Electoral Reforms

Why in News?

The Election Commission of India (ECI) has plans to strengthen the electoral process, but some require scrutiny.

What is an unhealthy pattern?

- Even as electoral democracy has taken strong root in India, some unhealthy patterns have emerged.
- The voter electoral participation has remained robust with the poor voting in large numbers.
- But, the candidates and winners in Assembly and Lok Sabha polls have largely been from affluent sections.
- With elections becoming expensive, most parties have sought to field richer candidates irrespective of their merit to represent public interest.

What are the current regulations?

- Current campaign finance regulations by the ECI **seek transparency on expenses** by party and candidate.
- The ECI **prescribes limits on a candidate's expenditure** have not been sufficient deterrents.
- Poll results have tended to be a function of either party or leader preference by the voter rather than a statement on the capability of the candidate.
- In many cases, capable candidates stand no chance against the money power of more affluent candidates.

What does the ECI seek to do now?

- The ECI is considering tightening ways to cap the expenditure of parties.
- It is welcomed as it should provide a more level playing field.
- But even this can be meaningful only if there is **more transparency in campaign finance.**
- The ECI has also suggested bringing social media and print **media under the silent period** ambit after campaigning ends.
- Regulating social media will be difficult and it remains to be seen how the ECI will implement this.

What does the ECI's plan need?

- The ECI's plans to introduce new safe and secure voting methods, however, this needs a **thorough scrutiny**.
- The EVM used now as a standalone, one-time programmable chip-based system, along with administrative safeguards is a safe mechanism.
- But any other online form of voting that is based on networked systems should be avoided.
- The idea of an Aadhaar-linked remote voting system that is sought to be built as a prototype could be problematic.
- This may be problematic because the unique identity card has excluded genuine beneficiaries when used in welfare schemes.

In what areas do the ECI needs concentration?

- The measures missing from the recommendations are the need for more teeth for the ECI in its fight against **vote buying** and **hate speech**.
- **Vote buying** - Increasingly, parties have resorted to bribing voters in the form of money and other commodities in return for votes.
- While the ECI has tried to warn outfits or in some cases postponed polls, these have not deterred them.
- **Hate speech** - In times when hate speech is used during elections, the ECI has only managed to rap the offending candidates or party spokespersons on the knuckles.
- But stricter norms including disqualification of the candidate would be needed for true deterrence.

Source: The Hindu

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