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HC tells Maharashtra govt to crack on bogus ration cards

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Taking a serious view of the existence of bogus ration cards in Maharashtra, the Bombay High Court today asked the state government to evolve a mechanism to stop such illegal practice and take stern action against the guilty officers.

Hearing a Public interest litigation (PIL), Justice DD Sinha and Justice Vijaya Kapse-Tahilramani asked the Chief Secretary to file an affidavit by August 9 giving details about the mechanism it will adopt to prevent the issue of bogus ration cards.

The PIL, filed by LB Shaikh, an associate of anti-corruption crusader Anna Hazare, alleged that the bogus ration card racket was to the tune of Rs25,000 crore.

One of the methods of this corrupt practice was to continue the ration card of a person even after his death and lift commodities in his name at cheaper rates from the public distribution system and sell it at a premium in the market, the petitioner, who is also President of Bhrashtachar Virodhi Janandolan Nyas, said.

Bhagwan Sahai, Principal Secretary to the Government of Maharashtra filed an affidavit saying a committee had been set up to look into the issues raised by the PIL. A report filed by the committee had been accepted by Commissioner (Supply), Pune.

As the department has no machinery to check the correctness of information given by the applicant of ration card about his income, only the evidence about residence is verified and thereafter the ration card is issued to him, the affidavit said.

Because of the procedure it is difficult to fix the responsibility on the staff for ineligible ration cards detected during the drives. In spite of this, instructions have been issued to the district collectors and Controller of Rationing in Mumbai and Thane to take action against the staff for issuing bogus ration cards, the affidavit said.

Out of 54.07 lakh deleted ration cards, 42.76 lakh belonged to families above the poverty line having an annual income of upto Rs one lakh (78.9%). Additionally, 2.59 lakh ration cards were of other families above the poverty line, the government affidavit stated.

Because of verification drives, the number of 11.86 lakh deleted ration cards will come down further, it said.

The total number of ration cards in the state after the conclusion of second detection drive on March 31, 2010, was 2.16 crore. However, after the third drive, it was 2.14 crore.

This clearly showed that a large proportion of these ration card holders whose cards were deleted after the drives have applied again for getting new cards, the affidavit said.

The government would ensure that penal action would be taken by respective District Collectors and Controller of Rationing in Mumbai and Thane against each staff responsible for issuing bogus ration cards to ineligible persons, the affidavit pointed out.

Another PIL, filed by a group of persons living below the poverty line in Malegaon, alleged their applications were pending since last four years or more though there is a statutory requirement to clear such cases within 45 days.

Counsel for the petitioners, Firoz Ansari, pleaded that the Tehsildar is the issuing authority but his office has outsourced the work to a private agency which is openly encouraging corrupt practices in the issue of ration cards.

He said the poor people living below the poverty line in Malegaon are harassed and not issued the ration cards within the stipulated time. They are asked to pay bribes and women folk are exploited.

However, a government officer filed an affidavit saying that not a single application was pending from April 2009 to December 2011. He said between January and April this year, the Food district officer at Malegaon had received 5,089 applications of which 3,525 had been disposed of. The rest will be cleared expeditiously as per law.

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