

Migration of Orissa's Tribal Women

A New Story of Exploitation

In Orissa's poverty-stricken tribal areas, recent shifts in migration trends have revealed the increasing movement of young women towards urban centres in search of work. The 'push' factor is responsible for such migration, but as a recent workshop revealed, the prospects such work offers leave much to be desired. Living conditions are unhygienic, the salary poor and tribal women are vulnerable to exploitation by unscrupulous agents.

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The kidnapping of one-and-a-half year old Arpit Dewan from Delhi by a domestic working girl from Orissa caught the attention of the national media but the plight of similar others, working in the same city does not raise eyebrows. A workshop organised in Sundargarh district, Orissa tried to highlight the exploitative and brutal working conditions of domestic working girls in Delhi.

Migration of the tribal population from Jharkhand, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh has been taking place since the last three centuries. In the 18th and 19th centuries, the migration was forced as the British employed tribal labour to work in the Assam tea gardens. However,

since the latter half of the 20th century, tribal people from these areas have begun to migrate voluntarily to earn their livelihood. In the last century, a noticeable change was visible in the nature and pattern of tribal migration. Between 1950 and 1980, tribal people migrated to the rural areas of Bihar and West Bengal mainly to work as agricultural labour. But from 1980 onwards, they started migrating to bigger cities in search of employment. This is obvious from the large concentration of tribal people in metropolitan cities like Delhi, Kolkata and Mumbai. Another new feature of tribal migration from these states in recent years has been the large-scale migration of single-women to cities in search of livelihood, which is a subtle change from the earlier migration patterns

when only the men migrated to urban centres. Tribal families nowadays are driven by poverty to send unmarried daughters to cities in search of work. Single women and tribal girls are, however, prone to exploitation not only by employers but also by anti-social elements.

To get a first-hand account of the nature and character of migration of tribal girls, a workshop organised by the Indian Social Institute, New Delhi, on 'Migration of Tribal Girls to Urban Centres' was held in Kalunga, Sundargarh district (Orissa) on January 14 and 15, 2005. The workshop was a follow-up to a survey carried out by the institute in October-November, 2004. According to this survey, nearly 63 per cent of Orissa's migrant tribal girls are from Sundargarh district; it was thus decided to organise the workshop at Sundargarh. Family members of the migrant tribal girls, social workers of the region and members of the church attended it. A majority of the participants belonged to the various scheduled tribes of Sundargarh district. Women from these tribes were represented adequately at the workshop; in all, 11 women attended the workshop.

The workshop began with a brief delineation of problems faced by tribal girls in Delhi, followed by a presentation of the survey by the Indian Social Institute. Thereafter, participants were encouraged to present their perspective on tribal women migration and its consequences for tribal societies. Family members and relatives of the migrant tribal girl and some social activists of the district presented stunning details of exploitation tribal girls faced in urban centres. Jyoti Kumari Bago of village Kairatoli, block Uttara said her sister had migrated to Delhi for domestic work two years ago. She added that her sister earned good money as she had constructed a three-room house in her village. Elaborating further, however, Jyoti said her sister developed a sore on her leg during her stay in Delhi. Her employers did not pay attention to her condition and the sore soon increased in size. Ultimately, the girl had to return to her village. The infection led to a large swelling in her leg and soon she could hardly walk. Treatment by a Rourkela doctor revealed that she had cancer that was in an advanced stage. The girl's father sold his property to ensure her treatment but her condition deteriorated fast and she died. Later, some monetary support was extended to the family by one of the nuns at the Holy Spirit Church.

Anil Dumdum of village Jhunur whose wife had been working in Delhi for two years before their marriage had a similar

tale of apathy and exploitation. Anil said that his wife fell seriously ill two months after the marriage and she developed sores all over the body. The medical treatment revealed that his wife was HIV positive. Despite the money spent on her treatment, Anil's wife soon succumbed to the disease.

Ajit Topo, a social activist from Rudrapara village, Sambalpur district pointed out that many tribal girls are duped by relatives and agents and sold to brothels in Delhi and Mumbai. He referred to the case of Meena Marandi of Sundargarh district who was sold by her relative to a brothel in Delhi for a sum of Rs 5,000. She was later caught in a raid in a brothel at GB Road by the Delhi police. Topo maintained that several tribal girls of the area were being sold in similar circumstances by agents for sums varying between Rs 8,000 and 20,000. He warned that social repercussions of such migration of girls to Delhi could prove disastrous. Migrant tribal girls were now finding it difficult to get married within tribal societies, as people suspected she could be HIV positive. Topo lamented that the situation had deteriorated to such an extent that even if a migrant tribal girl suffered a minor illness, rumour insisted she was carrying the 'Delhi disease'. The consequence is a social boycott of the girl; at times, even her family is subjected to social isolation.

In some instances, the families of the tribal girl have refused to accept her as she had migrated to Delhi without permission. Sunita Kumari, a participant, drew attention to such an incident in a nearby village. In the end, the tribal girl had to resort to begging to survive. Ultimately, it was the church that convinced her family to accept her. Another social activist, Sunil Marandi revealed that kidnappings of tribal girls have been reported from villages of Dhutka (Kutra thana) and village Balishankra (Talsara thana), both in Sundargarh district. Marandi suspected that many such kidnapped girls were sold to the brothels of Delhi and Mumbai.

Jyotna Lakra, a social activist, visited Delhi to see for herself the condition of the migrant tribal girls. She visited placement agencies at Kotla Mubarakpur, Punjabi Bagh and Viaspuri. She reported that the girls lived in extremely deplorable conditions before employment; 15-20 girls were forced to stay in a small and dingy room in extremely unhygienic conditions. Exploitation continued even after employment as they were never paid the full salary. Lakra pointed out that most often, half of her salary was taken by the placement agencies.

Similar instances of fraud and deceit were narrated by Neville Kumar of Radih village. He said that many placement agencies give a misleading impression about themselves and the work they engage in. Ostensibly devoted to tribal welfare, such agencies are actually run by non-tribals. Moreover, these placement agencies are unregistered bodies. Kumar further noted his shock when he saw some of the tribal girls from Orissa working in the massage parlours of Lajpat Nagar, New Delhi. He stressed that migration for such exploitative work should not be encouraged in tribal societies.

Some of the participants recounted similar incidents of exploitation of tribal girls from their village in other urban centres. It appeared indeed that Sundargarh district had become a wholesale market for buying girls to serve the sex bazaars of urban centres. The observations made by family members, relatives and social activists show that many illiterate and ignorant tribal girls are indeed migrating (or being lured) for such reasons.

The observations made by a participant, Ravi Tete showed the magnitude of the problem tribal societies face. Tete pointed out that girls in 15 families of his village are seriously ill and he did not know what disease they were suffering from. More distressing is the fact that families do not have the money to pay for treatment. Thus, the girls have no option but to face a slow, painful death.

Such startling revelations by relatives and family members brought to light the horrible life and miserable working conditions of migrant tribal girls. Blatant

instances of exploitation that do occur are not reflected in most surveys. Deplorable working conditions that tribal girls encounter in urban centres made the workshop participants debate on the urgency of developing alternative livelihood systems for the tribals in the region. In the last session, various livelihood options like formation of Self-Help Groups, cultivation of mushrooms, vegetables, 'safed musli' and ginger was discussed at the workshop. Some women in the workshop drew attention to the fact that a stitching centre for tribal women had become successful in village Raidih; a replication of such centres in other places could help. Participants realised that livelihood opportunities must be developed in order to avoid disgraceful and humiliating life that working in urban centres offers. The question remained as to who would facilitate and promote such livelihood opportunities for the poor tribal folks. Indeed, it is the right opportunity for NGOs, with reach and commitment, to step in and initiate some livelihood projects in this impoverished region of Orissa.

The workshop revealed the exploitative and brutal character of tribal migration in Orissa. Sexual exploitation, trafficking of women and sometimes poor health and disease appear as the consequences of such migration. Yet tribal families of Orissa can do little to stop migration, as migration is not a matter of choice but often a compulsion to avoid starvation. **END**

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