Dr. Manmohan Singh  
Prime Minister’s Office (PMO)  
New Delhi. September 18, 2013

Subject : Petition for Grant of postal ballot to Non-resident Indians (NRIs)

Hon’ble Dr. Manmohan Singh

The community of NRIs appreciates very much the decision of your government to grant voting rights to them for the national and state elections. This gesture will definitely strengthen further the bond which exists between the Government of India and the NRI community. This will stimulate them further in mobilizing their intellectual, financial and technological resources in the service of India. In this connection we appreciate very much your statement on 8th January, 2010 at Pravasi Bharatiya Divas, “I am sure that they (NRIs) will bring a fresh air to Indian polity”.

All members of NRI community would have very much liked to vote in the recent elections in five states of India but due to the specific conditions attached to the exercise of this right at present, only a handful have exercised it in previous elections and this is also likely to happen in the forthcoming elections. The election for the Kerala Assembly in 2011 was the first opportunity to exercise the right of vote by NRIs. According to the available data out of about 2 million Malayalis abroad, only 8,820 NRIs had their names on the electoral rolls, out of which only 4,639 turned to cast their votes on April 13, 2011. Highest number of NRI votes was polled in Kuttiyadi constituency in Kozhikode, where 617 individuals out of 931 registered casted their votes. Interestingly, in around 22 constituencies, not a single NRI turned out to exercise his/her fundamental right. Subsequently for the Tamil Nadu Assembly elections out of 1.5 million NRIs, none registered for the state elections. In Puducherry’s Mahe district, only 29 NRIs voted. Also in West Bengal Oman-based Sujit Datta became the first non-resident Bengali to cast his vote on April 27, in Behala West constituency.

According to the present regulations the NRI must be registered in election rolls of the constituency where he/she was resident before leaving India and be present on the day of election in the constituency physically. Due to their professional and family circumstances it is difficult for a large majority of NRI community to travel to India specifically for the purpose of exercising their voting right. The costs of travel are high and in some cases also costs of hotel accommodation. As a result of this for the majority of NRIs the gracefully granted right of vote has remained only on paper.

We would, therefore, request you and the Minister for Overseas Indian Affairs to seriously consider the grant of postal ballot to the NRIs which will enable the vast majority of NRIs to cast their vote for the right candidate and participate actively in the ongoing political process in India. We are very proud of India’s record as a democracy since its independence because of which India as well as its citizens abroad has a good image. We feel that essence of democracy is that every citizen should be able to vote in actual practice and we are very glad that the Election Commission and Government of India have introduced many changes and innovations so that all Indian citizens resident in India including those who are sick or live in small scattered, isolated places can also vote. We request that in the same spirit a favourable decision on postal ballot can change the present virtual de-franchised status of majority of NRIs.

In this context we find it strange that the staff of Indian embassies abroad is actually enjoying a postal ballot while a substantive part of the NRI community is denied the same privilege. In fact in many
countries political rights of civil servants are constrained due to their being neutral in politics but political rights of nationals abroad are respected. We are very proud that India is growing at a rapid rate and in near future will become one of the big powers of the world. There is also an expectation that like other advanced countries India will also take its governance at higher levels. At present there are 115 developed and developing countries which have granted their nationals abroad postal ballot including US, UK, Canada, Germany, France, Spain, Portugal, Italy, Netherlands, Switzerland, Australia, New Zealand, Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand, Lithuania, Hungary, Mexico, Dominican Republic, El Salvador, South Africa, Zimbabwe, Nepal, etc. Their distribution geographically is Africa (21), North America (13), Asia (15), Pacific (6) and Europe (36).

The specifics of conditions and procedures of postal ballot differ from country to country. At present sixty five countries allow all citizens abroad to vote by mail but 25 place restrictions based on period of absence from the motherland. Most organize possibility of voting at the Embassy/consulate physically and/or through mail. It may be useful to follow the procedure used by the UK, US, Canada which can be adjusted to the specific requirements of India. If need be, we will be too glad to provide more information on this.

In this context, we are very glad that Government of India has already examined the possibility of using ballot on internet to extend the number of NRIs using the voting right. We understand that Election Commission found it not feasible. We are aware of the security and other problems connected with internet voting and hence our request is to kindly consider the option of postal ballot through expansion of arrangements already made for the staff of Indian embassies.

In many western countries attempts are made not to exclude any individual from voting through proxy voting, allowing voting at railway stations, airports, in places other than the constituency. Singapore and Hong Kong used “optical scan voting” in general elections of 2010. India can at least make it possible for the majority of 50 lakhs NRIs with rich educational and professional background to participate in the democratic process of India through a postal ballot.

Hon’ble Prime Minister, you have been the initiator of economic liberalization in India, and despite political difficulties have been also pushing many other economic, social and governance reforms in the country. In this context we would like to state humbly that increasing involvement of Indian Diaspora is not a bipartisan issue. If you and the Minister for Overseas Indians as well as the Election Commission will examine soon the possibility of granting postal ballot to NRIs, if not all most of them will be able to exercise their right before the next general elections. We do not think that minor problems like inability of the embassies to verify identity documents, maintaining secrecy of votes cast, possibility of undue influence of postal votes on domestic election outcome, etc. are insurmountable. After all 115 countries had already found solutions to these and other possible problems. We are making this request on behalf of 50 lakh NRIs.

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