ASHA Workers in India

Why in News?

Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHAs) in Kerala staged protests demanding higher wages and retirement benefits.

Who are ASHA Workers?

- **About:** ASHAs are **community health volunteers** introduced under the **National Rural Health Mission (NRHM),** 2005 to provide essential healthcare services in rural areas.
    - In 2013, the NRHM merged with the **National Urban Health Mission (NUHM)** to form the **National Health Mission (NHM).**
    - ASHAs work alongside **Anganwadi Workers (AWWs)** under the **Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS)** to improve healthcare accessibility.
    - An ASHA is a local woman (age 25-45 years), preferably married, widowed, or divorced, with at **least Class 10 education.** NHM considers them volunteers, **limiting their earnings to task-based incentives.**
        - ASHAs serve **one per 1,000 people,** with 9.2 lakh in rural and 79,900 in urban areas (2022-23).
- **Key Responsibilities of ASHAs:** Ensure **antenatal check-ups, and postnatal care**, while educating mothers on **breastfeeding and infant nutrition**.
    - ASHAs support **immunization, tuberculosis (TB)** treatment, malaria screenings, and disease prevention. Additionally, they provide **basic healthcare, essential medicines,** first aid, and report births and deaths.
- **Concerns of ASHA Workers:** ASHAs face **low** (approx Rs 5000-15000) **and irregular payments**, receiving only a **nominal honorarium and task-based incentives** that vary by state and are often delayed due to **funding issues and Centre-State disputes**.
    - Despite their **crucial role during Covid-19**, earning them the **World Health Organization's (WHO's)** World Health Leaders Award in 2022**, their struggles persist.
        - They are not classified as government employees, denying them **fixed wages, pensions, gratuity, provident funds, and medical insurance**, though some states, like **Andhra Pradesh, offer gratuity**.
        - The **2020 Parliamentary Standing Committee on Labour** recommended **formalizing their roles**, but no action was taken.
    - ASHAs, mostly **women from marginalized backgrounds**, also face **gender-based discrimination** in the workforce.

How Can ASHA Workers Be Empowered?

- **Formalization:** Recognizing ASHAs as government employees or at least contractual workers with job benefits under the **Code on Social Security, 2020** would ensure they receive essential labor rights and protections.
- **Skill Development:** Offer training programs for ASHAs to upgrade their skills and transition into

higher healthcare roles (e.g., **Auxiliary Nurse and Midwives**).

- **Financial Security:** With rising inflation, ASHA workers need financial security. A fixed **salary alongside incentives ensures stability**, while **Direct Benefit Transfers (DBT)** prevent payment delays, empowering them to focus on healthcare without financial distress.

National Health Mission (NHM)

- NHM aims to ensure universal access to quality, affordable, and equitable healthcare services while advancing toward **Sustainable Development Goal 3 (Good Health and Well-being).**
- NHM, extended till 2026 and implemented by the **Ministry of Health and Family Welfare,** supports States/UTs in providing accessible and affordable healthcare, focusing on rural infrastructure, workforce, and service delivery.

Read more: **ASHA Workers & Related Challenges**

Drishti Mains Question:

Discuss how ASHA workers contribute to achieving Sustainable Development Goal 3 in India.

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