The ITEC Spirit: Sharing the art & skill of elections

By Manish Chand

It’s a journey without frontiers. Thirty people, 19 countries, one common mission: honing in on the art of holding elections and keeping the democratic fire burning.

Away from the exuberant noise of campaigning and rhetorical salvos, in the summer of 2014 the scene on the seventh floor of the imposing building of the Election Commission in Delhi was that of quiet enthusiasm and purposefulness. It was back to classroom for a group of 30 mid-career polling officials from countries as diverse as Yemen, Ghana, Lebanon, Georgia, Bhutan and Africa’s newest nation South Sudan. And they were earnestly trying to unscramble how India, the world’s most populous democracy, organises free, fair and credible elections.

An initiative of the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation Programme (ITEC), India’s signature programme for capacity building and training for kindred developing countries in the spirit of South-South solidarity, the electoral training programme, since its launch in the summer of 2012, has trained 90 mid-career polling officials from over 40 countries for the past three years. The training is conducted by the India International Institute of Democracy and Election Management (IIIDEM), an institute affiliated with the Election Commission, the autonomous constitutional body which conducts the mammoth elections of India with vigilance, finesse and sophistication.

This year was special for participants as they not only got tutorials in various facets of election management like operating the electronic voting machines and security at polling booths from seasoned EC officials, but they also got the first-hand feel of the spinning carnival of the parliamentary elections in India, which have been billed as the world’s largest democratic exercise. Besides attending the training course, they also visited Agra, home to the eternal wonder of the Taj Mahal, and Gwalior to see for themselves how the giant election machine works in India. The two week long “Third Special Course on Election Management” is being held in April even as the election process is in full swing. Like previous years, this time round also, the participants came from near and far and included countries such as Bhutan, Sri Lanka, the Maldives in India’s immediate neighbourhood; a host of African countries including Ethiopia, Tanzania, Sudan, South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ghana, Lesotho and Sierra Leone. Polling officials from countries from Middle
East (Lebanon, Yemen, Palestine), Latin America (El Salvador, Georgia) and Central Asia (Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan) also participated in the fortnight-long programme.

The training course has been conceptualised to disseminate India’s experience and expertise in holding elections with fellow developing countries, says Dr Noor Mohammad, a consultant with IIIDEM who proactively helped shape the course, which has become a window into how the Indian democracy works on the ground.

**The India Experience**

The participant were all praise at how India manages to hold the elections on this scale – with around 500-600 million people, in an electorate of 814.5 million, expected to vote in the 2014 parliamentary elections, which have witnessed a record turn-out. The appreciation is not rehearsed, but comes straight from the heart. “Indian democracy is outstanding. The elections are so well-organised. The technology used to conduct elections is simply superb and enhances transparency and accountability of the electoral process,” says Doris Emefa Agbezhulor, Principal Electoral Officer, Election Commission, Ghana, at the end of the two-week course in electoral training. In a similar vein, Julie Tanios of Lebanese National Assembly, who was among 30 participants at this year’s course in electoral training, is all praise. Says Ms Tanios: “I went to a lot of polling stations in India and was struck at transparency and atmosphere free from pressure. India is an example of democracy for my country, the Arab world and the Middle East. And I hope we will be able to reach your level of democracy and transparency.”

The training course is not a one-way traffic; it has also become a platform for Indian officials to learn how elections are held in other developing countries, the uniqueness of each system and the challenges faced by polling officials in the course of discharging their duties.

The electoral training course is often the first exposure to the spirit and ethos of India for most participants, who found their first encounter with a mind-bogglingly diverse country as overwhelming, illuminating and liberating. And thanks to ITEC, they forge lasting friendships and memories of a lifetime in this country.

The electoral training course has become hugely popular, with India’s Ministry of External Affairs flooded with requests for participation from scores of developing countries. “We are overwhelmed by the response we got,” says Kumar Tuhin, joint secretary in charge of ITEC. “The capacity building and
training courses are conducted within the framework of South-South cooperation and forms the basis of ITEC,” he says.

**ITEC Spirit of Sharing**

Transformation and self-fashioning is the animating mantra of the ITEC that hinges on capacity building and skills transfer to hundreds of thousands of students, professionals, and mid-career diplomats and officials in 160 countries across continents, including Africa, Asia, Latin America and East and Central Europe.

An embodiment of India’s unstinting commitment to South-South cooperation, the ITEC programme has disseminated expertise and shared India’s developmental experience with countries of the developing south. Started as a bilateral programme of assistance of the Indian government, the ITEC, including its corollary SCAAP (Special Commonwealth Assistance for Africa Programme), has expanded to include some 220-odd courses ranging from IT, textile designing, foreign affairs to commerce, science and media.

The electoral training course is a relatively new initiative under the ITEC, but it perfectly epitomises India’s development-centric diplomacy and outreach to fraternal countries of the global south, which is rapidly emerging as a hub of innovation, enterprise and can-do spirit. Above all, it’s an exemplar of the ITEC spirit of sharing, learning and empowering fellow human beings through ideas and knowledge. And this spirit will shine in resplendent celebrations as the ITEC turns 50 this year. The golden jubilee anniversary of the ITEC will not only be celebrated in India, but in a wide swathe of the developing world from Kabul to Kinshasa, Thimphu to Tbilisi and Colombo to Congo.

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*(The views expressed in this article are solely those of the author)*