

# PGP BHARAT

India's first travel-based business immersion programme



## Post-Read Notes: ECI & IIIDEM

*Systems built to never fail, and a conversation with the Election Commissioner*

Every few years, India pulls off something remarkable. Nearly a billion people vote. Hundreds of thousands of polling stations run at once. The logistics rival a military operation. Yet it happens, predictably, peacefully, and with near zero error.

Most organisations struggle to scale past a few hundred people. The Election Commission of India coordinates millions.

This immersion had two halves. The first was a walkthrough of the machinery that makes an election of this size possible. The second was a conversation with the Election Commissioner himself, who spoke less about elections and more about how to build a life. Both halves are worth carrying forward.



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## What we saw

The day began with the mechanics:

- How EVMs function and record votes
- How mock polling validates readiness before a single real vote is cast
- How votes are stored, counted, and verified

We walked through the physical infrastructure, watching demonstrations of processes that appear deceptively simple.

But the real learning was in what we couldn't see, the architecture that makes it all possible.

An election unfolds in three phases:

- Pre-election: mapping constituencies, registering voters, training personnel, deploying materials
- During the election: real time monitoring tracks thousands of variables across polling stations with no way to communicate with each other in the moment
- Post-election: a strict verification protocol checks everything before a single result is certified

Each phase has a backup system. Each backup system checks itself. Very little is left to trust alone.



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## Five principles that transfer

### 1. SOPs are not documentation

Standard procedures fail in most organisations. Not because they're poorly written, but because they're treated as paperwork. At the ECI, procedures hold because training is mandatory rather than optional, because ownership of each process sits with a specific person rather than a team, and because there are real consequences for skipping a step. Remove any one of those three, and a procedure becomes a suggestion.

**For business:** If you can't answer who owns a process and what happens when it breaks, you don't have a process. You have documentation.

### 2. Cascade training solves the scaling problem

You cannot train a million people centrally. The ECI doesn't try. Instead, a small group is trained deeply, that group trains the next layer, and that layer trains the next. The model cascades. This isn't a new theory, it's execution discipline. The quality of the message at each handoff decides whether the system compounds or degrades.

**For business:** Growth is limited by your ability to transfer capability, not by how much any one person knows.

### 3. Decentralisation needs standards, not instructions

Election administration spans states and union territories that differ wildly in language, geography and politics. Yet the standard for integrity never bends. The Commission's answer is tight, non-negotiable standards paired with real autonomy in how regional teams meet them. Control is not the same as trust, and trust, once the standard is clear, is what lets a system this large actually function.

**For business:** You don't scale by controlling everything. You scale by defining what matters and trusting the system to handle the rest.

### 4. Engineer reliability – don't hope for it

Elections cannot fail, so the ECI builds redundancy into everything: backup systems, verification loops, and manual overrides. This looks expensive until you price out the cost of failure. Most organisations

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rely on people being careful. High-reliability organisations assume people will make mistakes and design systems that catch them first.

**For business:** Where precision matters, redundancy isn't optional. Build systems that survive human error; don't just ask people to avoid it.

## 5. Institutions outlive individuals

IIIDEM exists for one reason: so that what works today still works tomorrow, under a completely different set of people. Knowledge stored in someone's head disappears the day they leave. Knowledge stored in documented systems, with the reasoning behind each rule, survives the transition.

**For business:** Strong organisations survive founder transitions. That takes deliberate knowledge transfer, not tribal wisdom passed down by word of mouth.

## Seven ideas from a conversation with the election commissioner

Midway through the day, the group sat down with Hon'ble Dr. S.S. Sandhu, Election Commissioner of India. The conversation moved away from elections almost immediately and into something closer to a life briefing.

### 1. Unlearn before you learn

Most of what holds people back is a pattern built years ago, without them ever noticing it happen. Growth starts with unlearning it.

**For life:** Progress is rarely about adding a new skill first. It's about clearing space for it.

### 2. Shortcuts cap your ceiling

Never take shortcuts, not because they never work, but because they quietly limit how far you're able to go.

**For life:** A shortcut solves today's problem and creates tomorrow's ceiling.

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### 3. A degree is a credential, not a capability

A formal degree is genuinely necessary for very few professions, doctors, lawyers, certain government roles. For almost everything else, what actually builds capability is a different cycle: learn, fail, and reflect. Reflection is the step that turns failure into growth instead of repetition.

**For life:** Build a solid foundation before you build height. Clarity is heaven, confusion is hell, and most bad decisions trace back to confusion, not a lack of intelligence.

### 4. Health is the actual foundation

Twenty minutes of exercise a day is worth roughly two hours of energy that day, and an estimated twenty years of life over time. Ninety percent of health problems trace back to stress, and stress, more often than not, traces back to confusion.

**For life:** If you are confused, you will be stressed. If you are stressed, your health eventually pays the bill.

### 5. Managers get, leaders give

A manager is a go-getter. A leader is a go-giver. And intelligence is not a degree or a mark, a mark identifies only a narrow slice of what intelligence actually is.

**For life:** The real test of intelligence is simpler than any exam: analyse yourself first, then analyse the people closest to you.

### 6. Attitude outranks any single skill

Attitude and etiquette matter more than anything you could list on a resume.

**For life:** Skills get you into the room. Attitude decides whether you're asked back.

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## 7. Perfection doesn't exist, so choose the lesser evil

Neither perfection nor a fully idle, trade-off-free life actually exists. The real skill is choosing the lesser evil, deliberately, rather than freezing while waiting for a perfect option that was never coming. And the world is full of injustice, so don't be cynical or upset when your own turn comes. It will.

**For life:** The measure of a person isn't whether injustice reaches them. It's how they respond when it does.

## The real insight

Here's what stayed with us.

Scale isn't about technology or capital. It's about discipline: discipline in how you build processes, discipline in how you train people, discipline in how you maintain standards when no one is watching.

The ECI doesn't run the world's largest election because Indians are naturally organised. It does it because it has built systems that work regardless of who is operating them. Dr. Sandhu's fifteen points, distilled here into seven, are the same argument turned inward: build the foundation, remove the confusion, protect your health, and let discipline, not motivation, carry you on the days that matter most.

Systems at the institutional level and discipline at the personal level turn out to be the same idea, just applied at a different scale. That transfers.

*For PGP Bharat learners moving into leadership roles: these aren't academic frameworks. They're operational realities from an institution that cannot afford to fail, and life advice from someone who has spent a career inside it.*

*Take them seriously, and carry them with you through the rest of the journey, and beyond it.*