



The South Asian- Gulf migrant crisis

Context:

- The pandemic crisis has further deteriorated the condition of **South Asian migrants in the GCC countries** and poses new challenges for the countries of their origin.
- The **South Asia-Gulf migration corridor is among the largest in the world**. South Asians account for nearly 15 million in the Gulf. **Indians constitute the largest segment of the South Asian workforce**.
- The precarious situation of the migrant labourers in West Asia forced the Indian government to repatriate the NRIs through the **Vande Bharat Mission**. The Indian government has repatriated over 7.88 lakh NRIs from various destinations.
- An increasing number of NRIs who have lost their jobs abroad have returned to India and have been seeking Government aid.

What are the major concerns?

- **Challenges faced by the migrant labourers:** Though the South Asian labour force forms the backbone of the Gulf economies, it has **no social security protection or labour rights**.
- **Pandemic crisis:** The pandemic, the shutdown of companies, the tightening of borders, and the exploitative nature of the **Kafala sponsorship system** have aggravated the miseries of South Asian migrant workers.
- The South Asian labour force found it hard to ensure the availability of basic necessities like food and medicines during the pandemic.
- Since medicines are expensive in GCC countries, migrants often procure medicines for lifestyle diseases from India. However, the suspension of flights caused an acute shortage of medicines for these workers.
- The migrants living in the labour camps (mostly characterised by overcrowded and unsanitary living conditions) were vulnerable to the COVID-19 outbreak.
- Employers, particularly construction companies, have used the crisis as an opportunity to retrench masses of migrant labourers without paying them wages or allowances.

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- **Anti-migrant sentiments:** The movement for nationalisation of labour and the anti-migrant sentiment have peaked in GCC countries.

Way forward:

- **Rehabilitate, reintegrate, and resettle:** India will need to rehabilitate, reintegrate, and resettle these migrant workers.
- This could involve **providing money on arrival, money to launch self-employment projects, and compensation for the families** of those who died abroad from COVID-19 apart from **upgrading the skills of returnees**.
- The Indian government's '**SWADES**' scheme aims at skill mapping of citizens returning from abroad. **Kerala's 'Dream Kerala'** scheme aims to utilise the multifaceted resources of the migrants.
- **Migration policy:** The need of the hour is a **comprehensive migration management system**. No South Asian country except Sri Lanka has an adequate migration policy.
- The pandemic provides an opportunity to voice the rights of South Asian migrants and to bring the South Asia-Gulf migration corridor within the ambit of SAARC, the ILO, and UN conventions.