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EPW – FEBRUARY 2019

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1. BREWING POISON AND DEATH

What is the issue?

- The 116 deaths in UP and Uttarakhand due to imbibing illicit liquor have once again foregrounded the issue of total prohibition versus sensible consumption of safe alcohol.

What do studies reveal?

- Studies have shown that current drinking practices disproportionately raise the risk of diseases and injuries in low-income and lower-middle-income countries as compared to high-income countries due to factors like differences in the type of alcohol consumed, among others.
- Invariably, it is the very poor and the near destitute who bear the fatal consequences of consumption of spurious liquor.
- However, the governments take the easy way out by offering compensation rather than ensuring safe alcohol.

What are the consequences of a total prohibition?

- The debate over the efficacy of prohibition in India has been a long and contentious one.
- That prohibition engenders parallel production and sale of illicit and cheap liquor is well known.

- Politicians, especially those in power, find it easy to ban alcohol rather than take other more tedious steps to ensure its regulation and quality.
- It is easy to take a moralistic attitude as well as the claim that since the families of the drinkers suffer, a ban is called for.
- **The Class factor:** While the economically better-off sections can afford to procure supplies of branded liquor during prohibition, it is the poor, those who cannot afford even the government permitted “country liquor,” who turn to the spurious liquor industry.
- The liquor that kills consumers almost immediately is made stealthily so as not to attract taxes.
- The lack of hygiene is the most negligible aspect as compared to what goes in the brew: methanol in large quantities, battery acid, and old leather items, among others.
- Any of these can prove to be the fatal cause depending on their quantity and condition and can lead to disabilities, including blindness.

What is the government's response?

- While the UP government suspects that there exists a conspiracy angle to the recent deaths, those who prefer to



issue prohibition are also wilfully turning a blind eye to reality.

- In fact, in one state even made it “more difficult” for the approved country liquor bars to operate, citing concern for consumers.

What should be done?

- All the aforementioned moves convey cynicism rather than concern for poor consumers.
- To expect that alcohol should not be imbibed is an unrealistic expectation and wisdom lies in ensuring that quality control and regulations are implemented.
- Instead of taking the politically expedient and administratively easy way out, governments must go the extra mile.
- The police must crack down on criminal gangs of bootleggers, and strict enforcement of rules and quality control must take precedence.
- Since alcohol is a state subject, every state government must put in place measures that are well-thought-out and ensure their implementation.
- The TN state government holds wholesale monopoly for sale in alcohol since 2001, and from 2014–15 began selling low-cost liquor too through a government agency is an example worth emulating.
- Only by dropping their cynically moralistic–hypocritical stance and

replacing it with genuine concern and measures for poor alcohol consumers will the government be able to prevent these mass deaths.

2. DATA IN PERIL?

Why in news?

- The resignations of 2 independent members of the National Statistical Commission (NSC) have, once again, brought to the fore the question of autonomy of public institutions in India.
- The autonomy of the statistical institutions is a must to ensure the credibility of official data.

How the government is undermining the statistical institutions?

- The NSC was created in 2006 not only to generate credible official statistics but also to see that such data is put in public domain.
- But, such a fundamental requirement, as the resigned members suggest, has not been met.
- The government has chosen not to publish the **NSSO’s Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS)** report for 2017–2018, disregarding its approval by the NSC.
- The members who resigned had also expressed their concerns about the NITI Aayog for its lack of consultation with the NSC and for sidelining the pre-eminent statistical institution.



- However, this was not the first instance in which the NITI Aayog has sought to undermine the effectiveness and autonomy of the NSC.
 - The NITI Aayog and the CSO had released the new official data on backdated GDP series with 2011–12 as the base year, in November 2018, bypassing the NSC.
 - It also sought to overturn the report of its subcommittee, to show better growth performance of the current government in comparison to the previous one.
 - This was considerably different from the figures provided in the NSC report.
 - This move had also drawn a lot of criticism from experts, who called out the NITI Aayog and the CSO for tinkering with official statistics.
 - In the case of the NSSO report, its release would be of significance as the survey was conducted to provide reliable data on the employment scenario in the country, especially after the implementation of demonetisation and the introduction of the GST.
- Why has the government withheld its publication?**
- **Worrisome employment outlook:** The general contention is that the report portrays a dismal picture of the employment scenario in the country, contrary to the government's claims.
 - This was confirmed by the publication of leaked data from the withheld NSSO report by the media, which brought to light the gravity of the employment crisis in the country.
 - According to the leaked report, in 2017–18, the unemployment rate in the country as per the usual status (the activity status of persons on the basis of the reference period of a year) was at 6.1%, while as per the current weekly status (CWS), the unemployment rate stood at an alarming 8.9%.
 - Further, the unemployment rate among the youth (between the ages of 15 and 29) was considerably high.
 - But, the labour force participation rate (LFPR) was low at 36.9%, indicating that more people were withdrawing from the workforce, especially women.
 - The high rate of unemployment, together with a low LFPR, however, does not bode well for a growing economy like India, which has a large demographic dividend.
 - **Fear of the Opposition:** It may be the case that the NSSO report is only in its “draft” stage; however, there is no denying the fact that the release and dissemination of the report would reveal the burgeoning job crisis.



- This would, as expected, enable the opposition to counter the claims of employment creation that the government has been making.
- **Upcoming elections:** The prime electoral promise that the ruling party had made in 2014, about the creation of 10 million jobs.
- The publication of data would, on the other hand, suggest that the unemployment record has been the worst in the last 45 years.
- It would also prove to be disastrous for the government in the run-up to the general election this year.

What is the significance of the report?

- The report and data on unemployment have implications for good politics and evaluative value for robust economic analysis.
- Such statistical information would help the governing class adopt a more informed policy for the benefit of the larger public.
- It would also help enable investors and businesses plan their economic activities.
- Nonetheless, what is clear is that by bypassing conventions and overruling the decisions of the NSC, the NITI Aayog has disregarded the autonomy of the statistical institution, and that, by doing so, has adversely affected the credibility of the official statistics.

3. THE VACCINE CONUNDRUM

What is the issue?

- Vaccination is treated as a public health intervention for its ability to develop herd immunity.
- However, the newer vaccinations are transforming the very nature of intervention from a “preventive” to a “promotive” one, and from disease-specific to strain-specific one, at a time when population prevalence of the parent diseases is uncertain.

What is the difference between prevention and promotion?

- Prevention in public health is defined as a “call for action in advance, based on knowledge of natural history and the social context of disease occurrence in order to make it improbable that the disease will progress subsequently.
- Whereas health “promotion” is defined as “measures that are not directed to a given disease or disorder, but serve to increase overall health and well-being”.

How are the issues with the new vaccines?

- **Strain-specific:** Newer vaccines intend to safeguard populations from one subcategory of a disease caused by a specific infectious agent.
- For instance, the Hib (Haemophilus influenzae type b) vaccine can protect only from Hib induced influenza,



though all forms of influenza leading to meningitis and pneumonia are usually projected as the one targeted by the vaccine.

- The important aspect to note here is that not all influenza is caused due to Hib bacterium and not all Hib induced influenza leads to meningitis.
- In other words, for each newer vaccine introduced, there exist a “parent” disease of which only one subcategory will be prevented through the vaccine.
- **Lack of population prevalence data:** Population prevalence of those diseases for which newer vaccines are introduced are either unknown or indicates a very low prevalence.
- For instance, the population prevalence of Hib influenza is estimated to be around 0.007%.
- Most of the estimates rely on specific hospital-based data to represent the population parameter, which is a serious methodological error in public health, especially in a context where the utilisation of healthcare service is low and random.
- It is a well-known fact that community-based prevalence of any disease will be higher than the hospital-based prevalence as not all cases from the population will get reported in healthcare facilities as the latter depends on the extent of utilisation.

- It is the inadequacies of population-based prevalence that poses a major challenge while evaluating mass immunisation programs.

What are the factors that determine Herd Immunity?

- Herd immunity is dependent upon three major factors-the reproduction of disease in a population, the vaccine efficacy and the population covered & the extent of “natural immunity” prevalent in a population towards the said disease .
- This threshold coverage necessary for attaining herd immunity is generally considered greater in the case of airborne infections as compared to vector-borne infections.
- Another important aspect which is not given adequate consideration is the extent of natural immunity that populations acquire by getting exposed to the same microbes or closely similar species of microbes during their life course.
- For instance, a study in Kerala population among antenatal women shows that the prevalence of antibody of rubella among unvaccinated women was 94.3% and among adolescent girls, it was reported around 68.3%.



What are the potential inferences possible?

- The inference drawn by the study was that this is a marker of prior exposure to rubella virus of the pregnant women and hence posed a risk of getting congenital rubella syndrome (CRS) by their children.
- However, it is also possible to argue that if there are already antibodies developed against rubella by unvaccinated women, there can be a possibility of “natural immunity” that exists in the society.
- As the study also reported that all the respondents were free of any specific clinical symptoms, it indicates that the population was free of rubella.
- This feature of natural immunity that exists among populations needs serious investigations, as this could be another important factor that shall decide the need for newer vaccines at a population level.
- Instead, using data on the high prevalence of antibodies among the unvaccinated population as a justification for introducing rubella vaccine by claiming prior exposure to the disease is unethical, as the outcome expected to achieve after immunisation is also a form of immunity (acquired).
- Scholars have also cautioned that a vaccination coverage lower than the

threshold coverage necessary for rubella control can lead to an increase in the cases rather than its reduction.

- This can only be monitored when the baseline information indicating the current population prevalence of rubella disease is available.

What should be done?

- The success of public health interventions like immunisation needs to be evaluated based on an interdisciplinary approach guided by the principles of public health, namely social justice, population, and prevention.
- This calls for a critical engagement with the logic of introduction of vaccines from biomedical, public health, economic and ethical perspective.
- A critical inquiry and engagement that address different realms need to be considered before introducing any vaccine as a mass immunisation program for the nation.
- Instead, the current challenge is that there is an inherent assumption among policymakers that biomedical logic (induce immunity among **individuals**) and public health logic (develop **herd immunity**) are similar and any critical inquiry towards vaccine from the latter perspective is generally dismissed as if it is triggered



by the anti-vaccine lobby based on misconceptions towards vaccines.

4. ANDAMAN TRIBES

Oscillating between Isolation and Doles

What is the issue?

- Oscillating between isolation and doles, the tribals of Andaman and Nicobar Islands face an imperious policy vacuum in the face of an onslaught from a gratuitous development paradigm, the aspirations of the settler population and the demands of the escalating tourism industry.

What are the various issues of the islanders?

- **Dwindling population:** In 1911, the **Great Andamanese** tribe had dwindled to 209, owing to syphilis introduced by the British and the penal settlers, and the birth rate had become excessively low.
- **Epidemics:** The opening up of the forest camps at Stewart Sound Islands certainly hastened the extinction of the Andamanese by introducing contagious diseases, especially influenza.
- **Substance abuse:** Post-independence, with no palpable change in the approach of the government, the remainder of the tribe, which had been almost decimated, was stricken with substance abuse.

- **Culture of Dependency:** As the government's policy was to assimilate the community and provide assistance, they were recipients of various altruistic measures that they welcomed, but ultimately became **dependent** upon.
- The chance of their survival in the absence of these doles is now questionable.
- **Deforestation & competition:** After the Little Andaman island was settled with refugees during the 1960s, the tropical forest, the primary resource base of the **Onges**, saw a large-scale clearing, pushing them to a corner and forcing them to lead a sedentary lifestyle with welfare measures doled out to them.
- Today, they face intense competition from the settlers in their hunt for pigs.
- Schooling for the Onge children has also been initiated, but what is taught lacks any understanding of their time and space.
- **Exploitation:** There were many cases of exploitation of the Jarawas through friendly contact expeditions as well as by poachers.
- And, there are also stories that settlers used to boast of about killing and wounding the Jarawas, and damaging their huts, and plundering exploits.



- The Great Andaman Trunk Road, which cuts across the Jarawa Tribal Reserve has seen conflicts of a different nature.
- On the west coast, interactions with fisherfolk and poachers increased.
- And on the fringes of villages, illegal barter of contraband continues between the poachers and the Jarawas, which is nearly impossible to check with the present mechanism.
- **Lack of proper implementation:** Had the policy of “**eyes on, hands off**” implemented in its true spirit, the incident where an American National was allegedly killed by Sentinelese tribes could have been averted.
- **Habitat loss :** Besides, the presence of defence forces and construction of a road crossing through the **habitat of the Shompen tribes** are other issues of contention.
- **Top- Down approach:** One clear challenge before the tribes of the Andamans is the island development plans, over which the indigenous tribes have no control, but are caught up within this conflict of power with the non-indigenes.
- **Tourism:** Another major issue is the flourishing tourism without a proper plan or place for the tribes in the whole scheme of things.

What should be done?

- **Sensitisation of both the tribes and outsiders:** A comprehensive policy for the tribes with sufficient attention to its implementation, and wide sensitisation about their history, culture and lifestyle among the settlers has been due for a long time.
- The settlers as well as the tourists, need to be sensitised about the vulnerability they face, and the resource depletion needs to be addressed through proper research-based interventions.
- **Establishing museums:** The proposal to set up a museum by of Andaman Nicobar Tribal Research Institute (ANTRI) could help in checking the human safari to a large extent by providing sufficient knowledge-based exposure on the culture, nature, and history of the tribes to the visiting tourists as well as the settlers, who remain totally ignorant about the tribes that live around them.
- **From dying cultures to continuing cultures :**From the concept of “**dying cultures,**” it is imperative to not just preserve but also manifest the tribal culture of the islands as “**continuing cultures**” through such a museum as proposed by ANTRI.
- **Empowerment:** Whereas the protection of the tribes from external



dangers is important, the larger issue is that of their empowerment through research-based interventions.

- The ill-informed decisions taken at higher levels do more harm than good.
- There is a need to build bridges of understanding and mutual respect among the tribal and non-tribal communities of the islands, which would be of great importance for the younger generation of the islands in the long run.

5. CAN SOCIAL MEDIA BE DEMOCRATISED?

What is the issue?

- Constructed as a marketplace of views, social media tends to favour privilege, and the privileged.

What is the role of social media in the public sphere?

- The digital sphere has fundamentally altered the public sphere in India.
- Now, the process of “news gathering” has witnessed a structural shift, as traditional media—that is, print and television—and new media are increasingly becoming inter-dependent.
- Trump’s election to the US presidency uncovered a few ways (campaign manipulation, filter bubbles, harassment, trolling, and fake trends) in which social media could be weaponised to influence an election.

- Facebook recently announced changes to how advertisements relating to political parties would appear on users’ newsfeed, while Twitter is trying to monitor accounts and hate speech more closely.
- Even the Election Commission of India has drawn up certain instructions in relation to the use of social media by political parties in the interest of transparency and creating a level playing field in the elections.
- But, these measures are ad hoc responses that do not adequately address the magnitude of the problem.

What does it really mean to create a level playing field in social media?

- Scholarship on media tells us that digital democracy is a **myth** because of its unequal architecture, one that offers the possibility of transcending traditional structures of privilege while retaining and replicating the oppressive structures.
- When anonymous private entities with high capital can pay for more space for their opinions, they are effectively buying a louder voice.
- Not every voice on the internet commands the same kind of audience.
- Voices from the grass roots do not have the volume to compete with the kind of resources that larger political



parties can employ for mobilising the vote bank.

- These nebulous connections within the architecture of social media platforms have enabled political parties to meet the dual goals of profitability and popularity.
- The focus is restricted to the promotion of content that generates more user engagement, regardless of how inflammatory the content may be.
- **Marketplace of views:** What is often being forgotten is that social media is not an ideology or an ideal or a moral institution, but a product built by companies to make profits.
- Masquerading as democratic, the operating principle of these platforms is not democratic, but commercial and is, in essence, what can be called a “marketplace of views.”
- This has resulted in the polarisation of political discourse in the digital sphere.
- The anonymity that the internet lends was supposed to aid freedom of speech and, thereby, help democracy thrive.
- **Fake news:** But, political elites have managed to design a grim **nexus between anonymity, capital, and technology to influence public opinion**, promote political agendas, and disseminate fake and misleading news and information.

- This nexus does not bode well for the health of electoral politics, and definitely not in the “largest democracy in the world.”

What lies ahead?

- Correcting these problems will be self-defeating for both social media companies and political parties.
- Now, more than ever, there is a need to understand how the internet is affecting our political lives so that a new legal regime can be formulated that ensures that our right to speak freely is held above all and the companies and political parties are held accountable.

6. WORKERS IN THEIR OWN RIGHT

Why in news?

- For the greater part of February, over 2 lakh anganwadi workers have been agitating for their demands in Maharashtra.
- In Bihar, cooks under the mid-day meal scheme (MDMS) in schools also went on a long strike in January demanding a pay hike.

Why is it significant?

- These anganwadi workers and cooks are among the “scheme workers” across the country who bring the central and state governments’ social welfare schemes to the people.



- In effect, they are the ambassadors and implementers of these schemes, many of which are flagship schemes of the respective governments.
- Despite their crucial role in welfare services, scheme workers continue to struggle for recognition of their rights.

What is the role of scheme workers in development & welfare?

- All across India, these scheme workers provide core services in basic areas like health, education, and nutrition.
- Termed as “volunteers,” they are poorly paid, carry a heavy workload, and are not eligible for any benefits that government employees get.
- There are around 27 lakh anganwadi workers and helpers, predominantly women, under the ICDS, a similar number under the MDMS, around 10 ASHA workers and urban social health activists (USHAs), and around three lakh auxiliary nurse midwives (ANMs), all under the National Health Mission.
- Considering their job descriptions and scope, it is obvious that this female-dominated workforce performs a crucial role involving the welfare of marginalised sections.
- They are the “**face**” and “**hands**” of social welfare schemes that cover pregnant women, children, the ill, and the malnourished.

What are their concerns?

- **Workload:** Their unions point out that, despite their workload, they are also expected to carry out government surveys and data collection drives.
- **Low Wages:** However, not only are these workers not considered government employees, they are also paid “honorariums” that are disproportionate to the responsibilities they shoulder.
- The unions have also pointed out that the various budgetary cuts in different schemes add to their insecurity and their burden of responsibilities.
- The anganwadi workers’ unions also allege that the government is attempting to close down those anganwadi centres that have less than 25 beneficiaries.

What are their demands?

- **Recognition:** The demands of the workers currently on strike include the implementation of the ILC’s recommendations that central government scheme “volunteers” should be recognised as workers, get minimum wages and pensions, and have the right to bargain collectively,
- **Social Security:** They also demand coverage under the Employees’ Provident Fund and Employees’ State Insurance schemes, adequate financial allocation for the schemes,



commensurate infrastructure, and the stemming of attempts to privatise some of these schemes by involving non-government entities to implement them.

What lies ahead?

- These workers have pointed out that their work is undervalued and their demands have been ignored because their work is treated in the same way as all “women’s work” is treated.
- The attempts to privatise and cut budgetary allocations to these schemes are also part of the state’s larger move to divest itself of its core responsibilities.
- The struggle of these workers, therefore, must be recognised as going beyond just the economic demands of a section of workers.

7. CLIMATE CHANGE AND THE POOR

What is the issue?

- Climate change is an emergency that has been affecting the planet and its inhabitants, human, plant, and animal, in big and small ways.
- However, it has affected the poor disproportionately and has had a greater impact on the poor and developing nations.

What are the recent developments?

- The earlier widely held belief that climate change is a gradual, slow-

moving phenomenon has been belied by an October 2018 report by the IPCC of the UN, Global Warming of 1.5°C.

- The report estimates that “even a 1.5 degree increase could push tens of millions of people into poverty.”

How climate change disproportionately affects the poor?

- **Scarcity of resources:** With climate change, people face shortage of water and food, resulting in increased competition to access these basic necessities.
- This increases the chances of the intensification of existing conflicts and also creates new ones.
- The water crisis in Cape Town began in 2015, and the city continues to live under the threat of becoming the 1st major city in the world to run out of water.
- However, the poorer neighbourhoods in the city have not only been dealing with reduced access to water for years now, but are more likely to face the brunt of the crisis.
- In the Democratic Republic of Congo, shifts in the timing and patterns of rainfall have led to lower food production and greater competition on arable land, increasing ethnic tensions and conflicts in the country.
- Such conflicts affect the poor the most, and further lead to an increase



in poverty and displacement, pushing people into a vicious trap.

- **Poverty and malnutrition:** Frequent floods and droughts caused by climate change lead to food shortages and rise in food prices.
- This causes hunger and malnutrition, the effects of which are felt most strongly by the poor.
- According to the **World Food Program's 2018 Global Report on Food Crises**, "climate disasters triggered food crises across 23 countries, mostly in Africa, with shocks such as drought leaving more than 39 million people in need of urgent assistance."
- **Climate change induced displacement:** According to the **2018 Global Report on Internal Displacement**, "30.6 million new internal displacements associated with conflict and disasters were recorded in 2017 across 143 countries and territories."
- The report identifies floods and storms as the primary causes of displacement, leading to 8.6 million and 7.5 million displacements, respectively.
- **Climate refugees** can be found all over the world, displaced by coastal flooding in Dhaka, by hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico, or due to the

desertification of Lake Chad in West Africa.

- It is estimated that the number of people seeking asylum in the European Union due to climate change would see a 28% increase by 2100.

What is the scenario in India?

- India ranks fifth globally for the losses it has experienced due to climate change.
- **Farm crisis:** Around 800 million people in the country live in villages and depend on agriculture for their livelihoods.
- With at least 50% of the farmlands in the country being rain-fed, changes in the pattern of the monsoons will affect their livelihoods the most.
- Empirical evidence suggests that climate change has led to a decline in wheat yields and has lowered the productivity of workers.
- **Lack of access to credit:** Small farmers lack access to credit and other means of insurance, which makes them more vulnerable to climate change.
- Thus, climate change will make the existing problems of poverty, malnutrition, and farmer suicides worse.



What lies ahead?

- At the **Katowice Climate Conference** in 2018, India called out the developed nations for reneging on their promises to provide developing countries with the financial support to combat climate change.
- It is the poor and developing countries that are being affected by the effects of climate change in the worst way, while having contributed next to nothing in creating the crisis of - climate change.
- And, it is these very countries that are being left behind both in terms of growth and development and mitigating and adapting to the effects of climate change as they try to juggle their commitments to both.
- If steps are not taken quickly, climate change has the potential to reverse decades of growth and development globally, and particularly in India.

8. POLITICAL DYNASTY CASTS A SHADOW ON DEMOCRACY

What is the issue?

- Dynastic formation in politics is an underlying recurring paradox of the Indian democracy.

What's the relationship between family and democracy?

- Democracy acquires its egalitarian orientation through the radical separation of enlightened individual

citizens from conservative and, hence, constraining family ties.

- A citizen who is committed to the public cause or an enlightened individual who accesses the democratic space in order to produce excellence as a public good, will refuse to rely on caste, religion, gender, or on family patronage, which is the result of accumulated material resources such as wealth, political contacts and human resources, including party workers.
- For such autonomous individuals, family patronage becomes a burden because it denies them self-definition which is considered as a genuine democratic practice.

How dynasty politics affects the power structure of society?

- **Decision making:** In contemporary electoral politics, it is the privileged families that have become the main reference point for those aspiring to make their career as successful politicians.
- Individual families or extended families seem to enjoy pre-eminence over deciding and regulating the decision-making bodies in electoral democracy.
- **Distribution of power:** Such families exercise control over the distribution of positions, particularly in the run-up to and during elections.



- Such families also enjoy complete control by exercising de facto power over the party's legislators.
- They do so by either disciplining those legislators who do not follow their instructions or appointing other legislators to top positions in the party or in public institutions.
- Analogically, such privilege is akin to the cue stick that billiard players use to move the ball into the board's pockets.
- Power does not flow freely; it is distributed by the family not as entitlement but as reward that is given in lieu of the loyalty expressed for the family.
- **Neo- feudalism:** It is a new form of feudalism, which ironically is being followed by those who are the victims of the very politics that is against the true spirit of egalitarian democracy.
- Thus, certain Dalit and Adivasi families have developed dynastic ambition, and recruit successors from their own families.
- The family-regulated political succession in electoral democracy is akin to this law of incumbency that has its roots in pre-democratic

societies, where succession by inheritance was the rule, the incumbent was pre-decided, and the decision was legitimised through the loyalty of the followers.

How can the hold of the entrenched family be diluted in order to democratise the electoral spaces?

- Some efforts were indeed made to achieve this goal.
- The 73rd & 74th constitutional amendments that sought to empower women at the local self-government level were one such step towards loosening the family hold.
- But, patriarchal families find ways to re-establish their hold over politics.
- It is in this disheartening situation that common voters need to acquire and use their power of judgment that would ensure the restoration of the dual democratic principles of equality and justice that will rule our conscience and dilute the dynastic rule.