13th Annual National Conference on Electoral and Political Reforms
Date and Venue: 29thApril, 2017 at Panjab University, Chandigarh
Background Note
Session: Innovative Ideas towards Greater Voter Awareness at the Grass-Root Level

For a democracy to be successful, it is not enough to hold elections. It is imperative that the voters make an informed decision in order to make democracy a truly people's government. There has been an increase in the voter turnout in the recent years. In the recent elections, states like Manipur, Goa, and Punjab recorded 87%, 82%, and 77 % voter turnout respectively. On the other hand, voter turnout in states like Uttarakhand and Uttar Pradesh was 65% and 61 % respectively. However, 28% of the total MLAs elected from these states have declared criminal cases against themselves.

This indicates a lack of voter awareness among the Indian population. It operates at two levels: one, people are not informed about the electoral process and second, voters are unaware about the details of candidates contesting from their constituency.

It has become essential to take steps in order to increase voters' awareness. There have been several initiatives taken by the ECI. One such initiative is called SVEEP (Systematic Voters' Education and Electoral Participation). It is a program that educates citizens, electors, and voters about the electoral process in order to increase their awareness and participation in the electoral processes. It has been working towards voters' awareness through several campaigns since 2009. There are various ways to help voters in making an informed choice, such as educating them about the electoral process through numerous contests, quiz competitions, mass mobilisation activities, street plays, rallies, helpline facility, SMS alerts etc. Uttar Pradesh Election Watch has worked intensively towards increasing voter awareness during the recent State Assembly Election using the above mentioned means.

People's active participation is quintessential for the effective working of democracy, but it should not be limited to the Lok Sabha or State Assembly Elections. It is equally important that people are informed about the local elections such as Panchayat as well as Municipal Corporation elections and the candidates contesting for them. In the recent BMC Elections, the Maharashtra State Election Commission took a remarkable step to intimate voters about the background details of candidates contesting for the same. Maharashtra SEC put up banners displaying the number of criminal cases registered against candidates outside each polling booth, whereas earlier, only the names of the candidates, along with their respective symbols were displayed. Civil Society is also playing a vital role in strengthening the democracy. Jharkhand Election Watch in collaboration with CEO Jharkhand is working toward raising electoral awareness among voters through quiz competition, street play, social media campaign etc. Orissa Election Watch undertook various campaigns to increase voter awareness at the grass-root level for the recently held panchayat election in the state. This bottoms-up approach will prove useful in increasing voters' knowledge about the electoral process and accessing the information of contesting candidates, thus ensuring that they will be able to make an informed choice.

What causes the lack of voter awareness? How can voters be educated about the significance of voting? How can we ensure that people understand their right as voters and exercise that right with full knowledge and responsibility? What kind of campaigns should be initiated to increase the engagement of the voters in the electoral process? How can these campaigns reach out to people in the remote areas? We hope that the panellists will be able to share their experiences from the local contexts they have operated in and throw light on some innovative ideas to increase voters' awareness.

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