



## Now, EC trains, tests staff for polls

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**I**N a new initiative aimed at making the government staff conducting elections better prepared to deal with poll-related exigencies, especially in sensitive states like Gujarat which goes to polls next month, the Election Commission of India has started training its returning officers, assistant returning officers and the army of over six lakh booth-level officers (BLOs).

After completing the training, all returning officers (ROs), assistant returning officers (AROs), and BLOs will have to take a test. And those who fail will have to undergo the training again and take the test again. "It has been decided that officers who don't clear the test will not be involved in the conduct of elections," said a source in the EC.

The ambitious project involves training all ROs, AROs, and BLOs in important matters relating to conduct of elections such as the model code of conduct, the dos and don'ts on voting and counting days, nomination and rejection of candidature etc.

To make the entire process transparent, the EC has roped in the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) to carry out third-party evaluation of the training and test.

Chief Election Commissioner V S Sampath is learnt to

be personally involved in the process along with the two Election Commissioners—H S Brahma and Nasim Zaidi.

In Gujarat, while the Orientation and Finishing Touch Test for the 182 ROs for the coming Assembly elections concluded on Monday with 40 ROs from central Gujarat districts taking the test at Godhra, the state chief electoral officer has received requests from several district electoral officers for similar tests to be conducted for AROs in their respective districts.

The questions for the written test are generally drawn from the manual of election law which includes rules and regulations governing elections in the country.

The officials said a list of 200 questions in Gujarati were drawn from these sources and 30 were chosen randomly for each test. Each test was attempted by about 35 to 40 ROs at a time. While most ROs are said to have answered an average of 25 to 27 questions correctly, some also scored less than satisfactory marks.

"While the BLOs and AROs receive minimal training, the ROs are expected to have each and every aspect of the election handbook on their fingertips. We decided to have this evaluation since we want each and every election to be near-perfect, something that is easier said than done considering the size and diversity of our electorate and constituencies," said an EC functionary.