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ARIVU, DHEE & THEIR SONG OF THE SOIL

Arivu and Dhee, the musicians behind *Enjoy Enjaami*, explain that their new, super popular song is almost like an origin story of man that reminds us to respect the planet. At the same time, it's about the thing that divides us—inequality

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NEW DAILY COVID CASES RACE PAST 81,000 MARK | PAGE 16



THE GREAT CLIMATE MIGRATION

AS THE IMPACTS OF CLIMATE CHANGE BECOME MORE VISIBLE, MILLIONS OF INDIANS LIVING IN CLIMATE-SENSITIVE REGIONS ARE MIGRATING TO 'GREENER' PASTURES IN URBAN INDIA



CULTURE
An ode to sharing and the pre-pandemic green room

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THE GREAT CLIMATE MIGRATION

As the impacts of climate change become more visible, millions of Indians living in climate-sensitive regions are migrating to 'greener' pastures in urban India

Migrant workers, stranded in Ahmedabad during the lockdown, waiting to board a train for their home state of Uttar Pradesh in May 2020.

REUTERS



Sibi Arasu

Pratap Malik, who comes from Radhaballavpur village in Balasore district, Odisha, went to Bengaluru years ago in search of work, seeking an escape from the river that today is not so much near his family's home as in it. With every passing year, the flooding seems to become more frequent. "See, my house is right next to the Kansa Bansa river, and since we are only 30km from the sea, we always receive plenty of rainfall," Malik says. "The rainfall is irregular but when it rains heavily or when there is a cyclone, large parts of my house get engulfed by the river."

In Bengaluru, Malik, 35, operates a 12-decibel power loom, weaving mosquito nets in a small industrial unit in the Pete Chennappa industrial area in the western part of the city, 1,600km from his village. The job is arduous, demanding at least 12 hours a day, six days a week.

Since he earns around ₹9,000 a month but can afford only ₹2,000 as rent, he has taken up a room that is just a five-minute walk from his workplace. He shares the room with two cousins. Malik goes there for meals, his only breaks during the workday, and sleeps in the power-loom factory. The room is too small for the three of them to sleep in.

The situation is far from ideal but Malik says he prefers Bengaluru to Radhaballavpur. Last year's covid-19 lockdown only convinced him further that his decision to leave the village was the right one.

"We had gone back during the lockdown because we had no money or place to stay here," he said recently, having returned to Bengaluru in December after spending seven months in the village.

Like many migrants, he and his relatives, including his family, started walking back to Odisha after the lockdown was announced in March last year. Thanks to some well-wishers, they were eventually able to board a train.

Malik found work as a farm labourer in the village during the lockdown, but the pay, around ₹200 per day, was paltry, he says. A government officer in Karnataka who comes from Odisha and two journalists helped him to set up a fish-farming business—but there were just too few fish in the river. As soon as restrictions eased and Malik was able to return to the factory in Bengaluru, he did so, leaving his family in the village.

"In Bengaluru, no one might care whether we live or die as long as we work, but despite that I can make a better life for my family here than I can ever do in my village," says Malik, who has to take care of his parents, wife and children—a six-year-old and a one-year-old.

RUNNING OUT OF OPTIONS

All along India's climate-sensitive Bay of Bengal coast, especially delta regions such as the Sundarbans, where the mighty rivers of the subcontinent empty out their water and sediments into the sea, millions are moving away because their homes and lands are being destroyed by what are increasingly seen as climate change-related events.

According to the Migration Data Portal, which provides comprehensive global migration statistics, "in the first half of 2020 alone, disasters displaced 9.8 million people and remained the leading trigger of new internal displacements globally. Five countries accounted for nearly 75 per cent of the new internal displacements due to disasters in the first half of 2020 with India leading the pack, accounting for nearly three million people, followed by Bangladesh (2.5 million), Philippines (811,000), China

(791,000) and Somalia (514,000)." Delta regions that are home to 500 million people worldwide will contribute an inordinate share to such migration, since these areas are considered climate change hot spots, places where high levels of exposure to climate stressors coincide with high levels of vulnerability. Low-lying regions and deltas face a high risk of flooding and storm surges even without these threats being exacerbated, as they are now, by climate change. Apart from extreme weather events, for example, large delta regions on India's east coast, such as the Mahanadi delta and the Sundarbans, where the Ganga, Brahmaputra and Meghna rivers join the sea, are exposed to a range of hazards such as sea-level rise, coastal erosion, flooding and salinisation.

A 2018 research paper by the American Meteorological Society shows how the risk of pre-monsoon extreme rainfall has been heightened by anthropogenic climate change in Bangladesh. Just in the last two decades, the two delta regions have borne the brunt of at least 15 tropical cyclones, some of them among the worst ever to hit the subcontinent. Cyclone Aila in 2009 and Cyclone Amphan last year wreaked havoc, with Amphan coinciding with the pandemic-induced lockdown.

According to *Climate Change Migration And Adaptation In Deltas*, a 2018 report by the Deltas, Vulnerability & Climate Change: Migration & Adaptation (Deccma) programme, an international initiative that studied conditions in the Volta in Ghana as well as the Ganga and the Mahanadi delta in India, a significant number of Indians for whom the eastern coast is home, and who still have a foothold in their homesteads, are moving thousands of kilometres, to cities, for work.

This is especially true for those who practise what is called circular migration—the temporary and usually repetitive movement of a migrant worker between home and host areas. They move not so much out of need but out of the hope that they can make a better life for themselves and their families in the urban and peri-urban regions of India's megapolises. These migrants hope to return. But for those forced to flee, there is often nothing to return to.

Migration is not new. Throughout history, human civilisation has been on the move. In India, people move within their state or the country, or abroad, for a variety of reasons: education, work and marriage. According to the 2011 census, more than 453 million Indians have migrated within the country. However, increasingly unliveable environments are fast joining the list of reasons for migration.

In the Bay of Bengal region, in particular, rising seas, increasing salinity, and a reduction in fish catch caused by factors such as overfishing, water pollution and climate change have forced people to migrate not just in search of opportunities but also to avoid threats to their health and livelihoods.

NEED FOR MIGRANT-FRIENDLY CITIES

World Migration Report 2015: Migrants And Cities—New Partnerships To Manage Mobility by the UN International Organisation for Migration highlights the important role the migrant community plays in



climate adaptation by sending home remittances that can help offset the distress caused by climate change. "A growing number of research findings demonstrate that migration can have a transformative power, remittances could promote adaptation strategies and distress reduction as people adopt circular mobility patterns and livelihood strategies based on links to multiple locations," the report states.

It also notes that migration has led to an informal process of skill development. "In addition to remittances, migrant groups and associations can support various development and risk reduction projects in areas of origin such as food and water security, infrastructural provisions and technical support along with political mobilisation in support of the distressed population," the report explains. Simply put, they can send back money and support measures to improve life in their villages.

Prof. S. Irudaya Rajan of the Centre for Development Studies in Kerala, who has been researching migration patterns in India and beyond for nearly four decades, says: "The greatest single impact of climate change will be human migration. Urban plan-



GETTY IMAGES

(left) Large parts of the Sunderbans flooded in 2020 after cyclone Amphan, causing families to leave their villages; and Hari Padha Mondal with his family in front of their home in 'Bengali colony' in Bengaluru's Bellandur area.



SIBI ARASU



Urban planning that is sensitive and inclusive of migrants will help deal with emerging challenges. JITHENDRA M/MINT

ning that is sensitive and inclusive of migrants will be helpful in dealing with emerging challenges. Migration, when planned and voluntary, can serve as an essential coping strategy to climate stress. This cannot be an all-purpose solution but it can work."

THE MIGRANT STORY

South-east Bengaluru, home to many of the city's information technology (IT) parks and a stone's throw from Bellandur Lake, heavily polluted by industrial waste, is also home to a construction workers colony. The colony, built in what used to be a coconut grove, is referred to as "Bengali colony" or "Sobha Daisy colony", a reference to the eponymous residential apartments in the shadows of which the colony has been built. It is home to hundreds of migrant workers, mostly from West Bengal and Assam, who live in *kutcha* structures that are rented out to them for ₹6,000 per month and upwards by a local landlord who owns the coconut grove.

Anywhere from three-seven people live in each of these small homes. Most of the men work as construction labourers, putting in the work to build sprawling office towers and residential apartments

in and around Bellandur, Whitefield and other areas nearby. The women mostly work as domestic help or as housekeeping staff once the apartments and buildings have come up. There's a constant demand for their services in this sprawling peri-urban region.

Hari Padha Mondal, 36, from the Hingalgaon community development block of North 24 Parganas district in West Bengal's Sunderbans region, lives in the colony with his wife Suparna and their two children, 11-year-old Sathi and six-year-old Hi Wong. He works as a construction labourer in one of the big developments nearby.

"I have a proper job here," Mondal says. "In the village, this is not the case. Also, since I have come here, my family gets more respect back in the village. Besides, my father too migrated to work when he was young, so it felt only right that my siblings and I do the same."

The Sunderbans region has watched its residents migrate for work for decades, primarily due to the hit farming has taken from rising sea levels and increasing salinity. In recent years, ever more frequent tropical cyclones have hastened the pace of migration. Popular destinations used to be the

Andamans and, of course, Kolkata. Kolkata is about 65 hours by ship from the Andamans, which makes it easy for many workers to migrate there, temporarily or permanently. The increase in construction work in the last few decades has also led to an increased demand for labourers in the Andamans. But many are now choosing to migrate to southern cities, attracted by the employment opportunities created by a number of public and private infrastructure projects.

Yet many still dream of returning home one day, when they have earned enough.

"My aim is to return to my village after 10 years or so and start an aquaculture and poultry business," Mondal says. "I want to save enough money from my work here so I can build a good house in my village."

His wife is quick to counter him. "I like Bengaluru, and I want my family to be here only and for my kids to study here. The village has nothing to offer us any more, I am happier here than I will be back home," she says.

GROWING STRESS

Research conducted in 2018 by the Decma project found that most migration is economically driven. The project, which surveyed 1,315 households in the Sunderbans region, found that 18% of households had migrants. In the Mahanadi delta region, the figure was 24%. They also discovered that environmental stresses are disrupting livelihood security and contributing to the economic circumstances that necessitate migration. Yet, the Decma project adds, migration is still not among the top three most common adaptation strategies in any of the deltas.

Prof. Tuhin Ghosh of the School of Oceanographic Studies at Kolkata's Jadavpur University, the India lead for the Decma project, says: "If you consider delta regions like the Sunderbans, it was full of forest, no one lived there. The first person there is a migrant and so will be the last person to reside there. So, when thinking about migration, it helps to understand human behaviour and their response systems. For many people, migration is another kind of opportunity."

"In the Anthropocene, no one in the delta regions is engaging in only one occupation. Everyone has multiple occupations and migration is another one they are exploring, and through this they are trying to get a foothold in peri-urban areas."

Prof. Ghosh and his team spoke to over 1,500 residents in both the Mahanadi and Sunderbans regions as well as 1,500 migrant workers in the peri-urban regions of West Bengal and Odisha for their study. The project, which was carried out by academics and researchers in various delta regions around the world, took five years to complete.

"If you go through migration patterns in India, a lot of people from places in southern India have migrated towards the Middle East," Prof. Ghosh says. "The labour force to build cities is not there. There is an opportunity in this and so people are migrating there. The landless people migrate all around the year and usually they select bag factories, hosiery, etc. Landholders select construction work because in the monsoon there will be no jobs in construction, so they can come back to the delta and cul-

tivate their own land and produce foodgrain for their year-long consumption. That is a clever way of seasonal migration that is happening today."

During the nationwide lockdown last year, millions of people were forced to leave cities and trudge to homes thousands of kilometres away. Many lost their lives during this journey, while the many who chose to stay behind were on the verge of starvation. The question through that crisis was whether the migrants would ever return to the cities. Clearly, an overwhelming number have, or are doing so.

"We are poor people and did not understand what a lockdown meant. We had no idea how long it would continue. People kept saying it was for a few days but we soon realised we were running out of money and soon we were left without any income," says Malik.

"Cyclone Amphan had also damaged my house extensively and there was really little source of income in Odisha, definitely nothing like there is in Bengaluru. I decided to come back and hopefully I will be able to bring my wife and children here too within the next few months. She was also working here (as a helper in a garment factory) before and we are hoping she will get a similar job again," he says.

In Bellandur, Mondal from the Sunderbans chose to stay back. "Thankfully, it was not so bad for us," he says, as we talk outside his home in Bengali colony. Mondal says both he and his wife, Suparna, began work as domestic workers as soon as the lockdown ended.

Subrata Das, 25, from West Bengal's East Midnapore district, also a resident of Bellandur, went back home during the lockdown. But like Malik, he too returned as soon as he could. "Disasters are definitely an important reason I chose to come to Bengaluru," says Das, who works as a community manager at the Samridhdhi Trust, an NGO that provides education to children of migrant workers. "In Midnapore, we are always being hit by one big cyclone after the other. I was 13 years old when Aila struck and I remember how all our village fields were completely flooded."

Moreover, he says, there are hardly any good jobs in his village. "I have finished my BSc chemistry, and like me there are many educated people in West Bengal but hardly any jobs for us, hence I decided to shift to Bengaluru," Das explains.

Das and his sister, Pinky Bera, who studies nursing, live in Bengaluru while his parents and younger brother are in their village, on the fringes of the Sunderbans.

"I like my work here and I am also able to help other migrant workers. Even though this year has been really difficult because of the pandemic, I feel things are improving now for migrant workers here. Of course, I love my state and village but the city is better for economic reasons," Das says, adding: "I am not really thinking about my future. I will probably decide in five years or so. We would love to settle in Bengaluru but it is so expensive, let's see what happens."

Sibi Arasu is a Bengaluru-based journalist. This story was supported by Internews' Earth Journalism Network Bay of Bengal Story Project.