired experience as CEC to contribute towards the history and well-functioning of the institution through this book.

The author studied at the Lawrence school Sanawar, India. He was appointed the Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) of India and he supervised the General Election of 2009.

The main focus of the reviewer of this book is to introduce to the readers about the Indian elections in short. The review will highlight the electoral process with its major difficulties and strategies used to over-come it. It signifies importance issues of trans-gender and the demand to recognize them as a separate entity. The introduction of EVMs is also significant achievement in the General Elections of 2009.

As a researcher, I feel, the Indian elections are not so fair and all the political parties are busy with their own self-interests to win. For Indians, the polls come as festivals once in 5 years. The language is very lucid and clear but on several occasions, I wish, the book had inculcated more interesting events. And the language could also have been fun at times.

This book is entirely about the General Elections of 2009 in India. There were 714 million voters. For the first time 556 women contested the polls. The book elaborates on the difficulties in the smooth operation of the election. It was the EC's main purpose to ensure transparency and fairness to the voters, political parties and contestants therefore the commission employed many new measures that were not used in the past. Firstly, they decided on the use of enhanced mobile connectivity to cover over half a million polling stations. Different states had their own difficult set of hurdles. Elections are the most visible and action part of Indian democracy. For instance, Andhra Pradesh alone had forty five million voters more than the population of Canada.

The polling stations ensured quick service for physically challenged people and senior citizens. The money power also played its role. Huge sums of money was seized by police. The police officials worked vigilantly and tactfully to ensure honest elections.

Another important state was Assam, according to the author. It is here where the mighty Brahmaputra river cuts through the middle of the state and it becomes very difficult during the monsoon season. The most crucial problem for Assam has been the doubtful voters. Another issue was of the security management which was required weeks before the election. All licensed arms were to be deposited in the allotted vaults till the time of the election.

Elections in Chattisgarh and Jharkhand were also the most difficult states for the electoral process. Chattisgarh is a home to a large tribal population. The predominant problem was that it had come under the influence of the Naxalite insurgents. Even in Jharkhand the Maoist has a huge dominance. The capital had its own set of problems, according to Mr. Chawla. In Delhi, there were double checks to see the matching photographs with the voters ID.

Haryana has excellent communication network so the elections were easy despite of the unbearable hot months. People helped one another with shamiyanas and drinking water.

Himachal Pradesh is a peaceful state. But in the remote villages and hills the villagers had to walk around 20 km through rugged snowbound terrain to reach to the nearest polling station. The officials were transported in helicopters and polling materials were sent in frequent sorties.

Mr. Chawla in the book lucidly mentions that in Karnataka, a rich state, had problems not of poverty but of wealth. A lot of unauthorized cash and liquor was seized. The most amount of wealth seized was from mining barons. Money played a huge role in this state so the security forces worked very hard round the clock to catch the corruption at the root level so the state could have free and fair elections.

Kerala with its literate population was the easiest in the polling stations. People queued up in lines obediently according to their names and the process ran smoothly. There was one problem the state faced was that the election rule did not permit overseas voting. It only allows the resident of the state to vote.

Madhya Pradesh is a large state so the elections were very complex. There were Maoist affected areas here too that needed to be dealt with high security personnel.

Punjab shares international boundary with Pakistan. Elections in Punjab needed special vigilance so that it could run impartially. Problems discussed in this book is about money and muscle power.

Muscle power indicates that many contestants began to rely on musclemen and local gangs to persuade and force people to attend the election rallies. The book also highlights the hidden facts about paid news. Newspapers demand money in exchange for a good coverage during election time. The role of social media in elections also played a huge role. Social media covers various platforms through which a user can create, share and curate content. Social media with its capability to network and share information with each other is the biggest and most powerful weapon nowadays. The use of EVM electronic voting machine is also an important achievement according to the author of this book.

The most interesting aspect of the book is the Naxalite factor in elections and how the jawans loyally faced every challenge for providing security to the people of those states affected by Naxal violence. There were many killed along with the journalist. According to the writer as he himself being the CEC says that the Maoist threat was the greatest internal security problem India currently faces. Analysing facts, the author Mr. Chawla says that there were many urban pockets who provided the Maoist weapon and shelter. The target of the Maoist party are the security forces as by killing them they could loot their weapons.

The Maoists would block the roads by felling trees which would slow the movement and then fiercely attack the security forces. The CEC requested for helicopters from the air force as travel by land was a big threat for the jawans and the people involved in the polls. The Maoists managed to kill 10 para-military troops and looted their explosives in Odhisa. In Jharkhand, 6 BSF personal were killed in a landmine blasts.

Another hallmark of the book are the suggestive issues Mr Chawla has presented:- He said elimination of money and muscle power is very important for fair elections. Another very sound area is bribery and candidates with criminal records have to be traced and immediate action needs be taken to disqualify. He highlights the importance of transparency of funds that comes into the political parties and where they are spent. The commission emphasized on making bribery in elections as a cognizable offence .The CEC was very watchful of various bodies registering as political parties and receiving funds and not participating in elections. Lastly the commission also suggested that there should be constitutional protection regarding removal of the CEC.

I would recommend this book to student officers of APF as well as other readers of this Journal as this gives a clear picture of how difficult it is to conduct polls in the largest democracy of the world. I recommend this book to everyone who would be interested to know about the Indian elections and gain insight on the voters' experiences during the election time. The police force always has to give up their lives to safeguard free and secure

elections. I would rate this book as 5 on the scale of 1-5 as it clearly illustrates every angle in simple language and makes me salute the police forces without which this complex general election cannot go off peacefully. New factors such as money and muscle power, use of social media techniques by contestants, even forming of new political parties just for getting donations have to be studied minutely as this has enormous ramifications. As a reviewer of this book, I agree to the viewpoints of the author and his first-hand experience indulging himself amidst the Indian electoral process. His insightful journey enables the readers to understand the nitty-gritty of the world's largest democratic elections.

Comparison cannot be made with elections in Nepal because of the sheer number of voters in India and the large number of polling booths that need to be set-up in India. One single state of UP itself has more voters than the whole of Nepal. However, there is enough scope to draw lessons for other South Asian nations.

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Political Science, Tribhuvan University)  
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### **Suggestive Reading:**

Roy, P. & Sopariwala, D. (2019). *The Verdict: Decoding India's Elections*. Penguin Publishing

Quraishi, S.Y. (2019). *The Great March of Democracy: Seven Decades of India's Election*. Penguin Publishing

Sharma, R. (2019). *Democracy on the Road*. Allan lane Publishing