

**Saluting Every Voter****Rajiv Kumar**

Today, January 25, marks the foundation day of Election Commission of India, also celebrated as National Voters' Day (NVD) since 2011. Its purpose is to sensitize the citizens of India about their rights and responsibilities as voters. The Election Commission (ECI) was established on January 25, 1950 on the eve of the first Republic Day. The Constituent Assembly gave it a Constitutional status under Article 324 to ensure independence of its functioning and decision making. Establishing a permanent, central and autonomous Commission to conduct elections based on the adult suffrage in an era of low literacy and non-existent electoral rolls is a tribute to the foresight of the Constituent Assembly. The institution's competency, impartiality and trustworthiness have been upheld in 17 Lok Sabha elections, 16 elections each to the office of the President and Vice President, 399 Legislative Assembly elections till date. The 400th assembly elections are underway. Contrary to occasional international experiences, election results in India have been never in dispute. Individual elections petitions are adjudicated by relevant High Courts. The ECI has earned the trust of both political parties and citizens of India. The commitment is to enhance and deepen it.

Strong and inclusive electoral participation is crucial for building a robust democracy. Elections in a vibrant democracy should be more than free, fair, regular and credible. They ought to be popular and participatory as well, in order to bear their full weight upon governance. The right to vote is power only when exercised. We are reminded of a saying of Mahatma Gandhi- *If leaving duties unperformed we run after rights, they escape us like a will-o'-the-wisp*".

India is the world's largest democracy having 94 crore plus registered electors. Still the actual voting figure of 67.4 percent in the last general elections (2019) leaves a lot to be desired. The challenge is to motivate the missing 30 crore electors to the booth. Missing voters have many dimensions like urban apathy, youth apathy, domestic migration, others. As in most liberal democracies, where enrollment and voting are voluntary, persuasive and facilitative methods are best. This entails targeting the low voting constituencies and underperforming segment of voters.

The ECI has already institutionalized systems for facilitating two crore plus voters of age eighty years and above, eighty-five lakh PWD voters, enrolling of 47,500 plus third gender people. Recently, I thanked over two lakh centenarian voters by a personal letter to recognize their commitment to democracy. On November 5, 2022 I had the mournful honour of paying homage to Late Shyam Saran Negi at Kalpa in Himachal Pradesh. Acknowledged as the first voter in the First General Election of India (1951), he never missed out on exercising franchise, before passing away at the ripe age of 106 years. The example of Late Shyam Saran Negi inspires us to cast our vote dutifully.

Young voters are the future of the Indian democracy. The next gen, born around and after 2000 have started joining our electoral roll. Their participation as voters would shape future of democracy, almost throughout the entire century. It is, therefore critical that democratic roots are seeded at school level before students attain voting age. Simultaneously, youth are being engaged through various mediums in order to bring them to the polling booths. So is the case with urban voters, who tend to display voting apathy.

The ECI is leading the development of Assured Minimum Facilities (AMF) like toilets, electricity, drinking water, ramps at every polling station. The

Commission is keen that the facilities developed in the schools should be of permanent nature, which is financially prudent decision as well.

In democracy, voters have a right to be informed about the background of candidates they vote. Enabling the voter to make informed choices thus assumes critical importance. It is for this reason that the criminal cases, if any, pending against the candidates should be notified in newspaper. Also, while every political party is within its right to promise welfare measures in its manifesto, voters equally have right to know their financial implications to the public exchequer.

Though muscle power has largely been subdued, there still remain a few states where election related violence impinges upon free choice of voters. Violence should have no place in democracy. Curbing money power remains a bigger challenge in the elections. The scale and quantum of inducement offered to voters is felt more acutely in certain states than others. Though, stricter vigilance by law enforcement agencies have resulted in record seizures as witnessed during recently held elections, there can be no substitute for sincere and vigilant voters in a democracy. The mobile Apps like C-Vigil has helped common citizen report incidents of violation of Model Code of Conduct, thereby helping the Election Observers initiate prompt action (within 100 minutes) against the offenders.

Retention and deepening of democratic spaces through credible electoral outcomes, worldwide, stands at a cusp. Sheer scale and speed with which the social media can disseminate the facts and views/fake news has propensity to overwhelm other aspects of the technology in election management. Unconstrained by underpinning of moral and legal spaces, which govern ECI's role & framework, anti-democratic chatter uses technology as an effective tool of its trade.

Hundreds of fake media videos/content are loaded and circulated before every election. In the absence of shelf-life, they continue to linger after the

elections are over, especially those which attack key/core election domains. World over there is a growing expectation that the social media platforms proactively use their enormous AI capabilities, in the least, to red flag such evident disinformation efforts. The responsibility to protect the free spaces including free speech is co-shared. The realization that deep fakes make job of Election Management Bodies much more difficult, needs to dawn and self-correction effected.

The NVD epitomizes the resolve of ECI to pull all stops out to make elections inclusive, participatory, voter friendly and ethical. The theme for 13<sup>th</sup> NVD (2023) is “*Nothing Like Voting, Vote for Sure*”. As evident, the theme is such that it can capture the imagination of the voters. When citizens take pride in being a voter, as part of their civic duty, its impact on the level of governance is sure to be felt. Happy voters Day.

**The author is the Chief Election Commissioner of India.**

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