

Accessible Voting- A Landmark Achievement

We should all rejoice in the fact that the Election Commission of the largest democracy in the world has been conscious about the electoral rights of persons with disabilities. Thanks to judgment of the Supreme Court of India dated April 19, 2004, the Election Commission of India has already taken a variety of measures. These measures include their identification, inclusive electoral roles, appointment of special officers, awareness, public education, involvement of NGOs, DPOs and CSOs, sensitization and orientation of election machinery, accessible website, communication, physical access at polling booths, cooperation of political parties, priority in entering, entry of companion, Braille signage, Braille ballot papers and special care for persons with speech and hearing impairment.

With the enactment of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016, provision of all these facilities or taking of these and all such other initiatives is no more a matter of choice. As per Section 11 of this statute, it is mandatory to make all polling booths accessible; and to provide all material of electoral process in an accessible format. It is heartening that the Election Commission of India has taken virtually all measures for making elections accessible for all people with disabilities.

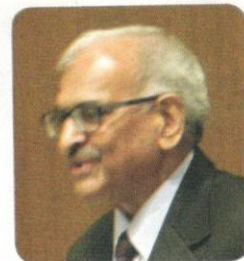
During the General Elections of 2019, the Election Commission of India took bold initiatives in providing ballot papers in Braille, providing Braille markings on EVMs, producing Voting Cards in Braille, providing election booklet in Braille, signage at polling booths, appointment of persons with disabilities as guides at election, physical accessibility at election booths, encouraging district authorities to provide transport facility and ensuring 'walk-in' entry to the election booths.

Another most note-worthy initiative of the ECI is to create nationwide public awareness through print and electronic media as regard voting rights

of people with disabilities, importance of their vote and facilities available at the polling both for facilitating their voting. Similarly, providing facility to such persons for their online enrolment, the special campaign for their registration and making the website of ECI and SECI accessible are excellent measures towards promoting accessible elections.

These measures have not merely given an opportunity to persons with disabilities to exercise their voting rights, these have, for the first time, recognized the concept of equal opportunity, equality, equity and social justice in the field of disability development. These measures have not only fulfilled the mandate of Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016 in respect protection of voting rights, they have also recognised the voting power of such people. These initiatives have given a universal message that people with disabilities can also contribute towards formation of democratically elected Governments. These measures have given voice, self-confidence, dignity and respect to such people.

Similarly, providing National Awards for promoting accessible voting to the respective State Governments, individuals and NGOs is a step in the right direction. It is a beginning of an inspiring journey on the path of inclusive development of people with disabilities and for that the efforts of the ECI are most appreciated.



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