Perspective: Remote Voting Facility

For Prelims: Remote Voting Facility, Blockchain Technology, Election Commission of India, Electronically Transmitted Postal Ballot System (ETPBS), e- SHRAM Portal

For Mains: Remote Voting Facility, Need for Remote Voting, Challenges associated and the way forward

Why in News?

Recently, the **Election Commission of India (ECI)** has decided to set up a committee to explore the possibility of allowing migrant workers to vote remotely on a pilot basis.

According to the ECI, there needs to be a concerted effort to see problems faced by migrant workers in exercising their franchise.

- In 2020, the **Election Commission officials also proposed the idea of using blockchain technology** to enable remote voting. The aim is to overcome the geographical hurdles in voting.
  - The Commission has been considering the possibility of remote voting which will allow people **to cast the ballot from their place of work.**
- Currently, postal ballots are **meant only for service voters** such as army personnel who cannot return to vote.

What is Remote Voting?

- Remote voting may take place in person somewhere **other than an assigned polling station** or at another time, or votes may be sent by post or cast by an appointed proxy.
  - There have been demands from various political parties that the EC should ensure that migrant workers, **NRIs (Non-Resident Indians)** who miss out on voting, as they cannot afford to go home during elections to exercise their franchise, should be allowed to **vote for their constituency from the city they are working in.**

How Blockchain Technology can be used in Voting?

- Growing concern over election security, voter registration integrity, poll accessibility, and voter turnout has led governments to consider blockchain-based voting platforms as a means to **increase faith and participation in essential democratic processes.**
  - Electronic voting has been used in varying forms since the 1970s with fundamental benefits over paper-based systems such as **increased efficiency and reduced errors**. At present, the feasibility of **blockchain** is being explored for effective **e-voting.**
  - Even the EC had used a **one-way electronic system for service electors** (consisting of personnel belonging to the armed forces, central para military forces and central government officers deployed at Indian missions abroad) i.e. **Electronically Transmitted Postal Ballot System (ETPBS)** in 2019 Lok Sabha Elections.
- Blockchain's decentralized, transparent, immutable, and encrypted qualities could **potentially**

help minimize election tampering and maximize poll accessibility.
- **Possible Working:**
  - A blockchain remote voting process would involve **voter identification and authorisation** using a multi-layered IT-enabled system (with the help of biometrics and web cameras) at the venue.
  - After a voter's identity is established by the system, a blockchain-enabled personalised **e-ballot paper** (Smart Contract) will be generated.
  - When the vote is cast (Smart Contract executed), the ballot would be **securely encrypted and a blockchain hashtag (#)** will be generated. This hashtag notification would be sent to various stakeholders i.e. the candidates and political parties.

Why is there a Need for Remote Voting?

- **Due to Unfavorable Conditions:** Voters migrate from the place of their registration to cities and other places for education, employment and other purposes. It becomes **difficult for them to return to their registered polling stations** to cast their vote.
  - It was also noted that in villages like Dumak and Kalgoth in Uttarakhand, about **20-25% of registered voters are unable to cast their vote** in their constituencies as they are required to move out of their village/state broadly on account of their jobs or educational pursuits.
- **Decrease in Voting Turnout:** During the **2019 General elections**, nearly 300 million citizens out of a total of 910 million electors didn't cast their votes.
  - Precisely it is about **30 crore voters who hadn't voted** for various and obvious reasons.
- **Concerns Regarding Metropolitan Areas:** The ECI also noted the concern about low voter turnout in some of the metropolitan/city areas despite the fact that polling stations are set up within 2 km for any voter in urban areas. The **need to address voting apathy in urban areas** was felt.
- **Increasing Registrations of Unorganised Workers:** There are nearly 10 million migrant workers, which is for the unorganised sector, registered with the government's **e-SHRAM portal.** If the remote voting project is implemented, it will have far reaching ramifications.
- **Health Concerns:** The health concerns of mainly the senior citizens also need to be discussed as they're also becoming the **main deliberation**. In this context, the remote voting facility will result in increasing the voting percentage in urban areas as well as in rural areas.

What are the Drawbacks Associated with Remote Voting?

- **Security:** Any new technology systems, including those based on blockchain technologies and others, are vulnerable to cyber-attacks and other security vulnerabilities.
  - Technology-based voting systems may also entail privacy risks and concerns.
- **Veracity and Verification:** Furthermore, a **voter verification system** that uses biometric software, such as facial recognition, could lead to false positives or negatives in voter identification, thus facilitating a fraud or disenfranchising citizens.
- **Internet Connection & Malware Security:** There is a dependency on voters having a reliable internet connection. Internet penetration and availability and use of e-government services in some countries are limited.
  - Software errors or malware on voters' devices may also affect vote casting.
- **Privacy/Secrecy:** Elections always require a high level of security in order to protect voter privacy and the integrity of final results. Meeting the security needs of elections means online voting technology must overcome barriers that can invade the voter's privacy.
- **Preferred Environment:** It is also possible that voting takes place in an uncontrolled environment. It is difficult to ensure that the person votes freely and without coercion.
  - There is the risk that another person votes on behalf of the voter so, it is difficult to identify the voter.

What can be the Way Forward?

- **Legal Framework:** Elections, like many other government processes, are carried out in accordance with a set of laws, typically dictated in a constitution or electoral code. Many of these

legal frameworks contain explicit detail as to how ballots can be cast during an election, and what those ballots consist of and contain.

- **Maintaining Election Integrity**: An online voting system must also be able to provide verification that it has successfully maintained election integrity and that no manipulation had occurred during the voting or tallying processes.
- **Acceptability of the Stakeholders:** It is important that any system of remote voting has to take into account the confidence and acceptability of all the stakeholders of the electoral system – voters, political parties and election machinery, the officials are learnt to have informed the committee while political consensus is the way forward to introduce remote voting.
- **Trust & Transparency**: Even with all of the proper legal frameworks in place, using an online voting system would be pointless if the government or general public were not confident in its security, integrity, and accuracy.
    - For this reason, a number of transparency measures have to be developed to help ensure the transparency of online voting technology, building trust in the final results.
- **Other Proposed Reforms:** The standing committee is deliberating on key electoral reforms which have been proposed, **including linking of Aadhaar with voter ID.** The committee has also decided to take up three other proposed electoral reforms, which include remote voting, action against elected representatives filing false affidavits, and a common electoral roll for conducting all elections from village panchayat to Parliament.

Conclusion

The concept of remote voting facility is a remarkable one moreover, it is likely to add more value to the democratic system but there are certain challenges and those challenges are being worked upon to ensure that proper checks and balances are put into the system so that voting through remote means free fair as well as secure in every way.

Civil Services Examination Previous Year's Questions (PYQs)

Q. Consider the following statements: (2017)

1. The Election Commission of India is a five-member body.
2. Union Ministry of Home Affairs decides the election schedule for the conduct of both general elections and bye-elections.
3. Election Commission resolves the disputes relating to splits/mergers of recognised political parties.

Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

A. 1 and 2 only
B. 2 only
C. 2 and 3 only
D. 3 only

Ans: D

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