

**Conduct of Municipal Elections during COVID
Revised Broad Guidelines**

2022

State Election Commission, Assam

Conduct of Election for Urban Local Bodies during COVID

Revised Broad Guidelines, 2022

Assam State Election Commission, on 26th August 2020, had adopted “Broad guidelines for conduct of General Elections/ Bye-elections during COVID-19” issued by Election Commission of India. The Elections to Bodoland Territorial Council and other Autonomous Councils were conducted accordingly. The Commission had also issued further instructions, from time to time, in view of the emerging COVID circumstances and advisories issued by Ministry of Home Affairs and MoHFW.

2. **Article 243 U of the Constitution of India** states that the term of the Municipalities shall be five years from the date of its first meeting. The term of Municipal Boards in Assam expired in April, 2020 and extension given to their management by DCs/SDOs under Assam Municipal Act, 1956 is due to expire on 31.03.2022.
3. **Commission held consultations with Home Secretary, Health Secretary and Secretary of Disaster Management in the state regarding prevailing Covid situation and measures being taken/planned by them.**
4. **The safety of vote and voters**, both are equally and critically important in the democracy. Therefore, it is the duty of the Commission to fulfil its constitutional mandate and those of Authorities/ Committee(s) under the Disaster Management Act, 2005 (DM Act) to extend support as per legal and institutional framework to steer elections even during unprecedented pandemic for putting elected government in place within due time.
5. **The Disaster Management Act, 2005 (DM Act)** provides for the effective management of disaster(s) and for matter connected therewith or incidental thereto. A comprehensive institutional regime has been set up under the DM Act with National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) at the Apex level u/s 3(1), National Executive Committee (NEC) u/s8(1), State Disaster Management Authority (SDMA) u/s 14(1), State Executive Committee (SEC) headed by the Chief Secretary of the State u/s 20(1) and the Disaster Management Authority headed by District Magistrate u/s 25(2a). the DM Act mandates and make such designated Authorities/Committee(s) responsible to prepare plan; prescribe regulatory/ mitigation regime and enforcement thereof; seek community/ inter agency coordination and to monitor implementation of the prescribed directions to contain, mitigate, control damage and providing assistance to the effected persons. The DM Act also empowers the designated authorities/ Committee(s) to take appropriate legal/ punitive action against violators of its directions u/s 51-60 of the Act.
6. The Commission directs that during electoral process the Chief Secretary at the State level and the District Magistrate at the District level, shall be primarily responsible for monitoring, supervision and strict enforcement of these COVID guidelines and the guidelines issued by NDMA, whichever is more stringent.

Details of the broad guidelines are as follows:

I. Campaign by the political parties/contesting candidates/others

1. It is expected that all stakeholders namely political parties, candidates, campaigners, voters and authorities engaged in the election process shall always be conscious of their prime duty towards public health/ safety and therefore shall abide by these general instructions and other norms of Covid appropriate behaviour as mandated by the respective authorities prescribed under the law.
2. **No road show, Pad-yatra, cycle/bike/vehicle rally and procession** shall be allowed till 15 February, 2022. Commission shall subsequently review the situation and issue further instructions accordingly.
3. **However, physical rallies during the campaign period**, shall be conducted subject to adherence to extant COVID-19 guidelines. **The maximum limit of persons allowed for Indoor and Outdoor rally/meeting** shall be as per existing direction of respective SDMA (Mention numbers). For these meetings political parties shall distribute masks and sanitizers to persons attending and maintain COVID protocol at entry and exit point.
4. District Election Officer should take following steps for this purpose:
 - I. District Election officer should, in advance, identify dedicated grounds for public gathering with clearly marked Entry/Exit points.
 - II. In all such identified grounds, the District Election Officer should ensure that markers for social distancing norms are put in place in advance by organisers of the meeting/ rally.
 - III. District Election Officer and District Superintendent of Police should ensure that the number of attendees do not exceed the limit prescribed by State Disaster Management Authority for public gatherings. DEO should depute Nodal Health Officers to oversee that COVID-19 instructions/guidelines are followed during these meetings.
 - IV. The Political Parties and Candidates concerned shall ensure that all COVID-19 related requirement like face masks, sanitizers, thermal scanning etc are fulfilled during each of election related activities.
5. Further, rallies and meeting shall be allowed **only in earmarked places** and with prior permissions of district administration.
6. **Each political party candidate shall furnish an undertaking** with the application that it shall abide by all the extant instructions/guidelines in this regard.
7. **Between 8 pm and 8 am no rallies and public meeting (akin to campaign curfew)** shall be allowed on any campaign day.
8. **Nukkad Sabhas (meeting) will not be allowed** on public roads, roundabouts or public streets or corners.
9. Further, Political parties and candidates are advised to conduct their **campaign as much as possible through digital/virtual/media platforms/mobile based mode** instead of physical mode ensuring strict compliance of Covid safety norms.

10. **Door to Door campaign-** A maximum of 5 (five) persons including candidate, excluding security personnel, if any, shall be allowed to do door to door campaign.
11. **The convoy of vehicles shall be broken after every 5 (five) vehicles** and interval between two sets of convoys of vehicles should be half an hour instead of gap of 100 meters (in supersession of Para 5.8.1 of Returning Officers' Handbook 2019). During the permitted campaign period, convoy of vehicles will be allowed only for movement of vehicle from one point to another point for campaigning.
12. **The maximum number of star campaigners** for recognized National political parties has been fixed at 20, for recognized State political parties at 15 and for unrecognized political parties at 10. Request for permission for campaign by star campaigners may be given at least 48 hours before the start of campaign to make all necessary safety arrangements.
13. **No victory procession** after the counting shall be allowed and not more than two persons shall be allowed to accompany the winning candidate or his/her authorized representative to receive the certificate of election from Returning Officer.
14. **If a candidate or political party violates any of the above guidelines**, no further permission shall be given to the concerned candidate/party for rallies, meetings etc.
15. The commission has requested Principal Secretary, Health Department to issue direction to treat all eligible govt. officials, deployed/engaged for Municipal Elections, at par with Front Line Workers (FLWs) and to give them additional precaution dose of COVID-19 vaccines.

II. General Guidelines to be followed during entire election processes for all persons.

16. All person involved with the electoral process shall **wear face mask** during the concerned election related activities.
17. **Social distancing norms** shall be strictly abided by all persons connected with election related activities as per the extant COVID guidelines of the State Govt. and Ministry of Home Affairs.
18. All Polling Personal/ Security Personal/ Counting Staff shall be doubly vaccinated before deploying/ engaging in election related activities.
19. No Polling Agent/ Counting Agent etc allowed to enter Counting hall/Polling Station without double vaccination.
20. No person shall be allowed to enter Counting hall without Double vaccination and if they are not vaccinated/ single vaccinated, RT-PCR/RAT from authorized lab will be required within 48 hours from start of polling/ counting.
21. At the **entry of hall/ room/ premises** used for election purposes:
 - **Thermal Scanning** of all persons shall be carried out;
 - **Sanitizer** shall be made available on all entry points.
22. As far as practicable, large halls should be identified and utilized to ensure social distancing norms.

23. Adequate number of vehicles shall be mobilized for movement of polling personal, security personal to ensure compliance of COVID-19 guidelines.
24. Create awareness among the public for COVID appropriate behaviour including self-monitoring.
25. **Nodal Health Officer:** Nodal Health Officer shall be designated for the State Level, the District Level and the Municipal Board Level to oversee COVID related arrangements and, preventive measures during entire election electoral process.
26. **EVMs**
 - i. First & Second randomization and preparation of EVMS shall be done in large halls.
 - ii. Sanitizers shall be provided insufficient quantity for use during the process.
 - iii. Gloves shall be made available to each official handling EVM.
27. **Election Materials:** Election Material Kit will be prepared in a spacious and sufficiently large hall following all safety, sanitation and social distancing measures.
28. **Distribution and Collection of Election Material**
 - i. Large hall/spaces should be identified for distribution/ collection of election material.
 - ii. As far as practicable, it should be organized in decentralized manner.
 - iii. Prior time should be allocated to the polling teams for distribution/ collection of election material.
29. **Kit for polling Officer**

The following items shall be provided to every polling official and security personal(Other than those where PEEs are needed) in addition to other prescribed items:

 - i. Mask
 - ii. Sanitizer
 - iii. Face-Shield
 - iv. Gloves
30. **Training and capacity Building**
 - i. As far as practicable, training of election officials will be organized in decentralized manner at large halls.
 - ii. Training for election officials may also be organized through online/ digital mode.
 - iii. All PPTs, training materials, relevant documents, topic wise video clips, question papers for self-assessment may be uploaded in app/ portal so that any election official can access it as per requirement.
 - iv. Sufficient number of Polling/Counting/Poll related staffs shall also be kept in reserve by DEO/RO, to replace in case any polling personnel displays COVID-19 symptoms.

31. Nomination Process

- i. Number of persons to accompany candidate for submission of Nomination is restricted to two (2).
- ii. Maximum number of vehicles for the purposes of nomination is restricted to two (2) (This is in supersession of the existing **Para 5.8.1 of Returning Officer's Handbook 2019**)
- iii. Returning Officer's chamber should have sufficient space to perform the functions of nomination, scrutiny and symbol allocation following social distancing norms.
- iv. Returning Officer should allot staggered time in advance to prospective candidates.
- v. Large space for waiting for candidate(s) should be arranged.
- vi. All steps required to be taken for the submission of nomination form and affidavit shall continue to operate as per the provisions.

32. No. of electors in Polling Station

There shall be maximum 1250 electors (as far as practicable) in a polling station.

33. Polling Station Arrangements

- i. Mandatory sanitization of polling station, preferably, a day before the poll.
- ii. Thermal scanner at the entry point of every polling station location.
- iii. Thermal checking of voters at entry point of polling station location/ Polling station, either by polling staff or Para Medical Staff or Asha worker.
- iv. **If temperature is above the set norms of MoH & FW at first reading, then it will be checked twice and if it remains, then the elector shall be provided with token/ certificate and will be asked to come for voting at the last hour of poll. At the last hour of poll, such electors shall be facilitated voting, strictly following COVID-19 related preventive measures.**
- v. Help desk for distribution of token to the voters of first come first basis so that they do not wait in the queue.
- vi. Marker to demonstrate social distancing for queue.
- vii. Earmarking circle for 15-20 persons of 2 yards (6 feet) distance for voters standing in the queues each, for male, female, and PwD/ senior citizen voters.
- viii. The services of BLOs, volunteers etc may be engaged to monitor and regulate social distancing norms strictly.
- ix. One shaded waiting areas with chairs, dari etc. will be provided, for male and female separately, within the polling station premises so that voters can participate in voting without safety concerns.

- x. **Sanitizer** should be provided at the entry/exit point of every polling station.
- xi. **Face masks** in reserve for those electors who are not carrying the mask will be kept.
- xii. Awareness posters on COVID should be displayed at visible locations.
- xiii. Sitting arrangement in polling station for the polling personnel and polling agents shall be made as per the norms of social distancing.
- xiv. If polling agent or counting agent is having temperature above the prescribed limit, then their reliever shall be allowed by Presiding Officer, who will keep a record accordingly.
- xv. During the process of identification of voter, the voters will require to lower the facemasks for identification, when required.
- xvi. At any given time, only 1(one) voter shall be allowed to stand in front of each polling official maintaining social distance.
- xvii. Hand gloves shall be provided to the voter, for signing on the voter register and pressing button of EVM for voting.
- xviii. Sanitizer shall be kept inside the booth at appropriate locations with clear direction for the use by voters.
- xix. COVID patients and all others who may be under quarantine will be allowed to cast their vote **at the last hour of poll day** at their respective Polling Stations, under the supervision of health authorities, strictly following COVID-19 related preventive measures. Sector Magistrates shall coordinate this activity in their allocated polling stations.

34. **Strong-room Arrangement**

- i. Strong Room should be sanitized before the storage of polled EVMs.
- ii. Social Distancing and other safety norms shall be followed for each activity.

35. **Counting of Votes**

- At entry of Counting Hall there must be facility of Thermal Scanning and Sanitizer.
 - Counting Centres shall be disinfected before and after the counting.
 - Counting hall be sufficiently big to maintain social distancing, proper ventilation, windows, exhaust fan etc.
 - Any one, even after double vaccinated, having any symptom of COVID like fever, Cold etc. will not be allowed in Counting Hall.
 - Every Counting Official and Security personnel be provided with Mask, Sanitizer, Face-Shield and Hand Gloves.
- I. Not more than 7 counting tables should be allowed in a counting hall. Hence, counting of votes of a constituency may be considered at 3-4 halls by appointing additional Assistant Returning Officers.
 - II. The counting centres shall be disinfected before, during and after the counting.
 - III. For counting of Postal Ballots, additional number of AROs may be required. If required, Postal Ballots may also be counted in a separate hall under the supervision of the Returning Officer/Assistant Returning Officer.

- i. DEO shall appoint a Nodal Officer at each Counting Centre to ensure compliance of COVID guidelines with assistance of Nodal Health Officer and compliance certificate in r/o Counting Centre arrangement as per COVID guidelines from Health Authorities be taken.
- ii. List of counting agents be made available by candidates to RO by 1700 hours on day three days prior to counting.
- iii. No public gathering outside the counting venue during process of counting.
- iv. Candidate may appoint/replace counting agents in case report is positive.

Needless to add that anybody violating instructions on COVID-19 measures will be liable to be preeded against as per provisions of Section 51 to 60 of the Disaster Management Act, 2005, besides legal action under Section 188 IPC, and other legal provisions as applicable, as specified in Order No.40-3/2020-DM-I(A) date 29th July, 2020 of Ministry of Home Affairs. District Election Officer should bring this to the notice of all concerned.

Further, the Chief Secretary cum Ex officio chairperson of the State Executive Committee under section 20 of the DM Act, 2005 shall as and when required as per the evolving/contextual needs of the State, at once bring notice of the Commission any new trend, development/situation that is not covered by these **broad guidelines for General Elections** and warrants Commission's intervention during the electoral process in the state so as to enable Commission to issue further appropriate instructions with respect to electoral process and thereby complementing the mandate/efforts of the State Executive Committee in containing/managing the spread of pandemic.
