



## The next step in democratic evolution is overdue

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**(Mains GS 2 : Functions and responsibilities of the Union and the States, issues and challenges pertaining to the federal structure, devolution of powers and finances up to local levels and challenges therein.)**

### **Context:**

- The human body, like a nation, is composed of structures and processes which are held together by a bony skeleton.
- When vital processes become weak, the body becomes unhealthy even if the frame is strong.

### **Elements of a democracy:**

- A democratic nation, or any nation, is also composed of structures — its constitution and laws.
- What distinguishes democratic nations from authoritarian ones is the liveliness of citizens' participation in the governance of their nation.
- In healthy democracies, citizens participate effectively in the shaping of the policies and laws by which they are governed.
- Democratic constitutions provide elected assemblies for citizens' representatives to shape new policies and pass laws.

### **Needs open-mindedness:**

- Open-minded deliberation in these forums is necessary to meet the requirements of democracy.

- It is also essential for finding good solutions for systemic problems which must be considered from many perspectives.
- When these forums become chambers for close-minded partisan politics, they cannot find solutions to the complex, systemic problems that all nations must address in the 21st century: climate change, historical inequities, increasing economic inequalities, and violence brewing with discontents within.
- The U.S. houses of Congress seem ham-strung by party politics; debates in the Indian Parliament have degenerated into floor battles; and, citizens of many European democracies are dismayed by the performance of their elected institutions.

### **Democratic deliberations:**

- Constitutions, elections, and assemblies are not all that a democracy needs to function.
- Democracies have life from what happens outside the elected chambers and what happens between elections.
- People who belong to different political factions, practise different religions, and have different histories within the history of their nation, must listen to each other, and learn to live democratically together every day of their lives.
- Therefore, what healthy democracies need most of all are processes of democratic deliberations among citizens themselves.

### **Widening fissures:**

- The cracks in the Indian nation dividing 'people like us' from 'people not like us', are widening in institutions at the top as well as in relationships on the ground.
- Majoritarian electoral systems of democracy will harden these divisions in India, as they are in the United States.
- Therefore, stronger processes are urgently required for democratic discourses amongst citizens themselves to bind the national fabric before it frays further.

### **Echo chambers created:**

- The media, which used to provide space for diverse perspectives to be heard, is divided along partisan lines.
- And social media, touted as a saviour of democracy by enabling citizens to freely listen to many points of view, has turned out to be a hardener of divisions.
- Smart algorithms have created echo chambers of people who like each other, and who do not listen to those in other chambers, and lob hate bombs at each other across the walls.
- There is little room for thoughtful, non-partisan deliberations among citizens.

### **Taking a new step:**

- It is time for the next step in the evolution of democratic institutions.
- Kalypso Nicolaidis of the School of Transnational Governance, European University Institute, says, “Consent of the governed is about more than periodic elections or referenda.
- The process of deepening the reach of democracy remains the same as it has been for the last 200 years: a struggle to expand the franchise.
- This time around, it is a franchise that does not necessarily express itself through the right to vote in periodic elections, but rather through widespread inclusion in the political process in all its forms.”
- A civil society movement suggested a solution in the form of a permanent transnational forum for citizens’ participation and deliberation.

### **The missing dialogues:**

- Human societies are complex systems, composed of many formal institutions, and many processes of interactions among people.
- Listening like breathing is a basic process which nowadays is forgotten especially to “People Not Like Us”.
- In schools we are taught how to speak well and win elocution contests and debates.
- There are no lessons in how to listen well, and no prizes for the best listeners.
- We listen only to “what” others say; we do not listen to understand “why” they believe what they do.

### **Dialogue not debates:**

- People stop listening even while another is speaking, mentally preparing our ripostes to win a debate but dialogues to understand are not debates to win.
- Dialogues are explorations of complex issues by combining the knowledge of diverse people.
- Monocultures of thought can be as sterile as monocultures in Nature.
- Diversity in the composition of the participants is essential for ensuring that complex issues are fully understood and new insights can emerge.
- However, diversity of opinions can create cacophonies unless the deliberations are managed well.
- Thus, citizens’ meetings, online or offline, must be properly designed and professionally facilitated to enable all points-of-view to be listened to for new insights to emerge.

### **Conclusion:**

- The time has come to learn to listen well, not just speak well; and to conduct dialogues, not debates.
- The assemblies of Emperors Ashoka and Akbar conducted centuries ago in India provide some role models.
- The soft power of India, the world's most richly diverse nation perhaps, will increase when it returns to lead in the evolution of institutions for citizens' participation in democratic governance.