

# Conducting Elections in India during COVID-19: Victory for Electoral Democracy against the Pandemic

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## Abstract

*Election Commission of India conducts the largest elections in the world. During the last seven decades of its journey, ECI has handled complex issues and challenges with high standards of performance in conduct of elections. However, COVID-19 and consequent containment measures presented a different kind of challenge in the Seventy first year of its journey. The Paper briefly looks at the global perspectives of COVID-19 challenge to the elections around the world. It further discusses approach taken by the ECI, the strategies, broad guidelines for conduct of elections during COVID-19 and the three tier planning from the state level to the polling station level and conduct of 'COVID-19 Safe' elections. The paper also discusses knowledge sharing on the subject 'Issues, Challenges and Protocols for Conducting Elections during COVID-19'.*

## Keywords:

**Broad guidelines, COVID-19 safe elections, Rajya Sabha.**

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## 1. Introduction

**E**lection Commission of India (ECI) is responsible for conducting elections *inter alia* to the Parliament and to the State legislatures of different States of the country. Articles 324 to 329 contained in Part XV of the Constitution of India and the law that flows there from determines and defines

the complete framework for conduct of elections in a free, fair and inclusive manner. Under this enabling and empowering framework, ECI engages the 925 million voters of the country spread over more than one million polling stations and operates on the premise of 'No Voter to be Left Behind'. The Commission, during last seven decades of its journey, has witnessed complex challenges in conduct of elections. The Commission has demonstrated the strength and resilience in overcoming such challenges through sheer professionalism, continued innovation, integration of the technology and taken pride in timely completion of the elections with high standards. However, COVID-19, the

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Received: 20 January 2021; Received in revised form

15 March 2021; Accepted on 26 March 2021

Pandemic of 2020 and consequent containment measures presented a different kind of challenge.

The Paper deals briefly with the COVID-19 challenge and discusses the approach taken by the ECI, the strategies, protocols, planning and conduct of 'COVID-19 Safe' elections. The paper also discusses the webinars for interaction on 'COVID-19 safe' elections model with the A-WEB Community for Knowledge sharing.

## **2. The COVID-19 challenge: Global perspectives**

With over 6 million cases of infection and over 371 thousand deaths from COVID-19 by 1 June 2020, (WHO 2020, Coronavirus disease situation report,133) COVID-19 emerged as a major challenge to the mankind. Containment measures and Emergency Public Health Safety measures at different levels of intensity were brought in place by governments across the world. The challenge affected practically all sectors of human existence. Election schedules were equally affected. Reportedly 64 countries had decided to postpone their national and sub national elections due to COVID-19 between 21 February and 4 June 2021. In all 30 countries decided to hold national or sub national elections as originally planned during the period (INFOGRAPHIC: Global overview of COVID -19: Impact of elections, May 2020).

Every country has its own pandemic trajectory, matching Public Health Safety protocols and specific containment measures against COVID-19. The emerging situations, depending upon the response

time available, meant substantive constitutional, legislative and technology implications for planning and conduct of elections. As such, the pandemic threw up complex challenges and difficult choices before the EMBs across the world. Many countries had to postpone their scheduled elections. There are others who went ahead and successfully completed their elections as per schedule even as they brought in place enormous safety measures in place. Arrangements made by successful EMB's in countries like Republic of South Korea, Mongolia, Taiwan, Australia and many others followed well designed 'Protocols' for conducting 'Safe' elections.

## **3. ECI's approach for COVID-19 safe elections**

### **India: the largest democracy monitors COVID-19 trajectory**

Committed to its tradition of timely conduct of elections in a free, fair, inclusive manner as per constitutional mandate, the Leadership at ECI was fully alert to the global emerging situation *ab initio*. Not with standing the prevailing 'Lockdown Conditions', ECI's cross functional teams of Experts carried out close monitoring of situation and analysis of international practices. They also took note of the extant containment guidelines, Public Health safety measures of the Governments both at the Central level and at the state level in the country.

On 11 March 2020, World Health Organization has declared COVID-19 a global pandemic (ibid). Concerned Ministries of the Government of India issued guidelines and instructions to monitor and contain the

transmission of COVID-19. On 22 March 2020, Government of India asked the State Governments to take all measures to break the chain of transmission of COVID-19. This included suspension of all train services till 31 March 2020, including sub urban rail services; closure of all activities except essential services such as hospitals, telecom, medicine shops, provision stores etc. Subsequently, on 23 March 2020 it was informed that the operations of domestic schedule commercial airlines shall cease operations. State Governments issued orders including curb on local transportation accordingly for management and containment of COVID-19.

At this juncture, let us look at the impact on the ongoing Rajya Sabha Elections.

#### **4. Rajya Sabha (Council of States) elections, 2020**

The Council of State elections are indirect elections where the Members of Legislative Assemblies of States are the electors. On 25 February 2020, Election Commission of India announced elections to the Council of States to fill 55 seats of Members from 17 States, retiring in the month of April 2020. On 6 March 2020, the official notification for Biennial Elections to 55 seats in Council of States in 17 States was issued. On 18 March 2020, the result in regard to 37 seats in 11 States was declared as uncontested. 26 March 2020 had been notified as the Scheduled Poll day for 18 seats spread over rest of the States.

#### **Pandemic impact on ongoing elections to the Upper House**

The Commission obtained inputs from Chief Electoral Officers (CEO's) of respective States

and the situation was carefully reviewed. The poll bound states of Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya and Rajasthan had issued orders of lock down to contain the transmission of COVID-19. On 24 March 2020, it was observed that prevailing unforeseen situation of public health emergency demands avoidance of possibilities of gatherings of any nature, which may otherwise expose all concerned to possible health hazard. The poll process in the above said elections would necessarily include the gathering of polling officials, agents of political parties, support staff and members of respective Legislative Assemblies on the poll day. This may not be suitable in view of the prevailing unforeseen situation and related advisories in the country.

#### **Existing legislative provisions empower Commission to handle given situation**

Section 153 of the Representation of the People Act, 1951 empowers the Election Commission to extend the time for the completion of any election provided there are sufficient reasons. This can be done by making necessary amendments in the notification issued by it under section 30 or section 39. Accordingly, the Commission deferred the poll and extended the period of said election. The list of contesting candidates, already published for the said elections by the respective Returning Officers would remain valid for the purposes of remaining activities. Fresh date of poll and counting for the said biennial elections would be announced after reviewing the prevailing situation (ECI defers Rajya Sabha Poll in view of COVID-19; Fresh date to be announced later).

### **Strategic approach to complete the deferred election**

In May, 2020, the Government started phased easing out of the restrictions. Concerned CEO's were contacted through video conferencing. Detailed interactions were carried out with inputs from the CEO's on the following core framework.

- Electors – quarantined, infected, suspected & hospitalised – how to inventorise and track the dynamic facts on ground?
  - Polling Station – flow of person and process, layout, introduction of containment barriers, incident response etc.
  - Counting Centres – flow of process and persons, layout, introduction of containment barriers, incident response etc.
  - Polling officials – special training, redundancy, preventive kit etc
  - Postal ballot – its possible utilisation as a measure in itself and as a measure of 'early voting'?
  - Number of Polling stations – whether a single polling could accommodate normal and infected through a time sequence for polling in last one hour or, a separate polling booth needed?
  - Validation by State COVID-19 designated official of all SOP's for access, travel, and interstate or intrastate that may be required.
- i. Additional staff and resources and safety protocols
  - ii. SVEEP strategies

### **The Council of States elections completed in a COVID safe manner**

The strategy which was worked on was that each CEO interacted with State Government's nodal officer for COVID – 19 and sensitised them to the steps needed to conduct all stages of the poll, including, the polling and the counting processes. On the basic premise of social distancing, the CEO's inventorised the requests of material, manpower, transportation, advance information, training, contingencies, layout designs etc. Options of using 'Postal Ballot'; 'Early voting' and 'Simultaneous poll at multiple locations' – were considered. The following steps were taken to complete the electoral process.

- Commission directed the respective State Governments to appoint a COVID-19 officer.
- No centralised SOP was issued to deal with the special situation, in view of State specific circumstances.
- In the first fortnight of June 2020, the CEO's developed specific plans, including contingency plan, to deal with COVID-19 suspected, quarantined, positive and hospitalised cases.
- Training to personnel and advance information (including do's & don'ts) to all Stakeholders were ensured.
- In terms of categorisation of COVID-19 affected electors i.e. COVID-19 suspected, COVID-19 positive; COVID-19 recovered (but in quarantine); COVID -19 hospitalised – it was the last category of elector i.e. COVID-19 hospitalised, which the Commission assessed as requiring a commonality of response.

- A 'Postal Ballot' approach was adopted by the Commission to deal with cases of hospitalised voters.
- All electors were provided Voter Guide for facilitation.

On 19 June 2020, out of 984 eligible voters, 967 voted. The absentees were not on account of COVID-19 circumstances. The results to all 19 seats were declared on 19 June 2020 itself. Election to the vacant seats Rajya Sabha was completed. This was a testing ground for COVID-19 Safe Elections protocols developed and utilised by the Commission so far.

### **5. Essential elements of protocols for COVID-19 safe large elections**

When we talk of Indian elections, scale of operations, except in case of 'Upper House', is gigantic and matching logistic support is very important for strategic advance planning. Issues and challenges involved from the ECI level down to the State, District and Polling Station level were carefully analysed while developing innovative sustainable model for conduct of 'COVID-19 Safe' elections. As an outcome of this approach, well grinded 'Protocols' for conduct of 'Safe Elections' were evolved through seamless harmonisation of the extant Public Health guidelines, the dynamic containment orders while adhering to framework prescribed by the election code.

The core features of the protocols are:

- Social Distancing;
- Disinfection of the premises, equipments in use, protective gear including PPE kits;

- Hand washing, sanitisers, face masks, hand gloves and face shields;
- Effective ventilation of the polling stations and other premises in use at elections;
- Special arrangements for COVID-19 positive cases;
- Regulation of campaigns, registration process for the purpose of safety;
- Frequent disinfection of equipments in use and surfaces in the respective premises such as polling stations, counting halls etc.
- Postal Vote wherever feasible under the law and acceptable to the stakeholders.
- Polling Station management in terms of number of voters and the hours of voting.
- Stakeholder consultations where ever necessary.

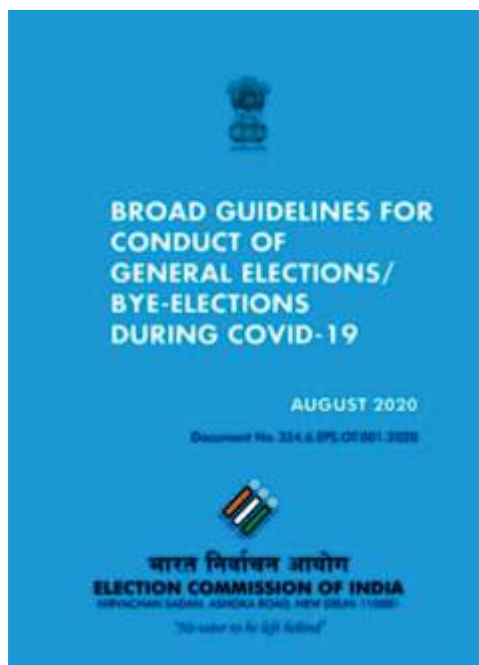
### **6. Broad guidelines for conduct of General Election during COVID-19**

The Commission completed its exercise on framing of Broad Guidelines for conduct of General Elections/ Bye Elections during COVID-19. The Guidelines, prepared through consultation with the Stakeholders, were notified and published in August, 2020. Highlights are as below:

- The Commission revised the norms of number of persons accompanying the candidate for submission of nominations: it is restricted to two instead of five persons.
- The number of vehicles for the purposes of nomination is restricted to two instead of three vehicles.

- It has also created facility for filing in the nomination form and the affidavit online and submission of same after taking print before the Returning Officer concerned.
- For the first time, the candidates will be able to deposit security amount for contesting the elections online.
- Keeping the containment guidelines in view, the Commission has limited the number of persons including candidate for door to door campaign to five.
- The convoy of vehicles in road show should be broken after every five vehicles instead of 10 excluding the security vehicles, if any. The interval between two sets of convoy of vehicles should be half an hour instead of gap of 100 meters.
- Public meeting and road shows shall be permissible with suitable instructions subject to containment instructions issued by the Government.
- Face Mask, Sanitiser, Thermal scanners, gloves, Face shield and PPE kits shall be used during the electoral process ensuring social distancing norms.
- The Chief Electoral Officer of the State was directed to make a comprehensive State Election Plan as per guidelines on arrangement and preventive measures in consultation with State Nodal Officer for COVID-19.

The Commission not only issued the 'Broad Guidelines' but also revisited many of the Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) especially the ones with larger public interface and in the process enhanced



utilisation of technology options where ever feasible with the ultimate objective of free, fair, inclusive, transparent and 'safe' elections. Election Observers were specially directed to report on compliance of COVID-19 Safe election preparedness and compliance.

## **7. Knowledge sharing with A-WEB community: International webinar**

The India A-WEB Centre while monitoring the global impact of the pandemic prepared a document namely 'International Experiences on Conducting Elections in 2020 during COVID-19' (ECI Broad Guidelines, August 2020).

Further, ECI, through its India A-WEB Centre, organised a webinar on 21 September 2020, on 'Issues, Challenges and Protocols for Conducting Elections during COVID-19: Sharing Country Experiences' where the entire A-WEB Community comprised by the 106 member countries and





*Release of document 'International Experiences on Conducting Elections in 2020 during COVID-19*

16 partner institutions were invited to join. The webinar offered a robust platform for sharing experiences in terms of 'Best Practices' on COVID-19 safe elections among A-WEB community. The view emerged that COVID-19 pandemic has changed the way for many of our daily lives and so also it has also changed the way we organise elections. As uncertainty about the pandemic continues, conducting safe and successful elections while ensuring all the elements of free and fair elections remain intact, is a growing concern. Election Management is a very specialised field, and the best way for EMBs to upgrade their skills is to learn from one another through exchange of best practices. The ideas and experiences shared at the Webinar will be of immense use to all in managing elections. The webinar reinforced the common resolve of the A-WEB Community to join hands for COVID-19 safe elections (India A-WEB Centre, 2020).

## **8. General election to the State Legislative Assembly of Bihar state**

The tenure of the State Legislative Assembly was due to expire on 29 November 2020. Bihar being one of the most populous states in the country, conduct of elections during COVID-19 was a different kind of challenge especially in the context of scale and dimensions of the operations. Commission, through strategic advance planning, has demonstrated the strength and resilience of the Indian electoral system in taking up the challenge.

### **How is this election different?**

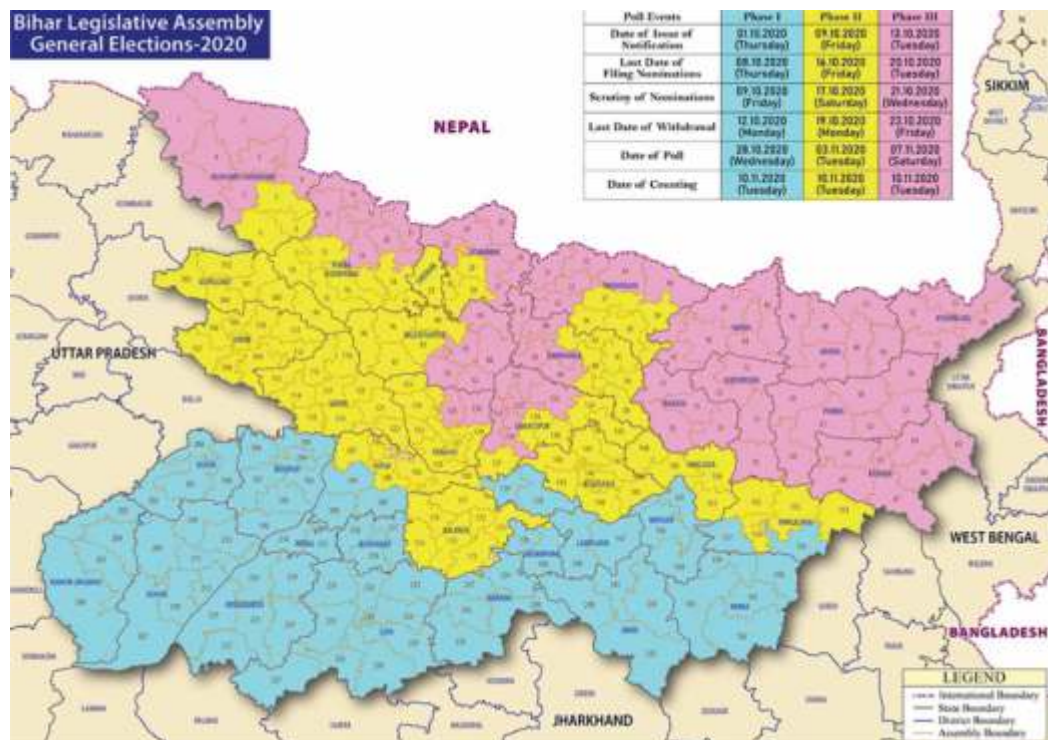
ECI, while maintaining the sanctity of electoral process, has considered safety of the stakeholders against pandemic also as very important. For achieving this, the essential elements of the COVID-19 safety protocol were embedded in the electoral process at every stage and every step in a seamless manner for stakeholder including

voter safety while ensuring free, fair, inclusive, transparent and ethical characteristics of the election process.

### State level 3-tier COVID-19 safety plan

Following the Broad Guidelines of the Commission, the Chief Electoral Officer of the State, prepared and implemented a comprehensive State level 'Three Tier' safety plan on arrangement and preventive measures, in consultation with the State Nodal Officer for Public Health to ensure conduct of safe elections down to the polling station level (ECI; General Election to Bihar Assembly 2020).

The plan ensured implementation of, inter alia, the following core principles:



Constituency Map for General Election to State Legislative Assembly of Bihar.  
Three colours mark three phases of Elections.



- Every person shall wear face mask; and other PPE as may be necessary during every election related activity.
- At the entry of hall/ room/ premises used for election purposes: Thermal Scanning of all persons shall be carried out;
- Sanitiser shall be made available at all locations.
- Social distancing shall be maintained as per the extant COVID-19 guidelines of the State Govt. and Ministry of Home Affairs.
- As far as practicable, large halls should be identified and utilised to ensure social distancing norms.
- Adequate number of vehicles shall be mobilised for movement of polling personnel, security personnel to ensure compliance of COVID-19 guidelines.

These principles apply across the board to all the steps of electoral operations. Every District Election Officers shall make comprehensive District Election Plan relating to arrangement and preventive measures in consultation with Nodal Officer for COVID in their district to conduct election. Detailed COVID-19 guidelines to be followed during electoral process were circulated to eligible voters. Advisories were issued to the State authorities for COVID-19 safe campaigns.

### **ECI's readiness**

With this, the election machinery was fully and confidently prepared for conducting not only free fair, inclusive and transparent election but also 'safe' election. The exercise also included state of full and efficacious logistic support in terms of men, materials

and infrastructure. ECI was fully ready through their strategic advance planning to fulfill its constitutional mandate of timely conduct of elections in the state.

### **ECI announces schedule for the General Election**

The Commission announced the schedule for General Election to the Bihar Legislative Assembly on 25 September 2020, for conducting the election to 243 seats in three phases so as to complete the entire process by 12 November 2020 (ECI announces General Election to State Legislative Assembly Bihar 2020).

With this announcement of election schedule about 73 million electors of the state were called upon to exercise their franchise for electing their representatives the legislature. The entire election machinery worked for 'Accessible, Inclusive and Safe' elections. The expression 'safe' is significant and has been added to mean pandemic COVID-19 safe election. General Election to the State Assembly of Bihar has been successfully completed on 12 November 2020 well ahead of the due date. This election will go into the chronicle of Indian elections as the first major election safely conducted during COVID-19.

The special measures taken by ECI to ensure conduct of elections under COVID-19 challenge emphasize a need for coordination with all stakeholders including Political Parties. Emphasis was also laid on effective communication with voters to convince and to ensure that the 'Polling Booths are safe'; and the need for comprehensive new protocols to be designed

to synchronise with Health Guidelines. Every district designated a Nodal Officer to coordinate implementation of guidelines.

### **Model code of conduct**

With announcement of the General Election, the Model Code of Conduct (MCC) came into force with immediate effect. Provisions of the Model Code cover all candidates, political parties; other stakeholders including the Government. MCC is brought in place for creating level playing field for all the contesting parties and violations are strictly dealt with to ensure that the elections are free and fair. The Commission made elaborate arrangements for ensuring the effective implementation of the MCC Guidelines. The election machinery including Observers ensured effective implementation of the MCC. Further, the citizens were empowered through technology driven App namely c-VIGIL for lodging complaints of violation.

### **Electoral rolls**

The Commission works on the premise of 'No Voter to be Left Behind'. Pure and updated electoral rolls are the foundation of free, fair and credible election. With intensive and sustained focus on improving quality, health and fidelity, the roll has been updated. COVID-19 and the resultant measures caused return migration of labor back to Bihar. Special efforts were made to enroll such eligible citizens (returnee migrants). Due attention has been given to enroll service voters. In all 72.9 million electors including 1,60,410 Service Voters were enrolled to exercise their franchise in Bihar.

All the voters are covered by the Photo Electoral Rolls and Electors Photo Identity Cards (EPIC). Booth level Officers deliver Photo Voter Slips to all voters; and every household was given Voter Guide to facilitate COVID-19 safe participation.

### **Nomination process**

Nomination process draws large number of people to the Election Office premises. Therefore for public health safety, additional options were provided to facilitate online mode for filing nominations, uploading of accompanying documents and deposit security for the nomination process. Number of persons to accompany candidate for submission of nomination was limited to two as also the number of vehicles for the purposes of nomination was limited to two. Directions were issued for availability of adequate space at the Returning Officers premises and time allotment for filing nominations (ECI; Online filing of nomination).

### **Campaign by the political parties and contesting candidates**

Nature of campaigns changed substantially due to COVID-19 safe precautions. Door to Door campaigns were restricted to maximum five persons including the candidate. Road Shows, the convoy of vehicles should be broken after every five vehicles instead of ten vehicles (excluding the security vehicles). The interval between two sets of convoy of vehicles should be half an hour instead of gap of 100 meters. As for Election meetings, Public gatherings or rallies could be conducted subject to adherence to extant COVID-19 guidelines District Election Officer has to, in advance,



*Equal Access, Social Distancing and the Masks culture at polling stations.*

identify dedicated grounds for public gathering with clearly marked Entry and Exit points and social distancing markers. The number of participants for such gathering was limited to ensure that infection does not spread. Violations were viewed very seriously by the Commission. The Commission also sent advisories to the concerned states to elicit compliance from the Stakeholders.

### **Polling Stations**

Special arrangements were made for disinfection of premises, social distancing, use of sanitisers, use of PPE kits besides compulsory use of masks. Help Desks for voter facilitation were set up at all the polling stations.

The safety protocols had been integrated in the poll process at polling



*Social Distancing, Thermal Scanning and Masks for Voters*

stations. As integration of safety protocols slows down the rate of voter turnover per hour, ECI decreased the number of voters per polling station from 1500 to 1000. This has meant increase of polling stations from 65,367 to 1, 06,526 in the state during these elections. This increase means larger number of polling personnel, materials and funding of the election process. Hours of polling were also increased with few exceptions.

One of the unique features of the polling was that the voters were voluntarily following the safety measures against the disease. This reflected their quiet yet robust determination to fight the pandemic.

### **EVM and VVPAT**

ECI uses EVM and VVPAT for polling purposes at all the polling stations as an established practice. In all 189 thousand ballot units, 141 thousand control units and 173 thousand VVPAT machines have been deployed in Bihar state elections. Safety protocols are being followed for use of EVM's by the voters. Sanitisation protocols were followed in addition to SOP's for handling EVM's at all stages and at the polling station by the voters.

### **Alternative voting options to enhance inclusion**

New Initiatives for option of Postal Ballot facility were extended to the electors of following categories:

- Electors, who are marked as Persons with Disabilities (PwD).
- Electors above the age of 80 years.
- Electors employed in notified Essential services.

- Electors who are COVID- 19 positive/suspect as certified by competent authority and are under quarantine (home/institutional).

Adequate publicity was given to the facility to make sure that the concerned voters avail of this facility. All polling stations were made accessible to facilitate polling on the premise of equal access.

### **Voter facilitation posters**

Voter facilitation posters were displayed at the polling stations to ensure sharing of accurate relevant information including the COVID-19 safety procedures with the voters.

### **Electronically transmitted postal ballot system (ETPBS) for service voter**

ETPBS facility was extended all Service Voters like it was during last Parliament General Elections in 2019. During Special Summary Revision of last part of electoral rolls, significant efforts were made by the Commission to maximize the enrollment of service voters with correct particulars.

### **Technology options for 'Contact free Elections'**

#### **Use of ICT and mobile applications**

The Commission enhanced use of Information and Communication Technology to strengthen citizen participation and transparency. Use of digital technology has been further encouraged to neutralize the impact of COVID-19 pandemic as it offers contactless operations. A brief discussion on ICT initiatives follows:



### **Single form for electoral services (voter portal)**

To ease the process of form submission, Election Commission of India is launching a new 'Voter Portal' - (<https://voterportal.eci.gov.in/>) to provide a seamless interface for registration, alteration in entries, deletion, change of address etc. After logging into the portal, a citizen is now presented with an interactive interface suggesting selection of choice based upon his previous selection. Use of Helpline at 1950 was encouraged.

### **Persons with disability App (PwD App)**

PwD App is meant to help for Person with Disabilities. A PwD elector can register requests for marking him as PwD, new registration, migration, correction in EPIC details, wheelchair etc. It utilises the Accessibility features of mobile phones for voters with blindness and hearing disabilities. The Application is available on the Google Play Store and can be downloaded.

### **cVIGIL application for filing model code of conduct violation cases by citizen**

cVIGIL provides time-stamped evidentiary proof of the Model Code of Conduct / Expenditure Violation by empowering every citizen to click a photo or video using his or her Smartphone. The application is based on GIS technology. The unique feature of auto location provides fairly correct information which can be relied upon by flying squads to navigate to the right spot of incidence and take prompt action. This App prioritises the speedy and effective actions by authorities and promised users status reports within 100 minutes.

Some of the other apps include Booth App, Voter Turnout App, The ENCORE counting and Results Website and Results Trends TV.

### **Deployment of central observers**

#### **General observers**

Free, fair and transparent elections constitute the essence of electoral democracy. The Commission is particular in ensuring that entire election is free, fair and transparent despite COVID-19 and the Observers have an important role to play in this. The Commission deployed 129 General Observers to ensure smooth conduct of election. The Observers maintain a close vigil over the entire election process for implementation of directions of the Commission. Additional responsibility of vigil on implementation of Commission's directions on COVID-19 safety was also entrusted to the General Observers. Micro Observers were also deployed to assist the General Observers in maintaining a close vigil over election process specially in vulnerable areas.

#### **Police observers**

The Commission deployed 37 Police Observers depending upon the need, sensitivity and assessment of ground situation of the District or the constituency level, wherever required. They monitored all activities relating to deployment of force, law and order situation and co-ordinate between Civil and Police administration to ensure free and fair election.

#### **Special observers**

The Commission deployed Special Observers with a view to objectively assess



the poll preparedness, identify the critical gaps and guide the election officials in the field to ensure free and fair elections. By dint of their seniority, long experience in the administrative services, in-depth administrative experience, acumen and understanding Special Observers guide, advise and facilitate the efforts and initiatives of the District office or the Returning officers in making necessary poll arrangements and conducting the election in a free, fair, transparent, peaceful and participatory manner.

### **Election expenditure monitoring**

Comprehensive instructions for the purpose of effective monitoring of the election expenditure of the candidates have been issued to ensure integrity of electoral process. The directions included formation of Flying Squads, Static Surveillance Teams, Video Surveillance Teams, involvement of State Police, Investigation Directorate of Income Tax Department, Enforcement Directorate, Financial Intelligence Unit and several other agencies. State Excise Department had been asked to monitor production, distribution, sale and storage of liquor and inducements in the form of free goods during the election process. The functioning and operations of the Flying Squads/Mobile Teams shall be closely monitored using GPS Tracking & the use of c-VIGIL App.

As a consequence of strict vigil over the expenditure control measures, the authorities have, till 3 Nov 2020 (from the date of announcement of election), seized cash, liquor, drugs and precious metals worth Rs 652 million.

### **Expenditure observers**

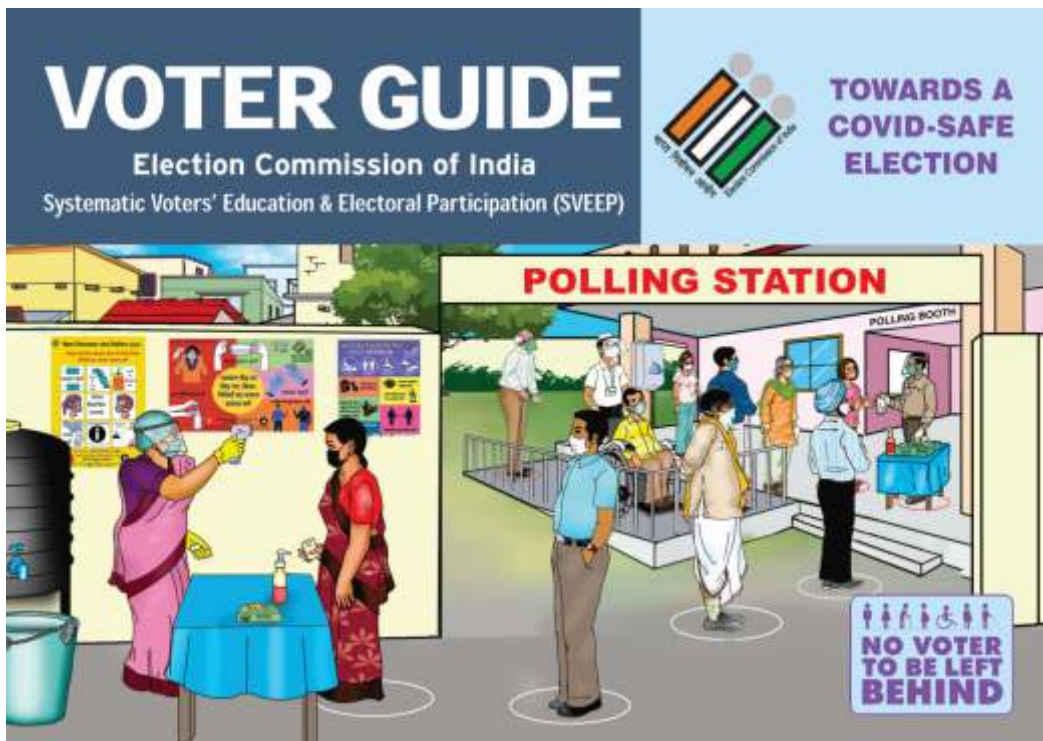
The Commission has appointed in all 67 Election Expenditure Observers to ensure a strict compliance of Commission's directions and very close monitoring of election expenditure of the candidates. In all 457 complaints of violation of MCC were received and dealt with promptly. Action taken reports have been made available at the website of the CEO.

### **Voter education**

Voter education is an important component of the election process that connects the voter, the key stakeholder, to the poll process. ECI operates with the premise of 'No Voter to be Left Behind' and accordingly, a comprehensive voter education plan was developed under SVEEP, the flagship voter education programme of the Commission. SVEEP Plan focused on the effective communication with voters and other stakeholders that to convince that the "Polling Booths are safe"; and awareness about new protocols, designed to serve safe elections.

Voter awareness programmes were carried out through multimedia channels in multilingual mode for a close connect with the voters. Voter Guides were distributed through Booth Level Officers to every household to ensure that the relevant guidance reaches every voter on time. A 360 degree approach was adopted with following features:

- First timers and young voters were approached through digital platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, etc.
- Women voters were approached through door to door campaigns



- Massive community programs were organised.
- Migrant voters and PwDs were informed through special drives.
- General tendency of fear and apprehension because of COVID-19 prevalent among public was addressed through awareness initiatives.

Detailed FAQ's were prepared to address the possible queries of voters. Some of the voter education posters prepared by CEO Bihar are shared as below.

### **Training of election personnel online training**

IT base operations were used by the Commission for training, webinars, web based monitoring of election processes. IT application as such has reduced the impact of COVID-19 in many operational areas.

The training of the election personnel was carried out essentially through video conferencing as discussed below:

- IIIDEM, New Delhi imparted training to State Level Master Trainers (SLMTs) from 29 June 2020 to 08 July 2020 in different batches through Video Conferencing.
- IIIDEM, New Delhi also imparted training to district level officers as DEOs/SPs/ROs/EROs/DyEOs in different batches through Video Conferencing.
- ROs and DyEOs were trained at state level by SLMTs in different batches from 09 July 2020 to 17 July 2020. SLMTs also imparted training to newly posted ROs.
- All district level nodal officers of different cells were given training at

head quarter level in different batches from 20 July 2020 to 26 July 2020.

- At state level all safety protocols in light of COVID-19 were observed during Extensive training was conducted through video conferencing and face to face training programme. Districts were instructed to conduct training in small groups and observing all safety protocols of COVID-19.

### **International Election Visitor Programme**

The Commission organised an International Virtual Election Visitors Programme 2020 (IEVP 2020) for foreign Election Management Bodies (EMBs) and Organisations in Nov 2020, in the context of the ongoing General Election to the Legislative Assembly of Bihar. The programme traditionally includes visits to actual polling areas, but because of the pandemic, the Commission opted for technology driven virtual visits for the participants.

Delegates from over 40 countries across the world besides International IDEA, International Foundation of Electoral Systems (IFES) and Association of World Election Bodies (A-WEB) participated. The programme included online briefing and virtual tour of live polling at different locations in Bihar. It offered unique opportunity to share best practices and experience of the conduct of elections during the pandemic period.

### **Voter turnout**

The overall voter turnout in the election comes up to 57.05% which compares well with the past voter turnouts and also reflects that the pandemic failed to dampen spirits

of voters and other stakeholders at elections. Bihar elections showed high elector confidence as they came out in large numbers to vote with masks and followed the safety protocols voluntarily. Voters of Bihar have defeated the fear of virus.

### **Other bye - elections**

Bye-Election to 2 Parliamentary constituencies and 68 Assembly constituencies of various States and UT's, were also conducted on time while keeping in view the 'safety' of the voters in focus against COVID-19.

### **9. ECI completes all elections on time in 2020**

ECI has completed all scheduled elections during 2020 well on time in an inclusive, informed and safe manner: Showcasing Elections Conducted During COVID-19. Road to safe elections coming up in the next year on a confident note. The elections conducted in 2020 have brought a unique experience of emerging strategies for handing elections especially large elections during the pandemic. New norms have emerged and COVID-19 has changed the processes. But the Electoral Democracy has demonstrated its victory over pandemic and marches ahead.

This experience is valuable for conducting forthcoming General Elections to the State Legislatures in Tamil Nadu, West Bengal, Assam, Kerala and Puducherry.

### **10. Where do we stand today?**

#### **Victory of electoral democracy over the pandemic**

WHO dashboard reports that globally, 14 March 2021, there have been over 119 million

confirmed cases of COVID-19 including 2.6 million deaths. As of 9 March 2021, a total of 300,002,228 vaccine doses have been administered. Over 461 thousand cases have been reported during last 24 hours.

International IDEA Global Overview of COVID-19: Impact on elections published on 8 March 2021 (From 21 February, 2020 until 7 March, 2021) reflects as follows. At least 76 countries and territories across the globe have decided to postpone national and sub national elections due to COVID-19, out of which at least 40 countries and territories have decided to postpone national elections and referendums. At least 108 countries and territories have decided to hold national or sub national elections despite concerns related to COVID-19 of which at least 86 have held national elections or referendums. At least, 50 countries and territories have held elections that were initially postponed due to concerns related to COVID-19 of which at least 27 have held national elections or referendums. In this view of things, the challenge to the Electoral Democracy sustains. Difference between now and then is that COVID-19 Safe models have been developed by different the countries (WHO Coronavirus 'COVID-19' Dashboard).

Completion of the electoral process by 12 November marks the victory of voter over COVID-19. It is a confident success for the ECI in conducting elections during the pandemic to enable it move ahead with the next set of General Elections to State Assemblies of West Bengal, Assam, Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Puducherry which have already been notified and the election

process is in full swing. In all 187 million voters will exercise then franchise for electing 824 members of Legislative Assemblies in these five states.

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National Voters' Day Theme for 2021-22  
'Making Our Voters Empowered, Vigilant,  
Safe and Informed'

'No Voter to be Left Behind'

- Election Commission of India

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