

Gist of EPW February Week 1, 2021

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Democracy sans Demos Cannot Survive

Context:

The article analyses the state of democracy in democratic nations particularly in developed European countries and the USA amidst the victory of Joe Biden and also in the context of the rising popularity of far-right conservative parties in many European countries.

Background:

- In the aftermath of events in the US capitol hill in which Trump supporters stormed the building, the Foreign Minister of Germany immediately made a call to the United States (US) and asked to join forces in order to prepare a 'Marshall Plan for Democracy'.
- He emphasized that it is impossible to establish democracy in Europe without democracy in the US.
- The reactions of the Western leaders made it evident that the audacious act by the supporters of Donald Trump in Washington has shaken the so-called “free world.”
- Some of the experts have asserted that the US has made an entry into the Weimar era. Now, the regions that had experienced the Weimar era and its consequences could see what it could possibly mean.
- The mainstream media in the US have now started looking at the 'American abyss', from years of neglecting the changes their country had undergone beneath the surface.
- Finally, taking Trump for granted was a mistake. Although he will not stay in the White House, his imprint is going to last as he is the result of a deep-rooted phenomenon.

Democracy in Europe:

- Indications of such a phenomenon have also been evident in Europe since the financial crisis of 2008–09. Hence, it is very natural that the incident of 6th January felt like déjà vu to many.
- In countries such as Hungary and Poland, the power of the state has been possessed by the far-right conservative politics.

- Many other Western countries of Europe have also been experiencing the rise of far-right, racist, xenophobic and neo-Nazi forces. We can see the growing impact of such forces on politics.
 - Brexit was a famous example of such politics. Apart from that, there are other forces as well which pose a serious “threat to democracy”.

Global summit for democracy:

- Observing these conditions, it was promised by Joe Biden as a presidential candidate that after taking charge as the US president, he will bring together the democracies of the world for strengthening democratic institutions, honestly tackling the challenges of the countries that are backsliding, and make a common plan to resolve the threats to common values.
- Biden is willing to organize and host a global summit for democracy to restore the spirit and shared goals of the countries of the Free World.
- However, some quarters are advising Biden to turn back on this idea as it may lead to diverting the attention from the real issues, because holding a Summit for Democracy or preparing a “Marshall Plan” to save it, would be a fundamentally problematic idea.

Roots of Disillusionment

- The question is why those forces which are posing a threat to democracy have got a lot of attention in the free world?
- It is a very uncomfortable question when asked to the elites of that part of the world who themselves have led to the creation of such a scenario where democratic states have become suspect in the eyes of a large section of the population.
- Amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, a German newspaper published an article stating that even after being an authoritarian country, China succeeded in strengthening the social system of the country.
- The article also highlighted the fact that if social welfare is improved, consumption choices are increased, domestic security is safeguarded, education and good healthcare are available to the masses then people will provide support to the system even if their participation in the process of decision making is limited.
- A large section of the masses in democratic countries are now not takers of living in a free and open society based on rule of law as claimed by ruling elites.
- This is because of the circumstances which they have faced in the last few decades. They have witnessed stagnant incomes, a decline in living standards, and decreasing opportunities.
- Further, an increase in wealth in the rich section of society has increased economic inequality to an unseen level.
- Such economic conditions have given rise to leaders such as Trump, Nigel Farage, and Marie Le Pen.

- These leaders became prominent following the adoption of austerity measures by ruling elites in the democratic world since the financial crisis of 2008–09.
- However, this only aggravated the conditions of the general masses which were already deteriorating due to the idea of “minimum government” and globalization of capital.
- In the neo-liberal era, ruling elites focused on different identities of people. A consensus on economic policies among political parties are growing, the only way to differentiate between them is their stand on social policies.
- As they are being financed by people of similar economic interests, they indulge in competitive identity politics to remain relevant.
- This situation has been seized by extremists, which in turn threaten democracy.
- In spite of this, elites wanted top-down management of the situation through measures such as the “Marshall Plan” or “Summit for Democracy” instead of addressing the root cause.
- Such shortsightedness has turned their system into a controlled democracy. Had elites tried to find genuine solutions, then such top-down measures would have not been required.
- Instead of this, elites have united to thwart any real democratic reforms that have challenged the status quo by branding them as populist so as to delegitimize them. For example, the treatment meted out to Syriza of Greece, or Bernie Sanders in the US, or Jeremy Corbyn in the United Kingdom.
- According to them, the only legitimate political forces are those who are serving the interests of finance capital and committed to keeping the status quo intact.
- Since the 1970s, income inequality in the US is increasing due to the weakening of trade unions, stagnant wages, decline in the upward mobility of working classes, etc., together with increasing concentration of wealth in the rich sections of society.
- In such a situation, for an average American, phrases like “American dream” would feel like 'rubbing salt on their wounds'.
- Globalization has led to deindustrialization in most parts of America so much so that the USA was struggling to produce PPE kits during the pandemic.
- This has angered most Americans and they became easy targets of leaders such as Trump who blamed immigrants, minorities, free trade agreements, and countries like China for all the wrongs and they started to identify themselves with the cause of “Make America great again” as coined by Trump.

Undemocratic Consensus

- The crux of the problem lies in the fact that after [World War II](#), the attributes of social democracies in the mid-1900s, such as rise in income, improvement in infrastructure, strengthening net of social security, and social equality started declining in the 1980s.
- Although the left political parties should have taken advantage of this condition, they failed to do this. But by surrendering to the idea of meritocracy, they lost their wings.

- Most of the working class people lost faith in left parties and turned towards the populist left or right political parties. For example, the socialist parties of France and Greece have been pushed to the margins.
- New emerging left leaders such as Sanders, Corbyn, Syriza, Podemos, etc. failed to form a political majority on their own thanks to status-quo forces including the old left.
- Hence, far-right forces remain a potent force. Even Biden's victory has not changed this reality.
- So, the question is whether Biden or his centrist counterparts in Europe can take action against the financial interests of those who have funded their election campaigns.
- Biden has announced a "band-aid" Covid-19 relief package of \$1.9 trillion along with indicating that he will implement minimum wages of \$15 an hour. However, he has also resolved to follow the bipartisan agreement in economic matters.
- People will trust his willingness to break free from corporate clutches only if he is taking action against big tech companies, raising taxes on them along with plugging loopholes, spending on green infrastructure, and working towards progressive healthcare guarantees.
- Biden and his European centrist counterparts understand the perils of running "democracy" sans demos. The political system in Europe and the USA have been in the clutches of elites. In Europe, elites established undemocratic institutions like the European Union, depriving people to have a say in handling affairs of such institutions. This needs to be changed fundamentally which cannot be done through measures like the "Marshall Plan".

Conclusion:

- Biden has talked about confronting the "challenges of nations that are backsliding." These nations could be found all over the world. However, it is noted that the main reason for such backsliding is the formula imposed by the "free world". The neoliberal ideas forced by the free world have let the managers of financial capital to control the political system in different parts of the world and this has done much harm to the evolution of people's democracy all over.
- To arrest the backslide it is not required to break away from neo-liberal consensus. What is required is that states should take charge of their economies.
- Ideas proposed by the emerging left in the US and Europe can also be implemented given that the state intervenes effectively in the economy.
- However, even if a political party or a political leader vow to take such measures, establishments funded by financial capitalists unite to thwart them.
- So, the way to stop these establishments is that common people should create pressure on Biden to stick to the progressive ideals and prove to be a progressive President.

Centre-state Cooperation in Handling Foreign Affairs

Context:

The article, while highlighting how provinces in other countries take an active part in foreign relations at their own level, makes a strong case for allowing participation of Indian states in India's external affairs.

Indian Outreach to Its States

- The Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) took a major decision at the end of 2014 to establish a state division to handle the domestic, sub-state relations.
- It was an important decision for a country that tended to take the line that the MEA's remit ended at India's borders.
 - This position had led to an ignorance of the important role that states bordering our immediate neighbours played.
- The political leadership understood this but very minimal attention was paid by the MEA to the external-domestic linkage except during crises.
- Three actions were taken:
 - First, the new division built state-level contacts which mainly depend on the resident commissioners that each state maintains in New Delhi.
 - Second, the MEA had asked senior officials to volunteer who would act as guides of the MEA for designated states.
 - The third was the initiation of the process of the gradual establishment of branch secretariats of MEA in state capitals.

Experiences of Other Countries

- In Canada, provinces are free to open offices abroad selectively for economic marketing.
- In China also, provinces participate in foreign affairs on their own and promote their economic agendas. However, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs supervises the functioning of these foreign offices and ensures that they follow a standard procedure strictly conforming to the national objectives. Provinces in China also have their own offices in selective countries. For example, Yunnan province used to have an office in Delhi, located in the Chinese embassy.
- In Germany, states which are called "landers" maintain their offices abroad on their own and coordinate with the German embassy. For example, the smallest German lander, Bremen, established special connections in Pune around the 1980s. Germany allows its states to pursue foreign affairs without any heavy-handed supervision.
- In Mexico, provinces are relatively autonomous in their external actions. They even sign accords with their counterparts, especially in the USA. Governors and other officers do not require permission from the central government to travel abroad.
- In the US, each state has its own way of maintaining foreign relations. Even individual cities can have their own foreign engagement. States of the US run their own offices to promote their economic interests. Though they coordinate with US embassies they remain autonomous. At least four to five states have their offices in India.

- Provinces and cities in many countries (China is an exception here) engage in sister-city and sister-province activities with little central coordination.
- After the end of world war II, such engagements were made between provinces and cities of France and Germany with an aim to end hostilities and craft new people-to-people connections. This is an important lesson for all countries that have seen endemic strife and conflict.
- Allowing such engagements at the municipal level in India will be a useful initiative.

Indian Centre-State Actions

- In India, foreign affairs is exclusively a “union” subject. Hence, states’ participation in external activities, especially in economic marketing abroad, or assisting with exports and [FDI](#) is subjected to approval by the central government.
- No minister of a state can make an official visit abroad without MEA’s permission. Though much has changed, still more needs to be done.
- There are many examples where the central government has scuttled moves by states to maintain foreign relations at their own level.
 - In the mid-2010s, Kerala wanted to open its own tourism promotion office in Singapore. However, this was turned down by the government.
 - After the reorganization of Andhra Pradesh (AP), the new AP government sought help from Singapore, which was allowed by New Delhi. But when the new government formed in AP in 2019, it canceled many actions alleging corruption by the previous government. Such local politics deter international cooperation.
- State promotion efforts are met by little sustained marketing efforts. Many times visits are aimed at gaining political support from non-resident Indians and political fundings. Follow up of state-level investment summits is lacking.
- In India, sister-city arrangements, a powerful international method for sub-state cooperation, do not work. Mayors of cities lack authority and funds for such activities.
- In 2014-15, when Prime Minister Modi visited China, the first meeting of Indian chief ministers and Chinese provincial governors was held. When relations between India and China improve again, such bilateral relationships can again be initiated.

Emerging roles of states in external affairs of India:

- The need for multilevel cooperation with respect to relations with neighbors is being recognized. For example, the interests of Uttar Pradesh (UP) and Bihar are taken into account in relation to Nepal, West Bengal’s and other Northeastern states’ in relation to Bangladesh and Tamil Nadu’s views with respect to Sri Lanka.
- New transport and people-to-people links are being promoted in Bangladesh–Bhutan–India–Nepal (BBIN) cooperation.

- MEA has established offices at five locations in the states, at Chennai, Guwahati, Hyderabad, Kolkata, and Mumbai. These state divisions of MEA are working in close coordination with its economic division.
- A state facilitation fund has been established to promote state-level engagements between states of two countries.
- MEA is also planning to train state officials at the Foreign Service Institute (FSI), to deepen their awareness of the activities.
- MEA will also facilitate states to organize their own promotional events in state capitals and other cities.
- MEA is facilitating a new sister-city relationship between Chandigarh and Nottingham, United Kingdom. Similar efforts are being made with the USA and Switzerland.

Way forward:

- There is a need to build and strengthen the capacity of states with respect to collaboration with their foreign counterparts and organize promotional events. Most importantly, It should not be a victim of domestic politics.
- States should set up their own external promotion units. MEA should actively engage and guide the states.
- States need to create a small consortium of think tanks, civil society, NGOs (like CUTS International). This will enable the MEA to further extend its excellent state initiative.

Conclusion:

Facilitating states to collaborate and participate in external affairs will strengthen cooperative federalism. Improved partnerships on foreign affairs issues will also lead to better domestic governance and further strengthen centre–state relations.
