Migrant Workers and Urban Housing

This editorial is based on “A Shelter In Pandemic” which was published in Indian Express on 10/01/2022. It talks about the housing related issues of the migrant workers which is further aggravated by the Covid-19 Pandemic.

For Prelims: Migrant Workers, Urbanisation, Smart Cities Mission, AMRUT Mission, Affordable Rental Housing Complexes (ARHC) for Urban Poor, Swachh Bharat Abhiyan, International Labour Organisation (ILO), Census of India.

For Mains: Issues faced by migrant workers, Affordable housing - a major challenge for good urbanisation, Urban housing and related issues of migrant workers.

Urbanisation and the growth of cities in India have been accompanied by pressure on basic infrastructure and services like housing, sanitation and health. The worst sufferers of unavailability of these basic needs are the migrant workers.

The Covid-19 pandemic has further aggravated the poor housing conditions of the urban poors/ migrant workers.

All these challenges point directly to the need of a sound policy framework that must also be viewed from the lens of human rights, property rights and socio-economic development.

These policy initiatives must be in sync with the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 8.8 which stands for providing a safe and secure working environment for all workers, particularly migrants.

Urban Housing and Migrant Workers

- **Homeless Urban Families:** The 2011 Census of India reveals that the urban population of the country stood at 31.16% where there are about 4.5 lakh homeless families and a total population of 17.73 lakh is living without any roof over their heads.
  - Maharashtra and Uttar Pradesh are the two states with an acute housing crisis.

- **Migrants and Urban Housing:** A vast majority of urban population, especially migrants, live under conditions of poor shelter and in highly congested spaces.
  - In India, more than half of the urban households occupy a single room, with an average occupancy per room of 4.4 persons.
  - In the case of migrants working in small units, hotels and homes, their workplace is also their place of lodging.
    - Such places are often unhygienic and poorly ventilated.
    - Most construction workers stay in makeshift arrangements. Casual workers sleep under bridges and on pavements, often living as a group in unhygienic surroundings.
Impact of Pandemic on Migrants’ Housing: Due to the pandemic induced nationwide lockdown, most workers rushed back home leaving behind their temporary abodes and those who were left behind lost their shelter because workplaces were shut.

- Migrants who lived in rented apartments could not maintain social distancing.
- In suburban regions with a sizable number of migrants, the local population insisted on them to vacate houses citing the unhygienic conditions in the dwellings.
- Even though most state governments appealed to house owners to waive two months’ rent, the migrant workers continued to face pressures for paying the rent.

Initiatives for Urban Housing:

- Smart Cities Mission: The Smart Cities Mission identified 100 cities, covering 21% of India’s urban population, for a transformation in four rounds starting January 2016.
  - Some of the core infrastructure elements in a smart city include proper water supply, assured electricity supply, sanitation, and affordable housing especially for the poor.
- AMRUT Mission: Efforts like the Atal Mission for Rejuvenation and Urban Transformation (AMRUT) launched in 2005 are intended to make the process of urbanisation smooth.
  - It aimed to ensure that every household has access to a tap with the assured supply of water and a sewerage connection.
  - The mission has now entered its second phase to make cities water-secure and provide better amenities for the marginalised.
- ARHCs Envisaged in Atma Nirbhar Bharat Package: The Rs 20 lakh crore Atma Nirbhar Bharat package announced by the government in May 2020 included the provision of Affordable Rental Housing Complexes (ARHC) for migrant workers/urban poor.
  - The plan was to convert government-funded housing in the cities into ARHCs through Public-Private Partnerships, and provide incentives to various stakeholders to develop ARHCs on their private land and operate them.

Issues in Affordable Housing for Migrants

- Ineffective Implementation of Housing Schemes: The Government data shows that 49% of 5,196 projects of the Smart Cities Mission for which work orders were issued across 100 smart cities in India remain unfinished.
  - This lag in implementation raises questions about the efficacy of innovative policy prescriptions.
- Absence of WASH Facilities: According to a 2020 International Labour Organisation (ILO) report on internal labour migrants, the absence of dignified housing is aggravated by a lack of adequate water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) facilities.
- Inadequate Public Toilets: Even though there has been an installation of public toilets through Swachh Bharat Abhiyan, their availability is not adequate in migrant-dense clusters.
- Sudden Increase in Rents: Migrant workers find housing in slums, which is often subject to a sudden increase in rent, and have access only to the poorest infrastructure and services.

Way Forward

- Policymaking For Housing Sector: The existing housing conditions indicate the necessity of coordinated efforts of the state and the contractors to address housing issues. It calls for long-term policymaking and analysis of the housing sector along with necessitating more transparency in the case of contracts.
  - Instead of an extreme condition where the owner suddenly increases a rent, the state can look into the matter to ensure an optimal condition where the rent evolves for a competitive market for houses.
- Reducing Owner-Tenant Conflicts: While developing social rental housing, the state should ensure that the location has proper access to transport networks, education and healthcare.
  - The working group by NITI Aayog constituted to study internal labour has recommended that rental housing in the public sector could be expanded through the provision of
dormitory accommodation.
  - This would make public housing affordable and **reduce the conflict between owners and tenants**.
- Action-oriented policies alone can improve the lives of labouring migrants.
- **Redeveloping Small and Medium Cities**: There is no denying that even our non-megacities have inadequate planning, non-scalable infrastructure, unaffordable housing, and poor public transport.
  - In order to ensure **good urbanisation**, it is important to equally focus on the **small and medium cities** and address the **issues of inadequate housing and lack of basic facilities** in these cities too.

**Drishti Mains Question**

“The issue of inadequate and unaffordable urban housing is a major roadblock to good urbanisation”. Discuss.