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1. What are VVPATs, and why has Jairam Ramesh written to EC about them?

What happened?

Congress leader Jairam Ramesh wrote to Chief Election Commissioner Rajiv Kumar on December 30, requesting that a team of INDIA group leaders be provided an opportunity to meet him and his colleagues to put forward their point of view on VVPATs.

In his letter to Rajiv Kumar, Jairam Ramesh said that on December 20, 2023, INDIA front leaders had requested an appointment with the ECI to “discuss and provide suggestions on the use of VVPATs” based on a resolution passed at a meeting of leaders of the bloc the previous day. The resolution had called for 100% verification of VVPAT slips.

What are VVPATs?

When a vote is cast, the Voter Verifiable Paper Audit Trail (VVPAT) machine, which is attached to the ballot unit (BU) of the Electronic Voting Machine (EVM), prints out a slip of paper with the voter’s choice indicated on it. Though it remains behind glass, the printed slip is visible for seven seconds so the voter can see that the vote has been recorded correctly, before it falls into a box underneath.

Introduction of VVPATs

The idea of the VVPAT machine first emerged in 2010, when the EC held a meeting with political parties to discuss the EVM and ways to make the polling process more transparent.

The Conduct of Elections Rules, 1961 were amended in 2013 to allow for a printer with a drop box to be attached to the EVM. The VVPAT was used for the first time in all 21 polling stations of the Noksen Assembly constituency of Nagaland in 2013, after which the EC decided to introduce VVPATs in a phased manner. From June 2017, 100% of VVPATs began to be used in polls, and the 2019 Lok Sabha elections became the first general election to have 100% of EVMs being attached to VVPATs.

What percentage of VVPAT slips are counted as of now?

When it came time to decide what percentage of the VVPAT slips should actually be counted to verify the accuracy, the EC asked the Indian Statistical Institute (ISI) in 2018

to come up with a “mathematically sound, statistically robust and practically cogent sample size for the internal audit of the VVPAT slips with electronic result of EVMs”, the EC affidavit said.

The EC also met political parties to discuss the issue, where demands for 10% to 100% counting emerged. In February 2018, the EC mandated the counting of VVPAT slips of one randomly selected polling station per Assembly constituency. This was increased to five polling stations per Assembly seat, following a Supreme Court judgment in April 2019 on a petition filed by TDP leader Chandrababu Naidu.

Meanwhile, the ISI report to the EC in March 2019 recommended that a random sample of 479 EVMs be selected for counting of VVPAT slips. “If for each of the selected machines, the EVM count matches with the VVPAT count, then it can be concluded with an extremely high statistical confidence (more than 99.993665752% confidence) that the proportion of defective EVMs is less than 2%,” the ISI report said.

Why does the INDIA alliance want 100% counting of VVPAT slips?

In its resolution passed on December 21, the INDIA alliance stated: “Instead of the VVPAT slip falling in the box, it should be handed over to the voter who shall then place it in a separate ballot box after having verified his or her choice. 100% counting of VVPAT slips should then be done. This will restore full confidence of the people in free and fair elections”.

What has the EC said?

Last year, the EC told the Supreme Court that verification of VVPATs of five randomly selected polling stations per Assembly seat, with more than 4,000 total Assembly seats in India, translated to 20,600 EVM-VVPAT systems – well above the ISI’s recommendation of 479.

In Lok Sabha and Assembly elections so far, the EC said, 38,156 VVPATs have been checked randomly. “Not a single case of transfer of vote meant for candidate ‘A’ to candidate ‘B’ has been detected,” the EC said. But, the EC did admit that “differences in count, if any, have always been traceable to human errors like non-deletion of mock poll votes” from the control unit of the EVM or the VVPAT.

The EC said the VVPAT was “essentially an audit trail” so the voter could verify the vote at that instant, but following Supreme Court orders, the slips were being tallied on a “statistically robust basis”. The EC said pressing for 100% verification was a “regressive thought and tantamount to going back to the days of manual voting using ballot system”. It said manual counting of all VVPAT slips would take time and introduce the potential of human error.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Governance

2. Justice Gavai nominated as SC Legal Services Committee Chairman: What law says on free legal aid in India

Introduction

Supreme Court judge Justice BR Gavai has been nominated as the Chairman of the Supreme Court Legal Services Committee (SCLSC), replacing Justice Sanjiv Khanna – the seniormost judge of the top court after the Chief Justice of India (CJI).

A notification issued by the Department of Justice on December 29, 2023, announced Justice Gavai's nomination.

What is the Supreme Court Legal Services Committee?

The Supreme Court Legal Services Committee was constituted under Section 3A of the Legal Services Authorities Act, 1987, to provide "free and competent legal services to the weaker sections of society", in cases falling under the top court's jurisdiction.

Section 3A of the Act states that the Central Authority (the National Legal Services Authority or NALSA) shall constitute the committee. It consists of a sitting SC judge, who is the chairman, along with other members possessing the experience and qualifications prescribed by the Centre. Both the chairman and other members will be nominated by the CJI. Further, the CJI can appoint the Secretary to the Committee.

Who does the SCLSC comprise?

As of date, the SCLSC consists of chairperson BR Gavai and nine members nominated by the CJI. The Committee, in turn, can appoint officers and other employees as prescribed by the Centre, in consultation with the CJI.

Besides this, Rule 10 of the NALSA Rules, 1995, entails the numbers, experience, and qualifications of the SCLSC members. Under Section 27 of the 1987 Act, the Centre is empowered to make rules in consultation with the CJI, by notification, to carry out the provisions of the Act.

What is the need for legal services and how is it dispensed to the people?

The need for providing legal services has been underlined in many provisions of the Indian Constitution. Article 39A states, "The State shall secure that the operation of the legal system promotes justice, on a basis of equal opportunity, and shall, in particular, provide free legal aid, by suitable legislation or schemes or in any other way, to ensure that opportunities for securing justice are not denied to any citizen by reason of economic or other disabilities."

Moreover, Articles 14 (right to equality) and 22(1) (rights to be informed of grounds for arrest) also make it obligatory for the State to ensure equality before the law and a legal system that promotes justice based on equal opportunity.

Although the idea of a legal aid programme was earlier floated in the 1950s, it was in 1980 that a committee at the national level was established under the chairmanship of then SC judge Justice PN Bhagwati. The Committee for Implementing Legal Aid Schemes started monitoring legal aid activities throughout India.

What the Legal Services Authorities Act says

In 1987, the Legal Services Authorities Act was enacted to give a statutory base to legal aid programmes. It aims to provide free and competent legal services to eligible groups, including women, children, SC/ST and EWS categories, industrial workers, disabled persons, and others.

Under the Act, NALSA was constituted in 1995 to monitor and evaluate the implementation of legal aid programmes and to lay down policies for making legal services available. A nationwide network has been envisaged under the Act for providing legal aid and assistance. It also disburses funds and grants to State Legal Services Authorities and NGOs for implementing legal aid schemes and programmes.

Subsequently, in every state, State Legal Services Authorities (SLSA) were established to implement NALSA's policies and directions, give free legal services to people, and conduct Lok Adalats. An SLSA is headed by the Chief Justice of the respective High Court and includes the senior HC judge as its Executive Chairman. While the HC Chief Justice is the patron-in-chief of the SLSA, the CJI is the patron-in-chief of NALSA.

Similarly, District Legal Services Authorities (DLSAs) and Taluk Legal Services Committees were established in districts and most taluks. Situated in the District Courts Complex in every district, each DLSA is chaired by the District Judge of the respective district.

The Taluka or Sub-Divisional Legal Services Committees are headed by a senior civil judge. Collectively, these bodies organise legal awareness camps, provide free legal services, and supply and obtain certified order copies and other legal documents, among other functions.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Governance

Source: The Indian Express

3. How the Burj Khalifa became the world's tallest billboard



Introduction

Dubai's Burj Khalifa turned 14 on January 5, 2024. Developed by Emaar Properties, one of the world's largest real estate companies, the world's tallest building contains a luxury hotel, luxury residences, restaurants, and observatories.

It is also the tallest billboard in the world — whether it is to launch a new product or film, or share an important message, the skyscraper's exteriors act like one giant advertising platform, entralling onlookers in Dubai and around the world.

The tallest human-made structure

At a total height of 829.8 m — equivalent to over 11.5 Qutub Minars, stacked on top of each other — the Burj Khalifa is the tallest human-made structure ever built. With its 160+ floors serviced by 57 lifts, the skyscraper overtook the Taipei 101 (508.2 m tall) to reach the top spot.

Construction began in 2004, and was completed in 2009, before Burj Khalifa's official opening on January 4, 2010.

Originally named Burj Dubai (literally "Dubai Tower"), it was renamed Burj Khalifa in honour of Sheikh Khalifa, the then president of the United Arab Emirates, who helped fund the project amidst financial trouble faced by Emaar.

The world's tallest billboard

From the very beginning, the Burj Khalifa was envisioned to be a premium advertising platform. It offers a number of locations where one can run ads — from inside elevators and common areas, to spots right outside the massive building, and of course, on the building itself.

The façade of the Burj Khalifa is one of the most exclusive, and expensive, advertising locations on the planet. According to Arabian Business, the cost to place an advertisement, movie teaser or message on the façade starts from roughly 250,000 Dirhams (or roughly \$70,000) for three minutes during weekdays, and can reach up to

350,000 Dirhams (roughly \$100,000) during weekends. These prices can be even higher depending on the specific date, time, duration, and type of advertising.

The exact advertising prices are not publicly disclosed, and are negotiated on a case-to-case basis. Over the years, the Burj Khalifa has been used by high-profile marketing campaigns for companies.

And how does all this work?

The Burj Khalifa is the world's largest electronic display, fitted with over 1.2 million pixels on its south-facing façade. Installed in 2014, and first unveiled during the New Year's celebration of 2015, these LEDs together allow Burj Khalifa to act like any other electronic screen.

Visuals are sent to a "main brain" server, which, through a network of fibre optics and smaller brains, tells tiny LED lights on the façade to display a particular colour — seen together from a distance, the 1.2 million LEDs make up a composite image of the visual, turning the façade into a screen.

Relevance: GS Prelims

Source: The Indian Express