

Civil Society for Governmental Accountability

What is the issue?

- The second wave of Covid has exposed the gaps in holding the government in power accountable.
- This necessitates a relook into the role of the civil society.

What constitutes the civil society?

- Civil society refers to associations or communities that work above and beyond the state.
- India's civil society has many actors:
 - i. grassroots organisations that connect to the last mile and provide essential services
 - ii. think tanks and academic institutions that offer new policy ideas and generate evidence
 - iii. advocacy organisations that amplify and build support for causes
 - iv. large impact funds and philanthropists who decide how these organisations get funded

What are the shortfalls in its functioning?

- Successive governments in India have been wary of the potential contributions of the civil society.
- Governments have significantly curtailed the kind of activities that civil society actors can engage in.
- Philanthropists and donor organisations are unable to support initiatives that strengthen India's democracy and its accountability mechanisms, for fear of retribution.
- Reportedly, close to 90% of total donor interest in India was targeted towards primary education, primary healthcare, rural infrastructure and disaster relief.
- This leaves other challenging areas such as human rights and governance with minimal funding.
- Many civil society actors also focus on engaging with narrow policy problems.
- They often ignore the core politics around policy and focusses disproportionately on technocratic solutions.

What is the implication?

- In the absence of a strong push from civil society, the democratic institutions have no intrinsic incentive to reform.
- Evidently, in challenging times such as the current pandemic, the country had no effective mechanism to hold a sitting government accountable.
- The judiciary was helpless, with judges having trouble in getting answers from the government.
- Even Parliament was unable to perform its oversight duty; it barely met in 2020.
- Evidently, the system of checks and balances in India's democracy has been weakened.

What is the way forward?

- There is a dire need to re-examine parliamentary rules that are heavily tilted in favour of the sitting government.
- It is essential to strengthen the hands of the judiciary, bolster federalism and the independent media.
- Creating transparency in decision making within the executive is another key priority.
- Civil society organisations need to broaden their agenda to include issues that strengthen India's institutions.
- It should unite to present a strong unified voice that demands more transparency and accountability in all areas and levels of policymaking.
- This involves building public opinion on a well-functioning democracy and creating tools and fora that help citizens engage with policymaking more readily.
- Philanthropists need to fund initiatives that empower citizens.
- Civil society has an important and irreplaceable role to play.
- Strengthening it will go a long way in fundamentally shaping a true democracy.

Source: The Indian Express