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Q5(d)

What are the major problems faced by the labour migrants while working in informal sectors of Indian States? Discuss.

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2025 · Sociology GS 2 · 10 marks · Rural and Agrarian transformation in India

Rural and Agrarian transformation in India: Programmes of rural development, Community Development Programme, cooperatives, poverty alleviation schemes; Green revolution and social change; Changing modes of production in Indian agriculture; Problems of rural labour, bondage, migration.

Core demand of the question

- **List major problems of labour migrants in informal work across states:** contract, wage theft, housing, health, documents, gender, child, social isolation, disaster vulnerability
- **Use Interstate Migrant Workmen Act, BOCW, Code on Social Security, COVID reverse migration as illustrations**

Revision summary

Interstate migrants in informal work are hired through contractors, not stable contracts.

Wage theft, unsafe housing, and missing social security are the core problems.

Women and children carry extra risks of harassment and lost schooling.

COVID reverse migration exposed their civic invisibility.

Portability laws and e-SHRAM are incomplete answers to a structural informality.

Introduction

Most Indian migrants who cross state lines to work do not enter a factory with a standing order. They enter **informal sectors**: construction, brick kilns, garments, domestic work, street vending, and now platforms. Their problems are **legal invisibility plus social distance** in the host state.

Body**The usual injuries**

Contractors mediate hiring; the principal employer denies the relation. **Wage theft**, delayed payment, and piece-rates below minimum wage are routine. Housing is a jhuggi, a night shelter, or a site shed-**no tenancy right**. Health is out-of-pocket; accidents in construction are frequent; ESI rarely follows the worker. **Documents**-ration card, voter ID, e-SHRAM, One Nation One Ration-do not travel smoothly, so PDS and school admission break. **Women** face sexual harassment and unpaid care; **children** miss school or work. Language and caste isolation block unions. During **COVID-19**, reverse migration showed that the city would use their labour and not keep their bodies.

The **Interstate Migrant Workmen Act, 1979** was weakly enforced. **BOCW** cess boards are state-bound. Labour codes promise portability; practice is still the munshi's notebook. **Jan Breman's** footloose labour remains the right phrase: circular, indebted, and replaceable.

Host states want labour, not citizens. Sending states want remittances, not political anger. Migrants fall between. **Occupational safety is a sociological fact: heat, dust, falling from slabs, and pesticide exposure in destination farms. Unionisation is hard because the worksite dissolves when the building is finished. During elections they are a vote in the village and a non-person in the city.** Platform workers add a new informal layer without solving housing or PDS.

A just response would be portable social security, landlord-employer liability, and the right to stay. Until then, "problems of labour migrants" are the normal operating system of Indian informal capitalism.

Flow diagram

Sending household -> Contractor
Contractor -> Informal worksite
Informal worksite -> Wage and housing risk
Informal worksite -> Documents do not port

Conclusion

Informal migrant labour faces wage theft, bad housing, broken social security, gendered risk, and civic non-recognition. Law exists on paper; the contractor and the disaster reveal the social fact.

Facts & figures

Interstate Migrant Workmen Act 1979

Required registration and licensed contractors; enforcement was chronically weak.

BOCW

Building and Other Construction Workers welfare boards, funded by cess; benefits often fail circular migrants.

COVID-19 2020

Mass reverse migration after lockdown showed the absence of urban social citizenship for informal labour.