



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](#).

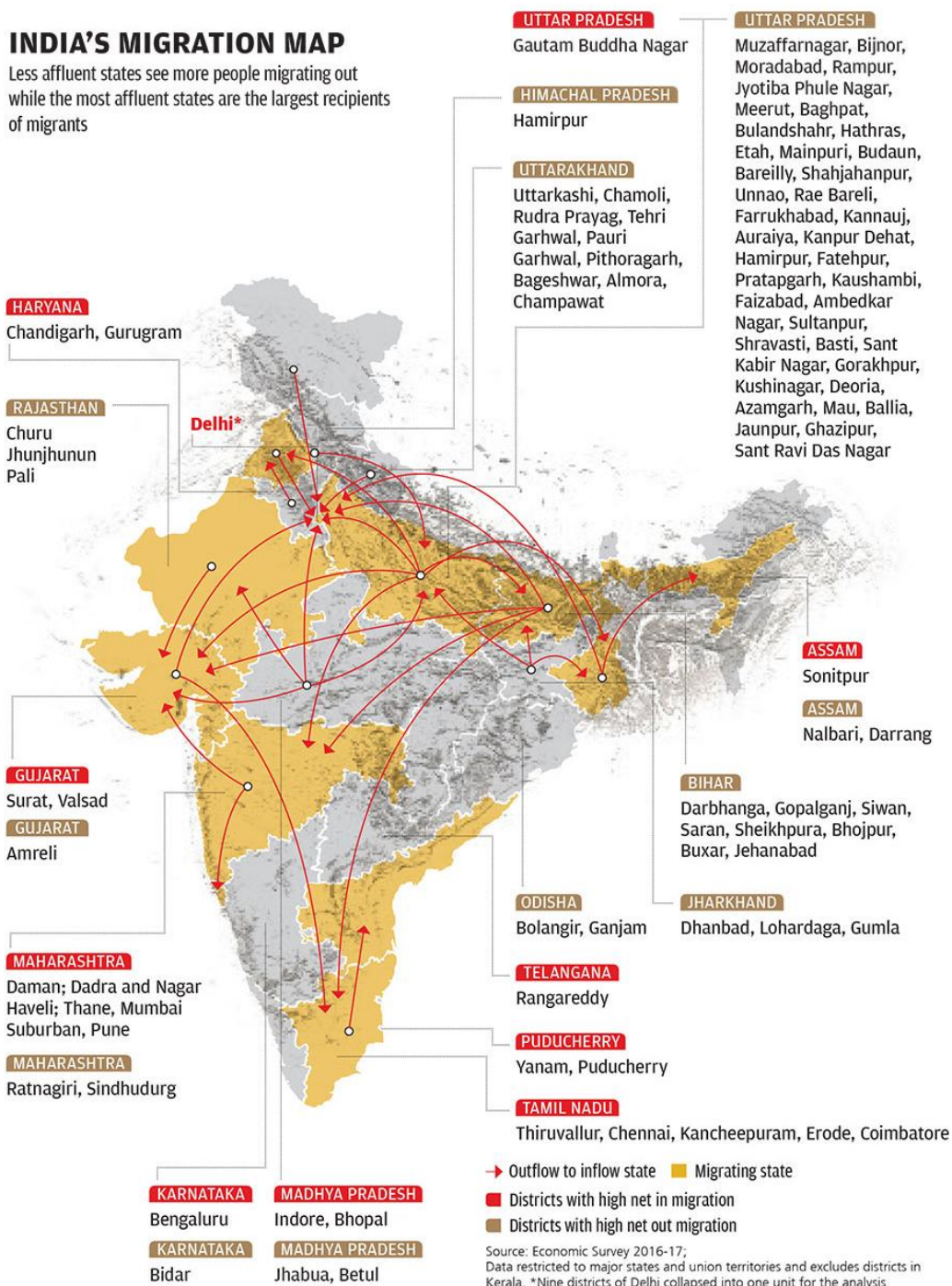
For Mains: Push and Pull Factors Related to Migration in India, Legal Framework for Migrant Welfare in India

[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)**

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