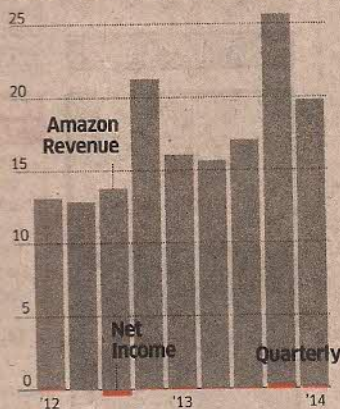


an End?



The company's shrinking profit had shareholders worried last week. More unnerving is its forecast for the next quarter: **flat revenue and a loss that might be as big as \$455 million**

Amazon's Revenue & Net Income (\$ billion)



Amazon's stock activity over the last three months



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The NRI Wants the Inked Finger

Dear EC, make it easy for the diaspora to vote

The other day, I got my voter ID card, and a call to vote next month. Unfortunately, it is not for the election I would want to vote in—this is for the local council and European Commission elections. As a Commonwealth citizen, I get to vote in all UK polls—but as an NRI, I'm still stuck without a vote in India.

A nation that manages to transport electronic ballot boxes on the backs of elephants (everyone sees those photos), runs the largest elections and claims to be an IT super power but cannot figure out how to let its overseas citizens vote is frankly ridiculous in this day and age. As innumerable activist groups have petitioned and protested, over 10 million NRIs descending on India during elections may give the aviation industry a massive bonanza but is totally impractical.

At last count, some 115 countries allow their overseas citizens to vote. Of these, at least 28 come from Africa, and include some of the least developed nations in the world, whether it is Chad or Senegal. Some countries have provisions, which include restricting certain elections, or specifying periods of overseas stay et al. The UK, for example, will allow you to vote for up to 15 years of your overseas stay.

Vote, Where, How

The irony is, technically, India falls under the category of countries that allow its diaspora to vote in person, after passing its famous bill in 2010. But guess what I have to do, even before I show up at a polling booth on the specified date? I have to first download and fill in Form 6A, with certified photocopies of relevant passport pages, and current photos, then I have to send it to the specific electoral registration officer of the constituency, and then I have to turn up clutching all these documents at the booth. Now, honestly, I doubt most people even know who their ERO is, or whether their names will actually be included on the list by election day.

It's easy to get all emotional and upset about overseas voting rights, and even more easy to get

all charged up about universal franchise, rights in the mother country and so on. And, yes, NRIs tend to be touchy about these things, especially when political parties come to them begging for funding.

According to people who study these things, how or why diaspora can take part in elections has much less to do with principle, and more to do with politics. Politicians don't really like voters who they cannot directly campaign to, or even predict.

In most cases, the origins of postal voting from abroad have almost always been for military staff. So far, so easy. Besides, soldiers have always been a relatively safe constituency for the powers-that-be.

The politics begin when countries start working out the mechanism for overseas voters. Countries use various methods for allowing overseas votes. The first is, be there in person. Some allow voters to give proxies. One of the more efficient ways is to allow votes at diplomatic missions. Finally there's postal or internet voting. Curiously, Estonia and the Netherlands are the two countries that allow internet voting.

The two simplest to administer are voting by proxy or voting at overseas missions. So why didn't the EC or Indian politicians choose either of those two? The first, of course, has the potential to be explosively misused. The problem with voting at overseas missions, in person, is this: which constituency will those votes be accounted in? Even assuming they're assigned to home address constituencies, it would mean extremely efficient and fast work by diplomatic missions. The least efficient is postal voting, as it involves complicated time scales and is most likely to create mistakes; unless, like Australia, you allow vote by fax. The jury is still out on internet voting, there aren't many who do that.

The SC judgment earlier this month, which put paid to the hopes of many campaigners, claimed that the EC is not ready to administer diaspora voting during these elections. What the EC has to do is choose which form of diaspora voting they want to implement.

Still whatever courts may say, it is beginning to look clear that without the requisite political will, we're unlikely to be able to vote in the next election either, forget this one.