

CHAPTER XXVI

ROLE OF GOVERNMENT SERVANTS

The Returning Officers, Presiding Officers and Polling Officers play an all-important part in the conduct of elections. The manpower resources available with the Governments are not yet adequate to meet at the time of a general election the entire requirements in respect of Presiding and Polling Officers from the ranks of Government servants. While the great majority of such officers are drawn from the Government services, a small percentage of them is also drawn from the local bodies and non-Governmental educational institutions. In the circumstances, the responsibility for the conduct of the general elections rested almost entirely on the Government servants. In fact, there were few Government servants indeed—Central or State—who could be spared from election duty in order that the poll might not have to be staggered over too long a period for the paucity of polling personnel.

In all, about 1,166,459 Government servants participated in the election operations in different capacities. Similarly, about 3,63,008 who were not Government officials also took part in the election work and carried out different duties in various capacities.

It was essential, therefore, that all Government servants should maintain an attitude of strict impartiality in carrying out their electoral duties in order that their conduct might inspire confidence in the public mind and that there might be no room for any suspicion that they were favouring any party or any candidate.

Impartiality of
Government ser-
vants

Shortly before the second general elections the Election Commission addressed the State Governments reiterating the following points :—

- (1) Government servants should not only act impartially but should also appear to be impartial in relation to the elections. They should so conduct themselves as to inspire confidence in the public mind in regard to their impartiality.
- (2) No Government servant should take any part in any election campaign or canvassing. They should take scrupulous care not to lend their names, official position or authority to assist one political group or individual as against any other.
- (3) In connection with the tours of Ministers immediately before and during the elections, they should continue to make all the usual arrangements to enable the Ministers to carry out their official responsibilities

as Ministers. Government servants should not, however, organise in connection with any Ministerial tours any election meetings nor should they be present in person at any such meeting. This ban would not apply, of course, to such officers who in course of their normal official duties have to attend such a meeting for the purpose of maintaining law and order and making the necessary security arrangements.

- (4) While granting permission to hold an election meeting in a public place, Government officers should not make any discrimination between one political party and another. If more parties than one apply for holding a meeting at any particular place on the same day and at the same hour, they should allow the application of the party which had applied first in point of time.
- (5) Government Officers should give the impression of being completely neutral in their dealings with the candidates, the political parties and their workers.
- (6) All complaints relating to matters connected with the elections should be dealt with promptly and the complainants should be given a courteous hearing and allowed a reasonable opportunity of making out their complaints.
- (7) Prompt and strict action should be invariably taken against every offence committed against the election law irrespective of the fact as to who the offender is or what political party, if any, he belongs to.
- (8) The Magistracy and the police should always retain the initiative in the matter of law and order by not only looking into all complaints fairly and promptly but also by themselves looking out for and bringing to book anyone transgressing the law.

Government Servants' Conduct Rules.

The Government Servants' Conduct Rules which prohibit Government servants from canvassing for or assisting any candidate in any manner or proposing or seconding any nomination papers were specifically brought to the notice of all officials.

Hardships endured by Government Servants.

The vast majority of Government servants had to work very hard during the elections. The Presiding Officers and Polling Officers were a vital link in the vast administrative machinery that had to be set in motion for the conduct of the elections inasmuch as it was they who had to deal directly with millions of illiterate and inexperienced voters on the day of the poll. They had to so implement the election procedure that the voters might

exercise their franchise intelligently and freely according to their individual choice.

Apart from this, the Government officers detailed on election duties had very often to undergo severe physical hardship and inconvenience in reaching remote and far-flung parts of the country and setting up polling stations there often in primitive buildings or in the open and with very rough furniture or none at all. Many of them had to travel long distances in open trucks or even on foot for reaching inaccessible places. They had often to sleep in the open and sustain themselves on strange or hastily procured meals for days together as they moved from one polling station to another for conducting the poll in the backwaters of the interior of the districts.

The Commission has the pleasure to record that as in the first general elections, so in the second, all Government servants in every part of the country cheerfully went through every hardship. It is a matter for pride that they conducted themselves throughout with exemplary fairness and impartiality.

Reports received from the various States before, during and after the general elections reveal that while there were isolated instances of minor lapses on the part of some Government servants, there was no case of any serious abuse of position or authority. Exemplary conduct.

Complaints of partiality or unfairness on the part of Government servants were very rare indeed and most of such complaints received were found on enquiry to have proceeded from an inadequate appreciation of the legal position on the part of those who had made the complaints. It is indeed a matter for gratification that compared to the first general elections a far greater degree of trust and reliance was extended in general by all the political parties and contesting candidates to the officials in charge of election duties.

A few instances will illustrate the high sense of duty and discipline shown by the Government servants as also the risks undertaken by them in discharging their duties:—

- (i) In Madhya Pradesh a lady polling officer was delivered of a child during her journey to the polling station for duty.
- (ii) A serious accident took place on the Gauhati—Shillong Road in Assam involving the motor-car carrying a polling party. This unfortunately resulted in the instantaneous death of a polling officer and injuries to others.
- (iii) In the Nimar (Khandwa) district of Madhya Pradesh a Presiding Officer was travelling by a motor truck from Burhanpur to Nepa Nagar with his party.

On the way, the vehicle ran into a ditch and in the serious accident which resulted, he met with instantaneous death while his companions suffered serious injuries.

- (iv) In the Sehore District of Madhya Pradesh, a Presiding Officer was returning to Sehore after completing the poll at his polling station when his jeep accidentally turned turtle resulting in his instantaneous death.
- (v) A number of instances have been reported to the Commission by the workers of different political parties in which the impartiality of the Presiding Officers was tested in various parts of the country. Under the Rules, a blind or purblind voter has to be assisted by the Presiding Officer while inserting his ballot paper into the ballot box of the candidate of his choice. This is done away from the sight of any other person in order that the secrecy of the vote may be maintained. Election agents of candidates are sometimes suspicious as to whether the Presiding Officer inserts the ballot paper into the correct ballot box. In the instances reported to the Commission, voters with normal eye-sight posed themselves to be blind or purblind voters and carefully watched whether the Presiding Officers inserted their ballot papers into the correct ballot boxes. The Commission is glad to record that in every instance the Presiding Officers were reported to have acted strictly in accordance with the wishes of the voter.

Due credit must also go to the police and the magistracy in maintaining an atmosphere of perfect peace during the poll throughout the country.