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Supreme Court Upholds Right to Discuss Covid-19

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Why in News

Recently, the Central government appealed in the Supreme Court that media outlets, in the “**larger interest of justice**”, should only publish or telecast anything on **COVID-19** after ascertaining the factual position from the government.

Key Points

- According to the government, “**any deliberate or inaccurate**” reporting by the media, particularly web portals, in the midst of an unprecedented situation can have a “**serious and inevitable potential of causing panic in a larger section of the society**”.
 - The government blamed “**fake and misleading**” messages on social media for creating widespread panic, which led to mass “**barefoot**” journeys of migrant workers from cities to their native villages in rural India.
 - The mass migration of the poor would defeat the preventive measures taken by the Central government to contain pandemic.
- The Supreme court took a view **balancing free press** and the **need to avoid panic** in society during an unprecedented crisis.
 - The Court upheld the **right to free discussion about COVID-19**, and directed the media to refer to and publish the official version of the developments in order to avoid inaccuracies and large-scale panic.
 - It **ordered the government to start a daily bulletin on COVID-19 developments** through all media avenues in the next 24 hours.

Constitutional Provisions

- **Article 19(1)(a)** of the Constitution of India states that, “**all citizens shall have the right to freedom of speech and expression**”.

The philosophy behind this Article lies in the Preamble of the Constitution, where a solemn resolve is made to secure to all its citizens, liberty of thought and expression.

- The exercise of this right is, however, subject to “**reasonable restrictions**” for certain purposes being imposed under **Article 19(2)** of the Constitution of India.

These reasonable restrictions are imposed in the interests of the **sovereignty and integrity of India, the security of the State, friendly relations with foreign States, public order, decency or morality or in relation to contempt of court, defamation or incitement to an offence.**

Source: TH