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Information is Empowering
A Shankar IAS Academy Initiative

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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