ELECTION COMMISSION OF INDIA

Nirvachan Sadan, Ashoka Road, New Delhi-110001

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PRESS NOTE

Democracies world over come together to share experiences of conducting elections during Covid 19

ECI hosts International Webinar on 'Issues, Challenges and Protocols for Conducting Elections during COVID-19: Sharing Country Experiences'

Two Publications released on the occasion; India A-WEB Centre to bring out an 'A-WEB India Journal of Elections'.

CEC highlights scale of elections to be conducted in Bihar amid the Covid19 pandemic; Commission to take a decision soon on visiting the State.

On completion of one year of Chairmanship of the Association of World Election Bodies (A-WEB), Election Commission of India today hosted an International Webinar on the Theme "Issues, Challenges and Protocols for Conducting Elections during COVID-19 : Sharing Country Experiences'. It was an occasion for democracies world over to come together to share experiences of conducting elections during Covid19.

It may be recalled that last year on 03 Sep 2019 India had taken over as Chair of A-WEB for 2019-2021 term during the 4th General Assembly of A-WEB held at Bengaluru. Inaugurating the Webinar, Hon'ble Chief Election Commissioner of India and Chairperson, A-WEB Shri Sunil Arora spoke of the "tough predicament" faced by Election Management Bodies across the world - whether and how to hold scheduled elections in a state of public health emergency.

He said the contextual framework of every country was different, the extent and trajectory of the disease varied and so did the capacity of each country to respond to the novel corona virus and its catastrophic impact. He mentioned countries such as South Korea, Australia, Malawi, Taiwan, Mongolia and many others who went ahead with scheduled elections even as they put in place the enormous arrangements required to ensure the health and safety of people while conducting election.

Shri Sunil Arora mentioned that Elections in India pose formidable challenges on account of large electorate, geographical and linguistic diversity and differing climatic conditions. Explaining in detail the scale of the upcoming elections to the Legislative Assembly of Bihar, he mentioned that the total number of electors is 72.9 million.

Explaining the impact of Covid-19 on the election, Shri Arora highlighted how Covid19 exigencies and social distancing measures necessitated a revisit of ECI's extant instructions. The maximum number of electors at a polling station was reduced from 1500 to 1000, and consequently, the number of polling stations jumped by 40 per cent, from 65,000 to 100,000. These changes have huge logistics and manpower implications. CEC mentioned that the Commission would take a decision within the next two to three days, on visiting Bihar.

Chief Election Commissioner also mentioned that ECI has placed a lot of emphasis on extending facilitation to senior citizens, women, Persons with disabilities and in current circumstances, ensuring franchise to Covid positive voters and those in quarantine. In this context, the CEC mentioned how, beginning with the elections to the Legislative Assembly of Jharkhand in November-December 2019, and elections to the Legislative Assembly of Delhi in February 2020, the postal ballot facility was extended to voters who are aged more than 80 years, persons with disability and those who engaged in specified essential services. This facility of postal ballot has been extended to Covid positive electors who are in quarantine/hospitalized.

Shri Sunil Arora mentioned the specific and detailed guidelines that have been drawn up on conducting election during the time of Covid. He also mentioned the successful conduct of elections to 18 seats of the Rajya Sabha in the month of June, 2020. He noted that elections are due in the states of West Bengal, Assam, Kerala, Puducherry and Tamil Naduin the first half of the year 2021.

CEC recalled the AWEB General Assembly, held in Bengaluru in September 2019. He noted that the Webinar today is being held under the aegis of India A-WEB Centre on the occasion of completion of one year of ECI's term as Chair of A-WEB.

Mentioning the two publications being released today viz. 'Brief Profiles of the Countries, member EMBs and Partner Organisations of A-WEB'and 'COVID 19 and International Election Experience', he said these would be a useful tool for researchers and practitioners alike. He said that A-WEB India Centre has also progressed considerably towards publishing a world class journal called "AWEB Journal of Elections'. The first issue of this journal will be released in March 2021.

Over 120 delegates from 45 countries across the world (viz. Angola, Argentina, Australia, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Botswana, Brazil, Cambodia, Cameroon, Colombia, Democratic Republic of Congo, Dominica, El Salvador, Ethiopia, Fiji, Georgia, Indonesia, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Republic of Korea, Kyrgyz Republic,   Liberia, Malawi, Maldives, Moldova, Mongolia,

Mozambique, Nigeria, Palestine, Philippines, Romania, Russia, Sao Tome and Principe, Solomon Islands, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Suriname, Sweden, Taiwan, Tonga, Turkey, Uzbekistan and Zambia) and 4 international organizations (viz. International IDEA, International Foundation of Electoral Systems (IFES), Association of World Election Bodies (A-WEB) and European Centre for Elections) participated in the Webinar today.

The Association of World Election Bodies (A-WEB) is largest association of Election Management Bodies (EMBs) worldwide. At present A-WEB has 115 EMBs as Members & 16 Regional Associations/Organisations as Associate Members. ECI has been very closely associated with the process of formation of A-WEB since 2011-12.

Pawan Diwan)
Under Secretary