

Address By Dr S Y Quraishi, Chief Election Commissioner, on 2nd National Voters' Day (25th January, 2012) at Vigyan Bhawan, New Delhi

Hon'ble Dr. A.P.J. Abdul Kalam Sahab, my fellow Commissioners, Sh. Sampath and Sh. Brahma, leaders of Political Parties, distinguished guests, Excellencies, Young Electors of Delhi, Award Winners, Ladies and Gentlemen! It is a moment of great honour and pride today for the Election Commission of India that we are gathered here to celebrate the National Voters' Day, the second in the series, launched one year ago on 25th January, 2011. While this day has been fully dedicated to the empowerment of voters and strengthening of India's participatory democracy, I am also reminded with great reverence that on this day in 1950, the founding fathers of the Indian Constitution gifted to the nation a precious institution by the name of Election Commission of India in order to make sure that journey of representative democracy does not waiver.

Today, would forever be an occasion to renew our commitment to this great cause. We have not faltered any time, and stay determined not to falter ever.

What we are witnessing here goes far outside this impressive Hall. I would like to remind everybody that this is not a ceremonial gathering or an ordinary function; it is an operation, being conducted simultaneously country-wide. The Pledge we all took is echoing from every corner of the country. We need to pay attention to each and every word of it and let it sink into our psyche, the oath to promote and protect our beloved democracy by taking part in elections and in the right manner. All of us are part of a historic commemoration at this very hour that involves millions of countrymen at more than 6.4 lakh locations covering each of the 8.5 lakh Polling Station areas.

I am happy to inform you that 3.8 crore voters have been enrolled in the Electoral Rolls in the last few months. We have already handed over the EPIC Cards to more than half of them in the last few days. The rest are receiving the card today in the manner the young men received now on the stage. This could easily be the biggest act of empowerment around a single day, anywhere in the world.

I feel even more proud to inform that 1 cr. 11 lakh out of these 3.8 crore are the newly eligible voters of the 18-19 age group. In fact, through the National Voters' Day, we have been able to deal with one of the weakest links in our electoral roll - the under registration of the newly eligible electors. It is encouraging that from a mere 10-15 percent representation of the 18-19 age group, we have been able to cover up to 35-40 percent through sustained campaign of last 15 months. When we registered 52 lakh newly eligible voters on the first National Voters Day, it was historic and we were greatly pleased.

But this time, the additional enrolment in this category shows more than a hundred percent increase. This brings to us a realisation about how much can be done through sincere and sustained pursuit of the by now famous SVEEP strategy – that stands for Systematic Voters Education and Electoral Participation. The focus of our campaign this year has been ‘Women’s registration’ directed at addressing the gender gap in participation.

We have worked in a mission-mode and we have been able to include more than double the number of citizens in the electoral roll, as compared to last year. But, to me this is just the beginning. We will not sit back until we have every eligible citizen of the country on the electoral rolls. You may be aware that we have extended the facility of registration as voters to the Non-Resident Indians also. We expect that the NRIs would avail this facility and become part of the democratic electoral process, from anywhere in the world. I am sure that our electoral base would grow manifold in the years to come with these initiatives.

Our modest beginnings in ensuring maximum participation of the citizens in the electoral process are not restricted to their registration as voters alone. The second and decisive part of this democratic participation is to turn out at the polling booth to vote. Election Commission of India aspires to see every citizen on the electoral roll to exercise her or his franchise when the occasion comes.

You would have come across the Voters’ Education and Awareness initiatives of the Commission in different parts of the country, especially in the States and Union Territories which had their Assembly elections last year and the 5 States where the election process is now on.

We have launched vigorous campaigns, again as a part of the SVEEP programme, to disseminate necessary information, motivate voters and facilitate participation. Interventions were targeted based on findings of scientific surveys of the knowledge, attitudes, behavior and practices of the electorate in each of these States, and by applying social marketing techniques.

Our efforts have yielded results. We received consistently higher turnout in the last seven general elections in the states. In West Bengal and Tamil Nadu, the turnout was the best in history. Going by the performance in registration, I do not have any doubt that the five states where polling is to happen soon, would also have higher turnout.

The Election Commission is committed to the conduct of free, fair and peaceful elections every time; we take all possible steps to ensure that the electorate participates in the electoral process freely and fearlessly. I feel that the National Voters’ Day is not

just for the voters to take a pledge but also for the Commission to resolve how to make voters participation friendlier and attractive.

This would require introspection in all areas of election management like registration, polling station, security, infrastructure, technology, training and grievance redressal. We need to reach out to each and everyone, the last citizen. I assure you that we are continuously doing so. Election to election, there are innovations in order to make sure that the hard earned credibility and the efficient conduct of world's largest elections acquires further glory.

I am very happy to see in front of me some of the finest performers from the field, who have received the National Awards today. They have gone beyond the ordinary call of duty to contribute their mite in managing elections, improving voter registration, educating voters and making fool-proof security arrangements. All their colleagues and counterparts across the country need to emulate their practices, ideas and contributions.

I also congratulate the 20 young voters of Delhi, who received their EPICs today. We welcome them into the elite club of the 75 crore electorate. You have very truly become adults today. I am sure you would act as informed and ethical voters at the first opportunity. Please help others among family, friends and the community to wake up to this power, if they have not done as yet.

We are honoured to have Dr. Kalam as the Chief Guest, who is also our national icon, for motivating citizens and more specifically the youth, to come forward and become part of the democratic electoral process. Our campaigns feature him everywhere, along with a few other celebrities from different walks of life who have lent their voices to the cause of voters' participation in various states and regions.

With these words, I would like to thank, the relentlessly working Booth Level Officers, Electoral Registration Officers and their Assistants and Deputies, the District Election Officers, the 35 Chief Electoral Officers in each State and UT, to all my colleagues and staff of the Election Commission, specially the Director General, Akshay Rout and other officers of the SVEEP Division and all other stakeholders for making the National Voters' Day a success.

Let me end by underlining the faith of the Election Commission in greater participation for the sake of a stronger democracy.

Jai Hind!