Big tech vs State - Social Media Platforms

What is the issue?

- Union Information and Technology minister Ravi Shankar Prasad recently accused Twitter of “double standards”.
- The ongoing exchange between the government and Twitter highlights the need for responsible roles by both the big techs and government.

What was the Minister's charge?

- He was referring to the alleged difference in approach taken by Twitter with respect to the events at Capitol Hill in the US and the Red Fort in India on Republic Day.
- This comes after the government issued notices seeking the blocking of some social media accounts.
    - This was for allegedly spreading misinformation and provocative content in the aftermath of the violence witnessed during the tractor march by farmers on January 26.

What was Twitter's response?

- Twitter did block some accounts.
- However, it said that the accounts it had not blocked, either on January 31 or after the February 4 notice, were consistent with their policies on free speech.
- It reiterated that the platform believed that “the notices sent to it were not consistent with laws in the country”.

What is the larger concern?

- The seeming arbitrariness of decision-making of social media platforms is not an India-specific concern.
- A few days ago, French President Emmanuel Macron expressed his displeasure of social media platforms.
- He expressed concerns at the way the platforms which had “helped President Trump to be so efficient” “suddenly cut the mic” the moment “they were sure he was out of power”.
- Such lack of consistency and the absence of clearly defined rules on part of social media platforms are worrying.

- These platforms wield immense power as they contribute to shaping online public discourse.
- Considering this, how these issues are resolved will have far-reaching effects.
- The decision of when to "cut the mic" cannot arguably be left in the hands of a private player alone.
    - This is because they are made by unelected executives with questionable incentive structures and opaque systems of accountability.
- In all, social media platforms must be neutral, transparent and consistent in their decision-making process.

What should the government do?

- The government needs to be more transparent in its decision-making.
- When it asks a social media platform to block hundreds of accounts, that must be guided by a pre-defined and publicly disclosed set of rules.
- Failing to do so would mean that the blacklist could be used to silence critical voices.
    - This would work against all the government's talk of freedom of expression and open democratic systems.

Source: The Indian Express

