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May 2016

## The Contours and Concerns of Drought-Induced Migration

An interview with Umi Daniel



Indira Gandhi Institute  
of Development Research



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An Initiative supported by Sir Dorabji Tata Trust and the Allied Trusts

# The Contours and Concerns of Drought-Induced Migration

An Interview with Umi Daniel

*Umi Daniel is currently working as Head Migration Thematic unit at Aide et Action South Asia. His areas of interests are tribal empowerment, people's right to food, micro level planning, rights and entitlement of migrant labourers and trade justice campaign.*

*In this interview Umi Daniel discuss how growing rural deprivation, inequality further worsened by the drought situation in country is giving rise to large scale distress migration of poor people who land up in cities and urban location to eke out better wage and livelihood.*

## **What is the Central Government's approach/ action plan on drought in India?**

India has been confronting and managing drought since time memorial. India still follows a rigid colonial and time consuming bureaucratic system of drought assessment and initiating relief measures. The average time taken between declaration of drought and actual relief work reaching people on the ground ranges somewhere 5-6 months. This delay triggers distress among poor wage earners, agriculture labourers and small farmers who choose migration as the key option to fight unemployment, survival and earn money to repay the farm debt. Drought in India is tackled through a short term contingency plan which is casual and relief oriented. Drought is also not given the same emphasis as other natural disaster because of varied impact and intensity. However, on the back drop of climate change, prolong and perennial drought has the eminent potential to create havoc and distress in the lives of people.

## **What hardships are faced by the migrants who move to urban centers because of drought?**

Distress migration always put people into severe trauma and stress. Those who migrate with families find it difficult to get a decent work and space to live humanely. Secondly

the family loses out all the basic entitlements such as food security under public distribution system, ICDS, schooling for the kids and access to drinking water, health, hygiene and safe environment at the destination also add to their woes. Human security and protection from exploitative practices is another cause of concern for the women, children and adolescent migrants at the destination. Since more and more exodus takes place to the urban area, people getting better and remunerative wages are a big challenge and people often opt to settle for lesser wages. Similarly for the single male migrants, accommodation, food and sending of remittance are a key concern. Back home, the left behind uncared family members also go through pain and hardship due to lack of care and support in the absence of their earning members migrated outside.

**Since your particular area of interest has been Orissa/ Are the impacts in other states similar or worse especially when we study its impact on migrants?**

The impact of distress migration emanating from natural disaster like drought put an extra burden on rural people. Increasing number of people forced to opt for wage labourers and the labour contractors earns extra bucks to recruit laborers in cheap rates and ferry them to urban locations. The region like Bundelkhand, Uttar Pradesh, Telangana, Maharashtra, and Karnataka which has been facing a drought situation is experiencing large rural to urban migration.

**Like you rightly said that MGNREGA (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act) has not delivered and provided for the extra days of employment? What reasons do you cite for this?**

After the enactment of MGNREGA, other mass employment generation schemes like food for work, employment assurance schemes and other relief oriented wage employment programmes were scrapped. Today, MGNREGA is considered as a flagship mass rural employment generation programme being implemented in India. However, a cursory observation on the budget allocation for 2014-15 which is also a drought year was one of lowest and has failed to provide gainful employment during distress. However, during 2015 the Government of India has declared another 50 days of employment making the total entitlement to 150 days employment in drought prone districts. Seems, the total entitlement of 100 days is yet to be fulfilled and the average employment is somewhere around 40 plus days. The main reason for the poor implementation of the rural employment scheme is basically due to lack of planning, unable to forecast labour demands, providing employment during lean employment period, untimely disbursement of payment and fail to create permanent and long-term livelihood opportunity through improvement of natural resources, agriculture and water conservation.

**Can policies like MGNREGA be a solution for drought?**

MGNREGA has the twin objective of creating employment and investing on rural

infrastructure and natural resources centric livelihood of poor and disadvantage people. MGNREGA also believe in promoting peoples participation in planning, execution of the work and assessment of the programme. Therefore, a long term planning for making a village drought proofing through enhancing natural resource, agriculture and water conservation is imperative under the MGNREGA. Each of the intervention can also create rural employment and the same can prevent distress migration.

### **Why does Orissa, a state that receives abundant rainfall (in historic perspective) and has good economic growth experience so much out-migration?**

Undoubtedly Orissa's rainfall is much better than any of the dry region of India. Odisha is also a key labour sending states like Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal and Telangana. Some of the pockets of these states are backward, poverty stricken and the Human Development Index is very poor. Generally people migrate from these backward pockets due to a host of reasons and mostly due to unemployment, food insecurity, conflict, and underdevelopment and many also move to urban area for better opportunity. The incidence of migration in coastal region is higher than the under development hilly northern, southern and western Odisha. Western, south and other tribal region of Odisha has been reporting issues concerning debt migration and labour trafficking resulting in to human bondage. The coastal region and the western region of Odisha is predominately disaster affected region where cyclone, flood and drought occurred in close intervals. To sum up, migration in Odisha is both intra and interstate and triggered due to poverty, debt, natural disaster, conflict and also due to better skill and better opportunity.

### **Government should make policies as experts and people suggest. But don't you think the root cause of distress migration should first be tackled at the source itself?**

Migration is inevitable and free mobility is a fundamental right of Indian citizen. However, the state has a special mandate to reduce distress and tackle forced migration. Today, labour trafficking along with trafficking for sex work is increasing and emerging as a huge challenge for Odisha. In one of the district in western Odisha, close to 100 crore is transacted for recruitment and transport of labourers to the brick kilns within and outside of the state. The first and foremost step the government can take is to reduce vulnerability of people to poverty, and lack of access to food, employment, social security entitlements. Secondly, create both rural and off rural livelihood opportunity and provide skill for youth for better employability. Community based long term drought mitigation plan and its implementation is crucial. Thirdly, enforcement of law to regulate labour trafficking and community awareness on safe and protected migration. Finally, it is imperative to have an integrated approach to protect women and children from becoming victims of distress migration and trafficking.

**According to Greenpeace (2008) estimates and solutions Orissa would be worst impacted by drought and sea level rise. Don't you think it is equally important that government should focus on climate induced migration and should make this as a part of larger initiative?**

Climate change induced environmental risk is unquestionably going to affect poor and disadvantage people. Odisha which is susceptible to frequent bouts of natural disaster has been triggering high mobility and migration of people. I think, disaster risk reduction and climate change action plan as a key development strategy will reduce distress migration of people.

**Do you think there is a rural urban disconnect in the sense that some services are available only in urban areas and sectors like construction are more flourishing in urban centres. What can be done so that in rural areas there are varied sources of livelihood apart from agriculture?**

Yes, the rural urban disconnect is quite visible and the gap is also increasing. I think, there is a greater need to create equal and inclusive opportunities in rural area through state of the art education, skill, agriculture, marketing, services and small industries which will create gainful employment for the people. I think, the Government of India's proposed Rurban Mission will usher new hope for creating social and economic infrastructure for inclusive development.