

SPEECH BY THE PRESIDENT OF INDIA AT THE CONCLUDING CEREMONY OF THE DIAMOND JUBILEE CELEBRATIONS OF THE ELECTION COMMISSION OF INDIA ON JANUARY 25, 2011 AT NEW DELHI

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am happy to participate in the Valedictory function of the Diamond Jubilee Celebrations of the Election Commission of India, the celebrations of which I had the occasion to launch last year. I understand that during the past year, the Commission organized a series of events in the country on the theme of "Sharing Best Electoral Practices". Based on these, the Best Electoral Practices Awards have been conferred today. I convey my greetings and good wishes to the award winners. I am also happy that a film on 60 Years of Indian Elections has been released today. This film should have great educative value in enabling our citizens to understand our electoral journey since we became a Republic, as also appreciate the great amount of efforts and preparations required for holding elections, and the importance of the right to vote.

I congratulate the Election Commission for its remarkable contribution to the flowering of democracy in the country. The Election Commission holds, in many ways, the key into the portals and chambers of democracy. The Commission is entrusted with conduct of the entire process of elections - the preparation of the voters' list, registering political parties, admitting candidates into the fray after scrutiny of their papers, monitoring election campaigns, making voting and counting arrangements as well as declaring results. For a credible electoral exercise that is free and fair, the people, candidates, the political parties and the Commission have to work together.

I am pleased that to commemorate the founding day of the Election Commission – the 25th of January – from now onwards, will be observed as the National Voter's Day every year, to spread awareness among voters about effective participation in the electoral process. Every citizen is a stakeholder in the maintenance, and the nurturing of

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democracy in the country. As Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, our first Prime Minister had said, "Democracy is based on the active and intelligent interest of the people in their national affairs and in the elections that result in the formation of governments." Comprehensive and correct electoral rolls are the very foundation of a successful election. Every year a significant number of young people on attainment of 18 years of age also become eligible as voters. In spite of the annual exercise for the revision of electoral rolls, a significant number of new voters do not come on to the voters list for one reason or another. In order to overcome this, I am pleased that the Commission has decided to carry out a regular exercise to identify all eligible voters, across the more than eight lakh polling stations in the country, and give to them Election Photo Identity Cards on 25th January at every polling station. I congratulate the Election Commission for this commendable initiative. I was, therefore, particularly happy to confer the Electors Photo Identify Cards to some of the newly registered voters on the first National Voters Day.

In its over six decades, the Election Commission has conducted 15 Lok Sabha and more than 300 elections to the State Legislative Assemblies, which has facilitated the peaceful, orderly and democratic transfer of power. Carrying out the most extensive and mammoth election process in the world with exceptional success is no mean achievement. Every year in the Election Commission's schedule, there would be one or more elections to be conducted. Each election would have greatly added to the Commission's knowledge about the conduct of elections. There would have been new aspects and new lessons learnt, enriching the experience base of the Commission. This has contributed to improvements and additionally, the Commission has also incorporated technological advances in the conduct of elections in India. Indeed, there has been a change in both quality and quantity of its operations. In 1962, the voting process moved from the balloting system to the marking system, and then gradually to the present system based on Electronic Voting Machines. Printed electoral rolls have now been substituted by computerized photo-electoral rolls. The Elector's Photo Identity Card (EPIC), has been issued to voters. Results are now declared in one day, as opposed to phased announcements earlier.

There can, however, never be a time when one can say that our tasks are complete. We should also be constantly looking at how processes can be improved, and how our democracy can be further strengthened. Some of the persistent concerns are the criteria for candidates to fight elections, so that criminals and other such elements are debarred from contesting elections. Good electoral practices and high conduct will attract the youth as well as talented and capable people to politics. The influence of money needs to be curbed. Elections are not about buying votes, it is about selecting candidates committed to working for the aspirations of the people and hence, eligible to be a representative of the people. Money can distort choices of the people, when voters are influenced through free distribution of goods, or through distortion of perception through paid news. I am sure that the Election Commission will continue to look at ways and means to make our electoral processes and procedures much more robust and free of any malpractices. If need be, necessary legislation and procedures must be introduced to achieve these objectives.

I am acutely aware of the tremendous work involved to keep the wheels of democracy moving. I believe that no effort should be spared to uphold the sanctity of our democratic institutions and to keep their uninterrupted functioning intact. The Election Commission, as an independent entity has not only helped strengthen democracy at home, but also enhanced the global prestige of India as a democracy. It has often been called upon to share its experiences of the conduct of elections in the world's largest democracy with other countries.

With these words, I convey my greetings to the Election Commission of India for the gigantic mechanism and efforts put in for the smooth functioning of the electoral process, and wish it many successful elections in the future.

Thank You.

JAI HIND!

Note : Speeches of the President of India are available at www.presidentofindia.nic.in

