


## Poverty forces ex-block chairperson of Deogaon to migrate

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**BALANGIR:** Failing agriculture and shrinking forests have destroyed traditional livelihoods, forcing lakhs of people to leave Odisha to work in distant and unsafe brick kilns. And this time, even the former chairperson of Deogaon block under Balangir Sadar sub-division has migrated to Andhra Pradesh far away from the panchayat poll campaign.

Former chairperson Kunti Kunar was in office during 2007-12 in Deogaon block. She had a successful stint and the people were happy with her works. Being herself a victim of poverty, she ensured people get their legitimate dues.



The post of block chairperson was reserved for ST and after winning as panchayat samiti member from Sarasmal gram panchayat, she was elected as block chairperson. As Kunar was landless and had no house of her own, she was even allotted a house under IAY. But finally poverty took a toll on her political aspiration and dreams.

Today, her house in Aphasara village under Sarasmal panchayat is locked and penury has forced her to migrate to neighbouring State. She along with her husband worked as daily wagger but in absence of work, they had no other way but to migrate. To add to the woes of the couple, their only son married around two years back and shifted to her in-law's house in Saintala.

The son is not in touch with his parents and remains confined to his family unmindful and unaware about his father and mother. Informing that Kuntri and her husband Ghana were forced to migrate to Hyderabad due to acute poverty and hunger, former Ward Member Baidyanath Pradhan said the family had no other way to sustain themselves. He said they had no other source of income and recalled that she functioned with great success.

Officially there is barely six per cent irrigation in the district while unofficial figure puts it at three per cent. And this has led to repeated visit by drought making migration a way of life. To make things worse with the migrants staying away from their villages for most part of the year, they miss out on surveys and in the process are left out of Government benefits under welfare schemes. The trend transcends caste, creed, sex and land holdings.

Lakhs of people from the district migrate year after year and the State Government has no database on the number of people who migrate from rainfed areas of western Odisha in search of livelihood.

Those who migrate include gountias (village headman), Janis and Jhankars (village priests), PRI members, school education committee members and watershed committee members. And only because it is poll time, the migration by a former block chairperson came to the fore exposing the naked truth of struggle for existence and survival of the fittest.