Aadhaar Voter Id Linkage

Mains Syllabus : GS II - Government policies and interventions for development in various sectors and issues arising out of their design and implementation; Important aspects of governance, transparency and accountability.

Why in the News?

The Election Commission of India (ECI)'s renewed push to link Aadhaar with voter ID.

What are the objectives of linking Aadhaar with Voter ID?

- **Improving efficiency of electoral process** - Integrating the Aadhaar database with the voter registry is expected to streamline electoral verification processes, making them quicker and more cost-effective for electoral officials.
- **Eliminate bogus voters** – Linking Aadhaar with electoral ID will ensure that one voter is registered in only one constituency or only once in the same constituency.
- **Enhancement of Electoral Roll Accuracy** – The linkage helps in updating the rolls efficiently, ensuring that only eligible voters are listed and that outdated or erroneous entries are minimized.
- **Enhanced Voter Authentication** - By integrating digital identity systems, voter verification at polling stations becomes more robust, making it harder for ineligible or fraudulent voters to cast ballots.
- This directly contributes to the credibility and transparency of the electoral process.
- **Strengthening electoral integrity** - By reducing the scope for bogus voting and impersonation, the linkage seeks to uphold the integrity of the electoral process and enhance the credibility of elections in India.
- **Facilitating remote voting** - Aadhaar linkage could enable future initiatives such as remote voting, potentially benefiting migrant workers and citizens living away from their home constituencies.

What are the challenges during and after the linkages?

- **Compulsion in linking** - Presently, Form 6B offers no meaningful opt-out — voters must either submit their Aadhaar number or declare they do not have one, coercing even those unwilling to share it into compliance.
- **Infringements on fundamental right to privacy** - DBT Seeding Data and data collected for the National Population Register are used for the linkages.
- **Judicial challenge** - In 2023, in G. Niranjan v. Election Commission of India, the ECI had assured the Supreme Court that Aadhaar-voter ID linkage is not mandatory.

The Supreme Court in Justice K.S. Puttaswamy (Retd.) v. Union of India (2018) had limited the use of Aadhaar for welfare programmes paid out of the Consolidated Fund of India per Section 7 of the Aadhaar Act, 2016.

- But the Latest ECI proposal requires citizen-voters who do not provide Aadhaar to physically appear before an Electoral Registration Officer to justify their decision.
- **Disproportionate burden** - It will be difficult for the elderly, persons with disabilities, migrant workers, and individuals in remote areas to attend in-person hearing before the Electoral Registration Officer.
- **Lack of appellate mechanism** - Lack of a clear, accessible, and time-bound appellate mechanism for the citizen-voter, if their justification for not submitting Aadhaar is arbitrarily rejected.
- **Inadequacy of Aadhaar** - Multiple High Courts have ruled that Aadhaar is not proof of Indian citizenship.
- Aadhaar Act, 2016, explicitly states that Aadhaar is a residency-based identification system, which means that an Aadhaar holder may not necessarily be an Indian citizen.

Non-citizens residing in India for 182 days are eligible for Aadhaar.

- **Issues in Aadhaar database** - The 2022 Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) Performance Audit Report identified major deficiencies, including the cancellation of over 4.75 lakh Aadhaar numbers due to their duplication and issuance based on faulty biometric data.
- **Disenfranchisement risks** - Systemic errors and exclusions may cerate barriers and already weak voter turnout.

In 2015, the ECI attempted a similar Aadhaar-voter ID linkage under the National Electoral Roll Purification and Authentication Programme.

As a result, in Telangana and Andhra Pradesh alone, 55 lakh voters were arbitrarily removed from electoral rolls due to Aadhaar mismatches.

The ECI was forced to abandon the exercise after the Supreme Court issued a stay through its August 11, 2015 order.

- **Voter profiling** - Once Aadhaar is linked to voter IDs, it becomes possible to cross-reference electoral data with other databases, allowing ruling parties to monitor voter demographics.
- Political actors could use this data to micro-target voters, suppress opposition strongholds, or even manipulate electoral rolls to achieve predetermined electoral outcomes.
- **Undermines the separation of powers of ECI** - The ECI is a constitutionally independent authority and the UIDAI is a statutory body operating under executive control.

- Entrusting UIDAI with electoral data may undermine the separation of powers, affect the integrity of the electoral process.
- **Arbitrary welfare disentitlements** – Fear of disentitlement from welfare schemes upon not voting in polls.

What lies ahead?

- Ensuring safety mechanisms to prohibit the misuse such as voter profiling using Aadhaar Electoral roll linkage.
- Providing legal guarantee on non-disentitlement of welfare will remove the fear among citizens about the linkage.
- Cleaning the Aadhaar database of errors, exclusions and duplications before linkage with electoral role.
- Regular door-to-door verification by booth level officers , comprehensive independent audits of electoral rolls and functional public grievance to address concerns about alleged duplicate or fraudulent entries.
- Introducing independent oversight through social audits would further enhance accountability and prevent politically motivated manipulations of electoral rolls.

Reference

The Hindu | A move that endangers the right to vote

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