



An issue of lives versus livelihoods

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(Mains GS 2 : Welfare schemes for vulnerable sections of the population by the Centre and the States and the performance of these schemes; mechanisms, laws, institutions and Bodies constituted for the protection and betterment of these vulnerable sections)

Context:

- Strict to moderate lockdowns are being imposed again leading to terminating jobs in many establishments employing large numbers of informal workers.
- Of those employed in the informal category, large numbers include migrants who face a bleak future, with job losses, loss of rented accommodations, a lack of sustainable income and savings to ensure food, transportation back to villages or any other emergency including falling victim to COVID-19.

Grim to grimmer:

- Given their bitter experiences last year, migrants have already begun their journeys back to villages, paying exorbitant sums for their travel.
- Although no bright prospect awaits them there given the state of rural distress which initially pushed them to seek a better future in the urban areas.
- Even they did not expect new job opportunities, especially under shrinking National Rural Employment Guarantee Act allotments by the government.
- The continuing exodus unofficially records figures upward of 4 lakh (Western Railway) between April 1 and 12, while the Central Railways sent back 4.7 lakh migrants, all from Maharashtra, over the last few weeks.
- Such journeys will be recorded in history as those of destitution, offering no prospects of a better state.

Distress created by Covid-19

- With multiple issues of serious sufferings on account of COVID-19- related distress, the country has less time to discuss the fate of these unwanted migrants on their path of reverse migration.

- Migrants are fleeing from centres of livelihood toward dark holes of rural helplessness and poverty.
- To provide a narrative of who these people are, we may describe them as 'mobile by default', with growing rural distress and inadequate official policies failing to support the ailing rural economy.

Lack of policy support:

- Providing a mirror image of the previous tragedy in 2020, this unwanted trek back to where they came from provides them no future worth mentioning.
- The conditions faced by these workers under a 'curfew-to-lockdown' status include the immediate termination of their livelihoods in terms of jobs, access to accommodation and near insolvency.
- That the situations faced by migrants are not a matter of concern in policy making is quite apparent.
- There has been no attempt to have an official estimate of such flows, either incoming or reverse.
- Nor has any thought, going by official announcements, been made visible to redress the miseries that await the returning migrants.
- The recent official announcement of free ration of 5 kg cereals to 80 crore families is the only sop visible so far.

Impact on urban centres.

- The measure of using lockdowns and curfews to save lives also takes away the means of livelihood for the rootless and roofless migrants.
- State needs to provide for some short-term relief for the workers and their families not wanted any more in the urban areas.
- The flow provided a reserve army of cheap labour waiting to be hired at wages which, often, could dip lower than the statutory minimum, especially after meeting the demands of the mediating contractor who arranged for the migration from villages.
- With the formal organised industry employing as many as one half or more of employees with casual or informal status, it proved rather opportune for enterprises in factories, construction sites and other labour-intensive activities to make use of these migrants in their cost-cutting exercises.
- On the whole, the presence of the rural migrants benefited the urban economy by providing cheap labour to manufacturing units and cheap services to households.
- However, these jobs provided did not entail further obligations on the part of the employers or the state, given that the 'footloose' migrants never had any legal status as a working population.

No labour safeguards:

- There has not been any attempt ever to ensure some legal safeguards to migrant people.
- Available legislation does not provide any evidence of addressing the issue especially in the current crisis, a pattern indicative of a minimalist state with close alliances with capital in the process.
- The Contract Labour (Regulation and Abolition) Act 1970 conferred on casual labour a legal status by providing a mechanism for registration of contractors engaging 20 or more workers.
- While it was never effective, the Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions Code, 2020 has replaced all such Acts.
- Seeking, rather ineffectively, to regulate the health and safety conditions of workers in establishments with 10 or more workers, the Code has replaced 13 prevailing labour laws.

Conclusion:

It is thus more than obvious that none of the so-called corrective measures was of any significance in relation to what the migrants have been experiencing today since partial or total lockdowns have been imposed over the last few weeks.