Remote Voting for Migrants

This editorial is based on **"Election Commission's initiative to enfranchise migrant voters is a step in the right direction"** which was published in Indian Express on 17/01/2023. It talks about the Participation of Migrants in the Electoral Process.

For Prelims: Remote Voting Facility, voter verification system, Election Commission of India, Electronically Transmitted Postal Ballot System (ETPBS)

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

In 2019, **India's latest general election, over 91% of its eligible citizens were registered** with 67% of them coming out to vote, which is the highest voter turnout in the nation's history. In 1951 in India's first general election, only 17% were registered and 4% of them turned out to vote.

It is, however, **worrying that a third of the eligible voters, a whopping 30 crore people, do not vote.** Among the many reasons, including urban apathy and geographical constraints, **one prominent reason is the inability of internal migrants to vote for different reasons.**

The Election Commission (EC) had earlier formed a "Committee of Officers on Domestic Migrants" to address this issue. The Committee's report **submitted in 2016 suggested a solution in the form of "remote voting".** To further address this serious problem, the EC invited representatives from all recognised national and state political parties to discuss the legal, administrative, and statutory changes to resolve the issue.

What is Remote Voting?

- Remote Voting **refers to all means which allow electors to vote from locations other than the polling station** assigned to the location where they are registered to vote. The remote voting location can be either abroad or from within the country.
- It comprises both electronic voting and non-electronic voting mechanisms.

Why is there a Need for Remote Voting?

- **Enable Migrants to Vote:**
    - 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 had to move out of their village/state.

- **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.**
- **Increasing Registrations of Unorganised Workers:**
  - There are **nearly 10 million migrant workers** registered with the government's **e-SHRAM portal.** If the remote voting project is implemented, it will have far reaching ramifications.
- **Lack of Access to Vote:**
  - This **fundamental right to access the vote is denied to migrant workers** in two ways:
    - First, a voter **may only be enrolled to vote in the constituency** in which they are 'permanent resident'.
    - Second, they can **only access their franchise through in-person voting** at their registered constituency.

What are the Issues with Remote Voting?

- **Security and Integrity:**
  - Remote voting systems are **vulnerable to hacking, fraud, and other forms of manipulation.**
  - This could **lead to unreliable and inaccurate results** and could undermine the integrity of the entire election.
    - Elections always require a high level of security in order to protect voter privacy and the integrity of final results.
- **Accessibility of Remote Voting:**
  - **Not all citizens may have access to the internet** or the necessary technology to participate in online voting.
  - Similarly, **mail-in ballots may not reach certain remote areas** or may not be delivered on time.
  - Furthermore, not all citizens may be able to travel to embassies or consulates to vote.
  - This could lead to disenfranchisement of certain groups of citizens and could skew the election results.
- **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 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.
- **Affect Elections and Campaigning:**
  - In a playing field which is far from level, **remote voting can theoretically provide an added edge to bigger parties** and richer candidates who can campaign across the constituency and beyond.

What is the State of Migrant Population in India?

- According to the **2011 Census,** the number of internal migrants stands at 450 million, a 45% surge from the 2001 census.
- Among these, 26% of the migration (117 million) occurs inter-district within the same state, while 12% of the migration (54 million) occurs inter-state.
- **Both official and independent experts** admit that **this number is underestimated**.
- **Short-term and circular migration could itself amount to 60-65 million migrants**, which, including family members, could approach 100 million in itself. Half of these are inter-state migrants.

What can be the Way Forward?

- **Keeping Election Integrity:**
  - As part of the verification process, an **online voting system must demonstrate that it has maintained election integrity** and that no manipulation has 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 acceptability of stakeholders is an important factor in determining the success of remote voting.
  - For remote voting to be accepted by stakeholders, **it must be seen as a viable and secure alternative to traditional in-person voting.**
  - They need to be convinced that it is a valid and legitimate way of voting and that the results will be accurate and fair.
- **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.
- **Secure Technology:**
  - The **technology used for remote voting must be secure and tamper-proof** to prevent hacking and manipulation of the voting process. This can include measures such as **encryption, multi-factor authentication, and regular security audits.**
- **Voter Verification:**
  - The remote voting process **should include robust voter verification mechanisms** to ensure that only eligible voters are able to cast their ballots.
  - This can include methods such as voter ID verification, biometric authentication, or digital signature.
- **Auditing and Transparency:**
  - The remote voting process **should be auditable and transparent**, with clear rules and procedures in place for verifying the accuracy and integrity of the vote count.
  - This can **include the use of independent auditors** and the publication of detailed vote counts and results.
- **Voter Education:**
  - Voter education and awareness campaigns are **important to ensure that voters understand the process** and can confidently and accurately cast their vote remotely.
- **Legal Framework:**
  - A clear and robust legal framework that **outlines the rules, procedures and responsibilities for remote voting is necessary** to ensure that the process is transparent and accountable.

Drishti Mains Question

Examine the feasibility and challenges of implementing remote voting for migrants in India.