Bypassing Political Leadership - Centre-State Relations

What is the issue?

- The Centre has a duty not to bypass political leadership in dealing with States.
- But two recent developments have raised concern that the Centre wants to give direct instructions to officials functioning under elected State regimes.

How important is Centre's role?

- India is a 'federal country with strong centralising features.'
- A major responsibility for the Centre is to maintain the balance, as well as mutual respect, between political structures at the central and State levels.
- In particular, it is an obligation of the Centre to refrain from bypassing the elected leadership while dealing with States.

What are the recent events?

- Prime Minister Narendra Modi has held two virtual meetings with district magistrates and State officials to review the COVID-19 situation.
- Union Education Minister Ramesh Pokhriyal held a virtual meeting with State Secretaries in charge of education.
- This was on the National Education Policy, and related matters such as the conduct of Class XII examinations.
- Such meetings are usual and help get some feedback from the field across India.
- But, it is quite unusual for leaders in the central political executive to bypass their counterparts in the States.
- The Tamil Nadu Minister for School Education took the right stand by not deputing any official to represent the State in Mr. Pokhriyal's interaction.
- The idea was not to boycott the meeting, but to say the Minister ought to have been included in a discussion on the NEP.
- Likewise, West Bengal CM Mamata Banerjee highlighted that Chief Ministers felt humiliated when all of them were not allowed to speak to the PM in a virtual interaction.

Is this the first time?

- The Prime Minister addressing district magistrates, or collectors, does have a precedent.
- Former PM Rajiv Gandhi addressed the heads of the district administration in Uttar Pradesh on the issue of Panchayati Raj.
- The defence then was that such direct interactions were permissible under the Constitution, citing Articles 256 and 257.
- These provisions stipulate that the States are obliged to comply with laws made by Parliament.
- They also allow some directions from the Union government.

What is the concern then?

- There is also scope for resentment that the elected representatives of the States are being bypassed.
- This is especially true if the Prime Minister belongs to one party, and the officials addressed are from a State run by another.

What is the way forward?

- In the present case, it is true that the Centre has a major role in the pandemic response.
- The Disaster Management Act has been invoked to specify guidelines on lockdowns and relaxations and to ensure smooth medical supplies.
- However, in the larger interest, it is better if events and discussions are held without undermining the political structures at the States.

Source: The Hindu

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