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## 'Voting is the Brahmastra to make government accountable'



Chief Electoral Officer K Praveen Kumar interacting with the students of Stella Maris on Monday | P Jawahar

To the sea of young women gathered before him at Stella Maris College, Chief Electoral Officer K Praveen Kumar, who earned all-round kudos for conducting free and fair Assembly polls in 2011, had a confession to make: He had never voted as a student.

“I am saying it more with disappointment than anything else that no one was there to make students aware of their power then,” he said.

His own experience makes the CEO look at the present voting scenario in the State with concern. Of the total population in Tamil Nadu, 4.14 per cent comprise those in the age group of 18-19 years. And only 2.61 per cent of this youth segment figures in the electoral rolls.

“There is nothing to worry about the gender ratio. There are equal number of men and women,” the IAS officer pointed out. “But nearly 50 per cent of the eligible youth are outside the electoral system. This is the biggest cause for worry,” he added.

No wonder, it propelled him and his team to launch a drive two years ago in both urban and rural areas to improve the situation. What is more, the electoral department is now looking to forge partnerships with colleges to motivate students to enrol themselves in the voters' list.

On Monday, the CEO launched a mass awareness-enrolment initiative on voter ID cards at Stella Maris College, thanks to the efforts of some enterprising students of the institution too. "The campaign is the brainchild of the students," as Aarthi Santhanam, head, Department of International Studies, remarked.

The objective of the campaign, Praveen Kumar said, is three-fold: whoever is eligible to vote should figure in the electoral rolls; that all those names in the rolls should vote; and that they should vote without fear or favour.

And in order to realise the objective, the CEO has decided to bring the entire enrolment procedure to the institutions' doorstep. "Since it is questions like where to enrol and how to enrol that confounds students, we have distributed the enrolment forms to colleges," he said.

"Campus ambassadors and nodal officers will motivate the students to enrol their names and the completed forms will be collected and sent to the various corporation zones for field verification," he added.

Hostel students have an option of choosing their place of residence to exercise their right to franchise, he added.

The revised electoral rolls will be out on January 6, 2014 and the voter ID cards distributed to students on January 25 –National Voters' Day.

With a banner proclaiming 'Your vote, your power' forming the backdrop of the stage, the CEO told the students that democracy was necessary for good governance and accountability a crucial factor. Hence, universal adult suffrage in India was a gift to the people.

"If you want the government to be made accountable every five years, this is your brahmastra," he said.