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Q11

Discuss the changes in the trends of labour migration within and outside India in the last four decades.

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2015 · GS I · 12 marks · Indian Society and Diversity

Salient features of Indian Society, Diversity of India.

Core demand of the question

- Discuss how labour migration inside India and from India abroad has changed over about four decades to 2015
- Cover streams, skills, gender, destinations, and causes, with limits of the data

Revision summary

Rural-rural and marriage migration stayed large, but rural-urban and inter-state work streams grew.

Sending belts of the north and east fed metros, Gujarat, and Punjab construction and services.

Gulf contract labour after the 1970s oil boom remained the main overseas worker stream.

From the 1990s a skilled and student stream to the West sat beside the Gulf.

Remittances and circular return link both maps; data still miss many short-term movers.

Introduction

For about forty years before 2015, Indian labour moved more often, farther, and into new kinds of work. Inside the country the old rural-rural farm stream remained large, but rural-urban and inter-state moves grew. Abroad, the Gulf contract boom after the 1970s oil shock was joined, from the 1990s, by skilled and student migration to the West.

Body**Internal migration: what changed**

- **Census** and NSS rounds still showed a large share of short-distance, rural-rural moves, often of women at marriage, so the map of migration is not only men going to cities.
- Male circular migration from Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Odisha, Rajasthan, and parts of the east to Delhi, Mumbai, Gujarat, Punjab, and southern construction belts became more visible from the 1980s and 1990s.
- Work shifted from farm labour toward construction, small manufacturing, transport, security, and informal urban services, which is a change in occupation more than a change in legal protection.
- **Inter-state streams thickened after liberalisation:** industrial Gujarat, the National Capital Region, and metro services pulled labour even when the sending village kept a foothold through remittances and seasonal return.
- Some female streams grew in domestic work, garments, and care, but female labour-force participation stayed low, so internal migration did not become gender-equal.

- Distress after drought or farm crisis still sent people out, yet betterment migration for education and regular wages also rose in better-connected districts.

International migration: what changed

- After the 1973 oil boom, Kerala, then Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, and later Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, sent large numbers of contract workers to the Gulf Cooperation Council states under **kafala-type rules**.
- From the 1990s, information-technology, nursing, and professional visas to the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia created a second, more skilled diaspora beside the Gulf stream.
- Student mobility and family settlement grew, so "labour migration" abroad mixed workers, students, and citizens-in-waiting.
- Kerala's share of Gulf workers remained high, but north Indian and eastern shares rose, which changed the language and skill mix of Indian labour in West Asia.
- Remittances became a major external receipt for Kerala, Punjab, and then several Hindi-belt districts, linking village housing and education to foreign wages.
- Shocks such as the 1990-91 Gulf War, the 2008 slowdown, and periodic Saudi or UAE nationalisation drives showed that overseas Indian labour is cyclical, not a one-way ladder.

Limits and way forward

- **Census** undercounts short-term and circular workers, so trends are clearer in direction than in exact headcount.
- Policy must treat internal migrants as workers with portability of rations and health, and treat overseas workers with recruitment regulation, not only celebration of remittances.

Flow diagram

Village surplus and network -> Internal circular urban
Village surplus and network -> Gulf contract labour
Village surplus and network -> Skilled West and students
Internal circular urban -> Remittance circular return
Gulf contract labour -> Remittance circular return
Skilled West and students -> Diaspora settlement

Conclusion

Over four decades to 2015, internal migration became more urban, more inter-state, and more tied to construction and services, while marriage still moved many women. Overseas, Gulf contract work remained huge, but a skilled Western stream grew beside it. The trend is diversification of destinations and skills, not the end of distress movement.

Facts & figures

Gulf oil boom, 1970s

Demand for construction and service labour in GCC states that pulled Indian contract workers, first heavily from Kerala.

Census migration

Decennial counts that capture place of last residence but miss much short-term circular labour.

NSS employment surveys

Sample data used with the **Census** to track rural-urban work and informal jobs.

Kafala-type rules

Sponsor-tied employment in several Gulf states that shapes the unfreedom of contract workers.

IT and H-1B era, 1990s-2000s

Skilled Indian movement to the United States and other OECD labour markets after liberalisation.

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