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Giving More Tooth To Human Rights Commissions

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“Giving Human Rights Commissions more teeth” This article is based on which was published in The Hindu on 20/03/2020. It talks about issues pertaining to Human Rights commissions.

Paris Principles on Human Rights. Protection of Human Rights Act, 1993 (PHR Act). In 1993, the UN General Assembly adopted the This led to the constitution of national human rights institutions in almost every country. In this pursuit, the Indian Parliament enacted the

National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), and also, Human Rights Commissions at the levels of the various States. “fourth branch institutions” lack of autonomy and political interference. The Act created a The National and State Human Rights Commissions are examples of (other three branches— the legislature, the executive, and the judiciary). However, the functioning of the Human Rights Commissions has come under scrutiny and criticism, on account of

“Toothless Tiger”. Moreover, the Supreme Court called the NHRC as This is because the recommendations tendered by the NHRC and other state bodies are not binding on the respective governments.

Fourth Branch Institutions

- Democracy is sustained through the distribution of power between three “branches” — the legislature, the executive, and the judiciary, with each branch acting as a check and a balance upon the others.
- However, the complexity of governance and administration in the modern world has necessitated the existence of a set of independent bodies, which are charged with performing vital functions of oversight.
- These independent bodies are termed as fourth branch institutions.

- Some of these bodies are constitutional bodies, for example, the Election Commission and the Office of the Comptroller and Auditor General. While others have been established under law, for example, the Information Commission under the Right to Information Act, and Human Rights Commissions under the Protection of Human Rights Act.

Issues Pertaining to NHRC

- **Political Interference:**

- It consists of the prime minister, home minister, Leaders of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha, the Lok Sabha Speaker and the Deputy-Chairman of the Rajya Sabha. Thus, this creates a conflict of interest.
- Further, the criteria to assess candidates is also not specified

The selection committee tasked with appointing the chairperson and the members to the Commission is dominated by the representatives of the State itself.

- **Lack of Autonomy:**

- Their allegiance lies with their home cadre to which they return after their tenure at the Commission is over.
- This conflict of interest restricts the scope of their work, as they often are charged with investigating abuse of power by law enforcement personnel.

Police officials investigating for the NHRC are sent on deputation by their forces.

- **Non-Binding Recommendations of NHRC: Section 18 of the Protection of Human Rights Act “recommend”** empowers the Human Rights Commission to to the concerned government to take appropriate actions.

- **Restricted Jurisdiction:**

- Also, human rights commissions cannot investigate any human rights violation, if the complaint was made more than one year after the incident.
- No cases of Human Rights violation can be investigated by NHRC in case the violation is reported against armed forces.

NHRC is not empowered to act when human rights violations through private parties take place.

Significance of Human Rights Commission

- The PHR Act defines Human Rights as the rights relating to life, liberty, equality and dignity of the individual guaranteed by the Constitution or embodied in the International Covenants and enforceable by courts in India.
- In this context, the Human Rights Commissions aims to ensure the full realisation of the constitutional commitment to protecting human rights and act as protector for citizens against arbitrary state action.

Way Forward

- - **Creative Interpretation of Law:** The term “recommend” in section 18 of PHR Act should not be viewed in literal terms.
 - **“consultation” “concurrence”**For example, the Supreme Court (in order to maintain judicial independence) has held, that with the Chief Justice for judicial appointments (as set out under the Article 124 of Indian Constitution) be read as of the Chief Justice (this is the basis for the collegium system).

The first step in strengthening the Human rights framework in India, the recommendations of NHRC can be made binding. This can be done by:

- **Equal Footing As Another Quasi Judicial Bodies:**
 - **quasi-judicial,**This provides strong reasons for human rights commissions to be treated as and like other tribunals, their recommendations should be binding upon the state (unless challenged).

The Human Rights Commission has the powers of a civil court, and proceedings before it are deemed to be judicial proceedings.

- **Independent Cadre:** Human rights commissions should be provided with their independent cadre of staff with appropriate experience, so that they can function autonomously.
- **Behavioral change:** There is a need for promotion of a culture of human rights. Human rights education can be made part of school curriculum.

- - For example, the Supreme Court laid down detailed guidelines to ensure the independence of the Central Bureau of Investigation; various judgments have endorsed and strengthened the powers of the Election Commission to compulsorily obtain relevant details of candidates, despite having no express power to do so.

The Supreme Court, in the past, in order to uphold the spirit of the constitution has creatively interpreted the powers of various fourth branch institutions in cases of ambiguity.

Drishti Mains Question

Discuss the various issues faced by National and State Human Rights Commissions in India.