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

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