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Democracy triumphs again...

of democracy the voters of Anantnag, Kulgam, Shopian, Rajouri and Poonch districts showed up in record numbers to cast their votes in a significant show of faith in the election process. Since beginning of the poll at 7.00 am, the voters were seen standing in long queues at many polling stations across all the 5 districts. Elders, ladies, youths were seen enthusiastically exercising their right to vote in a peaceful environment.

The Chief Electoral Officer and other senior officers of election department monitored the progress of voting in Phase-VI across the Parliamentary Constituency from the Union Territory level Command and Control Center established at ICCCHMT, Bemina and CEO Office, Srinagar.

It is pertinent to mention here that the Command and Control center had been working 24 x 7 at Srinagar as well as Jammu since 16 March to ensure free, fair and inducement-free elections.

After two hours of polling, 8.98% voting was recorded in the constituency at 09:00 am; 23.34 % at 11.00 am, 35.61% at 01:00 pm; 44.88% at 3:00 pm while 51.35 % polling was recorded by 5:00 pm. Assembly segment wise highest poll percentage was observed in Surankote Assembly segment with around 68.00 % and lowest in Kulgam Assembly segment with around 32 %. Budhal and Rajouri assembly segments have also recorded higher poll percentage.

Around 18,36,576 electors had been enrolled for casting their vote in this Parliamentary Constituency. More than 9,000 polling staff performed poll duty. The polling continued till 6.00 pm while at few polling stations of Poonch- Rajouri and other areas, it continued till the last voter in queue exercised his franchise. At every polling station, basic minimum facilities of water, electricity, toilet, ramp, verandah/ waiting room had been made.

The authorities have ensured that wheelchairs and volunteers are provided to the needy as and when required. All the polling stations were adorned in all colours of festivities.

Pertinently, Chief Election Commissioner, Rajiv Kumar, during his visit to J&K in March, had stressed on ensuring huge voter participation of all sections of the society and efforts were made earnestly to make sure the same.

Additionally, in order to ensure inclusive voting, 17 polling booths managed by women (also called as pink polling stations), 15 managed by specially abled persons and 8 polling stations managed by youths were established. Also to spread the message about environmental concerns, 15 green polling stations were set up.

To facilitate voter identification, apart from EPIC card, other documents such as Adhar card, Bank Passbooks, Driving License, PAN Card, Government employee ID card were also allowed. Media facilitation was done through special passes for more than 600 journalists.

"The democratic spirit has won over any kind of apprehension in the mind of the common Kashmiri voter. Despite terror incidence of Pahalgam, Shopian, Surankote-Mendhar in Poonch, the voters were seen coming in large numbers to vote. Anti-national elements failed to deter voters from exercising their constitutional rights. All candidates and parties were able to reach every nook and corner of the constituency during extended campaigning period from 5th to 23rd May. Meticulous planning and execution of SVEEP activities was done and it ultimately resulted in a significant increase in the voter turnout. SMS blast on mobile through telecom companies, hoarding, flex, nukkad natak, street play, painting competition, various sports competitions, rallies and related events resulted into an increase overall voter turnout. The spirit of democracy has triumphed and not even a single incident of stone pelting or any kind of violence has been reported on poll day," maintained the CEO.

The enthusiasm among the political parties, who are an important stakeholder in the democratic process can be gauged from the fact that a record number of applications regarding various permissions have been received on the Suvidha portal. The campaigning in Anantnag PC had been violence free witnessing historic participation of voters.

There were more than 26,000 Kashmiri migrant electors in the PC who opted for voting at 26 Special Polling Stations established at Jammu (21), Udhampur (01) and Delhi (04). At these 26 special polling stations, there was voter turnout of 40% at Jammu, around 50 % at Udhampur and 53 % at Delhi. It is for the first time that the migrant community has turned for voting in such a large numbers.

The CEO has expressed gratitude towards all the voters who came in large numbers to cast their votes despite of weather challenges. He also appreciated work done by all the Polling personnel including security personnel deployed in the election process, police officers, ARO, RO and District Election Officers for their service in making the ongoing elections successful.

Last highest voter turnout was 49.58 % in year 2014. This year's poll percentage is quite high compared to the earlier poll percentage.

Serpentine queues in...

two Union Territories in August 2019.

A segment of Shopian is part of the redrawn Anantnag-Rajouri parliamentary constituency which went to polls in the sixth phase on Saturday. Moderate to brisk polling was observed after the start of the voting across the constituency at 7 am.

One particularly striking moment was when the family members of active terrorists were spotted at polling booths exercising their right to vote.

Mushtaq Ahmed Reshi, the father of Hizbul Mujahideen terrorist Junaid Reshi, was seen at a polling booth in Shopian's Bemina casting his ballot.

He was full of enthusiasm as he talked to reporters, expressing his belief in the power of democracy and the idea of India, emphasising his determination to participate in the democratic process.

Following closely behind was former separatist Mukhtar Waza, who also cast his vote, marking a significant shift in attitudes within the community.

The turnout in these villages not only defied the looming threat of terrorism but also showcased a strong commitment among people to upholding the principles of democracy. As residents lined up to make their voices heard, the atmosphere was full of a sense of empowerment and hope for a better future.

The enthusiasm among the voters was such that people with disabilities also made it to the polling stations to cast their ballot instead of availing the facility of home voting.

"Voting is our democratic right and we are eagerly participating in the polling process with a hope that our representative will highlight our problems and seek their resolution," Abdul Ahad (72) told PTI at a polling station in Nadimarg.

He alleged that the villagers are suffering because of lack of basic facilities like electricity, water and proper roads.

"The talk of development is only on papers and not on the ground. The government should focus on the village with poor population," he said.

Mohammad Sultan, a senior citizen, drew much attention as he came to a polling station riding a horse.

"I am suffering from an ailment and unable to walk freely...By voting, I have fulfilled my responsibility and now it is the term of our representative to take care of our needs which include proper structure of school, improved roads, round-the-clock water and electric supply besides proper healthcare," he said.

He said most residents are labourers by profession and could not pay hefty electricity bills.

"We used to get bills in the range of Rs 150 to Rs 200 but now the cost of the energy is between Rs 1,000 and Rs 1,500. It is very difficult for us to pay power bill. If we pay the bills, how could we feed our families?" he said.

The voting in banned Jamaat-e-Islami-dominated areas was also high and one of the senior officials said the courage and determination displayed by the voters in the face of adversity serve as a powerful reminder of the enduring spirit of democracy and the unyielding resolve of individuals to shape their own destiny.

Meanwhile, just metres from the Line of Control (LoC), the polling stations set up for Lok Sabha elections at Sehar and Makri, the last Indian villages in this sector of Rajouri district, came to life with enthusiastic voters making a beeline to exercise their franchise without the fear of cross-border shelling.

"Voting is taking place in a peaceful atmosphere without the fear of the cross-border shelling this time. We have seen worst of the times due to the shelling from Pakistan and our only prayer is continuation of the peaceful atmosphere on the borders," Ved Prakash, a resident of Makri village, which falls near the border fence, told PTI after casting his vote.

"We are seeing massive development in our areas which were worst hit by cross-border shelling. The government has also provided us underground bunkers for our safety in case of shelling from Pakistan side," Prakash said.

Prakash said the fear of Pakistani shelling had faded a long ago and "today we are voting for a government which will address our pending issues like road connectivity and better facilities for our school going children".

"We want a government which will ensure that we live our lives peacefully, without the fear of Pakistani shelling and continue the developmental activities for the upliftment of the border residents," he said.

Gorakh Nath, a government teacher who was assigned the job of the Booth Level Officer, said moderate to brisk polling was recorded since this morning and the credit for it goes to the peaceful atmosphere.

"This is one of the unique polling stations, having the facility of underground

bunkers as well. People have started queuing up to exercise their vote," he said.

Sunil Choudhary said the village faces water scarcity and wanted the government to address the problem.

Choudhary, a former sarpanch, said the border villages have distinct challenges of their own and needs proper government attention.

"You cannot compare our problems with people in other parts of the country. We are boldly standing shoulder-to-shoulder with our jawans guarding the borders of the country which is the beauty of our areas," he said.

Neesha, a student and the first-time voter, expressed happiness for exercising her democratic right and said "I voted for the overall development of my country and strong government."

"Earlier, the frequent cross-border shelling have made our lives a living hell. We were unable to concentrate on our studies but now after the ceasefire, we are studying like any other student," she said.

Dewan Chand said the students had to traverse through the jungle trek to continue their studies after passing class 10.

"We want a higher secondary school and a proper road connectivity so that our children do not face any problem in continuing their studies," he said.

Displaced KPs vote...

The Kashmiri Pandits, some of whom travelled from outside the Union Territory to vote, emphasized the need for a permanent restoration of peace and the creation of a safe homeland in the Valley.

"I have voted for development and security of the nation. We want to strengthen the government. We want to get back to our homeland, and this government should work towards restoring our homeland with the dignity of our community," Sushma Bhat, a voter from erstwhile Kulgam district, told PTI.

Sushma, who travelled from Surat to vote for the first time for her home constituency at the Muthi polling station here, highlighted the need for setting up a big smart city to reconnect the community with their roots, emphasizing that such initiatives would foster a sense of homeland.

"There are smart cities set up by the Central government in all the states and Union Territories in the country. One or two big smart cities should be set up for our community in the Valley to reconnect us to our roots. It will be a homeland feeling for us. Nobody should have a problem with this," she said.

She urged the political leaders to view the issue as a humanitarian concern, advocating for a secure space for the community to return to the Valley.

Like her, Sandeep Koul, whose father and grandfather were assassinated by the terrorists in the 1990s, called for a safe, singular settlement for Kashmiri Pandits in the Valley.

"We want a one place settlement where security and safety are paramount. This will restore the dignity of our community, which has been in exile for the past 35 years. We need justice from the Modi government. It is a test for this government," said Koul, who voted at the Chinore polling station.

Livelihood can wait...

Ponywallahs had queued up at polling booths to exercise their franchise, even though the tourist hub of Pahalgam was brimming with visitors. Some rode on horses to reach booths quickly to vote and get back to business.

"We can earn our livelihood any day but we do not get this chance (to vote) every day. We should not waste this chance. Earning our livelihood can wait but voting cannot," Ahmed said. Voting is important to ensure development, he added.

"We have to vote to choose our representative who can then work to address our issues and bring development," he said.

Mohammad Rafiq, another ponywallah, said some tourists wanted to pony rides in the morning but "we preferred to vote instead". "Today we could not let this chance go. Tourists will come again and we will earn again but this is our duty (to vote)," he said.

Rafiq said employment was the main issue for the youth in this elections. "We have many other issues, we want tourism to flourish, we want increase in employment opportunities," he said.

"People of Kashmir face many issues... these need to be resolved. We want such a representative who can truly represent us. The poor are always neglected. We are the face of the people of Kashmir as we directly interact with tourists, so we want someone who can bring a change for the better," Rameez Ahmed, another ponywallah, said.

In Kulgam, there was an elderly man who came to a polling station riding a horse. "I am barely able to offer prayers but I came on a horse to vote as I did not waste my vote," the man said, proudly displaying his inked finger.

He said that "we have done what was our duty and now it is up to the elected representatives to fulfil their responsibility". People face several issues like lack of development and rising unemployment, the man added.

Some also stayed away from the electoral exercise, saying there was no benefit.

"There is no benefit of voting. Those who get elected do not work for the people. They only care about themselves. Our issues remain unaddressed," a local tea vendor in Pahalgam said.

Four tourists from...

sincere condolences to the bereaved families. Praying for the early recovery of the injured. I have directed the District Administration to provide all necessary assistance, as provided in rule, to the affected families".

Will initiate process...

the schedule for the Lok Sabha elections in March, Kumar said holding assembly and parliamentary elections simultaneously was not practical due to logistical and security reasons.

Whenever assembly elections are held in Jammu and Kashmir, they will be the first since the August 2019 abrogation of Article 370 of the Constitution and the division of Jammu and Kashmir into two Union Territories.

The electoral exercise in Jammu and Kashmir is usually spread over a month.

Following a delimitation exercise, the number of assembly seats has gone up from 83 to 90, excluding those allocated to Pakistan-occupied Kashmir.

In December, the Supreme Court directed the poll panel to hold assembly elections in Jammu and Kashmir by September 30.

PoK is ours...

to power in the state by making false promises like free electricity, one lakh jobs every year and giving Rs 1500 per month to women, has been exposed in front of the people of Himachal," Shah said.

Two governments would be formed - one at the Centre and the other in Himachal Pradesh - after the election results are announced on June 4, he said and added that according to his information "Rahul Baba would go to Bangkok on June 6 for relaxation".

Shah said that only a strong government headed by Prime Minister Narendra Modi can fight terrorism, ensure economic growth and take care of the poor.

"The Congress is trying to frighten us by saying that Pakistan has an atom bomb... And, today I speak from this land... in Himachal - Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK) hamara hai, hamara rahega aur hum ise lekar rahenge (PoK is ours and it will remain ours. We will take it)."

"Today the people of PoK say that we want to be a part of India and this is the charisma of Modi," he said and added the slogan of Modi "is the slogan of a developed and self-sufficient India".

Shah said that even when Article 370 was scrapped in 2019, Congress leaders said it would lead to a bloodbath but not even a single stone was hurled in Jammu and Kashmir.

During the Congress regime, terrorists from Pakistan used to intrude into India, trigger blasts and return, Shah said, adding this completely changed under the Modi government.

"We conducted surgical strikes and wiped out terrorists in their homes which put an end to such tactics," he said, referring to the targeting of terrorist launch pads after the Uri and Pulwama incidents.

Only a leader like PM Modi can put an end to terrorism and Naxalism, he added. He alleged that the Congress contests elections by "taking cuts" from Himachal and asked the people if their hard-earned money should be spent on the development of the state or election campaign of the Congress.

"Ensure the victory of BJP candidates in six assembly byelections for the formation of a BJP government and see the lotus (BJP's poll symbol) blooming in Himachal," he said.

The BJP has fielded six disqualified Congress MLAs, who had revolted against Chief Minister Sukhvinder Singh Sukhu in February, in the by-elections.

Four children among...

at around 4:30 pm, officials said, adding that the structure collapsed due to the huge fire.

"So far we have confirmed the death of 27 persons in the fire incident. The bodies are charred beyond recognition and hence their identification is difficult," said Assistant Commissioner of Police Radhika Bharai.

ACP Vinayak Patel said the deceased included at least four children under the age of 12.

The death toll is likely to increase as relief operations is going on, district officials said.

According to eyewitnesses, several people, including children were playing games at the game zone, located on Nana-Mava Road, when the tragedy struck.

Police said that the owner and manager of the game zone were detained and taken to the police station for questioning.

The government has handed over the investigation of the incident to a five-member Special Investigation Team (SIT) headed by Additional Director General of Police Subhash Trivedi.

Rajkot Collector Prabhav Joshi said the Fire Control Room received a call at around 4:30 pm regarding the blaze at the game zone.

"Fire tenders and ambulances rushed to the spot to douse the flames. The fire caused the collapse of the structure, and debris is being cleared," Joshi added.

However, the exact cause of the massive fire is not known.

President Droupadi Murmu, Vice President Jagdeep Dhanekar and Prime Minister Narendra Modi expressed grief over the incident.

Modi spoke to Gujarat Chief Minister Bhupendra Patel to enquire about the rescue and relief efforts.

"The fire tragedy in Rajkot has saddened us all. In my telephone conversation with him a short while ago, Gujarat CM Bhupendrabhai Patel Ji told me about the efforts underway to ensure all possible assistance is provided to those who have been affected," he said on X.

In a post on X, Murmu said, "I am deeply anguished to learn of the loss of lives in a fire accident at a gaming zone in Rajkot, Gujarat. My heart goes out to the families who have lost their near and dear ones including young children. I pray to the Almighty for the speedy recovery of those being rescued."

Chief Minister Patel has announced an ex gratia of Rs 4 lakh to the kin of each of the deceased and Rs 50,000 to each injured.

After the fire broke out, Rajkot Police Commissioner Raju Bhargava told media persons that the cause of the blaze would be investigated and that a message had been issued to all the gaming zones in the city to close operations.

"The fire tragedy in Rajkot is heart-wrenching. I express my heartfelt condolences to the persons who lost their lives in this incident and their families. I pray to God for the speedy recovery of the injured," Patel tweeted.

"It is very important to ensure that such an incident does not happen again," he added.

Patel further said that any kind of negligence would not be tolerated and assigned the investigation of the entire incident to a Special Investigation Team (SIT).

The SIT, headed by ADGP Trivedi, includes Commissioner, Technical Education, BN Pani; Director, Forensic Science Laboratory, Gandhinagar; HP Sanghvi; Chief Fire Officer, Ahmedabad, JN Khadia; and Superintending Engineer, Roads and Buildings Department, MB Desai.

INDIA bloc performing...

me in writing but they have been reluctant because they have a guilty conscience". He spelt out names of several deprived castes, including Yadavs who have been traditionally RJD supporters, which "could end up losing their constitutional rights if the INDIA bloc succeeded in its alleged plans".

The PM, however, asserted that the opposition coalition was "heading for a defeat" and on June 04 when the results will be out, "RJD and Congress workers will be seen tearing off each other's clothes. The 'shahi parivar' (royal family) of the Congress will put the entire blame of defeat on Mallikarjun Kharge and leave for a vacation abroad".

"The INDIA bloc is like a balloon that has got deflated today when voting is taking place for the sixth and penultimate phase of the elections," claimed the PM.

"Modi has been working to stamp out Pakistan-sponsored terrorism, naxal insurgency and corruption without fear. The INDIA bloc has tried to stop me at every step with scaremongering," he alleged.

Recalling the resolve he displayed in commissioning the surgical strikes and scrapping of Article 370, Modi vowed to continue crackdown on corruption, and indirectly referring to RJD supremo Lalu Prasad and his family, he remarked "those who have snatched people's land in return for jobs will be firmly dealt with".

Referring to Prasad's son and heir apparent Tejashwi Yadav, whom he did not mention by name, Modi remarked "the shehzada (crown prince) will spend his time, after June 04, protecting his inheritance (amaanat) and securing bail (zamaanat)". Referring to Akhilesh Yadav, who heads the Samajwadi Party, the BJP's principal rival in neighbouring Uttar Pradesh, the PM said, "His own party workers stood laughing when he predicted a defeat for Modi in Varanasi and boasted that the INDIA bloc will win all 80 seats in that state. The bicycle (SP poll symbol) stands punctured. The shehzada of UP seems to have drawn inspiration from the shehzada of Congress (Rahul Gandhi)".

Modi, known for his ability to connect with the masses, also asked the people to remember that "every vote for every NDA candidate is not just to elect the local MP but the prime minister...when you go back to your homes please tell your neighbours and family members, who may not have come here, that I have sent my greetings (Jai Shri Ram). Also, please visit the nearest temple and offer prayers for a developed India on my behalf".

Addressing the rallies, Modi said, "You have your Modi, whose actions and intentions you have known for 10 years. On the other hand, you have the motley group called INDIA bloc which is full of people hoping for the prime minister's post, even if just for a year.

Reasi Admn to...

district as Beti Janamohtsav for the empowerment of women.

Reviewing the functioning of the Social Welfare Department at a meeting convened here, the DDC directed the officers to post the list of all pensioners on District Portal and to conduct mega awareness programmes in Blocks/ Panchayats and educational institutions to spread public awareness about all the welfare schemes.

He emphasised the importance of maintaining close coordination with other departments to ensure the smooth implementation of the schemes.

The meeting focussed on evaluation of the implementation of the schemes and activities aimed to benefit the beneficiaries.

District Social Welfare Officer Sachin Sharma, provided a detailed insights into the ongoing schemes and initiatives. A significant emphasis was placed on reaching out to the doorsteps of the eligible persons to provide them benefits of the schemes.

ADDC Sukhdev Singh Samyal, Joint Director Chief Planning Officer Narinder Kumar and Assistant Director Planning Rajesh Kumar were also present.

Six injured in...

continued without any disruption as police intervened and separated the clashing groups, they said.

An FIR was registered by police and further investigation is on, the officials said.

"It is hereby clarified that a minor scuffle took place outside the polling station causing very minor injuries to a few persons.

"The altercation was stopped in time and an FIR has been lodged in the matter. Polling did not get interrupted at any time and went on smoothly," the office of Deputy Commissioner, Poonch, said on X.

CCIU Doda observes cyber awareness day

■ STATE TIMES NEWS

DODA: With a view to give awareness to General public about Cyber crime, J&K Police CCIU Doda organized Cyber awareness Day to observe "Cyber "Jaagrookta Divas" at District Hqrs Doda. The aim of organizing awareness drive was to aware the students in particular and general public at large about Cyber related Crimes and precautionary measures to tackle with it.

On this occasion lectures were delivered by IC CCIU Doda to the participants and they were aware about the use of cyber crime portal, floating trends of fraudsters to trap common man in their tricks to loot their hard earned money by way of using various type of online cheating like credit card fraud, OTP , QR scan frauds, online gaming frauds, assuring loan frauds. Participants were also cautioned to keep their social media accounts secure and safe and also be aware while accepting / chatting with unknown person on facebook, Whatsapp, Instagram, Twitter etc. Mentionable here that cyber awareness programmes are being organized by J&K Police to spread the awareness of Cyber related crimes, online frauds, cheating among the general public so that common people may not get trapped in the net of fraudsters / cheaters.

