On Postal Ballot for NRIs

Why in news?

In the Supreme Court, the Union government that said it was considering ways to facilitate non-resident Indians (NRIs) to cast their votes remotely.

> *Earlier, the Chief Election Commissioner of India urged the NRIs to register as overseas electors and talked about a proposal on Electronically Transmitted Postal Ballot System (postal ballot) facility for NRIs.*

What do the NRIs miss out on?

- India has the largest diaspora population, with nearly 1.35 crore NRIs spread across the globe.
- Many of them leave the country for short-term work and could miss out on exercising some of their rights such as registering their vote in India's Assembly or parliamentary elections.
- Currently, the Election Commission of India (ECI) allows enrolled overseas citizens to vote in person at the polling station in the constituency where the person is registered as an overseas elector.
- The necessity to vote in person and the costs have, for overseas citizens, acted as a disincentive for their wanting to exercise their mandate.
- This was evident in the numbers of such voters in the 2019 Lok Sabha election - 25,606 among the 99,844 registered electors who voted.

What are some actions taken to remedy this problem?

- In 2014, a committee constituted by the ECI to probe methods to enable overseas voters' mandates concluded that proxy voting was the most viable, though some political parties objected to the idea.
- A Bill was passed in the 16th Lok Sabha (2014-19) to enable this, but lapsed.
- In 2020, the ECI approached the Government to permit NRIs to vote via postal ballots, similar to the system already used by service voters, i.e., the Electronically Transmitted Postal Ballot System (ETPBS).

> *The Electronically Transmitted Postal Ballot System allows registering their mandate on a downloaded ETPB and sending it to the returning officer of the constituency.*

What will be the impact?

- Allowing postal ballot use does increase the burden on embassy or consular officials.
- But, allowing postal ballot use should be a good move for NRIs.
- This is also a more trustworthy way of registering mandates rather than appointing proxies.

Appointing proxies is currently allowed for service personnel who are a limited number in each constituency unlike NRIs who could constitute a more substantial chunk among the electorate in some States.

- In the 2014 discussion organised by the ECI, some parties raised the question whether NRIs will get a benefit denied to internal migrant workers.
- But the higher costs of travel back to India, as opposed to travelling within, is a valid reason for allowing NRIs the partially ETPB facility.
- Several democratic countries allow for this option to their overseas citizens, but again, none has to deal with anything near the scale India has.

What is the other group to which the ETPB facility can be extended?

- The more important question to be tackled while extending the facility of voting to overseas Indians is whether longer term migrants should also be allowed to register their mandate.
- This is because the idea behind limiting voters to specific constituencies on account of their residency will become infructuous.
- Therefore, if the postal ballot system is indeed instituted, rules must be clearly framed for voters' eligibility on the basis of their time spent away from the country.

Reference

1. The Hindu | Remote voting: On postal ballot for NRIs
2. The Hindu | Postal ballot facility for NRIs being contemplated

Quick Facts

Voting Options in India

- Generally, a person will visiting the polling booth to exercise his/her franchise.
- **Postal ballots** - In which a voter exercises his/her franchise through post is available only for people on election duty, armed forces personnel, and electors subject to preventive detention.
- **Proxy voting** - The option of proxy voting is available only for armed forces, police,

and government officials posted outside India.
- The person can authorize another residing in the same polling booth area to cast a vote on his/her behalf.
- This option is currently available for wives of the above-mentioned personnel, but not for the husbands.

Overseas Voter

- A non-resident Indian, who holds an Indian passport, can vote in his/her hometown after registering as an Overseas Voter.
- The NRI must fill the Form 6A, which can be downloaded online or taken from the nearest Indian Mission.
- Once the person returns to India, they will have to re-register themselves as a general voter and obtain an EPIC card.
- To know more about the Overseas Voters, click here.

