

## The Difficulty of Conducting Elections in India

**T**he regularity with which many countries keep relapsing into chaos shows in stark relief the strength of Indian democracy which appears to be taking newer strides with each passing day. One principal reason for the same lies in the strong democratic foundations which are predicated on a very sound and effective electoral system. And our electoral system has been moving from strength to strength since the time of Mr. T. N. Sheshan, the redoubtable Chief Election Commission of the nineties.

But there still remain many issues that need to be attended to fortify the gains already made for further solidifying our democratic base and one such important issue relates to our electoral system. The task of conducting elections in a billion plus country is really humongous and mind-boggling. It requires extra-ordinary preparations coupled with astute management skills.

This becomes more important because these days elections have to be conducted with increasing regularity given the fact that elections to parliamentary, different state assemblies and local bodies including panchayats keep taking their turns to keep the Election Commission of India (ECI) and its cognate state bodies engaged throughout the year. Hence, there is an urgent need for ECI to keep its machinery well-oiled all the time.

As the ECI works through the instrumentality of district administration across the country, myriad election related activities also keep the latter occupied through the year. And as the ECI takes newer initiatives to further sanitise the electoral system in this country resulting in more works, it has increasingly become difficult for the district administration to devote the requisite attention and energy to sundry more pressing functions of administration and development.

Be it the summary or special revision of the electoral roll, preparation of photo identity cards, rationalisation of polling booths, conduct of actual parliamentary/assembly/local body elections or an emergent by-election, the district administration has to contend with

one or the other election related work almost throughout the year. Since election-related exercises are serious affairs, one has to devote more than cursory attention which often makes it difficult for the district administration to do justice to the other pressing concerns of development administration.

This is why, there has long been felt an urgent need for a full-fledged set-up including full-time officers and staff members for manning the election section at the district level. It gets really difficult for the District Magistrate who in his capacity as the District Election Officer also has to do different election related work with his regular officers and staff members who should otherwise be devoting their time and energy to the regular assignments. Since, the district administration does not have adequate number of officers and staff, it is forced to fall back on the officers and staff from the line departments who have become increasingly reluctant to part with their officers and staff for election related works.

Many government departments including education, relief, women and child development, PWD, health, and backward classes development departments have issued specific directions from time to time against engaging their officers and staff members in election works for the simple reason that such engagement tells negatively on the normal functioning and performance of these departments, preventing them to do the very basic work which they are meant to do.

For example, the school education department has the largest number of employees in the form of teachers and when these teachers are engaged in election and other works round the year, their basic teaching job really suffers, more so when they happen to be teachers from a single or double teacher schools. And now that the Supreme Court has completely banned such employment of school teachers, it has become further difficult for the district administration.

The district administration is, therefore, finding it increasingly difficult to rope in the services of line department officers and staff for electoral purposes. Even though some permanent staff members have been provided recently, the manpower crunch is a serious problem and the government really needs to ponder over this issue seriously, more so when many of these district offices are already understaffed.

The district administration has to do some real tight-rope walking in this regard, trying to apportion officers and staff among the various tasks it is supposed to accomplish to the satisfaction of all concerned. Be it the preparation of electoral rolls or the management of various poverty alleviation programmes, it has to accomplish all with the same level of efficiency and effectiveness. The poor District Magistrate, even though over-burdened, is still the most important, if not the only, point of interaction and interface for anyone and everyone in the government and he/she is held accountable for any lapse anywhere.

It has generally been noticed and experienced that all the other developmental works and various services come to an almost complete halt during an election as a substantive proportion of the government staff-members, both provincial and central, are engaged in one or the other electoral exercise. As elections these days span over multiple phases, hence their engagement outside their own departmental functions gets unreasonably prolonged

resulting in compromising the quality of functions and services of these departments. More often than not, the use of school, college and other governmental buildings in electoral exercise also results in some damages to these properties which take quite some time before they are finally repaired.

It is against this background that we need to have a completely separate infrastructure and dedicated manpower for the purposes of attending to various electoral needs of the country. As already discussed, a country with the humongous size of India and with a three-tiered governance structure, there is definitely a strong case for considering the proposal of complete insulation of the developmental and electoral activities. If we continue to use the same organisation and manpower for both the activities, then we shall end up compromising both the important functions. Hence, it is only advisable that given the year-long occupational requirements of various election-related works, we should have dedicated infrastructures and manpower for the purpose.

### **Salient Points**

- Our electoral system has been moving from strength to strength since the time of Mr. T. N. Sheshan.
- Conduction elections require extra-ordinary preparations coupled with astute management skills.
- Since election-related exercises are serious affairs, district administration has to devote more than cursory attention which often makes it difficult to do justice to the development administration.
- An urgent need is felt for a full-fledged set-up including full-time officers for manning the election section at the district level.
- Many government departments have issued specific directions against engaging their staff members in election works.
- Supreme Court has completely banned employment of school teachers in elections.
- Use of school, college and other governmental buildings in electoral exercise also results in some damages to these properties.
- A country with the humongous size of India and with a three-tiered governance structure, there is a strong case to have dedicated infrastructures and manpower.

### **Glossary**

**Redoubtable:** commanding or evoking respect