SC Guidelines for Migrant Workers

What is the issue?

- The Supreme Court, in June 2021, pronounced its judgment in the migrant labourers case.
- While the guidelines laid down by the Supreme Court are welcome, they require robust systems to implement.

What is the case about?

- The case was initiated in 2020 after the national lockdown was announced.
- Thousands of landless labourers had started walking towards their home States.
- They faced loss of employment and income.
- The Supreme Court took cognisance of the matter.
- It rightfully acknowledged the plight of the workers in light of the strict lockdown.
- It laid down numerous guidelines to provide relief to workers and efficiently tackle the problem till the threat of COVID-19 subsides.

What are the key SC guidelines in this regard?

- Two key components to protect the migrants during this time were the food and travel arrangements.
- Under the National Food Security Act, migrant workers are issued ration cards.
- They are entitled to dry ration under various government programmes, such as the Atmanirbhar Bharat scheme, during the pandemic.
- In furtherance of the above, the court asked the States to formulate their own schemes and issue food grains to migrants.
- The Court laid down that dry ration be provided to migrants who want to return to their homes.
- Further, the court said that identity proof should not be insisted upon by the governments.
- The court also called upon the State governments to arrange transportation for workers who need to return to their homes.

What are the shortcomings?

- There are no normative data that would allow the States to identify eligible migrants to provide dry ration to them.
- The court took cognisance of this.
- It fixed July 31, 2021 as the deadline for the States to implement the 'One nation One Ration Card' scheme.
- And it thus directed the Ministry of Labour and Employment to ensure that the National Database for Unorganised Workers is updated by July 31.
- But it is unlikely that a standardised system can be developed within the deadline prescribed by the court.
- Apart from dry ration, the top court also directed the State governments to run community kitchens for migrant workers.
- However, there are administrative problems in implementing these measures.
- Migrant workers keep moving in search of employment.
- So, it is difficult to cover them all under the scheme.
- Also, many States do not have the necessary infrastructure to run and maintain community kitchens on such a large scale.
- The Court also recognised the need for direct cash benefit transfer to workers in the unorganised sector.
- But it did not issue any guidelines for the same as the workers need to be covered by the States themselves.

What is the way forward?

- In order to efficaciously implement the orders of the court, the State governments need to work with the Centre closely.
- With the third wave of COVID-19 infections looming, the government machinery has to work to its full potential, and robust systems must be developed to withstand the challenges.

Source: The Hindu

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