

Critical Reasoning Practice

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In the context of the broader ramifications of Karnataka's local employment law, five State-level reports from the southern States — on the Editorial and Opinion Pages — on labour conditions on the ground

New migrant realities in Karnataka's gig sector

Padma (name changed) has been working with a prominent home delivery services company in Bengaluru, as a beauty services provider for three years now. After migrating from her hometown in Sikkim to Visakhapatnam, Andhra Pradesh, to work in a salon, she then moved to Bengaluru after the COVID-19 pandemic to become a gig worker.

"The company charges a 30% commission, but I get paid every three days. That helps. After my husband met with an accident, it has not been easy for us. So, cash in hand and some amount of flexibility is useful," she says.

Padma's sister too has moved to Bengaluru and offers her services through the same company. The company offered a training programme for professionals for a facial treatment package that is to be launched, and she notes that there was a good mix of locals and migrants from Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, West Bengal and the northeastern States among them.

These women are among the many who have migrated to the Silicon Valley of India (Bengaluru). There is already a two-lakh-strong gig workforce in the city, facilitated by tech platforms such as Uber, Ola, Swiggy, Zomato and Dunzo among others.

The Karnataka government recently proposed a 'quota-for-local' Bill, which has been put in cold storage following a pushback on the proposal by corporates in the State. Nevertheless, at a time when India witnesses huge migration, characterised by an influx of people from rural regions to cities and more prosperous economies, and driven by a declining agrarian economy and unprecedented unemployment rates, what could initiatives such as the quota-for-local Bill mean for the migrant gig workers of the State?

The migration spectrum

While there is little data available on the strength of the migrant population among gig workers, the spectrum usually swings between autorickshaw drivers, very few of whom are inter-State migrants, and delivery personnel and home service providers, of whom a large portion are migrant workers.

Says Vinay Sarathy, president of the United Food Delivery Partners' Union, the migrant population among food delivery partners varies according to the locations within the city.



Shilpa Elizabeth

"If the location is around M.G. Road, Koramangala or HSR layout Bengaluru, there is a greater percentage of Hindi-speaking migrant workers. But if the location is Rajajinagar, the number comes down. Near Electronics City, you will find a large number of delivery personnel from other parts of Karnataka such as Mandya and a few from States such as Andhra Pradesh. There are also people from within Karnataka, such as Tumakuru and Ramanagara close to Bengaluru, and also faraway parts of North Karnataka."

According to Mr. Sarathy, after the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been a significant increase in the inflow of migrants to the city's booming gig sector.

In the case of drivers associated with aggregators, the number of inter-State migrants is relatively low, says Mohamad Inayat Ali from the Karnataka App-based Drivers' Union.

"The share of migrants may be around 5%-10%. Usually, they are from Bihar, West Bengal and Uttar Pradesh."

While that is the case with owner-drivers, schemes that allow drivers to rent a car from the platforms by depositing an amount seem to have more takers among the migrants.

"Such schemes as well as companies such as BluSmart which have their own fleet see more migrant workers as they require less investment and are relatively risk-free," Mr. Ali notes.

A more exploited class

Pasha (name changed) from Bengaluru works as a delivery partner with a leading food ordering platform in the city. He moved from a full-time job to a part-time job recently after finding an additional job as a security agent.

"It (delivery) is a risky job given the traffic and pollution. Earlier at least the payment was good. Then the rate cards changed, and I had to find another job that provided a stable income," he says. "Locals often work part-time for these platforms. Whereas you will see mostly migrants working full time," Pasha adds.

As he is a local it was not very difficult for Pasha to find a second job. For a migrant who does not have connections in a city that speaks a language alien to him, things are often different and the chances of being exploited are higher.

Says a source who works close to the delivery

workers, "There is more exploitation when outsiders/migrants are hired because they have no local support. Even among gig workers, if the companies offer a lower rate card, local workers will speak up and question them. But a migrant worker will not openly object and get into trouble. The companies/platforms have an edge over workers in such situations."

Ramifications of the Bill

What could a local reservation Bill mean for migrant gig workers in this

context?

Not much in terms of a direct impact on gig workers, since they are not "employees" in a traditional sense. However, it could make the already precarious situation worse for the larger migrant population, many feel.

There could be demographic changes within the gig labour force, with more locals moving to the formal sector if reservation is implemented.

Says Mohan Mani, a visiting fellow with the Centre for Labour Studies at the National Law School of India University, Bengaluru, "Such a Bill will have an impact on those who can aspire for formal sector jobs. If there are reservations, migrant workers would have a lesser chance at such jobs."

While pitting the local against the migrant, such moves overlook the elephant in the room, namely, the exploitation of workers, and spin narratives such as "locals not available for work" or "not enough work for locals", which shifts the focus from the real issue.

Says Soujanya Sridhar, researcher and Senior Manager at Aapti Institute, Bengaluru, "I don't think Karnataka-origin workers don't want to do the work that migrants do. It's just that they have more options given their social networks here. So, they're less likely to want to do a low-value job."

She points out that social security schemes which demand domicile status are ignorant of the migrant realities of today.

"Reservation in jobs will not stop or reverse migration. Migrant workers will continue to come and seek work in the city. But, fundamentally, such a move increases the fragility associated with migrant life and they will have fewer avenues for protection or fair work."

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Question -1) The passage discusses the potential impact of a local reservation Bill on migrant gig workers. Based on the information provided, which of the following statements is most accurate regarding the immediate effect of the Bill?

- A) The Bill will significantly reduce the number of migrant gig workers in Bengaluru.
- B) The Bill will have a direct impact on gig workers by reducing their wages.
- C) The Bill will primarily affect those aspiring for formal sector jobs rather than gig workers.
- D) The Bill will increase the overall employment rate among local workers in the gig economy.

Question -2) According to the passage, why are migrant gig workers more vulnerable to exploitation compared to local workers?

- A) They receive lower wages than local workers.
- B) They lack social support and are less likely to challenge unfair practices.
- C) They are required to work longer hours than local workers.
- D) They have more limited job opportunities in Bengaluru.

Question -3) Which of the following assumptions is implicit in the passage regarding the relationship between migrant status and employment in the gig economy?

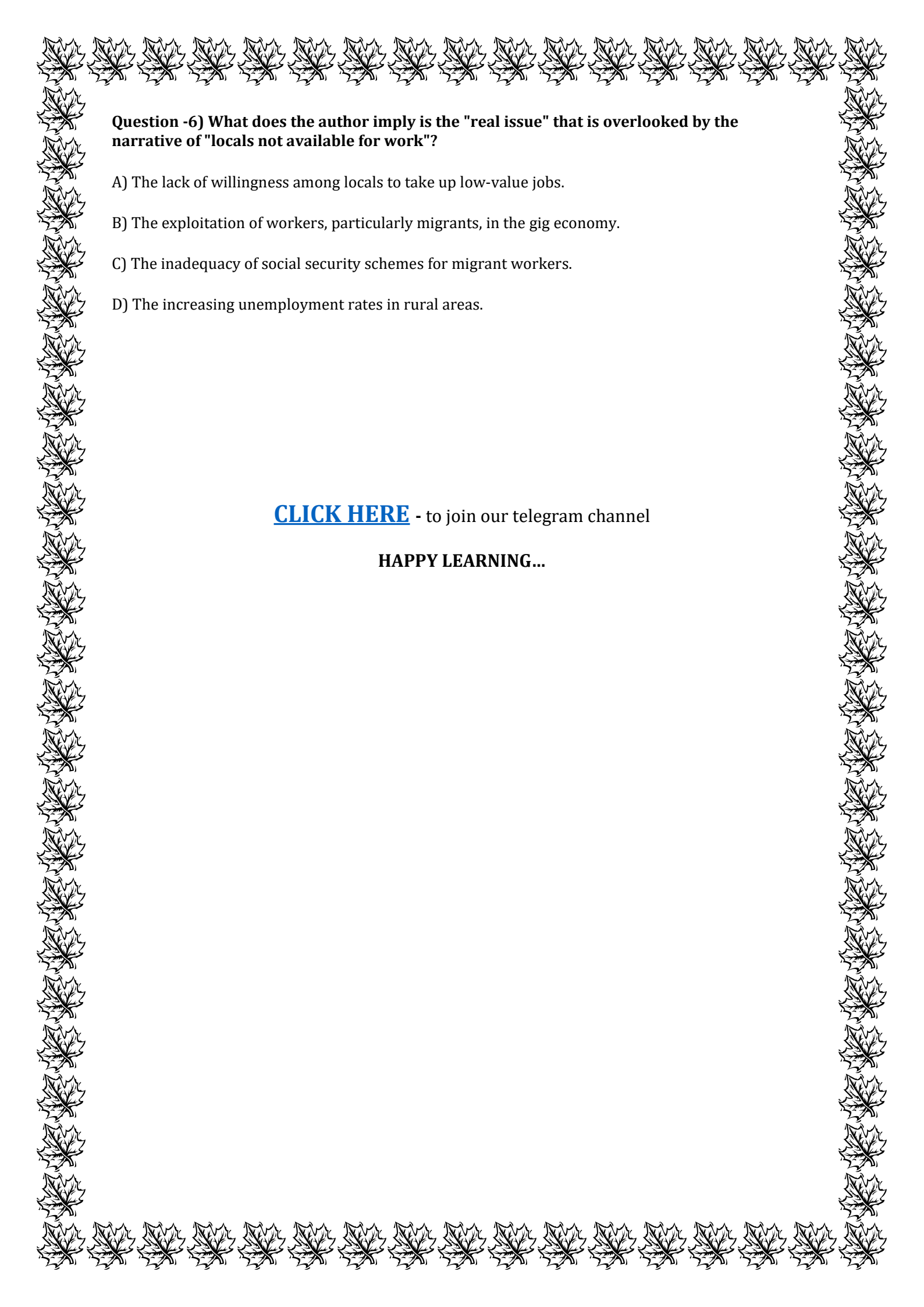
- A) Migrant workers are generally preferred over local workers in the gig economy.
- B) Migrant workers are more likely to accept low-paying jobs due to a lack of better opportunities.
- C) Local workers avoid the gig economy because of better opportunities in the formal sector.
- D) The gig economy offers the same opportunities to both migrant and local workers.

Question -4) The passage mentions that locals are often able to find second jobs more easily than migrants. What is the primary reason for this, according to the passage?

- A) Locals have better access to job networks and opportunities in the city.
- B) Locals are more skilled and therefore preferred by employers.
- C) Locals are less dependent on gig work for their livelihood.
- D) Locals are not as affected by changes in the rate cards as migrants.

Question -5) If the Karnataka government implements the 'quota-for-local' Bill, what is the most likely long-term effect on the migrant gig workforce in Bengaluru?

- A) An increase in the wages of migrant workers due to a reduced supply of local workers.
- B) A shift in demographic patterns with fewer migrants in the gig economy.
- C) A rise in the number of formal job opportunities for migrant workers.
- D) A decrease in the level of exploitation faced by migrant workers.



Question -6) What does the author imply is the "real issue" that is overlooked by the narrative of "locals not available for work"?

- A) The lack of willingness among locals to take up low-value jobs.
- B) The exploitation of workers, particularly migrants, in the gig economy.
- C) The inadequacy of social security schemes for migrant workers.
- D) The increasing unemployment rates in rural areas.

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