

EPFO's Dilemma

What is the issue?

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- "Employees' Provident Fund" (EPFO) is currently in a dilemma on whether to focus on the higher income strata or target the lower waged population. \n
- \bullet Its board of trustees are currently in a fix regarding these conflicting objectives and proper clarity and direction is yet to emerge from them. \n

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What is the context of the conflict?

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- At times, EPFO is seeking to position itself as a closed-end stable contributory social security net for lower income workers.
- But at other occasions, it sees itself as a market-linked generous retirement kitty for the well off.

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Withdrawal Option:

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- Limit In 2016, EPFO was forced to roll back its decision to restrict early withdrawals after nationwide protests.
- Currently, it is moving in the opposite direction by further easing norms, allowing up to 75% withdrawal after the very $1^{\rm st}$ month without a job. \n
- Even the residual 25% can be withdrawn, if one remains without work for more than two months.

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- Conflict These changes are likely to cheer affluent classes who are looking to take a career break to pursue higher education or start their own venture. \n
- But then, it may do serious harm to the social security of lower-income employees who make up the majority of the EPFO's member base. \n
- Given the churn in India's jobs market, sudden job losses are an ever-present threat for workers on the lower rungs of the income ladder. \n
- For workers who are at the middle or fag end of their careers, the leeway to withdraw 75%, will affect their retirement package. \n

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Investment Risk:

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- **Options** EPFO's 15% equity allocation is now being invested mainly in Sensex 30 and Nifty 50 ETFs (top shares in India's Share Markets). \n
- Central PSU shares and Bharat-22 ETFs (a conglomerate share of "multiple shares across sectors") is the other option where money is invested. \n
- The Fund is now proposing to add stocks beyond these blue chip names in the hope of bumping up its returns. γ_n
- Conflict Higher-income earners in the PF fold may not mind taking on higher market risks for higher rewards.
- But many EPFO members may not share this sentiment, and there is also fear that EPFO (like LIC) might become a bail-out for stressed public companies.

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What is the way ahead?

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- Higher income earners already have multiple market-linked vehicles to choose from to build their retirement kitty.
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- It would be best for the EPFO to clearly position itself as a basic social

security net for India's less-affluent workers.

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• In this context, high end employers could be given the leeway to opt out of EPF and offered a menu of market-linked options to further their retirement needs.

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Source: Business Line

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