

Standing Committee Report Summary

Management of COVID-19 Pandemic and Related Issues

- The Standing Committee on Home Affairs (Chair: Mr. Anand Sharma) submitted its report on the management of the COVID-19 pandemic on December 21, 2020. Key recommendations include:
 - **Preparedness:** The Committee noted that the sudden imposition of the lockdown caused an unprecedented economic disruption. It also caused fear and anxiety among migrant workers leading to large-scale movement of migrants back to their home states. To address such a crisis in the future, the Committee recommended: (i) framing a national plan and guidelines under the Disaster Management Act, 2005 and the Epidemic Diseases Act, 1897, (ii) creating an institutional mechanism to ensure coordination between the centre and states for a quick response, effective implementation of all decisions related to the pandemic, and timely and equitable distribution of relief to beneficiaries, and (iii) forming a separate wing within the National Disaster Management Authority (set up under the 2005 Act) to handle pandemics. The Committee also noted that the 2005 Act and the 1897 Act are not fully equipped to deal with challenges posed by a pandemic and recommended reviewing these Acts.
 - **Health funding:** The Committee noted that the central and state governments incurred heavy expenditure on COVID-19 treatment and related services. It noted the need for a strong public healthcare system across the country to deal with such shocks. Therefore, it recommended greater investment in health infrastructure to scale up public health services. The Committee further noted that a larger share of the burden to extend healthcare services has been borne by government hospitals since private hospitals have been inaccessible or not affordable for everyone. Therefore, it recommended greater allocation to public hospitals.
 - **Vaccines:** The Committee recommended that while undertaking vaccine trials, all mandatory requirements must be fulfilled and all phases of the trial must be completed. The Committee noted that no emergency use authorisation has ever been given by the Central Drugs Standard Control Organisation (set up under the Drugs and Cosmetics Act, 1940). Therefore, it recommended that such authorisation should only be given in the rarest of rare cases.
 - **Data collection:** The Committee noted that a study is needed to understand the patterns in test rate, recovery and fatality rate. Further, there is a need to identify states where testing capacity is inadequate and districts where health infrastructure is lacking. It also recommended that relevant data should be made publicly available to the research community to provide inputs for COVID-19 management, and to provide real-time solutions to control the pandemic. Such disclosure should follow principles of data anonymisation, security and privacy laws.
- **Malpractices:** The Committee noted reports of private hospitals selling beds for treatment and black-marketing and overpricing of some medicines. It recommended: (i) a comprehensive national public health Act to keep a check on private hospitals and on black-marketing of medicines, (ii) creating awareness campaigns on availability of cheaper and effective repurposed medicines, (iii) making quality and affordable medicines available to everyone, and at a subsidised rate to marginalised persons, especially during a pandemic, (iv) exercising regulatory oversight on hospitals to avoid refusal of health insurance claims, and (v) making COVID-19 treatment cashless for the insured.
- **Social impact:** To address the social impact of COVID-19 on the poor, the Committee recommended that the government ensure a decent minimum wage, food security, and safe living conditions for all workers by including them in health services, cash transfer, and other social programmes. Further, it recommended that a national database on migrant workers be launched at the earliest to help in identification of such workers and in delivering rations and other benefits to them.
- **Food distribution:** The Committee recommended that until all states implement One Nation One Ration card, inter-state operability of ration cards should be allowed. Further, the Ministry of Home Affairs should create a coordinated mechanism to track the movement of migrant workers across all states on a real-time basis, so that states can offtake rations from central agencies in a timely manner.
- **Economic impact:** The Committee noted that MSMEs are one of the most adversely affected sectors during the pandemic. It observed that there is a need to support MSMEs with dire working capital requirements to sustain the impact of COVID-19. Further, it recommended fiscal stimulus and other interventions to help the revival of the hospitality sector and related services.
- **Impact on education:** Noting social inequalities with respect to access to online classes, the Committee recommended: (i) formulating a scheme to provide financial assistance and low-cost devices to students to access these classes, (ii) strengthening of digital infrastructure to provide uninterrupted internet access, especially in rural areas, and (iii) training teachers to conduct online classes.

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