

Himachal Pradesh lies in the northwest of India. It is a varied region of fertile valleys, mountainous terrain, and harsh desert. With a population of only 6 million, it is one of the country's less populous states, yet it is one of the most progressive economically and socially. It is also home, however, to over 10,000 internally-displaced people. Driven from their land in central India by drought, environmental degradation and economic reform, these groups came to the region over 20 years ago to search for a new life and for the basics of survival. They were amongst the first of those we now refer to as 'environmental refugees'.



### Where do these people come from?

During the late 1970s and early 1980s, regions across India underwent an intensive period of agricultural reform. New high-yield farming technologies allowed for a rapidly increased growth of crops, resulting in India being able to 'feed itself' for the first time since independence. Despite their successes, however, the reforms yielded a less positive result for the people of the country whose livelihoods depended upon small-scale farming. When high-yield production took off, new 'agri-businesses' dominated the market, investing in methods that required less labour and which geared production for foreign export. Small-scale farmers were squeezed out of the market, and it was the rural poor whose livelihoods were in agricultural labour that suffered the most. Having no land or assets, when they lost their jobs they were left with nothing.

During the same period, large regions of India were suffering from rapid environmental degradation - land was drying up, losing its fertility and failing to produce crops, neither for sale nor for subsistence. This was a phenomenon known as desertification, and in parts of India it was actually induced by the poorly-planned farming practices of the agricultural reforms of the 1970s and '80s. Whilst rich farmers could compensate with use of irrigation and fertilisers, those who had small plots and relied upon manual labour soon found their land useless, and they faced the same dilemma as the workers in other regions who had lost their jobs. Many sought new opportunities in the villages; millions fled to the cities to seek new lives; and some travelled north to the fertile valleys of Himachal Pradesh.

### What happened when they left their homes?

Despite the prospects of new livelihoods in Himachal, the reality was that people found themselves working against the odds. As in any part of the world, trying to build a new life as an outsider - and at that a poverty-stricken,

low-caste 'immigrant' - can be difficult, and despite their efforts, people struggled to make ends meet. They settled on the outskirts of the large towns, hoping to find work, but with no real plan for doing so. They were driven out of desperation; not out of expectation. Some did find temporary work: in construction, in street-sales, in shoe repair. Nothing was permanent, however, and with no money and few rights, people were forced to remain in temporary shelters on the outskirts of Himachal's towns.

And they are still there. With nothing to go back to, the only option is to stay and try to earn enough to provide the basics - shelter, clothing, food. Being out-of-state citizens, they receive no support from the state government of Himachal Pradesh. They have no rights to land, to welfare, no subsidised healthcare; this, however, is still preferable to the situation in their home regions, where acute poverty and corruption is rife. In Himachal they can at least turn to begging to fill their stomachs.

### What is life like in an internally-displaced community?

Life is hard. With no land rights, and little money to afford a decent home, people live in temporary shelters made with bamboo poles and plastic sheeting. They cook on wood-fire stoves, and often have to walk miles to collect water. There are no sanitary facilities, and no public services, and so hygiene is a major concern. Disease spreads rapidly. Children often suffer unnecessarily from the poor conditions, with little money to afford adequate healthcare, an unwillingness to use it due to institutional discrimination, and a lack of basic awareness of health issues.

Few children go to school. Whilst education in India is free, it is a luxury not many can afford - children must work from an early age. They collect rubbish from the side of the road, work on construction sites or, when needs must, beg in tourist areas. As a result, most adults are illiterate. This not only reduces their job prospects, it cuts them off from engaging in all kinds of activities in daily life - they cannot apply for a ration card; they cannot register the birth of their child. Simple and necessary things become more difficult than they should be.



### What does the future look like for these people?

This depends on the opportunities that can be given to them. When literacy rates grow, doors will open. When the government recognises their universal rights, their voice will be heard. When attitudes change, and their situation is given the attention it deserves, things *will* change.