

Sitalkuchi Incident - Legitimate Use of Force Vs Citizens' Consent

Why in news?

The Central Industrial Security Force (CISF), deployed to ensure orderly conduct of polls, resorted to shooting (on April 10, 2021) at the polling station in Sitalkuchi, West Bengal, resulting in the death of four members of a mob.

What happened?

- The security forces were gheraoed by the mob.
- They did it with the implicit support of the regional government.
- The government there had objected to the dispatch of paramilitary forces as mandated by the independent Election Commission of India.
- Moreover, the four individuals who were shot by the security forces belong to the minority community.
- The Chief Minister of West Bengal has already labelled the episode as “genocide”.
- Both these facts add an additional, dangerous dimension to the incident.

What are the implications?

- The deployment of paramilitary forces and the phased nature of Indian elections to facilitate the movement of troops from one location to another is a routine activity so far.
- This can no longer be seen as unproblematic.
- The shooting broke the spell of the symbolism of authority.
- It thereby, broke a vital link in the causal chain that connects force and consent, and of both in the making of legitimacy.
- The incident raises some key questions that are fundamentally linked to the democratic theory:
- Is orderly rule the outcome of a social contract, with individuals freely choosing to set up an authoritative ruler?
 - Or, is the existence of order a precondition for people to be able to make their choices freely?
- Is the presence of armed security forces to reinforce civil authorities a denial of democracy?
 - Or are armed forces the last defence of democracy against anarchy,

disorder and individual or collective violence?

How does the security infrastructure of the country work?

- In order to promote and protect the security of the state, territorial integrity and orderly rule in general, the Ministry of Home Affairs of India has been accorded vast resources.
- These are impressive in terms of their military strength, budget, and personnel.
- Also, being headquartered in the national capital, it has proximity to the nerve centre of the state.
- Since Independence, this security infrastructure has evolved with the times and innovated new strategies and linkages.
- Under the Allocation of Business Rules, nine agencies are listed as components of the Ministry's order-keeping capacity.
- There are: Assam Rifles, Border Security Forces, Indo-Tibetan Police, Sashastra Seema Bal, Central Industrial Security Force, Central Reserve Police Force, National Security Guard, Civil Defence and Home Guards.
- The capacity of these forces is reinforced by a network of intelligence agencies.
- These are coordinated by several committees responsible for inter-ministerial and inter-federal coordination and accountable to Parliament.

How different are paramilitary forces?

- Paramilitary forces are organised on the lines of the military.
- But, there is a radical distinction between their respective functions.
- The main task of the military is to fight foreign enemies of the state.
- On the other hand, the insurgents, unruly mobs, and militants with whom the paramilitary forces engage are actually citizens of India.
- They are legally entitled to due process of the law.
- The main strategic goal of the paramilitary in this case is to contain the rebellion.
- They should discipline the mobs and wean the insurgents and rebels away from anti-state violence.
- It also has the responsibility to persuade the rebels to get back into the normal political process.

What is unique to post-colonial states in this regard?

- Force plays a residual role in all democracies.
- But the rulers in postcolonial democracies face a dilemma.
- Not enough force would be self-defeating; too much force might make the

system tip over into authoritarianism, or worse.

- Postcolonial states, in contrast with their peers in long-established democracies, face a special problem with regard to orderly rule.
- As a legacy of the anti-colonial movement, the distrust of forceful action by the state runs deep in the political culture of modern India.
- The same mistrust of force leads to the routine protest against the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, 1958.
- The Act permits military authorities to “assist the civilian rule” in areas considered “disturbed”.

What does the Sitalkuchi incident indicate?

- As seen above, the task before paramilitary forces is multiple.
- It requires well-drilled troops capable of taking on imminent danger, as well as winning “hearts and minds” through dialogue and negotiation.
- They should also extend what welfare and relief they can, within their limited resources.
- The shooting in West Bengal thus indicates the breakdown of this chain, thereby having consequences far beyond a specific regional election.
- It sheds light on the serious problem that the Indian state is up against:
 - justifying the forceful presence of the paramilitary in Kashmir, central and eastern India, affected by Maoist violence, and pockets of the Northeast where insurgency is still alive
- Legitimate order signified by the symbolic presence of security forces is the essence of state-ness.
- In all, true statesmanship lies in striking the right balance between force and consent, and taking responsibility for the choices made.

Source: The Indian Express

