



## Empowering India's Migrant Workforce

*This editorial is based on “[Building a system that sees the migrant worker](#)” which was published in The Indian Express on 06/01/2025. The article brings into picture the e-Shram portal, the world's largest unorganized worker database, launched in 2021 to address migrant workforce challenges exposed by the pandemic. While initiatives like the 'One-Stop Solution' aim to integrate social security schemes, persistent issues such as documentation gaps, gender inequality, and non-portable benefits hinder inclusive progress.*

**For Prelims:** [e-Shram portal](#), [Inter-State Migrant Workmen \(Regulation of Employment and Conditions of Service\) Act, 1979](#), [Poverty](#), [Disguised unemployment](#), [Minimum Support Prices](#), [Urban literacy rates](#), [Cyclone Amphan](#), [Manipur violence](#), [Make in India](#), [PM Gati Shakti](#), [Smart Cities Mission](#), [Labour Codes](#), [Draft National Migrant Labour Policy](#), [Periodic Labour Force Survey \(PLFS\) 2021-22](#).

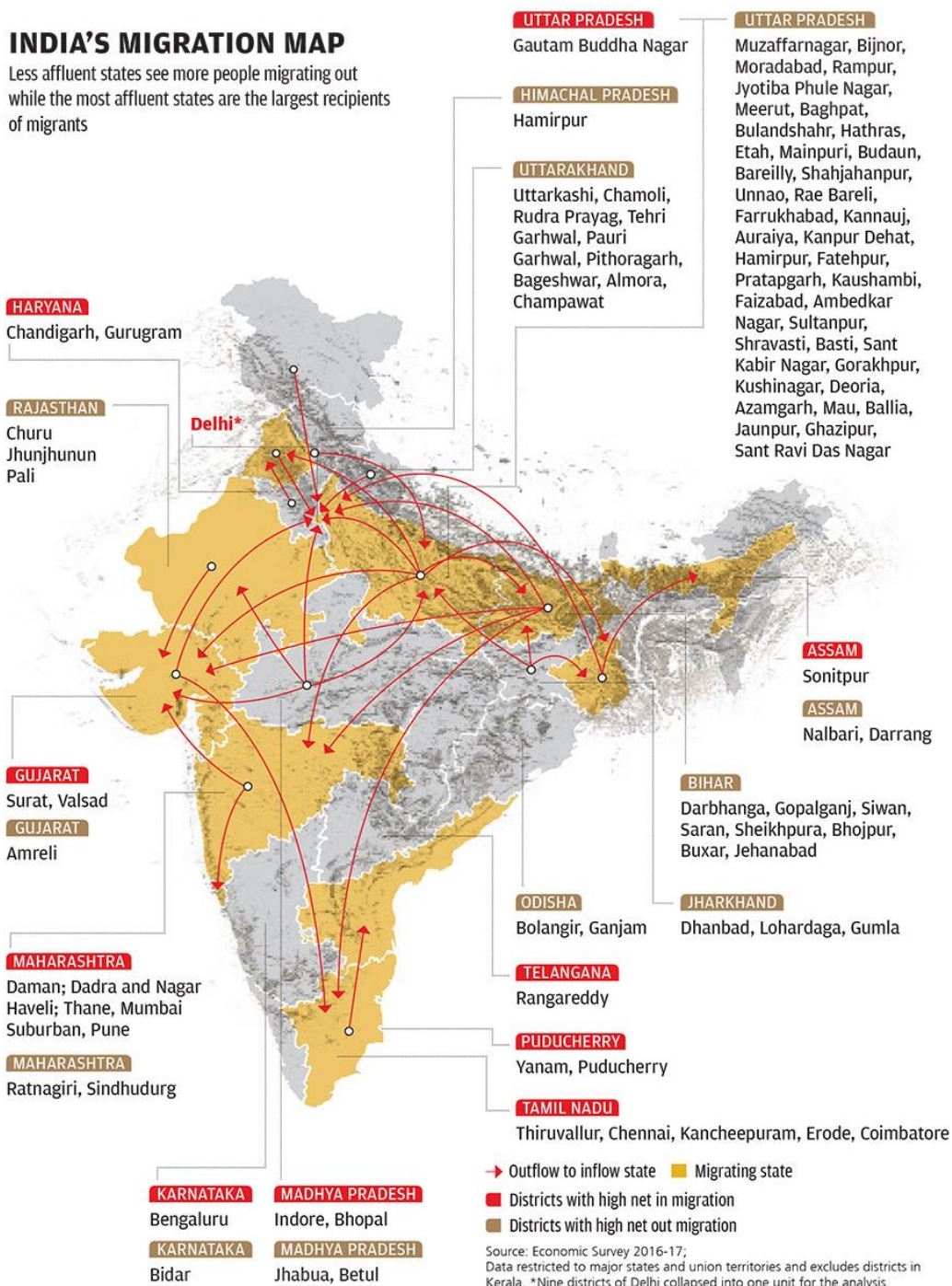
**For Mains:** Push and Pull Factors Related to Migration in India, Legal Framework for Migrant Welfare in India

[India's e-Shram portal](#), launched in 2021, stands as the **world's largest database** of unorganized workers with over 300 million registrations - a belated response to the **migrant crisis exposed by the pandemic**. The recent '**One-Stop Solution**' initiative promises to bridge crucial gaps by integrating various social security schemes, from ration cards to pension benefits. However, fundamental challenges persist - **from documentation barriers and gender inequalities to the lack of portable benefits across states**. As India aspires towards '**Viksit Bharat**', the meaningful inclusion of its migrant workforce, **who fuel the nation's economy**, remains both a critical challenge and an urgent necessity.

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## INDIA'S MIGRATION MAP

Less affluent states see more people migrating out while the most affluent states are the largest recipients of migrants



## Who are Considered as Migrant Workers?

The term "**migrant workers**" lacks a uniform definition, but conventional and legislative provisions provide some clarity:

- **International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families, 1990:** Defines a migrant worker as a person who is engaged, has been engaged, or is to be engaged in a remunerated activity in a state of which they are not a national.
- **Inter-State Migrant Workmen (Regulation of Employment and Conditions of Service) Act, 1979:** Defines an "**inter-state migrant workmen**" as a person recruited through a contractor in one state under an agreement for employment in another state, with or without the principal employer's knowledge.

## What are the Push and Pull Factors Related to Migration in India?

### ▪ Push Factors:

- **Economic Distress and Rural Unemployment:** Rural areas in India face **persistent poverty, disguised unemployment, and limited access to sustainable livelihoods**, driving people to cities.
  - Rural unemployment rate climbed to **7.8% in April 2024 (CMIE)**.
  - Declining farm incomes due to **erratic monsoons, with agriculture contributing only 16% to GDP despite employing 42% of the population**, further pushes migration.
  - Recent farmer protests over **Minimum Support Prices (MSP)** highlight the vulnerabilities in the agrarian economy.
- **Healthcare and Educational Deficiencies in Rural Areas:** Limited access to quality healthcare and education in rural India pushes families toward urban centers.
  - Rural areas face a shortfall of **79.9% of specialists in Community Health Centres**.
    - Moreover, **urban literacy rates (87.7%) far exceed rural rates (73.5%)**.
    - This creates a significant pull towards cities offering better infrastructure.
- **Climate Change and Environmental Degradation:** Increasing climate-induced calamities like droughts, floods, and cyclones force internal migration.
  - For instance, the **NDMA Report 2021-22 states that 68% of India's cultivable area is vulnerable to droughts**, affecting livelihoods.
  - **Cyclone Amphan in 2020 displaced over 2.4 million people**. Rising sea levels also threaten coastal populations, especially in regions like the **Sundarbans**.
- **Social Insecurity and Caste-Based Discrimination:** Marginalized communities often migrate due to social exclusion and lack of equitable opportunities in their native places.
  - Scheduled Castes and Tribes face higher unemployment rates.
  - This disparity is more pronounced in rural areas where caste-based violence, such as the **Hathras incident (2020)**, further exacerbates migration pressures.
- **Political Instability and Conflict Zones:** Insurgency in northeastern states and **Naxalite** activity in central India have forced families to migrate for safety.
  - For example, **Manipur violence accounted for 97% of displacements** in South Asia in 2023.
  - Conflict-driven migration is also seen in **Jammu & Kashmir**, where incidents like the **Pulwama attack (2019)** destabilized local economies and security.

### ▪ Pull Factors:

- **Urban Job Opportunities and Industrialization:** Cities attract migrants with **better-paying jobs in construction, services, and manufacturing sectors**.
  - India's urban population will contribute as high as **75% to GDP by 2030 (CMIE)**.
  - Initiatives like the **Make in India** and infrastructure projects, such as **PM Gati Shakti**, have increased demand for low-skilled labor.
  - **Bengaluru's booming IT sector** has also pulled high-skilled professionals across India.
- **Improved Healthcare and Educational Facilities:** Urban centers like Delhi, Mumbai, and Chennai offer **advanced medical care and top-tier educational institutions**.
  - According to **National Health Profile 2022**, rural hospitals comprise only **36.5% of the total beds and urban hospitals hold 63.5%**.
  - Furthermore, institutions like **IITs and AIIMS act as magnets for talent from remote regions** seeking higher education and better health outcomes.
- **Social Mobility and Diverse Opportunities:** Urban spaces provide anonymity and reduced social constraints, enabling marginalized communities to pursue better opportunities.
  - For example, cities like **Mumbai have higher representation of women in the workforce**, driven by service sectors like IT and hospitality.
  - Female Labour Force Participation Rate in urban areas rises from **22.7% to 25.6%** during January - March 2023 to **January - March 2024**.

- **Improved Infrastructure and Livability in Urban Regions:** Urban areas offer superior **transport, housing, and digital connectivity, driving migration.**
  - India's **Smart Cities Mission** has enhanced infrastructure in 100 cities, attracting skilled and unskilled labor.
- **Globalization and Aspirations for Better Quality of Life:** Exposure to global markets and culture through digital media has raised aspirations for urban lifestyles.
  - **Metropolitan cities serve as hubs for international companies** and better amenities, pulling migrants.
  - Metropolitan cities dominate fresher hiring in India. **Delhi/NCR** accounts for the largest share of job postings for freshers at **21%**, followed by **Bengaluru at 14%**.
    - Also, Mumbai, Chennai, Pune, and Hyderabad each contributed **8% to the total postings.**

## What is the Legal Framework for Migrant Welfare in India?

### ▪ Key Legislation

- **Inter-State Migrant Workmen Act, 1979:**
  - Mandates the registration of establishments employing migrant workers.
  - Requires contractors to obtain licenses from both home and host states.
  - Challenges: Poor implementation in practice.
- **Labour Codes:**
  - **Code on Wages, 2018**
  - **Industrial Relations Code, 2020**
  - **Code on Social Security, 2020**
  - **Occupational Safety, Health, and Working Conditions Code, 2020**

### ▪ Steps Taken by the Government for Migrant Welfare

- **Central Government Initiatives:**
  - **Relief and Rehabilitation of Migrants and Repatriates Scheme:**
    - Continuation of 7 sub-schemes approved by the Union Government.
  - **Draft National Migrant Labour Policy (2021):**
    - Prepared by NITI Aayog in collaboration with civil society.
  - **Major Projects and Schemes:**
    - **One Nation One Ration Card (ONORC):** Ensures food security for migrants.
    - **Affordable Rental Housing Complexes (ARHC):** Provides low-cost housing options.
    - **PM Garib Kalyan Yojana:** Offers financial assistance and food security.
  - **e-Shram Portal:** Aims to create a comprehensive database of unorganized workers.
- **State Government Initiatives:**
  - **Kerala's Facilitation Centres:**
    - Maintain data on incoming migrant workers and address their grievances.
  - **Jharkhand's Safe and Responsible Migration Initiative (SRMI) (2021):**
    - Systemic registration of migrant workers for monitoring in source and destination districts.
    - Establishment of 'Labour Consulates' in various states for assistance.

## What are the Key Issues Faced by Migrant Workers in India?

- **Lack of Social Security and Legal Protections:** Migrant workers, mostly in the **informal sector**, lack access to formal social security systems like EPF, health insurance, or maternity leave due to unregistered employment and interstate mobility.
  - According to the **Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) 2021-22**, **90% of India's workforce is informal.**
  - The **Inter-State Migrant Workmen Act, 1979**, meant to safeguard them, remains poorly enforced.
- **Exploitation and Wage Discrimination:** Migrant workers often face **underpayment, wage theft, and longer working hours** compared to local workers due to weak enforcement of labor laws.

- A survey revealed that **64% of migrant workers did not receive full wages during the Covid-19 lockdown.**
- **Poor Living Conditions and Housing Exclusion:** Migrants live in **overcrowded spaces with inadequate sanitation**, water, and electricity due to the unavailability of affordable housing in cities.
  - India's **slum population in 2020 is estimated at 236 million** suggesting that nearly half of its urban population lives in slums (UN-Habitat 2021)
- **Loss of Entitlements Due to Documentation Issues:** Migrant workers face challenges in accessing welfare schemes like PDS and housing due to the lack of portability of documents across states.
  - The [One Nation, One Ration Card \(ONORC\) scheme](#), meant to ensure food security, but its reach remains weak.
  - Similarly, the **lack of voter ID portability disenfranchises millions during elections.**
  - Migrant families struggle to access healthcare and education due to **documentation issues, exclusion from local services, and language barriers in host states.**
- **Gender-Specific Challenges:** Female migrant workers face added **vulnerabilities, including sexual harassment, low wages, and lack of access** to childcare or reproductive healthcare services.
  - Between 2018 and 2022, over 10,000 trafficking cases were reported, many of whom were migrant workers but convictions were **only 4.8% of the 26,849 arrests.**
  - Also, Female domestic workers, often migrants, earn much **less than their male counterparts in informal jobs.**
- **Social Alienation and Discrimination:** Migrant workers often face **xenophobia, exclusion, and discrimination** in host states due to linguistic, cultural, and regional biases.
  - During the **Covid-19 crisis**, several states imposed strict movement restrictions, labeling migrants as "**virus carriers**," exacerbating their marginalization.
- **Absence of Childcare Support:** Migrant families face challenges in securing childcare, leading to children either being left behind in their native places or exposed to unsafe conditions at worksites.
  - **Global Education Monitoring Report 2019** reveals that about **80% of seasonal migrant children** in seven cities in India lacked access to education near work sites.
  - **Children accompanying parents to construction sites** or fields are at risk of accidents, malnutrition, and neglect.
- **Inconsistent Policies Between States:** A lack of policy harmonization among states leads to unequal treatment of migrants, especially those crossing state boundaries.
  - For example, migrants from **Bihar and UP working in Gujarat or Maharashtra often face difficulties** accessing local welfare schemes due to domicile-based restrictions.

## What Measures can be Adopted to Ensure the Welfare and Integration of Migrant Workers?

- **Portable Social Security Systems:** Develop a nationwide platform for portability of social security benefits, such as **EPF, ESIC, and other welfare entitlements**, to address interstate mobility challenges.
  - Integration of the **One Nation, One Ration Card (ONORC) scheme** with health insurance schemes like [PMJAY](#) can ensure food and healthcare security for migrant families across states.
  - e-Shram can be integrated with schemes like **PM-Svanidhi and Vishwakarma Yojana**, enabling seamless data connectivity.
    - This integration would facilitate tracking worker entitlements, and ensuring easy access to information.
- **Formalization of Employment and Skill Certification:** Encourage formal employment contracts and skill mapping to integrate migrants into organized sectors, ensuring fair wages and legal protections.
  - Programs like **Skill India Mission** and [PM Kaushal Vikas Yojana \(PMKVY\)](#) can provide certified training for migrants, increasing their employability.
  - Formalization could improve productivity and reduce wage exploitation, benefiting both workers and employers.
- **Affordable Housing and Livelihood Clusters:** Develop affordable rental housing schemes for

migrants under the **Affordable Rental Housing Complexes (ARHC) initiative**, integrated with urban development policies like the **Smart Cities Mission**.

- Creating livelihood clusters near these housing complexes can reduce travel costs and enhance work-life balance.
- For example, **linking ARHCs with manufacturing hubs under Make in India** could ensure proximity to job opportunities while improving living standards.
- **Digitization of Welfare Delivery and Mobile Connectivity:** Develop migrant-friendly mobile applications to provide digital access to entitlements, including ration, healthcare, and financial services.
  - Strengthen the **implementation of Aadhaar-linked benefits and integrate them with state-specific welfare schemes** to ensure seamless delivery.
- **Gender-Sensitive Policies for Female Migrants:** Develop targeted policies addressing the unique needs of female migrants, including safety measures, wage parity, and access to childcare facilities.
  - For instance, **integrating Anganwadi services with urban housing policies can provide childcare support for working mothers** in informal sectors.
  - Enabling workplace safety and gender equality could significantly improve female labor force participation among migrants.
- **Healthcare Inclusion and Occupational Safety:** Introduce **mobile health clinics and occupational health programs for migrants**, especially those working in hazardous industries like construction and mining.
  - Strengthening the reach of **Ayushman Bharat** by linking it with employers in the unorganized sector can ensure **health insurance coverage for workers and their families**.
  - Preventive care at workplaces can reduce healthcare costs and improve productivity.
- **State Collaboration for Unified Policies:** Encourage state governments to harmonize labor policies through a national framework for interstate migrant workers.
  - The implementation of the **Inter-State Migrant Workmen Act** should be revamped to ensure coordination between source and destination states for grievance redressal.
  - **NITI Aayog's suggestion for a "National Migrant Policy"** could provide a blueprint for better integration of welfare schemes across states.
- **Creation of Livelihood Zones in Rural Areas:** Develop agro-industrial hubs and rural livelihood zones under **National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) and SFURTI (Scheme of Fund for Regeneration of Traditional Industries)** to reduce distress migration.
  - Linking these programs with self-help groups under the **Deendayal Antyodaya Yojana (DAY-NRLM)** could generate sustainable employment locally.
- This would empower rural communities while reducing migration pressures on urban areas.
- **Educational and Skill Support for Migrant Children:** Establish portable education systems with **open schooling and mid-day meal portability** to ensure uninterrupted education for migrant children.
  - Link the **Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan** with state-level programs to address language barriers in schools for migrant children.
- **Financial Inclusion and Credit Access:** Promote financial literacy programs and ensure easy access to banking services for migrants through simplified KYC norms and mobile banking.
  - Strengthen outreach of programs like **Jan Dhan Yojana** and democratise linkage with Aadhaar-enabled direct benefit transfers (**JAM Trinity**) to reduce dependency on informal moneylenders.
- **Public-Private Partnerships for Welfare Delivery:** Leverage private sector participation in implementing welfare measures like skill training, affordable housing, and healthcare for migrants.
  - **Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives** can complement government efforts by funding social infrastructure projects for migrant communities.

## Conclusion:

The welfare of migrant workers is crucial for India's inclusive growth and economic resilience. While existing frameworks like the e-Shram portal and initiatives such as **ONORC and ARHC show promise**, gaps in implementation, portability of benefits, and gender-sensitive policies persist. A **comprehensive and inclusive national migrant policy** is essential to ensure equitable opportunities

and dignity for this vital workforce.

**Drishti Mains Question:**

Discuss the challenges faced by migrant workers in India, both inter-state and intra-state, in accessing social security benefits and ensuring equitable working conditions. Suggest measures to address these issues in the context of India's aspiration for inclusive growth.

**UPSC Civil Services Exam, Previous Year Questions (PYQ)**

**Q.** What are the main socio-economic implications arising out of the development of IT industries in major cities of India? **(2021)**

**Q.** Discuss the changes in the trends of labour migration within and outside India in the last four decades. **(2015)**

PDF Reference URL: <https://www.drishtias.com/printpdf/empowering-indias-migrant-workforce>

