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Enabling Voting Rights for Migrants

Context

- Bihar, with one of the highest out-migration rates in India, is set for elections later this year.
- In the 2024 Lok Sabha polls, the state's voter turnout was only 56%, well below the national average of 66%.
- A key reason for this low turnout is the large migrant population, many of whom could not return home to cast their votes.
- In this context, the present article analyses various options to enable migrants—both inter- and intra-State—to exercise their voting rights, highlighting the need for a multi-pronged approach.

Migration Trends and Risk of Voter Disenfranchisement

- As of 2021, India's migration rate stood at 28.9%, with most migrations occurring for marriage, especially among women.
- However, about 10% of migrants relocate for work, a figure notably higher in States like Bihar.
- With rising labour migration from poorer to richer regions, many citizens risk being disenfranchised unless voting mechanisms for migrants are implemented.
- Although public discussions have taken place and the Election Commission of India proposed a concrete solution in 2024, no unified system to ensure voting access for migrants has yet been adopted.
- Distinct strategies are required for different categories of migrants.

Proposed Measures for Intra-State Migrants

- Intra-State migrants—who make up around 85% of the migrant population—could potentially return home to vote if supported adequately.
- Enforce statutory holidays on polling days to allow workers to vote without wage loss.
- Arrange special bus services before and on polling days to facilitate travel to home constituencies.

Mechanisms to Enable Voting Rights for Inter-State Migrants

- **Need for Tailored Mechanisms**
 - Inter-State migrants, especially those in informal, low-paying jobs, face unique challenges in exercising their voting rights.
 - A one-size-fits-all approach is inadequate; multiple mechanisms must be explored and implemented.

- **Remote Electronic Voting Machines (RVMs)**

- **Pilot Initiative:** In 2023, the ECI introduced **Remote Electronic Voting Machines (RVMs)**, each capable of catering to 72 constituencies.
 - RVMs, developed by BEL and ECIL, enable safe, non-networked remote voting for migrants.
 - It used dynamic ballot displays and barcode-based constituency identification for up to 72 constituencies.
- **Challenges:** Political parties raised concerns about lack of transparency, identification issues, and the model code of conduct.
- **Administrative Hurdles:** The need to pre-register migrants, assess constituency-wise presence, and deploy RVMs across cities makes scaling difficult—especially in Lok Sabha elections.
- Despite flaws, RVMs represent a significant first step. With improvements and consultations, they could eventually benefit many migrants.

- **Postal Ballots**

- **Existing Model:** Used for armed forces personnel.
- **Extension to Migrants:** Would require pre-registration, ballot issuance, and return mechanisms.
- **Feasibility:** Easier to implement than RVMs but still requires major logistical coordination by the ECI.

- **Changing Voting Constituency**

- **Target Group:** Long-term migrants with at least six months of residence.
- **Advantages:** Empowers migrants to influence local governance and push for inclusive policies.
- **Concerns:** May face resistance from local residents but offers long-term democratic integration of migrants.

- **Enrolment of Women Migrants**

- **Key Demographic:** A large number of women migrate post-marriage.
- **Recommendation:** Targeted voter registration drives should be launched to include them in electoral rolls at their new residences.

- A combination of RVMs, postal ballots, constituency-switching, and focused enrolment drives—especially for women—can ensure greater electoral inclusion of India’s vast migrant population.

Conclusion

- Given the diversity among migrants, enabling their voting rights is complex.
 - A mixed approach combining multiple mechanisms is essential to ensure broader participation of both inter- and intra-State migrants.
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A Lofty Concept, a Governor, and Unwanted Controversy

Context

- The **recent controversy in Kerala** surrounding the **placement of a Bharat Mata picture by the Governor at official functions has ignited a significant debate** about constitutional propriety, symbolism, and the role of historical imagery in public institutions.

- At the heart of this issue lies a broader question: **can unofficial, emotionally charged symbols be given official status in a constitutional democracy?**
- This **incident, seemingly minor, raises critical concerns about constitutional decorum**, the limits of gubernatorial authority, and the dangers of political symbolism being conflated with national identity.

An Overview of the Controversy

- The **controversy began when the Governor of Kerala displayed a painting of Bharat Mata**, a female figure clad in a saffron sari, holding a spear, and accompanied by a lion, at official events held in Raj Bhavan.
- The **room, adorned with this image and a brass lamp placed before it**, has become **the site of official functions**.
- The **Governor regularly bows before the picture, offers floral tributes, and lights the lamp**, treating it as an integral ceremonial part of the function.
- **The Kerala government, however, has raised objections on constitutional grounds**, arguing that such a representation of Bharat Mata is not a nationally recognised symbol, unlike the national flag, anthem, or emblem.
- **In protest, the Kerala government has opted out of official events** held under the visual presence of this picture.

Symbolism, The Freedom Struggle, The Constitutional and Legal Standpoint

- **Symbolism and The Freedom Struggle**
 - **Historically, the slogan ‘Bharat Mata ki Jai’ was a potent emotional cry** during the Indian freedom struggle.
 - Chanted at the height of anti-colonial resistance, **it stirred patriotism among freedom fighters**.
 - However, **this powerful slogan operated largely without a consistent or official visual representation of Bharat Mata**.
 - The **emotional resonance was tied more to the abstract idea** of the nation than to a standardised image.
 - While the personification of India as a mother gained traction in the 19th century, **the modern, saffron-clad depiction of Bharat Mata has clear ideological roots**.
 - **Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay first introduced the idea of a motherland** in Anandamath, though his symbol **was Banga Mata, not Bharat Mata**.
 - **Abanindranath Tagore later painted a goddess-like image** that Sister Nivedita popularised as Bharat Mata.
 - Yet, **even during the peak of the national movement, no particular image of Bharat Mata was ever adopted officially**.
- **The Constitutional and Legal Standpoint**
 - The **Indian Constitution provides no legal or symbolic status to any image of Bharat Mata**.
 - While emotional and cultural expressions are part of the democratic ethos, **they cannot override constitutional principles or official protocol**.

- The **picture used by the Governor, although historically grounded, has never been formally adopted** by the nation.
- Furthermore, **it has become prominently associated** with ideological organisations like the **Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)**.
- This **association politicises the symbol**, making its presence in official state functions problematic and potentially exclusionary in a secular and pluralistic nation.
- **B.R. Ambedkar's emphatic declaration in the Constituent Assembly that a Governor has no functions which he can discharge by himself** underlines the constitutional limits on the gubernatorial office.
- The **Governor is bound by the advice of the elected government**, especially in matters concerning the conduct and setting of official functions.
- **Displaying a symbol that is neither nationally endorsed nor inclusive in its appeal breaches the principles of impartiality and secularism** that govern constitutional offices.

The Nehruvian Ideal of Bharat Mata, Nationalism, Imagery, and Modern Governance

• The Nehruvian Ideal of Bharat Mata

- Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru's interpretation of Bharat Mata in The Discovery of India is particularly **instructive**.
- **For Nehru, Bharat Mata was not a deity or a goddess-like figure** but a symbol of the people of India, their hopes, struggles, and collective destiny.
- When asked to explain the cry 'Bharat Mata ki Jai', **Nehru described Bharat Mata as 'these millions of people,' emphasising the humanistic and democratic core of the nation**.
- This **view resonates more closely with the secular and inclusive ideals** enshrined in the Constitution, as opposed to mythologized or sectarian visual symbols.

• Nationalism, Imagery, and Modern Governance

- The **debate reflects a deeper tension in Indian nationalism**: the contrast between inclusive civic nationalism and symbolic ethno-religious nationalism.
- **Gandhi's nationalism was rooted in moral principles**, pluralism, and unity in diversity.
- In contrast, **the use of anthropomorphic images with religious or sectarian connotations tends to exclude rather than unite**, reinforcing ideological boundaries rather than dissolving them.
- The **resurgence of such imagery in contemporary political discourse risks regressing to a form of 19th-century nationalism**, which no longer fits the complex social and cultural fabric of 21st-century India.
- **India's vast diversity cannot be adequately represented by a single image**, particularly one that resembles a specific religious archetype.

Governor vs. Government: A Pattern of Conflict

- **The Kerala episode is not an isolated incident.** Conflicts between Governors and State governments have been a recurring theme in Indian federal politics.

- While **the Supreme Court has laid down clear guidelines limiting gubernatorial discretion, tensions persist**, often due to political differences between the central and state governments.
- **Raj Bhavan, like Rashtrapati Bhavan, is not merely a personal residence**; it is an institution that hosts constitutional functions.
- **Any symbol used in such a space must carry the legitimacy of national endorsement** and the neutrality of state institutions.
- **Allowing personal or ideological symbolism to seep into these spaces weakens institutional neutrality** and provokes avoidable political confrontations.

Conclusion

- **The Raj Bhavan controversy in Kerala is not just about a picture**; it is about constitutional fidelity, democratic symbolism, and institutional responsibility.
- The **Governor, as a constitutional head, must uphold the values of neutrality, inclusiveness**, and legality.
- **Symbols matter**, especially in a country as diverse and sensitive as India.
- When **personal or ideological symbols are given official sanction** without legal basis, **it challenges the very spirit of democratic governance**.

A Lofty Concept, a Governor, and Unwanted Controversy FAQs

Q1. Why did the Kerala government oppose the Bharat Mata picture?

Ans. The Kerala government opposed the Bharat Mata picture because it is not a constitutionally recognized national symbol.

Q2. What was the Governor's action at official functions?

Ans. The Governor placed a picture of Bharat Mata at official functions, bowed before it, offered flowers, and lit a lamp as part of the ceremony.

Q3. How did Nehru define Bharat Mata?

Ans. Nehru defined Bharat Mata as the people of India themselves, not as a divine or anthropomorphic image.

Q4. Is the Governor allowed to act independently in such matters?

Ans. No, the Governor is constitutionally required to act on the advice of the elected state government in such matters.

Q5. What does this controversy highlight?

Ans. This controversy highlights the conflict between ideological symbolism and the constitutional norms that govern public institutions.

Source: **The Hindu**

Trump's Geopolitical Disruption and the Reordering of Eurasia

Context:

- The article explores how US President Donald Trump's foreign policy interventions—ranging from **military action in Iran** to his **controversial stance on NATO** (questioning its relevance)—are reshaping geopolitical dynamics across Eurasia.
- It underscores the **emergence of Germany** as a strategic leader in Europe, **the shifting power structures in the Middle East**, and the **reverberations of US disengagement in the Indo-Pacific**.
- These transformations signal the **birth of a new geopolitical order** with major **implications** for **global and regional actors, including India**.

NATO in Flux - Trump and Transatlantic Tensions:

- **NATO under pressure:** The 32-member NATO summit (in The Hague) is marked by growing uncertainty about the alliance's future.
- **Trump's challenge:** His repeated **questioning of NATO's relevance** and demands for **increased European defence spending** are pushing **Europe to reassess its security dependencies**.
- **Shift in leadership focus:** With US reliability under question, **Germany** is emerging as a **new strategic anchor** within Europe.

Germany's Strategic Reorientation - From Reluctance to Leadership:

- **Historical backdrop:** From a constrained post-WWII role to a reunified "**economic giant, geopolitical dwarf**."
- **Turning point (2022):**
 - Chancellor (former) Olaf Scholz's declaration of a **Zeitenwende** — a historic turning point — marked the beginning of **Germany's strategic reorientation**.
 - Russia's **Ukraine invasion** compelled Germany to allocate €100 billion to modernise the **Bundeswehr** (German armed forces) and embrace NATO's 2% GDP defence spending goal.
- **Leadership under Merz:** Chancellor Friedrich Merz is consolidating this transformation by actively leading NATO's initiatives and deploying combat-ready troops in Lithuania.

US Middle East Strategy - Disruption and Normalisation:

- **Military and diplomatic shocks:** Trump **bombed** Iranian nuclear sites while facilitating temporary **ceasefires** and exploring the "**Cyrus Accords**" to normalise Israel-Iran ties.
- **Abraham Accords legacy:** His earlier term saw **Arab-Israel normalisation**; and current strategies aim to deepen these changes, potentially involving Saudi Arabia and Iran.
- **Regional implications:** The **weakening of Iran and shifting alliances** are recalibrating the security dynamics of the Middle East.

Indo-Pacific Resonance - Anxiety Amid US Disengagement:

- **Absence at NATO summit:** No representatives from Japan, South Korea, Australia, or New Zealand were present—signalling **drift in Asia-Europe security linkages**.
- **US commitment in doubt:** Trump’s reluctance to label Russia as a threat and his non-affirmation of **Article 5 of Washington Treaty (collective defence)** has unsettled US allies in Asia.
- **Need for strategic autonomy:** US allies in Asia may pursue more **independent** and **regional** security arrangements.

Rethinking Eurasian Security – A Structural Transformation:

- **Security needs political recalibration:** More defence spending is not enough; countries must **reimagine their regional partnerships**.
- **Signs of systemic change:** From the Ukraine war to strained NATO cohesion and Iran’s internal turmoil, **the geopolitical landscape of Eurasia is shifting dramatically**.
- **Emergence of new regional poles:** A more assertive Germany, Middle East realignments, and Indo-Pacific autonomy represent **a tripartite reordering** of Eurasia.

India’s Strategic Positioning in a Reordered Eurasia:

- **Multi-regional engagement:** India straddles the Indo-Pacific, Middle East, and Europe, giving it a **unique strategic advantage**.
- **Policy diversification:** New Delhi is deepening ties with **Europe**, engaging with the **Middle East** across divides, stabilizing ties with **China** and strengthening relationships with **ASEAN, Japan, Australia, and South Korea**.
- **Balancing act with Trump’s America:** Even as India partners with the US, it is building the capacity to navigate an uncertain world order marked by power transitions.

Conclusion:

- **The global order** is witnessing a **tectonic shift** as Trump’s disruptive strategies force Eurasia into a structural recalibration.
- With Germany asserting leadership in Europe, the Middle East moving toward regional balancing, and the Indo-Pacific exploring strategic autonomy, **the era of US-led security guarantees is being fundamentally questioned**.
- For **India**, this moment offers both **challenge and opportunity**—requiring nimble diplomacy and robust strategic foresight.

Trump’s Geopolitical Disruption and the Reordering of Eurasia FAQs

Q1. How is Germany repositioning itself within NATO amidst evolving European security dynamics?

Ans. Germany is transitioning from a “reluctant power” to a “security provider” by modernising its military, increasing defence spending, and taking frontline leadership roles within NATO.

Q2. What strategic implications does Trump’s Middle East policy have for regional balance and alliances?

Ans. Trump's policy, marked by bombing Iran and expanding the Abraham Accords, is shifting regional power balances by weakening Iran and encouraging Arab-Israel rapprochement.

Q3. Why is the notion of "strategic autonomy" gaining prominence in Europe and the Indo-Pacific?

Ans. Doubts over US commitment under Trump are compelling allies in Europe and Asia to enhance defence capabilities and consider independent security strategies.

Q4. In what ways is the Indo-Pacific affected by shifting US foreign policy priorities?

Ans. The absence of key Indo-Pacific allies from the NATO summit and declining US engagement are prompting regional actors to rethink security cooperation frameworks.

Q5. How is India adapting to the emerging geopolitical order in Eurasia?

Ans. India is diversifying strategic partnerships across Europe, the Middle East, and the Indo-Pacific while maintaining balanced engagement with the US to safeguard its interests

Source: IE

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