

Remarks by Shri V S Sampath, Chief Election Commissioner of India on assumption of charge on 11th June 2012

I feel honoured that I have been given this responsibility to lead one of the finest institutions that the Indian Constitution has provided – a glorious institution that reinforces Indian democracy. I am privileged to have been a part of this Commission for over three years. I am conscious of the onerous task on hand.

In 1952, Independent India conducted its first elections. On the eve of the polls, Mr. Sukumar Sen, the first CEC of India, had the task of preparing voter lists for 173 million voters for the very first time. Party symbols, ballot papers and ballot boxes were designed again for the first time. Polling stations had to be built and honest and efficient polling officers had to be recruited. On the eve of the elections, Mr. Sukumar Sen is said to have remarked that this was [I quote] “the biggest experiment in democracy in human history” [unquote]. There were several sceptics at that point. A veteran editor at that time commented [I quote] "a very large majority (will) exercise votes for the first time: not many know what the vote is, why they should vote, and whom they should vote for; no wonder the whole adventure is rated as the biggest gamble in history" [unquote].

As I stand before you today as the 18th Chief Election Commissioner of India, I note with great pride that we have conducted 15 general elections to the Lok Sabha, including the last one in 2009, during which period I had joined the commission. The Commission has also conducted about 340 general elections to state assemblies, thus cementing the democratic fabric across the federal structure. We have come a long way from a 173 million electorate in the first national election, to 714 million in 2009, which is larger than both the European Union and the United States combined.

Hence, I can say with no doubt in my mind that the experiment has succeeded, the gamble has paid off, and India stands in the forefront of democracy with the other great nations of the world.

Two years ago, on our Diamond jubilee, we laid a simple vision: ‘Elections that are completely free of crime and abuse of money, based on a perfect electoral roll and with full participation of voters’. As you know, we have continuously set high bench marks for ourselves. We would strive to deliver Elections which are free, fair, peaceful, transparent and highly participative every time.

Before I go further, I would like to say that today the Commission can see much farther and clearer, since we stand on the shoulders of giants. I would like to acknowledge the contribution of my illustrious predecessors, each one of them having contributed to embellished election management, notably my immediate predecessor, Dr SY Quraishi, for his untiring commitment to the cause of electoral reforms and innovation. Under his leadership, the Commission has taken several measures for voter education and increased voter awareness, which resulted in unprecedented increase in voting percentages in the recent state elections. I wish Dr Quraishi all the very best in all his future endeavours.

I would like to share some of my priorities on this occasion.

1. Electoral Roll

First and foremost, a clean electoral roll and hassle free registration are among our highest priorities. Every eligible person shall be on the roll and name of every ineligible person shall be removed. There shall be 100% photos on the roll and every voter shall be given an EPIC with correct details. We will engage all outreach methods, voters’ education and technology to achieve these objectives.

2. Electoral Reforms

Next, all of us know electoral reforms are long overdue. There have been a number of consultations between the Commission, Government, political parties and public at large. The reform proposals are at last mile stage. The commission will strive for the early implementation of electoral reforms which are key for putting an end to criminalization of politics and undue influence of money power in electoral arena.

3. Money Power

Use of money power in elections disturbs the level playing field and vitiates the purity of elections. Our objectives will be two fold – to ensure legal expenses like rally, poster, banner, vehicles etc are kept within the ceiling limits, while simultaneously ensuring that illegal expenses like bribing the voters with cash or kind is effectively prevented.

4. Training

Going forward, training will continue to get a very high focus, if we have to ensure a cent percent error-free election. Our Institute, IIIDEM is about a year old now and has rolled out 45 courses so far. This has immensely helped in recent elections. A comprehensive cascade of training courses will now be built into every general election starting from the training of master trainers and DEOs at IIIDEM, going right up to the field level functionaries in the interest of better election management. IIIDEM will be made stronger and its doors will be wide open to all countries wanting to avail its services.

5. Forthcoming elections

The immediate task on hand is the conduct and completion of the elections to the high offices of the President (25.7.2012) & Vice-President of India (11.8.2012). An orientation workshop for the returning officer, Assistant returning officers & presiding officers for the presidential poll was held last month. All preparatory works are in full swing and an announcement regarding election schedule is due shortly.

We are already engaged in preparation for the forthcoming elections in the states of Gujarat (17.01.2013), Himachal Pradesh (10.01.2013), Nagaland (26.03.2013), Tripura (16.03.2013) and Meghalaya (10.03.2013). Systematic training of personnel has already commenced. Work relating to electoral roll and polling station rationalisation has already been taken up. The Commission will start visiting these States soon.

It has often been said, “Information is the currency of democracy”. The media has played, and continues to play a key role in providing the Commission with timely and accurate information

and constructive criticism of our actions. I look forward to your continued support in the days to come.

Thank you.