

Facilitating Migration - Housing for Workers

What is the issue?

- Sudden and swift imposition of a complete national lockdown in India has left many migrant workers homeless.
- The resultant scenario and the impact on economy call for government intervention to ease migration process for the benefit of economy.

What is the lockdown-led migrants crisis?

- Many migrant workers found themselves far away from their homes post lockdown.
- Also, employment opportunities and payment dried up in their cities of adoption.
- The landlords threw out worker-tenants following the lockdown.
- Naturally, many of the migrants tried to get back home.
- But when normal transport was unavailable, some took the road and walked; others were stuffed into unpleasant holding camps.

What does this mean to the economy?

- These unfortunate circumstances are compounded by the general difficulties of the economy.
- This might altogether cause migrant workers to stay at home forever.
- In result, there would be a reduction in the number of “casual workers.”
- Casual workers are notably crucial for growth and development of the economy.
- Their absence would cause the broader economy to run down.
- The post-COVID India will thus have to make special provisions for the casual workers.

What are the much-needed measures?

- **Non-farm employment** - The government could try and make accessible non-farm employment closer to the migrants’ native places.
- This might require various forms of infrastructure upgrade in some of India’s most under-developed areas.
- This would be a win-win situation as living costs for workers would drop and wages in rural areas would go up.

- Factories in big cities and industrial centres would automatically have to pay more to attract migrants.
- Yet this depends crucially on overcoming the clustering in job creation.
- [This is particularly a feature of any capitalist economy.
- It is even more pronounced in large countries with considerable regional disparities, such as India.]
- **Easing migration** - A more realistic route would be for the government itself to help ease the process of migration.
- This should be done in partnership with the private sector.
- There are mechanisms across the world that can be examined for effectiveness in this regard.
- One such would be the creation and management of dormitory-style housing.
- This could be made from low-cost and pre-fabricated materials to a standard design.
- It must be ensured that the roll-out is rapid and the final product familiar to workers.
- The housing could include basic housekeeping services, the availability of food.
- It could also include user fees-based community services, such as a local health centre.
- Some private space, lockers for security, and public amenities are a must.
- This would be a variant of the Chinese model where the employer directly builds large dormitory-style accommodation for factory workers.
- The government need not do this itself; it can contract out, including to public-sector companies.
- E.g. many of the “chawls” in what was then the mill town of Bombay were built by the textile mills themselves
- Large businesses with casual workers could be charged a cess to pay for the initial capital cost.
- Otherwise, they could be charged rent for each worker with them who uses the facility.

What is the way forward?

- Attempts as the above were sharply variable in the quality of life they provided.
- In today’s India, emphasis must be on providing a decent rather than graceless existence for the migrant.
- Some measures have been announced as part of the revival package by the government to ensure the growth of rental housing in cities.
- The emphasis, however, must be on providing a path to urbanisation for the return of the workers.

Source: Business Standard

