

ELECTION COMMISSION OF INDIA

Nirvachan Sadan, Ashoka Road, New Delhi – 110 001.

No. ECI/PN/22/2002

Dated : June 13, 2002

PRESS NOTE

Subject : Steps being taken by the Election Commission to ensure free and fair elections in Jammu & Kashmir.

With a view to ensuring that the next J&K Assembly elections shall be among the fairest in the history of the State, the Election Commission chose to interactively engage with all the players in the electoral process, viz., recognised political parties in J&K State, the local press and government officials, particularly, field functionaries who conduct elections, many months in advance. The main objectives were to have a sound system in place, to create an atmosphere for competitive elections and impart a sense of security to intending parties and candidates.

2. To this end, the Chief Election Commissioner, alongwith Election Commissioner, Shri B.B. Tandon, and accompanied by a team of Election Commission officials, had visited both Jammu and Srinagar and held detailed discussions with representatives of all recognised political parties in J&K State, members of the press and the concerned officials, including Deputy Commissioners of districts, in March, 2002. Thereafter, officials from the Commission have been making visits to the State every month to observe on ground that the directives of the Commission are actually being followed and implemented. The last important visit took place towards the end of May, when Election Commissioner, Shri T.S. Krishna Murthy, along with the concerned Secretary in the Election Commission dealing with the J&K State, went to Srinagar.

3. The first task that the Commission carried out in its March visit was to disabuse the people that just because they were visiting Kashmir, the elections were around the corner. All concerned were told in emphatic terms that the elections were a long way off and large number of management inputs were to be put in place before they would be held. They were also told that repeated visits to the State shall take place so that the Commission drives information on a first hand basis about the nature of implementation on ground of its directives. Finally, it was clearly spelled out that it is the Commission and Commission alone which shall decide on the dates and schedule of elections.

4. The inputs received from the political parties have been most helpful to the Commission in charting out its course of action to ensure a good election in the State. All the political parties had complained that the electoral rolls were inaccurate, containing within them large number of dead voters, that they were unwieldy as they contained a large number of supplementaries and that they were in large parts not legible due to repeated photocopies. The political parties also urged the Commission to issue identity

cards to voters to prevent bogus voting. They wanted the existing polling station locations to be rationalised so that voters don't have to travel over long distances. Finally, when they were informed that this time the elections would be conducted through Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs), they welcomed it as EVMs totally rule out any abuse in the counting of votes.

5. Based on its interactions with different groups in J&K State, the Commission has so far taken measures in the following areas with a view to bringing about good election practices during polls in the J&K State. They are :-

- i) Making available to all concerned in the State clean, legible, computerised electoral rolls of high accuracy, which would form the basis for the electorate to cast their franchise.
- ii) Moving electronic voting machines into the State to subserve the stated intention of the Commission to conduct the elections by using EVMs in all polling stations.
- iii) Issuing instructions to the concerned field functionaries in the State to rationalise the polling stations so that not more than three polling stations be housed in one building and by and large no voter is to traverse more than 2 kms. to reach his polling station. This exercise, which is to be carried out in consultation with political parties, is to be over by 25.06.2002.
- iv) Issuing directions to the law and order authorities to ensure that there is a measure of equity amongst recognised political parties in getting security cover so that their election campaign can take place on an equitable basis.
- v) Issuance of photo identity cards to voters in State.

6. The points enumerated above show the efforts being made by the Commission in ensuring good and clean elections in the State of Jammu and Kashmir. However, some amount of elaboration is necessary on the two points of computerisation of electoral rolls and issuance of photo identity cards. Due to a variety of reasons, the primary one being unrest in the Valley, the electoral rolls of the State were last intensively revised in 1988. Thereafter, they have been revised, more or less every year, on a summary basis. Thus, over a period of 14 years, the rolls have generated a large number of supplements of inclusions, deletions and correction and have become unwieldy and lacking in accuracy. Moreover, the rolls have been hand-written and photo-copied from time to time whenever summary revisions took place or elections or bye-elections were held as a result of which a large mass of illegible paper reached both the polling stations and the political parties and formed the basis for the voting which took place. This was the common complaint made by all political parties when the Commission made the aforesaid visit to the State in March, 2002.

7. The Commission, therefore, launched the programme to bring about accuracy in the rolls by removing dead voters there from and including those who have been left out for any reason, with reference to 01.01.2002 as the qualifying date. This was carried out as a special drive during April to May, 2002, in which the entire electoral machinery in the State was actively involved right down to the polling station level. As urged by all political parties in rural areas, this exercise was carried out by comparing the rolls with the panchayat rolls. This has resulted in fairly clean rolls in the State comparable in its accuracy to other States. The computerisation of rolls in Jammu and Kashmir, which are in Urdu, was held up because of non-availability of proper fonts and the expertise in data entry in Urdu in large numbers. This problem was overcome by locating a software company that developed the programme by which the rolls in Urdu could be computerised, and by entrusting the work of data entry to the Uttar Pradesh Urdu Academy. The entire operation, some small portion of which is still underway, was launched in the last week of April with teams from all the 87 Assembly Constituencies in J&K State going over to Lucknow and Kanpur with their electoral rolls. Each roll with the mother roll of 1988 and supplements of all subsequent years upto 2002 has now been consolidated into one roll. The data entry in Urdu, being carried out at 15 centres, was corrected for errors once at the centre itself and thereafter taken back to the Districts for another check and brought back to Lucknow and Kanpur for further corrections. It is only after such intensive checks that computerised rolls are being finally printed which would be used for the elections. This massive exercise is almost over, with 90% of the work, i.e., data entry of about 52 lakh electors out of about 55 lakh total electorate being already finished. The Commission, through this release, wishes to place on record its deep appreciation of the field staff of all the Districts in J&K State, who have carried out this arduous work, and also to the UP Urdu Academy for carrying out this huge task without any slippages.

8. As regards the photo identity cards, because the current computerisation of J&K rolls does not have the full backup of 46 control tables as in the other States and the rolls in J&K State have been generated with 8 control tables, the conventional method of issuance of photo identity cards by using computers cannot be adopted in the State at this stage. Moreover, in view of the security implications of photo identity cards, it was felt that a higher order of security is necessary for photo identity cards in Jammu and Kashmir than in the rest of the country. The Commission has, therefore, entrusted to the India Security Press, Nashik, the task of preparing pre-formatted, pre-numbered photo identity cards on special security paper on which the elector's photograph furnished by him would be affixed and the card laminated and issued to him/her. This is a measure to achieve Commission's objectives to ensure compulsory identification of voters at the time of elections. Under this ambitious programme to be launched shortly, the cards would start to be issued to the voters in Jammu and Kashmir from 15th June onwards. Necessary precautions have been taken to ensure that it is only the genuine voter who gets the card. Also, the Commission will ensure through appropriate directions in time that no genuine voter is denied the right to cast his/her vote.

9. Lastly, the Commission wants to carry out a historic first in the election management for the elections in J&K State. The Commission, through its computerisation of rolls, would generate voters slips on household basis for the voters in J&K State and issue these slips to them at their door steps. This has been a long-standing demand of most of the political parties with the Commission as it considerably reduces their cost in campaign as well as ensures a fair and equitable outreach.

(C.R.BRAHMAM)

SECRETARY