

Ensuring Polling Arrangements against All Odds

What it takes to be the largest democratic and election management exercise in the world? To answer it simply, well, it's not easy. Testimony of it is the General Elections of 2009, a true painstaking exercise for all, who were part of it, as it involved trekking extreme heights, overcoming icy peaks, marching through deserts in the scorching heat, sailing and crossing streams, touching skies, travelling distances, taking responsibilities, and consequently contributing in letting the democratic flames burning.



Against All Odds

Photographs showing Polling officials with EVMs on their way to their allotted polling stations in Andhra Pradesh during the General Elections 2009

Lok Sabha Elections 2009 was spread over five phases, with phase one of polling on 16th April 2009 and phase five of polling on 13th May, 2009. The magnitude of the exercise could be gauged by the fact that in the General elections 2009, there were 71,377 crore electors to cast their votes at 8, 34,944 Polling stations through 9,08,643 control units and 11,83,543 ballot units of EVMs. For conducting smooth, fair, transparent and peaceful elections, 4.7 million polling personnel, 1.2 million security personnel and 2046 observers were deployed. 119 special trains were run to move security personnel. Also, 55 helicopters were used in this mega exercise. For counting purpose, on 16th May, 2009, there were 1080 centers where approximately 60000 staff were deployed.

The Election Commission of India left no stone unturned in ensuring that even one elector in the Gir forests of Gujarat could cast his vote. For collecting single vote of Guru Bharatdasji Maharaj, a polling station was set up and three poll officials were deployed.

Even two electors were not left out in Sheredand village of Korla district of Chhattisgarh, surrounded by dense forests and difficult hills with no village around for next five kms. The

Election Commission arranged a polling station for these two voters. A polling party consisted of four officials assisted by three security personnel was deployed for the station.

In Arunachal Pradesh, there were four polling stations with just 3 voters each. The terrain was so difficult that it took the polling parties three to four days' travel on foot to reach the polling stations from the nearest helipad or road. In the state, 690 polling parties were transported by helicopter to remote villages, many of them snow-bound and bordering Myanmar and China.

In many parts of Himachal Pradesh, a vote meant braving a tough trek and chilly winds. The highest polling station in the country was a polling station at Hikkam, in the tribal district of Lahaul and Spiti, situated at an altitude of 15000 feet and was set up for 321 voters. With more than one third of the polling stations in the district above 13,000 feet, it was not an easy task for the polling officials. Due to difficult hill terrain, 36 polling stations were declared hypersensitive and 23 sensitive. In Darjeeling district of West Bengal, poll officials overcame trekking of 12 km up the Himalayas to reach the polling station at Srikhola.

"An Overview of the Highest Polling Station 59-Hikkam (15,000 Feet) in Cold Desert of Lahaul & Spiti District"



Keeping in mind the rising mercury and vastness of Barmer constituency, spread over 71,601 square km in the desert districts of Barmer and Jaisalmer , six mobile booths were established to cover 2324 electors of Menau, Jesilia, Nehdai, Toba, Kayam Kik Dhani and Rablao Fakirowala villages. This was an attempt to prevent these electors from travelling uncomfortable long distances under the hot sun to exercise their franchise.

To cross the narrow creeks and water channels in the dense mangrove forest of Sundarbans, election officials and equipment were ferried on boats. The islands of Andaman and Nicobar with its 700 km length posed its challenge. Many places required 35-40 hours of journey by polling officials in boats to reach there. In Lakshdweep, 105 polling stations were accessible by boats only. In Minicoy Island, EVMs were ferried by helicopters.



Polling material being loaded in ferry for far flung areas during the General Elections 2009 : Andaman & Nicobar Islands

In Sonitpur district of Assam, 2 bullock carts were on standby to transport poll materials as the roads were not very good. In many parts of the state, tamed elephants were used to carry election officials and equipments. Porters were engaged for carrying polling material for five polling stations as it involved a 40-km trek through an area infested with wild elephants in Bokaijan district.



Polling Parties riding elephants to their destination in Assam during the General Elections 2009

As if geographical challenges were not enough, there were 79 constituencies marked Naxal affected apart from threats of insurgents in the North East, for which detailed planning and execution was carried out. Overcoming all these challenges came victorious the indelible and insurmountable spirit of democracy with voter turnout of over 58 percent.

(Source: PIB)