Unsafe Conditions of TN Fireworks Industry

What is the issue?

- In the latest accident at a fireworks unit in Virudhunagar, Tamil Nadu, more than 20 lives have perished (which is set to rise), and close to 30 workers are in hospital.
- This has highlighted the dire need for labour reforms and technological advances within the fireworks industry.

How is the fireworks industry in TN?

- Thousands of workers in Tamil Nadu's famed fireworks industry remain trapped in unsafe conditions.
- This is despite an unending series of accidents.
- In 11 months, 25 lives were lost in major blazes in three other fireworks factories in Virudhunagar (9), Cuddalore (9), and Madurai (7).
- Most victims were women.
- The dead end up in statistical records.
- However, on the ground, there are only short-term actions.
    - Registration of cases, arrests, identification of causes, token inspections, issuance of warnings and safety advisories

What are the key causes for accidents?

- These tragedies are caused predominantly by gross violation of norms governing the hazardous industry and human error in handling explosive substances.
- Unlicensed units that have mushroomed in and outside Sivakasi mostly escape scrutiny till explosions occur.
- A greater concern is the illegal sub-leasing of contracts for manufacturing crackers by licensed units.
- Preliminary investigation into the current tragedy has also revealed sub-leasing of works to several persons.
    - The very nature of work in a hazardous industry makes sub-leasing a byword for safety compromise.
    - It leads to conversion of every shed in a manufacturing unit into a 'factory' in itself with inflammable chemicals stored all over.
    - Consequently, the limit on workers to be deployed is violated, resulting

in crowding in each shed.
- There is also lack of supervision of the quantum of chemicals to be mixed or stored.

What are the labour issues here?

- A decade ago Parliament was informed that automation of the hazardous manufacturing process would be undertaken.
- However, the industry continues to be labour-intensive.
- The Petroleum and Explosives Safety Organisation offers training for workers.
- But, shortage of labour has prompted the industry to hire new recruits with limited skills.
- Moreover, the piece-rate system induces people to race to produce more units per day.
- Untrained workers and the piece-rate system thus contribute to more accidents.
- In the latest accident, a worker, possibly fatigued, had hurriedly emptied semi-finished crackers, triggering an explosion.

What does this call for?

- Periodic inspections at factories, sustained crackdown and stringent penal action against violators are non-negotiable.
- For this, the Central and State governments must provide the needed manpower for enforcement agencies.
- A sustained political push for labour reforms and technological innovations within the industry is also essential.

Source: The Hindu

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