Climate Disaster, Displacement and the State

-A project by Dipanjan Sinha, Piya Srinivasan and Utsa Sarmin

The Sundarbans, home to the world's largest mangrove forest, is also home to 4.5 million people who have been victims of climate disasters, especially floods and cyclones, over the decades. The two cyclones of 2020 and 2021, Amphan and Yaas, respectively, wreaked havoc on inhabitants of the islands of the Sundarbans, resulting in widespread displacement and loss of homes and livelihoods. Post Amphan, the state reportedly incurred a loss of 1 lakh crore.

Cyclones are not new in the delta region. Cyclone Aila which hit the state in May 2009, "... swept across South Bengal particularly the deltaic Sundarbans killing people, their livestocks and rendering thousands homeless… The very next day islanders were found lined up on the embankment pleading, shouting and jostling with each other trying to grab relief and aid that came their way." (Mukhopadhyay, 2009:3)

All these cyclones resulted in large-scale displacement and migration of the most marginalized people of Sundarbans, the ones who reside near embankments. An ever-rising sea also contributes to displacements. For example, even before Aila, Mousuni island's Baliara village suffered continuous inundation from the rising sea. First in 1991 and then in 2004. This led to loss of homes, agricultural lands and migration.

To stop the saline water of the sea from inundating the agricultural lands, embankments-a colonial legacy-were built multiple times throughout the years but failed to contain the rising sea and collapsed due to cyclones. Embankments also encroached on farm lands, people's homes leading to more displacement. Are embankments the solution to an ever changing delta region?

The displaced population were provided relief each time a natural disaster occurs but are they properly rehabilitated? Do state-sponsored rehabilitation and resettlement programmes address greater socio-economic concerns of life, livelihood and property, which are the biggest drivers of internal migration? Are there enough preventive mechanisms and legal, policy-based and structural mechanisms in place to address population resettlement in the face of the increasing natural disasters?

How do we identify these thousands of displaced populations who have to migrate from their homes either due to disaster or decreasing livelihood due to embankments and an ever-rising Bay of Bengal? Are they IDPs? Can we identify them as climate refugees or do they fall under the umbrella term "internal migrants"?

The proposed project "Climate Disaster, Displacement and the State" will seek to investigate these questions. The project will have three segments:

1. A podcast series looking into the long history of Sundarbans and displacement
2. An investigative piece on embankment and rehabilitation policies of the government
3. A research paper on the legal and policy mechanisms of the state to address climate change-induced displacement: definitions, inadequacies, and the efficacy of relief and rehabilitation programmes for natural disasters

Podcast:

A 5 episodes podcast series will act as the primer for the later essays. It will set the tone of the project. Each episode will feature one to two experts working in or on Sundarbans. The series will not only interview academics but also policy makers, journalists, lawyers and local panchayat leaders as and when needed. The episodes will aim to feature two interlocutors - one expert/journalist/policy maker and one local official/politician/panchayat leader/villager. Each episode will be of 35-40 minutes. The interviewees will be identified and contacted by August, 2021 and the questions will be shared with them prior to the interview. The names of the interviewees and the questionnaires will be shared with CRG as well.

The podcast series will mainly focus on these following topics:
1. The historical trajectory of the Sundarbans: this episode will build a historical narrative of a region and how the colonial legacy of embankments for paddy cultivation causes devastation to thousands of people each year.
2. Pattern and reasons of displacements: thousands of people have either migrated from Sundarbans to other states especially South India, or displaced due to climate disaster. Hence this episode will focus on the displacement pattern pre and post Aila. Importance will be given to displacements due to embankments.
3. Relief distribution programs: Post every climate disaster, Sundarbans become the focus of relief and aid agencies. From the state to the non-governmental sector, all actors engage in relief distribution. This episode will look into the politics of relief and aid in the Sundarbans.
4. Resettlement policies: Not much is said and written about the rehabilitation or resettlement of the displaced people of Sundarbans post-disaster. This episode will seek to address the rehabilitation programs by the state and look into the challenges of the same. It will mostly compare the rehabilitation programs and challenges after Aila and Amphan.
5. Who are the displaced people of Sundarbans? IDPs? Climate Refugees? Forced migrants? Or just internal Migrants?

Research Paper:

With disaster-induced displacement becoming a recurrent phenomenon over the decades, this paper will address how the state grapples with climate disasters with a focus on cyclones and

how the idea of disaster is represented in the legal and policy frameworks (such as the Disaster Management Act, 2005) that are often technocratic and bureaucratic and mired in a language of protection. If disaster can be understood as "predominantly an indicator of unsustainable development" (Lavell 2013), I will trace the conceptual underpinnings of state discourses on disaster in the way the DMA 2005 has been adopted by different states, focusing on West Bengal. Lastly, I will interrogate the provisions for rehabilitation in the state disaster management plans and policies, and the state's role in rehabilitating victims of displacement, concluding with reflections on the urgency of recognizing climate migrants as an outcome of disaster-induced displacement.

I will do a legal overview of the provisions and workings of the DMA 2005 since its inception, how disaster has been framed and 'managed', including recent critiques of its centrist nature in the management of the ongoing Covid-19 crisis. I will use the seven-year assessment by the National Task Force about the act's efficacy, a 2020 committee report reviewing the DMA's provisions, the West Bengal Disaster Management Policy, and a draft West Bengal disaster management plan for 2015-16 to review the state government's strategies of prevention, mitigation, vulnerability assessment, disaster response, recovery and rehabilitation, with a focus on long-term rehabilitation planning. I will focus on the exclusions of the Act and the relief and rehabilitation measures with an emphasis on cyclone-induced displacement to understand the state government's policy approach to disaster management. I will also address the impact of short-term disaster relief measures as measured against long-term infrastructural investments by the state and other stakeholders and their impact on the vulnerable communities of the Sundarbans.

One of the biggest limitations of the disaster management act is lack of provision for long-term rehabilitation of climate refugees. The only recognized form of displacement in India for which there is a provision for rehabilitation is development-induced displacement for which there is the National Rehabilitation and Resettlement Policy (NRRP) 2007 and the Right to Fair Compensation and Transparency in Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement Act, 2013[1]. The former policy provides for rehabilitation as an outcome of development-induced displacement. But climate refugees in the Sundarbans are created as an indirect outcome of development and climate change. All citizens have a right to life with dignity and livelihood[2] and right to shelter under Article 21 of the Indian Constitution. The ambit of these rights must apply to cases of climate-induced displacement and be addressed in the DMA 2005 to include long-term rehabilitation.

I will analyse how rehabilitation has been conceptualized in the DMA 2005. Does rehabilitation consider the cost of downgrading and destruction of property, livelihoods and what does the process of resettlement involve? I will use as case study the recent rehabilitation stories after cyclone Yaas and the aftermath of cyclone Amphan and see whether disaster-induced

displacement is different from climate induced migration. The displacement of vulnerable and marginalized populations in the Sundarbans, leading to forced migration and relocation of entire families, which can have a cascading effect, leading to unplanned urbanization and increase in poverty and informalization due to lack of long-term rehabilitation mechanisms and lack of legal recognition of climate-induced displacement. According to Dyson and Visaria (2004), three mega-urban regions, Mumbai (50 million), NCR of Delhi (more than 30 million), and Kolkata (20 million) will be among the largest concentrated urban areas in the world (in Blue 2018). This is an imminent crisis if such forms of forced migration are not acknowledged by the state or legal and policy instruments. The failure of existing legislative instruments allows the state to abnegate its responsibility towards its most vulnerable and marginalized populations as an outcome of skewed developmental practices and uneven welfare distribution.

Patterns of migration and policies of rehabilitation will also be examined using the conceptual category of climate migrants who are the by-products of a crisis in state developmental and welfare practices. I will explore the production of climate migrants through climate-induced displacement as a result of the state's technocratic disaster management principles and a top-down approach to recovery and mitigation that does not consider the human element in disaster operations. The interrogation of this nexus will uncover the more insidious relationship between climate disaster, displacement and the state and the politics of resettlement and rehabilitation. This will be located within a larger paradigm of state developmental failure and a lack of laws and policies which take into consideration the needs of the affected communities.

I will highlight how through its legislations, the state has brought into coherence the imminence of natural disasters through the visibilizing of the technological and scientific rationale behind the occurrence of climate change and its impact on weather systems, ocean currents, riverbank erosion. What kind of technologies of representation are used by the state and its legislative instruments to speak of natural disasters and how do the legal frameworks in place obscure the human element in these interventions? For this part of the analysis, I will use the political ethnography of De Wall (2006) and the idea of environmental justice posited by Abhayraj Naik (2018) to untangle the relationship between climate disaster, displacement and the state. I will demonstrate how the production of knowledge through technology and management renders illegible local ways of living that have been affected by slow-onset events like erosion, cyclone-induced displacement, increasing salinity, and laws preventing usage of the Sundarbans forest reserve in the name of preservation.

This paper will argue for a modification of the existing policy framework to protect climate-induced migration by taking into account the human element and recognizing the linkage between slow-onset events like climate change, displacement and migration due to loss of property and lack of livelihood options. It will argue for the recognition of human vulnerability as an outcome of climate change and for laws and policies to take into consideration the

fundamentals of environmental and ecological justice for a sustainable future: the human rights of vulnerable populations, traditional forms of knowledge and living, integrated approaches to development, and a clear recognition of what's at stake in disaster management.

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[1] The Act has a provision under 2 (1) (f) for "project for residential purposes to the poor or landless or to persons residing in areas affected by natural calamities, or to persons displaced or affected by reason of the implementation of any scheme undertaken by the Government, any local authority or a corporation owned or controlled by the State.

[2] See *Olga Tellis v. Bombay Municipal Corporation*

Investigative Piece:

Where are the funds flowing in Sundarban?

From June 11, the West Bengal government started to resettle hundreds of families living in the Ghoramara islands of the Sundarban delta. They are being moved to another panchayat in Sagar island of the South 24 Parganas district where they are less likely to be impacted by the repeated storms and cyclones. A large stretch of the mud embankment in this island has been completely destroyed by the cyclone Yaas this year. The story is similar in many other parts of Sundarbans like Mousuni or Gosaba islands of this world's largest mangrove forest area.

According to multiple claims this is the first such move to relocate people from the island that faces an unavoidable impact of climate change. And considering the fact that the population of Sundarbans is about 50 lakh, the target of moving people away from the high risk zones is a long way ahead.

In fact, though a project to relocate is new, until the 1990s the state government gave out land tenures and financial aid to displaced households forced to move because of environmental factors, according to this report (https://www.fmreview.org/issue64/das-hazra) on forced migration in the delta.

But in the 1990s the state government began to run out of land and the scheme was stopped.

A) The story will explore the challenges with relocation and resettlement: Why it hasn't happened till now and what kind of plans the government has for it in the future. For this we will travel to Ghoramara, Mousuni and Sagar islands.

B) Rehabilitation of forced migrants or climate refugees

Politics of relief and construction

Politics tussle over relief and construction has been a part of the Sundarban since the time of Aila in 2009. When one of the biggest cyclones to hit the area brought forth the imminent climate challenges.

In his research for MCRG in this paper (http://www.mcrg.ac.in/pp26.pdf), Amites Mukhopadhyay points out that back then when the Centre proposed to allocate Rs 1000 crore for Aila relief to the Bengal government, then state opposition demanded that it be sent to the panchayats directly as her party had control over these panchayats.

Similar tussles have continued and relief and resettlement both have its own electoral consequences. But the clamour now is for concrete embankments with political rallies in different places like Gosaba. (https://www.telegraphindia.com/west-bengal/villagers-hold-march-demanding-concrete-embankments-in-south-24-parganass-gosaba/cid/1818028).

Many experts, however, have been doubtful about the efficacy of concrete embankments, particularly in case of Sundarban. In this Telegraph piece (https://www.telegraphindia.com/opinion/is-concrete-the-way-forward-in-rebuilding-the-sunderbans/cid/1784882) Megnaa Mehtta and Debjani Bhattacharya point out that during cyclone Amphan many such concrete embankments developed cracks, broke and collapsed.

C) The story will also explore the feasibility of concrete embankments and how they have fared in the delta and elsewhere in the country and globally. For this we will travel to Gosaba to read the public mood for embankments and to find out why concrete embankments failed.

Timeline: The project will be submitted by October 31, 2021. The first month, i.e, July will be used to research and review existing literature on disaster, displacement. Fieldwork will be done in August and September. For the podcasts, interviewees will be identified by August and recording will be done by September. October will be used for editing the podcasts and writing the essays.

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