National Policy on Migrant Labour - Needed

What is the issue?

- Insecurities (job, income and food) coupled with a fear psychosis forced migrant workers to reverse migrate to their homes.
- There is a need for a national policy on migrant labour to protect the interests of the migrant workers.

What is the condition of migrant workers?

- The migrant workers account for 20% of the total workforce.
- They are said to be responsible for 10% of GDP.
- But, they are paid less and are denied formal contracts even though they work harder and put in longer hours.
- They are not given gratuity or medical benefits and are not entitled to any leave with pay.
- When at work, they do not have adequate occupational safety.
- Out of work, they lack a social safety net.
- They lack political support as they are disenfranchised (they rarely get an opportunity to cast their vote).
- The local population hates them as they are seen as job-stealers.

Why do they still migrate?

- Even under the above circumstances, they continue to migrate for work.
- This is because they earn much more than what they can back home.
- Despite the relatively poor pay, they manage to save and wire money back home to supplement the family's income.
- But the traumatic experience they were subjected to post-lockdown would deter them from migrating in search of work again.

What is the current reality?

- With lockdown easing across the country and manufacturing picking up pace, industry is beginning to miss the migrant workers.
- Some companies in host States have already sent buses all the way to Odisha, UP and other home States to fetch the workers.
- Migrant workers, on their part, have realised that there is no way they can earn enough staying back in their villages.

- The demand for jobs under MGNREGS is far more than what is being offered.
- The migrant workers' return is critical for the country's rapid economic revival post-Covid.
- But, it is only fair that when they do come back, they are treated with the respect they deserve.

What is the existing legislation?

- Inter-State Migrant Workmen Act, 1979 is a law to prevent exploitation of migrant labour.
- It calls for registration of all establishments employing migrant labour and licensing of contractors.
- Contractors are mandated to provide details of immigrant labour they have deployed to the relevant authority.
- They should also ensure regular payment, suitable accommodation, no discrimination, free medical facilities and protective clothings.
- There is a reason why this law has remained just on paper.
- It is onerous to implement and makes the cost of hiring a migrant labour more than a local.
- Yet another case of an over-enthusiastic bureaucrat defeating the very purpose for which the law was made.

How would a policy protect the migrant workers' interests?

- The national policy should ensure that a migrant worker's economic, social and political rights are protected.
- They should not be discriminated against when it comes to pay and other benefits that regular workers get.
- They should be registered and given an ID which can be linked to their Aadhaar and Jan Dhan account.
- Once this is done, the government can use direct benefit transfer to send their benefits.
- The Government's plan to have a one nation-one ration card will help them source their entitlements from whereever they are based.
- Similarly, their voter ID card has to be made portable.
- The policy should also ensure that contractors and the employers are made accountable when they employ migrants.
- Efforts should be made to skill/re-skill the labourers and a national registry created for them based on their skills.

What could be done further?

- Home States like Uttar Pradesh should discuss with host States like Maharashtra about the safety of migrant workers.
- A smarter way is to start economically developing the home States and creating local employment.
- If they do so, supply of workers to host States will reduce and employers will be forced to treat them better.

Source: Business Line

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