

ELECTION COMMISSION OF INDIA

Nirvachan Sadan, Ashoka Road, New Delhi-110001

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PRESS NOTE

ECI issues guidelines to nudge political parties to move towards respectful discourse for persons with disabilities

The very foundation of democracy lies in the representation of all communities in the electoral process. Accessible and Inclusive elections have been a non-negotiable premise for the Election Commission of India to ensure equal participation of Persons with Disabilities (PwDs). The Commission is consciously striving to promote the principle of accessibility and inclusivity in the elections through various initiatives. For the first time, to promote inclusivity and respect in the political discourse towards PwD community, the Commission has issued a set of guidelines to political parties and their representatives. The Commission has urged Political parties and their candidates to abide by the guidelines in letter and spirit as they are an important stakeholder in the electoral process.

Off late, the Commission has been made aware of use of derogatory or offensive language in the political discourse about Persons with Disabilities (PwDs). Usage of such semantics in speech/ campaign by members of any political parties or their candidates, can be interpreted as an affront to the PwDs. Common examples of ableist language are words like dumb(gunga), retarded (pagal, sirphira), blind (andha, kana), deaf (behra), lame (langda, lula, apahij) etc. It is necessary to avoid usage of such derogatory language. PwDs have to be accorded justice and respect in political discourse/campaign.

Salient features of the guidelines are given below:

1. Political parties and their representatives should not use ill/ derogatory/ insulting references on disability or PwDs during any public statement/ speech, in their writings/articles/ outreach material or political campaign.
2. Political parties and their representatives should not use disability/ PwDs or terms referring to disability/ PwDs in the context of human incapacity during any public speech, in their writings/articles, or political campaign.
3. Political parties and their representatives should strictly avoid comments related to disabilities/ PwDs that may be offensive or perpetuate stereotypes and prejudices.
4. Any usage of such language, terminology, context, mockery, derogatory references or insult to PwDs as mentioned in points (i),(ii) and (iii) may attract provisions of Section 92 of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act 2016.
5. All campaign materials, including speeches, social media posts, advertisements, and press releases, must undergo an internal review process within the political party to identify and rectify any instances of ableist language, offensive or discriminatory towards individuals/ PwDs.

6. All political parties should ensure and should declare on their website that they will use Disability & gender sensitive language and etiquette as well as respect inherent human equality, equity, dignity and autonomy.
7. All political parties shall use rights based terminologies as mentioned in CRPD (Convention on Rights of Persons with Disabilities) and not incline towards any other terminology.
8. All political parties shall make their public speeches/ campaigns/ activities/ events accessible for all citizens.
9. All political parties may make their website and social media content digitally accessible to allow accessible interaction with persons with disabilities.
10. All political parties may provide a training module on disability for party workers at all levels of political process and shall appoint nodal authority to hear complaints from persons with disabilities pertaining to usage of ableist language.
11. Political parties may endeavour to include more PwDs at levels such as members and party workers to shed the attitudinal barrier of the party and public and provide equal opportunities.

Background:

Over the years, a well-designed framework of guidelines and facilities have been initiated to create a conducive environment for the PwDs to cast their vote. These facilities include, having location of polling station at the ground floor, Braille signage on the Ballot Unit of EVM, construction of ramps with proper gradient, separate queues (priority entry) for PwDs, wheelchairs, permitting a companion to accompany a blind/infirm voter, accessible toilets and adequate signages explaining the process of voting etc.

While the effort is to encourage voters to come to the polling booth and have a secure, comfortable and pleasant voting experience, the Commission has also introduced the home voting facility. PwD voters with a benchmark disability of 40% may choose to avail this optional facility. In the recent elections, there has been a growing popularity of the facility and has been appreciated by the community.

The Election Commission along with other stakeholders like civil society have taken proactive steps to motivate and facilitate the participation of PwDs to achieve its overall objective of Accessible and Inclusive elections, the objective will fully be met when political parties and candidates also join the cause and treat all PwDs with respect and dignity. It should be our combined duty and endeavour to treat all with respect and create a society that does not discriminate based on disability.

The Right for Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016 provides for protection of rights of the Persons with Disabilities. Section 7 of the said Act provides protection from all forms of abuse, violence and exploitation. Further, Section 92 of the above mentioned Act lists out punishment for such offences.



Anuj Chandak
Joint Director (Media)