

# Alien Lands, New Opportunities

## Osmosis theory and internal migration of tribes in India

Summary of the 2011 World Bank winner essay written by Arpitha Upendra  
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**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 were shaped by the diverse forces present in India. It is through her story, and by introducing the Osmosis theory of Migration, that internal migration of young tribal girls and boys across India can be understood.**

*Gunawanti* was born on 15<sup>th</sup> September, 1987 to Lalli and Olongo Pamar at Vellur village, Itikyal Mandal, Mehbubnagar. Her parents belonged to the Lambada tribe. The term Lambada might have derived from the Sanskrit word 'lavan' meaning salt as ancestors of the Lambadas were historically traders the commodity. The Lambadas are one of the largest Adivasi communities in Andhra Pradesh and until recently rather nomadic.<sup>1</sup> Today, they are predominantly involved in agricultural labour. The same holds good for Gunawanti's family.

Between 2007 and 2009, due to the lack of water for irrigation and decreased land productivity, 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 in search for work and better income. She moved with the hope that this can alleviate her family from poverty.

Her story is not an isolated one and migration to urban cities has become a way of life in Palamur. Hargopal, a member of the Committee Against Famine, has studied the drought situation in Palamoor and noted that between 10-15 Lakh people- "the largest

migration anywhere in the world" - venture out in search of work.

Gunawanti faced severe problems while migrating to Bangalore. One of the major issues being constant exploitation from construction contractors. She recalls an incident where she was made to work in the hot sun for six 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. Furthermore, her troubles have only increased since she took a loan from the contractor (whom she refers to as 'Mukadam'). Her debt has since been absorbing a significant part of her earnings. Yet, her face lights up with a smile when she talks about the money she has sent home, enabling her parents to enjoy better status and comfort. She seldom gets to visit them but when she does she says she is reassured that her decision to move was the right one.

Indian policy is viewing rural-urban migration negatively and attempts are made to curb population movements through initiatives like the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act of 2005. The Act guarantees 100 days of work to one member of every household in the same village. It is a strategy adopted by the government of India to make it economically rewarding to stay at home rather than move towards larger urban centres. These are noble initiatives but are arrived at without a holistic understanding of the issue of migration.

A new understanding of migration needs to be adopted by the Indian Government for ensuring the preservation of human rights and cultural freedom of migrant labourers.

### Osmosis Theory of Migration

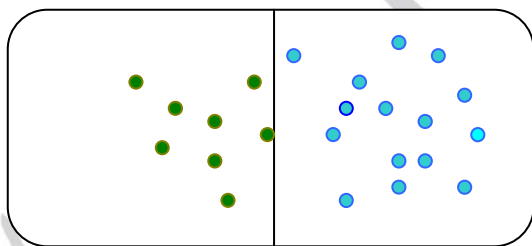
Ravenstein and Lee laid down the introductory theories for the analysis of migration. These great theories were used to understand why human migration occurred. On close examination of these theories, especially Lee's 'Push' and 'Pull' factors, it seems they fall short

<sup>1</sup> Lambadas: Changing Cultural Patterns ,Article (60kbs) - [Economic and Political Weekly](#), 20-04-2002. By [Gita Ramaswamy](#), [Bhangya Bhukya](#)  
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in providing a holistic analysis of tribal migration. The primary reason for the failure of this theory is the subjective approach to migration and population movements. The clear compartmentalization of 'push' and 'pull' factors is impossible as in some cases the 'push' factors might actually be considered 'pull' factors. Further, it does not allow for specific analysis of migration in terms of *one* 'push' or 'pull' factor.

The above reasons encourage the rise of new theories for a better understanding of urban migration. Arguably *Osmosis* may be a much more accurate for explaining this phenomenon.

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 tends to occur from an area characterized with low Human Development Index (HDI) to one with a higher Human Development Index.



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, uneven development policy has created a sense of 'haves' and 'have-nots' between states and regions. 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 and 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 exhibits 0.860.

The areas occupied by tribes exhibit the lowest levels of literacy. The literacy rate among Scheduled Tribes (recognised by the Constitution of India under Schedule 5) is only 24%, compared to 52% in the general population according to the 1991 census. They lack access to drinking water, basic health care and many suffer malnutrition. With bleak living conditions and poor infrastructure the only ray of hope for many families who lack a steady income is to migrate to the cities in search of better living conditions.

During the process of Osmosis 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 through interviewing 60 odd tribal migrants, one can deduce that the level of human development is intricately related to the level of human migration. In other words if the HDI is equal on either side of the border migration is less likely to occur as people tend to stay where they come from. Emphasis should be placed on human development rather than economic development as the latter alone does not ensure the expansion of human freedom and choice. Human development requires economic development coupled with basic public facilities in the form of primary health care clinics, food distribution systems and more.

### Migration and development

Three interesting phenomenon can be identified alongside such labour migration. (I) Through the remittances of the income, from migrant tribal labourers back to their families, they indirectly contribute to the rise in standard of living and thereby also human development as families tend to enjoy better social status, food security as well as freedom of thought. (II) Migration is arguably also a temporary phenomenon, that is, it will continue to occur till development in its true form surges through the tribal areas. (III) Migration contributes to cultural changes in tribal areas as, in certain cases, women who return from cities feel empowered and are likely to command a better position than previously enjoyed.

As in the case of Gunawanti, migration is not preferred by most tribal members, yet it is a choice that they would like to have in case of dire circumstances. In the words of Amartya Sen; the purpose of development is the expansion of human freedom and tribal workers should be given the choice of migrating in order to improve their situation. In addition policy makers must work towards facilitating such choices as opposed to restricting them.

### **A Shift in Perspective for Policy Makers**

Migration carries with it several socio-economic benefits as well as problems. Indian policy makers need to recognize them in their complete form rather than focusing on the negative impact alone.

Migration today is a catalyst for cultural exchange, a livelihood strategy, and it must be recognized as poverty reduction plan for many tribes. For example, the income earned by women migrating from West Bengal to Delhi meant that they had been able to move out of poverty (*Mukherjee 2004*). Migration can increase income, savings and assets. 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*). 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*).

Sending remittances to marginalised areas, have been used to invest in human capital or in productive assets and may certainly play an important role in reducing vulnerability, improving food security, while stimulating land markets and tightening rural labour markets (*Wiggins and Deshingkar, 2007*)<sup>2</sup> by increasing wages and demand for local goods and services (*Deshingkar, 2006b*).

A shift in perspective is needed where policy makers take a two part approach in identifying the positive impact of migrant labour. Keeping in mind the Osmosis theory, recognizing such migration as temporary until the level of human

development is equally distributed, policymakers should target this issue by: (I) implementing programs that enhances the human development in remote tribal belts and, (II) facilitate the process of migration while safeguarding people's basic rights.

### **New potential and policy Initiatives**

*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 when shaping policy in tribal areas results would be far more fruitful than just putting forth programs that ensure employment, food and education. A network approach is required to accomplish given development goals. If true human development is to be achieved in these tribal areas a tailor made policy solution for each tribe in accordance to their distinct culture will be necessary.

Gunawanti's tribe, the Lambada's, 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 can provide a more tangible 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. These are far more viable options than implementing general policies of agricultural credit and subsidy.

Another key element in these areas is the nature of poverty. Poverty here is in the form of '*Ecological Poverty*'- the lack of an ecologically healthy natural resource base that is needed for society's survival and development. It is not the economist's Gross National Product (GNP) that matters to local communities but rather the decline of the *Gross Nature Product*<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

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

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

understands this form of poverty and allows local people to assume control over their resources and establish rain water harvesting projects, not only will agricultural productivity increase but it will directly affect the human development index as villages will become increasingly self sufficient. The two policy initiatives that need to be adopted are:

- (i) decentralised natural resource governance and
- (ii) facilitated people's movement for land-water-forest management.

#### **Access to education and adequate health**

In addition, 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.

Positive steps have been taken by the government with the passing of the Right to Education Act, 2009. The Act ensures the establishment of schools in rural areas yet it fails to formulate incentives, such as decent salaries, for teachers. Moreover, it fails to integrate local teachers who understand the social fabric of that village or the community.

Health care is another issue in these areas as Gunawanti described. Government hospitals were far away and the village was filled with quack doctors and unskilled medical personnel. 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 is not only a necessity but also a long term investment in the communities.

#### **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. lack of reliable mechanism for sending of remittances,
- d. failing access to public health services due to lack of ration cards, and
- e. they remain largely unorganized

The Indian Government has not turned a blind eye to these issues as it passed The Interstate Migrant Workmen (Regulation of Employment and Conditions of Service) Act, 1979. The Act does give some teeth to the migrant labourers in their fight against the predatory contractors. Yet, there is no monitoring and reporting mechanism formed for the specific implementation of this Act.

#### **New institutions- better integration**

It is highly recommended that '*Migrant Labour Facilitation Centres*' are established in order to facilitate, monitor, and safeguard the application of the law. These Centres could act as a space in the urban areas where tribal migrants can interact and address their issues collectively. These centres, facilitated by the government as a part of the local public institutions, would potentially increase the access to public services. It is not difficult to envisage the issuing of temporary identity cards to allow access to various government schemes.

As seen in the diagram below such Centres can act as nodal agencies that connect tribal migrants to the different government services and schemes but also other tribal migrants in an attempt to organize them.

Migration to urban areas is going to be a constant occurrence and such initiatives will ensure that vulnerable groups are not subjected to gross violations of their human rights. It can be made compulsory for each migrant labourer to register 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 Centres in order to ensure transparency and partiality. These Centres could 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 difficulty of sending remittances back home safely. Gunawanti usually helps her family by sending money with her relative. However, such visits are irregular which also means that her family cannot always rely on her contribution. In such cases the Centre could act as a middlemen and ensure that regular

and stable money orders or manual delivery systems are formulated.

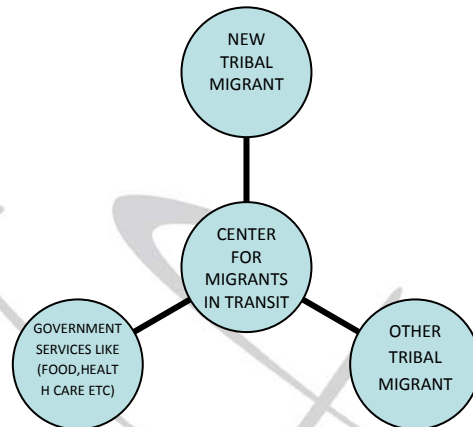
The establishment of these Centres is of immediate importance as migrants usually arrive in different states without any network base. A Centre can allow for the migrant to meet others and develop some form of a social capital which dramatically reduces the risk of marginalization. Access to such Centres may even allow for the preservation of distinct tribal cultures which are today lost due to migration. If people from the same tribal background are given an opportunity to interact through such Center they could keep their traditional practices alive by celebrating their festivals together.

Traditional knowledge is a treasure trove of valuable information. By migrating, tribal girls and boys depart from their traditional occupations to new ones often resulting in tremendous loss of traditional knowledge. This Centres can further promote the revival and preservation of local knowledge by encouraging its expression and thus also preserving the multifaceted fabric of Indian society.

### Non Governmental Interventions

Sound Government policy must also be accompanied by greater participation of civil society. Youth advocacy groups should be permitted and encouraged to participate and aid in such development. Citizens of such urban centres as well as construction companies tend to ignore the needs of these migrants who are the lifeline for urban infrastructure. Greater interaction between the private sector and civil society should allow for the following steps to be carried out:

- a. undertake and encourage contractors who ensure proper living condition and wages for workers,
- b. engage in formal and informal consultations with migrant workers
- c. facilitate youth run integration programmes which foster, promote and organize cultural exchange programs with the aim of greater intercultural understanding,
- d. establish local volunteer programmes in villages and communities in order to promote transfer of knowledge and capacity building where it is needed.



### Conclusion

In conclusion youth migration is an issue of great significance to India. This is an attempt to include and propose possible solutions for people like Gunawanti. When asked Gunawanti defined happiness as:

*"If I know that both my family and I can be rest assured that all our dreams are not restricted by our inability to fulfil them, I will be happy".*

Perhaps a distant goal, yet one, motivate by the desire to improve the quality of life and dignity of marginalized people in urban areas-my minute contribution in achieving an idea of happiness.

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