T.N. Seshan and His Role in Cleaning Up the Indian Electoral System

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Abstract: *This research paper examines the transformative role played by T.N. Seshan, the 10th Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) of India, in reforming and cleaning up the Indian electoral system. His tenure from 1990 to 1996 is marked by significant changes that enhanced the credibility and transparency of elections in India. This paper explores the historical context of electoral malpractices prior to his tenure, the specific reforms and measures he implemented, and the lasting impact of his actions on Indian democracy. The analysis is supported by a review of literature, reports, and empirical data to provide a comprehensive understanding of Seshan's contributions.*

Keywords: - *T.N. Seshan, CEC, electoral system, EVM*

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Introduction

The Indian electoral system, the world's largest democratic process, has faced numerous challenges since its inception. Issues such as voter intimidation, electoral violence, and malpractice have marred the electoral process, undermining public confidence. T.N. Seshan's tenure as CEC marked a paradigm shift, bringing about reforms that significantly altered the electoral landscape. This paper aims to analyze the changes introduced by Seshan, their implementation, and their long-term effects on the Indian electoral system.

Historical Context

Pre-Seshan Era: Challenges in the Electoral System

Before T.N. Seshan took office, the Indian electoral system was plagued by widespread corruption and malpractices. Issues such as booth capturing, voter intimidation, and fraudulent voting were rampant. The Election Commission of India (ECI), established in 1950, had limited powers and resources to address these problems effectively. The lack of stringent enforcement mechanisms and political will further exacerbated the situation.

Key Issues

1. Booth Capturing: Armed groups or political goons capturing polling stations to rig votes in favor of a particular candidate.

2. Voter Intimidation: Threats and violence to influence voter behavior.

3. Fake Voting: Impersonation and casting votes in the name of registered voters who did not actually vote.

4. Electoral Violence: Clashes and violence during the election period, often orchestrated by political parties to intimidate opponents.

T.N. Seshan: A Profile

Early Life and Career

Tirunellai Narayana Iyer Seshan was born on December 15, 1932, in Kerala. He joined the

Indian Administrative Service (IAS) in 1955 and held various positions in the government, including that of Cabinet Secretary. His reputation for integrity and administrative efficiency preceded his appointment as the Chief Election Commissioner in 1990.

Appointment as Chief Election Commissioner

Seshan's appointment came at a time when the ECI was seen as a toothless body. His arrival marked the beginning of a new era characterized by assertiveness and stringent enforcement of electoral laws. Seshan's uncompromising stance and fearless approach soon made him a household name in India.

Major Reforms and Measures

Voter Identification

One of the first significant reforms introduced by Seshan was the mandatory use of voter identification cards. This measure was aimed at curbing fraudulent voting practices and ensuring that only eligible voters could cast their ballots.

Model Code of Conduct

Seshan strictly enforced the Model Code of Conduct (MCC) for political parties and candidates. The MCC, although not legally binding, provided guidelines for the conduct of political parties and candidates during elections. Seshan ensured that any violation of the MCC was dealt with promptly and severely, which helped in maintaining a level playing field.

Campaign Finance Regulation

Regulating election expenditure was another area where Seshan made significant contributions. He introduced stringent monitoring of election expenses to prevent the misuse of money power in influencing election outcomes. This involved scrutinizing the financial reports submitted by candidates and political parties and taking action against those found guilty of overspending.

Electoral Roll Cleaning

Seshan undertook a comprehensive drive to clean up the electoral rolls, removing duplicate and fake entries. This ensured that the voter lists were accurate and up-to-date, thereby reducing the scope for electoral fraud.

Deployment of Central Forces

To prevent violence and intimidation during elections, Seshan ensured the deployment of central paramilitary forces at sensitive polling stations. This move was crucial in maintaining law and order and ensuring that voters could exercise their franchise without fear.

Use of Technology

Seshan was a proponent of using technology to enhance the efficiency and transparency of the electoral process. He introduced the use of Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs) on a pilot basis, which eventually led to their widespread adoption in Indian elections.

• Impact and Legacy

Restoring Public Confidence

The reforms introduced by Seshan played a crucial role in restoring public confidence in the electoral system. Voters began to believe that their votes would be counted fairly, and the instances of electoral malpractices saw a significant decline.

Institutional Empowerment

Seshan's tenure empowered the Election Commission of India, transforming it into a robust and independent institution. His assertiveness in enforcing electoral laws set a precedent for his successors, ensuring that the ECI continued to play a vital role in safeguarding democracy in India.

Judicial Backing

Seshan's actions received substantial backing from the judiciary, which further reinforced the

ECI's authority. The Supreme Court of India upheld many of his decisions, providing a legal endorsement of his efforts to clean up the electoral system.

Inspiration for Future Reforms

Seshan's legacy inspired future reforms aimed at further strengthening the electoral process. His tenure highlighted the importance of having a strong and independent electoral body capable of enforcing rules and regulations without fear or favor.

• Criticisms and Controversies

Autocratic Style

While Seshan was widely praised for his reforms, his autocratic style of functioning drew criticism from some quarters. He was often accused of being high-handed and not consulting political parties and other stakeholders before implementing changes.

Resistance from Political Class

Seshan faced significant resistance from political parties, many of whom were unhappy with his strict enforcement of the Model Code of Conduct and other regulations. His confrontations with politicians were frequent, and he had to navigate a challenging political landscape to implement his reforms.

•Conclusion

T.N. Seshan's tenure as the Chief Election Commissioner of India marked a watershed moment in the history of Indian democracy. His relentless pursuit of electoral reforms and his unwavering commitment to clean and fair elections transformed the Indian electoral landscape. The measures he introduced not only addressed the immediate challenges but also laid the foundation for future reforms. While his style of functioning was sometimes controversial, the positive impact of his tenure on the Indian electoral system is undeniable. Seshan's legacy continues to inspire efforts to strengthen democracy in India, making him a pivotal figure in the country's democratic history.

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