

CHAPTER VIII

TRAINING OF THE ELECTION OFFICERS

The successful conduct of an election depends to a large extent on the officers who are immediately in charge of the polling arrangements. These are the Returning Officers, the Presiding Officers and the Polling Officers. Steps were accordingly taken well before the general elections for training them adequately for the successful performance of their duties. During such training, their attention was particularly drawn to the amendments in the law and procedure which had been made shortly before the elections.

In October, 1956, the Commission held a series of polling rehearsals in every State to initiate such training. A revised exhaustive and up-to-date set of statutory directions under the Representation of the People Act, 1951, and the Rules made thereunder were issued by the Commission in supersession of all previous directions for the guidance and convenience of the Returning Officers, Presiding Officers and Polling Officers.

Pilot rehearsals.

The campaign of rehearsals opened with a pilot polling rehearsal held at Agra on the 21st November, 1956. This was attended by the Chief Election Commissioner, the Deputy Election Commissioners and the Chief Electoral Officers of Uttar Pradesh and the neighbouring States, namely, Rajasthan, Punjab and Delhi as also by a large number of other officers of Uttar Pradesh. The correct procedure to be followed at a polling station was demonstrated and explained to the officers present. In particular, the correct method of closing and sealing of ballot boxes was demonstrated and the importance of taking meticulous care in this regard was stressed. It was also emphasised that once a ballot box had been properly closed and sealed, it was invulnerable. The need and importance of demonstrating the invulnerability of the ballot boxes to the political parties, the candidates and the general public were also emphasised. The officers were directed to take up the challenge of any person who alleged that a ballot box was vulnerable and to require him to demonstrate that a ballot box could be tampered with without leaving evidence of such tampering.

Similar pilot polling rehearsals were held in other parts of the country, namely, at Calcutta, Nagpur and Bangalore where the Chief Electoral Officers of the neighbouring States were invited. The Chief Election Commissioner was present at each of these rehearsals. The Chief Electoral Officers thereafter arranged for polling rehearsals at different centres in their respective States for training the officers in the Districts.

An intensive programme of rehearsals was thereafter carried out in every State so as to cover every District including the urban and rural areas. During these polling rehearsals all District Magistrates, District Election Officers, Sub-Divisional Magistrates and other Officers who were later to be appointed as Returning Officers and Assistant Returning Officers, as well as other officers who would have to serve as Presiding and Polling Officers were adequately trained in the mechanics and procedure for conducting the poll on the correct lines. The following matters were specially attended to during these rehearsals :—

Subsequent rehearsals.

- (a) familiarity of the officers with the ballot box and its mechanism;
- (b) checking ballot boxes for mechanical defects and the remedy for any such defect;
- (c) the correct method of operating the ballot box, particularly closing and sealing it before and after the poll so as to make it tamper-proof;
- (d) the normal lay-out of a polling station which might be located in (i) a building, (ii) the open air or (iii) a temporary structure.

The State Governments were also requested to ensure that :—

- (a) every officer likely to be employed on polling duty attended at least four rehearsals before the actual poll;
- (b) every prospective presiding officer acted as the presiding officer at one or more rehearsals;
- (c) every such officer made himself familiar with the duties and responsibilities of a presiding officer under the Act and the Rules, and
- (d) a proper and meticulous account was kept of ballot papers and paper seals at the poll.

The Commission directed that one or more polling rehearsals should be held in every constituency. The Commission further directed that whenever a polling rehearsal was held in any area, the local representatives of all recognised and unrecognised political parties, as also all actual or prospective candidates, should be specially invited to attend the rehearsal and that the safeguards adopted by the Commission to ensure the secrecy of the ballot and the invulnerability of the ballot box were fully explained and demonstrated to them during these rehearsals.

The Chief Electoral Officers trained a sufficient number of officers from each district under their personal supervision. These officers were thereafter required to hold polling rehearsals in different areas of their own districts in order to train up other officers posted in those areas who were eventually to be employed

for conducting the poll. At these polling rehearsals, the local representatives of all political parties were also invited. The general public were also encouraged to attend the rehearsals so that the voters as well as all intending candidates and their agents and workers might become familiar with the correct polling procedure.

At least one polling rehearsal was required to be held in each constituency soon after the last day for filing nomination papers and all candidates who had filed nomination papers were specially invited to attend such rehearsals.

Hand books for Returning Officers and Presiding Officers.

Exhaustive Hand Books for the guidance of Returning Officers and Presiding Officers were prepared by the Commission and supplied to the officers so that they might have clear and authoritative guidance regarding the law and the procedure, as also their duties and responsibilities in the impending elections.

Documentary Films.

Short films were made with a view to impart visual instructions to the officers on the correct method of handling, closing and sealing various types of ballot boxes. These films were exhibited at suitable centres in each district for the benefit of the polling personnel. In addition to this, a film entitled "It's Your Vote" was prepared and exhibited all over the country in the four thousand and odd cinema halls for bringing home to the electorate their duties and responsibilities as voters. The Chief Electoral Officers were supplied with copies of this film and these were exhibited even in the remotest villages of each district by means of mobile publicity vans. Different versions of this film were prepared in all the thirteen main languages of the country, namely, Hindi, English, Tamil, Telugu, Bengali, Marathi, Gujarati, Malayalam, Kanarese, Punjabi, Oriya, Assamese and Kashmiri. It was possible through this film to reach the vast bulk of the electorate many of whom could not otherwise have been reached by actual polling rehearsals.

In every State the public evinced keen interest in these rehearsals and attendance at these was gratifyingly large.

As a result of this intensive programme of training, far fewer mistakes were committed by the election officers during the second general elections as compared to the first.

Future election rehearsals.

The experience gained in the last two general elections has demonstrated that it is imperative to give the Presiding and other Election Officers intensive training in the conduct of the poll by means of polling rehearsals and otherwise in order that the poll may be smoothly and efficiently conducted.