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EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

The Migrant as an Asset — Rethinking Internal Migration as a Development Driver

 **DOWN TO EARTH**

7 May 2026

SOCIAL ISSUES**ECONOMY****GS2****GS3**

CURATED & WRITTEN BY

**Bharat Choudhary**

UPSC Educator & Content Creator

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INTERVIEW ANGLE



"India has hundreds of millions of internal migrants who contribute enormously to GDP yet are excluded from most welfare programmes. What policy framework would recognise migrants as an asset rather than a problem? What are the key barriers to welfare portability?"

WHY IN NEWS

The **NCRB ADSI 2024** data (released May 2026) shows that **migrant workers face heightened vulnerability** — higher suicide rates in destination states, occupational hazards, and lack of welfare access. Simultaneously, the **India WIEGO study** and **NSSO Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) 2023–24** confirm that internal migrants account for **~15–20% of India's GDP** through remittances, labour supply, and urban economic activity. This dual reality — economic asset, policy exclusion — is the central contradiction the editorial addresses.

SCALE OF INTERNAL MIGRATION IN INDIA

Key Data

METRIC	DATA
Total internal migrants (Census 2011)	456 million (~37% of population)
Estimated current (2026)	~550–600 million (extrapolated)
Circular migrants	~100 million (seasonal, return to origin after work)
Inter-state migrants	~65–70 million (NSSO estimate)
Annual remittances (internal)	~₹1.5–2 lakh crore/year
Migration corridors	UP-Bihar → Delhi/Mumbai/Gujarat/Haryana (largest)
Migrant share of construction labour	>85%
Migrant share of brick kiln, textile, domestic work	>60–70%

THE PARADOX: ECONOMIC CONTRIBUTION VS. POLICY EXCLUSION

Contribution

SECTOR	MIGRANT ROLE
Construction	85%+ of unskilled labour; ~\$350 billion sector
Manufacturing	Textiles, automotive ancillaries, food processing
Domestic work	4–5 million migrant domestic workers (urban India)
Agriculture	Inter-state harvest labour (Punjab, Haryana paddy)
Services	Delivery platforms, sanitation, street food, retail

Remittances: Internal remittances from cities to rural areas sustain farm families, fund education, and finance local consumption — critical for rural development in Bihar, UP, Odisha, Jharkhand.

Exclusion from Welfare

?	
NFSA / PDS ration card	No — location-specific; migrant loses entitlement at destination
MGNREGS	No — only at origin village panchayat
Ayushman Bharat (PM-JAY)	Partial — portability added but implementation weak
State social security (Rajasthan, Kerala pension)	No — state-specific
BOCW welfare board (construction workers)	Fragmented — 36 state boards, non-portable
Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (urban)	Accessible but requires address proof migrant often lacks

One Nation One Ration Card (ONORC): The most significant portability reform — allows PDS card to be used at any FPS in India. Rolled out 2020–2022. But coverage gaps remain (e-PoS machines in some states).

THE COVID EXPOSURE — A POLICY TURNING POINT

Reverse Migration (2020)

- ~8–12 crore migrants returned home during the March–May 2020 COVID lockdown
- Walking hundreds of kilometres — became the defining image of migrant vulnerability
- **Commission on Migrants** (Supreme Court: Harsh Mander committee) documented conditions
- **e-Shram portal** launched 2021 to register unorganised workers including migrants

What COVID revealed

- 1 No database of internal migrants — government could not identify, contact, or support them
- 2 Exclusion from PDS at destination — returned home to no food support either
- 3 BOCW cess collected (~₹54,000 crore) — largely unspent; construction migrants couldn't access it

A MIGRANT-POSITIVE POLICY FRAMEWORK

1. Portability of All Entitlements

- Extend ONORC model to Ayushman Bharat, BOCW welfare, and state social security
- **Aadhaar-linked seeding** of all entitlements → location-independent access

2. Source-Destination Corridor Approach

- **Bilateral agreements** between high-migration state pairs (UP ↔ Maharashtra; Bihar ↔ Delhi)
- Joint welfare delivery, helplines, transit centres
- Model: **Kerala Overseas Workers' Welfare Fund** (for international migrants) — adapt for internal

3. Dedicated Migrant Policy

- **Ratan Kapur Committee (2017)** recommended a National Migrant Policy — not yet enacted
- Draft **Migrant Workers (Welfare and Protection) Bill** — pending

4. e-Shram Universal Coverage

- Currently 30 crore+ registered — but not linked to actual benefit delivery
- Needs: single welfare dashboard where any registered migrant can claim any entitlement

5. Urban Migrant Housing

- Rental housing market reform (Model Tenancy Act 2021) — migrant-friendly affordable rental
- Affordable Rental Housing Complexes (ARHCs) scheme — repurpose vacant govt flats

UPSC RELEVANCE

PAPER	ANGLE
GS2 — Social Justice	Migrant welfare, welfare portability, One Nation One Ration Card, BOCW
GS3 — Economy	Internal migration contribution to GDP, remittances, circular migration, labour markets
GS2 — Governance	e-Shram, social security for unorganised sector, National Migrant Policy

Mains Keywords: Internal migration, circular migrants, ONORC (One Nation One Ration Card), e-Shram portal, BOCW welfare board, PLFS, migrant welfare portability, Model Tenancy Act, ARHA, remittances ₹1.5–2 lakh crore, Ratan Kapur Committee, National Migrant Policy, source-destination corridor, COVID reverse migration

Prelims Facts Corner

ITEM	FACT
Internal migrants (Census 2011)	456 million (~37% of population)
Current estimate (2026)	~550–600 million
Annual internal remittances	~₹1.5–2 lakh crore
One Nation One Ration Card (ONORC)	2020–22 rollout — PDS portability across India
e-Shram portal	Launched 2021 — registers unorganised/migrant workers; 30 crore+ registered
BOCW cess collected	~₹54,000 crore — largely unspent (construction worker welfare fund)
COVID reverse migration (2020)	~8–12 crore migrants returned home during lockdown
Model Tenancy Act	2021 — migrant-friendly rental housing reform
ARHA scheme	Affordable Rental Housing Complexes — repurpose vacant govt flats for migrants
Ratan Kapur Committee (2017)	Recommended National Migrant Policy (not yet enacted)
PLFS 2023–24	Periodic Labour Force Survey — key data on migrant workers


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