Municipal Corporation Elections

What is the issue?

1. *According to a popular newspaper analysis, Delhi is recording a relatively low turnout of voters in municipal elections.*
2. *Not just in the national capital, municipal corporations in many other Indian cities also see a lukewarm response from voters, compared to a higher turnout for the Assembly or general elections.*

What is the trend in electoral response to municipal elections?

- A low voter turnout in municipal elections should cause concern about electoral apathy in any democracy.
- This concern was triggered by the revelation that just about half the total number of eligible voters for electing 250 councillors for the Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD) had cast their ballots in the recent poll.
- Voters' turnout trend for municipal corporation elections in Mumbai, Bengaluru and Chennai also was range between 45 and 48% only.
- Only exception was Kolkata, where the last municipal elections saw a turnout of 67%.

What could be the reason for such an electoral response?

- The city of Kolkata has always been a little more politically conscious than other Indian cities. So, the trend in Kolkata is an outlier.
- The story of other cities like Delhi, Mumbai, Bengaluru and Chennai is a little different.
- Though the amendments to the Constitution in 1993 mandated elections every 5 years for all local bodies including the municipal corporations, Bengaluru and Chennai **haven't conducted regular elections**.
- This could be one of the reasons for the lack of enthusiasm among voters for taking part in these elections.
- But a bigger reason for the lukewarm response from voters and political parties to municipal elections is about **India's governance structure** that allows little room for local governments like municipal corporations.
- As a result, the third tier of governance (the first two being the Centre and the state governments) has grossly **inadequate powers of raising resources** to fulfil its basic responsibilities.
- Most of these municipal corporations do not even show much interest in using their existing powers to tap into new sources of revenue to fund the schemes that they must run for the upkeep of the municipalities.

What are the consequences?

- **Performance affected** - The first consequence is that performance of municipal corporations suffers hugely.
- They are often short of funds to even pay salaries to the staff at the many agencies and organisations they run to provide basic services to people like primary education, health and sanitation.
- **Dependence increases** - The second consequence is that these corporations become more dependent on financial allocations from the state governments.
- If the allocations dry up, the corporations fail to discharge their basic functions.
- If the municipal corporation is ruled by a political party other than that running the state government, the financial consequences are serious.

What is being done?

- **Allocation from Finance Commissions** - Finance Commissions are now allocating resources to be directly transferred from the Centre to these municipal or local governments.
- This has to be of the annoyance of the states - the second tier of governance.
- **Allocation from the Centre** - Even the Centre is allocating resources to the state governments subject to the latter transferring them to the municipal corporations or other types of local governments.
- **Involvement of political parties** - Political parties are fighting the municipal corporation elections on the strength of whether they have the ability to get more resources from the Central or state government.
- Unfortunately, there is **no discussion** on how these corporations could be encouraged to **expand their tax revenue base** and make the collections of existing revenues more efficient and effective.
- A related issue is the **management structure** that is mandatorily followed by municipal corporations.
- The stranglehold of IAS officers on key positions responsible for running the municipal corporations may have many advantages in providing administrative continuity between the arms of different layers of the government.

What is needed?

- More freedom to these corporations to **hire their chief executive officers** from the private sector would be a good idea to push them to think hard about exploring new sources of revenue.
- Once the municipal corporations start **raising more resources on their own** and begin delivering services to the people more efficiently, the current indifference of voters should go away.
- That would also be a shot in the arm for India’s considerably weakened third tier of governance.

Reference

1. Business Standard | Unshackling the third tier



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