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No mechanism to check income of ration card applicants: State

Express news service Posted online: Fri Jun 29 2012, 03:49 hrs

In a worrisome revelation, in an affidavit submitted to the Bombay High Court, the state government has admitted that it does not have the machinery to verify the income brackets of individuals applying for a ration card.

Peeved by the submission, a Division Bench of Justices D D Sinha and V K Tahilramani observed, "There is no point in issuing the card and seeing if it is bogus or not. This is making a mockery of the whole thing. If they (state government) don't have a mechanism, they should create it."

The court was hearing a PIL filed by Brashtachar Virodhi Jan Andolan alleging various irregularities on the government's part in issuing and transferring ration cards. The PIL, filed through lawyer Ashish Gaikwad, also alleged that on account of these irregularities, commodities in fair price shops have been hoarded by shop-owners, resulting in a Rs 25,000-crore fraud.

The court had earlier questioned the government about steps taken against officers allegedly found issuing bogus ration cards.

An affidavit submitted by Bhagwan Sahai, Principal Secretary (Food, Civil Supplies and Consumer Protection) stated that after the department receives an application for a ration card, an undertaking is sought from the applicant that the information provided by him/her is true and the card is issued within seven days.

"As the department has no machinery to check the veracity of the information provided by the applicant regarding his income, only the evidence of his residence etc. is verified and thereafter the ration card is issued," Sahai's affidavit stated.

"Which category of people are issued ration cards? What is the criterion? You can't issue a ration card to everyone," Justice Sinha said.

The affidavit also stated that three drives were undertaken to detect bogus ration cards. The last one was conducted between March and August 2011. "...of the 54.07 lakh deleted ration cards, 42.76 lakh were of the above poverty line families... with an income of over Rs 1 lakh a year. In the below poverty line category, 6.63 lakh ration cards were deleted," the affidavit stated.

Observing that there needs to be co-ordination between all the departments of the state government to set up a mechanism to verify claims of ration card seekers, the court directed the Chief Secretary to file an affidavit stating the steps taken in that direction by August 9. "This is a matter of public importance. Only those who deserve should be given ration cards," the court said.