Making social welfare universal

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(Mains GS 2 : Welfare schemes for vulnerable sections of the population by the Centre and the States and the performance of these schemes; mechanisms, laws, institutions and Bodies constituted for the protection and betterment of these vulnerable sections.)

Context:

- India is one of the largest welfare states in the world and yet, with COVID-19 striking in 2020, the state failed to provide for its most vulnerable citizens.
- The country witnessed multiple crises: mass inter- and intra-migration, food insecurity, and a crumbling health infrastructure.
- The extenuating circumstances of the pandemic has pushed an estimated 75 million people into poverty.

Absorbing shock:

- Economic capital, in the absence of social capital, has proven to be insufficient in accessing healthcare facilities.
- The second wave has brought even the middle and upper-class citizens to their knees.
- The country has over 500 direct benefit transfer schemes for which various Central, State, and Line departments are responsible but these schemes have not reached those in need.
- The pandemic has revealed that leveraging our existing schemes and providing universal social security is of utmost importance.
- This will help absorb the impact of external shocks on our vulnerable populations.

The Ireland model:

- An example of a universal social protection scheme is the Poor Law System in Ireland.

- In the 19th century, Ireland was staggering under the weight of poverty and famine.
- Thus Ireland introduced the Poor Law System to provide relief that was financed by local property taxes.
- These laws were notable for not only providing timely assistance but maintaining the dignity and respectability of the poor while doing so.
- They were not designed as hand-outs but as necessary responses to a time of economic crisis.
- Today, the social welfare system in Ireland has evolved into a four-fold apparatus that promises social insurance, social assistance, universal schemes, and extra benefits/supplements.

Lessons from Universal immunization programme:

- A social security system like Ireland is not unimaginable in India.
- India successfully ran a universal healthcare programme i.e. the Pulse Polio Universal Immunisation Programme through which India was declared polio-free in 2014.
- Although programme took a dedicated effort over a number of years but it shows us what is possible.
- With the advancements in knowledge and technology, a universal coverage of social welfare is possible in a shorter time frame.

Ease of application:

- Existing schemes cover a wide variety of social protections but they are fractionalised across various departments and sub-schemes.
- This causes problems beginning with data collection to last-mile delivery.
- Having a universal system would improve the ease of application by consolidating the data of all eligible beneficiaries under one database which can also reduce exclusion errors.
- The Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana (PMGKY) is one scheme that can be strengthened into universal social security.
- It already consolidates the public distribution system (PDS), the provision of gas cylinders, and wages for the MGNREGS.

conclusion:

- Generally, social assistance schemes are provided on the basis of an assessment of needs thus having a universal scheme would take away this access/exclusion barrier.
- Making schemes/welfare provisions like education, maternity benefits, disability benefits etc. universal would ensure a better standard of living for the people.

- The implementation of these ideas will be possible through a focus on data digitisation, data-driven decision-making and collaboration across government departments.