

Introduction

- Covid-19 lockdown has led to an egress of migrant workers from cities to rural areas and threw the spotlight on the vast number of Indians who live outside their home states.
- Within days of the lockdown announcement, harrowing accounts began pouring in of migrants dying of starvation, fatigue, and road accidents as they started their long treacherous journeys – of more than 1,000 km on foot – from cities back to their villages.

Background

- The Constitution of India (Article 19) gives the right to all citizens “to move freely throughout the territory of India and to reside and settle in any part of the territory of India.
- According to the 2011 Census, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar are responsible for the most number of migrants as 20.9 million people migrated outside the state from the two states.
- Four states, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh accounted for 50% of India's total inter-state migrants.
- Uttar Pradesh has the highest share of out-migrants while Maharashtra has the highest share of in-migrants.
- The number of inter-state migrants grew at 55% between the 1991 and 2001 Census.
- This came down to just 33% between the 2001 and 2011 Census.

Step taken by Government

- The Unorganised Workers' Social Security Act (UWSS), 2008 was passed by the Government which defines unorganised workers as home-based worker, self-employed worker or wage worker in the unorganised sector.
- Pradhan Mantri Shram Yogi Maan-dhan Yojana was also introduced to ensure old age protection for unorganised workers.
- Atal Pension Yojana was launched under the National Pension System (NPS) to provide a steady stream of income after the age of 60 to all citizens of India including the migrants and labourers.
- Pradhan Mantri Jeevan Jyoti Bima Yojana and Pradhan Mantri Suraksha Bima Yojana provide for life insurance and accident insurance respectively to the migrants and labourers.
- Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana aims at providing health cover to protect the migrants among others against the financial risk arising out of catastrophic health episodes.

Highlights

- As per the World Bank report, the nationwide lockdown in India has impacted nearly 40 million internal migrants. Around 50,000–60,000 moved from urban centers to rural areas of origin in the span of a few days.
- The magnitude of internal migration is about two-and-a-half times that of international migration.
- Lockdowns, loss of employment, and social distancing prompted a chaotic and painful process of mass return for internal migrants in India

Way Ahead

- Relaxing the restrictions that prevent migrants from accessing vital benefits such as food rations in their destination cities
- Schemes like MGNREGA, Public Distribution Scheme (PDS) and Ujjwala need to be made portable and extensive. Geofencing of different benefits enabling a migrant worker to choose location-wise benefits.
- Preparing a comprehensive database of the migrant workers' source and destination, demography, employment patterns and skill sets of different benefits enabling a migrant worker to choose location-wise benefits.
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