Reflecting on Democracy

What is the issue?

The system of democracy invented in the West and exported to the rest is failing in the West.

How are democracies functioning at present?

- Democratically elected governments are in office, but not in power.
- Many countries in Europe cannot form stable governments because the largest party does not command a majority.
- Coalitions are becoming unstable.
- Consequently, Parliaments are unable to pass laws.
- **India** - Compared to the above, democracy is relatively shining in India.
- With a strong government at the Centre, Parliament has passed a range of big laws recently.

What are the key drawbacks of democracy?

- A democratic government with a majority, especially a large one, can become as authoritarian as a dictatorial one.
- The problem with a majoritarian democracy is that it is not designed to find solutions for complex problems with many points of view.
- It can deny minorities their rights for their views to be considered while framing laws and resolving contentious issues.
- Those dissatisfied with the governments' decisions go to courts wherever courts are independent, like in India.
- However, courts are not set up to find policy solutions to complex problems and must interpret the laws as written.
- In India, there is a concern that courts are venturing into matters of governance that they should not.
- However, this is a key indicator for the fact that something is missing in India's democracy.
- Referendums too at times turn out to be ineffective as a small majority determines how all must go.
- E.g. 52% wanted Britain to leave the European Union versus 48% that did not
- So, referendums too become yet another example of the problem with a

majoritarian democracy rather than a good solution.

- Some institutions help establish democracy and some others work to ensure it's proper and consistent functioning.
- In other words, some institutions provide the vertical pillars and others provide the lateral binders, giving strength and stability to the democratic structure.
- In reality, too much attention has been given to the vertical institutions required for people to elect their leaders.
- The lateral institutions required to create harmony amongst people are largely ignored.

What would constitute a healthy democracy?

- Democracy consists of much more than elections and passage of laws.
- India has a great Constitution. It conducts free and fair elections. Its Parliament has passed many landmark laws since Independence.
- However, failures of governance and democracy in India can be seen on the ground, in so-called 'backward areas' of the country.
- Democracies need an architecture of institutions; healthy democracies need three vibrant layers of institutions.
- At the bottom is the public space and the media in which people must be free to speak up if they want to.
- On the top is the layer of constitutional institutions - parliaments, courts, etc.
- Social media has enlarged the public space enormously; many more people are speaking up and many issues are being raised.
- It provides a good platform for opposing views, but is certainly incompetent at reconciling them; it is increasingly playing a divisive role.
- Therefore, more problems require the attention of constitutional institutions above, but they have overloading tasks.

What is the need for caution in India?

- When democratic governance is struck, it is generally attempted to close down the public space at the bottom or to impose a majoritarian view from above to strengthen the government.
- There is thus a fear that India may be slipping down this path, which may strengthen government on the ground and limit democratic governance.

What does this call for?

- The solution for strengthening governance and democracy at the same time is to strengthen the middle layer of institutions within democracies.
- This is the one that lies between the open public sphere and formal

government institutions.

- These are spaces where citizens with diverse views can listen to each other, and understand the whole system of which they are only parts.
- Neither elected assemblies nor social media provide such spaces.
- It is thus imperative for India to build intermediate level, unofficial or semi-official institutions for non-partisan deliberation amongst citizens concerned.

Source: The Hindu

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