Need for ‘One Nation One Voter ID’ - Re-enfranchising Migrant Voters

What is the issue?

- Migrant workers have, for long, been forgotten voters, given their conditions of work.
- Given this, there must be the political will to usher in a ‘One Nation One Voter ID’ to ensure ballot portability.

What are the recent changes made by the ECI?

- In response to the pandemic, the Election Commission of India (ECI) has made it possible for senior citizens above the age of 65 to vote by postal ballot.
- This is given the fact that they are at greater risk from exposure to the novel coronavirus.
- [Until now, this option was available only to disabled citizens and those above 80 years.]
- The same empowering approach could be extended to the migrants who evidently face difficulties in exercising their franchise.

How significant are the migrant workers?

- Internal migrant workers constitute about 13.9 crore as in the Economic Survey of 2017.
- This is nearly a third of India’s labour force.
- They travel across India in search of an economic livelihood.
- They engage in the construction sector, as domestic work, in brick kilns, mines, transportation, security, agriculture, etc.

What is the present scenario?

- With COVID-19 pandemic and the lockdown, the country witnessed the magnitude of internal migration.
- The hardships that migrant workers endured in their quest for livelihoods were also apparent.
- The humiliation they faced showed how politically powerless they were perceived to be.

Why are they called the forgotten voters?

- Most of the migrant workers never intend to settle down in their locations of work.
- They only wish to return to their native villages and towns once their work is completed or the working season ends.
- Often they toil in exploitative low-wage jobs, lacking identity and proper living conditions.
- So, they often go without access to welfare.
- Internal migrant workers do not enrol as voters in their place of employment.
- This is because they find it hard to provide proof of residence.
- They also cannot afford to return home on election day to vote.
- Thus, migrant workers become quasi-disenfranchised, and forgotten voters.
- It is perhaps this group does not constitute a vote bank worthy of attention.
- Also, since they do not have a vote where they work, their concerns are easy to ignore in their host State.
- Sometimes, they are targeted for allegedly taking jobs away from the local population.

What do the voters turn out show?

- It is indeed a matter of pride that India currently has over 91.05 crore registered voters.
- In the 2019 general election, a record 67.4% cast their vote.
- The ECI would do well to focus attention on the one-third, a substantial 29.68 crore, who did not cast their vote.
- National Election Study surveys have shown that about 10% of registered voters refrain from voting due to a lack of interest in politics.
- That leaves approximately 20 crore voters who want to vote but are unable to do so.
- Of these there are about 3 crore Non Resident Indians (NRIs).
- Only about 1 lakh NRIs have registered to vote, presumably because voting requires their physical presence in India.
- Of them, about 25,000 voted in the 2019 elections.
- To enable NRIs to exercise their franchise, the government brought in legislation in the previous Lok Sabha to enable voting through authorised proxies.
- The legislation lapsed.
- However, it is interesting to contrast the concern for NRIs with the lack thereof for poor migrant workers.

What are the models in place for voter portability?

- Service voters (government employees) posted away from home can vote through the Electronically Transmitted Postal Ballot System (ETPBS).
- Classified service voters (e.g., military personnel) can do so through their proxies.
- The ECI has said that it is testing an Aadhaar-linked voter-ID based solution.
- This is to enable electors to cast their votes digitally from anywhere in the country.
- It will be some time in the future before this becomes a functional reality.

What is the way forward?

- Ensuring that every Indian who is eligible to vote can do so must be a central mission for the ECI.
- Voting must be viewed not just as a civic duty but also as a civic right.
- In developing the Aadhaar-linked voter-ID based solution, it must be ensured that the linkage does not result in the exclusion of eligible individuals.
- Meanwhile, the existing forms of voter portability can be utilised for re-enfranchising migrant workers as well.
- To facilitate migrant workers voting, the ECI could undertake substantial outreach measures using the network of District Collectorates.
- Migrants should be able to physically vote in their city of work, based on the address on their existing voter IDs and duration of their temporary stay.
- The COVID-19 crisis has mobilised governments and NGOs to set up registers and portals to reach out to migrant workers.
- So, in the lines of the 'One Nation One Ration Card', a 'One Nation One Voter ID' will ensure native ballot portability and empower the forgotten migrant voters.
- Ensuring that every Indian voter can participate in elections is imperative to ensure a democratically inclusive India.

Source: The Hindu

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