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Q6(a)

Elucidate the main problems and challenges faced by the migrant labourers in the recent 'Lockdown period'

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2021 · Sociology GS 1 · 20 marks · Sociology

Sociology - The Discipline: Modernity and social changes in Europe and emergence of sociology; Scope of the subject and comparison with other social sciences; Sociology and common sense.

Core demand of the question

- Examine the social consequences of the COVID-19 lockdown for migrant labourers
- Keep the examination within a 20-mark length

Revision summary

2020 lockdown cut informal urban wages and sent migrants walking home.

Marx's **reserve army** and Durkheim's anomie explain the structure.

Census undercount and weak interstate protection were the administrative facts.

Gendered unpaid care in villages absorbed the shock.

Cities rehired precarity; WFH belonged to another class.

Introduction

The 2020 lockdown stopped urban work and transport almost at once. Migrant labourers, mostly informal, lost wages and shelter and walked toward villages. The event was a public lesson in how Indian capitalism uses a **reserve army** without urban citizenship.

Body**Who the migrant worker is**

- Circular and seasonal labour ties village reproduction to city construction, factories, and services.
- **Karl Marx's reserve army fits:** surplus labour, cheap, dismissible when accumulation pauses.
- Caste- and region-typed streams, and a large male majority on some sites, with women in domestic and garment niches, structure who could leave and who was trapped.

Immediate consequences

- **Anomie in Durkheim's sense:** sudden collapse of the rules of work, rent, and food.
- Hunger, debt, and death on the road were not "natural" viral facts. They were organisational facts of the state and the firm.
- Children and the old in villages absorbed the shock through unpaid care, which gender analysis must name.

Structural consequences

- The fiction of a self-regulating labour market broke. Inter-State Migrant Workmen law had long been weak; the walk made the gap visible.
- Reverse migration reloaded rural households and, for a time, tightened some local labour markets.
- Trust in the city as a moral community failed. Organic solidarity of the urban division of labour snapped for those without contracts.

Data and knowledge

- **Census 2011** already undercounted circular migrants. Lockdown showed why a house-list misses them.
- **Qualitative streams on highways supplemented missing counts:** mixed method by force.

Longer traces

- Some returned to cities when work restarted; precarity was not abolished.
- Political talk of self-reliance sat beside unchanged informal dependence in global and domestic supply chains.
- Platform and WFH India continued for another class, sharpening dualism.

Flow diagram

Lockdown -> Work transport stop
Work transport stop -> Reverse migration
Informal no contract -> Reverse migration
Reverse migration -> Anomie debt village care
Reserve army -> Informal no contract

Conclusion

Lockdown consequences for migrant labourers were hunger, forced mobility, anomie, and a return to the village as shock-absorber. **Marx's reserve army** and **Durkheim's** broken regulation explain the structure. **Census** invisibility and weak interstate law were the administrative side. The city rebuilt on the same informal terms.

Facts & figures

Reverse migration 2020

Large return of informal workers to villages after the sudden halt of urban work and trains.

Reserve army

Marx: surplus labour that capital can hire and dismiss; lockdown was a mass dismissal.

Census 2011

Last completed census; weak on circular migrants who have two places of stay.

Informal work

No secure contract or social security; the typical condition of the walking workers.

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