

ABILITY EXPRESS – EMPOWERING VOTERS WITH DISABILITIES

The human spirit is one of ability, perseverance and courage that no disability can take away. It has always been the endeavour of the Election Commission of India to facilitate ease of access to all voters to ensure holistic participation of all in the festival of democracy that is the Great Indian Election.

Assured Minimum Facilities at polling stations, volunteers for aid and assistance, provision of ramp and wheelchair, transport to and from the booth, sign language interpreters and Braille EVMs are just some of the initiatives of the Commission to abide by its motto of **‘No Voter to be Left Behind’**.

Buoyed by the dedicated efforts of the Commission, the South 24 Parganas District Administration in West Bengal undertook a unique initiative to empower Persons with Disabilities through five specially designed vehicles called ‘Ability Express’.

Developed in due consultation with disability experts, the vehicles were designed in such manner so that electors with any type of disability could experience the process of voting virtually and get inspired to participate in the electoral process of the largest democracy of the world.

After flag off on 6th March 2021 by the District Election Officer & District Magistrate, South 24 Parganas in the presence of the especially abled icons of the district - one Ability Express was allotted for each of the five Sub-Divisions of the district namely Alipore Sadar, Diamond Harbour, Kakdwip, Baruipur and Canning for movement as per the comprehensive date and area wise calendar prepared. Prior to this, mapping of PwD voters by the local Booth Level Officers and Anganwadi Workers helped ascertain the number of PwD voters in the district and the route of the five vehicles was charted accordingly.

With an audio-visual system for step-by-step demonstration of the process of voting, instructions in Braille on the wall panels of the vehicle, wheelchair and ramp for electors with locomotor and neurological disorders and sign language interpreters for hearing and speech impaired electors – concerted efforts were made to make this initiative accessible to voters with all kinds of disabilities.

After settling up at an earmarked spot at a pre-scheduled time, especially abled electors were guided into the Ability Express to stand at marked spots

and press the buzzer placed at the wall of the vehicle fixed against each such spot. After pressing each of the buzzers, the electors got the unique opportunity to experience the process of entering into the polling station maintaining COVID protocols and the entire polling process. As they moved along from the First, Second and Third Polling Officer to the Voting Compartment, the Presiding Officer virtually explained the important rules to be followed inside the polling station, especially maintaining the secrecy of voting.

In addition to this, the Ability Express also had a Special Ability coordinator cum demonstrator and Quiz Master for necessary guidance and support to all especially abled electors to make them aware of various important facilities. The Ability Express also had the provision of web-based services such as the NVSP portal, using the Voter Helpline App, generating e-EPIC and more right on the spot.

Empowering PwD electors by acknowledging their ability instead of their disability was widely appreciated and this initiative went a long way in boosting the confidence of PwD electors ahead of the polls. With the presence of District SVEEP Icons and District Especially Abled Icons, the five Ability Express vehicles covered more than 12,000 KMs and connected about 85,000 especially abled electors from the remotest areas of all of the 31 (thirty-one) Assembly Constituencies of South 24 Parganas District.

---Inputs from CEO West Bengal



