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The City That Uses and Erases: Labour at the Urban Margin

 **THE HINDU**

11 July 2026

SOCIAL ISSUES**GS1****GS2**

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THE LIFT LINE

A city is built by the hands it refuses to house, and the distance between where the worker labours and where the worker is allowed to live is the true map of urban inequality.

WHY THIS EDITORIAL MATTERS FOR YOUR EXAM

The Indian city depends on an army of informal and migrant workers, the construction labourer, the domestic help, the delivery rider, the street vendor, yet it systematically pushes them to its physical and social margins. They build the towers but sleep on their edges; they keep the city running but are invisible in its plans. This is not accidental neglect but the spatial logic of unplanned urbanisation and a globalising economy that wants their labour without owning their welfare. For your exam this is a question of society and social justice: how urbanisation produces inequality, and what the state owes its most vulnerable urban citizens.

GS Paper 1: urbanisation, its problems and remedies; salient features of Indian society and the effects of globalisation on it.

GS Paper 2: mechanisms, laws and institutions for the protection and betterment of vulnerable sections; issues relating to poverty.

For **Prelims**, hold the specifics: the informal sector accounts for the overwhelming majority of India's workforce; the **e-Shram portal** (<https://ujjyari.com/terms/e-shram-portal/>) is the national database of unorganised workers; schemes and missions on urban housing and livelihoods address slums and shelter; the idea of the right to the city frames urban space as a shared entitlement, not a privilege of ownership. For **Mains**, argue that spatial inclusion, housing, mobility, recognition and voice, is the substance of social justice in the urban context.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

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The migrant and informal worker is the invisible foundation of urban India. Drawn from villages by the promise of work, these workers occupy the least secure jobs, the most **precarious** (<https://ujjayari.com/vocab/precarious/>) housing and the most exposed positions in the city's social order. They live in slums, on pavements, at construction sites and in the crowded rooms of the urban periphery, far from the neighbourhoods their labour sustains. When the city plans, upgrades or beautifies itself, it tends to plan them out: informal settlements are cleared, vendors are displaced, and the poor are pushed further to the margin, both literally in space and figuratively in the city's imagination of itself.

Globalisation sharpened this pattern. The modern city competes for capital, aspires to a world-class image, and organises itself around consumption and real estate value. In that model the informal worker is simultaneously indispensable and unwelcome: needed for cheap labour and services, but treated as an eyesore to be moved out of sight. The result is a deep spatial inequality, a city divided between those with a secure claim to urban space and those permitted only to serve it, and this division strips the working poor of visibility, of decent housing and of the **collective bargaining** (<https://ujjayari.com/terms/collective-bargaining/>) power that stable community and recognition would give them.

THE CORE ARGUMENT / ISSUE

Unplanned urbanisation manufactures the margin

The margin is not a natural feature of the city; it is produced. When urban growth outpaces planning, housing and services never reach the workers who arrive to build the city, so they are forced into informal settlements that the city then treats as illegitimate. Each round of demolition and displacement pushes them further out, lengthening commutes, deepening insecurity and reproducing the very marginality that planning failed to prevent.

Invisibility strips bargaining power

A worker without a stable address, without recognition as a resident, and without a settled community is a worker without **leverage** (<https://ujjayari.com/vocab/leverage/>). Informality denies legal protections; displacement denies the social density from which collective bargaining grows. The migrant is easy to hire and easy to discard precisely because the city has organised their life to leave them isolated and voiceless.

DIMENSION OF MARGINALISATION	HOW THE CITY IMPOSES IT	CORRECTIVE LEVER
Spatial	Slum clearance, peripheral relocation, long commutes	Inclusive planning, in-situ upgrading
Housing	Informal, insecure shelter near worksites	Affordable rental and worker housing
Legal and social	Informality, no recognition as resident	e-Shram registration, portable entitlements
Voice and power	Isolation, displacement of community	Recognition, unionisation, right to the city

The right to the city is a claim of justice

The counter-idea is that urban space belongs to all who make and inhabit the city, not only to those who own property in it. The right to the city reframes the worker not as an intruder to be cleared but as a rightful participant entitled to housing, services, mobility and a voice in how the city is shaped. This is the social-justice core of the urban question.

HOW TO THINK ABOUT THIS (ANALYTICAL FRAME)

Treat the city as a distribution of visibility and space, not merely of income. The transferable rule: inequality in the urban context is spatial before it is monetary, because who is allowed to live where determines access to work, services, security and dignity. A just city is measured not by its skyline but by whether the people who build and service it can live in it with recognition and security. Judge urban policy by whether it includes the informal worker in the city's plan or pushes them out of it.

THE DIAGRAM IN WORDS

Migrant and informal worker sustains the city -> unplanned urbanisation + globalising, image-conscious city -> no housing, no recognition, cleared and displaced -> pushed to physical and social margin -> loss of visibility, housing and bargaining power -> spatial inequality entrenched -> fix: inclusive planning + worker housing + e-Shram entitlements + right to the city -> worker included, not erased

WAY FORWARD

- 1 **Plan for the worker, not around them.** Make affordable housing, basic services and secure tenure for informal and migrant workers a built-in objective of urban planning rather than an afterthought corrected by demolition.

- ② **Provide housing near work.** Expand affordable rental and worker housing close to worksites and transit, so inclusion in the city does not depend on ownership the poor can never afford.
- ③ **Make entitlements portable.** Use e-Shram registration and portable welfare so that a worker's rights and benefits travel with them across cities rather than lapsing on migration.
- ④ **Restore visibility and voice.** Recognise informal workers as legitimate residents, protect vendors and settlements from arbitrary displacement, and enable the collective organisation through which they can bargain.

PYQ LINKAGE AND PRACTICE

UPSC has asked about the problems of urbanisation, the condition of migrant and informal labour, and the effects of globalisation on Indian society. This editorial connects those themes to the spatial marginalisation of the urban working class.

Practice question: “The Indian city depends on its informal and migrant workers yet pushes them to its margins.” Examine the spatial dimension of urban inequality and suggest a rights-based response. (250 words, 15 marks)

Sources: The Hindu (<https://www.thehindu.com/>)

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