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**Silent footsteps that no one wants to hear:  
Adivasi/Dalit youth migrating to southern states in  
search of a way out of economic poverty and social  
insecurity**

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Migration is the silent footsteps of a people, searching for sources of livelihood. The rest of society does not want to hear these silent steps. Our present concern is with Adivasi and Dalit men and women migrating to the southern Indian states of Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Karnataka. We will discuss the following: (1) the main trends; (2) the reasons why; and (3) the hardships they endure.

## **The main trends**

There are three types of migration waves taking place in the predominantly Adivasi states of Central-Eastern India: the **first** is the migration of young Adivasi women to metropolitan cities. The reason is that, there is nothing at home to occupy themselves with, in a profitable and meaningful way. After the yearly mono-crop paddy is harvested in their tiny plots of land, they find it would suffice to feed them only for a few months. So instead of sitting at home idling

and starving, it is better for them to go to a town or a city; to work as domestic help in urban middle class households to earn some money for self and family. So they get in touch with middlemen/women and take off, sometimes without even informing and getting the consent of their parents. They land up in cities completely unaware of city-life. Who would their employers be? What would be the nature of work, amount of remuneration, living condition, etc.? Some of them never come back, some being sold off to brothels, and some others might be forcibly married to elderly men in northern states. A sizeable number of them do keep in touch with their families and send some money regularly or keep it and come home with a lump sum amount. Sadly, many of them face a social boycott by the village community insofar as, they are considered polluted by outsiders to the point that getting married locally and settling down becomes difficult.

The **second** wave is the migration of entire families to northern states. June to December is the monsoon-fed agricultural season in the central-eastern states of India. However, the food produced is insufficient to feed the family for the whole year; and in most villages, irrigation facilities for a second crop have not been developed. Land dispossession, state repression against resistance to displacement, and mining and industrialisation that use Adivasis, mostly as cheap labourers, only are further factors. As a result, between December and June each year, tens of thousands of Adivasi families leave their hearths and homes to temporarily find work in construction sites, brick-kilns and so on. Only some elderly members are left behind to care for the cattle. The government ignores this annual exodus.

The **third** wave is the recent exodus of Adivasi/Dalit youth to southern states as casual or contract labourers. Hundreds of thousands are residing in Karnataka, Kerala and Tamil Nadu. They go there, either through contacts or friends, who have already been there.

Often, they are taken in batches by contractors/middlemen. Kerala alone has about 35 lakh (3.5 million), and Tamil Nadu 10 lakh (one million). They are employed, for the great part, in construction (roads, buildings, etc.) works, whereas smaller numbers are also employed in other small industries, hotels, agriculture and as domestic helps.<sup>15</sup>

### **The reasons: Why?**

How to explain and understand this recent phenomenon of migration to southern states? There are two main reasons. The first is **deepening poverty**: while the Indian economy is said to be growing at the fastest rate, poverty is deepening in rural remote Adivasi belts of Central-Eastern India. During the past two years, at least 21 members of Adivasi/Dalit societies have died of starvation in Jharkhand, which the government refuses to accept as 'starvation deaths'. On the contrary, the state machinery attributes their death to some disease or illness. Nature has blessed Adivasi regions with tremendous natural and mineral wealth, which has now become a cause of their curse. The Indian state, controlled and directed by the corporate sector, is bent upon excavating the mineral wealth at all cost. The protective constitutional provisions, laws, policies and judicial verdicts meant to protect Adivasi, have been thrown to the winds. Meagre cash compensation for their land is thrown at them, while they are forced to vacate their hearths and homes. Hence, the younger generation of these societies look elsewhere for survival, and the southern Indian states seem to offer some limited chances in terms of contract/casual labour.

The second reason relates to **resistance to the processes of dispossession and simultaneous increase in state repression**. The exploited people are reaching a point of saying 'enough is enough'. The *Pathalgadi* movement is a telling example. Resistance movements that spring up against the unjust, illegal, forcible acquisition of *jal, jangal*,

*jamin* have always found an echo among the people at large, reflected in the formation of umbrella-organisations against displacement, violation of their right to food, denial of civic rights, exploitation of women and children, trafficking of young women, and unjust measures like *land bank*, which take away community rights over ‘commons’. The resistance of affected people, thus, receives solidarity and support from human rights groups, several Adivasi-organisations, leftist/socialist forces, some Jharkhandi Adivasi parties, concerned intellectuals and some legal professionals. However, proportionate to people’s resistance, the state’s repressive interventions have also been increasing. A small state like Jharkhand has several hundreds of young men and women in its prisons accused as Maoists/Naxals. Any young man/woman who openly expresses dissent to what the state is doing can be labelled as a ‘Naxal’ and thrown into jail. It is becoming increasingly difficult for a young man to live peacefully in his village: either he would be approached by local Naxals to join them; if he declines to join them, he might be liable to be beaten up or eliminated by labelling him as a ‘police informer’; or the police would pounce on him sooner or later calling him a ‘Naxal’ or ‘Naxal-sympathizer/helper’ to be picked up and thrown behind bars. This precarious situation causes many young men to want to get away from such situations of insecurity, at least for a while, and to try and earn something for his family. Hence, they come to the southern states of India in waves.

### **The hardships they endure**

Those young people, migrating to the southern states, hail from the central-eastern Indian states of Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Odisha, Bengal, northern state of Bihar and the north-eastern state of Assam. Leaving aside Bihar, all the other states are predominantly populated by indigenous Adivasis. They have their own culture,

tradition, ways of agriculture, intimate relation to nature and forest, strong community-identity, unique world-view, and their own cherished languages. When they come to the south, they are abruptly thrown into a very different world which contrasts with their own in numerous aspects. And this 'other world' does not look upon them kindly either; it looks at them with indifference and apathy, if not outright animosity. Yet, these migrants have to put up with all these alienating factors and continue to pursue their one single goal of earning some money for the welfare of their families back home.

Some concerned individuals, organisations and institutions have come forward to reach out to the migrants, often filling the vacuum left by the respective state governments which, though having the statutory obligation to look after these people, in reality fail to do so. Some sample studies have been done which cover the various aspects of the migrants' life, their working and living conditions, the language barriers, their efforts to socially integrate themselves into the society wherever they are, remuneration in terms of just/unjust wages, the extent to which they are actually able to help their families back home, and their expectations with regard to their future.

An article titled '*Adivasi youth migration from central and eastern states to south India: opportunities and challenges*'<sup>16</sup> sums up the findings of six case studies conducted in the southern states. It brings out the following points of concern:

- i. Exclusion of migrant Adivasi youth from benefits: Physically isolated from the surrounding communities, it is difficult for them to find out the local wage rates, and rights and support systems available to them. They are excluded from government schemes to varying degrees, from formal residency rights, documents to prove their identity, political representation, adequate housing, financial services, public distribution system, membership in

trade unions, public health facilities, education and other basic amenities such as water and sanitation.

- ii. Exploitation of migrant Adivasi youth: Adivasi women, especially those working in garment factories, undergo high levels of sexual harassment, verbal abuse and humiliation. Factory hostels deprive women and girl workers of their rights to privacy and liberty. Most Adivasi youth suffer from low wages, long working hours and lack of safety measures; they have often been made to take up more difficult, hazardous and menial jobs compared to local workers.
- iii. Xenophobia and migrant Adivasi youth suspected as Maoists: Dislike of foreigners, a sentiment influencing the general public, makes the local population conclude that migrant Adivasis are Maoists and as such, one should keep away from them. There are instances where they easily become suspects when some theft takes place in the neighbourhood.
- iv. Bonded labourers among migrant Adivasi youth: The intermediaries often exploit the helplessness of Adivasi youth by giving certain advance payments and forcing them and their families into a kind of bondage or trafficking. Those, thus, trapped are forced to work 12-16 hours a day with very little or no wages. There are reported cases of bonded labour in Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Telangana, and Andhra Pradesh.
- v. Adivasi girls trafficked: The traffickers are often agents of sex-rackets who literally buy girls from their parents and sell them to brothels at handsome rates. Media reports in Karnataka state once reported, 150 such trafficked and bonded girls from just one agency. Who and how many such agencies are operating has still not come to light. A heart-rending situation.

vi. Accidents and loss of lives: They are vulnerable to health hazards and infectious diseases as their working and living conditions are deplorable. Lack of access to health care takes a heavy toll. Housing conditions are appalling as they are made to live in hovels alongside heaps of filth and mud. No proper arrangements for toilet, drainage, ventilation or provision of clean drinking water are made. Owing to these factors, they are highly prone to accidents and deaths. When accidents occur leading to serious injury or death, they are denied rightful compensation. A newspaper reported that in 2013, in Kerala, at least 50 dead bodies of migrant workers were brought to hospitals for post-mortem every month. One consoling fact, is the construction of long tenement houses with basic amenities for migrant workers by the present government of Kerala. Will this fine example be emulated by the other states?

Back in the year 2000, when the Union Home Minister introduced the Bill in Parliament for the creation of the states of Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh and Uttarakhand, he solemnly announced that these states were being established so that the Indigenous Adivasi societies will be able to self-govern themselves as per their traditions and culture. It was also hoped that they would have a real say and a meaningful share in the mineral wealth being exploited in their land. However, what actually came to be was just the opposite. Multitudes of outsiders from neighbouring states poured in, took over all trade related and commercial activities, filled up most state government's high and low bureaucracy, and the law-and-order forces became replete with unsympathetic non-Adivasis/Dalit. The giant corporate houses came marching in with full patronage of the central and state governments to plunder the natural and mineral wealth of predominantly Adivasi ethno-territories. The Indigenous people felt let down and cheated. Most of their own political leaders, instead of standing up for their

cause, sold themselves off to power and money, some even joining hands with rightist Hindutva forces/parties to work directly against their own people.

Such is the predicament that forces the Adivasi youth to migrate in their thousands to the southern states. The above-mentioned six concerns point to serious violations of Adivasis' and Dalits' labour, human and constitutional rights. This gives a clarion call to all civic-minded individuals, groups, organisations, institutions, people's movements, trade unions and political parties to make concerted efforts to ensure human, constitutional rights and labour rights to the Indigenous Adivasi/Dalit migrant youth, wherever they may be.