Syllabus subtopic: Welfare schemes for vulnerable sections of the population by the Centre and States and the performance of these schemes; mechanisms, laws, institutions and bodies constituted for the protection and betterment of these vulnerable sections

Prelims and Mains focus: about PMMVy and its significance, challenges in implementation and the govt’s performance in addressing them

News: Three years after a panIndia maternity benefit programme promising ₹6,000 to new mothers was first announced, the chorus on its many exclusions is growing louder leading to a demand for a scheme that is truly universal.

Why so many exclusions?

The many clauses introduced into the long and tedious documentation work totalling 32 pages has led to single women and young brides being left out of its purview, say activists working at the grassroots level.

Activists say that registration for the scheme requires an applicant to provide her husband’s Aadhaar details along with her own, affecting single women which include unwed mothers, deserted a mother seeking benefits needs to provide proof of address of her marital home, which proves challenging for a newlywed expecting a child and often residing in her natal home during pregnancy. She is then forced to go from pillar to post to claim benefits.

About PM Matru Vandana Yojana (PMMVy)

The Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandana Yojana (PMMVy) was announced by PM Modi in a televised address to the nation on December 31, 2016. Five month’s later when the Union Cabinet approved the scheme, it decided to give a benefit of ₹5,000 to pregnant and lactating mothers for the birth of the first child.

This would be disbursed in three installments upon meeting several conditionalities — registration of pregnancy, at least one antenatal check-up, registration of child birth and vaccinations.

The remaining cash incentive of upto ₹1,000 is to be given under a separate scheme called the Janani Suraksha Yojana so that on an “average” women get a total sum of ₹6,000.
Objective

The objective is to compensate women for wage loss due to child birth.

Problems faced by a newlywed woman

A mother is unable to get the compensation when she needs it the most, i.e. during the nine months of her pregnancy. While the scheme is solely for the first living child, it ironically leaves out those who are most likely to give birth to one — a newlywed woman.

The requirement that the applicant has to be at least 19 years old also leaves out younger brides, who hesitate in getting their marriages registered as the legal age of marriage is 18 years. 30-35% first-time mothers are under the age of 18 years.

The application form requires separate undertakings from the woman and her husband that the child for whom they are seeking the benefit will be “the first living child for both of them”, further making it prohibitive.

Govt’s target versus actual performance of the scheme

Since the scheme came into effect on January 2017, it has benefited a total of 128 lakh women as per the government’s reply in Parliament last week.

This is 80% of the total target the government has set out for itself — 53 lakh women per year.

Experts estimate that the government’s target itself is 43% of the total 123 lakh first births in the country in a year as derived from the population size of 133.9 crore in 2017 and the birth rate of 20.2 per thousand.

Questions and Concerns raised by the activists

1. Eligible beneficiaries have to jump through several hoops to claim their entitlement. Moreover, this is a woman’s right under the National Food Security Act, 2013, why then insist on the husband’s identity proof?
2. The documentation work is likely to result in many women living on the margins, such as sex workers, women in custody, migrant and those living in postconflict situations unable to claim benefits even though they are most in need of monetary compensation.

3. Women have to pay a hefty bribe during the application process. The lengthy documentation work includes filling up six documents totaling 32 pages — an application form to be filled for each of the three installments, an application for linking the Aadhaar card with bank account, another one for linking the Aadhaar card with post office account and a feedback form. Applicants have to also submit at least nine other documents for verification—Aadhaar card (or enrolment slip when there is no card), an identity proof, voter ID card (as age proof) of the mother and her husband; ration card (for husband's address), copy of bank passbook and maternal and child protection (MCP) card.

**Way ahead**

Activists and grassroot workers must make a “formal representation” to the government highlighting their concerns so that corrective actions can be taken. Activists urge for a need for reviewing the scheme and making it universal by removing restrictions on the number of children as well as including all women, whether they are in the formal or informal sector, engaged in paid or unpaid work.

The sum promised should also be at least on par with minimum wages for women in selfemployment, unpaid work, or working for less than minimum wages.

In order to raise these demands, protest marches are planned across several States on December 31, the third anniversary of the scheme. Workers, part of the Right to Food Campaign’s M.P. Chapter, have also started a signature campaign on the demands, which has so far been endorsed by 1,18,000 people.