Migrant Workers in India [UPSC Notes for GS I]

This article will describe in detail the issue of migration in India, causes of migration, problems associated with it and other factors.

These UPSC Notes on India's migrational problems are aligned with the UPSC Syllabus and aspirants should prepare this topic for General Studies Paper I.

Migration and related issues are frequently heard in the news and hence its relevance for the UPSC Mains.

Challenges of Migration

Context

- Rising migration due to natural disasters, ethnic violence or employment
- There is a rise in violence against migrants accelerated by social media
- India has a large rural-to-rural migration. A major part of this is female migration after marriage.
- The number of rural-to-urban migrants is about 14 crore, but unofficial figures put it much higher. Even 2017 Economic survey shows that the migrant population is in the country is 139 million.
- The increasing intensity of natural disasters like floods, drought, cyclones, etc. and distress migration due to the rural agrarian crisis has also increased the number of migrants in India.
- In cases of distress migration and migration into urban slums, the migrants become more vulnerable due to lack of negotiating power with the potential employers, lack of social capital or lack of political organization and clout.

Issues

- In urban areas, migrants are forced to live in ghettos with no access to amenities like clean drinking water, electricity, safe houses, etc.
- They form groups in public places or markets waiting to be recruited as manual labourers.
- This makes them vulnerable to exploitation, which includes physical assaults, lack of a fair wage etc.

- Even though the cheap labour provided by them keeps the prices of commodities and services low, they are often portrayed as anti-social elements and face significant discrimination from other sections of society. The slums/ghettos where they are forced to live are routinely pictured as "crime infested" and they are harassed by law enforcement authorities.
- Because of the unstable nature of their jobs and residence, they are frequently declared illegal residents and are evicted or arrested.
- Social media has added to their misery. Migrants are often portrayed as criminals and this barrage of social media messages escalates into targeted violence against them. For example, a migrant allegedly raped a minor girl in Gujarat. Even though the accused was arrested the same day, there were attacks against migrant workers on a continuous basis. This was fuelled by incessant fearmongering and the spread of hateful messages on social media.
- Similar fake messages also triggered a mass exodus of labourers from the northeast in Bangalore as well.
- An increase in extreme climate events also triggers mass migration. These migrants are at an added disadvantage because in most cases, they have lost their relevant documents and any capital/asset that could facilitate an easy translocation.
- Another factor that contributes to an upward trend in internal migration is rural distress.

Migrants' Issues in News

In 2023, the Tamil Nadu Police department formed a five-member nodal team in order to coordinate with other states and agencies to deal with the rumours pertaining to the safety and security of migrant workers from North India.

Migrant Workers Latest News

- The Tamil Nadu Police swung into action after **a false report about 12 labourers from Bihar being hanged and two videos of clashes wrongly attributed to Tamils** attacking Hindi-speaking migrant workers were shared widely on social media a few days ago.
- The nodal team comprised an Inspector General of Police, a Deputy Inspector General of Police, a Deputy Commissioner of Police, Traffic, and a Superintendent of Police.
- The DGP has asked the police officers to **carry out day and night patrols** in the areas where the labourers work and reside to prevent any offences against them.
- The officers have been told **to identify companies and factories that employ migrant labourers and collect details** such as their phone numbers, sex, age, and native state.
- Released a set of **guidelines for monitoring the rumours and preventing panic situations** regarding the fake attacks on the North Indian migrant workers.
- The state police had been conducting **outreach and awareness programmes** to ensure the safety of the workers, particularly in areas like Tiruppur, Erode, Coimbatore, and

Nilgiris. **A separate cell** has also been set up to address the grievances of the migrant workers.

- Earlier, a fact-finding team from Bihar that came to Tamil Nadu following the rumours expressed full satisfaction with the Tamil Nadu government's measures taken to protect the workers from other states.
- The migrant workforce in every company or factory has been told **to nominate one person among them as a point of contact** between the Station House officer and them, and further, they would be added to the WhatsApp group created by the Inspector.

Migrant Labourer Issue between Jharkhand and the Border Roads Organisation:

- Around 9 lakh labourers had returned to Jharkhand from across India during the Covid-19 pandemic.
- After reverse migration during the pandemic, the Jharkhand government started thinking about migrant labourers' welfare.
- One of the employers, [Border Roads Organisation (BRO)](link) under the Ministry of Defence, had recruited many labourers from Dumka, Jharkhand for civil construction in high altitudes, especially in the Union Territory of Ladakh.
- The Jharkhand government signed a **Terms of Reference in 2020 with BRO to eliminate 'predatory' middlemen.** Two trains full of labourers went to work at sites in Ladakh and Uttarakhand in June 2020.
- But this plan did not work as traditionally middlemen take charge of the workers' lodging and upkeep.
  - The workers who were recruited with the help of the state government allegedly faced low wages, lack of services and ill-treatment at the BRO sites, because they went without 'middlemen'.
- **How has Jharkhand responded to the situation?**
  - Currently, migrants can take the benefit of **One Nation One Ration Card or Ayushman Yojana.** However, the Jharkhand government is adding more benefits and checking whether all systems are in place so that migrant workers can work safely.
  - In the case of the **Border Roads Organisation, subsequent meetings with Ladakh district officials have resulted in mates (middlemen) being registered as labour agencies.** These agencies will then form a union registered and verified by the authorities. The union will then provide data on migrant workers data to the Dumka district administration.
  - **Jharkhand has started the Safe and Responsible Migration Initiative (SRMI) in 2021, which aims at enabling systemic registration of migrant workers for monitoring and analysis in the source as well as the destination districts.**

- ○ SRMI will produce data and map the labourers who migrate to several states for work.
- ○ The Jharkhand government will have help desks which will be known as 'labour consulates' in various states.
- ○ An MOU is expected to be signed between Kerala and Jharkhand wherein nodal officers will be appointed in both states to look into the issues of migrant workers.

Migrants in India and Covid-19

India saw its biggest migration since Independence during the lockdown phase because of the Covid-19 disease with over 10 million people walking thousands of kilometres to rural areas. This also led to the labour force participation rate falling as low as 35.57 per cent in April from 42.9 per cent in January 2020. Unemployment rates surged to 23.52 percent in April, with both rural and in urban areas taking a hit.

Reasons for Migration

- ● Lakhs of migrant workers were rendered jobless as urban areas were shut down due to the lockdown.
- ● Night shelters run by local authorities began overflowing, and supplies started dwindling.
- ● These migrants were left with no choice but to head towards their hometowns.

Governments view the migration crisis as a consequence of the challenges of the pandemic. However, there are some structural inadequacies in the public understanding of circular rural-urban migrants.

Structural inadequacies like -

- ● inability to recognize the size and importance of these communities
- ● inability to correctly count such migrants because of their shuttling between their villages and cities due to the informal conditions in which they live and work

These inabilities have real costs, rendering governments ill-prepared to anticipate the responses of migrant communities at crucial moments.

The government has announced relief measures for migrants and made arrangements for migrants to return to their native place. The Supreme Court of India, recognizing the problems faced by migrants stranded in different parts of the country, reviewed transportation and relief arrangements made by the government.

Laws in India for migrant welfare:

- ● The **Inter-State Migrant Workmen Act, 1979** for the welfare of the labourers.

- Under this act, any industry or factory or organisation which wants to employ migrant workers must register with destination states.
- Contractors must acquire a licence from the government authority of the host states and home states. But this Act was never fully implemented.
- This Act has been subsumed into the four broad labour codes notified by the Centre but these have not been implemented yet:
  - The Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions Code - 2020
  - The Code on Social Security - 2020
  - The Industrial Relations Code - 2020
  - The Code on Wages - 2019

Are there any states which have tried to implement the Inter-State Act?

- The first **Jharkhand Migrant Survey (JMS) was recently conducted across 24 districts of the state.**
- Kerala has set up **facilitation centres (maintain data)** for migrant workers whom the state refers to as "guest workers".
- In 2012, **Odisha and Andhra Pradesh (AP) signed an MoU** to track labourers migrating from Odisha to work in brick kilns in the-united AP.

Way forward

- There is a public perception that public funds are only for the "legitimate residents" of an area. The political class engaged in narrow 'vote bank' politics also tend to overlook the genuine concern of migrants.
- These issues have to be tackled through long-term awareness campaigns.
- Literacy campaigns specifically targeting the migrant population also need to be implemented. The "Changathi" campaign by the Kerala government can be used as a model.
- Every major city has to start a specific budget just for the development of the migrant population. The central government also has to look at distress migration as a disaster-related issue and allocate the necessary funds for the same.
- Smart city campaign needs to address the issue of large-scale affordable and safe housing for migrants.
- Law enforcement agencies need to sensitise themselves to the special needs of this vulnerable section. They also need to evolve special strategies to curb hate speech in social media.

Frequently Asked Questions on Migration in India
Q 1. What are the main causes for the higher number of migrants in India?

Ans. In India, the major cause of migration is unemployment or natural disasters/pandemics. People tend to migrate from rural to urban areas in search of livelihood and work. Apart from this, rising migration is also due to natural disasters and ethnic violence. The COVID-19 pandemic saw major migration in the country.

Q 2. What is the number of migrants in India?

Ans. The Economic Survey (2017) estimated that an average of 5–6 million Indians migrated annually between 2001 and 2011, leading to an inter-state migrant population of about 60 million and an inter-district migrant population as high as 80 million.