

SOCIAL SECURITY FOR MIGRANT WORKERS IN INDIA: A REVIEW OF BARRIERS AND PROSPECTS

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This article takes a closer look at the various challenges that migrant workers in India face regarding social security, based on recent literature. Even though they play such a vital role in the economy, these workers often find themselves left out of formal social security systems, making them especially vulnerable. Some of the main issues include the inability to transfer benefits across state lines, messy and complicated legal frameworks, limited protection for those in the informal sector, lack of access to digital resources, and systemic biases. Tackling these issues isn't just about labor rights; it's crucial for promoting fair and sustainable development in India.

Introduction

India's economic growth really depends on how easily its workers can move around. A lot of people move from rural areas to cities, or even across state lines, looking for better job opportunities—some just for the season, while others make permanent moves. Most of these migrant workers, over 90% of the workforce, are in the informal sector, taking on crucial but often risky jobs¹. Unfortunately, because of their mobility, they're especially at risk during economic downturns, health emergencies, workplace accidents, and when they get older and can't work anymore. The COVID-19 pandemic really highlighted these issues, trapping millions without jobs, food, or any social support when lockdowns hit². Even though India has set up several social security programs, they often don't cater to the specific needs of migrant workers, leaving huge gaps in coverage and access.

Materials and Methods

This study used a thematic literature review approach. It looked at recent academic papers from Google Scholar

between 2021 and 2025 about social security for migrant workers in India. The study identified key issues such as difficulties in portability, inconsistent laws, lack of coverage for workers in informal jobs, limited access to digital services, and unfair treatment. It aimed to examine the main challenges and check where current policies fall short.

Migration: Magnitude and Nature

According to the 2011 Census, there were over 450 million internal migrants in India, many of whom moved for work³. That number has probably gone up quite a bit since then. Migration trends vary widely and include everything from short-term seasonal movement, like agricultural workers coming back home during off-seasons, to long-term relocation, such as construction workers who decide to settle in cities. Most of these migrants tend to come from poorer, marginalized backgrounds⁴. They generally find jobs in industries like construction, brick kilns, mining, food services, and small businesses—all sectors known for low pay, tough working conditions, and a lot of informal labor¹.

Challenges in Social Security Coverage for Migrant Workers

Social Security policies in India is a complex structure, comprising both central and state-level schemes. Migrant

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workers in India receive benefits like Employees' State Insurance (ESI) and Employees' Provident Fund (EPF). They also can avail Pradhan Mantri Shram Yogi Maandhan (PM-SYM) scheme and scheme under Building and Other Construction Workers (BOCW) Welfare Cess & Boards. E-Shram Portal is also available for them. Even with the existing framework, migrant workers still encounter significant obstacles in getting social security benefits:

Implementation Issues: In India, there's no law under single umbrella that guarantees social security for every worker, including migrants. The Code on Social Security, 2020 is not implemented by all states. The Code on Social Security, 2020, aims to bring things together, but how well it works for migrants really depends on strong implementation guidelines and inter-state cooperation⁵. Plus, the execution often falls short, hampered by things like staff shortages, corruption, and a lack of coordination among different departments and states¹.

Limited Coverage for Informal Workers: Most migrant workers are involved in informal jobs and don't qualify for mandatory programs like ESI and EPF. There are voluntary options, like PM-SYM, but they require regular contributions that are tough for people with unpredictable incomes and no employer backing. The sign-up processes for state welfare boards or the e-Shram portal can be tricky and often need paperwork which migrants may not have or can struggle to update while on the move¹.

Bureaucratic Challenges: Dealing with the complicated bureaucracy to register, claim benefits, or sort out issues can be difficult, especially for migrant workers who might not have high literacy levels or aren't fluent in the local language. Many migrants also don't know what benefits they're entitled to or how to access them. Employers, particularly small contractors, frequently neglect to register workers or contribute to schemes¹.

Digital Barriers: Even though platforms like e-Shram and the UMANG app are pushed for use, a lot of migrant workers don't have digital skills needed to navigate these tools. This makes it tough for them to register, find information, or get benefits online⁶.

Social Exclusion: Discrimination against migrant workers based on their home region, language, caste, or ethnicity is common. This social exclusion leads to challenges in accessing local services, including healthcare and social security offices. Many are reluctant to approach authorities for fear of harassment or deportation (even if they are internal migrants)¹.

Health and Safety Risks: Many migrant workers are in hazardous jobs (like construction, mining, or manufacturing), where the risk of accidents and work-related illnesses is high. Access to prompt and quality medical care, compensation, and rehabilitation through schemes like ESI is often lacking, especially if injuries happen away from their registered workplace or state⁷.

Future Prospects: Towards Inclusive Social Security

To tackle these issues, we really need a comprehensive approach that focuses on universality, portability, accessibility, and equity. It's essential to implement the Code on Social Security from 2020 in a way that specifically addresses the needs of migrant workers. Also, we should broaden the definition of "worker" and the eligibility criteria to include a large part of the informal sector⁸. The aim here should be to achieve universal social security coverage, leaning more towards a rights-based approach instead of just a welfare-focused one.

Accessibility is super important too. We need a strong tech framework that can connect social security records across different states and schemes³. The e-Shram portal should be able to track all social security schemes, no matter where the worker is located. Having mutual understanding between states and a central monitoring system is crucial for implementation of this scheme.

Conclusion

Social security is a basic right and a key part of decent work. For the millions of migrant workers in India, the current social security system is mostly out of reach and falls short of what's needed. The issues like portability, fragmentation, informality, bureaucracy, digital gaps, and discrimination are pretty ingrained. But that doesn't mean they can't be tackled. We need strong political will, serious administrative reforms, and considerable investment in tech and infrastructure. We also need to fundamentally shift how we recognize and appreciate migrant workers' contributions. By focusing on easy portability, accessible services, and social inclusion, India can create a social security system that genuinely safeguards its mobile workforce, boosts resilience, and sets the stage for more sustainable development. □

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