



Migration as Constrained Adaptation: Climate Change, Governance Failures & Gendered Vulnerability in India

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Abstract:

This paper explores the interconnections between climate change, migration and gendered vulnerability in India with the argument that environmental stress has become a structural factor contributing to internal migration. Although the economic factors have always been used to explain migration, climate related disturbances like extreme weather, land degradation and scarcity of resources are gradually defining the patterns of mobility. The paper theorizes the concept of migration as a limited way of adjusting to the environment instead of a choice using qualitative analysis of secondary data and policy frameworks. It illuminates how governance failures, including incoherent welfare regimes, low portability and informal labour make migrants more vulnerable, and gendered inequalities contribute to these effects. The paper introduces migration as a multi-dimensional process that is influenced by structural inequalities and demands more inclusive policy solutions.

Keywords: Migration, Climate adaptation, India, Gendered vulnerability, Migration governance, Climate-induced migration.

Introduction

Climate change has become one of the most important factors to promote human mobility, a factor that is becoming more and more significant in altering old migration patterns in the world. Although the traditional perception of migration has been based on economic factors and access to livelihoods, there is increasingly a body of literature that states the contribution of environmental stressors, including severe weather conditions, soil erosion, and lack of resources, to population movement (Black et al., 2011; Foresight, 2011; IPCC, 2022). The association of climate change and migration is especially strong in India when it comes to developing countries such as India where a good percentage of the population relies on climate sensitive industries such as agriculture. Government statistics also indicate the extent and structural aspects of

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internal migration in India, which indicates its strong connections with livelihood insecurity and geographic disparities (Government of India, 2019; World Bank, 2018).

The ecological heterogeneity and societal economic disparities in India render it an important setting to study the migration that has been brought about by climate change. Areas like the Sundarbans and Bundelkhand provide examples of how vulnerabilities of the environment interact with precarious livelihoods to generate distress - based mobility (World Bank, 2018). Increase in sea levels, cyclones, and intrusion of salinity in coastal regions, periodic droughts and shortage of water in semi-arid areas have severely impacted the traditional sources of income (Ministry of Home Affairs, 2020). Consequently, migration is being employed more as a means of economic development, but rather as an obligatory reaction towards livelihood insecurity.

The current literature still regards climate change, migration, and gender as very distinct analytical fields. Migration literature has a tendency of giving more emphasis on economic factors, whereas the climate research literature is limited to the environmental effects without sufficiently considering human mobility (Black et al., 2011; IOM, 2022). Likewise, gender is often added or included as a secondary variable or an add - on variable instead of being the focus of the analysis (Neetha, 2010; UN Women, 2020). Such a disjointed strategy does not give a full picture of the interaction of environmental stress with structural inequalities and governance systems to determine the results of migration. Evidence also shows that environmental stress is also becoming a major determinant of migration patterns in different regions worldwide (IOM, 2022).

This gap is filled in this paper in which climate change, migration and gender are incorporated in a single analytical framework. It holds that migration in India due to climate is not either an environmental or economic phenomenon, but a multidimensional process that is determined by failures of governance and intersectional inequalities. In particular, the paper develops the thesis that migration is a limited adaptive technique, the results of which are mediated by institutional structures, the organisation of the labour market and gendered relations of power. The study through its combination of conceptual analysis and empirical insights adds to a more subtle view of migration as a reaction to environmental change as well as a manifestation of underlying structural vulnerabilities.



The Climate Change as a Structural Cause of Internal Migration

Climate change has increasingly become a major structural force that has been causing internal migration in India especially in areas that have been determined as ecologically vulnerable and economically weak (IPCC, 2022). Although economic opportunity and labour mobility theories have been the best explanation of migration, recent studies have come to appreciate environmental stressors like extreme weather conditions, land degradation and water scarcity as structural determinants as important as they are in determining patterns of internal migration. Climate change is increasingly compromising livelihood systems both due to sudden - onset disasters and low and slow processes, which is why migration is now being reframed as a reaction to compounded economic and environmental insecurity rather than a voluntary or opportunity - driven phenomenon (World Bank, 2018). Such stressors in the environment seldom exist alone, but rather overlap with pre - existing socioeconomic inequalities, exerting a multiplier effect on vulnerability and limiting livelihood options, making migration a necessity and not a choice (Foresight, 2011). These processes are very much related to the larger issues of human security where climate risks are overlapping with economic and social vulnerabilities (Adger et al., 2014).

Among the brightest cases of the migration caused by climate in India, the Sundarbans area can be noted. This delta, which is common to both India and Bangladesh, is being extremely susceptible to sea level rise, hurricanes and saline intrusion. Extreme weather events have led to massive damage of houses, infrastructure and farmlands, with immediate displacement and long - term livelihood disruption being recorded in the aftermath of Cyclone Aila (2009) and Amphan (2020) (Ministry of Home Affairs, 2020). Besides these paroxysmal shocks, there are slow processes, like increasing salinity of soils, that have decreased agricultural productivity and raised the traditional livelihoods like farming and fishing to be less sustainable (World Bank, 2018). Subsequently, migration has become a prominent adaptive tool and most households nowadays are sending members to urban centres mainly men in search of wage labour.

The same trend can be observed in Bundelkhand region where there have been frequent droughts, unpredictable rainfall and perpetual water shortage in the last decades. Such climatic stresses have had a devastating effect on agricultural production and income stability causing mass distress migration (Deshingkar, 2009). Migration at Bundelkhand in comparison to aspirational migration, which is usually planned and wealth motivated, is compelled, less predictable, and less choiceful, and indicative of the loss of agrarian stability under prolonged climatic stress conditions, and households having to depend on seasonal or short - term mobility as a coping strategy (Akter, 2009). The structural conditions and absence



of secure jobs in the region are reflected in migrants in this region being disproportionately absorbed into the informal low - paying sectors (Srivastava, 2020)-

Climate change is not a direct or a single determinant of migration, but interacts with the underlying economic and social vulnerabilities, and mobility is now an adapted option limited by constraints and often driven by distress (Black et al., 2011). Environmental degradation also adds to the agricultural productivity of the environment, food insecurity and household indebtedness, escalating the economic pressures that lead to migration decisions. Migration, in that sense, may be thought of as a kind of adaptive behaviour, but one that is bound by the lack of access to resources and institutional assistance (Adger et al., 2014). This is especially pertinent to the so - called concept of the distress migration as the latter represents a form of mobility, which is not motivated by opportunity, but rather by need, where households migrate in the circumstances of limited choice and financial uncertainty (World Bank, 2018).

But it is also important to note that not all people have migration as an option to adaptation. The power of migration is limited to the availability of financial resources, social networks, and information, which are also unevenly distributed among the populations (IPCC, 2022). Consequently, the most vulnerable groups can get trapped as populations, which cannot migrate even though they are at risk of severe environmental impacts due to income, network, and information asymmetries. Such an unequal ability to migrate underscores how structural inequalities produce mobility results and upset simplistic accounts that migration is a natural reaction to climate change (Black et al., 2011).

Moreover, the migration resulting of the climate in India is mostly internal and circular. The migrants usually relocate temporarily to cities and back to their home places during the farming seasons or when their jobs are scarce. The lack of stable and secure employment opportunities in urban destinations, as well as the continuity of rural socio - economic connections, can be observed in this cyclical trend (Srivastava, 2020). It further highlights the insufficiency of considering migration as an irreversible move, but rather it is a dynamic and continuous adaptive approach in an uncertain setting.

On the whole, it can be noted that climate change is not just another element affecting migration but a key structural force that is transforming the nature, trends, and motives behind mobility in India. Nonetheless, its effects are moderated by economic factors, institutional settings and social inequalities thus the need to explore migration in a more multidimensional framework (IPCC, 2022; Black et al., 2011). This analysis is expanded in the following section through the analysis of how governance failures and policy gaps contribute to worsening the vulnerabilities in relation to climate - induced migration.



Weaknesses in Governance and Policy loopholes in Migration Systems

Although climate change is a major factor that causes migration, the susceptibility of migrant communities in India is essentially determined by the failure of governance and inefficiency of institutions as opposed to environmental pressures (Deshingkar & Akter 2009). In India, migrant vulnerability is systematically generated through fragmented policy frameworks, which do not guarantee portability of welfare entitlements, which systematically marginalizes mobile populations in the provision of basic services including food security, health, housing services (World Bank, 2018). The lack of coherent and comprehensive migration governance system has led to the fact that vast parts of migrant workers, especially those in the informal sector, are not an object of institutional protection (Deshingkar & Akter, 2009; Srivastava, 2020).

The most serious governance malpractice is the lack of portability of social protection programmes, which remain structured around a sedentary population, as opposed to mobile livelihoods. Place - based entitlements have historically been linked to welfare programs like the Public Distribution System (PDS) and this has limited access to subsidized food and other necessities across state borders by migrants, even though they contribute to urban economies (Kone et al., 2018). Despite the efforts to resolve the problem by implementing measures like portability reforms, internal obstacles and fragmentation in policies limits access to welfare by migrants across the state borders, which can be explained by a lack of institutional coordination. Subsequently, migrant workers, in particular, working in the context of circular migration, often experience food insecurity and lack of access to basic welfare services, especially at the time of economic or another crisis (World Bank, 2018).

These vulnerabilities are further enshrined by the informal nature of labour which places migrant labour in precarious and unregulated employment systems (ILO, 2021). A significant percentage of the migrant workers in India work in the industries of construction, house help, and small - scale manufacturing wherein employment is marked by low wages, no job security, and no formal contracts (Srivastava, 2020). The current labour regulations and laws fail to sufficiently address these sectors, and as such, labour exploitation, wage insecurity, and unsafe working environments are rampant. (ILO, 2021). Without official recognition, migrant workers do not usually enjoy the benefits of labour laws, social welfare benefits, and redressing the grievances, which renders them very susceptible to economic shocks (World Bank, 2018).

The other policy gap which is critical is that of documentation and identity systems which by its very structure do not fit with the mobility patterns of migrant populations. The welfare programs, health care,



and housing can also depend on whether one has locally recognized identity documents. Migrants, especially those who move regularly, or informally, will have a great difficulty in keeping up to date documentation in multiple places. This puts obstacles to the accessibility of critical services and strengthens the exclusion of them in formal systems of governance (Keshri and Bhagat, 2012). This is not only an administrative issue but it portrays a more fundamental structural weakness to create governance structures that embrace mobility as a key characteristic of modern livelihoods.

Although there is growing evidence that climate change has been connecting with migration, no formal institutional identity of the climate migrants represent in the Indian policy framework exists. Climate change is redefining the migration patterns by destabilizing livelihood systems with both sudden and slow-onset environmental stressors (IPCC, 2022). Likewise, the migration policies still tend to think of mobility mostly in economic aspects and ignore the ecological and socio-environmental aspects of mobility. The outcome of this disconnect is disconnected policy responses. The lack of a clear institutional framework of the identification and assistance of the climate migrants inhibits the formulation of specific interventions and long-term adaptation strategies (Black et al., 2011).

These failures in governance became very pronounced with the COVID-19 pandemic that revealed how precarious the migrant population is systematically. This loss of jobs and the inability to access food, shelter and medical care resulted in mass reverse migration throughout the nation (Srivastava, 2020). Migrant workers were particularly vulnerable since they were neither covered by formal protection mechanisms nor did any concerted policy efforts occur. Although the pandemic was not a climate event, it demonstrated systemic vulnerabilities that also apply to the situation of displacement caused by climate (ILO, 2021).

All in all, issues of migrant populations in India are systemically entrenched within where the governance fails and institutional overlooking and not necessarily environmentally pressured. The absence of portable welfare mechanisms, ineffective labour protection, and the continuous documentation barriers, all contribute to the vulnerability of migrant populations. To deal with migration in the context of climatic changes, thus, a fundamental redesigning of governance structures is needed, to provide inclusion, safety, and resilience over time. In the absence of such reforms, the inequalities that already exist can probably continue to increase, weakening the adaptive capacity of already vulnerable populations. In the next section, this analysis is followed by consideration of the intersection of these structural and institutional gaps with gender to create various migration experiences (World Bank, 2018).



Intersectional and Gendered aspects of Migration Vulnerability

Migration as an issue of climate change is not a uniform and socially neutral phenomenon, but instead it is highly organized in terms of hierarchies of gender, class, caste, and regional inequality which already exist (Chant, 2008). Of these, gender is a key determinant of the migration process and the results. Migration processes in India are highly gendered where women have been more vulnerable with their concentration in informal jobs, lack of access to resources and policy exclusion systems (Neetha, 2010). The trends are also supported by the larger global data, which reflects on the ongoing marginalisation of women in the context of migration and their increased vulnerability in the context of informal and insecure labour arrangements (UN Women, 2020). To truly take into account the differentiated effects of climate - driven migration, however, an intersectional approach, i.e. one that takes into account the joint effects of gender, of class, of caste, and of regional vulnerability, is necessary.

The gendered migration is one of the most noticeable trends in climatically impacted areas. Migration in most households mostly in areas like Sundarbans and Bundelkhand is mostly male - led, where men migrate to urban areas seeking employment leaving women in rural areas. This disproportionate mobility leads to the so - called feminization of responsibility in which women are obliged to undertake greater roles in household management, care giving and agricultural labour in response to a redistribution of responsibilities, but without a redistribution of resources or of decision - making power (Deshingkar & Akter, 2009). With declining productivity and more limited access to natural resources as environmental degradation becomes a more significant issue, these roles become even heavier, and access to financial resources and even institutional support is not always the same (UN Women, 2020).

Meanwhile, those women who do migrate (either alone or as part of an accompanying family) have different issues in the destination locations. They are mainly involved in informal and low - paying sectors of the labour market which include domestic service, construction, and small - scale services. The employment types are marked by uncertainties about the job, the lack of formal employment agreements, and the low level of legal security (ILO, 2021). Moreover, there are increased vulnerabilities to labour exploitation, unsafe working environments and gender - based harassment, which further manifest deeply rooted inequalities in labour market systems by women migrants. Although they contribute to the economies, they are often classified as secondary earners, thus restricting their ability to enjoy labour rights and social security benefits (Neetha, 2010).



Unpaid labour is another vital aspect of gendered vulnerability. The fact that women do more unpaid care and household labour, which is still systematically undervalued and not included in the formal economic and policy systems, greatly restricts their ability to pursue formal jobs and to engage in all the migration - associated opportunities (Rao & Raju, 2020). This load is exacerbated when there is male out - migration as the women must be productive and reproductive at the same time in an incidence where male members migrate. Climate stress also intensifies these pressures by raising the time and energy needed to access the most fundamental needs and resources like water, fuel, and food (UN Women, 2020).

These stresses are also caused by gendered time utilization, in which women bear a disproportionately large burden of the hidden expenses of environmental stress (Rao & Raju, 2020). Although it is key to the survival of the household, this labour is very much invisible in policy circles, which adds to the marginalization of the experiences of women in migration discourse.

An intersectional approach shows the dynamic of gender and interaction with caste, class and regional susceptibility to create compound and stratified sources of disadvantage. The women belonging to the fringe caste, lower socio - economic status, and areas prone to climate are doubly disadvantaged and their mobility and adaptability is limited. Their migration is hampered by structural barriers like inadequate access to education, financial opportunities, and social networks to enable them to migrate safely and have stable livelihoods (Keshri and Bhagat, 2012). These limitations in certain instances result in so - called involuntary immobility: people cannot move even in case of extreme environmental hazards, which further exposes them to vulnerability (IPCC, 2022).

Nevertheless, the degradation of women to mere victims of climate - related migration may simplify the aspect of agency and adaptability in women. Women have been proactive in coping and adapting with many strategies even in the face of structural constraints which restrict access to resources and institutional support such as livelihood diversification, involvement in informal networks and household management of resources. Research has revealed that women tend to be key in supporting households by managing remittances and resilience practices at the community level (Deshingkar and Akter, 2009). However, these strategies have structural limitations that limit their effectiveness such as inaccessibility to credit, training and institutional support.

By and large, the meeting point of climate change, migration and gender provides a highly stratified pattern of vulnerability due to the interplay of systems of power and inequality. Migration processes are integrated into wider systems of power and inequality which define access to resources, mobility and adaptation. To



help eliminate these challenges, intersectional perspectives need to be incorporated into the design and execution of policies (IPCC, 2022; UN Women, 2020). In the absence of such an approach, policy responses stand a chance of reproduction and reinforcement of the very inequalities that it attempts to mitigate.

Conclusion

The article shows that institutional failures and structural inequalities are key to comprehending the interconnections between climate change, migration, and gendered vulnerability in India. Extreme weather events and slow onset degradation are other environmental disturbances that have significant impacts on livelihood systems and induce migration especially in ecologically sensitive areas (IPCC, 2022). These pressures though do not work alone and their effects are mediated by labour markets, systems of governance, and access to social protection (Black et al., 2011).

The results point out that the inefficiency in governance, including the lack of portability of welfare, labour protection mechanisms, and barrier to documentation, aggravates the vulnerability of migrants (Kone et al., 2018). Meanwhile, the process of migration is still disproportionate, and gender and intersectional inequalities determine its outcomes, which frequently tend to overload women, even though they actively participate in the adaptation process (Neetha, 2010; UN Women, 2020).

On the whole, migration should not be thought of as an issue that needs to be controlled, but a required adaptive reaction to climate change (IOM, 2022). Policy responses to climate change, migration governance, and social protection systems will not help to build resilience and inclusive development without incorporating climate policy, migration governance, and social protection systems, reinforcing the existing vulnerabilities.

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