

EVM ABOVE SUSPICION

EC accepts demand for paper trail.

THE decision of the Election Commission to give up its vindictive stand against those doubting the integrity of electronic voting machines and accepting the demand to introduce a paper trail must be welcomed. The use of EVMs has made the election process quicker and more efficient than using paper ballots. But EVMs lacked transparency and left a nagging suspicion that could be tampered with. The Election Commission had taken the stand that it uses stand-alone machines with a one-time programme chip and that the machine does not have an operating system. Manufacture of the chip is outsourced and the EC has no control over it. At an international workshop organised by Save Indian Democracy in Chennai three years ago, experts from across the globe spoke about the vulnerability of the voting machines and how easily they could be hacked and manipulated. The Election Commission took umbrage at the workshop, harassed some of the international participants by cancelling their visas and maintained the Indian EVMs are tamper-proof. Hari Prasad, a computer expert from Hyderabad, managed to get hold of an EVM used by the EC and demonstrated with ease on a live television show how the machine could be programmed to produce a pre-determined result. Instead of trying to learn about the shortcomings of the machines and rectifying them, the EC got him arrested for alleged theft of the machine and launched criminal proceedings against him. Hari Prasad's sole intention was to protect the sanctity of the electoral process of the world's largest democracy. Will the EC have the grace to withdraw the case against him? The use of EVMs in their present form is a violation of the citizen's fundamental right to information in a democracy. Most electronic transactions such as money transfer via internet can be verified, but this is not the case with electronic voting. Casting of votes is a secret exercise. In the case of electronic voting, citizens are not able to verify if their votes have been properly counted. A citizen should be able to observe all steps in the election procedure, which is not possible in the case of electronic voting. There is no electronic device that can count without any software involved. Where there is software involved, it is always possible to manipulate it. The paper trail system helps verify the counting whenever called for. Voting by EVMs without a paper receipt is not in tune with the Information and Technology Act, 2000, and the Indian Evidence Act, 1872. The EC, which resisted the demand to introduce a paper trail, had to be goaded by the Supreme Court to concede this legally required technical improvement of its EVMs. It is to be hoped the EC will not drag its feet in modifying EVMs to provide for a paper trail to each voter instead of leaving him with a mere beep and a flash of light after he has cast his vote.