

**ALEIN LANDS, NEW OPPORTUNITES**  
**Internal migration of tribes in India**

## **INTRODUCTION**

India is a land of diversity and this diversity is its biggest strength as well as its greatest weakness. Gunawanti, aged 23, comes from Mahabubnagar in Andhra Pradesh. She currently works as a construction labourer in Bangalore. She hails from the famous group of 'palamur' labourers. Her circumstances was shaped by the diverse forces present in India, it is through her story that I wish to explore this pertinent issue of internal migration of young tribal girls and boys across India.

Gunawanti was born on 15<sup>th</sup> September ,1987 to a Lalli and Olongo Pamar at Vellur village, itikyala mandal ,Mehbubnagar. Her parents belonged to the lambada tribe. The lambadas are one of the largest adivasi communities in Andhra Pradesh. The term lambada might have been derived from the Sanskrit 'lavan' meaning salt. Ancestors of the lambadas were traders of salt. They were basically a nomadic community till recent times<sup>1</sup>. They are now predominantly involved in agricultural labor. The same holds good for Gunawanti's family. During the period between 2007 and 2009 due to lack of water for irrigation and decreased productivity of land, her family was pushed to the state of absolute poverty. In search of a better life for her family, Gunawanti made the tough choice that most people in this area make, to move away from her family to the city for a better income. She moved with the hope that this can alleviate her family from poverty .This story is not an isolated one and migration to urban cities has become a way of life in Palamur. Hargopal, member of the Committee Against Famine that has studied the drought situation in palamoor, said between 10-15 lakh people - "the largest migration anywhere in the world" - go out in search of work.

Gunawanti faced severe problems on migrating to Bangalore one of the major issues being, constant exploitation from construction contractors. She recalled an incident where she was made to work in the hot sun for 6 whole days but received only 2 days income. She stated that she is also being subject to social exclusion and ridicule from the local people near her rented house. Her troubles have only increased since the debt that she took from the contractor (whom she refers to as 'Mukadam'), which has been absorbing a chunk of her earnings. This is just one aspect as her face lights up with a smile when she talks about the money she has sent home that is now enabling her parents back home to enjoy better status and comfort. She seldom gets to visit home but when she does she says she is reassured that her decision to move was the right one.

Rural-Urban migration in Indian policy is viewed negatively and attempts are being made to curb such migration through initiatives like the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act,2005 where it guarantees 100 days of work to one member of every household in the

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<sup>1</sup> Lambadas: Changing Cultural Patterns ,Article (60kbs) - [Economic and Political Weekly](#), 20-04-2002.  
By [Gita Ramaswamy](#), [Bhangya Bhukya](#)  
Record Number : A0353933

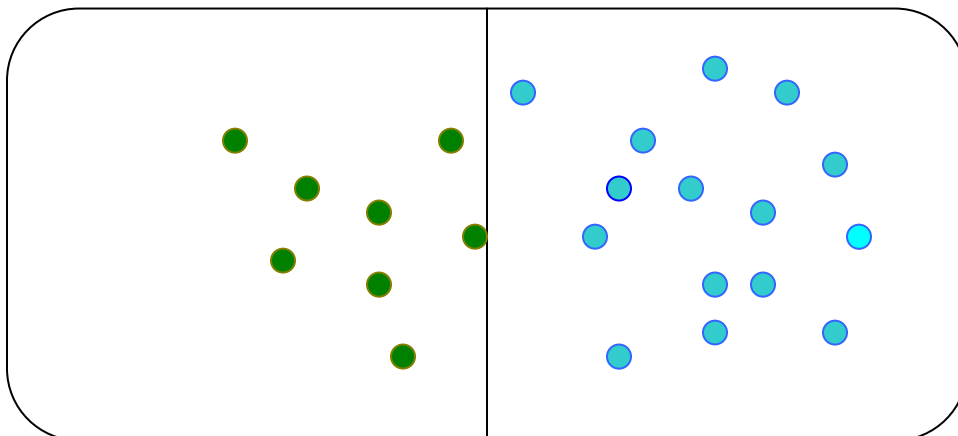
same village. It is a strategy adopted by the government of India to make it economically rewarding to stay at home than move towards the town and cities. These are noble initiatives but are arrived at without a holistic understanding of the issue of migration. Policy makers need to recognize migration as a livelihood strategy. After in-depth study on the issue and interviewing several construction labourers it seems that Gunawanti's story is a universal one. Her problems are similar to the ones faced by most tribal migrants.

I will now proceed to put forth a new understanding of migration that I believe needs to be adopted by the Indian Government for ensuring the preservation of human rights and cultural freedom of these migrants.

### **OSMOSIS THEORY OF MIGRATION**

Ravenstein and Lee laid down the foundational theories for the analysis of migration, these great theories were used to understand why human migration occurred. On close examination of these theories especially Lee's 'Push' and 'Pull' factors, I began to understand reasons why it would not fit in to analyze tribal migration. The primary reason for the failure of this theory is the subjective approach to migration. The clear compartmentalization of 'push' and 'pull' factors is impossible as in some cases the 'push' factors might actually be considered 'pull' factors for another. Further it does not allow for specific analysis of migration in terms of one 'push' or 'pull' factor.

It was due to these reasons that I was motivated to fashion my own theory for the analyses of this issue. Osmosis refers to that scientific principle where water molecules move through a semi-permeable membrane from an area of low solute concentration to one of high solute concentration. This similar principle can be applied to the movement of humans across borders. Tribal migration occurs from an area characterized with low Human Development Index to one with a higher Human Development Index. This model is being adopted for the current analysis.



In the above diagram the green circles reflect the tribal migrants and the blue circles refer to the tribal migrants in urban areas who are enjoying a better standard of human development. The first space is characterized by low human development index thus promoting migration to the second space reflective of the urban areas with a higher human development index.

In India due to its uneven development policy it has created a sense of the haves and the have-nots between the states. Developmental programs were initially concentrated in a few states and then spread to the other. Attempts were made through the land reform legislation to increase rural development but it was not effectively implemented. The truth remains that India is still characterized by stark differences in terms of human development indicators in different states. For instance Bihar has a HDI of 0.449 while Chandigarh is 0.860.

The areas occupied by tribes is subject to the low levels of literacy, The literacy rate among STs is only 24%, compared to 52% in the general population in 1991 census. Further they lack access to drinking water, basic health care and many suffer malnutrition. The conditions here are bleak and the only ray of hope for many families who lack a steady income is to migrate in search of better living conditions to the cities.

In the process of Osmosis these water molecules continue to move from low solute concentration to high solute concentration till the level of concentration of the solute on either side of the membrane is equal. Similarly after consolidating the general sentiment I procured from interviewing 60 odd tribal migrants is that if the level of human development is equal on either side of the border they would rather stay where they come from. I lay emphasis on Human development and not economic development as economic development alone does not ensure the expansion of human freedom and choice. It requires economic development coupled with basic public facilities in the form of primary health care clinics, food distribution systems and more.

There are three interesting phenomenon to be noticed that are occurring along side such migration, one being that through the remittances of the income of these migrant tribal labourers back to their family they are indirectly aiding in increasing the level of human development as now the family is enjoying a better social status and food security which increases the amount of freedom of thought and action of the said family. Further that such migration is only a temporary phenomenon that is it will continue to occur between now and till development in its true form surges through the tribal areas. The last one being the cultural impact of migration in tribal areas, in certain cases women who return from cities command a better position than what they enjoyed before as seen in the case of Gunawanti.

From above one can understand that though migration is not preferred by most tribal members it is a choice that they would like to have in case of dire circumstances. As Amartya Sen stated that the purpose of development is the expansion of human freedom.

The tribal workers should be given this choice of migrating to improve their situation and policy makers should work towards facilitating this choice as opposed to restricting it.

## **MIGRATION – A SHIFT IN PERSPECTIVE FOR POLICY MAKERS**

Migration carries with it several socio-economic problems and benefits and Indian policy makers need to recognize it in its complete form, instead of focusing on its negative impacts alone.

Migration today has begun to act as a key livelihood strategy for these tribes. Migration can help to reduce poverty or to halt the slide into poverty. For example, the income earned by women migrating from West Bengal to Delhi to work as housemaids meant that they had been able to move out of poverty (**Mukherjee 2004**). It can increase income, savings and assets. For example, a study of 955 migrant households in Tamil Nadu found that 57% of lower income migrants had seen their income increase and 53% had increased their asset holdings (**Sundari, 2005**) and migrants from Mahbubnagar District, Andhra Pradesh to the paddy fields of Karnataka have been found to save an average Rs 2000-3000 per season (**Khandelwal, 2002**). It can lead to the sending of remittances to marginalised sending localities, which can be used to invest in human capital or in productive assets in sending localities and can play an important role in reducing vulnerability, improving food security, stimulating land markets in sending areas, increasing local wages and the demand for local goods and services and generally improving the economy (**Deshingkar, 2006b**).<sup>6</sup> It also helps tighten rural labour markets (**Wiggins and Deshingkar, 2007**)<sup>2</sup>.

The current policy set up does not identify these positive impacts and we need a shift in perspective where policy makers take a two part approach, keeping in mind the Osmosis theory where we have identified that such migration is temporary till the level of human development is the same. Thus policy should target this issue on two counts

- (i) To put in place programs that enhances the human development in these remote tribal belts.
- (ii) To facilitate the process of migration by making it easier for the tribal migrants in the new place and safeguarding their rights.

## **NEW POLICY INITIATIVES THAT CAN BE ADOPTED**

### **HUMAN DEVELOPMENT**

Human Development speaks of enlarging human choices for building human capabilities and looks at human decisions as the key element in development. If this model of development is adopted for the shaping of policy in tribal areas results would be far more fruitful than just putting forth programs that ensure employment, food and education. We require a network approach to achieve this goal and these problems are linked. If true

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<sup>2</sup> Circular Migration in India ,Policy Brief No 4. Prepared for the World Development Report 2009  
Kate Bird and Priya Deshingkar

human development is to be achieved in these tribal areas a tailor made policy solution for each tribe in accordance to their distinct culture is required.

If we take the Gunawanti's tribe the Lambada's for instance they have settled on land for cultivation but due to excessive drought are unable to earn their income. Instead of an agricultural development policy primarily based on subsidies, one based on natural resource management will provide a concrete solution. Example can be taken by Laxman Singh's work in Laporiya a region which was once drought prone is now a land of abundance because of the 'Chauka' system devised by him. A scientific approach to these issues like drought is required to be adopted. These are far more viable options than placing a universal policy of agricultural credit and subsidy.

Another key element that one needs to identify in these areas is the nature of poverty. Poverty here is in the form of ecological poverty. Ecological poverty is the lack of an ecologically healthy natural resource base that is needed for a human society's survival and development. It is not the economist's Gross National Product that matters to them. It is the decline of the Gross Nature Product that matters to them<sup>3</sup>. In India, government mismanagement of forests, grazing lands, and water resources has often alienated rural people and exacerbated resource degradation. If there can be a drastic shift in agricultural policy that understands this form of poverty and allows local people to control their resources for their betterment and establish rain water harvesting projects, not only will agricultural productivity increase but it will directly effect the human development index as villages will become self sufficient. The two policy initiatives that need to be adopted are:

- i. Decentralised natural resource governance and
- ii. People's movement for land-water-forest management should be allowed

Primary Education in these areas is a must yet government schools are partially functioning and teachers seldom show up for class. Gunawanti said that there were several times that she had not attended school for months in a year because no teachers were available. In such a case it is not shocking to see the low literacy rates in such places. Positive steps have been taken by the government with the passing of the Right to Education Act, 2009 that ensures the establishment of schools in different places. Another step that can be taken however is to provide better pay and incentives to the teachers so that they may be more regular also the teachers should be from that particular area as it will make it easier for them to understand the social fabric of that village.

Health care is another issue in these areas as Gunawanti described that the government hospitals were far away and the village was filled with quack doctors. If true human development is to be achieved health care is a must. A government initiative to establish mobile clinics and encourage doctors to serve in these remote villages will be a boon in the long run.

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<sup>3</sup> **The Real Green Revolution-II: Ecological Poverty publication of CSE at**  
<http://www.rainwaterharvesting.org/policy/Ecological-poverty.htm>

## **FACILITATE THE PROCESS OF MIGRATION**

As described earlier migrants like Gunawanti suffer from several problems the main ones being:

- a. Exploitation from Contractors
- b. Cultural shock and social exclusion
- c. Mechanism for sending of remittances
- d. Access to public health services due to lack of Ration Cards
- e. They remain largely unorganized

The Indian Government has not turned a blind eye to these issues as it passed the The Inter-state Migrant Workmen (Regulation of Employment and Conditions of Service) Act, 1979. This Act does give some teeth to the migrant labourers in their fight against the Contractor yet there is no monitoring body formed for the specific implementation of this Act.

The main policy initiative that can be adopted is the establishment of a **Migrant Labour Facilitation Centers**. These centers can act as a space in the urban areas where the other tribal migrants can interact and address their issues collectively. These centers being a part of the government can increase the access of these tribal migrants to public services. A temporary identity card can be issued which is valid in the eyes of the government to access the various government schemes.

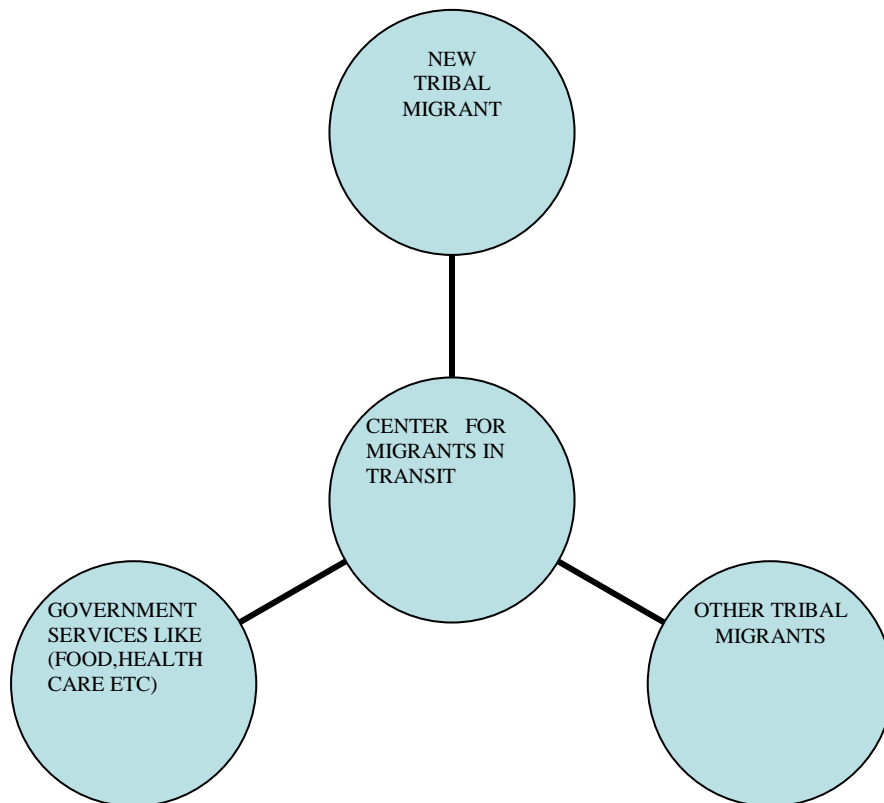
Migration to urban areas is going to be a constant occurrence and such initiatives will ensure that this vulnerable group is not subject to gross violation of their human rights. It can be made compulsory for each migrant labourer to register himself on entrance to the new state as opposed to allowing the contractor to maintain the register as provided in the current legislations. Once these tribal migrants register themselves the relationship between the Contractor and the migrant should be regulated through the center and not away from the purview of the regulatory bodies. These centers can also undertake awareness programs about the various laws and policies that are present to prevent their exploitation.

Another issue faced by most tribal migrants is the inability to find a means of sending their remittance back home safely. Gunawanti said she usually send it with her relative who visits her and if he does not come the money remains with her causing her family great suffering. In such cases the center can act as a middlemen and ensure that money orders or manual delivery systems are formulated such that the remittances reach their destination on time and safely.

The establishment of these centers is of immediate importance as migrants usually arrive in different states without any network base. This center can allow for the migrant to meet others and develop some form of a social capital. This will dramatically reduce the sense of social alienation they feel. Another role that this will play is in the preservation

of distinct tribal culture which is being lost through migration. If people from the same tribal background are given an opportunity to interact through this center they can keep their traditional practices alive by celebrating their festivals together.

Traditional knowledge is a treasure trove of valuable information. With migration tribal girls and boys are departing from their traditional occupation to new ones. This is resulting in tremendous loss of traditional knowledge. This center can promote the revival and preservation of this knowledge by promoting their traditional arts and creations in their spare time. It can also teach these arts to the general public thus keeping this body of knowledge alive.



As seen in the diagram above this Center can act as a nodal agency that connects these tribal migrants to the different government services and schemes and other tribal migrants in an attempt to organize them.

### **NON GOVERNMENTAL INTERVENTIONS**

Apart from the above mentioned government initiatives the several youth advocacy groups should enter into this realm and aid in the furtherance of their cause. Citizens of

these cities as well as the construction companies tend to ignore the needs of these migrants who are the lifeline for urban infrastructure. A few steps that can be taken by them is:

- a. To only undertake those contractors who ensure proper living condition and wages for these workers
- b. To engage in simple conversation with them as Gunawanti pointed out that she often feels like she does not exist as people seldom approach her and strike a conversation.
- c. The youth should attempt to integrate them into the society by trying to hold some cultural exchange programs so that there can be a harmonious space for both to coexist.
- d. Lastly attempts can be made to volunteer at their villages and transfer some of their knowledge and skills in these areas which are in dire need.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion youth migration is an issue of great significance to India and I have attempted to include all those solutions that I thought would be viable for people like Gunawanti to lead a life of dignity in urban areas.

I once asked Gunawanti what is her idea of happiness and she said *“If I know that both my family and I can be rest assured that all our dreams are not restricted by our inability to fulfill them, I will be happy”*. I know that this is a distant goal but I was motivated to write this essay as my minute contribution in achieving her idea of happiness.

