Locked Doors: A Deserted Village

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Rampant Seasonal Migration from the village Khohar in Northern Rajasthan

On October 29, 2014, a group of researchers from Sehgal Foundation, a Gurgaon-based NGO, visited Khohar village in Ramgarh Tehsil of Alwar District in Northern Rajasthan, to capture the views of the community about the check dam that has been built in the region in the recent past.

Passing through the narrow lanes of the village, the team observed many locked houses. Hardly any person could be seen. Besides being startling, the scene was quite improbable, as rural India normally bustles with activities, especially in early winters. Finally, at one end of the village, the team was able to meet some women, who were busy in cleaning the wheat grains. Interaction with them revealed the ground reality of mass migration that has been taking place in the village every year in search of a viable livelihood option. The two major destinations for the people of Khohar village were rural belts of Punjab and Gujarat, where they can work as cotton pluckers. Dismally, the migration from the northern belts of Rajasthan is lesser known than the migration from
southern tribal districts of Rajasthan as the scholars have taken large interest in the southern belts. (Jones et al, 2010)[2](NCPCR)[3]

The village Khohar is domiciled by a single community, Rajput, who are categorized as OBCs. Out of the 147 households in the village, in around 90 per cent households, at least one member from the household has migrated out for better income[4]. This shows the ground reality of rural India, and raises several questions; despite the introduction of a plethora of government programmes in the name of ‘Rural Development’ such as MGNREGA, a large number of households still are forced to migrate to distant places for income generation. This exodus is a result of lack of employment opportunities in the village or near by villages, crop failures, and scarcity of water for irrigation. Migration from this particular village is not a new phenomenon. It is an age-old practice of dwellers. DhannoBai (changed name), appeared to be more than 50 years of age, said “harsal ye log baharjaatehain, agar nahi jaaenge to khaenge kya? (Every year they migrate, and if they don’t migrate, what will they eat?).” Sam Chand (changed name) a member of the Water Management Committee formed in the village by Sehgal Foundation, said, “small land holdings, rain-fed land and unfavorable weather compel people to migrate”. SanjuBai (changed name) an anganwadi (child care centre) worker in the village said, “those who do not migrate have good land holdings, ranging from 20-50 bhigas”.

Further discussions with the villagers revealed that the water scarcity is a major problem in the village, affecting rural economy. The water level in the village, ranges between 90-105 metres, is depleting alarmingly over the years. Those, who have tubewells, can cultivate their land twice a year, but those who do not
have tubewells, either have to depend on rains or tubewell owners (traders) to purchase water. This makes the agriculture non-remunerative in the region as they have to pay a huge amount of money or a substantiative share of their produces for water charges. Further, all the agricultural activities conclude in late September and October every year and after that no work is available. Therefore, people prefer to move out from the village to work in other parts of the country without any job guarantee, protection of wages, or dignity of labour and life. These migrants return by March. The predominant duration of their stay at the work site is up to 6 months.

In India, this kind of migration is rising day by day (Smita, 2008[5]) and addressed in the name of “distress seasonal migration”, where people live under deplorable living conditions, i.e., low wages, lack of employment, crop failures, are compelled them to migrate with their families. Lack of access to income generating activities along with poor access to government programs accentuate the situation; in the selected village, the situation worsens with poor access to government’s rural development programmes and social protection schemes, including MGNREGA (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Gurantee Act), which were launched with an objective to reduce the number of out-migrants. On being asked about the implementation of MGNREGA, the villagers replied that they never worked under MGNREGA. This raises a question on 9 years of MGNREGA implementation in the state. Under this background, the chorus of “Shining India”, “Bharat Nirman” and celebrating a “good governance day/week” make little sense as poors are excluded from the major programmes. It was clearly visible that the villagers were not so hopeful of the government
programme. Instead, they see a ray of hope with the construction of a check dam by Sehgal Foundation. They look forward to create an alternative source of water through rainwater harvesting that may result in higher agricultural productivity and more allied livelihood options in the village. It is pertinent to mention that the organization has started working in the village recently and it is too short a time to gauge any success or failure of the program.

We wish, in the coming days, increase in the availability of water through the construction of check dam would be able to reduce ongoing migrations in the Khohar village.

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Notes


This has been revealed out from the discussion with the villagers who were present and participated in the Focus Group Discussions conducted.