

Need to reconsider voting rights of blind

By Amita Shah

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For the lakhs of blind voters in India there is no secret ballot. They have no option but to take the help of a companion or election official to vote, in the absence of ballot papers in Braille or any other special facility.

While most agree that Braille ballot papers may not help, considering that only five to seven per cent of the blind are educated, they say something should be done to make things easier for them.

"I would like to ask, how do we vote? How can one be absolutely sure that the companion or official we take would cast the vote we want. That person can even try to influence us," says business executive Preeti Singh.

"I have never voted because of this," says Preeti, who has never let her blindness come between her and success.

Providing ballot papers in Braille is not feasible, says the Election Commission. Besides, only a fraction of the blind population can read Braille, an election official says.

There are three million blind voters, as per the National Sample Survey Report of 1991. According to WHO's 1991 survey, there are 12 million blind over the age of 18 in the country. According to another survey there are 87 lakh. The disparity in figures is strangely not looked into and there has been no formal survey after that.

"If Braille is too difficult, they



A blind girl exercising her franchise in New Delhi.

can go in for embossing of the symbols, which even the illiterate can understand. Whether they do it for all the ballot papers or just a few is up to them, but something should be done," says Preeti.

A number of blind people in India are not even aware that they have the right to vote, she says. "Very often you have to fight with the polling official that you have the right to take in a companion into the booth. And not everyone can fight."

Things get tougher when it comes to the uneducated, poor blind. Sometimes party workers come and drive them to the booth, promising to be the companion. Theirs is really a blind vote.

"The blind are as much a part of the social situation. Even in rural areas, they are quite active. But the polling process for them is not an independent one. They have to depend on someone reliable," says A K Mittal, principal, blind school, Blind Relief Association of Delhi.

"We get reports that people in remote areas of some states like Uttar Pradesh, Bihar are not able to vote, because their votes are already cast. But again, there is no authentic survey to substantiate this contention," says Mr Mittal.

Talking of Braille, he says maybe it would be difficult to have Braille ballot papers, but postal ballot could help.

"There is no secret ballot for us. But there is no alternative," says J L Kaul, All India Confederation of Blind.

"Braille would have been possi-

ble if all the blind were educated," says Mr Kaul, who has always voted, generally taking as a companion a worker of the party he wants to vote for. "This way I am sure of my vote." He says that the EC can at least keep the record of how many blind voted.

The visually impaired people are totally involved in the election process, says Mr Narayanan, executive secretary, Blind Relief Association of Delhi.

They take the help of the polling officer, he says. "how can there be Braille ballot sheets, when they do not even do regular surveys to find out how many blind people there are?" asks Mr Narayanan.

"Braille is a very good point, but the problem with it would be that our staff, counting the votes, will not understand it," says chief electoral officer T T Joseph.

Talking of special facilities for the blind and other, handicapped people, he says they can take any companion of their choice or take the help of a polling officer.

"The handicapped should apply for postal ballot," he suggests.

Postal ballots for the handicapped is a good idea, says Mr Mittal.

Ms Preeti too says that postal ballot may possibly help as long as there is no manipulation of the votes. "They can have separate booths for the handicapped," she says.

Considering that 10 per cent of India's population is disabled, their voting rights should be taken into consideration, she says. (PTI)