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Q12

Case study. Migrant workers have always remained at the socio-economic margins of our society, silently serving as the instrumental labour force of urban economics. The pandemic has brought them into national focus. On announcement of a countrywide lockdown, a very large number of migrant workers decided to move back from their places of employment to their native villages. The non-availability of transport created its own problems. Added to this was the fear of starvation and inconvenience to their families. This caused the migrant workers to demand wages and transport facilities for returning to their villages. Their mental agony was accentuated by multiple factors such as a sudden loss of livelihood, possibility of lack of food and inability to assist in harvesting their rabi crop due to not being able to reach home in time. Reports of inadequate response of some districts in providing the essential boarding and lodging arrangements along the way multiplied their fears. You have learnt many lessons from this situation when you were tasked to oversee the functioning of the District Disaster Relief Force in your district. In your opinion what ethical issues arose in the current migrant crisis? What do you understand by an ethical care giving state? What assistance can the civil society render to mitigate the sufferings of migrants in similar situations?

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2020 · GS IV · 20 marks · Ethics Case Studies

Case Studies on above issues.

Core demand of the question

- Migrant workers, already at the socio-economic margin, walked home when a nationwide lockdown was announced: no transport, fear of starvation, wage loss, rabi harvest anxiety, uneven boarding along the route. You oversaw the District Disaster Relief Force. Ethical issues in the migrant crisis? What is an ethical care-giving State? What can civil society do in similar situations?

Revision summary

Ethical issues were dignity, abandonment after a freeze, invisible urban labour, unpaid wages, and a lottery of district mercy.

- **A care-giving State is a duty-bearer:** food without a local card, planned transport, wages, health and information in the worker's language.

Civil society runs kitchens, compiles lists, gives legal aid and records abuse.

It watches the State and must not be asked to replace trains and the treasury.

The lesson is to count and house the migrant before the next emergency order.

Introduction

The people who built the city were told to freeze, then discovered they had no city. The ethic is dignity, non-abandonment and justice to invisible labour. A care-giving State feeds, moves, pays and treats along the road. Civil society runs kitchens and watches - it does not replace the State.

Body

Stakeholders

- Migrant workers and the families waiting in villages, including those who needed to harvest rabi.
- Origin districts, destination cities, and the dusty stretches in between.
- Employers who held back wages; contractors who vanished.
- District Disaster Relief Force, police, railways, and health workers.
- Civil-society kitchens, gurudwaras, and volunteers.
- The rest of the public that wanted both a lockdown and a quiet pavement.

Ethical issues in the migrant crisis

- **Dignity:** workers were treated as a viral load to be cleared from a metropolis, not as citizens with names, language and a right to stand in the shade.
- **Non-abandonment:** a lockdown without trains, wages or food is an order to a person without the means to obey except by walking. That is abandonment dressed as epidemiology.
- **Justice to invisible labour:** urban welfare (rations, PDS portability, shelters) had long assumed a local, documented poor. The circular migrant was the exception the city lived on and did not count.
- **Sudden livelihood death:** loss of wage overnight without notice proportional to the harm, while capital and salaried classes logged in from home.
- **Family and harvest:** the rabi anxiety was not a rumour; it was a peasant calendar the lockdown did not read.
- **Uneven district response:** some corridors fed and housed; some pushed people to the next border. A Union lockdown with a lottery of mercy is an equality failure (**Article 14**) as well as a compassion failure.
- **Health along the route:** COVID risk was real; so was heat, hunger, accident and labour. Ethics does not choose only the virus.
- **Communication:** orders in a language and a medium (smartphone, e-pass) that the worker did not own.
- **Stigma:** calling the walker a super-spreader as a class, while needing him back when construction restarted.
- **Federal buck-passing:** origin, destination and transit States each hoping the column would become someone else's file.

An ethical care-giving State

- Care-giving here is not a charity slogan. It is the State as a duty-bearer that keeps people alive and unhumiliated when a public order makes ordinary life impossible.
- **Food:** cooked meals and dry ration without a local ration card as the only key - portability, camps, and schools as kitchens.
- **Transport:** planned shramik movement, rest, water, and toilets; walking is not a policy. If movement must stop, the stop is housed and fed where the person already is.
- **Wages:** enforce held-back pay; use disaster funds and, where the law allows, a living stipend so that a worker is not punished for the lockdown the State chose.
- **Health:** screening without beating; medicines, ORS, maternal care, and no dumping of a positive worker in a ditch.
- **Information:** loudspeakers, labour-union and contractor lists, a helpline that answers in Bhojpuri and Odia, not only in a PDF.
- Shelter in the destination city as the first default, so that a twelve-hundred-kilometre walk is not the only "choice."
- **Aftercare:** return to work when safe, with travel and a job that still exists, not a second abandonment.
- **The care-giving State is therefore logistics plus rights:** disaster management as if the migrant were a member of the household of the republic.

Civil society - help, do not replace

- Kitchens, water, shoes, phone-charging, and shade on the highway - the immediate body.
- **Data:** lists of who left which basti, who is missing, who is pregnant; feed the Collector, do not hoard for a grant.
- Volunteers who speak the workers' language; legal aid for wages; a camera that records a lathi so that the State can be held, not only fed.
- **Watch the State:** RTI, public hearings, and naming a district that closed a border without a camp. Civil society's highest ethic here is witness, not a parallel government.
- **Do not replace:** a langar is necessary and still cannot run a railway. Demanding trains and wages from the government is part of seva.
- Do not communalise care, and do not treat the migrant as a prop for a brand.
- Unions, student groups, and local traders' associations can keep a payroll honest when the contractor has left.

Lessons for a District Disaster Relief Force

- Count migrants before the next order; register clusters; pre-contract buses.
- Never announce a freeze that implies "go home" without a homeward machine.
- The ethical success is a worker who did not have to walk, or who walked only inside a cared corridor.

Flow diagram

Lockdown -> Migrants stranded
Migrants stranded -> Dignity
Migrants stranded -> Non-abandonment
Migrants stranded -> Justice to invisible labour
Care-giving State -> Food transport wages health
Civil society -> Kitchens data volunteers
Civil society -> Watch the State
Watch the State -> Care-giving State

Conclusion

The migrant crisis was a failure of dignity, non-abandonment and justice to the labour the city hides. An ethical care-giving State owes food, transport, wages and health along the route and at both ends. Civil society cooks, counts, translates and watches; it does not become the republic.

Facts & figures

Disaster Management Act, 2005

The Union and district architecture used in 2020; ethics asks that directions include the means to live, not only the prohibition.

Inter-State Migrant Workmen Act, 1979

A pre-existing, poorly implemented statute on contractors and displacement; the crisis showed a law that was not lived.

Code on Social Security, 2020 / unorganised worker boards

The later policy push to register gig and migrant workers is an admission that invisibility was the original ethical failure.

One Nation One Ration Card

Portability intended to let a migrant draw grain away from the home PDS shop; incomplete last-mile in 2020 made walking rational.

Supreme Court orders on migrants, 2020

The Court eventually directed transport, food and shelter; a reminder that care-giving can be a judicially noticed duty, not only a sentiment.