National Public Relations Day 2018

Report on the Event Organised by Shimla Chapter of PRSI

Public Relations Society of India, Shimla Chapter celebrates National Public Relations Day every year on 21 April by organising different programmes such as symposiums, seminars, conferences, colloquiums etc. This year, it was celebrated by holding a symposium on *"Indian Democracy: Mantra for Effective Elections"* in association with the Department of Journalism and Mass Communication, Himachal Pradesh University, Shimla. The Chief Guest of the event was the Vice Chancellor of Himachal Pradesh University, Professor Rajinder Singh Chauhan who presided over the Symposium. The speakers were – Professor Harish Thakur, Head of the Department of Political Science, Professor Ajay Srivastav, Department of Journalism and Mass Communication, Dr. Neeraj Sharma, Officer on Special Duty, Department of Elections, Himachal Pradesh, and Ms. Muskan Thakur, visually impaired PG student of Music and Icon of State Election Department. The Symposium was attended by over two hundred participants which includes Dean of Studies, Dean of Student Welfare, Heads of several Departments, dignitaries from the Shimla town, Members of PRSI Shimla Chapter from across the State, Media personnel, Students of Journalism and Mass Communication, and over fifteen physically impaired students of H.P. University.

Welcoming the participants of the Symposium the Chairman PRSI Shimla Chapter, Shri Ashok Sharma said that every year Public Relations Society of India through its over 25 Chapters across the country celebrate 21 April as National Public Relations Day and organizes public awareness events on some themes of national and social importance. He added that the theme for this important day is decided by the National Council of the PRSI. This year's theme is "Indian Democracy: Mantra for Effective Elections" *(Bhartiya Loktantra - Sarthak Chunav ka Mantr)*. Shri Sharma elaborated the eight-point agenda set by the PRSI for effective public awareness drive. He further said that the elections play a very vital role in democracy. General elections of next year would be deciding factor for the future of India and the efforts of PRSI would go a long way in effective public awareness. In the end Shri Sharma urged the audience particularly media and young students to help the PRSI in this endeavour.

The first presentation of the Symposium was made by Ms. Muskan Thakur, visually impaired PG student of Music and Icon of H.P. State Election Department. Ms. Thakur shared her experiences faced by physically challenged people who were neglected and not able to cast their votes even after seventy years of independence. She explained the difficulties faced by her in her village because of which she could not cast her vote till 2016. She thanked the Election Commission of India for being appointed the icon of State Election Department which enabled her to persuade the physically challenged people of the state to cast their votes. She was overwhelmed by casting vote for the first time in recently concluded Vidhan Sabha Elections in the State. At the end of her presentation Ms. Thakur mesmerized the audience by her melodious song.

In his presentation, Professor Harish Thakur said that today democracy is faced with multiple of challenges all over the world. Theoretically democracy stands for 'Government by the People' but it has been observed by many and realistically too, that it appears to be government by the mob. The definitional view point implies that all members of a community participate in the electoral process and the government represents the people in totality but far from this the governments turn out to be bundles of vested interests, or the elite circles that dominate people.

Recent history tells that in many of the so called developed democracies elections were either deferred (Ireland, 2004) or hijacked by the use of money, muscle and technology to continue the dominance of the established regimes. In the 2000 US elections George W. Bush won due to the electoral system, although his opponent got the majority of votes (patronizingly being called the 'Popular Vote'). And the 'loss' of thousands of absentee ballots is a regular feature in US elections that's hardly deemed worth mentioning. The victory of Donald Trump in US against Hillary Clinton who secured 29 lakh more votes than Trump highlights the electoral flaws at its best

The idea of the government of people is also suggestive of the role of people not only in government but also on political issues. This implies that the public could enforce referenda on all topics they feel differently about than their government. But most 'democracies' do not give their citizens that opportunity. In India we too have failed to introduce this.

However, as Paul Starr observes that democracy has the advantage of having election as a mode of self-correction. If an election works out badly, the next one offers an opportunity to make a better choice, and in the meantime constitutional guarantees keep the winners from abusing their power. But sometimes elections fail so disastrously as to threaten irremediable damage to a society's foundations. Several states are facing this situation today. Elections may be rigged or manipulated, muscled or financed and, even when they haven't been, the suspicion that they have may impair a new government's legitimacy and create a constitutional crisis. Oppositions too float such rumours to destabilize the elected ones. In US election in 2014 the Russian interference has created uproars and this opens the biggest challenge to elections in India too as the recent upheavals over Cambridge Analytica has frowned the eyes of many. The task of conducting simultaneous elections to state assemblies and parliament in India, as recommended by Law Commission of India on April 19, 2018 is full of complications. This is further made difficult by the charges Modi government has received about the manipulation of EVMs (though after VVPAT the chances for manipulation have Harish Thakur expensive but they are saver of time, energy and man force required for the ballot papers. Therefore, the use of EVM requires to be made more transparent and error proof because the approximate expenditure for machines as quoted by Election Commission around 5511.48 crore (for about 14 lakh machines) is not a big amount keeping in view the safeties they offer. The chief mantra for effective elections seems to be the refinement of voters' view and vision and not the re-fixation of periodicities and methods. It needs a cleanliness drive like endeavour through media and educational and public relations institutions so that the flaws of elections, which are less procedural

and more behavioural could be remedied and a strong democratic character of the voter could be evolved.

Ajay Srivastava, Associate Professor of Journalism and Mass Communication (ICDEOL) had an interactive session with the students and other participants. He discussed how even after independence the votes were manipulated by threatening, bribing, and killing people by political parties. Dr. Srivastav also emphasized on discrimination done on SC, ST, and OBC people in states like Maharashtra, Oddisha, Jharkhand, and Chatisgarh who were not allowed to cast their votes and their votes were misused by the powerful people.

Srivastav said that in 1990, Shri T. N. Seshan, who was 10th Chief Election Commissioner of India, has cleaned up elections in India. He reformed elections by largely ending its malpractices in the country and redefined the status and visibility of the Election Commission of India. Shri Seshan was instrumental in strict implementation of election code of conduct; issuance of voter IDs for all eligible voters; and limit on candidates expenditure in his/her election.

Dr Neeraj Sharma, OSD, Department of Elections in Himachal Pradesh said that voting right be used in right earnest manner and become a voter instead of elector. He emphasized upon sensitizing the younger generation about voting right very beginning in the school days. He said that the percentage of voting in the State of Himachal was highest, i.e. 70 per cent, in the recent Vidhan Sabha elections. This was possible because of effective awareness drive by the State Election Department. In 2008, he said that a research was conducted in which they observed that 70% of youth is not a registered voter and only 25 per cent of people cast their votes. To overcome this problem the election department started a campaign to encourage people to use their constitutional right with the result in 20018 total 90 per cent of youth is registered voter now in Himachal Pradesh. He also mentioned measures taken during elections and after elections. He also told the effectiveness of VVPAT Vote Verified Paper Audit Trail and told the machine is totally secured and votes cannot be manipulated as it is offline not online. He hoped that the VVPAT machine would be further improved and the visual impaired voters would be able to know to whom they have cast the vote.

In his presidential address, Professor Rajinder Singh Chauhan, Vice Chancellor of the H.P. University said that Indian Democratic history has been very powerful and torch bearer for the rest of the world and there has been see change in the political process and therein we have shifted from quotocracy to telecracy as maximum population of today's India is powered by electronic media. He said that the role of public relations through print media have been commendable during the freedom struggle but now the role of social media and electronic media have squeezed the world and made a global village. He added that the citizen of the country has its right to vote and should use their constitutional right wisely. He exhorted that media have an effective role in helping people to know their rights. He appreciated the team of PRSI Shimla chapter as they

had organise such events to encourage people and to informate people . He also thanked the team of the PRSI to celebrate National public Relation day in the university.

Vote of thanks. . . . .

During the symposium the publicity material and Status Paper on Electronic Voting Machine (EVM) was distributed.