

THE UNAIDED REFUGEES
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Refugees and displaced persons from wars, wide spread internal conflicts or large scale natural calamities call for and do get national and international attention which they certainly deserve. During the war in Afghanistan, after the terrorist attacks at New York on September 11, 2001, millions of displaced Afghans took shelter in refugee camps in Quetta, Baluchistan, Peshawar and other border areas and urban settlements in Pakistan.

Similarly during the decade-long internal ethnic conflicts in Sri Lanka, millions of people got displaced as refugees in their own country. In Bangladesh too large numbers of people get displaced year after year after natural calamities like floods. All these man-made conflicts like wars and natural calamities like floods and droughts get national and international attention and succour.

But in many parts of the world, especially in developing and under developed countries there are displaced persons and refugees of different types. Their country and the world are usually ignorant of them and pay no heed to them. These are the poorest of the poor people like the Adivasis (tribal people) and dalits (the poor, defenseless and oppressed people) in India and in South Asia at large.

A study made by the Indian Social Institute of New Delhi says that there are nearly 21 million people, mostly dalits and tribals who are displaced in India since independence due to small and big developmental projects.

The Adivasis (tribals) in India are evicted from the land where they and several generations of their ancestors have lived; because now their government claims that they have been illegally occupying the forest land! Some of the Adivasis and dalits are forcefully evicted without adequate compensation because their land is required for regional and national projects like building dams, canals, highways and railway lines.

The government and officials concerned prefer to evict the tribals, the dalits and the marginalized small farmers because they are the people who offer the least resistance. They can not fight the government. They can not organize protest marches and sit in hunger-strikes at the state and national capital. And above all, they can not claim adequate compensation and thus most of the compensation sanctioned by the project concerned, can be pocketed by government officials and the middle men.

India and South Asia continue to have huge populations of forcibly displaced persons. One study says that South Asia, till recently, has received nearly 1.5 million refugees and another 1.6 million internally displaced people.

And what are the lot of these displaced tribals and dalits in their own land and country? They migrate into small towns and cities in search of jobs and livelihood and end up in slums eking out the minimum to keep their body and soul together.

Many Adivasi and dalit men end up doing odd jobs like buying old newspapers and scraps of household items and selling them for meagre profits. The able bodied men may go for construction works of roads and buildings or as day-labourers on hire and fire basis.

The hutments and slums, where these refugees live, are often in the least habitable areas of the cities like on the banks of open gutters and in abandoned and isolated locations close to sewage farms and other swampy places.

These slums lack basic amenities like water, healthcare and education. Poor sanitation and over crowding cause often such sicknesses like gastro-enteritis, skin and respiratory disorders and diseases like cholera, diarrhoea and pneumonia.

The lot of migrant women and children is the worst. They often end up as domestic workers in middle class and rich families, as low-paid house-maids doing all sorts of works like cleaning, cooking, washing, baby-sitting, etc. Their working hours stretch out from early morning to late at night.

Apart from their back-breaking jobs the girls and women are often exploited sexually. When these clandestine exploitations result in pregnancies the women are discarded like unwanted old clothes without any care or concern for their predicament and others are employed in their place without any remorse.

There are also individual and groups of young girls lured to the city by middle men, sometimes heartless relatives, with the promise of jobs and sold to city brothels! Life is hell for them as they are often beaten to submission and they have none to run to and take refuge.

Most of these girls as well as a considerable number of men folk migrate to towns and cities from their natural habitat on account of poverty. The vast majority of people in India and for that matter in the whole of South Asia live in villages occupying themselves mainly with agriculture and cattle breeding. They depend on seasonal rains for cultivating and making their livelihood.

The poor village people especially the landless labourers migrate to towns and cities when there is no work in the fields. Adivasis and dalits constitute the vast majority of these seasonal migrants. Experts say that 20 million poor people are on the move for jobs and better opportunities in India. A study has shown that dalits and tribals constitute 80% of the rural and urban immigration in India.

The problems of all these displaced refugees and migrant workers have to be tackled at different levels. I suggest that they could be organized in three different groups according to their background and jobs. The displaced people who cannot go back to their original habitat form one group. The second group is formed of seasonal migrant workers and the third group with women and children.

The government should provide at least one permanent job to each family of displaced people and provide better relocation than what they have lost in vacating their land for the construction of dams, highways and railway lines. The government can involve non-government

organizations (NGO) to make sure that adequate and satisfactory compensation is given fully to the victims and not to officials and other middle men.

The problems of seasonal migration can be solved by imaginative planning of development. Seasonal migrants flock to towns and cities for jobs, entertainments and other amenities of life available in the cities. The government can create jobs in the villages by way of developing service sectors, building roads, gardens and small scale village industries. When jobs and other facilities like communication, entertainments as well as good food and other services are easily and equally available

in villages as in towns and cities, the seasonal migration will stop automatically as it has happened in Kerala.

The third group, woman and child labourers and domestic workers, are the most exploited lot of all immigrants and displaced people. They have to be organized to make sure that they get the minimum wages and their working hours are regulated. Educational facilities and adequate health service should be made available to children and the prohibition of child labour should be strictly enforced. Non-government organizations can play an important role in these areas.