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SCHARFF: This is Michael Scharff. The date is Nov. 18, 2010. I'm sitting with Dr. Alok Shukla, who is the deputy election commissioner at the Election Commission of India. Sir, thank you very much for agreeing to this meeting today. If I could just ask for our listeners if you could introduce yourself and tell us how you first became involved in the administration of Indian elections.

SHUKLA: *As you already said, my name is Alok Shukla. I am deputy election commissioner here in the Election Commission of India, and I am part of the civil service of India. So, in the course of a routine posting, I have been posted here in the secretariat of the Election Commission.*

SCHARFF: How long have you been in your current role as deputy commissioner?

SHUKLA: *A little less than two years.*

SCHARFF: So before that you were also here with the Election Commission?

SHUKLA: *I was involved with the elections, but in one of the states. I was in the state of Chhattisgarh, where I was chief electoral officer for the state of Chhattisgarh for approximately 2½ years.*

SCHARFF: Can I ask, if somebody were to say "What does violence during elections in India look like," how would you categorize it?

SHUKLA: *If you look, there are different types of violence which happen. Of course nowadays, with the current management techniques which the Election Commission of India follows, violence is very much less. But there are two different kinds of things that happen. One is political violence, which is more or less controlled. You hardly ever come across, nowadays, cases of political violence of the kind that is basically related to electoral politics.*

There is also sometimes violence which is not directly related to elections. But you are going for elections in an area where otherwise—other than that—you have a different type of violence. For example, as you know, in India we have certain areas which are affected with left-wing terrorism. So if you have left-wing terrorism in that particular area, there is violence related to left-wing terrorism. It is hardly electoral violence—whether there are elections there or no elections there, there is that violence there. It is not really directly related to elections. So that is one type of violence.

The other type of violence would be violence which is directly related to elections—if there is violence between contesting candidates or among the electorate as a result of the elections being that. That kind of violence is pretty much controlled these days.

SCHARFF: Why is that? What has been done to help control that violence?

SHUKLA: *There are many things which have been done. First of all, the Election Commission uses a lot of police force. The police force of the state where the election is held and lots of central police forces are also at the command of the Election Commission of India. This is being used primarily for the purpose of show of force rather than the actual use of force. Which means if the bad elements, so to say, know that there is enough police force available—and that if*

they try something that they are not going to be spared—then they would rather desist from doing that kind of a thing. That's one thing.

The second is—. Again, our experience has been that if people know that they are, that somebody is going to find out about what they have done and that they are likely to be punished for it, then they will think twice before doing it. They would rather not do it. They would do it more often if they felt nobody is going to catch them. So therefore we also use lots of other measures, measures other than police force. For example, we make a lot of use of video recordings. These days in Indian elections, the Election Commission of India uses video recording as a very interesting weapon against violence. The simple thing that you do is hire a large number of people with a video camera who just keep going around in the area where electioneering takes place. If any untoward thing is likely to happen, they just stay there and shoot—take pictures. Instead of shooting with a gun, you shoot with a camera. That becomes evidence that can be used against these people to punish them. Therefore we find that many of these people, if they see that there is a video camera around, or even an ordinary still camera around, would rather not indulge in the activities that they would otherwise.

Now, one very interesting instruction which the Election Commission issued a few years back was that if we have a candidate—any candidate, anywhere—with criminal antecedents, he will be followed by someone with a video camera 24 hours a day. The person carrying a video camera will follow that person, continuously, 24 hours a day. “Twenty-four hours” means from the time he comes out of his residence until the time he goes back in his residence. [Interruption.]

As I was telling you, the instructions of the commission are that if there is a candidate with a criminal background, criminal antecedents, this candidate has to be followed continuously with a video camera. We found that this is very effective. Since we started doing this, the level of violence has really, really come down, because they see that it is being recorded—evidence which can be used against them. So this is one thing.

Now the second thing that the commission has also started doing is the use of—. I am sure that you know that the commission uses lots of election observers. Election observers in India are different from election observers elsewhere, because election observers in India are not international observers, they are observers appointed by the Election Commission of India under the law. These are normally very senior civil servants. They go and observe elections in states which are not their home states and also not in the states where they are otherwise working.

SCHARFF: We were starting to talk before about the process by which this idea of vulnerability mapping came about. The way I understand it, the 2007 U.P. (Uttar Pradesh) elections was the first time that vulnerability mapping was implemented as a strategic exercise. I am curious where the idea for this exercise came from.

SHUKLA: *I think basically we left off with different methods used by the commission for preventing violence, as it were. I was explaining to you that the use of a video camera or use of an ordinary still camera has really contributed a lot to this. I'll just continue with that and then come to the vulnerability mapping part. The second interesting thing that has happened in the past one year is the use of Webcasting. More and more at the polling stations, we are putting Webcams—*

ordinary Webcams connected on the Internet—so that on the poll day everything which happens at the polling station is not only recorded but, in real time, is put on the Internet for the world to see. Again, they found that it has brought down disorderly behavior, violence, everything, all of these kinds of things, to a very large extent. People know that whatever is happening there is not only being recorded but is being seen by the world. That again has been very, very helpful.

The third thing, which very few people really realize, is the great power which the Election Commission of India has to order a re-poll. The Election Commission has made it very clear to all concerned that if we get any information that there was violence or there was anything which happened, which has vitiated the poll, the commission will not tolerate it and will order a re-poll be taken. What happens is on the normal poll day, you have polling in thousands of polling stations. But on the re-poll, there will be very, very few polling stations where polling is happening, so therefore all your efforts are concentrated on those few polling stations where you have re-poll and then you can ensure that anything which vitiates the polling process doesn't happen.

SCHARFF: When was re-polling first started?

SHUKLA: *Re-polling has been there for all the time, but the commission has increasingly used re-polling as an instrument of preventing things which can lead to vitiation of the poll. So the candidates and all of the stakeholders realize that if they try to do something through violent means or something that vitiates that polling process, they are not going to succeed in it, because the commission will order a re-poll. So it doesn't help them.*

You might, for example, think that if there are a thousand people, I'll beat five of them and then I'll tell everybody that if you don't do this, then I am going to beat you. But if you realize that, in spite of all of that, the votes polled on that day are not going to be counted at all—because the commission will then take a re-poll—then there is no point in beating up people.

SCHARFF: Whose decision is it to ask for, or order, a re-poll?

SHUKLA: *A re-poll is ordered by the Election Commission in Delhi, in every single instance. However, the request can be made by anybody. The request can be made by candidates; the request can be made by political parties—and also the election officials who are posted in the field in the district. Then the commission, as I explained to you, sends its observers. We have nowadays micro-observers, who are responsible for either one single polling station or a group of three or four polling stations. These are also senior officers who are sent by the commission to observe the polling process. If they feel that something wrong has happened, they can also recommend a re-poll to the Election Commission.*

Then the commission watches video footage. The commission watches the Webcast. The commission watches still photographs. The commission watches media reports. And using all of this, if the commission anywhere feels that a re-poll is necessary, it doesn't hesitate in ordering a re-poll.

SCHARFF: And by “commission” we mean the chief election commissioner and yourself and the other deputy?

SHUKLA: *No, no. By “commission” we mean the commission.*

SCHARFF: Who is the commission?

SHUKLA: *Under the constitution of India, the Election Commission is the chief election commissioner and election commissioners. The election commissioners and chief election commissioner are appointed by the president of India. As of now there is one chief election commissioner and two other election commissioners. But the number of two other election commissioners is not constant; it can vary. But as of now, there is one chief election commissioner and two election commissioners. We are not the commission. We are the secretariat of the commission—to help the commission, to assist the commission. So there is Mr. (Shahabuddin Yaqoob) Quraishi, who is the chief election commissioner. There is Mr. (V.S.) Sampath, who is the election commissioner. And there is Mr. (Hari Shankar) Brahma, who is also the election commissioner. The three of them sit like a bench and decide. We help them. So we basically provide information, prepare files, and put up to them for decision. But the decision is taken by the commission. We are like the registry of a court. So we are the registry and they are the court.*

Now let me come to the vulnerability.

SCHARFF: Let me actually keep you on this subject, because I think it is really fascinating—and then we'll go back to that. You mentioned this Webcasting. There is this big push today to introduce technology in election processes worldwide, so I think somebody would find this really interesting. Where was the first example where we saw this webcasting?

SHUKLA: *The webcasting actually started very recently. It started from Arunachal Pradesh. It came about very interestingly because you know Arunachal Pradesh is in the far eastern part of India—very, very remote. There are polling stations in Arunachal Pradesh where polling parties have to walk sometimes 50, 60, 70 kilometers to reach the polling station because there is no good road there. So you can't take a vehicle and go there; you have to walk and go there on foot.*

Now there was a very young, dynamic officer, a district collector, who stayed in a district, Tirap, which borders Burma. There he was posted. We had three polling stations, which are very, very far away. It was not possible for anybody to reach the polling station to see what was happening there on the polling day.

SCHARFF: Sure.

SHUKLA: *So the polling party goes there, three, four days in advance and then stays there, takes the poll, and then comes back on foot. So we were trying to find different ways of finding out what is happening at the polling station, on the poll day itself in real time. This young, bright officer came up with this. He is just about five years into service, and most of the time we'll find that technology solutions are given by the young people, because young people are more technology-savvy. So he came up with this solution. He said, "Why don't we simply put a small webcam there with an internet connection and then we can see what is happening there in real time".*

So the commission said yes, try it out. We tried it out with a great amount of success. And sitting here, in this building, all of us, and the commission saw, in real time, what was happening at the polling stations. They were fascinated by it. From then on, the commission has been using this more and more. In the

recently held Bihar elections, webcasting was used in more than 600 polling stations.

SCHARFF: And the first—this example that you cited, what year was this?

SHUKLA: *It was 2009, last year.*

SCHARFF: Do you have any sense of the number or the percentage of polling stations that use web casting?

SHUKLA: *As of now, it is very limited. Bihar used about 600, and the total number of polling stations in Bihar would be about 50,000. But it is increasing. So from three polling stations, it has come to 600 polling stations in another election, so over a period of time it has increased.*

SCHARFF: Now on the issue of taking the video.

SHUKLA: *Also, please remember, we also don't insist on a Webcast everywhere. There are—if there is polling station across the road from this building, you don't really need Webcasting; you can actually see what is happening there. So Webcasting is more useful primarily in locations which are difficult to reach.*

SCHARFF: Does the vulnerability mapping—as it is now, the criterion that you have—help you to identify the polling stations for Webcasting?

SHUKLA: *No, the vulnerability mapping is a totally different concept. I'll come to this. But this is, the criterion on Webcasting primarily is connectivity—whether you can reach there. If you can't reach there physically, then you can at least reach there through a Webcast.*

SCHARFF: OK.

SHUKLA: *Now, vulnerability mapping—let me explain that.*

Earlier the commission used to take lots of measures to prevent intimidation on the poll day. We used to talk in terms of "booth capturing." But when we said booth capturing, most of the time what we meant was that somebody actually, physically goes to a polling booth, captures it, and casts all the votes, or most of the votes, in favor of a particular candidate. That certainly is a thing of the past now. It cannot happen, because so many people are watching that if somebody even tries this the commission, if nothing else, will order a re-poll certainly.

But in the U.P. elections which you mentioned, a very interesting thing actually was seen. The commission realized that this is something similar to silent booth capturing. Now, you know that on the poll day, at the time of the poll, you have the electoral roll—the roll on the basis of which the voters will come and cast their votes. This roll, in most cases, will have about 1,000, 1,500, or 2,000 voters in one polling station. It is like a small booklet of names. Names and other details are printed there. As I said, the commission appoints senior civil servants as election observers who are supposed to be there on the poll day. And they keep going around and keep a watch on what is happening.

So one observer was extremely vigilant, and what he found was—. I'm telling this more in the form of a story because then it will be interesting. So this observer

found that, in more than one polling station, people from the first few pages were coming and voting and people from the last few pages were coming and voting, but there were whole pages in the middle that were totally unrepresented, in the sense that nobody came and voted. So he suddenly questioned, Why is it, that while some people are voting, there is a large population which is not coming to vote at all?

In our case, the electoral role is arranged in such a manner that people living in one area are together on the page. So when you are saying that people from certain pages are not coming to vote, it actually means that people from certain localities are not coming and voting. So it struck the observer, Why is it that people from certain localities are not coming to vote at all?

Now mind you, this is not in the nature of prevention of electoral violence, more in the nature of preventing intimidation, this vulnerability mapping. There was no violence anywhere to be seen. The polling was going on extremely peacefully. There was no violence, absolutely. Anybody who was from the outside would have found it to be absolutely normal. Even the poll percentage was not very low. If in general you find there is about 60% polling, even in this polling station it was 60% polling. But what struck him really was that it was people from certain localities who were not coming to vote.

So then he decided on his own to go to that area and find out. So he went there and he asked those people, "Why are you not voting?" Then these people told him, "We belong to the vulnerable communities, and therefore we've been told that if you go and vote, then you will suffer the consequences"—whatever they might be, by some of the bad elements in that area.

So at that point in time, what he did was very simple. He said, "OK, I'll get some police force and I'll escort you to the polling station so that you don't feel intimidated." Therefore, he escorted these people to the polling station so they were able to vote.

The observer then made his report to the Election Commission. So when the Election Commission saw that this had happened, the commission thought that this phenomenon actually could be much more widespread than a few polling stations. From this, the concept of vulnerability mapping evolved. So the commission then gave instructions that in all future elections, much before the date of the election—at least 15, 20 days, one month in advance—the election officers will do a vulnerability mapping of the polling-station area. It means they will identify those localities where vulnerable communities live.

Having identified them, our officers will go into that area—not on the poll day, but before the poll day, and build their confidence. "We know, we have identified you as vulnerable people and we're going to be helping you, so that nobody is able to do anything wrong to you." Then the identification goes further. We not only identify localities and communities which are vulnerable, we also identify their leaders. So if there is a vulnerable community, who is the person who is their leader? These days, as you know, the penetration of cell phones is very, very high, even in India. So we try to take the cell-phone number of this person and we give our cell-phone number to them, saying that if there is anything, you can call this particular number directly so that we can help you. We're taking your number so that on the poll day we can call you and find out whether you are able to come and vote or not, whether you need any help.

SCHARFF: Sure.

SHUKLA: *Then, the second step is that we try to identify the people who have made them vulnerable. Who are the persons who are likely to intimidate them? Generally, we'll find that these are musclemen or people with moneybags in and around that area. Those people are identified, and then we take preventive action under the law against those people. For example, under the criminal-procedure code in India, there is a provision of taking bond for good behavior. You can take a bond with or without surety. You take a bond, you take some surety from some other respectable people in the community, and you say, "We have identified this person. This person is likely to intimidate vulnerable communities. You give a bond of whatever—10,000, 15,000, 20,000—that you are surety. You stand surety for the good behavior of this person." So we do that.*

In rare cases where we find that this person is not likely to behave properly in spite of this, there is the provision of preventive arrest. If they have arms licenses, etc., they are temporarily suspended. Their arms are deposited in the police and then we keep a watch on them. If these are really, really big musclemen, we also put a video camera on them so that we track their movements. What is it that they are doing?

Now on the poll day, instructions are given to all the officers to especially see that the people from the vulnerable localities are actually coming and voting. If we find that people are not voting, then somebody has to visit that area and if necessary escort them to the polling station. That's the concept.

SCHARFF: That's the concept of vulnerability mapping. It's a fascinating concept and a way to build on previous efforts that were made. I just wonder with the story of this observer in U.P.—seeing that a whole chunk of the population from particular geographic areas was not coming to vote—why hadn't this issue been brought up earlier? If observers were to be checking the lists, why is this the first time—or is it perhaps complaints had been registered but there is somebody at the Election Commission now, a reformer if you will, who says now is the time to honor these complaints. Let's get the ball rolling, here's an idea, let's try it.

Because I've got to believe that for decades and decades similar complaints were being aired, because this practice was in place of denying entire areas, intimidating entire regions. So I think the question is just, Why is it—?

SHUKLA: *Actually, I wasn't here at the time. As I explained to you, I am here for only about two years so I wouldn't know exactly what transpired here on that particular day. But what I certainly know is that our present chief election commissioner, Mr. Quraishi, was extremely keen on vulnerability mapping and it was primarily his efforts which—even in the evolution of the whole concept.*

SCHARFF: But it was Mr. (N.) Gopaldaswami—or sorry Mr. (R.) Balakrishnan who was the—.

SHUKLA: *Mr. Balakrishnan was like one of us; he was deputy election commissioner.*

SCHARFF: OK. But at the time it was Mr. Gopaldaswami who would have been—?

SHUKLA: *Mr. Gopaldaswami was the chief election commission and the other two commissioners at that time were Mr. Navin Chawla and Mr. Quraishi.*

SCHARFF: OK.

- SHUKLA: *Mr. Balakrishnan was like one of us; he was deputy election commissioner. He was part of the secretariat of the commission. We're the bureaucracy of the commission.*
- SCHARFF: Sure. So it was a personality that decided to take action.
- SHUKLA: *Partly that. And I think maybe partly that the time was right for it probably. Also partly because the more obvious methods of booth capturing had already been taken care of by that time. So the commission therefore had the opportunity of taking care of the less obvious ones.*
- SCHARFF: But I would imagine that a decision like vulnerability mapping is going to make a lot of the political parties very mad.
- SHUKLA: *As a matter of fact, no. The political parties have actually been very supportive, because no political party can say that you should not protect people in vulnerable communities. Political parties are supposed to be standing for vulnerability mapping.*
- SCHARFF: I can see how the political parties that were underrepresented—the opposition, if you will, that was being quieted, silenced by the strong men—would agree that this is a good thing. But the ruling parties—for instance, in the particular areas where we're discussing—had an incentive to want to not see this come to fruition. They had their strongmen, their musclemen, out there on the streets. Now you're putting in all these steps; you're rounding up their political-party operatives. You're taking away their cash and their liquor; you're making all of these constraints for them on rigging the voting.
- SHUKLA: *We have to differentiate between the political parties and certain elements within the political parties. So no political party—if they believe in democracy—would actually stand for winning elections by distribution of liquor or by muscle. No political party. The party would not stand for that. Obviously, there are some elements within the party who would try to do this.*
- So, as a matter of fact, the good thing would be that, by the measures which the Election Commission is taking, these elements would get marginalized and the real good people within political parties would then assume center stage.*
- SCHARFF: But I think that a skeptic who comes to this—who is not very familiar with Indian elections, but only knows the buzzword for Indian elections, which is widespread corruption that does take place—would be very skeptical of this idea. I think this just comes back to the question of trying to understand what kinds of pressures there may have been on the Election Commission at the time to put this thing in place.
- SHUKLA: *Having been on the Election Commission for almost two years now, what I can definitely say is that the Election Commission is a very, very fiercely independent body. So pressures don't work on the Election Commission at all. Once a person has been made an election commissioner of India, he is beyond these kinds of pressures. I'm saying it from experience, because in the last two years I've seen this kind of thing happening.*
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It might have happened that, before, this idea may not have come to people; it might not have struck them. I don't think it was because of any sort of pressure that they were not able to do it or the present commission did it because it was under pressure. No, I don't agree with that at all.

SCHARFF: Something that came out of this is that actually, if you look on the Election Commission's Web site people visit, they can see the guidelines for the vulnerability mapping. It explicitly spells out what the chief electoral officer in the state and his deputies are supposed to do. Do you have any idea who actually drafted those recommendations? Where would those recommendations have come from?

SHUKLA: *That, I think, Balakrishnan at that time was the deputy election commissioner and he was in charge of the planning division within the Election Commission of India. So Balakrishnan looked after the planning division. The guidelines came out of the planning division. But you know, the process that happens in the Election Commission of India is actually a very interesting process. It is a very informal kind of an organization.*

It is quite different from most of the other ministries. Of course we also have fights, but what we normally do is, on the fourth floor we have a small room which we call the Commission Room. It is like a boardroom. Every morning, for almost four hours, what happens is that the three commissioners—the CEC (chief election commissioner) and the two other commissioners—and senior officers, five or six of us, every morning have a meeting in the morning.

The first few items on the agenda are points on which a decision has to be taken. But then after that, almost every day for an hour or so, there is so much brainstorming on how to improve things. Most of these drafts actually come out of that process of brainstorming. So you know, it is rather difficult to put a single name to this. Of course, yes, Balakrishnan was the deputy election commissioner in charge at that time; it was his division which drafted it. But the whole process came through a very good process of consultation amongst all the officers who were there at that time.

SCHARFF: So Mr. Balakrishnan and his planning team may have sort of drafted these initial guidelines, and they would have perhaps sent them to the meeting, and at this meeting they would have been discussed with more brainstorming and feedback?

SHUKLA: *A lot of changes would have taken place.*

SCHARFF: Then they would go back to the planning. And then they'd be further refined. So this is sort of a collaborative back-and-forth process, I guess.

SHUKLA: Yes.

SCHARFF: The issue of detentions of individuals is something I think that a lot of people wonder about. There is quite a bit of room for the rounding up of supposed strongmen—musclemen—to actually be, in some cases, the rounding up of political opposition. Given the fact that it has been well documented that the DMs (district magistrates) and the DEOs (district election officers) have been historically under political influence, people might question whether or not this is the best possible strategy—to go about rounding up people when you have the

Indian Human Rights Commission coming out with some figure which says something like 60 percent of all the arrests during elections are probably not necessary. What do you say to the skeptics who ask is this really doing its job?

SHUKLA: *Let me put it this way. What is an election, after all? An election is not about convincing the person who has won the election. An election is about convincing the person who has lost. It has to be credible to the person who has lost the election. I think the big difference between India and many other countries—and what shows that Indian democracy is mature and that the Election Commission of India is extremely independent and very effective—is the fact that in all of the previous elections, losers have always accepted the result. They have, without any doubt. I know of instances where people have lost by one vote, one vote, and still accept it. You would never have seen anywhere in India that a party which loses power refuses to hand over power to the next person who wins. That speaks volumes.*

In this office, we keep meeting persons from political parties across the country every day. As a matter of fact, the commission makes it a point to actually give more time to the opposition parties rather than to the party in power. By and large, what we have seen is that the Election Commission and its work is respected by politicians of all hues. They might have their differences here and there, but generally, by and large, the Election Commission is respected and people come with grievances to the Election Commission and go back satisfied.

SCHARFF: But this doesn't answer my question about the detentions of individuals.

SHUKLA: *No, I didn't say individuals. I'm saying the system, political parties. Otherwise, your question is—. You're saying whether these arrests are arbitrary, and therefore more people from the opposition parties are getting arrested.*

SCHARFF: Maybe I should rephrase, because it was probably poorly asked. How does the Election Commission ensure that when individuals under its guidelines are being arrested—that they're justified. What is the check?

SHUKLA: *The check is that, as I explained to you, we have a whole system in place, and first of all, under the constitution, there is something called Article 324, under which the Election Commission of India works. As soon as an election is announced in any state, the entire election machinery comes under the discipline and control of the Election Commission of India. So while, in a non-election time, the district magistrates, the subdivision magistrates and other officers working in the field may be subordinate to the politicians there and reporting to them, as soon as elections are announced, they become subordinate to the Election Commissioner of India and report to us and not to their bosses in the district. That's the first thing which happens.*

The second thing is that the Election Commission is extremely conscious and very vigilant about all of this, and therefore the Election Commission invariably organizes lots of monitoring meetings. So there are meetings at the state level. There are meetings in the district. There are meetings at the divisional level. There is video conferencing, and almost on a daily basis the officers in the field have to report to us, either directly or through the other machinery that we have in place.

At the state level there is a representative of the Election Commission called the chief electoral officer. He has his office at the state level, so some reports come through him. Then also, as I explained to you, we send senior civil servants at the level of joint secretary to the government of India to these districts, generally one person per constituency. These people go from outside and report directly to the Election Commission of India, not through a channel. Every observer of the Election Commission reports to the Election Commission of India directly, and his report is very seriously studied here in this office, and the Election Commission takes action on it.

Third: So the entire machinery comes under the control of the Election Commission of India; we send observers; we have the chief electoral officer. Then we meet political parties on a regular basis. Proactively. It is not as if we are waiting for political parties to come and meet us. The Election Commission calls political parties. Whenever the Election Commission visits a state, in the first part of the meeting it calls all political parties in alphabetic order and has detailed interaction with every political party and their concerns are immediately addressed.

So if the political parties have a feeling that some wrongdoing is taking place or that some of their supporters have been wrongly arrested, etc., they will bring it to our notice and we immediately take action. Then the media. The Election Commission keeps a very, very strict watch on the media. You have the print media, the TV channels, and we keep a watch on it. Anything that gets reported in the media is immediately taken into cognizance and the Election Commission acts on it.

Now finally, the writ of the Election Commission runs because the Election Commission does not hesitate in taking action. So wherever we find that a district magistrate has been found lacking, he is transferred immediately. Not only district magistrates—other officers, as well. Without a hitch, the Election Commission transfers those officers and brings in another officer for the duration of the election. Also, it is not just a transfer; there are department proceedings, action taken against him, punishment.

SCHARFF: Again, you keep mentioning this term—the commission, the commission. As you said before, all of these decisions are, at the end of the day, taken by—?

SHUKLA: Yes, in the sense that the constitution has given the authority to the Election Commission, which means the three commissioners there: the chief election commissioner and the two other commissioners. However, under the constitutional provisions, the Election Commission can delegate some of its authority to its officers. So wherever the Election Commission feels that some of its authority can be delegated, then authority can be delegated to deputy commissioners, to other officers down the line. But the important decisions are always made by the Election Commission themselves.

As a matter of fact, during elections you will find that they are in office more than 18 hours a day. They work day and night. Also, we have evolved a very interesting system, which I found only here in this particular organization. Earlier, when I worked in other organizations, I never found this. In the Election Commission there is another very interesting thing. The decision is not by the chief election commissioner—it is by the commission, which means there are

three of them, and the three of them have to sit together as a committee to decide, and the decision is by majority of votes.

So what happens? For example, let us say there is an election in Kerala and I'm the deputy election commissioner in charge of Kerala, and I'm in Kerala and I'm seeing something which is happening there on the ground. Let us say I need some decision of the Election Commission immediately. What we do generally is very interesting; you can say "use of technology," or whatever. So all of them have their Blackberrys. If it is a small thing, we will simply compose a small SMS (short message service) and send the SMS to them and they will make the order on SMS. If it is a longish kind of thing, then I will compose—and other officers like me will compose—a detailed e-mail, maybe two pages, three pages, four pages. They get it on their Blackberry. I have seen it happening in the middle of the night, at midnight sometimes and within five minutes they reply with a yes or a no.

So when you are saying all the decisions are taken by the commission and so will get delayed, they don't get delayed in spite of that. Most of the time, what will happen is that by the time I wake up in the morning I will have their replies on my phone. And then I can issue the order, then and there. Of course, when I come back I will record it on a file and take their signatures on a file.

SCHARFF: OK.

SHUKLA: *But the decision is taken.*

SCHARFF: Interesting. I hesitate to take too much of your time, so maybe I can just bring this to a conclusion. I am curious, who determines the number of security forces to go to a particular area?

SHUKLA: *The commission. However, you must realize that it is a function of a very large consultative process. If the Election Commission says, for example, that I need an army—a whole army there—you can't really ask for something that is impossible. So this is the process which is followed before an election. Of course, if it is a small by-election, then it doesn't matter; you want 10 companies, you'll get 10 companies. If it is a large election, generally before the election, the Election Commission will start the process of consultation a few months before the election.*

So what we'll do is, we will talk to the political parties. We will talk to the officers of the state. We will talk to people who have conducted earlier elections in that state; look at the history; and arrive at some figures. "This is the kind of police force which may be necessary to conduct an election in that particular state." Then, the next step is that the Election Commission consults with the Home Ministry, with people who have the forces. So we'll say, how much can you give to us?

For example, if I say that in a particular election I need 600 companies of central police forces, then we consult with the Home Ministry and we say, "We need 600—how much can you give?" Suppose they say, "We don't have 600, because there are some problems going on in Jammu and Kashmir and there are some problems in Assam, and some of our forces are at the Commonwealth Games." Suppose they say, "We have only 400."

So we don't accept that. What we then do is, we go back to the drawing board and plan. We say OK, for the entire state I need 600. So how much will I need for half of the state? In that case, what I'll do is, in half the state, I'll have the poll on day X, and the remaining half I'll have the poll on day Y. So I can use this force first here and then transport and shift my force from here to here and use it there.

SCHARFF: And the vulnerability mapping has helped you identify where those forces should go. So during this process you're working closely with the CEO (chief executive officer) in the state?

SHUKLA: *Closely with the CEO, closely with the political parties, closely with the media, and also closely with the Home Department.*

SCHARFF: Does the vulnerability mapping occur before the discussions about the number forces take place?

SHUKLA: *Yes, but it is a dynamic process in the sense that after the candidates are declared, these vulnerabilities may change a little.*

SCHARFF: Sure.

SHUKLA: *So we always keep improvising. For example, we had the last phase of the Bihar election on the 20th. Now, suddenly three days back, we realized we needed 40 more companies in that particular area. So we made a request and we were getting 40 more companies in that area. Because dynamically, we realized that the situation had changed and we needed more force in that area.*

SCHARFF: Did that request come from the ground to the CEO in Bihar and then that CEO then calls the commission?

SHUKLA: *It definitely works both ways. What happened in this case, actually, was that one of my colleagues, another deputy election commissioner visited the state. He toured the state, had discussion with the field officers, with the chief electoral officer, looked at the vulnerability mapping, and then sort of realized that we needed more force. Then he came to the commission, he discussed it with the commission and the commission agreed, so the commission made the request to the Home Ministry.*

SCHARFF: Is this a normal practice—that a deputy commissioner would visit the state?

SHUKLA: *Not only a deputy commissioner, the commissioner also visits. The commission themselves also visit.*

SCHARFF: Every state?

SHUKLA: *Every state which is going through elections, yes. But what happens is that the commission will probably go there one or two times. A deputy election commissioner will probably go there four times, five times. Then there will be officers below us who will probably go there 10 times. Then these days, again, we have technology—we have video conferencing in an adjoining room. So we are on video conferencing with each and every district of the country. So I can do a conference on the video with any district magistrate when I want. The commission can do that.*

- SCHARFF: But that initial recommendation on force size is made by perhaps the CEO first and then—?
- SHUKLA: *The CEO, based on whatever inputs he has got on vulnerability mapping and other things. He will make some kind of a recommendation. But what I have seen is that it undergoes a huge amount of change.*
- SCHARFF: But just so people, if they're trying to replicate this, understand that the CEO and the people under him do this vulnerability mapping—and as part of the vulnerability mapping they identify the polling stations, they identify a list of individuals who may need to be more closely scrutinized, let's call it. From this, he looks at this and he is probably also consulting with the head of the police in that particular state. So the CEO and the head of the police are sitting down, and the police are going through their intelligence reports and the information that they have. Somehow the CEO and the head of the police come up with that figure.
- SHUKLA: *That is one part of the input. We don't depend only on this. As I said, at least a month or two before the elections, the commission will also visit the state and talk to the political parties, take their list, their concerns. So that's another input.*
- SCHARFF: OK.
- SHUKLA: *Then at least two or three months before the elections, we start looking at all the newspapers published in the state. So that's another input from the media.*
- SCHARFF: So there's no specific date, like 15 days before the election, when you have to declare the official number of paramilitary forces?
- SHUKLA: *No, you don't have to declare that number. We don't declare that number at all. As a strategy, we never declare that number, because if we declare the number, then the people who want to sort of—.*
- SCHARFF: Disrupt—sure.
- SHUKLA: *They're well prepared. If I tell you that in a polling station X I'm sending five policemen and you want to storm that polling station, you'll probably send 50 people. So it is never disclosed in advance to anybody.*
- SCHARFF: In conclusion is there anything that I haven't touched on that you think is important to emphasize, for the readers to understand the vulnerability mapping?
- SHUKLA: *I would only say that in India, electoral violence has now really become a thing of the past. You may have other kinds of violence—for example, as I said, Naxalites or other kinds of terrorists or insurgency. Those kinds of things are totally different, not electoral in nature. But electoral violence is out. Money power is still there, and the commission is still grappling with the control over money power and the commission is actually, recently in elections we have tried some very new methods. But that's another story.*
- SCHARFF: For another day. Thanks very much for your time, this has been great.
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