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Outsourcing Elections

Following a talk last week at a college forum about foreign perception of U.S elections, a bright-eyed student stepped up to the microphone during Q&A and asked me what advice did Indians have for Americans, especially after India had completed its elections using electronic voting machines. "Just outsource your election," I replied jauntily, submitting a thought I had exchanged with a colleague after the Florida fiasco. Even back then, it was obvious that a poor and chaotic democracy like India had a better system in place than the US of A.

Going by the build up to Presidential 2004, Americans are getting ready to make a meal of it again. Thousands of lawyers - both Democrats and Republicans -- have fanned out across the country to challenge the results in court whichever way it goes. A Time magazine columnist has already declared "It's 2000 All Over Again." The quadrennial kvetching by Americans about what a lousy electoral system they have has reached fever pitch. According to one poll, 71 per cent want the current system scrapped.

Seriously folks, India's Chief Election Commissioner T.S.Krishnamurthy, who will be here the coming week as an observer, should be bringing an offer to rewire the system and conduct U.S elections. Why not? With our short campaign time, our model code of conduct, and our new EVMs (such a waste using them so infrequently), we could do it faster, cleaner, and most of all, cheaper. This is one outsourcing that American voters, tired of the 18-month long campaign, the \$ 3.9 billion tab, and dubious results, may not mind. Trust me, my outsourcing suggestion was received with cheers (it was a liberal arts college.)

Part of the problem with American elections is that it is a decentralized system with states and even counties having their own election laws and procedures. But Americans are also famous for occasionally complicating simple ideas. Spasmodic attempts to institute electronic voting have been scuppered by doubts and conspiracy theories about hacking and pilferage. So how did India manage it? It reminds me of an apocryphal story...

At the height of the space race with the Soviets, Americans found that their pens were malfunctioning in space because the ink flow was affected by gravity. So they committed millions of dollars for research to make a pen that would write well in space. While they were coming up with the new device, it occurred to them to check and see what the Soviets were doing. "Why, we are using pencils," came the reply.

Truly, warts, wrinkles and all, India has arrived at a sturdy democratic model worthy of not just praise but also of commercial exploitation. If Indian companies can prospect for oil and gas in Sudan and Angola, there is no reason why the Indian Election Commission cannot fish for business in the ever widening pool of democracy. Supplying indelible ink for the Afghanistan is such a wash out idea. There ought to be a whole package; in fact, a variety of packages...perhaps even a special called "Musharraf-style democracy."

Of course, there is always the possibility that the 'smother of all democracies,' which pays such suffocating but selective lip service to freedom, liberty etc. may not like it. Such gall, ji, teaching Umreekans how to conduct elections and practice democracy! Besides, what will happen to the motley crew of dissolute monarchs and deceitful dictators if the idea of real elections catches on among people? So, alas and alack, CEC Krishnamurthy's trip to the United States will remain an academic exercise, not a business mission it could be.
