

Indian election statistics astonish British MPs

Members of the world's oldest Parliament have been hearing some mind-boggling facts and figures about the recent general elections in India - the world's largest democratic exercise.

India's electorate of 714 million is larger than those of all of the 50 countries of Europe put together, all of Africa's 54, North America's 41, North and South America combined, and the entire Commonwealth minus India, Election Commissioner S.Y. Quraishi told a select audience on June 2.

"We had 43 million more voters this time than the last elections — and that's two Australian electorates put together," said Quraishi, who drew spontaneous felicitations after reeling off the figures while briefing MPs, businesspeople and Indian-origin politicians at the British lower house.

"This is possibly the most appropriate place to have a discussion like this, the mother of parliaments," said India's High Commissioner Shiv Shankar Mukherjee, introducing Quraishi to an audience that included host Virender Sharma, the Labour MP representing Southall, Baroness Sheila Flather of the Conservative Party and Peter Luff, chairman of the



India's Election Commissioner S.Y. Quraishi

Parliament's business and enterprise committee.

Baroness Flather, congratulating the Election Commission for overcoming logistical challenges that are unimaginable in Britain, said: "Compared to India, the U.K. is like someone's back garden."

Quraishi said the EC could cut down the length of the Indian general election from the current five phases to a single day if it had enough security personnel.

"Whenever newspapers ask 'can it be done better?', they really mean 'can it be made shorter'?" Quraishi said.

"Sure. It can be done in one day if we have the security forces available," the Indian official said, pointing out that "lack of trust" in local police meant the EC had to move around security personnel — either from central forces or state forces deployed elsewhere — which took time.

A vulnerability mapping, done for the first time in India, had shown that around 87,000 of India's estimated 800,000 villages were vulnerable to caste, religious or Maoist violence.

The EC had to deploy 119 special trains to move around security personnel, who generally had only two weeks to establish 'area domination'.

All constituencies that were vulnerable to Maoist violence were covered in the first phase of the poll in order to give security forces three weeks for preparation, Quraishi added.

At 5.8 percent, growth hits the fast track

India's economy grew more than expected in the quarter ended March, boosting the confidence of both the corporate sector and the new Manmohan Singh Cabinet.

A spending spree by the government and strong growth in agriculture and services industries helped the economy grow 5.8 percent year-on-year in the previous quarter, according to data released by the Central Statistical Organisation. The market was expecting just over 5 percent growth.

The industry now expects the economy to expand faster. "We expect a pick-up in economic activity from lower borrowing costs and higher government spending, which is feeding through the system with a lag," said Shubhada Rao, chief economist at Yes Bank. She said the growth trajectory was showing a degree of stability with the quarter ended December being the lowest point.

"With the reversal of contractionary monetary policy and fiscal stimulus measures, the growth rate should now show improvement in the current fiscal," said Harsh Pati Singhanian, president



of industry association FICCI.

The Indian economy registered a decent 6.7 percent growth in the last financial year, although it missed the government forecast of a 7.1 percent jump. The new data also revised growth in the third quarter of last year upward to 5.8 percent. The stock markets also welcomed the news that signalled a pause in the country's economic slowdown with Sensex hovering around 15000 mark.

Most of the credit for growth goes to government spending, which almost tripled year-on-year to cross 20 percent in the last quarter. In sharp contrast, growth in private consumption shrunk almost two-thirds to 2.9 percent.

"What you're seeing in these better-than-expected figures is essentially the

effects of government spending, which is showing up in social and community services and construction," said D.K. Joshi, principal economist at credit rating agency Crisil. It had its negative impact as well, with fiscal deficit breaching earlier government estimation to touch 6.2 percent of the revised gross domestic product (GDP), according to the government's internal auditor Controller General of Accounts.

India's good show and expectations contrast with the world economy, which is expected to contract by 2.6 percent in 2009, according the U.N. mid-year update to its World Economic Situation and Prospects 2009 report released recently.

In India, sectors like construction, trade, hotels, transport and communication, financing, real estate and business services grew by over 5 percent in the last quarter. The overall growth got a boost from the 13 percent jump in the expansion of community services, 9 percent in transport and communications sectors, and 7.8 percent in financial and other services sector.

Portland and Mudra Group to target retail market

Mudra Group, one of India's leading marketing communication networks recently announced a joint venture with Portland Design, U.K. to set-up a consultancy venture that targets the retail, leisure and travel markets in India. Called 'Portland Mudra', the new company will start operating in July from its office in Mumbai. "Mudra MAX already has three distinct offerings in retail — Prime Consult, Prime Retail and Prime Wayfinding," said Pratap Bose, chief operating officer, Mudra Group. Portland has a growing portfolio of design projects in India. All existing Indian projects of the joint venture partners will now be serviced by the new identity — Portland Mudra.

'Pune most suitable place in India for British investments'

A survey conducted by trade facilitation body UK-India Business Council (UKIBC) has ranked Pune as the most suitable place for British investments in India. The survey report, titled 'Opportunities for U.K. Plc in Emerging Cities in India', also ranks eight other cities — Ahmedabad, Chandigarh, Jaipur, Goa, Indore, Kochi, Nagpur and Vadodara — as the most conducive destinations for U.K. investments in India. The report is a product of "qualitative research through a process of in-depth interviews, reviews and perception surveys across various professional and social networks".

Indian-born MP in race for British parliament Speaker

Indian-born MP and former minister Parmjit Dhanda has joined the race for the post of Speaker of the House of Commons.

Dhanda, a 37-year-old Sikh, threw his hat in the ring to succeed Michael Martin, who will step down June 21. If successful, he would be the first British Speaker — a centuries-old office — from an ethnic minority.



Indian-origin ministers, when he was replaced in a reshuffle last year, has written an e-mail to all MPs ahead of the June 22 election saying the new speaker should be the "the interface between Parliament and modern Britain".

In his email, Dhanda admitted that he was not "an obvious choice" but added: "Until I see someone more likely to win who will fight for the causes I spell out here, I'll be in this contest."

The Punjabi MP, whose parents came

to Britain in the 1960s, has strong working class roots: his father was a lorry driver and mother a hospital cleaner. Dhanda became a trade union organiser and local councillor before being elected to the Commons in 2001, and made junior minister for communities and local government in 2007.

His decision to stand was backed by Simon Woolley, director of Operation Black Vote, a non-government body that aims to get more ethnic minority involvement in British politics. "Electing Parmjit as speaker would be a breath of fresh air and a break from tradition and the establishment," Woolley said.

Dhanda, who bemoaned the lack of