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National Voters' Day- 2021

‘Making Our Voters Empowered, Vigilant, Safe and Informed’

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Abstract

Just like a currency in the economy, a political system is as valuable as people think it to be. Thus, trust of the people or legitimacy is the foundation on which any democratic system works. Participation of people in the electoral process is a crucial element of the legitimacy enjoyed by a political system. World is replete with examples where lack of participation of people in the electoral process has robbed the elected government of legitimacy and led to serious political crises in those countries. Mandate for universal equal suffrage emanates from Article 326 of the Constitution. The mandate was further enhanced with the Constitution (Sixty-first Amendment) Act, 1988 that reduced the voting age to 18 years. As per its mandate, the Election Commission made sustained efforts to enrol all eligible electors. On 25 January, 2021, National Voters' Day (NVD) celebration is completing a decade. Every year this day is observed at over 10 lakh location all over the country that include polling station areas, sub-divisions, divisions, district, and at State headquarters. On this day, the entire nation reverberates with the festivities of democracy as crores of Indians celebrate their right to vote.

Key Words: Significance, Pledge, Theme, Empowered and Vigilant, Safe and Informed.

Introduction: IT is a well-worn cliché that ‘People get the leaders they deserve.’ It perhaps hides and distorts as much as it reveals the real processes at work in a democracy. After all the closely intermeshed network of agencies and institutions through which democracy is actualised may appear like an enigmatic labyrinth with too many closed doors. The electoral process, in a way, if we may perhaps Foucault, ‘makes windows where there were once wall’. While other institution of democracy may be difficult to penetrate and change for the common people, the key to its pinnacle in the form of electoral process remains in the hands of masses. Herein lies the importance of the electoral process for democracy. Digging through the ruins of many failed democracies and exploring the success of many others, it becomes obvious that the nitty-gritty of the electoral process could write the epitaph of democracy or infuse it with energy and vitality.

Significance: Elections are the foundation-stone of any democracy. India is a democratic country. Every citizen has the basic right to vote. He or she has the right to select his leader to whomever they think is capable of leading the nation, solve the problems of common people, bring about change, etc. National Voters Day is a significant root of India as the future of the country lies in the leader that we choose. Just think once, that if we do not come forward and choose the right leader then the progress and development of the country will be hampered and will also affect the people of the country. It is the leader of the country who decides various basic big projects and several things. If the basic system will not be developed properly it may lead to under construction of roads, electricity connection problems, etc. Hence, we should encourage youth to participate and build a strong network for the coming generation who will make sure to cast their votes without fail.

Nation Voter's Day is celebrated since 2011 to mark the Foundation day of the Election Commission of India (ECI), which was established on this day in the year 1950. Every vote counts in the elections. NVD was initiated in 2011 by the Commission to highlight the value of vote and importance of every vote in democracy. NVD marks the Foundation day of Election commission of India, which was established on this day in the year 1950. The main purpose of the celebration is to encourage, facilitate, and maximise the enrolment, especially for the new voters. Dedicated to the voters of the country, the day is also utilised to spread awareness for effective participation in the electoral process.

Each year, simultaneous celebrations are organised at the National level, State level, District level down to the polling station level making it the largest celebration of democracy in the world.

Pledge: Voter's Pledge is administered to every participant on National Voter's Day during the celebration at three levels. The pledge conveys Commission to ensure "Informed and Ethical Voting". Voter's Pledge - " We, the Citizens of India, having abiding faith in democracy, hereby pledge to uphold the democratic traditions of our country and the dignity of free, fair and peaceful elections, and to vote in every election fearlessly and without being influenced by considerations of religion, race, caste, community, language or any other inducement".

National level: National level function is organised at New Delhi by ECI where Hon'ble President of India graces the occasion as Chief Guest. Awards are given away to the National, Special and Zonal recipients besides the 'Best State Award' for excellence, proficiency, and innovation in electoral process and outstanding performance. Best Practices in Election Management in the fields of Voter Education, Security Management, Infrastructure Management, Expenditure Monitoring and Tackling Money Power, Use of Technology, Management of Electoral Rolls, Innovation etc. are considered. The selection process is fairly comprehensive and aims at eliciting the best of the talent and performance among election officials and stakeholders. New voters (18+ years old) are given their elector photo Identity Card. Stakeholders in other categories are also felicitated. Guidance

from the Hon'ble President and Chief election Commissioner inspire citizen towards commitment to maximise electoral participation.

State level: At the state level, the Chief Electoral Officers (CEOs) organise similar celebration in association with state administration, State Election Commission media, Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), educational institutions, youth organization, representatives of political parties etc. Hon'ble Governor of the respective State presides over State-level functions. State awards for excellence, proficiency and innovation in electoral process, and outstanding achievement are given at these functions.

District level: At the district level, District Election Officers (DEOs) organise similar events including voter education activities. Panchayats, academic institutions, CSOs, media, youth and as such all sections of the society and citizens also get involved. The Booth Level Officers (BLOs) in polling station areas felicitate new voters at brief ceremony and hand over Elector Photo Identity Card to them. Moreover, the freshly eligible and registered voters are given a badge with slogan – “Proud to be a Voter-Ready to Vote”; and all participants are administered Voter's Pledge.

Theme: Mandate for universal equal suffrage emanates from Article 326 of the Constitution. The mandate was further enhanced with the Constitution (Sixty-first Amendment) Act, 1988 that reduced the voting age to 18 years. As per its mandate, the Election Commission made sustained efforts to enrol all eligible electors. Yet, voter's apathy and lack of enrolment and participation of certain sections of society, especially the new voters (18+), was a challenge. During the Diamond Jubilee celebration in 2010, the Commission had a focused analysis of both, the enrolment and electoral participation, especially among the young voters.

NVD celebrations focus on a specific theme every year. The theme sets the tone for the activities conducted throughout the year. Year- wise themes are as follows:

- 2011:- Greater Participation for a Stronger Democracy
- 2012:-Women's Registration
- 2013:-Inclusion
- 2014:-Ethical Voting
- 2015:-Easy Registration, Easy Correction
- 2016:-Inclusive and Qualitative Participation; No voter to be left behind
- 2017:-Empowering Young and Future Voters
- 2018:-Accessible Elections
- 2019:-No Voter to be Left Behind
- 2020:-Electoral Literacy for a Stronger Democracy
- 2021:-Making Our Voters Empowered, Vigilant, Safe and Informed.

Empowered and Vigilant: The commission decided to take up a rigorous exercise to identify all eligible voters attaining the age of 18 as on 1st January every years in each

polling station area of the country, enrol them and handover their Elector Photo Identity Cards on 25 January. The initiative aimed at providing the youth a sense of citizenship, empowerment, and pride in electoral participation as also to inspire them in exercising the newly acquired franchise. Thus, as a measure of enhancing participation of citizens, especially the youth in democratic electoral process, ECI decided to celebrate 25th January, it's Foundation Day, as the National Voter's Day every year.

ECI launched the Electoral literacy programme under SVEEP on the eve of 8th NVD and by now about 5.8 lakh Election Literacy Clubs (ELC), Chunav Pathshalas, and Voter Awareness Forums have been set up across the country. These forums work on the principle of engaging the target populations through hands-on experience on the electoral process. The ELCs operate at the level of schools, colleges, and other institutions of learning; Chunav Pathshalas operate at community levels; and the Voter Awareness Forums operate at the level of organisations including government offices. The programme is envisaged to expand and cover all the institutions.

Elections to the Lok Sabha and legislative Assemblies, the lower houses of legislature, are held from single member territorial parliamentary and assembly constituencies, through direct election. The First-Past-the Post (FPTP) system is followed in these elections. Elections to Rajya Sabha and Legislative Councils are under the system of proportional representation through single transferrable vote. In the FPTP system followed in India voters vote for one candidate from among those contesting election in their constituency. The candidate polling the highest number of votes among contesting candidates is declared elected. Percentage of votes of the winning candidate is irrelevant. Winner may or may not gate absolute majority of votes. If two or more candidates poll the same number of votes the winner is decided by draw of lots among such candidates. The following are the advantage of FPTP system:

- It is easy to understand for electors.
- Counting is simple.
- Winner is known immediately.
- Voters can elect representative of their choice.
- There is an identified representative for each constituency, accountable to his electorate.
- All candidates get to know their relative support in the constituency.
- The system has given, by and large, stable governments at the centre and in the status.

Safe and Informed: There are other elements of the electoral process which imbue meaning and value to the concept of democracy. Beyond the outer shell of democracy, defined by the electoral participation of people, there is an inner core which needs constant nurturing. It is self evident that democracy can flourish only in an environment of openness, transparency, voluntary participation, freedom of ideas and personal liberty exercised without fear or inducement. The burden of ensuring such a system lies on the shoulders of

the electoral process a country adopts. Apart from this, a strong democracy also requires the existence of robust institutions capable of safeguarding the fundamental values of democracy without getting sucked into the flux and flow of politics as it unfolds on the ground. Election Commission is the institutions which invigorate and protect democracy not merely in its form but in terms of its real content also.

Undue influence and bribery at elections are electoral offence under Sections 171B and 171C, respectively, of the IPC. These offences are, however, non-cognizable offences, rendering the provisions virtually ineffective. Under Section 171-G, publishing false statement in connection with election with intent to affect the result of an election, is punishable with fine only. Section 171H provides that incurring or authorizing expenditure for promoting the election prospects of a candidate is an offence. However, punishment for an offence under this Section is a meagre fine of Rs.500/-. This amount may have been a deterrent sixty years ago, but now is laughable.

These punishments were provided as far back as in 1920. Considering the gravity of the offences under the aforesaid sections in the context of free and fair elections, the punishments under all the four sections need to be enhanced and made cognizable, if they are to serve the intended objects.

Conclusion: At present, about 91 crore Indian citizens are registered as voters. The Commission has demonstrated fulfilment of its mandate through conduct of successive elections in the country right from 1950 onwards. The strength of its electoral processes is seen both with awe and respect among democracies of the world. Today, the electoral operations of India are the largest in the world as demonstrated in the Lok Sabha Election 2019 where about 1.2crore polling officials worked at over 10 lakh polling stations in the country. NVD inspires the voters, the key stakeholder in democratic polity besides other stakeholders including election machinery. Today, NVD initiative has been institutionalised as an annual feature for celebration of democracy and electoral participation in the country. At last, A Voter is the central unit of a democracy and its electoral processes. NVD connects voters with the electoral process and renews both, their relevance and contribution to the democracy.

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