

15th Annual National Conference on Electoral and Political Reforms

Lucknow, 2nd Mar 2019: The Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR) and the Uttar Pradesh Election Watch (UPEW) are organizing the 15th Annual National Conference at DeenDayal Upadhyaya State Institute of Rural Development on the 2nd and 3rd March 2019. On the first day of the two-day event, the discussion focused on the urgent requirement of addressing the most pressing problems in the electoral and political arena. State Election Watch coordinators from all the states in India participated on the first day of the event, along with, members from various civil society groups, social activists, journalists, retired bureaucrats, retired judges, advocates, political party representatives, academicians and students from across India.

The Senior Deputy Election Commissioner, **Shri Umesh Sinha** inaugurated the two-day conference and delivered the keynote address. During the conference, Shri Umesh Sinha released the All India Survey Report, 2018 and a report on 15 years of Uttar Pradesh Election Watch.

The 15 years of Uttar Pradesh Election Watch Report and the UP Survey Report can be accessed [here](#).

At the outset, Sr. Deputy Election Commissioner appreciated the ongoing efforts of ADR and National Election Watch (NEW) for its continuous work in the area of Electoral and Political Reforms.

While addressing the audience, he stated that the Commission lays great emphasis on the voter and all the stakeholders. Emphasizing on electoral participation, he stressed that elections cannot be conducted alone without stakeholders, and need participation and coordination with all stakeholders like voters, media, civil society, youth organizations etc. He said in his view, voter is the first representative of the country and is the center of the electoral process, not just in participation but ethical and informed participation. He also urged the general public to use the helpline number '1950' and cVigil App to register complaints against poll related issues.

Shri Sinha also said that both voter who sells his/her vote and the politician who is offering bribe are equally responsible for the ill-practice. On the role of youth, he suggested that youth will have to take lead not just as a voter but also as an educator and motivator in the family and the society. Speaking of the challenges faced by the Commission, he highlighted and elaborated the 3 main obstacles for conducting free and fair elections - (i) Muscle Power, (ii) Money Power and (iii) Paid News and Fake News.

The Sr. Deputy Election Commissioner concluded by stating that it is important that we make citizens responsible voters and added that despite diversities and challenges, elections have been conducted freely and fairly in India, calling it an achievement in itself.

The first day of the conference consisted of panel discussions on various important issues related to electoral and political reforms like 'Electoral and Political Reforms: A lack of political

will?', 'Electoral and Political reforms and the Role of Judiciary', 'Electoral Bonds and Financial Opacity, and 'Local and Urban Governance'.

Chairing the session on "Electoral and political reforms: a lack of political will?", **Prof. Trilochan Sastry**, founder member and Trustee ADR, opened the session focusing on the issue of buying and selling of votes. He spoke about how political parties and their candidates are representing and protecting interests of corporate houses as they are their sponsors and donors, but not that of voters.

Speaking on the same issue, **Shri Arun Gurtoo**, from Madhya Pradesh Election Watch, said that since political parties are not at all interested in implementing political reforms, either the ECI should take some initiative or Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) should file PILs in courts to put pressure on parties to bring reforms. He added that political parties must be held accountable by bringing them under RTI.

Dr. Niranjana Sahoo, Senior Fellow, Observer Research Foundation, spoke about the crucial role played by money power in democracy like India. He stated that politics has become pure business wherein parties are collecting funds from sources such as mafias, illegal businesses, black marketeers, which compels them to protect the vested interests of their donors post elections.

Also on the panel was **Dr. Ajit Ranade**, Founder Member and Trustee – ADR, National Election Watch, who spoke about the lack of political will among the political class. He substantiated his view by giving the example of opposition from parties to disclose their criminal and financial background, to come under RTI as well as how parties unite on the issues of foreign funding and anonymous electoral bonds.

Discussing electoral and political reforms and the role of judiciary, **Shri Shaktikanta Srivastava**, Retired District Judge, stressed that political parties are not concerned about core issues like education, social and economic development and instead, every party is looking for different ways to allure voters to win elections.

Ms. Kamini Jaiswal, Supreme Court Advocate and Founder-Trustee ADR, emphasized on the important role played by judiciary in electoral reforms since Supreme Court's 2002 and 2003 judgments on election affidavits. At the same time, she said that judiciary can only render judgments and it is the duty of the vigilante electorate to bring important electoral and political issues to notice of the court.

Shri Amit Puri, Spokesperson, BJP proposed the idea of state funding of elections in the light of increasing costs of elections. He also appreciated NOTA and spoke about giving it legal power in case maximum votes go to NOTA.

Another very important panel discussion was on “Electoral Bonds and Financial Opacity”, chaired by **Maj. Gen Anil Verma (Retd)**, Head-ADR and National Election Watch wherein he explained the Electoral Bond Scheme to the audience.

Speaking on the problem of anonymity with electoral bonds, **Mr. Suchindran Baskar Narayan**, advocate with Supreme Court of India and Madras High Court, said that they are the worst form of electoral reforms where anonymity is only for the citizens and not for the government in power given that information on identity of donors and recipient party is available with RBI and SBI.

Mr. Rakesh Reddy Dubbudu, Founder – Factly.in and ADR State Coordinator of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, highlighted the low demand for electoral bonds of lower denomination. He added that 99 per cent of electoral bonds are purchased by corporate houses, of which more than 70 per cent are encashed in Delhi.

Focusing on the absence of transparency in electoral bonds, **Shri Sanjay Singh**, Uttar Pradesh State Coordinator of ADR/NEW and Secretary at Parmarth Samaj Sevi Sansthan, said that these bonds facilitate corruption by making way for black money to enter electoral and political process. He opined that political parties in power are the biggest beneficiaries of funding through electoral bonds.

The final session of the day was a discussion on “Local and Urban Governance”. Chairing this session, **Prof. Sudarsan Padmanabhan**, Trustee ADR, stated that local government is the foundation of a strong democracy.

Talking of his overall experience, **Shri Sudhir Pal**, Chief Functionary of Manthan Yuva Sansthan and Jharkhand State Coordinator of ADR, said that local bodies like Gram Panchayats, Municipal Corporations are acting as an extended wing of state governments, against the spirit of 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments.

Ms. Pankti Jog, Executive Director – Mahiti Adhikar Gujarat Pahal and Gujarat State Coordinator of ADR, said that those working in the village blocks are facing challenges such as organised corruption, paralyzed enforcement mechanism and tampering of data and facts etc.

Ms. Mukta Soni, President, Talbehat Municipal Corporation, spoke of the challenges she faced while contesting elections against opponents who bribed voters. She said that she won because voters (especially female voters) supported her for her clean image and good work, despite her opponents spending enormous amounts of money in their election campaigns.

The first day of national conference concluded with the Uttar Pradesh State Coordinator, Mr. Sanjay Singh thanking all the panelists, participants, the ECI, DDU State Institute of Rural Development and ADR for making this event a success.