

ECI CONDUCTS NATIONAL WORKSHOP ON ACCESSIBLE ELECTIONS

ENTIRE PROCESS FROM ENROLMENT TO ELECTIONS (E2E) NEEDS TO BE MADE MORE PWD FRIENDLY: CEC SHRI. SUNIL ARORA

The Election Commission of India today organized a National Workshop on Accessible Elections. The Workshop was organized with the purpose of reviewing steps taken as yet by ECI for making Elections PwD and Senior Citizens friendly and to deliberate on steps still required to make the process more inclusive and accessible.

Chief Election Commissioner Shri Sunil Arora in his keynote address said "while disability is a problem that needs to be addressed more by the individual and the family, Accessibility is a problem that needs more of institutional remedies". Shri Arora said "It is our aim to achieve optimum level of awareness and optimum level of interventions on the ground. From Booth Level Officers to ECI, each and every person must work in tandem. It was in January, 2018 that "Accessible Elections" was decided as the guiding theme for General Elections 2019. "It is essential that we scale up efforts and interventions in a manner that issues of accessibility are removed altogether and our elections are inclusive in the truest sense." He noted that it is heartening that over that over 90% PwDs have been able to cast their votes in the recently held polling in Jharkhand. "The entire chain of electoral process, E2E i.e. Enrolment to Elections, needs to be PwD friendly & accessible and the entire system from BLOs to ECI HQs needs to be worked to overcome these issues" he emphasized.

Reaffirming ECI's commitment, Election Commissioner Shri Ashok Lavasa stated that while all efforts made by Chief Electoral Officers & DEOs have made ECI come a long way, yet more needs to be done. "We must learn from around the world, find out what lies ahead, and identify concrete steps that will empower us to make adequate changes", he said. Suggesting a three pronged strategy, Sh Lavasa said Benchmarking of data, assessing it against parameters of Accessibility Index, making ECI and CEO websites compliant with prescribed guidelines and continuous evaluation would help us unlock the potential that lies ahead.



The Election Commissioner Shri Sushil Chandra lauded the efforts of Civil Society organizations and Election Officials on the field. Sh Chandra emphasized the importance of sensitization towards the electoral rights of Persons with Disabilities. "We need the support of all Civil Society Organisations and concerned NGOs to make PwD voters an integral part of democracy" he added.

Speaking on the occasion, Secretary General Shri Umesh Sinha emphasized the need for desired structural changes to address critical gaps and lauded the efforts of Election Machinery, Civil Society Organisations and other stakeholders at the grassroots level. Mr Sinha highlighted the added facility of choice of Postal ballot from home for Octogenarians and PwDs, piloted in recent Jharkhand elections. Deputy Election Commissioner Shri Chandra Bhushan Kumar reiterated the importance of the recommendations received from stakeholders across the country since these would pave the way in making future elections more inclusive. He thanked the Organizations who came to participate in today's workshop and particularly the Accessibility Consultant ECI Ms Smitha Sadasivan for making the deliberations so fruitful.



Exhaustive mapping of PwD voters, providing transport facility, special volunteers, Assured Minimum Facilities like ramp, wheelchair, sign language, EVM with Braille at polling station and most recently, the provision of postal ballots to PwD voters are some of the initiatives taken by Election Commission of India to ensure accessibility and uphold the tenet of 'No Voter to be Left Behind'.

Besides Chief Electoral Officers and District Election Officers from various States/UTs, the workshop saw the participation of representatives of Civil Society Organizations, Government Organizations and NGOs representing different disability sectors including AADI, Sarthak Educational Trust, National Association of the Deaf, NCPEDP National Disability Network, Saksham, EcoTatv, NIEPVD, PDUNIPPD, BPA Ahmedabad and ISLRTC.

With stakeholders from across India in attendance, the technical sessions involved group tasks and deliberation on four assigned topics such as Electoral Registration & Mapping in the Electoral Roll; Facilitation at Polling Station Specially for Persons with Disabilities and Senior Citizens: Accessible Voter Education & Communication Strategies and Use of Technology in Accessible Elections. The participants worked on evaluating the current challenges, analyzing the in-place initiatives and devising solutions, as part of thematic presentations that were made to the Commission.

The Commission also released a booklet, 'Crossing the Barriers – I Got Inked' on first-person accounts of voters who overcame all hurdles to participate in the largest festival of democracy. A comprehensive document highlighting the work done so far, recent initiatives, and recommendations



from all States/UTs and various stakeholders named "Accessibility Report 2019" was made available to participants of the workshop highlighting therein the policies and guiding principles on Accessible Elections. Sign language interpreters at Workshop today, screen reader access were significant features of day's proceedings.

