Covid-19 and elections: The Case of Bihar Legislative Assembly, India

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1. Introduction

While many countries postponed their upcoming elections (International IDEA 2020) as Covid-19-related fatalities grew (Cooper 2020)—often grappling with the legal implications of doing so—others went ahead. India, the world's largest democracy with 910 million (ECI 2019b) registered voters for the national election in 2019, saw elections early in 2020 to the assembly of the National Capital Territory (NCT) of Delhi (with close to 14.8 million voters (ECI 2020h)). These were held on 8 February 2020 when only three cases of Covid-19 were reported in the country (MoH 2020), and the results were declared on 11 February 2020. As per the Election Commission of India's calendar (ECI 2017), no other major election was planned when the pandemic hit in its full scale in April–May 2020 and the first lockdown was announced (Hebbar 2020), apart from elections to the upper house (Rajya Sabha) of the parliament.

The upper house is indirectly elected via a proportional representation system (ECI 2018a) using the single transferable vote. The number of voters was very low at 984. After an initial postponement (ECI 2020g), the low number of voters helped the ECI to test its Covid-19 strategy in the course of this election and its success (Devasahayam 2020) providing the necessary confidence to conduct a large-scale election in the state of Bihar in November 2020. Among the key lessons from the assembly election of Bihar were the importance of the timely execution of Covid-19 protocols, the benefits of robust planning for registering migrant workers returning to the state due to Covid-19, and the positive contribution of baseline surveys of voters (Das et al. n.d.) to peaceful, fair and safe elections.

2. Public health context

India announced a strict nationwide lockdown (Rukmini 2020) on 23 March 2020 with 12 Covid-19 deaths and 564 positive cases (Hebbar 2020). The government imposed the lockdown after a 14-hour voluntary public curfew to gauge the situation (Chandna and Basu 2020). After the initial 21 days, when all organizations were closed except for essential services (but including transport, along with places of worship and gatherings of any kind—Hebbar 2020), the lockdown was further extended to 3, 17 and 31 May 2020 on the recommendations of various state governments and the National Disaster Management

Authority (NDMA). The lockdown was announced with four hours' notice (A. Bhardwaj 2020), triggering one of India's largest ever internal migrations. Labourers from rural and semi-urban areas made journeys to their home regions due to lack of services—including provision for food—in the cities during the lockdown (Bhowmick 2020). In May, six weeks into the lockdown, the government started arranging trains to take migrant workers home (Government of India 2020). A significant number of these migrants were from Bihar (Biswas 2020). The government was heavily criticized by opposition leaders as well as civil society (Rajan 2020) for initially not providing transport for home-bound migrant workers and then for providing trains that were seen as virus 'super-spreaders' (Gettleman et al. 2020).

Bihar is a state in the east of India with the third largest population among the states of India at above 104 million according to the 2011 census. Almost 58 per cent of this population is below 25 years of age. The term of the Legislative Assembly of Bihar was due to expire on 29 November 2020. With 243 legislators to be elected by 72.9 million registered voters, Bihar was the only Indian state headed for elections during the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 (*Economic Times*/PTI 2020a). After the onset of the pandemic in India, the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) and Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (MoH) issued occasional guidelines. In their circular dated 29 July 2020, the MHA issued comprehensive guidelines/ directives to be followed countrywide on containment measures (Ministry of Home Affairs 2020). Similarly, the MoH also issued Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) on disinfection, sanitization and prevention for containing Covid-19 (MoH 2020).

By the end of September 2020, Covid-19 cases in India were above 6.2 million and total deaths were 97,497 (MoH 2020). By then, the lockdown was lifted and people slowly started getting back to work (Deol 2020). Figures 1 and 2 show the total monthly cases and the new/active monthly cases of Covid-19 in India between March 2020 and January 2021 (MoH 2020). During the first wave, new cases peaked in September 2020; they then started to decline until February 2021, followed by a resurgence in April–May 2021. On 16 January 2021, India started the largest vaccination programme for Covid-19 in the world (Ellis-Petersen 2021). More than 200,000 vaccinators and 370,000 team members were trained for the rollout as of 16 January 2021 (Frayer 2021).

Figure 1. Total monthly Covid-19 cases and deaths, 2020–early 2021
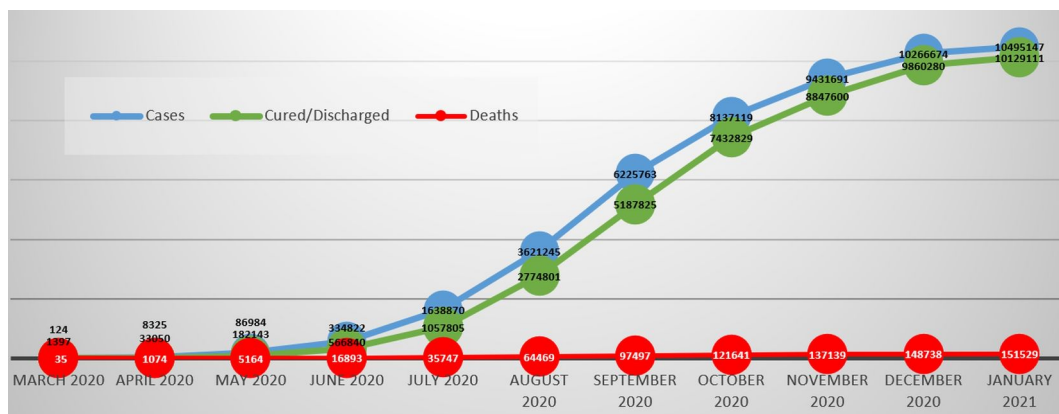
Source: Author, data published by MoH, Government of India.

Figure 2. New/active monthly Covid-19 cases, 2020–early 2021
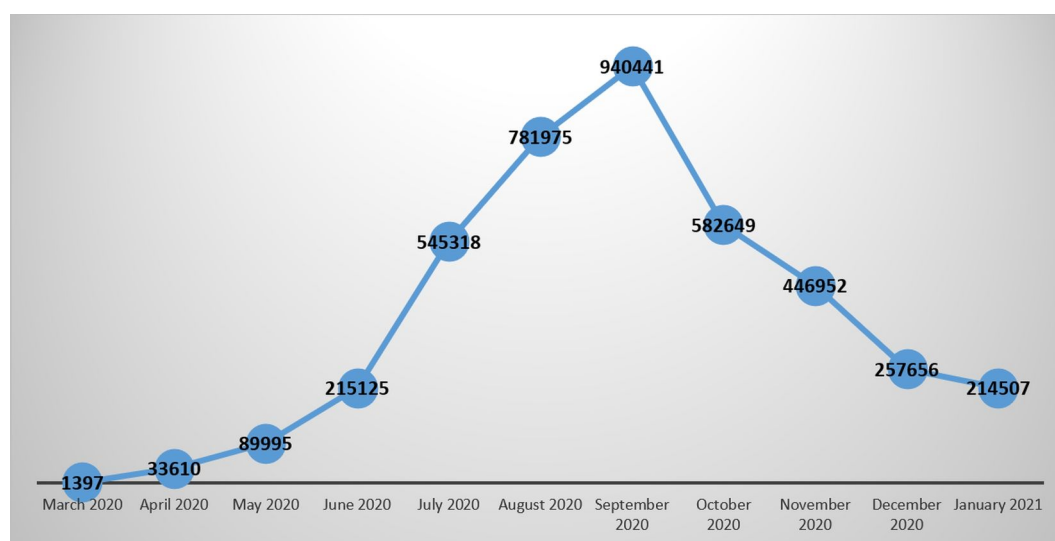
Source: Author, data published by MoH, Government of India.

3. Institutional and legal framework

India is a sovereign, democratic republic. The Supreme Court has held that democracy is one of the inalienable basic features of the Constitution of India (India 2020) and forms part of its basic structure. Parliament consists of the President of India and the two Houses—the Rajya Sabha and Lok Sabha. The country is divided into 543 parliamentary constituencies, each of which returns one MP to the Lok Sabha, the lower house of the Parliament. Being a Union of states, the Federal Democratic Republic of India has 36 constituent units. All 29 states and two of the seven Union Territories have their own assemblies—Vidhan Sabhas. State legislatures consist of the Governor and two Houses, the Legislative Council and Legislative Assembly. The 31 Assemblies have 4,120 constituencies in total (ECI 2018a).

Table 1. Electoral Commission's role as provided for in the Constitution of India

Article 324	• **Superintendence, direction and control** of **elections** to be vested in an Election Commission
Article 325	• No discrimination or special privilege in electoral roll on grounds of religion, race, caste or sex
Article 326	• Elections to the House of the People and to the Legislative Assemblies of States to be on the basis of Adult Suffrage
Article 327	• **Power of Parliament** to make laws with respect to elections to Legislatures
Article 328	• Power of State Legislature to make provision with respect to elections to such Legislature
Article 329	• Bar to interference by courts in electoral matters

Source: Author, adapted from ECI reports.

Article 324, along with article 329, provides the Election Commission of India (ECI) with significant powers (see Table 1). Under article 327, the Parliament of India has passed many

laws and rules including the Representation of People (RP) Acts 1950 and 1951 (India 1950, 1951), among others.

The ECI is a constitutional body created under article 324 of the Constitution of India. It was set up on 25 January 1950. The ECI conducts elections to the offices of President and Vice President of India, both Houses of Parliament, State Legislative Assemblies and State Legislative Councils. The election machinery is headed by Chief Electoral Officers at the state/Union Territory (UT) level, and by District Election Officers at the district level (MG and Ambarkhane 2018).

The functions of the Commission may be delegated by the Commission (under section 19A of the RP Act 1951) to the Deputy Election Commissioner or the Secretary to the Commission. The administrative machinery for the conduct of elections is detailed in part IV of this Act.

The decision to defer polling for the upper house

For elections during Covid-19, most instructions issued by the ECI for safety of voters were direct instructions under article 324. However, there were some specific legal provisions made. To defer elections to the Rajya Sabha (upper house) in March 2020, the ECI invoked the RP Act 1951 section 153, which specifies that the ECI, for reasons which it considers sufficient, may extend the time for the completion of any election (by making necessary amendments in the notification issued by it under section 30 or sub-section (1) of section 39) (ECI 2020g).

While most parties did not object to the deferment, there were a few voices of dissent. The Chief Minister of Rajasthan, from the Congress Party, objected to the lack of consultation with all political parties before taking the decision. However, his deputy, also from the Congress Party, thought that it was a good step and that it was 'inappropriate to politicize every decision of ECI' (Asnani 2020). A petition was also filed by a private citizen in the Madhya Pradesh State High Court further after 19 June 2020, which was dismissed by the Court on the grounds of maintainability (LiveLaw 2020).

The decision to conduct polling in Bihar

For Bihar's election during Covid-19, the ECI sent notifications under the RP Act 1951 to issue postal ballots to electors over 80 years of age, electors with physical disabilities and electors in quarantine due to Covid-19 (ECI 2020b). By another notification, the Ministry of Law and Justice amended rules to enable 'absentee voters' to vote by postal ballot (Bihar CEO 2020b). The definition of absentee voters was expanded to accommodate persons employed in essential services, senior citizens over 80, persons with disabilities and suspected cases of Covid-19 or affected persons, as certified by the competent authority.

While ECI was assessing the situation on the ground to conduct the election, there was a clamour to postpone the Bihar election (Roy 2020). Petitions were also filed in the courts to that effect. The Supreme Court on 28 August 2020 dismissed two pleas seeking for a direction to the Chief Election Commissioner for the postponement of the impending general election to the Legislative Assembly of Bihar (Roy 2020).

4. Preparation for the Bihar elections

Introduction

In early June 2020, the ECI held meetings to discuss the global Covid-19 scenario—and electoral best practices from Australia, Mongolia, Singapore and South Korea—to plan ahead including scheduling of the Rajya Sabha and Bihar elections. These covered the necessity of changes to rules, laws and the ECI's own instructions, as well as practical issues such as

whether and how social distancing and similar mitigation measures could be achieved (ECI 2020d).

Some political parties including the main opposition party in Bihar and some parties in the state's ruling coalition queried whether there was really a need to conduct the elections during the pandemic, and called for a postponement (*Economic Times*/PTI 2020a). The ECI sought views and suggestions from national and state political parties until 11 August 2020 (ECI 2020i). After consideration of the views and suggestions received from various political parties and Chief Electoral Officers of States/UTs on election campaign and public meetings, the ECI decided to conduct the general election to the Bihar Legislative Assembly as per schedule. The ECI also framed the guidelines for precautions during Covid-19. These guidelines and instructions for Covid-19-related precautions for elections were issued by the ECI on 21 August 2020, before the elections to the Legislative Assembly of the state of Bihar, and covered every aspect of elections (ECI 2020a). All these guidelines and instructions were translated in the field for the Bihar election (*National Herald*/PTI 2020; Bihar CEO 2020c), and a detailed Covid-19-related comprehensive plan was prepared at the state level based upon them, taking local conditions into account. A three-layer plan (see Figure 4) was prepared in consultation with the concerned Nodal Health Officers—of the constituency, district and state levels (Bihar CEO 2020c). The state also developed contingency plans (for last minute infected voters) and Covid-19 suspected, positive, hospitalized and quarantined cases.

With over 73 million voters registered (almost the size of Viet Nam, see Table 2) and more than 106,000 polling stations, ensuring a Covid-19-safe election was a big challenge (Ramani and Radhakrishnan 2019).

Table 2. Registration and voting figures, Bihar 2020

Voters in Bihar election 2020	Male	Female	Third gender	Total
Number of registered voters	38,789,388	34,855,815	2,457	73,647,660
Number of registered voters who voted	21,121,394	20,804,957	92	41,926,443
Voter turnout	54.5%	59.7%	3.7%	56.9%

Source: Author, from data published by ECI.

Registration

The ECI had directed the State of Bihar election machinery to complete a Special Summary Revision and publication of the draft voter lists by 1 January 2020 (Bihar CEO 2020b). The final electoral roll was then published on 7 February 2020. By then, critical gaps in the electoral rolls had been identified such as polling station areas with low voter turnout, particularly among the marginalized sections such as women, persons with disability (PWD) or ethnic minorities. Local Booth Level Officers were deployed to find out the reasons for these gaps. Targeted 'Systematic Voter Education and Electoral Participation' (SVEEP) activities were carried out to address these gaps by engaging local women leaders and other social activists (Bihar CEO n.d.). As part of a continual update (which continues up until filing of candidate nominations), special efforts including door-to-door surveys by Booth Level Officers were undertaken to enrol eligible returnee migrants who entered the state in the preceding months (Biswas 2020). The Chief Electoral Officer reported that more than 230,000 such returnees were enrolled during this period.

Voter education

The SVEEP activities were planned well in advance. In May 2020, the Chief Electoral Officer (CEO) Bihar planned a baseline survey (Das et al. n.d.) for assessing voters' awareness about enrolment procedure, eligibility and voter cards. Key factors responsible for voter participation (attitudes and expectations, disability, inducements, among others) were identified and assessed in the context of Covid-19, and exposure of voters to the SVEEP interventions was monitored and evaluated (Bihar CEO 2020b). In view of the pandemic, additional outreach activities were carried out to publicize the safety measures to be undertaken during elections. Mass gatherings and in-person contact were avoided (Bihar CEO 2020a). Contactless and digital media for all outreach activities i.e. broadcast and social media were preferred. Awareness campaigns for and demonstration of Covid-safe use of electronic voting machines (EVMs) and Voter Verifiable Paper Audit Trail (VVPAT) were undertaken.

A Voter Guide in Hindi and English (ECI 2020f) was handed out to every elector's household ahead of the elections, giving information about the date and time of polls, contact details of the ECI's Booth Level Officer, important websites, helpline numbers, identification documents required, and other do's and don'ts (Figure 3). This Voter Guide was distributed along with the photo voter slips by the Booth Level Officers. Since this was a state election, the cost was incurred by the Bihar State exchequer. The details of money spent on the additional efforts to engage with voters are not available publicly.

Candidate nominations and campaign safeguards

In addition to physical nominations, nomination forms were available online from the website of the Chief Electoral Officer of the State/District Electoral Officer (CEO/DEO) (Bihar CEO n.d.). Any intending candidate could fill it in online and print it for submitting before the Returning Officer as specified in Form-1 (Rule-3 of Conduct of Election Rules 1961) (Ministry of Law 1961). Candidate affidavits were also allowed to be completed online at the same website. Candidates were allowed to pay their security deposits, and to seek their elector certification online at the designated platform too.

Restrictions were placed on the number of persons who could accompany a candidate for the door-to-door campaign (four, excluding security personnel), and the number of vehicles in a convoy (5 rather than 10). Restrictions were also placed on public gatherings and rallies including clearly marking entry and exit points and advance markers for social distancing at venues (Bihar CEO 2020b). Nodal District Health Officers were involved in the process to ensure that all Covid-19-related guidelines were adhered to by all stakeholders, including the limits set for public gatherings (as prescribed by the State Disaster Management Authority) and in this were supported by District Superintendents of Police. Political parties and candidates were asked to ensure that all Covid-19-related requirements such as face masks, sanitizers and thermal scanning were fulfilled during campaign activities (Bihar CEO 2020b).

Requests for allocation of public spaces for campaigning were made online using the 'Suvidha' app in the manner prescribed (ECI 2019a) and in-person events drew large crowds. (An option was provided to political parties for holding virtual rallies online, but while political parties worked extensively on their digital campaigns (Ananth 2020), most did not use that option.) Non-compliance with Covid-19-mitigation measures was made a punishable offence: anybody violating them was liable under the provisions of sections 51 to 60 of the Disaster Management Act 2005 and Indian Penal Code sections. The precise level of compliance is not possible to determine as the ECI's observation reports are not publicly available. However, many media outlets reported gross violation of Covid-19 protocols as thousands of people thronged to attend mass rallies (LiveMint/PTI, 2020; Pandey 2020) and

a large number of leaders from various political parties tested positive for Covid-19 during the campaign (Kumar 2020).

Figure 3. Voter education materials, Election Commission of India/Bihar CEO office
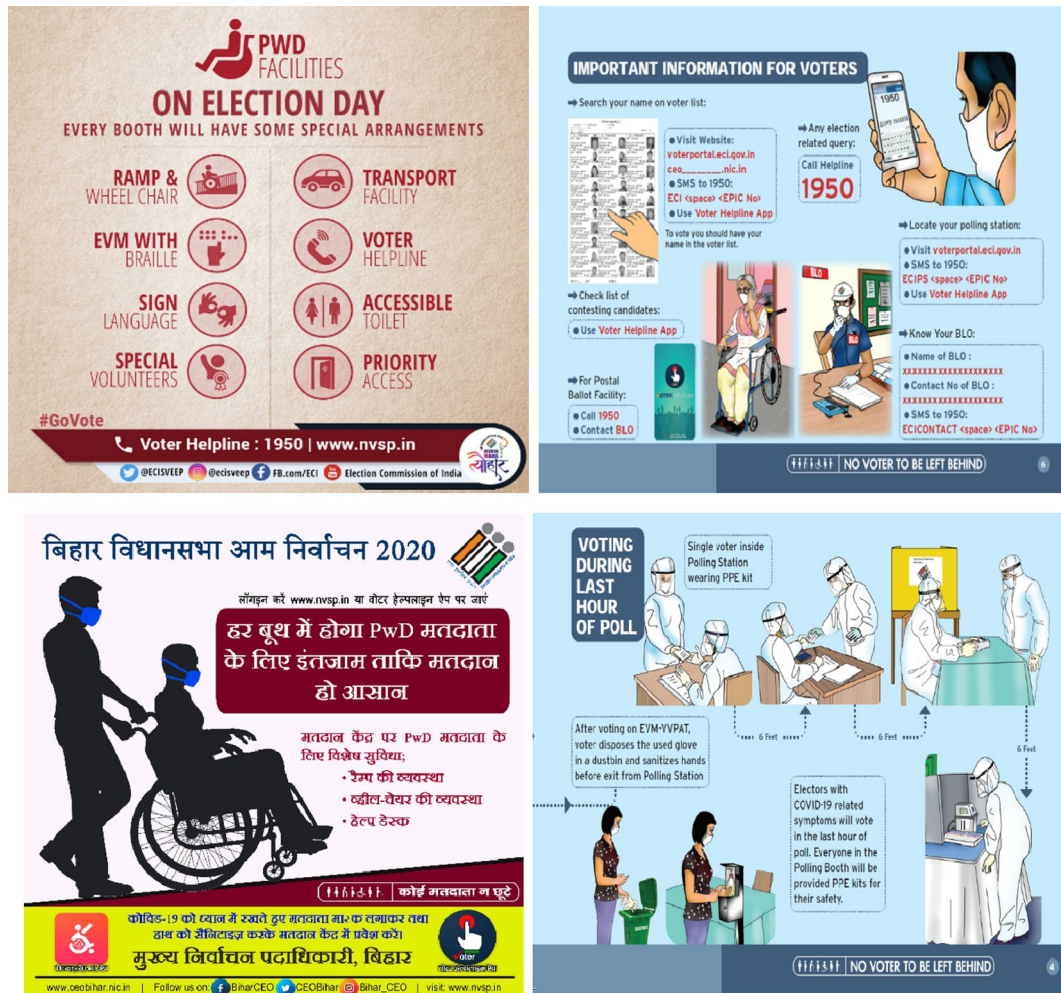
Source: Election Commission of India/Bihar CEO office, <https://eci.gov.in/files/file/ 12425-voter-guide-towards-a-covid-safe-election/>.

Polling arrangements

The ECI reduced the number of electors in each polling station from 1,500 to 1,000, to ensure social distancing and facilitate voting for elderly and vulnerable electors (ECI 2020a). This decision led to an additional 40,734 polling stations in the Bihar elections (a rise of 62.3 per cent above the 65,337 polling stations installed in 2015), bringing the total to over 106,000 (Phadnis 2020). A massive mobilization of resources saw over 400,000 polling personnel deployed (compared to some 200,000 in 2015) (ECI 2018b, 2021).

The ECI had also issued instructions (ECI 2020a) to the CEO Bihar that every polling station must have a good access road and be equipped with assured minimum facilities (AMF) including drinking water, a waiting shed, a flushing toilet, adequate lighting, a ramp for PWD and a standard voting compartment (ECI 2020a). This was supplemented with Covid-19-mitigation measures including a three-queue system for male, female, and PWD or elderly voters, each voter to be physically distanced by at least 1.83 meters (6 feet). There

were 683,266 disabled voters identified in the State of Bihar, to be assisted by volunteers who were appointed by polling officials.

Electronic and postal voting

The ECI decided to use Voter Verifiable Paper Audit Trail (VVPAT) along with electronic voting machines (EVMs) in all the assembly constituencies and at every polling station, as VVPAT allows the voter to verify her or his vote (Bihar CEO 2020b). The Commission made arrangements to ensure the availability of an adequate number of EVMs and VVPATs for the smooth conduct of the elections (189,000 EVM ballot units, 141 EVM control units and 173,000 VVPATs).

Given the ongoing pandemic, as mentioned above, the option of a postal ballot facility (Bihar CEO 2020b) was extended to a wider subset of eligible voters.

Training, media and observation

The ECI in its press note (Bihar CEO 2020b) pointed out that it expected the media to play a pro-active and constructive role in facilitating efforts towards free, fair, transparent, participative, peaceful and credible elections. The media was also expected to follow all the extant guidelines issued by the Ministry of Home Affairs and the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (MoH) on Covid-19- mitigation measures.

Transfer, postings, movement of security forces etc. were within the purview of the ECI nationally, as is all state-level machinery for the duration of an election once announced. The large number of central and state government officials deployed for election duties (related to polling, security, election observation etc.) are deemed to be on deputation to the Commission, report exclusively to it, and for the duration are subject to its supervision and discipline. The ECI does not hire temporary staff (unless they are hired by the state government itself), as they have access to the entire government staff across all positions and can appoint them at various positions. On a rolling basis the ECI regularly trains government officials from states with upcoming elections (MG and Ambarkhane 2018).

For training of election officials, this involves a 15-day in-person programme at the ECI's India International Institute of Democracy and Election Management (IIIDEM) at New Delhi. The institute, set up in 2011, was envisioned to train the electoral machinery in the delivery of free, fair and flawless elections, and to orient stakeholders on systems for better and more productive delivery (IIIDEM 2011). Fifteen newly appointed Sub Election Officers from Bihar Election Services were trained from 7 to 21 January 2020 with a one-day local study tour covering topics across the entire election cycle. Due to Covid-19 it was not feasible to organize in-person training for election officials or trainers-of-trainers for Bihar at IIIDEM in the usual manner. IIIDEM therefore organized the training for all Bihar election officers including Returning Officers, and Assistant Returning Officers, from the month of June 2020 through video conferencing. These officials then further trained junior and polling officials at the state level in a cascade training model. Training was conducted in smaller groups and, wherever possible, training content and evaluation was conducted via e-learning tools and the CEO website. Participants at state, district and polling station levels were provided separate training sessions on ensuring social distancing during polling, along with queue management. Data on the feedback of the training and the total number of staff trained for elections was not available (Bihar CEO 2020c).

The ECI believes that impartial observation (MG and Ambarkhane 2018) and reporting of elections is a must for the conduct of free and fair elections. The concept of deputing senior officers as observers started from the 1990s. Over the past two decades, the deputation of election observers from one state to another has become crucial to the management of elections in the country. Mostly the officers deputed as observers are from the All India Services and Central Services, such as Indian Administrative Services (IAS), Indian Revenue

Services (IRS), and the Central Bureau of Direct Taxes (CBDT). General, police, special, expenditure and micro observers were deployed to ensure all extant preparations were conducted and all procedures and regulations were followed including those relating to Covid-19 (*Economic Times*/PTI 2020b).

5. Schedule and implementation

The election to the Legislative Assembly of Bihar 2020 was scheduled in three phases. Figure 4 shows the three phases and the various dates associated with notification, nomination, withdrawal, polling and counting. The Three dates on which polling was conducted were 28 October, 3 November, and 7 November 2020. The results were announced on 10 November 2020. As per the three-tier plan (Bihar CEO 2020c), Covid-19-positive patients who were quarantined were allowed to cast their vote during the last hour of polling at their respective polling stations, under the supervision of health authorities, strictly following hygiene protocols. Nodal Health Officers were appointed at the state, district and constituency level to oversee all Covid-19-related arrangements during the entire electoral process.

The three-tier plan contained comprehensive measures to protect the 769,000 polling personnel involved (All India Radio 2020). They were each provided one hand sanitizer, six three-ply face masks, one face shield and one pair of gloves. Security personnel deployed at polling stations also received this Covid-19 protective kit. The following amounts of materials were procured for the Bihar election (*Business Insider* 2020): 700,000 hand sanitizers; 460,000 masks; 600,000 PPE kits; 670,000 face shields; and 2.3 million pairs of gloves.

Figure 4. Map of the Bihar state assembly election schedule
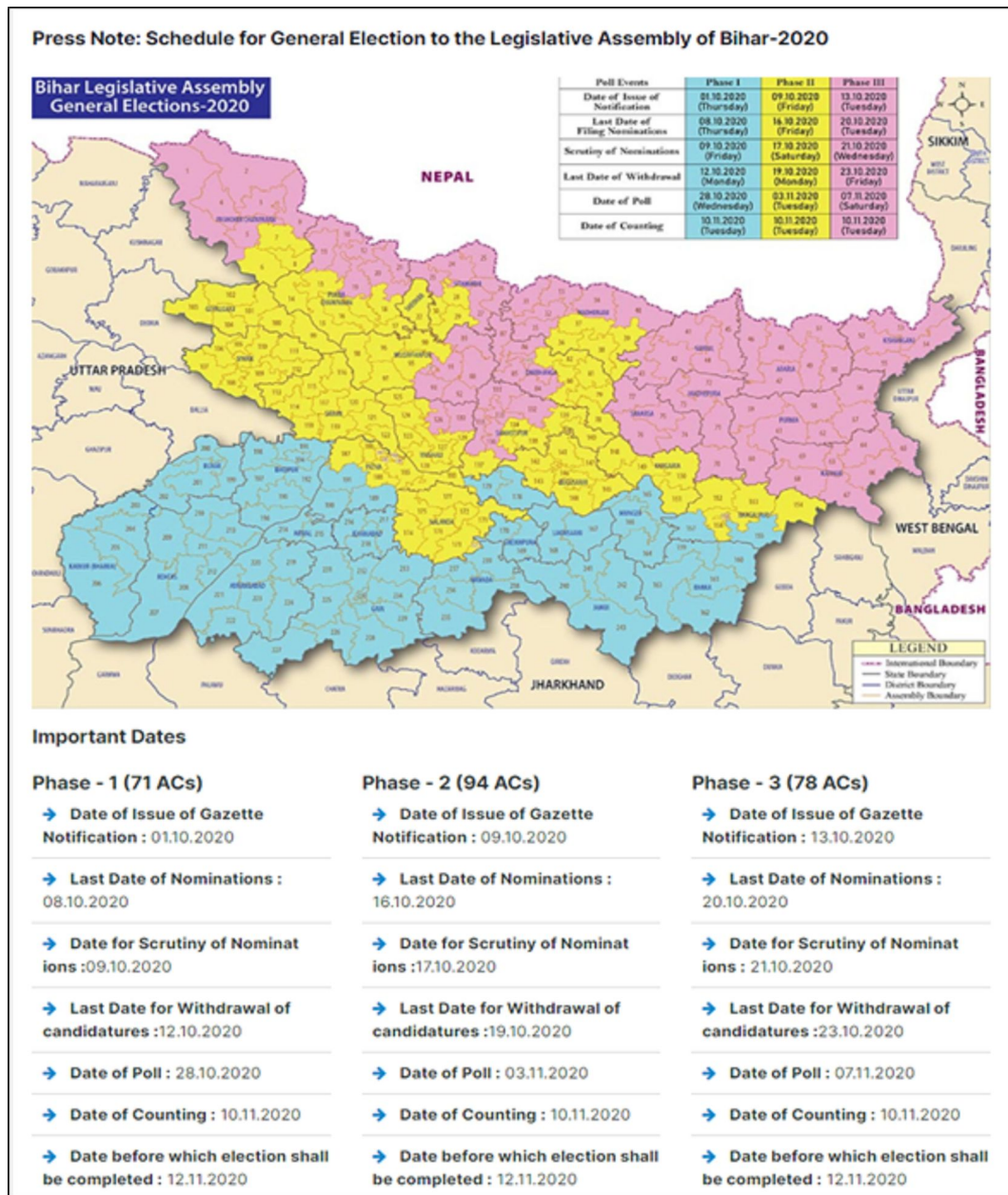
Source: Election Commission of India/Bihar CEO office, <https://eci.gov.in/assembly-election/ae-2020-bihar/>.

Voters were allowed access into the polling station premises after mandatory thermal screening, wearing of face masks, gloves and sanitization (especially hands and forearms). Separate entry and exit routes were made for the polling station with appropriate queue-position markings to ensure social distancing. Only one voter was allowed at a time in the polling station (Phadnis 2020), with others in waiting halls. A separate room was arranged to keep actual or suspected Covid-19 cases separate, up to several at a time. Sanitization teams worked to sanitize polling station premises but details of how often they did so are unknown.

Bio-medical waste discarded masks and gloves were collected by waste management teams wearing PPE; the ECI also insisted on tracking dustbin collection vehicles to ensure all waste was disposed of appropriately (D. Bhardwaj 2020).

The ECI announced that in the first phase of the election on 28 October (that is, in 71 constituencies spread over 16 districts), more than 52,000 electors exercised their vote through postal ballots (ECI 2020c). The total number of postal ballot votes received from all the 243 constituencies of Bihar state was recorded at 269,879 out of 41.4 million total votes (0.65 per cent). This was almost double the postal ballots received in the last Bihar election in 2015—148,732 (ECI 2018b, 2021; Chopra 2020). Table 3 shows the postal ballot turnout (60.2 per cent) broken down by category of voter entitled to receive one.

Table 3. Postal ballot statistics

Registered					Voted				
Aged 80 years+	Persons with disabilities	Electronic Postal Ballot System	Essential services employees	Total	Aged 80 years+	Persons with disabilities	Electronic Postal Ballot System	Essential services employees	Total
39,556	26,094	161,589	220,759	447,998	32,034	20,484	45,472	171,889	269,879

Source: data published by CEO, Bihar, ECI, <https://eci.gov.in/files/file/12787-bihar-legislative-election-2020/>.

Despite all these arrangements, some problems were encountered during the conduct of the election. There was controversy around the incumbent Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) including in their election manifesto a promise of free Covid-19 vaccines for all in Bihar, once approved by the Indian Council for Medical Research (ICMR) (*Times of India* 2020). This promise was criticized by the opposition leaders and a complaint was made to the ECI about violation of the Model Code of Conduct (MCC) and use of the pandemic for political gains. The ECI ruled that this did not constitute a violation, citing three provisions of MCC (The Wire 2020; Scroll.in 2020).

India Today's Data Intelligence Unit (DIU), which analysed the Covid-19 cases in Bihar from the day election dates were announced by the ECI until counting day, found that Bihar saw no rise in Covid-19 cases during the election period (Singh 2020). This data is presented in Figure 5.

Figure 5. Covid-19 cases and recoveries, Bihar election period
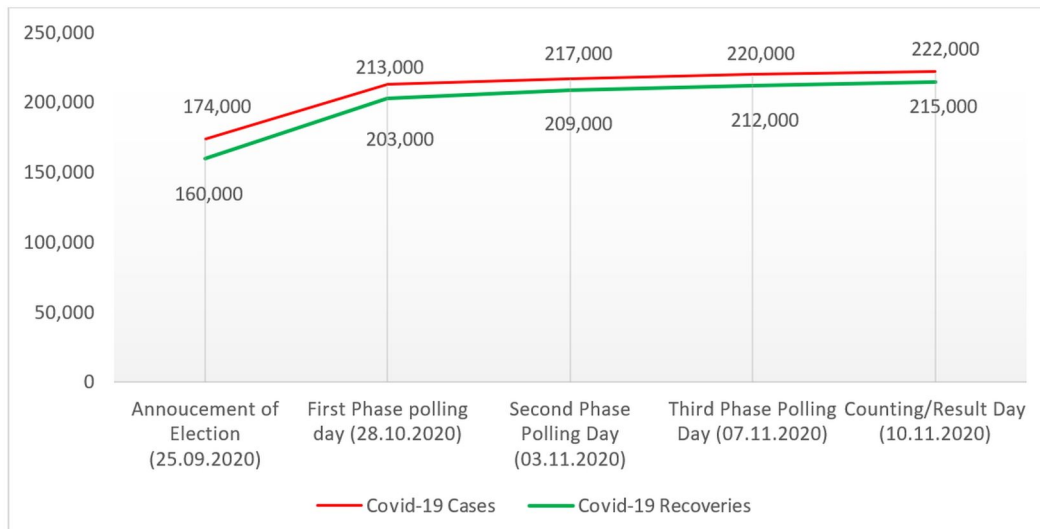
Source: Author, data published by *India Today* DIU, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/bihar-covid19-coronavirus-cases-under-controll-assembly-election-poll-1740778-2020-11-13>.

Bihar's 2020 state legislative elections could be seen as a success because despite the threat of Covid-19, overall voter turnout was steady at 57 per cent (a slight increase from 56.7 per cent in 2015). The number of candidates contesting the elections also increased from 3,450 in 2015 to 3,733 in 2020. Similarly, the number of female candidates increased by over a third, from 221 to 302 candidates. There was also an increase in the participation of third gender voters as well as candidates. However, there was a decrease in the participation of female voters while the number of elected female candidates reduced by two (ECI 2018b, 2021).

6. Conclusion

The general election to the state Legislative Assembly of Bihar was important as it was India's first state election during the Covid-19 pandemic and a large number of migrants had returned from other parts of the country, potentially carrying the virus with them. Traditionally one of the states with low socio-economic indicators in India, Bihar's successful conduct of an election at such a large scale was astounding (Rout 2020). Mr Sunil Arora, Chief Election Commissioner, at the conclusion of the poll said, 'We were able to conduct a Covid-safe election, with a voter turnout of 57.34 per cent, which was higher than in 2015 (…) The Bihar election was not only a priority for us but a necessity of our electoral democracy. We had to build confidence among the voters that the polling station would be a place safe for them to come and vote' (*National Herald*/PTI 2020; ECI 2020e).

Dr S. Y. Quraishi, a former Chief Election Commissioner and Board Member of International IDEA, praised the work of the ECI and pointed out that, 'At a time when all countries of the world are looking at each other for lessons, Bihar could provide a leading example of successful election management, and the ECI a leading electoral management body' (Quraishi 2020).

Due to the size of Bihar's electorate and the rapid spread of Covid-19 during the first wave of the pandemic, the mere conduct of elections during the pandemic was considered impossible by many, including some political parties which initially opposed the idea. However, after the ECI's assurance, they reconsidered their position. the ECI's focus on timely development of Covid-19 guidelines was central to the confidence-building alluded to and the safety of the election in practice. The Bihar unit of the ECI, in a timely manner, registered the incoming migrant workers who were eligible to vote using voter education and information drives, special voter registration camps and door-to-door visits by the Booth Level Officers. As mentioned above, the Chief Electoral Office of Bihar also conducted baseline surveys of voters (Das et al. n.d.), a valuable exercise which the ECI initiated in previous elections.

In the end, the 2020 general election to the Bihar Legislative Assembly was held by and large safely. Apart from the widely reported flouting of Covid-19 protocols during campaigning by political parties and candidates, most of the public health protocols appear to have been followed. The fact that there was no significant increase in the number of Covid-19 cases during the election helped the ECI conduct the election safely. Finally, Bihar has many migrant workers and their timely registration before the elections would help in improving the usually low voter turnout during its elections. Such a reform would make a lasting contribution beyond the pandemic.

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In our work we focus on three main impact areas: electoral processes; constitution-building processes; and political participation and representation. The themes of gender and inclusion, conflict sensitivity and sustainable development are mainstreamed across all our areas of work.

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