
Annexure

Farewell speech of Sh Rajiv Kumar, the 25th Chief Election Commissioner on 17 Feb 2025

Executive summary:

Unwavering faith in democracy and the wisdom of close to a billion Indian voters is a guarantee that democratic values will only grow stronger. The commitment of 15 million polling personnel ensures free and fair elections, reinforcing public confidence in the system. Motivated and uncorroborated attacks on democratic institutions will not shake their trust, which is paramount and is a legacy built over 75 years. The increasing participation of women voters, surpassing male turnout in many states, marks a historic shift, strengthening democratic engagement. However, urban voter apathy remains a pressing concern despite outreach efforts. For a more inclusive electoral engagement, remote voting mechanisms for migrants and enabling NRIs to vote must be prioritized.

Technology is transforming conduct of elections. Innovations like biometric authentication and the totalizer system will strengthen the process. AI can revolutionize conduct of elections, but safeguards against cyber threats and disinformation are crucial. Social media companies must introspect and act responsibly by not letting their algorithms propagate fake narratives. Media and social media platforms must ensure that truth prevails over misinformation.

mmmmmmclvi. *transparency in the functioning of political parties is essential. The Integrated Election Expenditure Management System has been a step forward, but mandatory e-compliance for political party funding and expenditure is necessary. Misuse of Registered Unrecognized Political Parties (RUPPs) for tax evasion must be curbed with vigilant monitoring. Political parties must ensure that promises in manifestos are backed by clear financial disclosures to prevent fiscal mismanagement and timely court order will facilitate.*

The Model Code of Conduct has upheld electoral fairness, ensuring responsible campaigning without restricting political debate. However, political parties must take accountability for their star campaigners' rhetoric and strive for constructive, issue-based debates.

The rising trend of misleading narratives during peak polling or counting hours is a deliberate attempt to distort facts and mislead voters. Casting doubt on outcomes after active and full participation in the process is undesirable. While the Commission exercises constitutional restraint, such tactics are better avoided in the interest of a mature democracy. The judiciary's role in upholding electoral integrity remains vital. In the course of judicial proceedings, due consideration to election timelines must be maintained.

India's expertise in election management system is globally respected and is one of the biggest soft-power of the country. As the leadership transitions, the Election Commission remains committed to strengthening democracy through transparency, innovation, and inclusivity.

As I bid farewell to this esteemed institution, which has been nothing short of a place of worship, I extend my deepest gratitude to all those who have been part of this incredible journey.

First and foremost, my heartfelt thanks to the Indian voters, whose numbers have surged to almost a billion. Their unwavering faith in democracy has been the cornerstone of my strength. It is always inspiring to witness democracy in action, the strength of inclusivity and demographic diversity at the polling stations with diverse mosaic of electors including women, youngsters, PwDs, elderly voters, PVTGs, third genders, etc. This also reflects a profound message of hope in Indian democracy. The very essence of democracy lies in its inclusivity, ensuring that every voice, regardless of age, gender, or ability, is heard and valued.

The sight of long voter queues in places like Jammu and Kashmir and Left-Wing Extremism-affected areas speaks volumes about the people's faith in the electoral process. A peaceful, violence free election in these regions is not just an achievement; it is a testament to the power of the vote in shaping the nation's future, victory of ballot over bullet.

Our voters are our biggest asset. I salute the wisdom and maturity of our voters, who can discern truth from misinformation. Their awareness and commitment to democratic values reflect their readiness to shape a just and progressive future. I firmly believe that our voters' wisdom and active engagement at all layers of democracy guarantee that our nation will prosper, democratic values will only grow stronger, designed and uncorroborated attacks on democratic institutions will not shake their trust. India will continue to create democratic surpluses for the democracy's world over.

I also want to convey my gratitude to the women voters who turned out in large numbers, surpassing male turnout in many states, and finally in 2024 Lok Sabha election as well. They have created a new chapter in electoral history, showcasing their vital role in shaping the future of this nation.

I thank the young and first-time voters who came out to vote, as they are the future and the true ambassadors of our democracy. Your participation is not just a right but a responsibility. It can bring change, build a better future, and make a real impact. Exercise your franchise wisely, for every vote contributes to a stronger democracy. It becomes an anxiety if you do not step forward.

While the nation takes pride in conducting one of the largest elections in the world, the lack of voter participation in major urban center's raises pressing concerns. The trend of urban voter apathy is highly disconcerting. The vibrant hustle of city life often masks a troubling silence at polling booths reflecting a democracy deficit in making. Despite massive outreach and better access to polling stations, facilities, and even scheduling of elections mid-week, urban voters often neglect their responsibility to vote. Continued engagement with urban voters is a must.

A heartfelt gratitude to the vast family of polling personnel and security staff, the foot soldiers of the Election Commission of India. Their numbers surged to an incredible 15 million during the last Lok Sabha elections, yet their dedication to upholding democracy has never wavered. Their relentless efforts ensure the seamless conduct of elections, time and again. And I am confident that as long as our foot soldiers continue to perform their duties with transparency and impartiality, engaging political parties and the media at every step, no one can weaken the strong democracy of our country regardless of any insinuations that come their way.

I extend my gratitude to my fellow Commissioners, past and present, whose wisdom and collaboration have enriched the Commission's work. To my colleagues at Nirvachan Sadan and Chief Electoral Officers across states, your commitment has been instrumental in carrying forward the mission of free and fair elections. Conducting elections in the world's largest democracy is no small task, and it has been an honor to work alongside such dedicated and selfless colleagues.

Internationally, it has been an honour to engage with Election Management Bodies worldwide, exchanging ideas to strengthen democratic processes across borders. I was overwhelmed by the respect that India attracts in conduct of free, and fair elections in the largest democracy in the world and the expectations that global election management community has to learn from the Indian experience.

Conducting elections in the world's largest democracy is an immense responsibility, one that requires constant innovation and vigilance. As I pass the baton to my successors, leaving the commission in experienced and competent hands, I acknowledge the evolving challenges ahead. The future of elections will be shaped by a complex and multifaceted blend of technological advancements, voter engagement, influx of fake narratives and the balancing of transparency with privacy. The Election Commission has to remain steadfast in preserving the trust of voters while adapting to these new realities.

The Model Code of Conduct has played a crucial role in maintaining a delicate balance between allowing robust political debate and ensuring responsible campaigning. While it has been leveraged effectively to uphold electoral fairness, we must remain mindful that any overreach could stifle genuine political expression, just as unchecked violations could undermine the sanctity of elections. The challenge ahead lies in carefully calibrating the MCC's enforcement, ensuring it remains an effective tool for ethical campaigning without becoming an undue constraint on democratic expression. The Commission on many occasions in the past tread upon a fine line which required the balancing of proactive actions with constitutional wisdom and restraint in the interest of allowing for the fullest and vibrant electoral participation by parties and candidates alike, while not overrun the legal judicial process. Political Parties and their presidents must also take responsibility for the utterance of their star campaigners and leaders.

Technology has been a powerful enabler in our electoral processes, helping refine voter rolls, streamline operations, and engage citizens more effectively. We are at the forefront of adopting technology in our electoral operations. The suite of more than 20 applications provides the perfect ecosystem for rolling the giant wheel of the electoral system from Registration to Results.

ERONET is a web-based platform for Electoral officials, supporting 14 languages and 11 scripts to manage the country's largest electoral database safely. It standardizes form processing, database structure, and E-Roll printing while automating voter registration, verification, and decision support. Used across all States/UTs, it ensures a seamless, integrated electoral roll management system on a national-level infrastructure. Using facial recognition software's, our electoral rolls have been further purified.

However, innovations like biometric authentication may further help prevent impersonation and multiple voting, ensuring that every vote belongs to the rightful voter. Additionally, emerging technologies hold great potential for more efficient management of movement of man and material, AI enabled capacity building modules, enhancing transparency and security in elections, etc.

Presently in the system of counting of votes, the result is retrieved from each EVM, then the votes polled in respect of each candidate is totaled and result is declared. The demerit of this system of counting is that the candidates can know from where they have received how much vote. This leads to the problem of post-election violence, victimization and exclusion of the supporters of opposition parties from developmental activities. To address this, technologies like the totalizer, already developed by the Commission would ensure that the votes polled by each candidate- polling station wise is not disclosed. I believe that this matter should be explored, political consensus attempted and tested on a pilot basis to enhance voter secrecy and protect the integrity of the electoral process.

The Election Commission has always worked to make elections more inclusive, ensuring that every voter can exercise their franchise. However, with nearly 300 million electors not engaging in the electoral process, due to reasons including migration- domestic and external, it is imperative to move forward with pilot programs for Remote Voting Mechanisms. ECI has explored the option of using a modified version of the existing model of M3 EVMs to enable voting at remote polling stations i.e. polling stations outside home constituency, for domestic migrants. A Concept Note for on the matter of improving voter participation of domestic migrants using remote voting was also shared with all Recognized National and State Political Parties, ahead of all party consultation held on 16.01.2023. Efforts to build consensus among various stakeholders must continue to bring the ballot closer to those who cannot reach polling stations.

India's growing aspirations for its rightful place in world order, require to show deep commitment to Commission's moto of " No voter to be left behind". It is right time to enable our Non-Resident Indians to vote from outside the country. Commission has developed necessary mechanisms required. The Government should take a final decision swiftly to enfranchise those who contribute significantly to our nation from afar.

Financial transparency in elections remains a vital pillar of democratic integrity and level playing field. The introduction of the Integrated Election Expenditure Management System (IEMS) has been a significant step for an online compliance framework for financial reporting by political parties. However, as the compliance was voluntary, most of the major parties continue to use offline mode, despite IEMS being user friendly with lots of pre-populated data fields and facility to directly upload csv files. Therefore, Commission in future may consider bringing the full political party compliance and engagement ecosystem online and making e-compliance mandatory in future.

Political parties must uphold transparency in both fundraising and expenditure. Certain RUPPs had become instruments for tax evasion by way of bogus donation rackets and thereby misused enabling provisions of the Income-tax Act and R.P. Act. The Commission while doing the massive verification exercise of RUPPs also verified the financial compliance status of RUPPs. The exercise not only resulted in delisting/ declaring inactive of non-compliant RUPPs, it also flagged the issue of misuse of exemption provision under the income-tax Act. CBDT, since then has been taking necessary enforcement actions to curb this misuse of RUPPs. However, as the RUPPs make their compliance before respective CEOs, the offices of CEOs need to be more sensitized towards various aspects of financial compliances by political parties. Transparency and accountability must remain at the heart of political financing reforms.

The Commission remains steadfast in its commitment to addressing concerns surrounding unchecked freebies and overpromising manifestos. While the matter related to freebies is currently sub-judice, and I hope for a timely decision from the court, it is imperative in the interim that political promises are backed by clear disclosures on their financial viability and their effect on the fiscal health of the state. We had also prescribed formats to ensure that political parties transparently display the financial implications of their promises against well-defined, quantifiable parameters like quantum of funds required to fulfill promise, availability of fiscal space, means to fulfill promise by cutting expenditure or augmenting revenue, revenue deficit, fiscal deficit, requirement of any additional borrowings, impact on fiscal deficit, etc. to let voter know the feasibility of fulfilling the promise within the available State or Union financial space.

Additionally, emerging technologies hold great potential for more efficient management of polling logistics and operation, AI-enabled capacity building modules and enhancing transparency and security in elections. AI can inter alia be leveraged to ensure that voter information, and voting instructions are available in multiple languages and that voting mechanisms are accessible to all voters.

While the integration of AI and digital tools holds great promise, we must also guard against their misuse. The rise of cyber threats and disinformation campaigns necessitates stronger safeguards and strategic countermeasures. The unchecked use of bots, fake SM content, and AI-generated content during campaigns can distort public opinion and polarize societies. The Election Commission of India's has recently issued advisory to political parties mandating the clear labeling of AI-generated content on social media. This is a significant step in the direction of protecting democratic discourse.

Social media companies must introspect on their role in upholding free speech while ensuring it does not become a casualty of their own algorithmic shortcomings. The very freedom they champion should not be compromised by their failure to detect even the most obvious fake content. Timely detection and labeling of misinformation are crucial before it spreads unchecked.

We have also seen many digital portals propagating misleading narratives and half-truths. While the Commission is generally restrained in reaction, I urge CEOs of various states to not only respond to such issues but also to preempt and actively dispel such notions.

As a nation celebrating 75 years of its Republic, it is worth reflecting on the nature of election campaigns. A concerning trend has emerged in recent years, with political discourse increasingly becoming such that scars are left even after campaign period. This not only lowers the quality of debate but also risks disillusioning our youth with the electoral process. Should we not strive for a more constructive and dignified dialogue? Should political parties not focus on issue-based debates? Should political parties not take responsibility for encouraging youth participation through their campaigns? These are the questions political parties must introspect.

I have observed a pattern in the timing of certain narratives. During peak polling or counting hours, a wave of fake allegations and rumors begins to spread across media and social media, misleading people and creating confusion. Narratives are deliberately set to distort facts. However, the Commission follows a policy of restraint, choosing not to respond while the election process is underway, ensuring that focus remains on the integrity and smooth conduct of the elections. The live reporting of hearing of the long pending cases at critical junctures, sometimes fuel distrust that the petitioner intends to create. It would be beneficial if such proceedings are scheduled with due consideration to the election period, ensuring that the electoral process remains smooth and undisturbed. This is a specific expectation of India's esteemed constitutional Courts. I say this while recording my gratitude for the higher judiciary of the country which has consistently acted as the guardian spirit of India's electoral process and system.

The Commission, as an institution, often finds itself unfairly blamed by those unwilling to accept electoral outcomes. A pressing concern is the growing tendency to target election officials in the aftermath of electoral contests. It is perceived as a convenient scapegoat. All candidates and parties are involved in every stage of the process with utmost transparency. Having participated in each step, without raising objections or filing appeals during the process, then attempting to create doubt afterward is undesirable. Dialogue should always be the

preferred approach and while the Commission reacts with sagacity, stoicism and restraint, this is a disturbing trend and should be abandoned soon.

The media is playing a crucial role in ensuring transparency and accountability in the electoral process. All out efforts must continue to involve them at every stage of electoral cycle so that in the rush to break news first, misinformation and false narratives do not gain undue prominence.

India stands as a global beacon of democracy with one of the largest and most transparent election systems, India's democratic framework has the quality to inspire nations worldwide and thus a soft power to be adequately leveraged.

Lastly, as I step away, I do so know that the responsibility we carry is greater than of any one individual but is upheld by each of you every day. I hope the Commission continues to strengthen this great institution, uphold its values. I am confident that I am leaving Commission in more competent, committed and professional hands.

Thank you, and my best wishes to all of you.