RTI on PM CARES Fund

Why in news?

Right to Information (RTI) applications seeking information pertaining to the PM CARES Fund have been stonewalled.

What is the concern?

- This violation of peoples' RTI is particularly concerning given the unprecedented crisis gripping the nation.
- Relief and welfare programmes funded through public money are the lifeline of people who lost income-earning opportunities during the lockdown.
- The poor and marginalised affected by the public health emergency are to have any hope of obtaining the benefits of government schemes.
- So, they must have access to relevant information.

What is a worrying narrative?

- A narrative seems to have emerged that public scrutiny of actions of the government is undesirable during the crisis and citizens must unquestioningly trust the state.
- This undermines the basic democratic tenet that citizens' oversight is necessary to ensure they are able to access their rights.
- Without information, peoples' ability to perform that role is eviscerated and corruption thrives.
- The RTI Act, 2005, has empowered citizens to access information from public authorities and hold them accountable.

Why openness is crucial?

- During the Covid-19 crisis, proper implementation of the law has assumed greater significance than ever before.
- Information related to implementation of relief measures announced by governments should be widely disseminated.
- Greater openness would **prevent controversies** of the kind exemplified by faulty testing kits and fake ventilators.
- It is a time when incentives for secrecy are great, and the scope for discretionary actions are wide.

- During this time, a culture of openness needs to be created to empower people to participate in the decisions that have profound effects on their lives and livelihoods.

How accessibility can be ensured?

- Numerous instances have been reported of Covid-19 patients requiring treatment in ICUs being shunted from one hospital to another.
- This could be prevented if hospitals and health centres publicly provide real-time information about availability of facilities.
- To ensure accessibility to those who need it the most, relevant information must be made available in local languages and widely disseminated.
- In fact, this is a statutory obligation of public authorities under Section 4 of the RTI Act.

How did the transparency watchdogs perform?

- Around 21 out of 29 commissions in the country did not hold a single hearing during the first three stages of the lockdown.
- The Central Information Commission and some State commissions used audio and video conferencing to hear and dispose cases.
- But, most commissions did not make provision for hearing even urgent matters.
- In the current scenario, the role of information commissions is crucial.

What is the way forward?

- In the midst of a pandemic, it is reasonable to expect delays in processing information requests.
- However, the public authorities must not be allowed to interpret the crisis as a justification for not complying with the RTI Act.
- People must be able to obtain information about how and where their money is being spent in the efforts to combat the pandemic.
- They should also know whether the funds are reaching the intended beneficiaries.

Source: The Hindu

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