Epidemic Diseases Ordinance, 2020

Why in news?

The Epidemic Diseases (Amendment) Ordinance, 2020 is promulgated to protect the healthcare workers.

What is the Ordinance?

- This 2020 ordinance will amend the Epidemic Act, 1897.
- It will **criminalise attacks on healthcare personnel**, including doctors, nurses, paramedics and ASHA workers.
- It will make them a **non-bailable offence**.

- Ordinarily, the guilty can be sent to jail for 3 months to 5 years, with a fine of Rs 50,000 to Rs 2 lakh.
- If there is grievous injury, the guilty could be sent to jail for 6 months to 7 years and fined Rs 1 lakh to Rs 5 lakh.

Why this ordinance was promulgated?

- There are several incidences of frontline workers being attacked or facing harassment across the country.
- [Frontline workers - Healthcare workers, civic workers, emergency responders, police personnel]

- India's shortage in healthcare manpower already places a heavy burden on the existing workforce.
- The pandemic has compounded this burden many times over.
- If India ends up seeing the infection spread and hospitalisation numbers projected for it, it will need every healthcare hand available.
- So, protecting these healthcare workers is a need of the time.

Is this Ordinance enough?

- The ordinance's provision for harsher punishment and its strict enforcement should serve as a deterrent.
- However, the government must look at a more permanent way to protect healthcare workers.
- It framed the Healthcare Service Personnel and Clinical Establishments Bill 2019 to deter attacks on, and harassment of hospital staff.

- However, this is yet to be enacted.

What could be done?

- **Sensitizing the masses** to support frontline workers is needed.
- If not, India's battle against the disease will truly be lost.
- The government must run **awareness campaigns** to address citizens' fears about exposure to the pathogen via healthcare workers.
- It must pass the 2019 Bill to protect healthcare workers in a more permanent way.

Source: Financial Express, Livemint