



Climate Induced Migration and displacement addressing the challenges in South Asia and India

Dr. Krishnakali Roy
Assistant Professor
Gokhale Memorial Girls' College

Abstract

The climate of the Earth is drastically changing and its effect is being felt across the planet. Due to their demographical and geographical factors, some nations suffer more from its impacts. Many people have been forced to migrate from their homes owing to the disasters occurring due to climate change. This study focuses on climate change-induced migration, especially in South Asia and India. Human migration and mobility are age old phenomena. However, their triggers are rapidly changing owing to the deteriorating ecosystems and environment. The world witnessed large-scale displacements triggered by weather events and climate in 2020 and 2021, even amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. The coastal states of India are experiencing a rapid increase in cyclones and floods brought on by the impacts of climate change, while its interior regions witness slower effects like droughts. The growing threat of climate change increases the instances of migration and displacement, making many people more vulnerable to trafficking and forced labor. Proper government policies and social safety net are needed to ensure the safety and well-being of such people.

Governments must try to identify migration hubs, or regions that are less susceptible to the impacts of climate change and be proactive about creating more diverse livelihood opportunities in those parts. Such regions can include cooler Southern Indian highlands around Chennai and Bangalore. Governments should try to direct resources to peri-urban areas and secondary cities, thereby creating infrastructure and employment opportunities for migrants, while avoiding overcrowding within slums in major cities. The development of climate-resilient secondary cities can be a chance to diversify South Asian economies and bridge the expansive rural-urban divide. This study discusses why and the government must facilitate livelihood diversification strategies or planned relocation. The conclusions made in this study are based on secondary data sources from government websites, reports, news articles, and research papers.

Keywords: Climate Change, Climate migration, Climate change in South Asia, Climate migrants in India, Climate migration policies

Introduction

Climate-induced displacements have gone up in both magnitude and numbers across the world. Based on an IDMC or Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre report, about 23.7 million people experienced displacements in 2021 due to floods and cyclones. Climate change has augmented the severity of various weather-related hazards like forest fires, earthquakes, floods, hurricanes, droughts, and heatwaves. It has also led to slow-onset changes like rise in the sea levels. The International Organization on Migration (IOM) estimated that between 25 million and 1 billion people might be compelled to migrate from their homes because of climate change and environmental degradation by 2050 on a global scale.



South Asia is especially like to bear high negative impacts of extreme weather conditions. It can become an epicenter of extreme weather in the future, afflicted by a combination of intensified cyclones, rising sea levels, chronic droughts, and ‘un-survivable heatwaves. Natural disaster and weather events lead to several internal displacements in South Asia every year. The Climate Action Network South Asia (CANSA) reports that approximately 45 million people in India alone will be compelled to migrate by 2050 due to climate disasters.

Despite concerning figures, there is a lack of consensus on how to manage or deal with climate induced migration. Terms like “environmental migrants,” “environmental refugees”, “climate refugees”, and “climate migrants” are often used interchangeably. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) underlines that one of the greatest impacts of climate change could be ‘human migration.’

Climate-induced migration in South Asia

South Asia is among the most climate-vulnerable regions on the planet. It is home to about a quarter of the population of world. Over 62.9 million people in South Asian countries, however, might be forced to migrate from their homes due to climate disasters by 2050 as per Costs of Climate Inaction: Displacement and Distress Migration. Failure of not being able to limit global warming to below 2 degrees Celsius as agreed upon in the 2015 Paris climate pact ended up driving about 18 million climate refugees from their homes in South Asia in 2020 according to the report.

With its high levels of poverty, South Asia is quite susceptible to climate change-induced migration and displacement, a lot of which is likely to be internal. However, it must be kept in mind that migration is only feasible when there are places to go, and people are not restricted by any such political, economic, and social constraints and considerations. Forced migration is likely to substantially go up in area that is affected badly by varying climate change-induced disasters, like severe and frequent cyclones, droughts, and floods. Moreover, as several of most important and largest urban centers of South Asia lie in especially vulnerable coastal areas, policy makers must prepare for likely influx of migrants.

Yet, there is no agreement on the status of people who are displaced by climate change. The term “climate refugees” does not have a place regarding international law. And even if climate refugees get recognized, the question arises about who would be responsible for their rehabilitation and protection.

Origin of climate change-induced migrants

Climate change induced migrants typically originate from marginal areas where individuals with low skill levels reside. They also come from low lying cities and coastlines that are vulnerable to sea-level rises, as well as areas of high water and agricultural stress. Northeastern and eastern Bangladesh, the corridor from Delhi to Lahore are hotspots for out-migration in South Asia, and the northern part of the Gangetic Plain are some of the major areas from where climate change-induced migrants come. The decline of productivity in agriculture, particularly in rice growing areas of India and Bangladesh, is likely to displace people from these areas. Storm surges and rising sea levels are expected to lead to migration in many coastal metros like Dhaka, Chittagong, Chennai, and Mumbai.



Categories of climate migrants

Climate migrants can be classified as either permanent or either short-term, on the basis of their temporality.

They can also be involuntary or voluntary, on the basis of the intention of migration.

- **Temporary and seasonal migration:** Such migration often takes place due to a lack of economic opportunity in the lean season, shortage of irrigation water in the dry season, as well as unexpected crop loss due to climatic uncertainty. Temporary and seasonal migration often leads to a couple of members in an affected household to migrate to make temporary arrangements. As the conditions are restored, such migrants return to their original homes. This type of migration is common across South Asian nations, particularly Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh, and India.
- **Permanent migration:** There are several situations in which people tend to migrate from their original homes permanently, especially as they must deal with a high degree of vulnerability in their homeland, and recurring losses of assets and livelihoods, in the face of continuous climatic changes. Slow onset events like rise in sea levels and desertification are also quite likely to be linked with permanent migration. In certain scenarios, permanent migration does lower the vulnerability of people if it is accompanied by increased income and the acquisition of skills. Such migration can, however be detrimental if it is followed by poor living conditions and employment opportunities at the destination.
- **Voluntary migration:** Voluntary migration takes place if people make a choice to relocate with the aim of enhancing their resilience to changing climate conditions. Families with more adult members and families who are wealthier are likely to take part in voluntary migration in South Asia. They do so to earn better income and investing in climate-resilient livelihood alternatives in their homeland.
- **Involuntary migration:** There are many places in the world that are gradually becoming a less viable destinations to live owing to the impact of climate change. These places are commonly referred to as climate change hotspots. Therefore, residents of such areas are forced to leave their original homes, as those places have degraded to the point that they are no longer habitable. For instance, the subsidence of islands in the Sundarbans has forced several people to flee. Certain small island states of South Asia, like Sri Lanka and Maldives are also expected to witness a considerable involuntary migration as sea levels rise further.

It is critical to understand that even though many are vulnerable to the effect of climate change, not all are able to migrate. Migration is commonly constrained by the lack of access to the required social networks assets, and at times even emotional attachment to the homeland. The impoverished individuals get trapped in a condition where they face double hardships, i.e., economic hardships and risks of climate change.



Destinations for climate migrants

Climate migrants are more likely to travel to places that have good climatic conditions for agriculture, and even to cities that can provide them with better livelihood opportunities. In South Asia, it is projected that western Bangladesh, western Bangladesh, and the Indian Highlands, especially between Bangalore and Chennai, are likely to emerge as climate in-migration hotspots. In-migration is especially expected in the cropland areas of the Ganges River basin in western Bangladesh, where improvements in crop productivity and water availability are more likely to take place. By 2030, in-migration hotspots may also start to emerge in the southern Gangetic Plain. These in-migration hotspots are expected to experience more favorable climatic conditions. According to a 2021 World Bank report, by 2050 cities like Bengaluru are predicted to become the preferred destination for almost 40 million people in South Asia forced to leave their homes due to climate change.

Climate migration and adaptation in India

Droughts, extreme heat and excess rainfall are destroying the livelihoods of millions of poor people in many parts of India. They may not contribute much to global warming, but suffer from its worse consequences. In the absence of adequate government policies and support, they are forced to migrate to other places in search of a job and better living conditions. Unfortunately, this often takes them to overpopulated, large cities of India, where they live in precarious situations and work in dangerous jobs. As per a 2020 report from McKinsey, almost 75% of the labor force in India, which would be more than 300 million people, are exposed to heat-related stress. The average loss in daylight working hours could put between 2.5 and 4.5 % of the GDP at risk annually by 2030, in a business-as-usual scenario. Construction, manufacturing, and agriculture, the sectors that collectively employ most of the working population of India, are all hit by the severe impacts of climate change.

Unplanned migration can lead to regional instability, conflict over land and resources, and overcrowding of cities. However, while reducing climate migration is a necessity, governments must not encourage people to stay in deteriorating environments where their health might be affected by the slow-onset climate consequences like the increase of air- and water-borne diseases in warm environments.

Moreover, if carried out properly, migration can also be a viable adaptive strategy to changing environmental conditions. Nomadic pastoralism in the Himalayan-Kush region and circular rural-urban migration in Bangladesh are good examples of migration as climate adaptation in South Asia. If it is supported by the right policy frameworks and institutional infrastructure, migration can prove to be a sustainable and effective climate adaptation mechanism in India. In the face of climate change, and the resulting security and economic concerns, governments must facilitate orderly and safe migration where local adaptation is no longer feasible. They also need to incorporate migration strategies into their development agendas.

Right to move

Anticipating the expected rise in temperature and sea-levels, flood or droughts, persistent storms and another impact that can render an area inhospitable for most of a year or permanently is possible, to an extent. As such, dignified planned movement becomes extremely vital. Communities should have the option to migrate separately or together, and gets the chance to provide their inputs in the decision making process. Transitions should be dignified, orderly and safe. Moreover, opportunities to live



autonomous lives with the relevant human rights protections in the places of migration should be promoted. Governments should try to make sure that communities are effectively relocated to resilient territories, with adequate support and resources needed to build infrastructures and homes.

Planned migration should take place with the active participation and consent of the communities. It should be safe and help increase long-term resilience by offering a welcome start at a new, safer location. This includes access to training and education, as well as green jobs. Provisions for social and healthcare, child protection schemes and more must also be present for the well-being of the climate migrants.

Instead of increasing insecurity and precarity, dignified, orderly and safe movement can boost the resilience and empowerment of communities. This aligns with the call for parties to the UNFCCC by Taskforce on Displacement to facilitate regular, responsible, orderly, and safe mobility and migration of people, as per accordance to the national policies and laws, in the context of climate change.

Facilitating planned, dignified migration in South Asia requires policymakers to gain a better understanding of the climate-induced displacement now, and share the information and learning across borders. For instance, in India, even though the National Disaster Management Authority does maps out disasters and consequences in the country, the official migration statistics resulting from such disasters are not often tracked properly. Municipal, national, and regional authorities hence do not have a proper idea about the evolution, nature, and scale of climate induced displacement.

Now, the rehabilitation of communities that are forced to migrate is not integrated with a system that helps in repairing the losses experienced by them, and improves resilience to economic, climate and health related hardships they may face in the new location.

Therefore, it becomes vital for governments to view the climate crisis as a chance to strengthen and support a more sustainable approach to urban development. The community and residential infrastructure should be provided to the displaced people through international, national, regional, and local climate financing transfer, and built-in areas that have the capacity to withstand the impacts of climate change in the future.

Currently, people who own land and other assets, and/or have a level of formal level of educational qualifications and training, are more likely to find decent work opportunities in the places they migrate to. Dignified, orderly and safe migration in response to climate change should ideally improve the capacity for everyone to do this. Governments must bolster labor, ensure safe working conditions for all, and elevate access to new areas of work for climate-displaced communities, including green jobs that pave the way for a sustainable future.

Steps Indian Policymakers must take to address climate migrants

- **Create a policy framework for climate refugees:** Even though UNHRC does recognize India as a haven for asylum seekers, it is among the few nations in the planet that is not a signatory to the 1951 UN Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol. As per the convention, a signatory nation must provide a minimum standard of housing and hospitality towards refugees. In the absence of a dedicated policy for climate refugees and an internationally binding framework, properly protecting their rehabilitation and rights can become an issue. The government may even adopt ad-hoc measures like detention, forced deportation, as well



as selective assistance and protection based on gender, region, religion, and other factors. India, however, has adopted the National Action Plan for Climate Change (NAPCC) that puts emphasis on certain aspects of climate adaptation. Even though a large part of the plan is still in a development stage, policy frameworks acknowledging climate refugees as a vulnerable group, while having a defined criteria for granting climate refugee status, might be discussed under the NAPCC umbrella

- **Developing localized plans for climate adaptation:** Policymakers should create localized adaptation plans on two-fronts. First at the source of migration to cut down the outflow of migrants, and second at the destination villages and cities to accommodate the influx of people. There is a need to develop climate resilient livelihood models and infrastructure at the source. For instance, farmers in flood-prone regions of Bihar are encouraged to cultivate water intensive rice that effectively makes use of the available floodwater. In a similar manner, each plan must be localized based on local socio-economic factors, geography, and demographics. This will make sure that the communities have the support, incentive, and dependable infrastructure in the region where they live.

Owing to the geographic diversity of India, it becomes vital for the central government to support and incentivize de-centralized planning for the mitigation and adaptation of climate change. For example, there is a need to develop adaptation and resilience plans for destination villages and cities in which migration is most likely to take place. In case the eastern borders are more likely to experience cross-border migration from Nepal and Bangladesh, the states in the North East would need to have proper mechanisms in place for identifying areas for resettlement and adopting city plans that are climate-resilient. States essentially must adopt adaptation plans by taking their future and present cultural, economic, socio-economic, and ecological context into consideration.

- **Developing climate refugee funds:** A proper climate refugee fund that is independent from the PM Cares fund and disaster management fund should be created, while encouraging private and public contributors. States should be obligated under NAPCC to identify climate refugee camps and develop them with the use of these funds. Humanitarian assistance for climate refugee should be included under the scope of CSR bill, which does not consider disaster and related contributions now. Countries must come together on the global level as well, in order to frame policies for protection and rehabilitation. They should allocate funds either under existing or new initiatives for the increasing concern of climate refugees.

Conclusion

As per a 2020 study conducted by McKinsey Global Institute, nations in South Asia can lose almost 2% of its GDP by 2050 due to slow-onset climate impacts without strong mitigation and adaptation measures. People living in poverty would be the hardest hit by climate hazards. Proper mitigation actions along with increased resilience through social protection, disaster risk reduction and green work is imperative for managing the situation. Moreover, thousands of people will continue to be displaced regardless of climate action, and robust policies are needed to protect the right to move with dignity. Such movements are majorly undertaken without targeted support, which is an issue that must be redressed. Even as around 8.5 million people remained displaced by disasters in G20 member



countries like India, China, Japan, Indonesia, and United States, G20 countries have not taken up the cause of climate migration.

India is positioned to play a major role in the international efforts for climate action. Its commitment can be reflected in it being party to the UNFCCC and its various instruments like the Paris Agreement and Kyoto Protocol. Its presidency can provide a platform for the G20 nations to work together with the aim of addressing increasing concerns of human mobility in regards to both displacements and migration, while also reducing the knowledge gaps pertaining to human mobility because of climate change and environmental degradation with the help of intergovernmental dialogues.

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