

## Navigating Climate Migration and Internal Displacement in India

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Sumitra Sahani had a busy week at the end of March. She toiled in her kitchen for several days, preparing and carefully packing containers of prawn and lemon pickles, as well as dried fish. These provisions became part of the baggage that her 18-year-old son, Sudarshan, hauled onto a bus that he boarded a few days later, as he headed back to work after a month of leave. Over the next two days, the bus travelled 2,000 km from Sahani's village, Bagapatia in Odisha's Kendrapara district, to Ernakulam district in Kerala, tracing a long arc between India's eastern and western coasts.

Its last stop was the town of Perumbavoor, 15 km from the Cochin International Airport, where Sudarshan works at a plywood factory. His mother had packed the food for him out of concern that he might miss food he was familiar with. "Here in Odisha, we cook with mustard oil, but in Kerala, the coconut oil used is not something that they are used to," she said. The food may be unfamiliar. But, in Kerala, Sudarshan is surrounded by familiar faces: his elder brother, father, and uncle, Sahani's brother, also work in different factories in Perumbavoor. So do many others from Bagapatia. In fact, the traffic between Bagapatia and Perumbavoor is large enough to make it profitable for the bus to run twice a week.

The bi-weekly bus is an outcome of a complex set of forces, which centre around climate change and cyclones, that have pushed the people of Bagapatia away from their homes to workplaces thousands of kilometres away. The Sahani family originally lived in a village named Satbhaya, on the coast of the Bay of Bengal, around 12 km from Bagapatia. But since the 1960s, the village had been facing serious threats from coastal erosion. (Rathore, 2023)

The above-cited real-life story is quoted from Vaishnavi Rathore's article titled "From Odisha to Kerala, a Bus of Climate Migrants" (May 10, 2023). Migration is a challenge worldwide. According to the World Bank's World Development Report 2023, about 2.3 percent of the world's population, around 184 million people, have migrated to foreign countries, mostly in low- and middle-income countries. Internal migration and/or displacement owing to major

climate change has been causing significant challenges for the populace and the government worldwide. Internal Displacement or internal migration has been taking place because of the forced climatic changes across many regions in India, among various other challenges India faces today.

Climate migration has become the reality of the day, an established fact worldwide. However, the triggers have been rapidly changing, such as the push and pull factors that now include severe environmental and climate vicissitudes, changes in agricultural patterns, and water scarcity, which are significant reasons for forced internal human mobilities. The vulnerable migrant populations face economic and social vulnerabilities in their migrated regions. India is witnessing suddenly increased human mobility because of two different impacts. A rapid effect is caused by recurring floods and cyclones in the coastal areas, whereas a slower effect is caused in the interior regions like draught. Varied Indian states like Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal and Bihar are encountering severe weather events, resulting in increased numbers of trafficking cases from across regions, mainly among the migrated vulnerable communities.

The Hindu, a known Indian newspaper, published a study (Barik, 2022) funded by the U.K. Government's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) states that the mass migration between Odisha's coastal areas to Jharkhand's Palamu district is caused by the severe climatic events, "Climate extremes in coastal Odisha are predominantly rapid-onset events like cyclones, floods and storm surges. Jharkhand primarily experiences drought, which is typically a slow-onset event. Our study's findings from both rapid-onset and slow-onset contexts show that social protection mechanisms could not absorb the climate shocks or efficiently cover all eligible households," states the research titled 'Climate change, migration and vulnerability to trafficking.' These migrants become socially and economically vulnerable in the migrated region with almost no social and economic stability. Climate change and the rise in sea levels are not only impacting and affecting human mobility but are posing an equal threat to the animal world, especially endangered species like the Royal Bengal tigers being safely bred in the Sundarbans. Saumya Ancheri's article for CNTraveller (February 2019) says, "Climate change will wipe out Sundarbans in 50 years." She cited a study by scientists at James Cook University, Australia, claiming that "the last coastal stronghold of an iconic predator, the endangered Bengal tiger, could be destroyed by climate change and rising sea levels over the next 50 years."

The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre says about 2.5 million people are internally displaced annually. Such displacement has been occurring for various reasons, as

discussed above. However, natural disasters and climate change were counted as one of the major push factors in this case. Significant and sudden unforeseen circumstances such as the COVID-19 pandemic also triggered mass displacements in India, where the widely known case of displaced and stranded migrant workers in huge numbers caught the attention of the world.

Internally displaced migrants are generally considered ‘problematic outsiders’ and marginal communities of migrants within their own country. A multicultural, multilingual democratic country like India is home to a highly diverse populace. Therefore, it is evident that the migrants encounter multiple challenges when they leave their state for a very distinct state. These problems stem from either mere social and economic hierarchy or majority and minority community-wise social, religious and cultural hierarchy that impacts their chances of better and stable employment, housing facilities and social security.

The situation requires India to take these internal migration challenges stemming from climatic changes upfront and consider them one of the crucial issues requiring urgent attention. Social and economic vulnerabilities and insecurities encountered by marginal migrants should be acknowledged. Gender equality, social awareness, capacity building through community involvement and inclusive policies should be formed. These steps, to begin with, may facilitate and strengthen our country’s stand on handling internal forced migration owing to climate change while ensuring a smooth transition within the country.

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