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e-Shram Portal: Scope of Improvement

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This article is based on **“e-Shram Needs Some Hard Work To Get Going”** which was published in The Hindu on 17/09/2021. It talks about the e-Shram portal, the much needed initiative for the unorganised sector of India and the issues associated with it.

Recently, the Ministry of Labour and Employment (MoLE) launched the e-Shram portal for creating a National Database of Unorganized Workers (NDUW).

The portal came into being after the Supreme Court **directed the Government to complete the registration process of unorganized workers.**

This much needed step, considering the enactment of **Unorganised Workers’ Social Security Act, 2008** is however, about a decade late to come into existence.

As much as appreciable the step is towards addressing the issues of the informal sector, the portal also raises concerns over issues like workers’ data protection, digital illiteracy etc.

Unorganised Sector and e-Shram

- **Total Share:** According to the **Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS 2018-19)**, **90% of workers were in the informal sector**, which is 419 million of the 465 million workers.
- **Impact of Pandemic:** Informal workers in rural and urban areas have been hit the most due to the pandemic, because of the seasonality of their employment and lack of formal employee-employer relationship.

- **e-Shram Portal:** It seeks to register an estimated 398-400 million unorganised workers and to issue an E-Shram card containing a 12 digit unique number.

Significance:

- **Accidental Coverage:** Each individual registering at the portal is eligible for an accidental cover of Rs 2 lakh for a year which is provided yearly under the **Pradhan Mantri Suraksha Bima Yojana (PMSBY)**.
- **Integrating Welfare Schemes:** The portal seeks to integrate all the social welfare schemes available for the benefit of unorganised workers.
- **Beneficial for Inter-state Migrants:** The portal helps the inter-state migrant workers avail the **benefit of the welfare schemes regardless of their location**.
- **Social Security Benefits:** The unorganised workers will be able to receive social security benefits such as insurance coverage, maternity benefits, pensions, educational benefits, provident fund benefits, housing schemes etc.

Issues Associated

- **Lower Teledensity and Digital Literacy:** India still witnesses a significant digital divide, as per the **Telecom Regulatory Authority of India**, as of 30th June, 2021, the **rural teledensity** (number of telephone connections per 100 people in a specified geographic area) **stands at 60.10% against the overall teledensity is 88.07%**.
This is compounded by the low levels of **digital literacy**.
- **Aadhaar Related Issues:** Imposing the condition of **Aadhaar** would exclude workers without Aadhaar cards from the process.
 - Many unorganised workers have to change mobile numbers frequently and may **not always be able to access the Aadhaar-linked mobile**.
Aadhaar-seeding is a controversial issue in the **North-eastern regions**.
 - Moreover, the Aadhaar verification system has **suffered technology failures many times** that have led to serious issues of exclusion for welfare benefits.
- **Data-Security Related Issues:** In the **absence of a stringent data protection law**, one of the vital concerns of the portal is **data security and its potential abuse** considering it is a mega-sized database.
The central government would have to share data with State governments whose data security capacities vary.
- **Non-Inclusive Coverage of Workers:** By excluding workers covered by **EPF and ESI**, lakhs of **contract workers will be excluded from the ambit of unorganised workers**.
Moreover, the portal is open to unorganised workers aged between 16 and 59 only, the NDUW **excludes a large number of workers aged over 59** from its ambit, which constitutes age discrimination.

- **Ambiguity regarding Gig Workers:** Even though the MoLE includes gig workers in this process, the other three **Labour Codes** do not include them as workers, neither does the **Social Security Code** specifically include them, unless they are declared 'self-employed' or 'wage workers'.

Way Forward

- **Allowing Multiple Mediums for Identification:** The mandatory usage of Aadhaar for registration is unconstitutional and exclusionary. Other government provided ID cards should be allowed for authenticating a worker's identity.
 - Triple linkage for efficient and leakage-less delivery of all kinds of benefits to workers viz. **One-Nation-One-Ration Card (ONORC)**, **E-Shram Card** and the **Election Commission Card** can be done.
 - Also, the workers must be provided the flexibility to use different numbers as it would increase the portal's registration intake.
- **Offline Registrations:** Arrangements for offline registration are needed, given that all workers will not be able to access the online portal.

To this extent, **Common Service Centres can be leveraged to hold 'registration camps'** for those who wish to register offline.
- **Adopting Multi-Pronged Approach:** The success of the project depends on the involvement of a variety of stakeholders. It also includes:
 - Massive and innovative dissemination exercises involving multiple media outlets of various languages.
 - The holding of camps on demand by the stakeholders by the Government.
 - Efficiency of the resolution of grievance redress mechanisms.
 - Micro-level operations.
- **Surveys and Surveillance:** The Government must **publish statistics at the national and the regional levels** of the registrations to assess the registration system's efficiency.

There is also the concern of corruption as middle-service agencies such as Internet providers might charge exorbitant charges to register and print the E-Shram cards.

Therefore, the **involvement of surveillance agencies is crucial.**

Conclusion

- The Covid-19 crisis has taught us the importance of building safety nets and raised the need to formulate robust social security mechanisms for the unorganised sector in India.
- E-Shram is a vital system to provide hitherto invisible workers much-needed visibility. It will provide the Labour Market Citizenship Document to them.

It must be ensured that registrations are not a source of exclusion of a person from receiving social assistance and benefits.

Drishhti Mains Question

“E-Shram Portal is a vital system to provide hitherto invisible workers much-needed visibility”. Comment.
