COVID's impact on Child Labour

Why in news?

The economic downturn and huge health costs triggered by the pandemic have increased the number of child labours across the country.

What is Child labour in India?

- The Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act of 1986 defines 'child' as any person below the age of 14.
- Child labour is the employment of a Child in any employment including as a domestic help.
- It does not include helping own family in non-hazardous occupations.

What are the government initiatives to prevent child labour?

- **Constitutional provision -** ***Article 21A*** of the Indian Constitution was added to prevent child labour and provide free education to them.
- It mandates that the State shall provide free and compulsory education to all children of the ages of 6-14 years in the manner prescribed by the State.
- **Legal Provision -** The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act of 2009, gave affect to this constitutional provision.
- 'Compulsory Education' casts an obligation on the appropriate authorities to ensure admission and sustenance of compulsory elementary education for such children.

How Covid-19 has impacted the vulnerable sections of India?

- The Covid-19 pandemic has brought the world to its knees.
- The pandemic exposed multiple fault-lines in the healthcare, education, economic, and job-related sectors.
- The effect of the pandemic has been deep and long lasting among the marginalised sections of society, especially women and children.
- **Effects -** Households in poor economic conditions were pushed to the brink of poverty.
- These conditions have exacerbated the social inequities.
- These conditions have exposed women and children to abuse, violence and lack of security.

How Covid-19 has impacted child labour in India?

> *A 2022 report by UNICEF and ILO said that as COVID has put children at risk of child labour globally.*

Child Labours in India pre and post pandemic
According to 2011 Census data, there were 10.1 million child labourers in India.
• As per the National Crime Bureau Report 2022, in 2021, around 982 cases were registered under the Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act, 1986.
• The highest number of cases were registered in Telangana, followed by Assam.
• The figures saw a significant increase from 476 cases registered under the Act in 2020.

- **Adolescents -** The RTE Act leaves the children between the ages of 14-18 years (adolescents) out of its purview.
- Moreover, the Child Labour Act allows adolescents to engage in work if it does not qualify under hazardous occupations.
- This section of the children become most prone to the perils of child labour.
- **Breadwinners -** The pandemic triggered economic downturn has put excessive pressure on children to be income earners for the family.
- **Reasons**
    - Adult family members have lost their jobs
    - Adult family members have not survived the pandemic.
    - Catastrophic health costs associated with the pandemic
- **Hazardous occupations -** The above reasons has driven children to take up work in exploitative and hazardous circumstances.
- Closure of schools globally has also led to a surge in child labour around the world.

What should be done to the rescued child labours?

- **Post-rescue Rehabilitation -** Children after rescued from the jobs where they were employed illegally should be given rehabilitation.
- Rehab ensuring that they do not once again get trapped in that cycle of exploitation.
- The children after rescue from labour should be integrated and assimilated into the education system to build a better future for them.
- District and local administrations have to take proactive steps to ensure this part.
- **Implementation of RTE -** A stronger implementation of RTE, in terms of mobilisation of resources and all the actors in the ecosystem along with a robust infrastructure.
- **Awareness at hotspots -** Literacy awareness programmes targeting primary education for children must be undertaken by local authorities, especially in regions where the number of child labourers is high.
- **Including adolescents -** These rehab and awareness programmes must also consider adolescents who are not covered by RTE and are forced to work in hazardous environments.
- **Synergy of policies -** Policies amplifying the spread of education and curtailing child labour should be cohesive and complementary in nature.
- **Mental health -** The special care and protection for these children should be extended taking their mental and physical immaturity into account.

Reference

1. Business Line - COVID has led to major rise in child labour

