Systematic Voters' Education and Electoral Participation (SVEEP)

A separate division was created by the ECI during 2010, viz, Information Education and Communication (IEC), which was later renamed as SVEEP, aimed at providing information, motivation and facilitation in the Election front to citizens.

The goals of SVEEP are:-

To ensure that all eligible electors are enrolled in the E Roll.

 To facilitate inclusive and qualitative electoral participation aimed at strengthening our democracy and to achieve these by providing Information, Motivation and Facilitation (IMF) to citizens.

The present slogan of the Election Commission of India is that *'no voter is left behind'*.

A. The Kerala scenario

Kerala is a pioneer in many social sectors such as literacy, health, education, standard of living etc. The people are highly aware politically and are conscious about their rights as citizens. The fact that the electorate in the State has switched preference to the UDF or LDF in the General Elections in the past clearly proves that democratic values are deeply rooted in its social fabric. Though communal overtures are visible in some areas, the society is more or less secular in nature. The media penetration is very high with highly circulated Newspapers, Periodicals and a large number of Malayalam TV Channels. All major political parties in Kerala are having their own Newspapers and TV Channels.

In the Election front also Kerala is a forerunner in many people friendly initiatives. A Model Code of Conduct in elections was first evolved in Kerala, early during sixties. It is the first State to use EVMs in the country for a bye election early in 1982. It is also the first State to prepare a computerized E Roll, to use photo Roll for the first time in elections, to introduce a fully online facility for enrollment, transposition and correction in E Roll. It still holds the distinction of achieving 100% EPIC and BLO coverage. The Voter Turnout in all the General Elections was also as high as 75 %, when compared to the national average of 60%.

As per the instructions of the ECI, two Baseline surveys on Voter Behavior were conducted by the Political Science Department of the University of Kerala during the run up to the General Elections to KLA 2011 and GE to Lok Sabha 2014. One Endline survey for assessing the impact of various SVEEP initiatives introduced in the State, based on the findings of the Baseline Survey was also conducted.

No major issues were identified in the two Baseline surveys conducted earlier other than the conspicuous gap in enrollment of 18 -19 age groups and urban apathy in electoral participation in Cities like Thiruvananthapuram and Ernakulam. A minor gap in enrollment of STs was also identified in the first Survey.

As part of the SVEEP plans, the idea of appointing **Campus Ambassadors** in Educational institutions of and above Plus Two levels was first mooted in Kerala which was later replicated in other States. Special

campaigns were organized in all Educational institutions of and above Plus Two levels with the active involvement of Campus Ambassadors. With the fully online registration facility, the initiative was a grand success in bridging the gap in registration in 18 -19 age groups to a large extent. So also the Special targeted campaigns in Tribal Settlements with the assistance of Tribal Promoters and BLOs have borne fruits and the gap in registration of Scheduled Tribes could be fully bridged. Regarding the apathy in urban areas, the awareness initiatives taken as part of SVEEP plan have not yielded any positive results as some of the Legislative Assembly Constituencies in Thiruvananthapuram district and 80 - Kochi LAC in Ernakulam district recorded a lower turnout in the GE to Lok Sabha 2014 when compared to the State average. The main reason identified for this is the floating population in cities.

The ECI had ordered to conduct Baseline Surveys in all poll going States with a view to identify gaps in areas of registration and electoral participation. The Survey was entrusted with the Political Science Department of the University of Kerala to be completed before 30th January 2016. The preliminary report has been submitted by the Department of Political Science on 18th January 2016.

B.   The major findings are as under:-
1.   **Registration in E Roll**.
     Except in the age group of 18-19, the percentage of enrollment of general, SC and ST electors are on the higher side. Only 38% of the newly eligible category in the age group of 18 -19 were found to have registered, out of which the Male/Female percentage is 42.9% and 31.8% respectively.
2.   **Possession of EPIC**
     Only 2% of the respondents were found to be not in possession of EPICs. This shows beyond doubt that the EPIC coverage in the State is almost 100%.
3.   **Process of Enrollment**
     The State has fully switched over to fully online mode of registration and has done away with the cumbersome manual registration process. Out of the respondents, only 1.4% said that the present procedure is difficult.
4.   **Reason for not getting enrolled.**
     Only 1.1% of the respondents were not aware of the enrollment procedure. 87% of the respondents had voted in the last General Election to Lok Sabha and 86% for the last General Election to Kerala Legislative Assembly . 88% of women and 87.5% of men voted in the elections. Only 1.6% of the respondents said that they voted due to threat or coercion.
5.   **Difficulty in voting**
     While the majority (85.6%) said they did not face any difficulty in voting, 6.9% said that they face difficulties. The major component (3%) attributed the difficulty to long queues and the absence of separate queue for senior citizens.

6. **Facilities at Polling Stations (BMF)**

The item wise percentage of ***affirmative response*** is as under:-

(a) Separate queue for women, senior citizens and PwD – 59.6%

(b) Drinking water   - 52%

(c) Furniture   - 64%

(d) Toilet   - 89%

(e) Help Desk   - 81%

(f) Separate entry and exit   - 69%

(g) Ramp and Wheel Chairs   - 50%

(h) Lighting   - 96%

(i) Sign Boards   - 90%

7. **Reason for not voting in the last election**

Only 2.1% of the respondents said that their names were not in the E Roll and 0.9% were not having EPICs. 0.7% was out of station. The distance or non receipt of Voters Slip was not a deterring factor to any of the respondents. Only 0.3% had no faith in voting.

8. **Voter awareness**

92.1% of the respondents correctly answered the question regarding the qualifying age for voting. However, the date determining the qualifying date was correctly answered only by 23.5%. 41% are not aware of NOTA option on EVM. 64% disagreed and 21% strongly disagreed to the statement that *'voting is a cumbersome task'*. 50% of the respondents agreed to the statement that 'elections *are conducted freely and fairly in India'*. The statement that 'influence of money and muscle power are increasing in elections' was agreed to by 39%.

C. The following suggestions have been made by the Survey team.

(i) The EC shall collect Taluk-wise voter registration details. Intervention measures shall be initiated where it fell below the normal. A ten year average can be the realistic normal. Wider media publicity shall be given about this so that political parties and civil society groups can step up their activities.

(ii) Registration for the young age group shall be given importance. Since majority join College, campaigns using NSS, NCC, Science Club etc. can increase the registration. BLOs shall collect details of students (who study outside) and remind them periodically of the need for registration through SMS.

(iii) Registration among Muslim women in Malabar is poor. Political parties are not very keen on getting them registered. Official campaigning mechanism should be strengthened in such places. BLOs shall work overtime in such places.

(iv) The officials who determine the polling booths shall be aware of the geographical and terrestrial coordinates of the place.

(v) Since incidence of internal and external migration is quite high in Kerala, voter registration campaigns shall take this factor into account.

(vi) Registration/transfer of voter cards of migrant workers has become a major problem in

Kerala. Very few migrant workers have voting rights in Kerala.

(vii) Special enrolment campaigns shall be initiated in places where it is historically low. The BLO system shall be strengthened. Higher visibility for the BLOs is absolutely necessary. Telephonic answering facility shall be given to BLOs.

(viii) The administration shall ensure facilities like drinking water, ramp, chairs, desks, wheel chairs, volunteers, toilet etc. at the polling booth. The EC can initiate a quick survey during the next election to assess the ground reality.

(ix) The EC shall ensure that all eligible persons are registered and no names are removed on political grounds.

(x)There is a need for increasing voter awareness. Systematic long term and short-term measures are required for this.

(xi) Schools and colleges can celebrate National Voters Day through appropriate programmes like lectures, quiz, debates, drama etc. EVM demos can be done during such occasion.

(xii) The SVEEP campaigns by EC shall be broadened and deepened. Appropriate budget allocation shall be made for the programme.

(xiii)The State government shall start a SVEEP cell with sufficient staff and resources. Professionally trained personnel shall be appointed to steer the campaign. Periodic SVEEP reports shall be prepared and remedial action taken.

(xiv)The State shall formulate a SVEEP Plan for the next five years by identifying definite milestones. Such Plan shall specify the collaborating agencies governmental, non-governmental and private philanthropic.

(xv) Schools and colleges can start "Democracy Clubs". SVEEP campaign can be contemplated as one of the community outreach programmes.

(xvi) All SC/ST communities are not exposed to the SVEEP campaign equally. Certain sections are socially and economically so backward that intervention is required. In Tamil/Kannda dominant areas, the campaign strategy should take into account the linguistic sensibilities.

(xvii) Icons/stars shall be changed periodically. Several prominent persons are voluntarily willing to lend their support to this cause.

(xviii) The EC can buy radio/channel time, hording space through free sponsorship. All it requires is appeal to the right person.

(xix) Appropriate SVEEP plan shall provide due importance to electronic sources like internet and its various uses.

(xx) The CEO-Kerala can think of starting a SVEEP page on its web site. Campaign materials of all types (posters, games, skits, dramas, lectures, music, etc.) can be uploaded on this page and whoever

wants to download it may be freely permitted to do so. The possibility of using You *Tube* shall also be explored. Facebook, Whatsapp and Twitter platforms can be effectively used for campaign.

(xxi) The CEO-Kerala can solicit the support of social media for the development of web content free of cost.

In view of the suggestions made by the Survey agency viz, the Political Science Department of University of Kerala the following Long term and Short term plans can be prepared.

Long Term Plans

1. The Election Department shall constitute a SVEEP cell with sufficient staff and resources at the State and District levels. Professionally trained personnel shall be appointed to steer the campaign. Periodic SVEEP reports shall be prepared and remedial action taken.

2. Electoral Literacy should be made a part of the curriculum in the Text Books of High School and above. The NCERT, CBSE etc to be addressed by the ECI.

3. A *'Voter Registration Day'* may be observed in all Educational Institutions of and above Plus Two on a specific date every year during the Summary Revision period. Proper advertisements for the purpose to be given through the Print and Electronic media. Posters and banners designed for the purpose to be displayed in all such institutions.

4. The CEO shall formulate a SVEEP Plan for the next five years by identifying definite milestones. Such Plan shall specify the collaborating agencies governmental, non-governmental and private philanthropic. Private firms, as part of their corporate social responsibilities, can contribute to the campaign by creating advertisements or sponsoring programmes to generate voter awareness. Special care to be taken to ensure that the private firms have no hidden agenda or political bais.

5. Schools and colleges can start "Democracy Clubs". SVEEP campaign can be contemplated as one of the community outreach programmes.

6. Icons/stars shall be changed periodically. Several prominent persons are voluntarily willing to lend their support to this cause.

7. The EC can buy radio/channel time, hoarding space through free sponsorship. All it requires is appeal to the right person.

8. The CEO-Kerala can think of starting a SVEEP page on its web site. Campaign materials of all types (posters, games, skits, dramas, lectures, music, etc.) can be uploaded on this page and whoever wants to download it may be freely permitted to do so. The possibility of using You *Tube* shall also be explored. Facebook, Whatsapp and Twitter platforms can be effectively used for campaign.

9. The CEO-Kerala can solicit the support of social media for the development of web content free of cost.

Short Term Plans (for the upcoming GE to KLA 2016)

1. In order to bridge the gap in registration in 18 -19 age groups, the possibility of sending bulk SMS messages can be explored. The following message can be given through SMS.

   'Have you enrolled as a voter ?. If you are 18 years old as on 1st January 2016, you can enroll now. Log on to www.ceo.kerala.gov.in and register today or visit the nearest 'Akshaya Kendra'.

2. One day special enrollment campaign in all Educational Institutions with the active participation of Campus Ambassadors, preferably in the 1st week of March 2016.

3. Organizing Special Campaigns in all Grama Panchayats in Malappuram district on a specific date manned only by women officials, for bridging the gap in female enrollment.

4. Targeted Voter Awareness advertisements to be given through the Print and Electronic media with appeals of popular ICONs or non political dignitaries. The short animation film prepared by C Dit to be screened in all Cinema Theatres.

5. Providing Wheel Chairs, Mobile Toilets and bottled drinking water in all Polling Station locations through sponsorship from public sector Banks and institutions. Publicity to be given on these facilities available in PSs.

6. Pandals or Sun shades to be provided in all Polling Station locations through sponsorships from Public Sector undetakings

7. Feeding/Rest rooms to be provided in all Polling Station locations for carrying women and women with children in Polling Station Locations.

8. Voter facilitation Desks in all Polling Station locations manned by BLOs to help the voters to identify Booths and Serial Numbers, especially for those who are unable to come with EPICs or Voters Slips.

9. Medical Aid teams with Doctors stationed in Ambulances to be arranged for 10 to 15 PS locations on the poll day. The services of 108 Ambulances could also be availed for the purpose.

10. Voter awareness appeals and messages/ programmes on ethical voting to be telecast/broadcast by official media viz, DD and AIR.

District SVEEP plans

The DEOs may be requested to prepare suitable SVEEP Plans targeting areas where the enrollment percentage in 18 -19 age groups are low and also in the LACs where the Voter Turnout is low compared to the State average.

Budget

The ECI has sought the requirement of funds for the implementation of SVEEP plans in the State for the upcoming GE to KLA 2016. The ECI may therefore be requested to release an amount of Rs.150 Lakhs to the State for various SVEEP activities at the State and District levels. (Rs.1 Lakhs per LAC =140 Lakhs (districts) + 10 Lakhs for State level SVEEP plan.