

ONE NATION, ONE RATION CARD: IT WILL GIVE A CUSHION TO MIGRANT WORKERS - EDITORIALS - HINDUSTAN TIMES

Relevant for: Indian Economy | Topic: Issues Related to Poverty, Inclusion, Employment & Sustainable Development

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The Supreme Court (SC), on Tuesday, asked the Union government to examine the feasibility of implementing the “one nation one ration card” (ONORC) scheme during the national lockdown. The scheme, which allows beneficiaries to access food grains that they are entitled to under the National Food Security Act, 2013, from any fair-price shop in the country, was announced last June.

The SC’s nudge to expedite the ONORC is critical. Millions of out-of-work migrant workers are stuck in host cities due to the lockdown. Many have run out of money to buy food and don’t have a proof of identity like ration cards to access subsidised food grains via the well-stocked public distribution system (PDS). States where they are stuck prefer offering relief to their own residents first, and cite the lack of identity documents to deny benefits. And among those states which have opened community kitchens for out-of-job migrant workers, there have been complaints of the quantity, quality and type of food. Some feel that the ONORC scheme will not be of much help during the present crisis since many migrant workers have left their PDS cards in their villages. Instead, the Union government must expand the well-stocked PDS system to cover all individuals, irrespective of whether they have a ration card or not, for at least six months.

While this must be done, the government must also fast-track the ONORC scheme because India’s present rights-based regime is based on the assumption that people are sedentary. This is not true given the high rates of inter- and intra-state migration. Without any safety net, migrants depend either on their employers or labour contractors for food provisions or purchase food in the open market. This increases their cost of living and reduces the additional earnings they might hope to remit to their families. During the lockdown, the crisis has become even more acute. But even after the coronavirus pandemic is over, this will be useful. Migration is bound to restart because of unemployment. When migrant workers again start boarding trains and buses for the destination cities, they must have their PDS cards that are valid across India with them.

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