

THE STATE MUST ADDRESS MIGRANTS' VULNERABILITIES

Relevant for: Indian Society | Topic: Urbanization, their problems and their remedies incl. Migration & Smart Cities

Two simultaneous processes are likely to significantly increase north-south migration in India in the not-so-distant future. Southern states are aging at a much faster rate than their northern counterparts. By 2050, more than 20% of the population in the south will be more than 65 years old. This figure will be around one-tenth for big northern states such as Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. The south is also richer than the north, which means that wage rates are significantly higher in the latter.

To be sure, migration is not a new phenomenon in India. While policy reforms like Goods and Services Tax have facilitated the movement of goods across states finally (70 years after Independence) there have been no restrictions on inter-state labour mobility in the country. But India's migration story is not without problems. Bulk of the migration which happens comprises of poorly educated unskilled workers. They are most vulnerable to being exploited by not just labour contractors, who pocket a significant share of their earnings, but also miss out on the various social welfare provisions in their places of work.

Schemes such as the public distribution system often demand permanent address proofs, which migrants find difficult to furnish. Governments are increasingly coming under pressure to exclude migrant workers from subsidised provisions of health and education. Migrant workers are also unlikely to be able to use local patronage networks comprising of politicians and bureaucrats to work the local administration to their advantage in times of need or crisis.

The State has a responsibility to correct this growing imbalance. Unskilled workers are among the most insecure sections of our workforce. Being a migrant worker increases that vulnerability even more. Because state governments are more likely to be influenced by local interests, they cannot be expected to act on this problem. The central government must take the initiative to evolve a consensus on a fair and compassionate migration policy.

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