

## **POSTAL BALLOT FACILITY: INCLUSIVE ELECTIONS**

Where there is a will, there is a way – and when voters cannot physically reach the Polling Station, the Polling Station will reach out to them! From enrollment to election, the Election Commission of India leaves no stone unturned in ensuring that no voter is left behind. It is in the pursuit of this endeavour that the facility of Postal Ballot was extended to PwD electors, senior citizens above the age of 80 years, officers on essential election duty as notified by the Commission and COVID-19 positive patients.

22-Kalimpong, situated at a height of more than 1,200 metres above sea level in the eastern Himalayas is the only Assembly Constituency of the smallest District of Darjeeling, West Bengal. It is the determination of our polling officers buoyed by the commitment of the Election Commission of India that voters from this hilly district were reached out to despite the many hurdles of extreme climatic conditions and inaccessible terrain.

106-year-old Pavitra Pradhan from Part No.86 in the Municipal area of Kalimpong AC and 82-year-old Bhuddiman Mukhia of Nokdara village who availed this facility for the first time were excited to provide a heartwarming welcome to the entire polling team. The family of 31-year-old Jivan Roy from the Lower Beong village of Gidabling Gram Panchayat witnessed the joy of their son voting for the first time despite his locomotor disability. The polling officials even reached out to the hidden hamlet Mansintar in a remote corner at the border of Bhutan - truly, no voter was left behind.

With the announcement of the Postal Ballot facility, 45% of the flagged voters i.e 2400 electors applied for access to cast their votes by Postal Ballot. ECI was fully geared to fulfill the commitment to make the voting process easy, accessible, inclusive, safe and free & fair for all. Majority of the population of this area consists of various tribal and non-tribal groups like Lepcha, Bhutia, Tamang, Limbu, Sherpa, Dukpa, Yolmo, Mech, Santal, Sarki, Damai, Kami,

Rai, Magar, Chettri, Gurung and others with Nepali as the lingua franca of the region.

Considering the hilly terrain and hidden hamlets in the slopes, meticulous planning was done to cover each and every absentee voter within the stipulated time. The Polling Party comprising of two Polling Officers, Videographer, Micro Observer and half section of CAPF apart from State Police, started their journey on 5<sup>th</sup> April, 12 days ahead of poll. There was a well managed Distribution Centre at the District Treasury where Postal Ballots were split and handed over to the Polling Teams in the early morning under tight security.

51 such polling parties were on the field, travelling by car and even by foot to reach the voters! The polling officials reaffirmed the faith of voters in democracy as they recorded the postal ballot votes.

The success of any democratic process of election rests upon the sheer strong faith of electors in the democracy accompanied by the sheer grit and determination of election officials. Absentee voters were appreciative of the Postal Ballot facility given by the Election Commission in view of the pandemic. Undoubtedly, it has improved the total voter turnout percentage while ensuring that elections were accessible and inclusive for all.

*---Inputs from CEO West Bengal*



