Improving the Migrant Workers' Condition

What is the issue?

- After a stressful lockdown period, migrant workers have returned to their villages.
- Many have said they wish to stay there and no longer yearn to go back to their work in the cities.

Why do they say so?

- This is understandable given their terrible living conditions in the cities and the shocking treatment meted out to them during lockdown.
- This is an opportunity for those who work for workers security, for those in the cooperative movement, etc to enable the migrant workers to fulfil their desire of staying at home.

What could the migrant workers do?

- Back home, the migrants can form **cooperative societies**. So can MGNREGA workers.
- Many migrant workers said they worked as tailors, plumbers, cooks, and construction workers in the cities. All of them can form cooperatives.

What will be the purpose of these cooperatives?

- These cooperative societies could start developing their services or products that can be sold with better terms and conditions.
- Many government agencies are mandated to help build cooperative societies.
- There are also cooperative banks to help such societies.
- With large national institutions enabling such cooperative societies, groups of migrant workers can find institutional strength.

What could seasonal workers or those without a local market do?

- Those whose skills or products do not have enough marketing in a local area can re-enter the city as **labour cooperatives**, or even unions.
- These unions could have demands that they get housing and other support systems that help them have a decent living, not only a wage.
- Many workers are engaged in seasonal work in cities.

- It is customary for such workers to provide their services and return to their villages.
- They too could get together to form **service cooperatives**.
- NGOs and cooperative federations, agencies such as the National Cooperative Union of India, and labour unions can intervene.

What are some examples?

- The AMUL project is a model of one kind.
- But there are other, lesser-known models which are not as sophisticated and fair in terms of wages and other terms as AMUL but still offer ideas for today.
- India has examples of putting-out work in several industries.
- It is a deeply exploitative system where the people on contractual work had poor salaries and no benefits.
- Cooperatives, on the other hand, can get the same process done without the middle man.

Why MGNREGA should be given a better shape?

- MGNREGA has been offered as a way of alleviating migrant workers' distress.
- But this is only a short term and vulnerable wage-earning occupation.
- Sites cannot be opened during the monsoon season.
- Also, at any given area, there may not be enough sites to engage many people.
- So another possibility is to give MGNREGA better shape so that its funds can be used to enable women or artisans to market their products.

What could the state do?

- This is a valuable opportunity for the state to build new kinds of **economic structures** in India.
- It could build a pyramid of **group economic activity** going from the rural areas through collective marketing to fill the demand from cities.
- In the present dispersed production model, lack of concern for the fair treatment of the workers is what that has been lacking.
- **Successful unionisation** of workers can protect them from exploitation.
- This is an opportunity to rebuild economic production through different **institutional arrangements**.
- Arrangements that can provide an optimal solution to the workers as well as contribute to the GDP must be made.

Source: The Hindu

