

ADIVASI YOUTH MIGRATION FROM CENTRAL AND EASTERN STATES TO SOUTH INDIA: OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

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Abstract

In recent years, three types of migration waves are taking place in the Adivasi dominated states of Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Odisha, West Bengal and Assam. The First Wave is the migration of young Adivasi women to metropolitan cities. The Second Wave is the seasonal migration of whole families to neighboring states. The Third Wave is the more recent exodus of Adivasi youth to the southern states. This paper focuses on the Third Wave and on the challenges faced by young Adivasi men and women migrating to southern states for livelihood and survival. The paper narrates some of these major challenges based on case studies. The six case studies describe the adverse realities such as exclusion, exploitation, xenophobia, bondedness, human trafficking and loss of lives faced by Adivasi youth from Jharkhand, Odisha, Assam and West Bengal in southern states of India.

Key words: Adivasi youth migration, Waves of Migration, Challenges, Exclusion

1. Introduction

The Economic Survey of India (2016-17) highlighted the surge in inter-state labour migration towards south Indian states, particularly to Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Kerala. The survey also showed Jharkhand as the major source of migrant working population for different parts of the country. It revealed that Jharkhand had lost about 5 million working age population between 2001 and 2011 averaging about 5 per cent of the working age population of the state every year as migrants. The economic development, job opportunities and daily wages in the southern states are considerably higher and act as green pastures. Thus, the vacuum created in the manual labour and other works is filled by the migrant workers from northern and eastern states. Stan Swamy (2016) connects this recent phenomenon to 'the third wave of Adivasi migration' – migration of *Adivasi* youth to the southern states (the first being the migration of young Adivasi women to

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metropolitan cities and the second being the seasonal migration of whole families to northern states). According to him, deepening poverty and increasing state repression have forced thousands of young Adivasi men and women from Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Odisha, West Bengal and Assam to migrate to southern states of Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh and Telangana for livelihood and survival. However, these survival strategies and opportunities are laden with challenges for these distress migrant Adivasi youth in southern states.

The Adivasi youth migrants from north and east Indian states to south Indian states are catapulted into a state of cultural shock. They grapple with alien languages, different cultures, races, climate, food habits, work cultures, etc. These factors at the destinations assume an adverse form and trigger alienation, exclusion and various vulnerabilities despite the same nationality. This paper narrates some of these major challenges based on case studies and probes into the causes. The paper describes six types of adverse realities such as exclusion, exploitation, xenophobia, bonded labour, human trafficking and loss of lives faced by Adivasi youth from Jharkhand, Odisha, Assam and West Bengal in southern states of India.

2. Exclusion of migrant Adivasi youth from benefits

Understanding and learning the local language is a major challenge for the migrant Adivasi youth in southern states. Tamil, Kannada, Malayalam and Telugu, the major languages of the southern states, are of Dravidian origin. On the other hand, most of the local population in southern states are not very conversant in Hindi. Thus, language barrier continues to be a major challenge for the migrant Adivasi youth for their communication with the local population, to understand the instructions of the employers, for travelling and for accessing government schemes and benefits available to them.

The migrant Adivasi youth in southern states are physically isolated from the surrounding community which makes it more difficult for them to find out local wage, rights, and support systems available to them. They are excluded from government schemes to varying degrees, from formal residency rights, identity proofs, political representation, adequate housing, financial services, public distribution system [PDS] and membership in trade unions at the destinations. They are also denied access to public health, education and other basic amenities such as water and sanitation.

For instance, according to *The Hindu* (31 March 2018) families from the tribal belts of Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Odisha and West Bengal are

joining the labour force in Munnar's tea plantations in Kerala that was once predominantly Tamil. A tribal Munda youth from Jharkhand's Khunti district is the man responsible for bringing nearly 400 labourers from his native State to work in the tea gardens of the Kannan Devan Hills Plantations (KDHP) in Munnar. The receding Tamil labour population is being rapidly replaced by workers from the tribal districts of Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh and Odisha. The Gundumalai estate has 713-strong temporary workforce entirely from the tribal community. But there is no uniformity in wages and allowances – decent shelters, ration, paid leave, Leave Travel Allowance (LTA), health care benefits, gratuity, and incentives.

3. Exploitation of migrant Adivasi youth

According to Sisters For Change (2016), 80 per cent of Bangalore's garment factory workers are women and these women undergo high levels of sexual harassment and violence at workplace despite the existence of the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act 2013. A large number of these young women garment workers are from scheduled tribes. A good number of them are Adivasi girls hailing from Odisha, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Assam and West Bengal. The study found that one out of every fourteen women garment workers experiences physical violence and fourteen per cent undergo rape or forced sexual act. Verbal abuse, humiliation and sexual harassment of women garment workers are part of daily life. Factory hostels deprive women and girl workers of their rights to privacy and liberty, and create an enabling environment for exploitation.

The vulnerability of the migrant Adivasi youth at work sites is evidenced in the form of low wages, long working hours and lack of safety measures. They are often forced to take up more difficult, hazardous and menial jobs compared to the local workers. They are usually in the 3D jobs – dirty, dangerous and degrading. Very often they are forced to work under inhuman conditions. They are not given equal wages compared to local workers and are often forced to work long hours without appropriate payment for over time. They are vulnerable to wage theft. Employers vanish when the time for payment is due or pay less than agreed upon. Since workers have no recourse, they are easily cheated.

4. Xenophobia and migrant Adivasi youth suspected as Maoists in south India

Migrant Adivasi youth from Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Odisha, West Bengal

and Assam could be suspected as Maoists in southern states. For instance, Dipen Konra, a 30-year old tribal from a remote village in West Bengal, was travelling in a suffocated general compartment of the Shalimar-Trivandrum Express to toil at the construction sites in Kerala. At the Aluva railway station, Dipen got down to fetch water and could not get back into the overcrowded general boggy to reach Kollam, his destination. Not knowing what to do and how to ask in Malayalam, the partially and poorly dressed Dipen began to walk. In the late evening, as the strangely appeared Dipen could not answer the police in Malayalam, he was taken to the Police Station. In the early hours, he attempted to escape and inadvertently entered the adjacent airport compound. He was suspected to be a Maoist and beaten up so brutally that his legs and hands were broken and he became unconscious. The critical Dipen was sent to a central jail. After nine months of the assault, with the intervention of State Human Rights Commission, Dipen was released from the jail and returned home, but with one leg and one hand dysfunctional (Martin, 2017).

5. Bonded labourers among migrant Adivasi youth in South India

The intermediaries often exploit the helplessness of Adivasi youth by giving certain advance payments and force them and their families into a kind of bondage or trafficking. Those who have been trapped as bonded labourers work 12 to 16 hours a day with very little or no wages. Some of the employers, particularly the owners of construction companies, brick chambers and quarry chambers exploit and harass the migrant workers as slaves. There are several recently reported cases of existence of bonded labour in Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Telangana and Andhra Pradesh.

In Karnataka, a large number of migrant workers have fallen prey to money lenders and become bonded labourers. A total of 7,646 people are being allegedly forced to work as bonded labourers in different districts of Karnataka, according to a report of the Bonded Labourers' Review constituted by the State government (Prabhu, 25 September 2015).

Kaibalya Majhi, aged 40 was one among the 260 migrant men, women and children who were rescued from forced labour slavery in three brick factories on the outskirts of Bangalore on 29 April 2015. The agrarian crisis compelled this poor tribal from Bolangir district of Odisha to borrow a sum of money from a middle man on the promise of working in a brick kiln near Bangalore. After seven months of hard toil as bonded labourer, through the intervention of a voluntary organisation, Kaibalya along with his wife and two children walked into freedom to re-join his joint family in rural Odisha.

333 bonded labourers including 75 children were rescued from Tamil Nadu brick kilns in 2015 (NDTV, 12 February 2015). They were all migrant workers from Odisha and were paid just Rs. 200 per week for every ten thousand bricks they made. An agent had brought them to Tiruvallur after paying an advance of about Rs. 14,000-16,000. They were reportedly housed in thatched sheds with no toilet and some of the children were also made to work.

6. Adivasi girls trafficked to south India

Phoolmoni Murmu, a seventeen-year-old Adivasi girl from Assam, who died in suspicious circumstances in Whitefield in Bangalore on 2 April 2017, was a victim of human trafficking. An agent paid Rs. 19,000 to her father, who sold her to a placement agency in Delhi. The agency employed her as a domestic worker in Delhi and later transferred her to Bangalore without informing her parents. According to the police, 150 such trafficked and bonded girls from the same agency are working in Bangalore (Deccan Herald News Service, 8 April 2017).

7. Accidents and loss of lives among migrant Adivasi youth in South India

Migrant Adivasi youth in southern states of India are vulnerable to health hazards and infectious diseases as their working and living conditions are deplorable. Their poor living and working conditions increased exposure to infectious diseases and lack of access to public health care takes a toll on their health. The employers hardly provide medical and health facilities to the migrant workers. Housing conditions too are appalling. They live in hovels alongside the heaps of filth and mud. There is no proper arrangement for toilets, drainage, ventilation or provision for clean drinking water or light. For instance, 80 per cent of the women garment workers in Bangalore reported their health at risk because of working conditions and 19 per cent of the respondents of the study classified themselves as having bad health (Sisters For Change, 2016).

Due to dangerous working conditions and lack of safety measures, migrant workers are highly prone to accidents and deaths. However, in cases of accidental injury and deaths, migrant workers are often denied rightful compensation. Statistics provided by the police show that as many as 52 migrant labourers have died at the construction sites alone in Bangalore in the first six months of 2015 (Gangadhar, 10 July 2015). Minimum 50 dead bodies of inter-state migrant workers reach the hospitals for post mortem

every month in Kerala (Malayala Manorama, 28 November 2013). In fact, these statistics account only for deaths in which FIRs have been registered.

8. Conclusion

Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh States were created aiming at better development of Tribals. However, studies show that since the formation of these states, a high percentage of non-Tribals have migrated into these states and a large number of Tribals have been forced to migrate out of these states for survival. Now thousands of these distress Adivasi youth from Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Odisha, West Bengal and Assam work in southern states of India with the above narrated dangers and risks. The above narrated challenges experienced by the distress migrant Adivasi youth in South India are serious violations of labour rights, human rights and constitutional rights. Therefore, this calls for collective action from civil society groups to ensure that the human rights, constitutional rights and labour rights of Adivasi migrant youth are guaranteed throughout India.

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