

**SPEECH OF SHRI PRANAB MUKHERJEE,  
FORMER PRESIDENT OF INDIA ON THE  
OCCASION OF THE INAUGURAL SUKUMAR SEN  
MEMORIAL LECTURE, ORGANISED BY THE  
ELECTION COMMISSION OF INDIA**

I am indeed happy and appreciative of the Election Commission for inviting me to deliver the **First Sukumar Sen Memorial Lecture**. As a student of Constitution as also a participant of our electoral democracy, it is indeed an honor to recall the remarkable contribution of a man who had the stupendous task of implementing and establishing our Democracy – an idea so deeply cherished by our forefathers.

Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

2. Sukumar Sen was India's first Chief Election Commissioner and conducted the Nation's first two General Elections – in 1952 and in 1957. For a contemporary student of history or politics, his

contributions would appear to be rather lost in the pages of history. He has been unacknowledged, unrecognized and unspoken for a long time. One of the reasons maybe because our historical archives have very little information on who he was, although we have a great deal of knowledge of what he did. I would like to congratulate the Election Commission of India for instituting this lecture in his name – a befitting tribute to his outstanding accomplishment in institutionalizing India's Democratic foundations.

3. At the outset let me highlight the life of the protagonist of this lecture. Sukumar Sen was educated in the Presidency College in Calcutta and later awarded gold medal in mathematics at the London University. At the age of just 22, he joined the prestigious Indian Civil Service (ICS), he served as a District and Sessions Judge for 19 long years, and went on to acquire the apex position of Chief Secretary of Bengal.

4. The February 17, 1957 edition of the popular periodical '*Shankar's Weekly*' edited by one of the foremost cartoonists of that time, Shankar Pillai named, Sukumar Sen as – '***The Man of the Week***' for having successfully conducted his, and India's, second general elections. I would quote some excerpts from the praise that the magazine showered on Sukumar Sen and refresh our collective memory.

5. **“Sukumar Sen could easily have been a bit of the Steel Frame that rusted, for he was a District and Sessions Judge for 19 years. That he brought to August 1947 the resilience that made him Chief Secretary to the very difficult Government of Bengal was due undoubtedly to the fact that he had much more than steel in his frame. Bengal in the war years was almost a lost province and when division rent it, what seemed to be wholly ripped off was the morale of the administration.**

**While the White scooted, many a Brown Saheb collapsed in a din of scandal.”**

**6. “Sukumar Sen’s Chief Secretaryship for three years, on the other hand, seemed to prepare him for the most unconventional job that ever came to an I.C.S. man. He was chosen to play obstetrician and to deliver Indian democracy’s first crop of nearly three thousand elected representatives. Realizing with surprising un-I.C.S. humility that democracy likes its mechanics to be as self-effacing as possible, the Chief Election Commissioner became an unseen, undogmatic influence patiently judicial in his attitude to parties but insistent in regard to the machine he wielded.”**

**7. “Where nearly two hundred million people, for the most part unlettered but politically conscious none the less, are set on choosing between one**

**phenomenally big party and a clutter of many small and new ones, where words have come to be replaced by symbols, where a corps of workers recruited ad hoc from a thousand offices with no experience of applied democracy have to face an army of agents both suspicious and persistent, the actual process of election can be very wearing.”**

**8. “But largely due to Sukumar Sen it can be said that apart from Panch Sheela the most impressive gift we have given to Asia in the first decade of our freedom is the system of elections that has been perfected in this country. His success was recognised internationally when he was asked to organise the first Sudan elections. As the voters get ready to clutch at the voting papers for the second Indian general elections, every Political party has reason to remember**

**Sukumar Sen with gratitude for doing a very difficult job very well indeed.” (Unquote)**

Free, fair, popular and credible elections are a cornerstone, indeed the life blood of Democracy. Sen, by seamlessly conducting the first two general elections, aided India’s transition from a Crown colony to a sovereign Democratic Republic in practical terms.

Distinuated Friends, Ladies and Gentlemen,

9. It is our founding fathers, the towering women and men who drafted our Constitution, who wanted India’s giant leap of faith in democracy to get truly ingrained and rather swiftly. In an unprecedented move, hitherto not experimented anywhere in the world, we chose to bring about a peaceful political revolution through **Universal Adult Franchise**. This giant political leap forward was to eventually foster and further the social and economic transformation of the second largest national population of the world.

India is one of the rare countries in the world, where political transformation happened more rapidly than economic or social transformation. A large number of nations that gained freedom around the same time also adopted democratic systems of governance, but India is one of the very few nations that has been able to strengthen its democratic ethos. In comparison, unfortunately many nations degenerated into autocratic rule while India overcame many challenges and built the democratic edifice that is in many ways unparalleled. What India's constitutionalists like Surendranath Banerjee, Justice M. G. Ranade and Pheroza Shah M. Mehta had brought into conception in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, Sen effectively brought to completion in the 1950's. India attained freedom in August 1947, and two years later set up an Election Commission under **Article 324** of the Constitution. In March 1950 Sukumar Sen was appointed the Chief Election Commissioner. Within The next month, the Representation of the People Act

was passed in Parliament. While proposing the Act, Prime minister, Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru, expressed the hope that elections would be held as early as the spring of 1951.

10. It is important to note that before the Election Commission was established in independent India, the seeds of institutionalizing the mechanism where every Indian above the age of 21 had the '**Right to Vote**' was already mooted and deliberated upon. The Motilal Nehru report on a draft Constitution for free India advocated unlimited adult franchise and equal rights for women. The resolution of the 1931 Karachi session of the Indian National Congress – presided over by Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel regarded the affirmation of political equality, encapsulated in the notion of universal adult franchise, as fundamental to the future of *Purna Swaraj*. Interestingly, Britain had removed the remaining arbitrary restrictions on the exercise of the vote for adults only recently, in 1928.



The principle of one man one vote galvanised large sections of the populace behind the anti-colonial struggle. A vindication was the overwhelming victory of the Indian National Congress in the 1937 provincial elections, and in subsequent elections of 1945 and 1946 that were held on restrictive franchise on the ground of qualifications based on property, payment of taxes etc

11. The Round Table Conferences on the future of India that took place in 1931-32 which led to the creation of an Indian Franchise Committee headed by The Marquess of Lothian, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for British India, to advise on an expanded and more equitable Indian election system.

12. The Committee was forced to agree that Universal Adult Franchise was the only really fair way to conduct elections, but they couldn't see how this could be easily implemented in India. The Committee noted, and I quote **"The first is that adult suffrage is**

**the only method by which absolute equality of political rights can be secured to every adult citizen. Any form of restricted franchise necessarily infringes the principle of equality between individuals in some degree. The second reason is that adult suffrage is the best means of securing that the legislatures represent the people as a whole. The third reason is that it solves, so far as the electoral roll is concerned, the difficult problem of securing the fair representation of all elements of the population, communal and racial, rich and poor, town and country, men and women, depressed classes, and labour” (Unquote)**

13. While these observations, vindicated the stance of the Indian native polity at large, what is really significant though, is that the idea of Universal Adult Franchise boiled down to, how to make an illiterate voter identify his choice of vote. This obviously was

based on their experience of British elections. But while they worried about the effects of illiteracy on the electorate, they also conceded that this need not prevent people from voting – because they had the example of Ceylon to show how this could be done. The Ceylon system also known as the coloured box or ‘symbol’ system, made it unnecessary for the voter, whether literate or illiterate to make any mark on the ballot paper. He or she had merely to place it in the box marked with the colour or “symbol“ of the candidate of their choice. This system not only simplified the task, but made it possible for the voter to cast his vote in secret, while increasing the number of electors who can be polled within a given time.

Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

14. When India chose to adopt Democracy, this form of government was confined to a narrow spectrum of industrially and educationally advanced nations of the West. Even there, the number had dwindled to mere

12 by 1942, down from 29 in 1922, due to rise of the authoritarian regime in Italy, Germany and its satellite states. The Allied victory in World War II in 1945 opened up the way for re-democratization, yet in the case of India, the enlistment of 36 Crore people (as per Census 1951), who constituted almost one-sixth of world population, to the cause of democracy, was a mammoth exercise. India was the pioneer of democracy, in the non-Western world, despite its low socio-economic indicators. India also became the world's largest democracy and remains so, as population nearly quadrupled between the Census of 1951 and 2011.

Distinguished Friends, Ladies and Gentlemen,

15. The world watched disbelievingly as the Indian elections commenced over a span of four months from 25 October 1951 to 21 February 1952. It was the biggest democratic exercise in history, at that point. Sukumar Sen worked undaunted by cynicism and the

Cassandra's of doom, felt that a nation with sub-17 per cent literacy was not fit for adult universal suffrage. Let me share with you the kind of criticism India's democratic exercise was facing from its skeptics. Winston Churchill had infamously argued that **"in handing over the government of India to these so-called political classes, we are handing over to men of straw, of who, in a few years, no trace will remain"**. (Unquote) Similarly, American scholar-journalist Selig S. Harrison had posited that **"the odds are almost wholly against the survival of freedom and the issue is, in fact, whether any Indian state can survive at all"**.

**16.** That fact that India could choose its own leaders via nationwide elections seemed an incomprehensible idea to most of the western observers. The British General Claude Auchinleck who was the Supreme Commander of the Indian Armed Forces reportedly wrote in 1948, **"The Sikhs may try to set up a**

**separate regime... and that will be only a start of a general decentralisation and break-up of the idea that India is a country, whereas it is a subcontinent as varied as Europe. The Punjabi is as different from a Madrassi as a Scot is from an Italian. The British tried to consolidate it but achieved nothing permanent. No one can make a nation out of a continent of many nations."**

17. Even nine years after the first election, Aldous Huxley, the great writer of Brave New World declared, and I quote **"When Nehru goes, the government will become a military dictatorship—as in so many of the newly independent states, for the army seems to be the only highly organised centre of power."** (Unquote) Even after the fourth General Elections, the London Times wrote in 1967 that **"The great experiment of developing India within a democratic framework has failed. (Indians will soon vote) in the fourth—and surely last—general**

**election.”** Friends, not only were all these high browed Cassandras proven wrong, but we can with some collective pride and satisfaction, say that these detractors were proved wrong by the people of India.

Distinguished Friends, Ladies and Gentlemen.

18. The Constituent Assembly of India, which prepared the Constitution, had intensely debated the issue of universal adult franchise. It had unhesitatingly adopted the principle of adult suffrage with the full knowledge of the difficulties involved. According to Sen, who supervised the first general elections of the Lok Sabha and 18 State Assemblies, granting votes to one and all was an act of faith, **“faith in the common man of India and in his practical common sense. This decision launched a great and fateful experiment unique in the world in its stupendousness and**

**complexities,”** Sen wrote in an extensive report on the first general elections.

By the time 1951-52 polls were completed, a new Constitution of India was in place. The Constitution made a provision for an independent Election Commission. By independent, it was implied that the poll body would be free from any control of the executive or the parliament or the party in power.

19. Sukumar Sen spoke of the first election as "**the biggest experiment in democracy in human history.**" It was an exercise of massive logistical proportions. The electorate comprised around 176 million individuals, of who 86% were illiterate. It was not just one election, but two since provincial assemblies were also elected at the same time. A house-to-house survey was undertaken to register the voters. About 10 lakh officials were assigned duties to supervise the proceedings. Nearly 620,000,000 (6.2 Crore) ballot papers printed. Over



2,24,000 polling booths, one assigned almost for over 1000 voters were established; 2.5 million plus steel ballot-boxes were made; 17,500 candidates from over 14 national and 63 regional or local parties and a large number of independents contested for; 489 seats to the Lok Sabha and 3,283 seats to the state assemblies; 98 seats in the Lok Sabha and 669 seats in state assemblies were reserved for the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes. As a concession to scheduled castes and tribes some constituencies had to elect two members from the same seat, one general and one from the caste or tribe, and North Bengal (today's Cooch Behar seat), actually elected three members – one SC, one ST and one General. Perhaps the biggest difference from today's election was the one replicated from Ceylon's attempt to simplify matters as much as possible for illiterate voters. Instead of all the symbols being printed on one ballot paper which voters had to mark, the symbols were placed on ballot boxes, one for each

candidate. Voters were given a ballot paper (or two or three for multiple member constituencies) which they simply had to drop into the ballot box marked with the symbol of their choice. Given the colossal task of producing over 21.5 lakh steel ballot-boxes, one for each candidate, even the private sector pitched in. Godrej had leased a village at Vikhroli in Bombay suburban area, comprising a roofed area of 2,33,000 sq ft for making these ballot boxes. The factory had to churn out more than 15,000 ballot boxes a day.

20. Over 16,500 clerks were needed to type up and collate the electoral rolls. About 380,000 reams of paper were used to print the rolls. 224,000 members of the police would be required to prevent violence and intimidation. The electorate was spread out over an area of more than a million square miles, and in places the terrain made the exercise horrendously difficult. Bridges had to be specially constructed across rivers to reach remote hill villages; naval

vessels would be required to carry the rolls to the voting booths on small islands in the Indian Ocean. History records how people from the remotest corners of the country be it the nomads of Kutch for whom special booths were built in the sweltering desert or the Tribals of Odisha who came to the voting booths with their bows and arrows, while the Nagas trekked the hills for days. They knew what they were voting for. **A country that would include the rights of all Indians, without bias or exception.**

Distinguished Friends, Ladies and Gentlemen.

21. India's tryst with Democracy is a story which needs to be told time and again, but complacency enables authoritarian' tendencies to gain ground. We are a nation of 12,69,219 (Twelve lakh, Sixty Nine Thousand, Two Hundred and Nineteen) square miles, practicing 7 major religions, speaking 122 languages and 1600 dialects in their everyday lives, belonging to

3 major ethnic groups – Caucasians, Mongoloids, and Dravidians – represented by the Constitution of India. The deepening and diffusion of Democracy in India did not go without its share of challenges. I would like to underline five such instances, when the maturity of Indian Democracy assimilated even the most anarchic of the views and helped in strengthening our intrinsic belief in democratic ethos and values.

- a. To my mind, **the foremost achievement of the First General Election lies in the fact that it cemented the painstakingly brought about unification of India.** Despite the complex arrangement of categorization under parts A, B, C and D of the Provinces, States, Territory and areas, **the entire geographical territory of India voted as a singular electorate electing for themselves a single Union Parliament.** Ofcourse, by the time the second General Elections happened, the complex categorization

had been done away with, since there were just states and UTs in existence. Our geographical electoral map changed only when territories associated with Pondicherry in 1954, Goa, Daman & Diu in 1961 and Sikkim in 1975 joined the Indian Union.

b. **The participation of the Communist Party of India (CPI)** in the Constituent Assembly elections, even though they strongly disapproved of its idea and termed it a ploy of the British to lead India into a 'new imperial partnership' can be termed as another accomplishment of the democratic experiment in India. Although there was practically no Communist in the Constituent Assembly, they launched a severe attack on the Constitution based on their own ideological principles from outside, and we are yet to fully address the socio-economic dimension associated with Left-wing extremism.

- c. **Another victory of Indian democratic principles was the successful suppression of the radical and violent rebellion in Naxalbari.** Although this may be regarded as a partial victory, because the threat of Naxals to India's internal security still looms large in many parts of the country.
- d. **Democracy in India also gave rise to Identity based politics.** Inequalities in a society exacerbate the need to assert identity. Unfortunately, the societal texture of India has given rise to groups and communities to assert their democratic rights to bargain with the State for political power. Purely from the lens of deepening democracy, I see this as a positive development because it leads to wider representation. However, the rise of identity based politics has at the same time diluted the very representative aspect of the Parliament. An electorate divided on caste and community

lines throws up a polarised mandate. This is ultimately reflected in the functioning of the Parliament which rather than pursuing a national agenda ends up pursuing sectarian interests.

e. **Indian democracy and its inherent power of assimilation has successfully thwarted insurgency and separate movements** and elections have successfully co-opted varied groups into the electoral mainstream. The various accords – Punjab Accord, the Shillong Accord, the Mizo Accord, the Assam Accord and the recent Agreement on Bru-Reang people are some of the momentous milestones which have enabled a tradition of dialogue within the four corners of Democracy and fostered integration.

Distinguished Friends, Ladies and Gentlemen,

22. Indian Democracy has been tested time and again. The last few months have witnessed people come out on the streets in large numbers, particularly the young to voice out their views on issues which in their opinion are important. Their assertion and belief in the Constitution of India is particularly heartening to see. Consensus is the lifeblood of Democracy. Democracy thrives on listening, deliberating, discussing, arguing and even dissent. I believe the present wave of largely peaceful protests that have gripped the country shall once again enable the further deepening of our democratic roots.

Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

23. It is my firm belief that all these could be achieved because we fiercely upheld and maintained the sanctity and supremacy of elections and the electoral process. This indeed could not have been possible without the institutional framework headed by



the Election Commission of India. Dr. Ambedkar called for an independent Election commission and instituted the same through Article 324 of the Constitution. In his words: (Quote) "**the greatest safeguard for purity of elections, for fairness in elections, was to take away the matter from the hands of the executive authority and to hand it over to some independent authority**". (Unquote). In my opinion, the Election Commission of India respected and revered by the people and feared by the participants of elections, has mostly stood the test of time.

24. In another few days, we shall be observing the '**National Voters**' Day. I need to hardly emphasize the importance of the Voters' Day for the nation. It reaffirms the power of the people to determine their own destiny by exercising the freedom to elect their own representatives. The role of the Election Commission in the practical play of democracy in

India has been simply outstanding. The challenges it has had to face have been daunting. The management of an electorate of over 900 million in 2019 that is nearly the combined population of third, fourth and fifth largest nations in the world, and ensuring fair polling over Ten Lakh Thirty Six thousand polling stations is not an easy job. I compliment the Election Commission for this laudable achievement.

25. Enthusiastic participation of people in the electoral process is the key to healthy democracy. The Voter is, therefore, the central actor in any democratic election. I am happy to note that the Election Commission of India has taken several initiatives to make the process of enrolment easier and convenient, and the voting experience people-friendly.

26. It would be worth mentioning here, thanks to the path outlined by Shri Sukumar Sen, and the legacy of grit and determination left behind by him, the Election Commission of India has always found itself equal to the task. After having smoothly conducted 17 general elections for the Lok Sabha and almost 400 elections for the state legislative assemblies, the Election Commission finds itself in an enviable position. With five to six states going to election every year, the Election Commission of India is never at rest.

**27.** Any lecture on the electoral processes of India would be incomplete without underlining the outstanding contribution of the women and men at its helm. I would especially like to mention – Shri Kalyan Sundaram, the second CEC, Shri S. P. Sen Verma, who managed to conduct the elections of 1969 in the midst of Naxal fury, Shri T. N Seshan for bringing about far reaching and much needed reforms and

Shri J M Lyngdoh for setting right our University Election system.

**28.** Having spoken about our achievements so far, it would be fitting if we were to look at the challenges that our electoral system as indeed our democracy faces. I would like to accordingly underline a few.

**a. During elections, the Election Commission of India puts an embargo on the sanctioning and implementation of developmental projects,** leading to near estoppel of day to day administration. In a country of India's size and magnitude, where apart from the Parliament, there are 29 State Assemblies and 2 Union Territories with elected assemblies, almost throughout the year one or the other election takes place. In this regard, there is a thought of holding Assembly and Parliamentary Elections simultaneously. However, it is possible only by amending the Constitution and with political

consensus. There are many flaws that will need to be adequately addressed if the pre 1967 electoral arrangements of simultaneous elections to Parliament and Assemblies have to be effected. This may address this problem to some extent.

Another alternate could be to amend the model code of conduct appropriately and ensure that no developmental work is stopped simply because of the fact that elections are taking place. Ideally, it may be confined only to the elections to Lok Sabha which takes place all over the country and should be for a period of 3-4 weeks when actual Election process starts with the filing on nomination papers and ends with the casting of votes. It need not be applicable to election to the Assemblies of the States and Union Territories

**b. Disproportionately large size of the electorate vis-à-vis the number of public**

**representatives.** The last enhancement of seats in Lok Sabha took place in 1977, almost half a century ago, on the basis of the 1971 census, according to which the entire population of the country was 55 crores. Thereafter, there has been an embargo on increasing the number of seats in Parliament and State Assemblies till the year 2026. This has resulted in the fact that the number of voters per Lok Sabha Constituency as per the 2011 census has risen to more than 16 lakh. In the last general election of 2019, approximately 90 crore voters were enrolled and were eligible for voting for 543 members of the Lok Sabha.

With an average of 16-18 lakh people being represented by one member of the Parliament, how can we expect the representatives to be in touch with the electors? There is a strong case for removing the freeze on the number of seats in the Delimitation exercise. Whenever there is a

question of removing this freeze on the number of seats- which should ideally increase to about 1000 Lok Sabha MPs with a corresponding rise in the number of MPs in Rajya Sabha and the State Legislatures, there are various theories put forward to oppose it

**c. Adequate representation of women in Parliament and the Assemblies has emerged as a major area of concern.** An appropriate mechanism to ensure this should be worked out and necessary amendments should be brought about in the Constitution. I am happy to note that women form 14.6% of the total strength of the 17th Lok Sabha, highest since Independence.

Distinguished Friends, Ladies and Gentlemen,

29. Towards the end I would like to draw the attention of this august gathering towards the importance of institutions in our National evolution. If democracy has succeeded, it's

largely due to the perfect conduct of elections by all Election Commissioners starting from Sukumar Sen to the present Election Commissioners. Although appointed by the executive of the day itself, they have managed to discharge their non partisan role. A deliberate and arduous journey that entailed visionary leadership, sagacious patience and exemplary hard work by many inspiring individuals and hundreds of faceless civil servants led to the establishment of world class institutions. These institutions like the RBI, CAG, Planning Commission, UPSC and the Election Commission spearheaded our socio-economic and political resurgence. The Election Commission like its peers in other fields has served its purpose accordingly well, and any attempt at its denigration will amount to denigrating the electoral process itself. There can be no room for speculation that



challenges the very basis of our democracy. People's mandate is sacrosanct and has to be above any iota of reasonable doubt. A firm believer in our institutions, it is my considered opinion that it is the 'workmen' who decide how the institutional 'tools' perform. The onus of ensuring institutional integrity in this case lies with the Election Commission of India. They must do so and put any speculations to rest.

30. I congratulate all of you for your invaluable contribution in efficiently managing elections, improving voter registration, enhancing voters' participation, educating and motivating voters, fighting black-money and paid news during elections, and ensuring a conducive environment for people to cast their vote.

31. I mentioned earlier that our first Chief Election Commissioner was asked to supervise elections in the then newly independent country of Sudan. He spent nine months in that country, setting up the infrastructure for polling and making sure it worked. Sen's work in Sudan was the subject of a stirring tribute in the Egyptian newspaper, *Al Misri*. In its issue of December 18, 1953, it called the Indian **“one of those men who were born to lead the pitched battles for Democracy”**. For under Sen's supervision the Sudanese polls had been **“free in every sense of the word”**.

32. Our experiment with Democracy based on Universal Adult Franchise has not only continued despite hindrances but has deepened and spread with regular elections to Panchayats and Urban Local Bodies also

being held successfully on a periodic basis. The answer to this success lies in the wisdom and resilience of our people, strength of our institutions and above all maturity of our political class – which has to a very large extent adhered to our guiding civilizational dictum of **Satyameva Jayate**.

**Thank You**

**Jai Hind**

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