

MIGRATION, REHABILITATION AND ASSISTANCE: CLIMATE REFUGEES OF THE SUNDARBANS

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1. Introduction

‘Climate refugees’, ‘Environmental migrants’, ‘climate change–induced migrants’, and ‘environmentally displaced people’ are some of the terms used to refer to the people who are displaced within their country or outside it, due to the effects of several climatological factors. These include increasing temperatures, widespread floods, droughts, rises in sea level, tsunamis, aggravating coastal erosion, desertification, and other natural calamities. It can also be classified as a complex cause of food and water shortages as well as difficulties in accessing natural resources.

In 2018, the UNHRC stated that environmental degradation can be brought within the scope of violation of right to life under Article 6 of the International Convention of Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR).

This was one of the most significant and important rulings in favor of ‘climate refugees’. At COP 21 in Paris, the term ‘climate migrants’ was acknowledged in the preamble of the agreement. Countries like France have also begun drafting laws for climate refugees, recognising the imminent danger of climate refugees arriving in Europe. On the other hand, the country we focus on in this paper– India is far behind in recognising the intricacies that come with climate refuge. The same applies to most South Asian countries.

According to a report by the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, between 2008 and 2019, 3.6 million people are estimated to have been displaced annually due to cyclones, floods, and storms within India.

This paper is primarily a policy-based paper which aims to explore the means by which the Indian government can improve the conditions of the people of Sundarbans.

2. The Sundarbans forests

The Sundarbans mangrove forest lies on the delta of the Ganges, Brahmaputra and Meghna rivers on the Bay of Bengal. The site is intersected by a complex network of tidal waterways, mudflats and small islands of salt-tolerant mangrove forests. The habitat is densely populated and supports approximately 4.37 million people. About a third of this population lives in extreme poverty.

The Sundarbans provides sustainable livelihoods for millions of people in the vicinity of the site and acts as a shelter belt to protect the people from storms, cyclones, tidal surges, sea water seepage and intrusion. The area provides livelihood in certain seasons for large numbers of people living in small villages surrounding the property, working variously as wood-cutters, fisherman, honey gatherers, leaves and grass gatherers.

With rising sea levels, islands are disappearing. Along with this, the increasing salinity in the water and soil has severely threatened the health of mangrove forests and the quality of soil and crops. Climate phenomena such as frequent cyclones and erratic monsoon raining patterns are damaging ecology, and killing and displacing people from their homes.

In 2007, 3,000 people were killed due to Cyclone Sidr, and only two years later, Cyclone Aila killed another 200, while also affecting the food and drinking water supply of approximately two million people. Cyclone Fani, in 2019, killed another 81 people, and caused over \$8 billion of loss.

In 2020, cyclone Amphan destroyed about a quarter of the delta's Indian mangrove forest. These mangroves are a natural bulwark against coastal erosion and rough water.

Cyclone Yaas, which hit the Sundarbans the following year, also damaged the brick and earth embankments that had protected many parts of the island for over three decades.

All these devastating cyclones are simply effects of climate change.

The areas that have been the most affected are Sagar, Namkhana, and Pathar Pratima, Kakdwip of Kakdwip. Islands like Lohachara and Suparibhanga have totally disappeared from maps. Erosion has reduced Ghoramara Island to a mere 4.43 square kilometres from 8.51 square kilometres. Once home to 40,000 people, Ghoramara has faced mass exodus due to habitat loss, and as of 2011—only 5000 people continue to live here.

At present, villages are just about 1.5 to 3 meters above the average sea level.

Agricultural land is the most important source of livelihood. It is through the loss of this element

that many other vital things are lost. It causes loss of family and community assets, food, trading places, and public and private physical assets.

The people displaced by these phenomena are *forced* to move to other places. It is not a choice. This contrast can be highlighted by the differences between a migrant and a refugee. Pull factors such as better livelihoods and favorable socio-cultural or political factors motivate migrants to move to a new region or country. They have the option to return to their place of origin. For a refugee, however, returning to their place of origin is nearly impossible due to push factors, such as war or a threat of violence. Climate related phenomena such as cyclones, salination, sea-level rise, extreme heatwaves, and desertification also act as push factors with long-lasting impacts, such as loss of livelihoods, biodiversity, food, and water.

It is time the international community realizes that not only is climate change a scientific issue, with multiple technical aspects to it, but it is also a human rights issue.

Through the devastating effects of climate change, we deprive people, and with the context to this paper, the people of the Sundarbans region of their life, home, security, culture, livelihood. Their rights are being violated.

3. Challenges

Lack of political will

Although India may have officially adopted the National Action Plan for Climate Change (NAPCC) in 2008, this alone does not solve all the issues, human rights related or others, that continue to come up.

1. India is not a signatory of the 1951 Refugee Convention or its 1967 Protocol. According to the convention, the signatory country has to provide a minimum standard of hospitality and housing towards refugees and internally displaced people. Without an internationally binding agreement and a proper commitment to safeguarding the rights of these displaced individuals, the Indian government may adopt ad hoc measures such as forced deportation, detention, and selective protection and assistance based on religion, region, gender, and other factors.
2. Under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, environmental protection laws have been severely undermined. India is home to more than half of the 50 most polluted cities in the world; its air and water quality rank at the bottom of global indices. In spite of this, more coal production has been encouraged.
3. The west bengal state government has not brought up or had any serious discussions

about the impending and ongoing crisis in the Sundarbans region.

Inefficient technical backings

1. When the West Bengal Government initiated a plan to construct a series of embankments after the 2009 Aila cyclone, petty local politics made people unwilling to give up their land for the embankments. This was a key requirement for their proper construction. As a result, concrete embankments could not be erected at many places.
2. Emergency situations are mostly met by ad hoc measures like raising the height of the embankment or by covering bamboo poles and bamboo fences with mud.
3. More than 90 per cent of embankments in the Sundarbans are still made of soft alluvial clay.

Migration & rehabilitation

1. According to certain news articles that quote interviews with relocated citizens from the Sundarbans– the allotment of land as a means of compensation for their lost homes stopped in 2005. In the 1990s, the Government of West Bengal allotted a series of huts to the displaced individuals. But as the number of people grew, the sizes of the huts decreased.
2. From an interview mentioned in one of these articles one of the individuals said “While evacuation is done, rehabilitation is very shoddy and never a part of the plan.”
3. Individuals who lose their home move to Sagar island which is located higher from the sea than the other islands of the Sundarbans and has more jobs, better roads and a bustling economy. While some use their last chunk of wealth to make the move, others are rehabilitated by the government. However, housing this refugee crisis has been expensive for Sagar, putting undue pressure on its land and resources. Since 2011, the population of Sagar has increased 20 percent and the island, in general, has suddenly become more vulnerable to natural calamities. After cyclone Yass, Sagar too took a huge hit. Soon, it will no longer continue to be the safe haven of Sundarbans. Sagar’s citizens too will need rehabilitation.

4. Policy recommendations

Recognition by the UN and other governmental bodies

It is important to note that although the word ‘climate refugee’ seems to be frequently used in this paper and perhaps even in daily vocabulary–this term and its definition has still not been

officially recognised by the United Nations or incorporated under any refugee related documents. This step is crucial for validating the reality of hundreds and thousands of individuals. It will enable us to prevent any further injustices committed against them.

Rehabilitation and compensation

Land compensation ought to be resumed. Instead of considering the displacement of individuals in the Sundarbans as a voluntary migration, it must be viewed as forced migration by the government. Along with new laws, the National Policy on Resettlement and Rehabilitation, a law initially meant for land compensation related to development projects, could be used to grant compensation.

Creation of Climate Refugee Funds

There needs to be the creation of a separate fund, used solely for the intention of building new homes, new embankments and other infrastructure related projects for the upliftment of climate refugees.

Alternative employment

Climate related phenomena endangers traditional agricultural livelihoods. The central government or the West Bengal Government should collaborate with other organisations and provide the residents with training for alternative employment. This will allow them to have their options open and make them less dependent upon the land of the region. This would further allow them to blend into the mainland region, if ever they are forced to settle there.

Afforestation and the barring of harmful developmental projects

Mangroves are natural shock absorbers during cyclones. They should be considered the first line of defense during emergency situations. These mangroves have the power to prevent flooding and trap salts from the water. Mangrove forests must be protected from deforestation and other developmental projects that can cause harm to them.

Awareness campaigns

Schools could utilize their influence to impart practical knowledge to the youth as to how to manage natural disasters (through mock drills), and teach them methods of survival. It is necessary to recognise that people living in the Sundarbans inhabit a disaster-prone zone and take preventive measures accordingly and that too at a quick pace.

Public discussions

The West Bengal government hasn't played a proactive role in this entire crisis since the 1990s. The public must establish a connection with the government and be able to rely on them. This can be done by implementing similar projects such as the *Jan Sunwai*— translated literally to 'public hearing'. This public hearing campaign has been launched in New Delhi. Through this, citizens can convey their problems and complaints to civic authorities to seek their redressal.

5. Conclusion

Article 21 of the Indian Constitution, 'The right to protection of life and liberty' can be interpreted in favor of the people of Sundarbans. Ignorance will no longer do. Long term strategies need to be developed in order to enhance the dignity of the people of Sunderbans' and prevent future human rights violations against them.

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