REFUGEE WATCH

A South Asian Journal on Forced Migration

Migration, Gender, and the Ecology of Marginality in Asia

66 & 67

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(Special Issue)

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Book Reviews

Precarious Lives at Asia's Margins: Decolonial Perspectives on Displacement, Climate, and Care

By

Priya Singh *

Displacement has emerged as a defining condition of life in the twenty-first century. Across South and Southeast Asia, mobility and immobility coexist as intertwined modalities of survival and exclusion. Environmental degradation, extractive models of development, and increasingly authoritarian forms of governance generate movements of people that blur the conventional boundaries between the refugee, the migrant worker, and the internally displaced citizen. The essays compiled in *Refugee Watch* 66–67 emerge from this critical conjuncture and respond to the urgent need to reconceptualise the interlinkages among migration, labour, and climate in the Global South. Rather than an episodic humanitarian crisis, this double issue contends that displacement in South and Southeast Asia constitutes a structural condition rooted in the interwoven dynamics of ecological degradation, capitalist expansion, and differentiated citizenship. While not all contributions originated in this context, many were first presented and debated within collaborative forums such as the Migrant Asia Conference (2024), organised by the Centre for Gender and Forced Displacement (CGFD) at the Asian Institute of Technology, Bangkok, in collaboration with the Calcutta Research Group (CRG) and the European Master in Migration and Intercultural Relations (EMMIR) programme. The intellectual ambition of these engagements was to situate Asian experiences of displacement within a comparative and decolonial analytical frame. Building on CRG's longstanding interventions in South–South migration and EMMIR's transnational and intersectional pedagogy, these collaborations emphasise the urgency of repositioning migration studies within a Global South epistemology. In doing

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so, they embody what Kuan-Hsing Chen calls *Asia as Method* transforming regional dialogue into a generative mode of theory making.

Rethinking Displacement Beyond Emergency

Scholars argue that forced migration is not simply a transient humanitarian problem but a continuing outcome of structural inequality.[1] Analyses of global capitalism show that much contemporary displacement arises from economic systems that generate persistent vulnerability in marginalised regions.[2] This perspective treats migration as a consequence of enduring material conditions rather than isolated crises. Barbara Harrell-Bond's *Imposing Aid* (1986) offered an early critique of top-down humanitarian responses, demonstrating how narrowly framed relief efforts often ignore the political and structural causes of displacement and can further disempower those affected.[3] More recent scholarship has extended this critique, revealing how technocratic aid regimes often operate through biopolitical control and paternalistic logic.[4] A related body of work proposes a shift from state-centred to human-centred security, focusing on the well-being of communities rather than borders, and thereby recognising the structural drivers of protracted displacement such as chronic violence, inequality, and rights violations.[5] Research on long term displacement in the Global South further challenges the notion of crisis as rupture, showing that displacement is often a sustained condition demanding political and developmental solutions rather than temporary relief.[6] Recent Southern scholarship also advances alternative approaches that emphasise the agency and expertise of migrants in addressing structural causes of mobility and in shaping more equitable responses.[7] Sassen's notion of "expulsions" similarly captures how economic rationalities and environmental shocks converge to displace populations without formal recognition.[8] Migration within Asia far exceeds migration from Asia to the West—a dynamic that continues to unsettle Northern-centred paradigms of mobility.[9] The South Asian city and the Southeast Asian borderland, from the floating markets of the Mekong to the trans-island economies of the Visayas, are sites where the categories of citizen, worker, and refugee are rendered porous and mutually constitutive.[10] This issue, therefore, refuses to treat displacement as a self-contained event; it approaches it as a relational process linking environmental crisis to labour, gender, and governance. Such an approach draws from feminist political ecology, critical political economy, and migration-governance studies to ask how precarious lives are governed, represented, and resisted.[11] The essays in this volume are organised into two thematic sections that mirror and engage with one another. The first, *Climate, Displacement and Environmental Precarity*, focuses on ecological transformation and the ways in which environmental change precipitates displacement. The second, *Labour, Gender and Migration Governance*, turns to the social reproduction of precarity in the world of work, law, and everyday survival. Together they chart the shifting terrain of what Judith Butler calls *precarious life*, life rendered vulnerable through political and economic design rather than through fate.[12]

Conceptual Foundations

Three intertwined concepts anchor the double issue. First, climate justice foregrounds the moral and political asymmetry in global environmental governance. Countries such as Bangladesh, the Philippines, and Afghanistan contribute negligibly to global greenhouse gas emissions yet face some of the most severe consequences of climatic upheaval.[13] Scholars such as Bettini, and Farbotko and Lazrus critique dominant Northern narratives that frame climate affected populations as passive victims or security threats, obscuring the structural inequalities that shape their displacement.[14] Chakrabarty and Nixon further remind us that the climate question is also one of historical responsibility and uneven temporalities of development.[15] These asymmetries exemplify what Nancy Fraser terms *maldistribution*, a structural transfer of ecological risk from powerful to powerless regions.[16] Often narrated through the humanitarianism of the Global North, these crises are re-read here through a decolonial optic that foregrounds Southern epistemologies of survival. The contributors therefore read environmental displacement not as an environmental problem alone but as an outcome of political economy and power. Second, the issue engages *temporality and precarity* as defining features of governance in Asia. Migrant labour systems, emergency relief mechanisms, and short term adaptation projects all rest on temporal logics of deferral and suspension. Cecilia Menjívar's notion of "liminal legality" and Nicholas De Genova's analysis of "deportability" reveals how states maintain control by keeping populations in a permanent state of provisional legality.[17] The temporality of waiting recalls Anderson's insight into how nations imagine time as homogenous and empty.[18] By contrast, the displaced inhabit fragmented temporalities that unsettle this homogeneity. Within Asian contexts this temporariness extends beyond borders into internal citizenship regimes, from the Rohingya camps of Bangladesh to informal settlements in Bangkok or Manila. The essays collectively show that time itself; waiting, repetition, cyclical return, becomes a technology of rule. Third, the collection adopts an ethics of care derived from feminist thought.[19] Care refers to the affective and reproductive labour through which communities persist amid crises. In contexts of displacement, women's everyday practices of sustenance, caregiving, and mutual aid constitute forms of political agency that challenge the abstraction of "resilience" celebrated in technocratic discourse. As Fraser argues, the crisis of care is inseparable from the crisis of capital; in the Global South, women's unpaid and affective labour sustains economies of displacement.[20] By centring care, these essays resist the reduction of migrants to data points in adaptation policy and restore attention to the moral economies that sustain collective life.

South–South Epistemologies

Across both themes, contributors situate their analyses within the epistemic landscape of the Global South. South and Southeast Asia occupy a paradoxical position: as sites of acute vulnerability to climate change and as laboratories for developmental experimentation. From India's smart city projects to Thailand's urban flood management and Indonesia's labour export regimes, the region illustrates how adaptation and exploitation intertwine. Yet it also generates alternative knowledges. Philip Hirsch has shown, in the context of the Mekong, that regional environmental politics produce their own epistemic communities whose insights rarely travel northward.[21] Scholars such as Lahiri-Dutt and Baviskar reveal that local communities possess sophisticated understandings of environmental rhythms, while feminist economists such as Kabeer and Parreñas demonstrate how women's informal networks constitute practical knowledge systems that compensate for the absence of formal protections.[22] Caroline Hau further reminds us that Southeast Asian modernities are historically plural, shaped by overlapping colonial and regional trajectories that continue to define mobility and belonging.[23] The essays gathered here draw on these traditions of Southern theorising to provincialise Euro-Atlantic paradigms of governance and rights, enacting what Chen terms *Asia as Method*, the transformation of regional experience into theoretical insight.

This commitment to South–South dialogue also reorients the scale of comparison. Empirical studies demonstrate that migration within Asia far exceeds outward movement to the Global North, with roughly 70 per cent of Asian migrants remaining within the region.[24] The region's internal circuits of mobility, from the Bay of Bengal to the Mekong and from Nepal to the Gulf, reveal the embedded hierarchies of labour and belonging that structure transnational movement. As Xiang and Lindquist observe, these migration infrastructures comprise not only laws and borders but also brokers, kinship networks, and digital platforms that mediate mobility.[25] Recognising these infrastructures enables the contributors to trace continuities between environmental and economic displacement: the fisher forced inland by erosion may become the care worker or construction labourer abroad. This dialogue across South and Southeast Asia enacts what Chen describes as a methodological decentring of the West, turning Asia's interregional conversations into a source of theoretical innovation.[26]

Crisis, Governance, and the Politics of Knowledge

The epistemology of crisis underpins the essays in this issue. Here, "crisis" operates not merely as a descriptor of catastrophic events but as a persistent technology of governance. States and international agencies routinely invoke crisis, whether of migration, climate, or labour, to legitimize exceptional measures that often reproduce inequality. As Mezzadra and Neilson (2013) argue, crisis is constitutive of global capitalism itself, as borders and labour

regimes are continually reorganised through emergency discourses that sustain extraction and exclusion..[27] This intersects with Naomi Klein's analysis of the shock doctrine, where disaster becomes a pretext for neoliberal restructuring, and with Giorgio Agamben's notion of the state of exception as a prevailing logic of rule.[28] By reading crisis as an instrument of power, the contributors to this issue trace how governments manage populations through a shifting calculus of care and abandonment, a form of biopolitical governance in Foucault's sense.[29] The same logic informs contemporary climate adaptation policies, refugee management systems, and temporary labour migration regimes across South and Southeast Asia. Equally significant is the politics of knowledge that governs which accounts of crisis are authorised. The Global North continues to monopolise both the data and the discourse on climate and migration. Ranabir Samaddar (2020) critiques precisely this Euro-Atlantic epistemology, arguing that migration theory, as shaped by scholars such as Stephen Castles, universalises (universalises not ecolonizatio) the European experience and renders postcolonial histories peripheral. Against this epistemic hierarchy, Samaddar advances a South Asian perspective grounded in histories of displacement, partition, and colonial governance, demonstrating that the South's archives of mobility generate their own theoretical vocabularies.[30] This double issue aligns with that project of intellectual decolonization(decolonisation not ecolonization) by foregrounding locally situated scholarship that rethinks crisis, mobility, and governance from the vantage of Asia's diverse margins.

The Dual Architecture of the Issue

The organisation of this double issue mirrors these conceptual concerns. The first thematic cluster, *Climate, Displacement and Environmental Precarity*, maps the ecological frontiers of displacement, focusing on the interaction between natural processes and human governance. It moves from the maritime histories of fisher migration in the Philippines to the hydropolitics of the Mekong, traversing Afghanistan's drought-stricken highlands and the flood-prone deltas of Bengal and Thailand. These essays reveal how environmental change exposes structural inequities and how communities craft adaptive strategies that defy reduction to technocratic solutions. The second thematic cluster, *Labour, Gender and Migration Governance*, turns from the environmental to the social ecology of displacement. It examines the lived experiences of migrant workers, women, and sexual minorities navigating regimes of regulation and representation. Here migration governance is understood not merely as policy but as a complex assemblage of law, culture, and everyday practice. Together, the two clusters portray displacement as both cause and consequence of the transformations reshaping Asia's economies, environments, and moral orders.

Climate, Displacement and Environmental Precarity

The six essays curated in this thematic cluster examine the ecological and political economies that produce environmental precarity in Asia. Each contribution demonstrates that climate displacement is not a discrete event but the cumulative expression of social, historical, and institutional forces. The authors collectively expose the limitations of technocratic adaptation narratives and propose instead a situated understanding of vulnerability rooted in social reproduction, political ecology, and moral economy. Read together, these essays conceptualise the environment not merely as setting but as a site of governance where state, capital, and community negotiate authority over life itself.[31] The comparative perspective from Thailand and the Philippines reaffirms Southeast Asia's centrality in conceptualising agrarian and deltaic vulnerability.[32]

Alfie Anthony Neodama in "Fishermen's Migration Amidst Depleting Seas," reconstructs a micro-history of inter-island migration among Philippine fishing communities to illustrate how ecological depletion reconfigures social networks and livelihoods. Drawing on oral testimony and archival materials, he situates the relocation of fishing families from Calatrava to Miagao within the changing political ecology of the Visayan Sea. Mechanised trawling, coral destruction and the commodification of coastal resources produced a crisis that compelled households to develop circular migratory circuits across islands. The study interprets these movements not as passive responses to environmental decline but as historically embedded strategies of adaptation that link kinship, labour and ecology. By emphasising the agency of fishers in negotiating scarcity, Neodama contributes to a regional historiography that treats the sea as a social rather than a purely natural space.

Abdullah Ammar in "Navigating Policy Gaps in Climate-Induced Migration Afghanistan Before and After the 2021 Government Collapse" examines Afghanistan as a paradigmatic case of governance failure under conditions of climatic stress. Employing the frameworks of climate justice and policy analysis, he traces how recurring droughts and floods have displaced rural populations in a fragile state marked by conflict and institutional erosion. Comparing the reformist aspirations of the Comprehensive Migration Policy (2019) with the administrative paralysis that followed the 2021 regime change, he demonstrates how the absence of policy continuity has deepened humanitarian vulnerability. The study's ethnographic focus on Herat reveals informal systems of water management and mutual assistance through which communities attempt to compensate for state inaction. Ammar's analysis therefore moves beyond conventional climate-security discourse to show that adaptation in conflict-affected societies depends less on external aid than on local moral economies and emergent forms of decentralised governance.

Nur Alam's "Understanding River Flows and Displacement in the Lives of a Village in Malda" is an ethnographic study of Haripur village in the

Ganges basin that rethinks displacement through a hydrosocial lens. Rejecting the binary of land and water, he conceptualises the delta as a mutable continuum in which erosion, sedimentation and settlement are part of a single ecological process. Through a year of fieldwork, he records villagers' experiences of settlement, displacement, resettlement and renewed loss—a recurring cycle he describes as *SDRR*. The inhabitants' oral narratives reveal an intimate knowledge of river behaviour, soil composition and seasonal rhythms that challenges state perceptions of erosion as exceptional disaster. In dialogue with Lahiri-Dutt's theorisation of hydrosociality, Alam positions the Bengal delta as a living archive of environmental memory where social and ecological resilience are co-produced.

"Fleeing the Floods" is a collaborative Thai study by research team from the Chiang Mai University, Thailand, supported by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), Canada, that combines quantitative surveys with qualitative interviews to map the differentiated consequences of flooding across regions and communities. By analysing the 2011 mega-flood and subsequent inundations, the authors reveal that climate impacts are mediated by class, gender and citizenship. Rural farmers, urban workers and stateless minorities experience dislocation in distinct yet overlapping ways. The essay interrogates the dominant policy discourse of *resilience*, arguing that it transfers responsibility for adaptation from state to individual while leaving structural inequality unaddressed. It advocates a reorientation of disaster governance that integrates social protection, housing rights and gender-responsive planning. The Thai case thereby demonstrates how environmental vulnerability intersects with questions of legal recognition and social justice throughout Southeast Asia.

Banerjee and Baskhoro in "Water Resilience, Ecological Diplomacy and Human Security" expands the analysis from local adaptation to the transnational politics of water. Their study situates the Mekong River as both ecological system and diplomatic arena, interrogating the asymmetries that structure relations between upstream and downstream states. Drawing on policy documents and stakeholder interviews, they argue that hydropower development under Chinese and Laotian leadership has transformed the river into a site of contestation where the rhetoric of cooperation masks deep inequities. The authors propose an alternative framework of *ecological diplomacy* grounded in feminist ethics of care and regional solidarity. By linking environmental governance to human security, they show how sustainable management requires participatory mechanisms that foreground the voices of riparian communities rather than privileging state sovereignty or corporate profit.

Samanta concludes the thematic cluster by theorising (theorising not odernizat) vulnerability as a social relation embedded in neoliberal development. Drawing on empirical research from eastern India, she argues that climate risk and infrastructural exclusion operate as forms of structural violence that distribute insecurity unevenly across populations. Her critique extends to urban modernization projects that pursue sustainability through displacement, transforming ecological crisis into a rationale for accumulation.

By replacing technocratic cartography with what she terms *moral cartography*, Samanta calls for analytic tools that locate responsibility within the political economy of development. Her intervention establishes a conceptual bridge to the second cluster, which examines how labour regimes, gender hierarchies and migration governance reproduce the same logics of inequality that underpin environmental precarity.

From Environmental Precarity to Social Governance

The environmental transformations examined in the preceding section find their social counterparts in the regulation of labour, gender, and mobility. This shift marks what Mezzadra and Neilson term the "multiplication of labour," wherein environmental displacement feeds the circuits of precarious work that sustain global capitalism.[33] The continuum of precarity thus traverses both natural and social domains, revealing how governance operates through differentiated regimes of visibility and value. Ecological displacement frequently culminates in economic migration, while the governance of migration reproduces the same hierarchies that generate environmental vulnerability. As livelihoods collapse under environmental strain, the displaced are drawn into informal economies, domestic service, construction, or other forms of precarious labour across Asia's internal and transnational corridors. The shift from delta to city, from ecological to social space, thus reveals a continuum of precariousness rather than a transition from one domain to another. The essays in this second thematic section interrogate the architectures of migration governance that institutionalise inequality under the guise of protection or development. Drawing upon the conceptual triad of feminist political economy, intersectionality, and governance of mobility, the authors demonstrate that the regulation of movement is as crucial to contemporary capitalism as the regulation of capital itself. They examine not only transnational labour regimes, but also everyday infrastructures of mobility such as public transport, showing how access to the city is differentially mediated by gender, documentation, and class. Harvey and Standing similarly contend that neoliberalism depends on producing flexible yet insecure labour, a logic mirrored across the Asian migration industry.[34] Labour mobility in Asia is managed through a complex assemblage of laws, bilateral agreements, recruitment agencies, and cultural norms that together constitute what Piper calls the migration industry.[35] Within this system, gender and citizenship act as filters through which access to rights and resources is determined. The essays collected here explore how women, queer communities, and low wage workers navigate these structures, and how the discourse of rights, often mediated by development institutions, is refracted through local moral economies. Feminist political economy provides a methodological anchor for this analysis. Building on Kabeer's and Parreñas's insights, the contributors read migration not only as economic movement but also as a process of social reproduction.[36] As Butler reminds us, precarity is not merely material insecurity but a condition of differential recognisability; migrants' lives are rendered less valued and thus more exploitable.[37] The

global demand for care labour, the commodification of intimacy, and the persistence of informal work have made women's mobility central to contemporary capitalism. Intersectionality, articulated by Crenshaw and extended by Asian scholars such as Kapur and Wilson, reveals how gender interacts with class, caste, and sexuality in shaping migrants' positionalities.[38] Finally, the concept of governance, as theorised by Mezzadra and Neilson, draws attention to the technologies through which states and markets regulate life itself, what Foucault described as the biopolitics of population management.[39] These frameworks converge in a shared question: how do regimes of labour and mobility reproduce the precarity that displacement seeks to escape?

Labour, Gender and Migration Governance

Menon's article situates the experience of women migrant workers in Kerala within the intersecting discourses of respectability, labour, and mobility. Through interviews and ethnographic observation, she examines how female migration continues to be interpreted through moral rather than economic categories. The social perception that a woman who travels for work disrupts familial harmony persists even as households depend on her income. Menon analyses this paradox through the lens of social reproduction, showing that patriarchal ideology sustains itself by rendering women's wage labour both indispensable and invisible. Her discussion of Malayali women's participation in Gulf migration highlights the contradictory effects of transnational mobility: while migration expands women's economic agency, it also exposes them to intensified scrutiny. The essay concludes that any meaningful migration policy must dismantle these moral economies of gender and recognise migrant women as full economic and social actors.

Mithra's comparative study advances the conversation on inclusivity by examining how sexuality and legal recognition shape migration experiences in Thailand and India. Drawing on queer theory and legal anthropology, the article demonstrates that migration governance rarely accounts for sexual diversity. Thailand's relative openness to LGBTQ persons contrasts with India's recent yet partial decriminalisation of homosexuality. The author shows that legal reforms without corresponding social transformation yield *conditional citizenship*, where rights exist in law but not in lived reality. Thailand's image as a tolerant society coexists with persistent exclusion from marriage, adoption, and certain employment sectors, while in India queer individuals navigate bureaucratic invisibility and social hostility despite formal legal progress. By reading these contexts together, Mithra contributes to an emergent body of South–South scholarship that redefines migration not only as economic displacement but also as a quest for recognition and safety.

Adula's essay provides a structural analysis of the kafala system in the Gulf states as a paradigmatic instance of illiberal governance. The system, which binds a worker's legal status to an employer-sponsor, epitomises the contradictions of neoliberal globalisation: high mobility of labour coupled with severe restriction of rights. Adula situates the kafala regime within a

broader historical and political economy that privileges national citizens while commodifying foreign labour. Drawing on feminist and postcolonial critiques, she argues that the kafala system extends the patriarchal and racial hierarchies of the Gulf's rentier states into the domain of migration management. The essay evaluates recent reforms in Qatar and Saudi Arabia but concludes that partial liberalisation leaves intact the deeper logic of control and dependency. Adula's analysis thus reveals how state sovereignty and private capital collaborate to sustain a flexible yet subordinated labour force, a dynamic central to the political economy of the region.

Borah's research reorients the discussion of rights from formal law to public consciousness. Using surveys and qualitative interviews, he explores how education, media exposure, and socio-economic status influence human rights awareness in Assam. The findings indicate a pronounced disparity between constitutional guarantees and popular understanding. While respondents recognise the moral value of rights, many remain uncertain about their practical application or recourse. Interpreting this gap through the Theory of Planned Behaviour, Borah argues that knowledge of rights must translate into a sense of agency before it can inspire collective action. His focus on participatory learning and local context underscores the need for culturally grounded approaches to human rights education. The study's implications extend beyond Assam: without cultivating informed citizenship, policy frameworks on migration or labour cannot produce equitable outcomes. Borah thus positions rights awareness as a foundational element of social justice.

Mukherjee's essay on pink tickets examines Delhi's experiment with fare-free public transport for women, analysing how the scheme reconfigures gendered mobility through the lens of transportation justice. Based on ethnographic fieldwork along a Delhi bus route connecting peripheral labour colonies to central urban spaces, the essay explores how the 2019 pink ticket scheme enabled working-class migrant women to access the city with greater autonomy and regularity. Framed as a universal subsidy aimed at enhancing women's safety and labour force participation, the initiative increased female ridership and reshaped everyday experiences of the city. The subsequent replacement of pink tickets with digital Saheli Smart Cards, however, marked a turn towards technocratic governance, requiring proof of Delhi residency and excluding many migrant women without documentation. The essay situates this shift within a broader politics of exclusion that reconfigures empowerment as conditional upon bureaucratic legibility. By drawing on the narratives of women bus riders, Mukherjee links transport infrastructure to structures of precarity and differentiated citizenship, arguing that mobility rights cannot be contingent on residency status. She offers a critical perspective on how gendered infrastructures of care are reworked through digital governance and urban securitisation.

Mukhopadhyay's essay closes the cluster by returning to the Bengal delta to interrogate the moral and epistemological assumptions of climate governance. Through a historical and ethnographic reading of the Sundarbans, he critiques the technocratic discourse of *managed retreat*

advocated by environmental planners and international agencies. The paper traces how the language of climate adaptation reproduces colonial legacies of conservation that privilege wilderness over human habitation. By juxtaposing scientific projections with the lived histories of islanders, Mukhopadhyay exposes the reduction of complex social relations to cost–benefit calculations. His engagement with the heritage–history debate reveals how climate discourse often transforms the delta into a heritage landscape emptied of its inhabitants. Drawing on critiques of climate reductionism, he argues for a reading of the delta as a moral and historical ecology where people and environment are co-constitutive. In repositioning the climate migrant as a subject of knowledge rather than an object of policy, the essay extends the ethical horizon of migration studies.

The six essays collectively demonstrate how displacement is sustained by structural forces that extend from the household to the global economy. They show that migration governance in Asia operates through what Ong terms *graduated sovereignty*, whereby states selectively confer rights and protections according to market logics, gender norms, and geopolitical utility.[40] The analytical emphasis on intersectionality and social reproduction links this thematic section back to the environmental themes of the first thematic section: just as ecological systems depend on invisible labour, so too does the governance of migration depend on the unacknowledged work of care and adaptation performed by migrants themselves.

Book Reviews: Thematic Reflections

The volume turns to the wider body of scholarship through four book reviews that explore how displacement is represented and understood. As a whole, these reviews extend the discussion beyond empirical studies to engage with questions of epistemology, ethics, and representation. Each contributes to the politics of knowledge production in forced-migration scholarship and, in doing so, strengthens the conceptual architecture of this collection. Kandar and Chakraborti reviews *Environment, Climate Change and Migration in South Asia* (Routledge, 2023) as a work that redefines the study of environmental displacement through regional specificity. The book assembles empirical cases from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, and Nepal to show that migration is not a linear outcome of climatic stress but a socially mediated process. The reviewers emphasise that the collection counters the tendency to exoticise South Asia as a space of environmental catastrophe. Instead, it foregrounds historical agency, adaptation, and the uneven responsibilities of states. Their commentary resonates with the arguments developed in Cluster I, reinforcing that climate-induced mobility must be analysed through the intertwined lenses of ecology, governance, and justice rather than through technocratic prediction alone. Basu's reading of Gigi Ganguly's *Biopeculiar: Stories of an Uncertain World* (Westland, 2024) moves the discussion from human displacement to non-human relationality. Through a critique of anthropocentrism, Basu interprets Ganguly's speculative fiction as a philosophical intervention that invites readers to rethink coexistence among

species. The stories' recurring transformation of humans into other life forms becomes, in Basu's view, an allegory for moral responsibility in the Anthropocene. Her review thus complements the environmental humanities perspective implicit in Cluster I and prefigures the ethical arguments of Mukhopadhyay's essay on the Sundarbans. Both works insist that ecological justice demands a decentring of human exceptionalism and an acknowledgement of mutual vulnerability. Siddique reviews Neha Dixit's *The Many Lives of Syeda X* (Juggernaut, 2024), a narrative that follows the life of a Muslim woman navigating labour migration within a politically transforming India. Siddique reads the text as an ethnography of precarity that exposes how religion, gender, and class intersect to shape mobility. Her review highlights how the protagonist's multiple identities, as worker, woman, and minority, reveal the moral economies through which belonging and exclusion are produced in contemporary India. This analysis echoes the concerns of Menon's article in Cluster II and underlines the need for intersectional frameworks that link personal experience to structural inequality. Sarkar's engagement with *Refugee Voices in Modern Global History: Reckoning with Refugeedom* (Oxford University Press, 2025) draws attention to the epistemological politics of writing refugee history. The review situates the edited volume's archival work within a broader movement to recentre refugee testimony in global historiography. By discussing how refugees negotiate representation within bureaucratic regimes of documentation, Sarkar connects historical refugeehood to contemporary debates on voice, agency, and the counter-archive. Her reading thus bridges the methodological concerns of both clusters, reminding us that the production of knowledge about displacement is itself a site of power and contestation.

Conclusion

The two thematic sections and the accompanying reviews outline a comprehensive map of displacement in the twenty-first-century South. Taken as a whole, this volume advances an integrated South–South framework that interprets ecological and social displacements through shared logics of governance and care. It shows that ecological and social precarity, though analytically distinct, are closely connected. Environmental crises drive populations into mobility, yet the regimes that regulate labour and citizenship determine whether such movement leads to security or renewed dispossession. Across deltas, deserts, and megacities, the displaced inhabit a continuum of precarious citizenship in which rights remain partial and belonging provisional. A central theme uniting these contributions is the politics of care. From the hydrosocial relations of the Ganges to the affective economies of migrant households, care emerges as both a means of survival and a form of political critique. It reveals the moral labour that sustains societies amid structural neglect. The collection also advances a South–South epistemology that refuses to view Asia merely as a recipient of theory. By engaging scholars and practitioners from the region, these essays reposition the Global South as a generator of concepts such as hydrosociality, ecological

diplomacy, precarious citizenship, and moral cartography that question universal models of migration and climate governance. The volume argues that displacement is not only a humanitarian concern but a defining element of modern development. The climate migrant, the domestic worker, and the stateless refugee share exposure to the uneven geographies of capital and governance. Addressing these realities requires not only policy reform but an epistemic transformation that recognises interdependence across species, regions, and histories. In this sense, *Refugee Watch* 66–67 serves as both a record of crisis and an invitation to imagine more ethical futures of mobility and coexistence. By bringing Global South experience into dialogue with Global North theory, the volume affirms that decolonial scholarship does not reject universality but redefines it through diverse histories of knowledge and resistance.

Notes

[1] Saskia Sassen, *Expulsions: Brutality and Complexity in the Global Economy* (Harvard University Press, 2014); Tiina Seppälä, "Feminizing Resistance, Decolonizing Solidarity: Contesting Neoliberal Development in the Global South," *Journal of Resistance Studies* 2, no. 1 (2016): 12–46.

[2] Mona Harb and Rana Khalaf, "Global Neoliberalism and Protracted Conflict in the Middle East," in *The Routledge Handbook of Conflict Response and Leadership in the Global South*, eds. V. Shahzad et al. (Routledge, 2022), 113–30.

[3] Barbara E. Harrell-Bond, *Imposing Aid: Emergency Assistance to Refugees* (Oxford University Press, 1986).

[4] Tom Scott-Smith, "Control and Biopower in Contemporary Humanitarian Aid: The Case of Supplementary Feeding," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 28, no. 1 (2015): 21–37; Ilana Feldman, *Life Lived in Relief: Humanitarian Predicaments and Palestinian Refugee Politics* (University of California Press, 2018).

[5] Stefania Panebianco, "Human Security at the Mediterranean Borders: Humanitarian Discourse in the EU Periphery," *International Politics* 59, no. 3 (2022): 428–48.

[6] Cathrine Brun, 2016. "There Is No Future in Humanitarianism: Emergency, Temporality and Protracted Displacement," *History and Anthropology* 27, no. 4 (2016): 393–410; Alexander Betts and Paul Collier, *Refuge: Transforming a Broken Refugee* System (Allen Lane, 2017).

[7] Heaven Crawley, François Gemenne, Kholofelo Kugler, and Nando Sigona, eds. *The Palgrave Handbook of South–South Migration and Inequality* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2023); Froilan Malit Jr., and Gerasimos Tsourapas, "Contesting Migrant Precarity in the Global South? Informal Labor Markets, High-Risk Coping Strategies and Low-Income Filipino Migrants in the Gulf," *Asian and Pacific Migration Journal* 32, no. 2 (2023): 203–27.

[8] Sassen, *Expulsions*.

[9] Stephen Castles, Hein de Haas, and Mark J. Miller, *The Age of Migration: International Population Movements in the Modern World*, 5th ed. (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

[10] Biao Xiang and Johan Lindquist, "Migration Infrastructure," *International Migration Review* 48, S1 (2014): S122–S148; Eric Tagliacozzo, *The Longest Journey: Southeast Asians and Pilgrimage to Mecca* (Oxford University Press, 2013); Jonathan Rigg, *More than Rural: Textures of Thailand's Agrarian Transformation* (University of Hawai'i Press, 2020).

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Fishermen's Migration Amidst Depleting Seas: A History of Fishers' Migration from Calatrava, Negros Occidental to Miagao, Iloilo (1961–1995)

By

Alfie Anthony Nualda Neodama *

Migration or the movement of people that "involve the permanent or quasi-permanent relocation of an individual or group of individuals from a place of origin to a place of destination" has been an important historical force that has formed societies across the globe.[1] This movement ushered interaction of people that resulted to major historical achievements such as the spread and enrichment of cultures, exchange of knowledge and technology, globalisation, among many others. The motivations that underlie migration are complex, but it is economic factors that exert the strongest influence. While some people migrate for economic advancement, the movement of many peoples in Third World countries like the Philippines is primarily a "survival strategy".[2]In the Philippines, migration has become a "source of much of the nation's history."[3] Theories concerning the origins of the islands underscore the key role of migration. With the growth of regional economies in the nineteenth century, migration became the "most dynamic component of population change in the Philippines."[4] Despite its meaning to history, organised attempt to study migration particularly internal migration in the Philippines only began in mid-twentieth century.[5] Pioneering works in this field had been done mostly by demographers and economists who were more concerned with "the volume and direction of movements, and the demographic characteristics of persons engaged in the movement" than the motivational aspect of migration.[6] Since 2000, however, there has been a drop in the publication on internal migration in the country which explains its paucity in literature. Until recently, migration studies in the Philippines have been biased towards international and transnational migration, and relatively neglectful of internal migration despite censuses reveal that Filipinos are highly mobile inside the country.[7]

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At the center of the Philippine islands, the Visayan region has borne witness to this long tradition of internal migration. In western Visayas, intra-regional migration between the islands of Panay and Negros particularly between the provinces of Iloilo and Negros Occidental since mid-nineteenth century has been an indispensable theme in the social and economic history of the region and the larger nation. These patterns of in-migration and out-migration have been conventionally explained by the historic boon and bane of the sugarcane industry which remains an important industry in the region. Albeit true, this is just one of the many factors that influence complex patterns of migration in the region. It could not adequately explain the whole phenomenon especially when one wishes to look into the migration of another equally important sector of its population, the fishers. In the Visayan archipelago in central Philippines, fisher's migration is a regular feature of maritime life. According to maritime anthropologist Zayas, fishers are "the most mobile population" whose "residence is never permanent".[8] Despite its prevalence, Seki contended that it has "rarely attracted academic interest", hence, the sparse literature.[9] To Zayas, fisher's migration is cyclical and is primarily motivated by the seasonality of fishing, that is, when fishes no longer abound a traditional fishing ground, fishers move to another place where fish is abundant. Seki, however, pointed out that this is a simplistic way of thinking about the cause of the phenomenon, especially since there are cases of fishers' migration that involve permanent change of residence. Their migration is unique; an in-depth study of migration of a group of fishers is important. "Questions such as what actually happened in their place of origin, their process of settling in new places, and the effect of their in-migration on the local community remain to be studied."[10] These questions helped conceptualise this study.

This study examines the history of fishers' migration from a fishing community in Barangay San Isidro, Calatrava, Negros Occidental to Barangay Baybay Norte, Miagao, Iloilo, from 1961 to 1995. Specifically, it answered the following questions: 1) What was the situation in Calatrava, Negros Occidental at the time of outmigration? 2) What was the situation in Miagao, Iloilo at the time of in-migration? 3) How did the situations in Calatrava vis-à-vis Miagao affect the fishers' decision to migrate? 4) What was the process of settling down in Miagao? and 5) What is the effect of in-migration have on the fishing industry of Miagao? This study used a historical perspective which seeks to understand a present subject, i.e. fishers' migration, using the past.[11] Gathering and interpretation of data was guided by Everett S. Lee's "A Theory of Migration" which hypothesises that the interplay of factors associated with the area of origin; factors associated with the area of destination; intervening obstacles; and personal factors, influence the act of migration.[12] Oral narrative was used because migration history is likely unrecorded, ill-documented, and hidden, and the migrant's own story provides an essential record.[13] Thirteen key informants were interviewed using a semi-structured questionnaire divided into demographic profile, migration history, factors of migration, processes of migration and integration to the new place, and the effects of migration to the

fishing industry of Miagao. This study used purposive sampling using the following criteria: 1) must be a resident of San Isidro, Calatrava prior to transfer in Miagao sometime beginning in 1961; 2) must be a present resident of Miagao at the time of study; 3) a senior member of a migrant fishing household; and 4) must be no less than 50 years of age at the time of interview. Ten participants were initially identified but three additional informants were later interviewed as recommended by the initial informants. Interviews with informants' spouses, their relatives in San Isidro, and officials and local residents of Baybay Norte were also conducted to have a more comprehensive understanding of their migration history. Series of interviews and validations were held from February 2018 to May 2019.

Calatrava, Negros Occidental in the 1950s to 1990s: A Setting of Out-Migration

> *Ang kabuhi namon ridto daw galatay sa isa ka bilog nga lanot. Pigado.* (Our life there [in Calatrava] was like walking on a thread. Life was difficult).

The statement above by Albino Pason, a fisher migrant, describes the life he and his family had in Brgy. San Isidro, Calatrava prior to moving in Miagao in 1972. His father, just like many other fishers at that time, used explosives in fishing to increase fish catch. He recounted that the use of explosives was initially rewarding but not in the later decades as fish catch started to shrink in size and volume alarmingly, making policemen more aggressive in nabbing the perpetrators including his father. *Pigado nga pangabuhi* in Calatrava, which for fishers meant lower fish catch, lower income, and no better alternative livelihood to fishing, was a recurring theme in their motivation to migrate out of the town. Calatrava is located at 10°35'44" east latitude and 123°28'53" north longitude on the northeastern side of the province of Negros Occidental in Negros Island. It has a total land area of 32,196.98 ha. and is composed of forty barangays; fourteen of which have a coastline and the remaining twenty-six are mountain barangays.[14] The population of Calatrava in 2015 had multiplied by a dozen since 1903, to 80,624 from 6,385, respectively. In 1970 and 1980, however, the town population was in negative. The trend further drew almost a plateau between 1975 and 1990. This numerical decline, although affected by fertility and mortality but the role of migration could not be totally ruled out as a factor.

Calatrava is mainly hilly with rough mountains, and some rolling and flat lands along its coastal plain. The rugged topography of the town limited its agricultural potential. In a soil survey published in 1951, the mountains of adjacent towns of Escalante, Toboso, Calatrava, and San Carlos City were "completely denuded of its native vegetation".[15] Its soil type, faraon clay, was described to have "more pebbles and cobbles of limestone than …soils".[16] Crops planted in these areas e.g. corn, banana, cassava, and upland rice were miserably small.[17] In the narrow flat lowlands of the town, on the other hand, soil is mainly classified as hydrosols and obando sand. Hydrosols was "not

suited to crops" because of the presence of sea water during high tide.[18] Obando sand, on the other hand, was "very poor in organic matter" and was weakly acidic. Areas with this type of soil were "seldom used for agricultural purposes".[19] Despite these geographical limitations, Calatrava remains as an agricultural town. Agricultural censuses from 1948 to 1991 revealed that corn, *palay* and sugarcane were the main valuable crops widely cultivated in Calatrava. Although corn is most expansive in terms of land area, it is sugarcane concentrated in the littoral plains of the town that has remained the principal agricultural industry of Calatrava.

Sugarcane cultivation in Calatrava started as early as 1910. In a report published in the same year, Calatrava, then a barrio of San Carlos, had sugar plantations extending "from the Hacienda Santo Tomas [in present day Barangay Buenavista, Calatrava] in the north to Valle Hermoso [San Carlos] in the south."[20] However, until the breakout of the Second World War in the Philippines in 1941, Calatrava was best recognised for its production of corn, tobacco, *gabe,* and *ubi* rather than sugarcane.[21] During the War, the Calatrava remained only as a "small town of no commercial importance" and its small barrios were "unimportant".[22] The post-War years showed an upscale trend in the size of farm lands devoted for sugarcane, growing significantly from 441 ha. in 1948 to 1,379.30 ha. in 1960 to 4,387.60 ha. in 1970. A map of the town in 1961 showed that there were eight sugar haciendas of which three were located in Barangay San Isidro. In 1980, however, its size shrinked to almost half its size at 2,357 ha. Interestingly, of the total 129 farms reporting to cultivate sugarcane in 1980, only 63 per cent or 81 farms were planted with sugarcane exclusively while the remaining 37 per cent or 48 farms had other crops.[23] This number could be indicative that planters in town were diversifying their sources of income to cope up with the crisis in sugar following the end of Philippine-American free trade agreement in 1974 as there was no similar data in previous censuses.[24]

Subsequently, employment opportunities in Calatrava's major industry dwindled. A study in 1989 surveyed the survival strategies of displaced sugarcane workers and identified migration as one of those. In the survey, some 77 per cent of the *pangayaos* or the transient sugarcane workers who moved from one hacienda to another, came from towns in northern Negros, specifically Calatrava, Cadiz City, and Manapla. On the other hand, the largest 15 per cent surveyed *duma-ans* or regular farm workers who reside permanently in the hacienda that employs them, also came from Calatrava. The study also revealed that 54 per cent of displaced sugarcane workers who chose to stay were predominantly skillful at fishing.[25] In Calatrava, the waters that bound the town make fishing a sensible livelihood option for them. The eastern side of the Calatrava is bounded by Tañon Strait. The Strait lies south of the Visayan Sea, and it separates the islands of Cebu and Negros. It is extremely narrow, 27 km wide, and 160 km long. Its deepest point is at 500 meters. Its coastline stretches at 450 km.[26] Evinced from *Fisheries Statistics Report* from 1960 to 1972, the following marine species were commonly caught in the Strait: anchovy, barracuda, big-eye scad, bonito, butterfly fish, cavalla, crab, herring, lizard fish,

mackerel, nemipterid, pampano, porgy, ray round scad, runner, sardine, shrimp, slipmouth, squid, swordfish, ten pounder, and tuna. Today, diamond back squid aside from tunas e.g. yellowfin, skipjack, bullet and frigate, are frequently caught in the Strait.[27] Among the pressing issues of Tañon Strait is overfishing. A historical look at the Strait revealed that high density of fishers, expansive commercial fishing, and dynamite fishing were among the major contributors to the problem. In 1987 Tañon Strait, specifically its northern and southern sections, were identified as heavily exploited waters in the country.[28] The waters under this category were characterised by a high density of more than 70 fishers/km. An important contributor to this could be the turning of some displaced sugarcane workers to fishing to survive the crisis in the sugar industry. Expansive commercial fishing and rampant use of destructive fishing were also among the major contributors to lower fish catch in the Strait. *Fisheries Statistics of the Philippines,* an annual statistical report published by the Bureau of Fisheries which became known as Philippine Fisheries Commission and later the Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources, revealed that as early as the 1950s, Tañon Strait had already been identified as one of the fishing grounds in the country frequented by commercial fishing vessels. In the annual reports of the Commission, bag net, purse seine, and otter trawl were the types of commercial fishing gears commonly used in the Strait. Table 1 shows the volume of fish catch in the Strait by commercial fishing vessels and by the kind of gears used from 1959 to 1972.[29] While the reports are not conclusive, nonetheless, they present evidence of commercial fishing operations in the narrow Tañon Strait to cause problems to its artisanal fishers.

Table 1: Volume of Production of Fish by Commercia; Fishing Vessels and by Kind of Gear Used in Tañon Strait: 1959–1969, 1972

Year	Otter Trawl (Kg)	Bag Net (Kg)	Round Haul Seine (Kg)	Muro-Ami (Kg)	Purse Seine (Kg)	Beach Seine (Kg)	Fish Coral (Kg)
1959	37,050	330,850	-	-	27,980	-	-
1960	16,500	669,040	-	-	54,390	-	-
1961	17,790	270,600	9,420	-	59,490	-	-
1962	21,120	298,500	7,860	-	54,930	-	-
1963	11,310	130,920	14,670	-	559,470	-	-
1964	26,840	138,720	4,000	28,200	545,760	27,520	9,600
1965	28,160	20,040	40,040	-	169,800	-	-
1966	11,000	7,600	16,200	-	60,920	-	-
1967	-	20,640	17,520	-	35,480	-	-
1968	7,320	-	8,480	-	70,400	-	-
1969	-	4,400	-	-	3,600	-	-
1972	84,650	31,870	-	-	3,330	-	-

Source: *Fisheries Statistics of the Philippines*, 1959-1969, 1972

Commercial fishing in the Strait as in other adjacent Visayan waters intensified at the time of the sugar crisis in Negros as many sugar landlords ventured on fishing business to cope up with the crisis. In the words of Rolando Batusbatusan, the President of the Federation of Small Fishermen in Negros established in 1984, "former landlords… control much of commercial fishing…the fishing industry [became] an extension of the agricultural industry" of the landlords.[30] They owned trawlers and purse seines which could be exploitative and destructive when used in the 27km wide Strait. The Federation also believed that many of the trawlers fishing in the waters of northern Negros were owned and operated by the Japanese who were granted the fishing rights by the Philippine-Japan Treaty of Amity, Commerce and Navigation in 1973.[31] In effect, artisanal fishermen suffered to a very low fish catch. A fisherman in northern Negros once recalled that, "we used to have plenty of fish to eat…, since the trawlers came in, we have only crabs. Sometimes we don't get anything at all."[32] Most of small fishermen in northern Negros used hook-and-line method. Because of their traditional way of fishing, they faced unfair competition from commercial vessels equipped with sonar and radar devices. Eric Gamalinda noted that "in 1960 the average catch was 20 kilos in two to four hours; today fishermen hardly catch four kilos. These conditions have encouraged subsistence fishermen to resort to illegal and often dangerous methods to compete with bigtime fishers."[33]

Blast fishing was a recurring problem in the Strait as it was all around the waters of Visayas since the 1950s. A graduate thesis submitted to the University of San Carlos in 1954 reported that dynamite fishing was all over the waters of Cebu. Through field observation and interviews with old time fishers of the island, the study found out that in the waters around the Bantayan Island in northern Tañon Strait: "1) only 35 [per cent] of the dynamited fish is retrieved by the unscrupulous fisherman, 2) schools of fish are destroyed, 3) their spawning period is altered, 4) most of the dynamited fish sink to the bottom of the sea, 5) some dynamited fish when eaten produce a certain form of skin disease. The powder used in this explosive is usually taken from the abandoned Japanese mines; 6) some fish that eat the unrecovered dynamited ones are poisoned; and, 7) food supplies of fish like plant and animal life are often destroyed by the blasts. In Northern Negros, the reefs off Sagay City were notorious for intense blast fishing.[34] Other target offshore areas in order of frequency were San Carlos City, Cadiz City, Manapla and Victorias.[35] Although not directly in the waters of Calatrava, the destruction caused by blast fishing in adjacent waters had a spill-over effect affecting the volume of fish catch of fishers in town. The compound effect of high density of fishers fishing in the Strait, expansive commercial fishing, and widespread blast fishing to the livelihood of artisanal fishers in Calatrava and in other neighboring towns was very low fish catch, very low income.

Life in Calatrava was made more difficult in the 1980s due to armed conflicts between bandit gangs and the Philippine Constabulary (PC) or state police. The *Visayan Daily Star*, a local newspaper based in Bacolod City, reported series of ambushes, killings, kidnapping, torture, and illegal taxation perpetuated

by four bandit gangs in towns and in neighboring municipalities of Toboso, Escalante, San Carlos, and Don Benedicto. These gangs professed no links with the New People's Army (NPA), a military wing of the Communist Party of the Philippines, which was a real threat in southern Negros.[36] The crimes of these gangs brought them into armed conflicts with the PC.[37] The PC, however, were also alleged to have maltreated and harassed civilians in Calatrava.[38] It was not until 1986 that the bandits became cooperative with the government.[39] While reconciliation with the bandit gangs was underway, news of NPA's presence in northern Negros filled the local print media in the later years of the decade. In Calatrava, ambushes organised by the suspected NPA were reported in its hinterland barangays.[40] PC were deployed to destroy the dissidents. In effect, some civilians were forced to move out and in September 1989 more than 200 of residents of Minapasok were reported to evacuate the barangay "to avoid being caught in the crossfire in the gunbattle between 100 heavily armed New People's Army insurgents and the 334th PC soldiers."[41]

Low fish catch in Tañon Strait, lack of alternative livelihood to fishing due to sugar crisis and geographical limitations coupled with armed conflicts between dissidents and the state forces were among the major developments that made life particularly challenging in Calatrava between the 1950s and 1990s. In fact, in 1990, Calatrava was named among the "low income municipalities" of the province along with Murcia, Pontevedra, Sagay and La Castellana.[42] *Pigado nga pangabuhi* in Calatrava was repeatedly complained by families of fisher migrants who left Barangay San Isidro in the past decades. As their income mainly depended on the amount of fish catch, fishers whined over its obvious decrease. Regino Simeon, who began fishing in his elementary years and left San Isidro in 1980s, estimated that he could bring home about 10kgs of fish after fishing for an hour or two in the 1960s. In the 1970s, the catch was hardly 5kgs, and almost nothing in the succeeding decades. If catch in the 1970s was at an average of 5kgs a day multiplied by 365 days in a year, annual fish catch of one fisherman in San Isidro would be at 1.83mt. In this decade, it was lower than the average annual productivity of individual fisher in the region at 1.94 mt.[43]

Barangay San Isidro is located at 5.6km from the town proper, and 10.2km from San Carlos City. Due to the location, the fishers to not sell their catch in the public markets because transporting their fish would add up to the cost. Instead, women fishers would hand carry their buckets of fish covered in ice and peddled them to workers in the haciendas and folks in and outside San Isidro. Milagros Argoncillo, a fisher herself whose husband was a *duma-an* and who left the town in 1983, earned a living primarily from peddling fish in the barangay. It was typical for her fish to be exchanged with bananas and sweet potatoes because money was scarce, especially among the poverty stricken hacienda workers. With the outbreak of conflicts in town, Milagros could no longer peddle her fish in the upland barangays freely. The army would have her turned back for fear that she might be harmed on her way up. Milagros recalled how bad her family's situation was, especially when her husband's asthma got worsened and could not report to work, peddling of fish was also hard up. "*Sus!*

gutom-gutom gid mi… laka ra mi makakaon og kan-on nga bugas kay dili tayuyon amoang pangita… daklit-daklit lang maglibod ka isda.. amo to pag-pigado gid," (Sus! we were starving… rarely did my family eat rice because my income was disrupted…I could sell fish but only secretly… life was very difficult).[44]

Hacienda work was not a better alternative to fishing. San Isidro is home to three sugarcane plantations. One would think working in plantations was the best substitute for fishing. For fishers who chose to leave the barangay, the seasonal unemployment in the industry i.e. plenty of work during the milling season and very little work during the off-milling season, promised no better chance. The seasonal unemployment, poor wages and dearth of social benefits in the hacienda work impoverished worker's living conditions characterised by the lack of education and deficient diet.[45] Leonora Luague, wife of a fisherman who left the barangay earlier in the 1960s, thought that fishers' income remained better than sugarcane workers' despite the woes in fishing. To Leonora, the hacienda workers had poor material condition. She described them empathically as "*makaluluoy*. *Ang* shorts *kara nga lusbot, ang lusbot tapakan pa guid… Sa ka pigado nga daw indi na sila ka bakal* shorts… *Ang tapakan nga* shorts, *tapakan pa gid nga daw puros na tapak*" (Pitiful. Their tattered shorts were sewn on a patch after the other. They were so destitute to not afford a new one).[46]

The poor income from low-yield fishing and the apparent absence of livelihood prospects in the barangay encouraged a number of families to look for better chances outside. When a primary school teacher in San Isidro Elementary School named Clara Monsale needed a helper to work for her in Miagao, Eusebio Pason, a fisher whom the teacher befriended, presented her daughter, Milagros Pason. Clara, a *tumandok* or local of Miagao, went and stayed in Negros only to land a teaching job. Her service record retrieved from the files of the Division of Iloilo showed that she taught in Calatrava from August 16, 1950, to June 4, 1961, when she filed for her maternity leave for her first child. In 1962, she returned for a month to teach in Toboso but got transferred to the Division of Iloilo in August of the same year. The arrival of Milagros Pason in 1961 and her marriage to a local the following year would open a way for her family and families in her neighborhood to come to Miagao primarily to fish. Subsequently, their in-migration created a community of *Cebuano* speaking fisher migrants in Barangay Baybay Norte.

Miagao, Iloilo in the 1950s to 1990s: A Setting of In-Migration

> M*ag oras mag kuchichang aloy, pirte nga hulikanay. Kun-an ka nga daw wala gani isa ka oras sa lawod pauli na ka. Binanyera na! Daw ma kapan na lang na baroto mo. Baroto lang ginahulat mo magkarga, indi ang isda* (When it's season of bullet tuna [in Miagao], bountiful fish were hauled. In less than an hour of fishing in the sea, I could go home. Fish crates were full. Boats seemed to tip over. It was like the fish waited for the boat to get hauled, not the other way around).
>
> Maximo Pason

In the statement above Maximo, who came to Miagao in 1964, describes inshore fishing in town in the '60s to '80s. His coming to Miagao was primarily

a response to his Manang Milagros's excessive laudation of the bounty of fish in the new town. Together with his father Eusebio, his brother Sergio, and a neighbor Alberto Lopez, they travelled to literally test its water. "*Binanyera nga isda*," they exclaimed. Their neighborhood knew of their success during their return visits in San Isidro. Male fishers who got hooked by their stories considered trying out fishing in Miagao. They stayed from weeks to months. The abundance of fish gave them a high hope of "*taratawhay nga pangabuht*" (a comfortable living). Soon after, their families followed. What started as weeks of fishing sojourn became long years of residence in town.

The Municipality of Miagao is located at 125°54'54" east longitude and 10°40'15" north latitude on the southwestern coast of the province in the First District of the province of Iloilo in Panay Island. It has a total land area of 15,680ha or 156.80sq.km. It is bounded by the town of Igbaras on the north, Guimbal on the east, Sibalom, Antique on the far west, San Joaquin on the southwest, and Panay Gulf on the south. The town is composed of 119 barangays; 8 of these barangays constitute the poblacion which can be divided into three main sections, Baybay (Baybay Norte, Baybay Sur, Bolho, and Sapa), Tacas (Mat-y, and Tacas), and Ubos (Ubos Ilawod, and Ubos Ilaya). Of the 119 barangays, 22 have a coastline stretching to a total of 16km. The coastal waters of the town form a part of the northern Panay Gulf. These coastal waters are clear of dangers as there are neither reefs nor shoals which are hazardous for large vessels.[47] Similar to Tañon Strait, Panay Gulf had been one of the major fishing grounds in the Philippines frequented by commercial vessels. In the reports of the Fisheries Philippine Commission, commercial fishing vessels such as otter trawl and bag net had been operating and frequenting the Panay Gulf as early as 1959. Purse seine fishery, on the other hand, began to appear at least on records in 1967.

Table 2: Productivity of Panay Gulf by Commercial Fishing Vessels Per Year, 1953-1969, 1972, and 1977

Year	Kilograms	Year	Kilograms
1953	1,226,268	1963	84,000
1954	2,547,115	1964	249,400
1955	2,642,256	1965	629,080
1956	2,393,823	1966	571,960
1957	783,606	1967	987,800
1958	499,578	1968	190,840
1959	884,760	1969	408,200
1960	707,870	1972	700,560
1961	1,146,420	1977	2,712,000
1962	648,060		

Source: *Fisheries Statistics of the Philippines*, 1954, 1956, 1958-1969, 1972, 1977

In comparison with Tañon Strait, the numbers hint that Panay Gulf was generally more productive. This is likely especially that the Panay Gulf lies northeast of a wider Sulu Sea. The water southwest of Panay was also a migration route of valuable fishes particularly skipjack and yellowfin tuna.[48] Local fishers in nearby coasts recalled that Miagao was plentiful of fish specifically *aloy* (bullet tuna), *panit* and *bantala-an* (yellowfin tuna), and *barilis* (skipjack). These fish were caught inshore about thirty meters from the shoreline using inexpensive traditional fishing gears namely hook and line, fish net, and rowboats. Fishing was not costly, so income was guaranteed. People remembered that during the *tag-araloy* or season of *aloy* in November to March–May, fish was superabundant that some were left to rot on the shore or dump beside the river. *Basnigan* (motorised fishing boats) from *aminhan* or northern Iloilo sojourned in town until March–April yearly. "*Daw pista ang dagat. Pirte daghana ang baroto*" (it seemed like a festival at sea. There were too many boats).[49]

Fisher migrants estimated that a *banyera* of fish weighed 30–40kg. This volume of catch continued until the '90s. In the later decades, however, fishers observed that their fish catch was decreasing in volume. They believed that *kubkuban* or purse seines owned by a local of Miagao have depleted the fish inshore. Vicenta Tawani, who came in 1977, described the fishers' plight figuratively saying, "*gahambal ang mananagat nga gagmay ano ra kay wara run ti sungi mong. Wara run ti sungi bay nga isda nga mahulik. Ubos gid sa lambat mong*" (the small fishermen are saying that even fish with cleft lip with has no escape from the massive purse seines). Although this expression may be an exaggeration, nonetheless, it is telling of how bad the situation of small-scale fishermen like her husband used to catch fish unhooked by large fishing boats. However, in recent decades, purse seines have hauled all fish barely leaving a few to them. The dwindling inshore fishing compelled them to adopt pump boats and fish outside the municipal water of Miagao as far as the waters facing Antique, Cuyo Island, and in recent years, Zamboanga peninsula. The wealth of fish which caused a neighborhood of fishers in San Isidro to migrate in Miagao was gradually shrinking. Despite this dismay, they chose to stay. The progress of town and the proximity of their new residence to what are essential to them were crucial in their decision not to leave Miagao.

History of Miagao (1716-1979) written and published by Elias Failagao in 1979 narrated the "rich culture and glorious past" of the town.[50] During the American colonial years, Miagao was already a high income municipality. Its net income of PHP20,333.86 in 1933 and PHP18,661.97 in 1935 classified the town as a second-class municipality.[51] Its income principally came from its major industries including farming, especially of *palay*, fishing, salt-making, and weaving. Other income was sourced from small businesses and industrial products produced in town. In 1937, Miagao had a total of 55 sari-sari stores, all owned by Filipinos. Its industrial products included "*patadiong* or *tapiz*, *sinamay*, mosquito nets, *piñatex, abatex, jusi, jusitex, barabara, sadoc, buri* mats, leather slippers, *tabungos, malindog, swali*, bolos, axes and *guinamos*".[52] Also, the town was a trade center in southern Panay where merchants from other towns converged to trade goods especially during its market day on Saturday. Before

the outbreak of war, Miagao was reclassified as a first-class municipality. With an annual income amounting to PHP50,000, Miagao was the third among other towns in the province with the highest tax collection, outranked only by Janiuay and Pototan.[53] During the war, however, economic activities were disrupted. Many of the town's commercial establishments closed. This reduced the town's annual income to PHP30,399.69 in 1946, downgrading its status to a fourth-class municipality. The recovery of Miagao from the war did not come immediately. From 1963 to 1978, the town's annual income was rising, suggesting the revival and proliferation of businesses in town. In 1971, Miagao recorded at least 563 commercial establishments, the second most numerous among the thirty other towns surveyed for electrification projects outside of Iloilo City. The town remained primarily agricultural but other important industries were fishing, copra making, cattle raising, and salt making.[54] By the late 1970s, "Miagao believed to be self-sufficient in rice".[55] Handloom weaving produced *patadyong*, mosquito nets, and *hablon* that earned the town its popularity.

Improvements in town were crucial in the decision of the migrants to stay. Because of the influx of people, the fishers believed there would be greater demand for their fish. Barangay Baybay Norte, where majority of them reside in Miagao, is walkable distance to the town's public market, commercial establishments, health services, and other essential institutions like schools. Transporting their catch to sell in the market and around poblacion did not require large costs. They did not incur transportation costs/fare to buying their essentials or for sending their children to school. Vicenta and her husband Jeluiz articulated this reasoning in an interview saying "*nag boom ang Miagao, 1980s plastado run ang UP in the Visayas sa Miagao. 80 pa babaw… amat-mat ikbo ang tawo. Sang una wala man manindahan kung hapon ukon, aga man lang, tapos tulad nga 80s pataas na aga hapon ang mga tawo*" (Miagao prospered in 1980s when UP Visayas rose in town. More people were coming in. Before, people would come to market only in the morning. When UP came, people would crowd the market both in the morning and afternoon). Vicenta added that she has not regretted her family's decision not to return to San Isidro because "*number one guid nga ang mga bata ko indi mga ignorante kay wara ka iskwela. Bisan high school grad lang sila, pero naka high school, makaintsindi. Kung ridto, hindi guid na ka high school. Manghilamon guid sa kampo*," (the foremost reason is our children were able to attend school and are not ignorant. They completed high school and they have discernment. If we came back to San Isidro, surely none of them attended high school. They could have been strained working in the hacienda).[56]

"*Hulas pa sa linugaw*" (easier than making porridge), Maximo analogously described his living in Baybay Norte. Although he was not a local of the place, he felt no alienation. On the contrary, *tumandok* helped him make a living in Miagao. Rufo Muzones, a *tumandok* and uncle-in-law of his Manang Milagros, offered him and three others (father Eusebio, brother Sergio, and neighbor Alberto) a boat and gears to use in fishing. He became their *amo* (patron) to whom they shared income from fishing. In times of distress, it was their *amo* who lent them advances. He felt fortunate to have an *amo* who was

kind. Another *tumandok*, a bachelor teacher Ramon Lamberto, offered them his untenanted *kamalig*. Enhanced with *palayas* (extended roofing), this *kamalig* became the temporary shelter that housed many sojourners and their families on their first visit to town. They were packed in a house of familiar faces, assisting each other until each family was able to put up their own house nearby. Subsequently, the migrant fishers grew in numbers, from one *kamalig* to a community of *Sebuano* speaking households at Zone 6, Baybay Norte. Their population is high enough to earn its appellation as "*lugar kang mga Sebuano*" (place of Sebuanos). Others reside in adjacent coastal barangays, namely Baybay Sur, Guibongan, Kirayan Sur, and Sapa. At the time of interview in the first quarter of 2018, the total number of households whose head of household and/or the spouse came from Calatrava in Miagao accounted to 78. They spread in five adjoining coastal barangays of Miagao: Baybay Norte (44), Baybay Sur (3), Guibongan (16), Kirayan Sur (4), and Sapa (11).

Although they speak *Sebuano* and could not understand *Kinaray-a*, the language difference did not cause major trouble to fishers. They spent their nights fishing and days resting. Interacting with *tumandok* was minimal. However, their wives who were principally tasked to sell their catch had to deal with *tumandok*. As newcomers in town who barely knew the place and understood the local language, it was a major concern. Sales and income depended on how well they speak the language of their prospective buyers. Vicenta apprehensively spoke how serious it was. In her words, "*Ginoo ko! Sa lugar nga dili ko kabalo mag K[in]aray-a, unsaon ko? May kalag ka? Kung may kalag ka, buligi man ko kay di pa bala ko kabalo mag K[in]aray-a. Sa uban nga mga binarangay, dalum anda Kinaray-a to*," (Oh God! In a place where I do not understand *Kinaray-a*, what should I do? Do you have a soul? If you have, help me learn the language. In far-flung barangays they spoke deep *Kinaray-a*). Eventually, she learned and acquired the language but like most of the primary migrants, they continue to speak *Sebuano* especially among themselves.

Effects of Fishers' In-Migration to Artisanal Fishing Knowledge in Miagao

Ang sila diri, ang taga, gamay lang gid… Nagsunod lang na samon panagat kay wala na sila naman-an diri panagat mong… Isa lang ka bilog taga nanda. Isa lang, bunit lang. Ang amon to, tag-duwa ka putos kag sang ka putos nga 200 ka taga. Pag abot namon diri, amo to nakabalo na sila nga amo panguha sang isda," (the local fishers used only a few hooks. They copied our way of fishing because their fishing was inadequate. Their fishing line only had one hook locally known as *bunit*. Ours, on the other hand, we used two boxes of hooks of 200 each. When we came in, they imitated our way of fishing and that was when they learned how to fish more productively), said Regino Simeon who sojourned to fish in Miagao in the '70 and permanently resided in early 1980s. The migration of fishers from San Isidro, Calatrava to Miagao was primarily motivated by fishing. Many of their sons, likewise, became like them and their daughters married a fisher. Although some tried other work, carpentry being the most common, it never replaced

fishing as their principal source of income. Thus, if fishers' in-migration has any significant effect on the locality, it would in their pursuit of this livelihood.

In fishing, they employed similar technology they had used in San Isidro. Hook and line, and rowboats. The migrant fishers described that the most common fishing gear that the local fishermen used in the year of their arrival was a traditional hook and line, similar to what they used in the waters of San Isidro. It has several variations but the commonly used are *bunit* with one hook, and *into-intu* with about 10-50 hooks. In Cebuano, *into-intu* is called *bundak-bundak*. However, the migrants' *diskarte* or ingenious style was they multiplied the hooks into hundreds. This enabled them to catch more fish, particularly bullet tuna to the envy of the locals. The use of hundreds of hooks in *into-intu* is believed by migrants to be introduced by them in Miagao. Gerry Amolo who migrated in 1979 and Regino Simeon in 1982 recalled that local fishermen sought help from them to make *bundak-bundak*. Regino said, "*nagsunod lang na sa'mon panagat…, bundak-bundak. Isa lang ka bilog taga nanda. Isa lang, bunit lang. Ang amon to, tag-duwa ka putos. Sang ka putos nga 200 ka taga. Pag-abot namon diri, amo to nakahibalo na sila nga amo panguha sang isda.*"[57] (The local fishers of Miagao simply followed our style of fishing…, *bundak-bundak*. They used only 1 hook to catch fish. Ours, on the other hand, we used 2 boxes for each line. One box is equivalent to 200 fishhooks).

Photo 1: *Bundak-Bundak* or *Into-Intu* made by Wilfredo Palabrica. In this photo, there are about 20–30 hooks. ©Author, February 16, 2018.

Gunzo Kawamura and Teodora Bagarinao noted that by the 1980s, *intu-intu* or *sibid* was already popular around in Panay. It "is operated vertically and hauled many times, in daytime. Fishermen use a certain white synthetic fiber which they tie to the hooks with red-colored thread. Underwater, the white fibers looked light-violet; together with the red binding at one end, the net effect is, according to the fishermen, that of a shrimp or similar organism, moving through the water and very attractive to fishes. This line is usually operated

from a small non-motorized boat. Sometimes, feathers are attached to the hooks together with the synthetic fibers."[58] In Calatrava, it was common among the artisanal fishermen to dive into the water or *panalum* to catch fish in the reefs. Despite exhausting, it was deemed most effective method especially that Tañon Strait is characterised by reefs. Waters of Panay Gulf, on the other hand, are clear of reefs, thus, dart fishing is not a common practice in the area. However, a few of the migrants have used *pana* in their fishing in the waters offshore of Miagao. None of the locals followed the migrants in their *panalum*.

Photo 2: *Pana* or fish dart used by Remlani Tawani, brother of Jeluiz Tawani. ©Author May 26, 2018

Another important fishing gear that migrant fishers introduced in town is called *pang-nocos* or *angkla* in Sebuano or *kawil* in Kinaray-a or squid jig in English. Tañon Strait is abundant of pelagic squid that made fishers in the area expert in squid hunting. The migrants introduced *angkla* to local fishermen in the town. It is made of stainless tin rod carefully formed like an inverted umbrella and each sharpened spike measures 1–1¼". Assembling the spikes was a tedious and dangerous process that none of the *Karay-a* acquired the skill. In the early decades, the father of Jeluiz Tawani was among the few dealers that made squid jigs in Miagao. Today, squid jigs could be bought in the market. In catching squid, migrant fishers use bait and light. The migrants claimed to have been the first to use *ata* or squid ink as bait in Miagao fisheries. It proved to be very effective in that the local fishers followed soon. Also, they used to attract their prey using *stringki*, an improvised kerosene lamp that could cast greater light than the local *kingki* which is its smaller version. Sometime in the 1970s and 1980s, they began using *petromax*. It could be bought in the market. However, it could only carry small amount of gas for light. The *diskarte* of the migrant fishers was to combine two to make a bigger container for the gas. To their amusement, locals soon adopted these methods but never made them on their own. Sometime in early 2000, the migrant fishers, particularly the Para-asi family from Cebu with matriarchal roots are in San Isidro, Calatrava, introduced the *igpat-igpat* or blinker. It was popularly used in Cebu which was brought in Miagao after one member of the Para-asi family had a vacation in the province. *Igpat-igpat* is manually put inside the unused syringe and attached close to the squid jig. The syringe protects the blinker from getting wet, otherwise, it would not lit. It has replaced *stringki* and *petromax* and proved to be much more efficient.

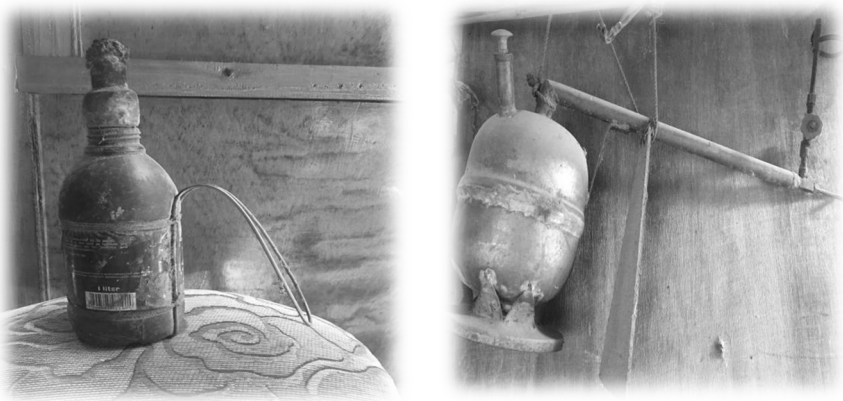

Photo 3: *Stringki* (left) and *petromax* (right) used for squid hunting. The *stringki* is owned by Remlani Tawani while the *petromax* by Lydia Dayondon. ©Author, April 15, 2018.

Other fishing gears commonly used by migrant fishers include *buga-buga*, *hiwihiw*, *labay*, *pakaway*, *palagnas*, *palaran*, and *pang-dorado*. All of these fall under the category of hook and line. First generation migrants learned the crafting of these gears even before they moved in Miagao; their children had learned from them. The migrants, unlike the locals, have not used big nets because it is costly. It is important to note that until early 1990s, majority of migrant fishers as well as local fishermen in Miagao used only *baroto* in their fishing. Concurring from the migrants, very few Miagaowanon owned *pamboat* (pump boat) in the 1960s and 1970s. They made two references, Rupo Muzones, and the family of Clara Monsale Montealto. By the late 1980s, still a few owned a *pamboat* but migrant fishers were beginning to own it such as Lodovico Abalos, Arturo Luague, and Eduardo Dayondon. Majority had not shifted to motorised fishing crafts until the late 1990s because of the cost of motor and fuel. In the late 1990s, majority of migrant fishers were already owning a *pamboat*. By the early 2000s, one could hardly see a *baroto* resting on the shores. There have been changes in the sizes and physical appearance of fishing boats used by the migrants.

The migrants adopted *pamboat* because fishes were no longer abound the municipal waters of Miagao and they blamed this to the operation of highly mechanised commercial fishing within or just outside the 15km municipal waters. Also, the increasing needs of their growing families were pressing them to venture to other grounds especially during the lean months, from April to September. They have to fish outside the coastal waters, otherwise, they would starve. Till early 1990s, they could still yield this amount of fish but with more time needed. It was only during the later years of that decade when fish catch from the coastal waters were becoming mere subsistence. *Kotsitsa kang aloy* is yearly but as years passed by, fish catch even during this season is becoming less and less. Active fishers in the Baybay Norte blamed it to overfishing that was worsened by the entry of commercial fishing vessels in early 2000. To cope with the slackening fish near the shore, the local fishermen shifted to pump

boats to allow them to fish beyond the coastal waters. Unlike in earlier decades, by the 1990s, it was not uncommon for fishermen in Miagao to fish in other grounds. They frequented the waters facing Antique. In recent years, others would go as far as the waters surrounding Cuyo and Cagayancillo of Palawan and Zamboanga.

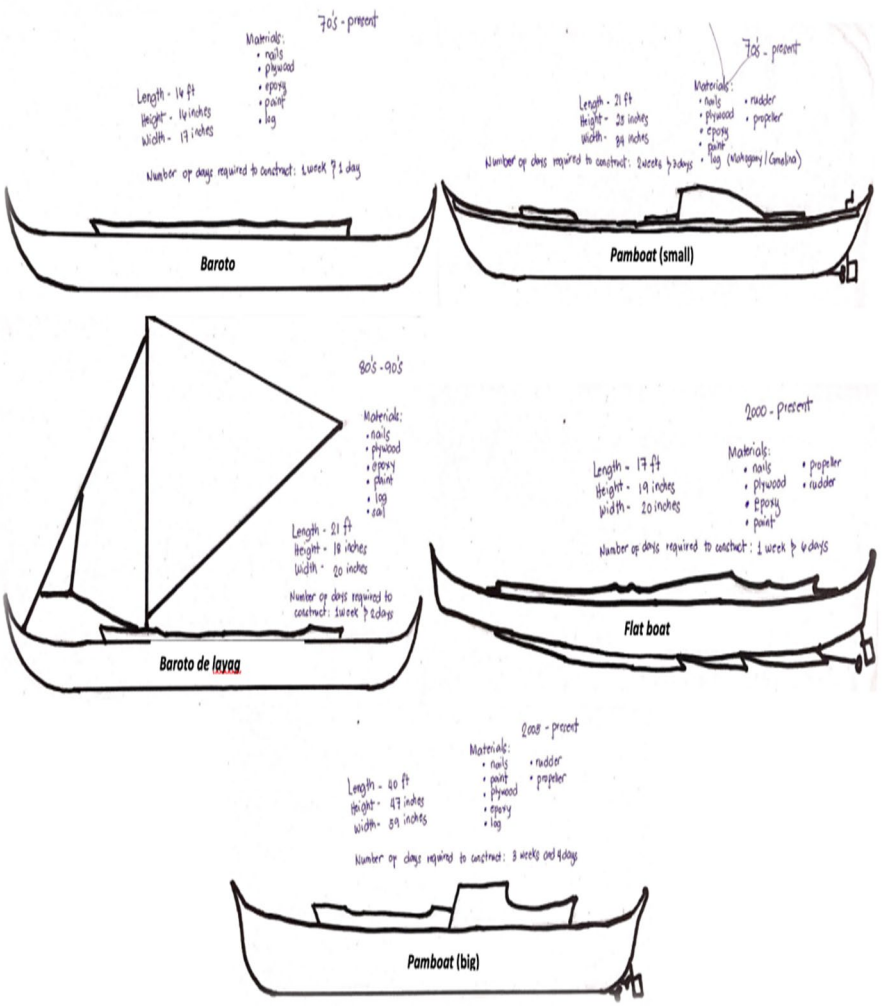

Figure 1: Illustration of different fishing boats used by the *mananagat* in Miagao through time. ©Monrey A. Tawani, April 21, 2018.

Most of the migrant fishers built their own *baroto* and/or *pamboat* using their own labour. But those who lack the skill contract labor of skilled boat-builder, but they provide the materials. Eduardo Dayondon and Remlani Tawani are among the few skilled boat builders in Baybay Norte who have made it a major source of income after fishing. Most of their clients are *tumandok* of the town, others are from neighboring towns like San Joaquin and Guimbal.

They learned the art of boat building by observing their elders in their youthful years.

Conclusion

The migration history of *mananagat* from Calatrava to Miagao from 1961 to 1995 presents a story of fisher's resilience to poverty that inherently characterised their way of living. The dwindling fish catch in northern Tañon Strait due to exploitative commercial and dynamite fishing, the sugar crisis in the '70s and poverty in hacienda work, the lack of livelihood alternatives due to town's rugged landscape, and the disruption of work caused by the presence of dissidents (bandit gangs and the NPAs) and encounter with the police, were among the major developments that had made life difficult for these fishers in Calatrava. As a survival strategy, the fishers adopted migration to Miagao following a chain migration, from the members of immediate family to families in the neighborhood. The success of their fishing sojourn, the economic and institutional developments, and the essential support from the locals and among themselves helped these fishers adjust and adapt in their new place in Miagao where they have built a community.

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Navigating Policy Gaps in Climate Induced Migration: Afghanistan Before and After the 2021 Government Collapse

By

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Climate induced migration has become one of the most urgent humanitarian and policy challenges of the twenty-first century. According to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC), more than 30 million people globally were displaced by climate-related disasters in 2022 alone.[1] While much of the academic discourse has centred on regions such as Sub-Saharan Africa, Southeast Asia, and Latin America, conflict-affected and geopolitically sensitive countries like Afghanistan have remained relatively underexamined. Afghanistan stands at a complex intersection of protracted conflict, weak governance, deep poverty, and escalating climate impacts. The country is among the most climate-vulnerable nations in the world, despite contributing less than 0.03 per cent to global greenhouse gas emissions. Afghanistan's geographical composition—arid and semi-arid terrains—renders it highly susceptible to climate related shocks such as droughts, floods, desertification, and glacial melt. These hazards have grown more frequent and intense due to global warming. For instance, the drought of 2018 displaced over 370,000 individuals, surpassing conflict induced displacement for that year[2] More recently, the 2022 floods led to over 500 deaths and the destruction of 23,000 homes.[3]

The consequences of these environmental events are exacerbated by structural vulnerabilities. Over 80 per cent of the population relies on agriculture for subsistence, yet water management systems, irrigation infrastructure, and disaster preparedness remain poorly developed. Women and children are particularly vulnerable to the consequences of displacement, facing gender-based violence, disruption of education, and restricted access to healthcare. Afghanistan's political turmoil further complicates its climate response. Before the Taliban's return to power in August 2021, policies such as the Comprehensive Migration Policy (CMP 2019)[4] and the Afghanistan

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National Peace and Development Framework (ANPDF II 2021–2025)[5]provided a conceptual roadmap for integrating climate concerns into governance. These frameworks aligned with international commitments like the Paris Agreement, yet implementation was limited by insecurity, underfunding, and bureaucratic inefficiency. Following the collapse of the internationally recognised government, the Taliban's de facto administration inherited a fractured policy landscape. International aid was curtailed, foreign reserves were frozen, and diplomatic isolation deepened. As a result, policy continuity stalled, and Afghanistan became increasingly excluded from global climate negotiations, including COP27 and COP28.[6]

This study aims to examine the evolution of Afghanistan's policy response to climate induced migration before and after the 2021 government collapse. Using an interdisciplinary framework that combines climate justice and policy analysis, the research investigates gaps in institutional design, international cooperation, and resource allocation. The objective is to assess how Afghanistan can better prepare for the climate mobility crisis in the absence of strong governance and amid global geopolitical shifts.

Theoretical Framework

This study employs two interrelated theoretical frameworks, climate justice and policy analysis, to explore the design, implementation, and ethical implications of climate induced migration policies in Afghanistan. The selection of these frameworks reflects both the normative urgency of protecting vulnerable populations and the practical need for evaluating policy mechanisms in fragile and conflict affected contexts. Their integration allows for a comprehensive understanding of how ethical commitments and governance challenges intersect in shaping climate mobility outcomes. Climate Justice offers a compelling ethical lens through which to assess climate induced displacement, especially in countries like Afghanistan that have contributed minimally to global greenhouse gas emissions but suffer disproportionately from the impacts of climate change. According to the UNFCCC, Afghanistan ranks among the top ten countries most affected by climate risks, while accounting for a negligible share of global emissions. This stark inequity underscores the central tenet of climate justice, i.e., the principle that those least responsible for climate change should not bear the heaviest burdens of its consequences.[7] In the context of Afghanistan, where over 80 per cent of the population relies on agriculture and natural resources for survival, rising temperatures, droughts, and flash floods have direct, devastating consequences. The 2018 drought and the 2022 floods highlight the direct relationship between climate events and forced migration, particularly among rural and marginalised communities. Climate justice also emphasises intersectionality, considering how vulnerability is shaped by gender, ethnicity, age, and socio-economic status. Afghan women and children are disproportionately affected by climate induced displacement due to limited mobility, lack of access to education, and exposure to gender-based violence in displacement camps.[8] Thus, a justice based framework helps

highlight the need for gender sensitive policies and inclusive governance mechanisms. In the broader literature, climate justice has been widely applied to case studies in the Global South, particularly in Bangladesh, the Philippines, and Sub-Saharan Africa[9]. However, few studies have applied this framework to Afghanistan, despite the country's extreme vulnerability. This paper addresses that gap by contextualising Afghanistan's climate migration crisis within a justice-based ethical framework, emphasising both the obligations of the international community and the responsibilities of domestic institutions. Policy Analysis serves as a complementary analytical framework for systematically evaluating how institutional mechanisms respond—or fail to respond—to climate induced migration. In contrast to climate justice, which provides an ethical critique of inequity and vulnerability, policy analysis offers a pragmatic lens through which to assess policy coherence, stakeholder participation, and administrative capacity. Given the complexity of Afghanistan's governance landscape, particularly around the 2021 regime change, this framework is well-suited for examining not only existing policies but also the institutional conditions that enable or obstruct policy implementation. Its relevance in fragile and post-conflict states has been widely demonstrated.

Masudi, Islam, and Ahrens illustrate how policy analysis can identify governance gaps, institutional fragility, and implementation failures in disaster risk management and climate adaptation planning by revealing the disconnect between formal policy commitments and actual implementation capacity in fragile state contexts.[10] In Afghanistan's case, the CMP 2019 recognised environmental stressors such as droughts and floods as major drivers of internal displacement and proposed mechanisms for early warning and local level adaptation.[11] However, these measures remained largely aspirational due to weak institutional capacity, fragmented inter-ministerial coordination, and the lack of financial and technical resources.[12] Similarly, ANPDF II 2021–2025 aimed to mainstream climate resilience into national development priorities.[13] Yet its operationalisation was severely constrained by political instability and insufficient institutional bandwidth even before the regime transition.[14] Following the Taliban's return to power in 2021, formal climate governance deteriorated further. While no national climate migration strategy has since been articulated, the application of policy analysis remains methodologically important. Absence of formal policy is itself an analytical object highlighting institutional collapse, geopolitical isolation, and the inaccessibility of global adaptation finance. This vacuum also invites scrutiny of how informal governance, subnational initiatives, and non-state actors attempt to fill the policy void. Similar approaches have been applied in cases such as Yemen and Somalia, where international support for community-led adaptation bypassed state institutions.[15] In this study, policy analysis is used not only to evaluate the ambition and limitations of pre-2021 frameworks but also to investigate the post-2021 fragmentation of institutional authority and the emergent role of decentralised adaptation responses. It is especially useful in identifying the gap between policy rhetoric and implementation, the breakdown of multilevel

governance, and the declining capacity for international cooperation—issues that are now central to Afghanistan's climate resilience challenge.

While both frameworks have been widely applied in other regions, their combined use in the Afghan context is limited. Some early attempts to apply climate justice to Afghanistan have appeared in policy briefs and advocacy reports by NGOs like ActionAid[16] and the IOM[17] emphasising the need for equitable adaptation funding and inclusive governance. However, comprehensive academic analyses using both climate justice and policy analysis remain scarce. This study seeks to fill that void by offering a dual-framework approach that integrates ethical imperatives with institutional diagnostics. The paper not only evaluates whether Afghanistan's policies are ethically justified and technically sound but also addresses the structural constraints that hinder policy success. In doing so, it contributes to a growing but still insufficient body of literature on climate induced migration in conflict affected states.

Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative methodology grounded in interpretive policy analysis and ethical inquiry. The qualitative approach is well-suited for exploring complex social and institutional phenomena like climate induced migration in conflict affected settings, where data may be fragmented, politicised, or inaccessible. In contrast to quantitative methodologies that prioritise statistical generalisation, this study emphasises contextual understanding and policy interpretation. The research employs a comparative case study design to analyse the evolution of Afghanistan's climate migration policy before and after the August 2021 collapse of the democratic government. This design allows for an in-depth examination of how governance structures, international engagement, and institutional capacities shifted across two contrasting political regimes. By treating the pre- and post-2021 governance periods as distinct cases, the research is able to isolate patterns of continuity and disruption in policy planning, implementation, and cooperation and draws on precedent studies in climate governance in fragile states, including research by Mikulewicz in Sub-Saharan Africa and Helen Lackner et al., and L. Fooks et al., in Yemen and other conflict-affected states.[18] Key policy documents reviewed include Afghanistan's CMP 2019, ANPDF II 2021–2025, and the country's Nationally Determined Contributions (NDC) submitted under the Paris Agreement. Complementing these were institutional reports and briefs from organisations such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the International Organization for Migration (IOM), Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), IDMC, and ActionAid, which provided insight into humanitarian trends and displacement metrics.

Environmental Challenges and Mobility Patterns

Afghanistan faces a convergence of acute environmental hazards and chronic sociopolitical instability, making it one of the country most susceptible to

climate-induced migration. Its geography comprises arid and semi-arid lands that are naturally prone to water scarcity, compounded by decades of underinvestment in infrastructure and mismanagement of natural resources. Climate change has intensified these vulnerabilities, leading to more frequent and severe extreme weather events, particularly droughts, floods, and glacial melt. Over the past two decades, Afghanistan has witnessed a substantial increase in the frequency and severity of climate related disasters. The 2018 drought, which impacted more than two-thirds of the country surpassed those displaced by conflict in the same year. This drought led to the collapse of agricultural production in provinces of Herat and Badghis, triggering widespread food insecurity and compelling rural communities to migrate en masse to urban centres and seek refuge in displacement camps. The 2022, catastrophic flash floods exacerbated by unusually heavy seasonal rains and the resultant death, displacement and loss of property in twenty-five provinces.[19] These events mark a lack of early warning systems, limited disaster resilient infrastructure, and weak evacuation protocols. More recently, in early May 2024, torrential rainfall triggered deadly flash floods in northern Afghanistan, particularly affecting Baghlan province. At least 300 people were killed, hundreds were injured, and over 1,000 homes were either completely destroyed or severely damaged.[20] The flooding also affected surrounding provinces such as Takhar and Badakhshan, displacing thousands and overwhelming local emergency response capacity. Rescue operations were delayed by blocked roads and damaged communications infrastructure, underlining persistent gaps in Afghanistan's disaster preparedness and climate resilience frameworks.[21] In parallel, long-term climate stressors such as glacial melt in the Hindu Kush Himalayan region are accelerating due to rising global temperatures. This trend threatens to drastically reduce water availability for both agricultural and domestic consumption, increasing the risk of sustained ecological degradation across Afghanistan.[22] Together, these climate related hazards reveal a systemic vulnerability that is not only environmental but also deeply institutional and developmental in nature.

Herat: A Case Study in Urban Vulnerability: According to Holloway[23] the convergence of climate and conflict driven displacement is starkly visible in Afghanistan's cities, with Herat near the Iranian border serving as a critical case. Here, prolonged drought, conflict induced migration, and institutional fragility intersect, illustrating the realities of climate mobility and the limits of current policy responses. Herat has absorbed large numbers of IDPs, primarily from drought and conflict affected provinces such as Badghis, where reduced rainfall, persistent drought, and insecurity have driven rural livelihood collapse through crop failures and livestock mortality. The coping strategies in Herat differ between host and displaced communities. Host households, with relatively greater resources, invest in wells, storage systems, and durable housing. Displaced populations, often living in informal settlements, rely on short-term measures such as pooling money for water or collecting rainwater. Declining water levels in the Salma Dam have also reduced electricity, forcing both groups

to adopt alternatives like solar panels, generators, or firewood—access that again reflects underlying inequality. As agricultural livelihoods become untenable many, especially displaced people, turn to precarious informal work in construction, trading, scrap collection, or domestic labour. Income insecurity fuels negative coping strategies, including food rationing, child school withdrawal, and early or forced marriage of girls, underscoring the gendered and intergenerational impacts of overlapping stressors. Resilience in Herat remains constrained by weak governance. Informal settlements lack secure tenure, sanitation, and services, while displaced households remain excluded from urban planning and face fragmented, short-term aid. Without durable solutions, adaptation remains limited and social tensions grow. Herat, they conclude, highlights the urgent need for integrated approaches linking climate resilience, migration governance, and conflict sensitivity.

Internal Displacement and Urban Strain: Climate induced disasters have led to growing patterns of internal displacement. According to the IOM, nearly 9 million people in Afghanistan live in areas classified as high-risk for environmental hazards.[24] Displaced populations typically move from rural provinces to cities like Kabul, Herat, and Mazar-i-Sharif, which already suffer from overcrowded informal settlements, insufficient infrastructure, and overstretched social services. The influx of climate migrants' places additional pressure on urban housing, water, sanitation, and employment, exacerbating poverty and leading to competition over scarce resources. Women and girls in these displacement settings face heightened risks of gender-based violence, early marriage, and school dropouts, revealing the gendered dimensions of climate mobility.[25]

Cross Border Migration: In addition to internal mobility, environmental stressors have increasingly contributed to cross border migration. During the 2018 drought, tens of thousands of Afghans fled across the western border into Iran, seeking food and livelihoods. In the wake of the 2021 political transition and subsequent drought, Iran and Pakistan again experienced a surge in undocumented Afghan arrivals. Although exact numbers are difficult to determine, the Mixed Migration Centre[26] estimates that hundreds of thousands have crossed into neighbouring countries due, at least in part, to climate driven hardship. These migration flows occur in a legal grey zone. Afghanistan lacks bilateral agreements with its neighbours that recognise climate related displacement, and international protection frameworks like the 1951 Refugee Convention do not accommodate climate migrants. This legal vacuum leaves displaced individuals vulnerable to detention, deportation, and exploitation.

Intersecting Drivers of Displacement: Climate induced migration in Afghanistan does not occur in isolation but is deeply intertwined with other structural drivers. Decades of conflict have weakened state institutions, destroyed infrastructure, and eroded community resilience. The collapse of irrigation systems, deforestation, and overgrazing have further degraded

environmental buffers against climate shocks. Simultaneously, widespread poverty and unemployment limit adaptive capacity. The Taliban's return to power in 2021 introduced additional barriers. international sanctions, frozen assets, and the exodus of skilled professionals have left the country without the technical capacity or political legitimacy to implement large-scale climate adaptation programs.[27] Thus, displacement in Afghanistan is best understood as a multi-causal phenomenon, where environmental triggers are amplified by governance failures and socio-economic precarity.

Regional Geopolitical Constraints on Climate Adaptation

Afghanistan's capacity to effectively address climate change is significantly constrained by the policies and actions of its neighboring countries, particularly Iran and Pakistan. These external dynamics manifest in transboundary water governance, cross-border migration policy, and regional political instability. Afghanistan shares critical river basins with both Iran and Pakistan, making regional cooperation essential for sustainable water management. However, competing national interests and inadequate institutional mechanisms have led to recurring disputes. In the west, tensions with Iran over the Helmand River have intensified, particularly relating to Afghanistan's construction and operation of upstream infrastructure, including the Kamal Khan and Kajaki dams. These developments have led to Iranian accusations that Afghanistan is violating the 1973 Helmand River Water Treaty by reducing water flows into Iran's Sistan Basin and the ecologically sensitive Hamoun wetlands.[28] Similarly, in the east, Pakistan expresses concern over Afghanistan's planned development of the Kabul River basin. Despite the absence of a formal water sharing agreement, Pakistani policymakers have expressed apprehensions regarding potential reductions in downstream flows due to Afghan dam projects and shifting hydrological patterns.[29]

The migration policies of neighbouring states often hinder Afghanistan's ability to manage climate induced displacement. Both Iran and Pakistan host significant Afghan refugee populations but have periodically undertaken mass deportations of undocumented migrants, particularly during times of political tension or economic strain.[30] These expulsions, occurring amid environmental degradation and limited absorption capacity within Afghanistan, undermine climate resilience and humanitarian stability. Moreover, the lack of coordinated regional frameworks for climate induced migration contributes to the precariousness of displaced populations. Afghanistan's political isolation has drastically limited its participation in global climate negotiations and access to international climate finance. As a result, Afghanistan remains underrepresented in multilateral forums and has limited capacity to influence regional environmental diplomacy. [31] This marginalisation is exacerbated by the absence of regional platforms for environmental cooperation that effectively include Afghanistan. The reluctance of Iran and Pakistan to engage in substantive trilateral cooperation restricts the

development of integrated adaptation strategies, preventing joint infrastructure planning and the creation of early warning systems.[32]

Policy Landscape Before and After 2021

Afghanistan's policy engagement with climate induced migration has evolved in fragmented and inconsistent ways, reflecting broader patterns of governance instability and shifting international involvement. Policy development before and after the 2021 collapse of the internationally recognised Afghan government saw shifts in focus on institutional design, stakeholder participation, and the influence of international actors. Pre-2021 period marks a time of emerging frameworks with limited implementation. Before the Taliban's return to power, Afghanistan had begun developing frameworks to address climate change and its socio-economic consequences. The most notable was CMP adopted by Government of Afghanistan in 2019. This policy marked the first explicit acknowledgment of climate change as a driver of internal and cross border migration in national legislation. It recommended conducting national assessments, integrating environmental variables into migration planning, and enhancing the role of the National Environmental Protection Agency (NEPA) in coordinating climate related mobility policy.[33] ANPDF II 2021–2025 also recognised environmental sustainability as a pillar of long-term peace and economic development. It outlined climate resilience as a national objective and proposed integrating climate action into rural development and urban infrastructure planning. However, as with many policy documents in fragile states, the gap between strategic vision and implementation was substantial. Weak institutional capacity, inconsistent donor engagement, security challenges, and bureaucratic inefficiencies limited the impact of these policy frameworks. The human consequences of this implementation gap were starkly visible in cities like Herat, where the promised urban integration and support mechanisms for climate migrants outlined in these frameworks failed to materialise, leaving local authorities and communities overwhelmed.[34] Afghanistan also submitted its NDCs under the Paris Agreement, identifying drought, water scarcity, and land degradation as key climate risks. Yet, the government struggled to operationalise adaptation plans, in part due to the absence of reliable climate data, technical expertise, and local implementation structures. Despite these limitations, the pre-2021 period featured significant international cooperation. Agencies like UNDP, IOM, and UNHCR provided technical support, facilitated capacity building workshops, and co-authored action plans with Afghan ministries. Donor backed programs such as the Green Climate Fund and the Least Developed Countries Fund also began initial planning for adaptation financing.

Post-2021 was a period of governance disruption and international disengagement. Taliban's takeover in August 2021 marked a turning point. Most international donors froze development aid, and Afghanistan was largely cut off from climate financing mechanisms such as the Green Climate Fund due to non-recognition of the new regime. Institutional fragmentation

followed, with many civil servants fleeing the country and ministries experiencing significant turnover or dissolution. NEPA which had been central to climate governance, was effectively sidelined. Implementation of the CMP and ANPDF II stalled. Without recognised diplomatic channels, Afghanistan lost its voice in international climate negotiations, missing COP27 and COP28, although a symbolic re-engagement was noted at COP29 in 2024.[35] Humanitarian organisations pivoted to emergency relief under the UN Transitional Engagement Framework (TEF), which offered interim support for essential services, including food security and health. Climate related efforts continued but were subordinated to humanitarian priorities. UNHCR and IOM incorporated climate risks into displacement tracking and response strategies, but without national policy coordination, these efforts lacked long term direction.[36] Despite these constraints, some subnational and community based efforts persisted. Informal networks, NGOs, and local councils have led adaptation efforts in certain provinces, often supported by diaspora funding and regional NGOs. However, these initiatives lack the scale or support to influence national policy meaningfully. For example, in Herat, community adaptation is fractured along economic lines, with wealthier host households investing in deep wells while displaced populations in informal settlements rely on precarious, short-term water-sharing arrangements—a clear illustration of resilience occurring in a policy vacuum.[37]

The transition from the pre-2021 to post-2021 policy landscape illustrates a shift from nascent policy development with international backing to a state of institutional paralysis and fragmented emergency response. Although Afghanistan once aspired to align its climate migration policies with global standards, the post-2021 context is marked by geopolitical isolation, diminished capacity, and uncertainty over future climate governance. This evolving landscape, evidenced by the rise of autonomous local adaptation in places like Herat and constrained by regional isolation, underscores the need for rethinking engagement strategies and designing adaptive, non-state-centric models for climate resilience.

Key Findings

Despite progress in formulating policy prior to 2021, Afghanistan encountered persistent obstacles in operationalising its climate and migration strategies. The CMP explicitly recognised that "environmental factors, including droughts and floods, are now key drivers of internal displacement," and called for the development of "early warning systems and community-based adaptation strategies to mitigate migration pressures".[38] Similarly ANPDF II 2021–2025 stressed that "building climate resilience is a cornerstone of long-term peace and development" and outlined a commitment to "mainstreaming climate considerations across all rural development, infrastructure, and livelihood initiatives".[39] However, these strategic visions were not matched by implementation capacity. According to a midterm review by NEPA by mid-2020 only 18 per cent of planned environmental initiatives had been executed,

largely due to "underfunding, weak inter-ministerial coordination, and a lack of subnational capacity to deliver climate adaptation programs".[40] Following the Taliban's return to power in August 2021, administrative continuity collapsed. As international development aid was suspended and access to multilateral climate finance was severed, previously active frameworks—including those aligned with the Paris Agreement—were left inactive. Afghanistan's exclusion from COP27 and COP28, coupled with the deterioration of formal environmental governance institutions, has created a policy vacuum in which climate displacement is poorly monitored and largely unaddressed by state mechanisms.[41] The case of Herat exemplifies this failure: the lack of executed urban planning initiatives led to the proliferation of informal settlements lacking basic sanitation and secure tenure for those displaced by climate disasters, directly linking policy inaction to increased human vulnerability.[42] Climate disasters are no longer peripheral triggers, but they have become central drivers of migration and catalyst for displacement. The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre confirms that Afghanistan experienced over 700,000 new disaster related displacements between 2018 and 2022.[43] These figures place climate change on par with, or in some cases ahead of, armed conflict as a cause of forced mobility. Additionally, nearly 9 million Afghans currently reside in areas designated as high risk for environmental hazards, indicating a chronic exposure to recurrent climate events.[44] This renders entire communities vulnerable to repetitive cycles of loss, displacement, and impoverishment.

Following the Taliban's return to power, Afghanistan experienced a near complete disruption in environmental governance. NEPA, once a central coordinating body for climate adaptation, lost most of its leadership and staff. Development aid, which constituted over 75 per cent of public spending in the pre-Taliban era was suspended by major donors.[45] Consequently, programs addressing environmental risk, agricultural resilience, and urban migration planning were frozen or dismantled. The lack of a recognised state authority has also meant that Afghanistan has been excluded from essential global climate discussions. The country did not participate in COP27 or COP28, and though it sent a delegation to COP29 in 2024, it had no decision-making power.[46] In the absence of a national strategy, international organisations have taken the lead in addressing climate induced displacement. The UNTEF became the main vehicle for delivering essential services, including water access, food distribution, and temporary shelter. However, these efforts remain largely short-term and reactive. While agencies like UNHCR and IOM integrate environmental risk in their programming, their work lacks alignment with any broader national framework, thereby limiting systemic resilience. For example, in Herat, the humanitarian response is fragmented. IOM projects operate alongside community self-help initiatives, where adaptive capacity is determined by personal wealth rather than coordinated policy—leading to unequal outcomes, such as host communities drilling private wells while displaced populations resort to unsafe water-sharing.[47] Such fragmentation dilutes impact and restricts opportunities for scalability.

The burden of climate displacement is not evenly distributed. Women, children, ethnic minorities, and people with disabilities experience disproportionate levels of vulnerability. In displacement camps near Jalalabad and Kandahar, studies have shown that adolescent girls face increased risk of early marriage and sexual violence, especially following climate induced relocation.[48] Despite these realities, there has been little effort to design gender sensitive or socially inclusive climate adaptation plans. Most interventions fail to disaggregate data by gender or vulnerability status, making it difficult to formulate targeted support mechanisms. The absence of such protections exacerbates existing inequalities and reveals a deeper ethical gap in climate adaptation policy particularly in fragile contexts where structural discrimination intersects with environmental risk. While these internal dynamics highlight issues of social justice and representation, Afghanistan's situation is further complicated by its external geopolitical status. Afghanistan's isolation on the global stage has had a direct and detrimental impact on its ability to respond effectively to the climate crisis. Without diplomatic recognition, the current administration is excluded from accessing essential multilateral funding mechanisms, such as the Green Climate Fund and the Adaptation Fund. Prior to the 2021 regime change, Afghanistan had begun developing proposals for over $120 million in climate adaptation finance—plans that have now stalled indefinitely due to the country's contested political status and lack of formal international engagement.[49] Moreover, Afghanistan's absence from major policy forums limits its ability to advocate for the specific needs of its population. Global climate frameworks currently lack mechanisms to include unrecognised or contested states in decision making, leaving a governance blind spot for some of the world's most vulnerable communities. This isolation is actively compounded by regional geopolitical tensions, particularly disputes with Iran and Pakistan over transboundary water resources, which hinder essential cooperation on shared climate risks and resource management.[50]

Amidst the policy paralysis, some promising community-led initiatives have emerged. In Bamiyan and Badakhshan provinces, local NGOs and informal councils have implemented low-cost water harvesting systems and reforestation efforts, supported by the Afghan diaspora and non-Western partners like the Aga Khan Development Network. These efforts highlight the potential for decentralised, community based adaptation strategies, particularly in areas where trust in state institutions is low. This is also evident in urban settings. In Herat, local adaptation is a necessity and manifests in community-led solutions. However, these efforts often exacerbate existing inequalities, as they are dependent on private wealth and lack technical or financial support, leaving the most vulnerable behind.[51] However, these initiatives remain underfunded and lack technical support. They are also vulnerable to co-optation by local power brokers and cannot substitute for the scale and coordination provided by national level policies. Nonetheless, they represent valuable entry points for future hybrid models of governance that blend grassroots innovation with international support.

Discussion

Despite strong rhetorical commitments, climate policy frameworks such as the CMP and ANPDFII suffered from chronic under implementation. This reflects a broader pattern seen in fragile states, where policy formulation is not matched by execution capacity. While previous policy initiatives, such as the CMP and ANPDFII, demonstrated some foresight in integrating climate and displacement concerns, the collapse of institutional capacity and political legitimacy post-2021 has left these strategies suspended in limbo. Rather than restating institutional weaknesses, this section examines how this governance gaps illuminate broader issues of justice, international responsibility, and the limitations of conventional policy frameworks in crisis environments.

From a climate justice perspective, the Afghan case exemplifies profound global inequity. A country contributing less than 0.03 per cent of global greenhouse gas emissions is among the most severely impacted by climate induced disasters. This disparity illustrates what the framework defines as distributive injustice, where those least responsible for climate change suffer its most devastating effects. Moreover, the exclusion of Afghanistan from climate finance and international policy platforms, due to its unrecognised government, further compounds this inequity. The principle of "common but differentiated responsibilities," a core pillar of international climate ethics, is undermined when structurally vulnerable populations are denied access to adaptation support. This exclusion highlights not just a policy failure but a structural flaw in the architecture of global climate governance, where recognition of state legitimacy overrides the ethical imperative to protect those most at risk. This flaw is exacerbated by regional power dynamics. Afghanistan's vulnerability is not only due to global inaction but also active regional constraints, such as water disputes with Iran and Pakistan that limit its adaptive capacity and turn shared resources into sources of tension rather than cooperation.[52] This places a doubly disproportionate burden on Afghan civilians.

Applying policy analysis in this context requires rethinking its scope. Traditional state based assessments fall short when the central government is dysfunctional or unrecognised. As demonstrated in cases like Yemen and Somalia, a broader lens is necessary—one that extends beyond state centric paradigms to include community level adaptation, informal institutions, and non-state actors. The resilience efforts emerging across Afghanistan's provinces, though localised and underfunded, highlight the importance of decentralised responses and the urgent need to legitimise these actors within global adaptation frameworks. The case of Herat provides a clear microcosm of this phenomenon where policy collapse has led to a fragmented landscape of autonomous adaptation, and outcomes are determined by wealth rather than equity, leaving displaced populations in informal settlements to rely on precarious, short-term solutions.[53] This is not a model of resilience to be celebrated but a stark example of the inequities that arise when community action is forced to replace absent state policy. These community-driven

responses also underscore the continued relevance of the policy analysis framework, particularly in contexts where formal governance structures are inactive or lack international legitimacy. Rather than assessing only the presence or quality of formal policies, Policy Analysis offers a broader diagnostic approach—one that exposes institutional voids, fragmented operational systems, and the improvised emergence of alternative actors. In the Afghan context, policy failure stems not merely from poor implementation but from the collapse of the institutional ecosystem required to support climate adaptation. This framework allows us to analyse how humanitarian organisations, NGOs, and informal governance networks have stepped in to fill this void—often without sustained coordination, adequate funding, or long-term strategic alignment. The Afghan case, therefore, illustrates the need for governance models capable of functioning under conditions of protracted fragmentation, rather than assuming post-conflict recovery as a prerequisite for policy engagement.

A particularly underexplored dimension of Afghanistan's climate displacement crisis is its gendered impact. The persistent failure to integrate gender sensitive strategies into most post-2021 programming reveals not only operational shortcomings but also a deeper disconnect from the normative principles of inclusive climate governance. Despite growing international recognition of women's unique vulnerabilities and adaptive capacities, Afghan women and girls continue to face disproportionate risks, including early marriage, gender based violence, and educational exclusion, particularly within displacement settings. As observed in Herat, these risks are acutely amplified in climate induced displacement settings, where negative coping strategies like early marriage of girls are directly employed by families facing total livelihood collapse.[54] Addressing this gap requires the deliberate inclusion of women led adaptation initiatives, participatory decision making structures, and the routine use of gender disaggregated data to guide both planning and implementation. As demonstrated in other fragile settings, gender responsive adaptation not only advances equity but also significantly improves the effectiveness and sustainability of resilience outcomes.[55]

Ultimately, Afghanistan presents a compelling case for rethinking international engagement with fragile and unrecognised states. The current model—anchored in formal diplomatic recognition and centralised planning—fails to reflect the operational realities of political fragmentation and localised adaptation. A more responsive and just approach must be rooted in flexibility, inclusivity, and ethical commitment, enabling multilateral institutions to partner directly with community based organisations and non-state actors. Without such structural shifts, the world's most climate vulnerable populations will remain excluded from the systems and resources ostensibly designed to protect them.

Recommendations

In light of the findings and broader discussion, this study proposes several actionable recommendations to address the intersecting challenges of climate induced displacement and policy paralysis in Afghanistan. These suggestions prioritise inclusivity, equity, and practical pathways to enhance resilience in the absence of strong state institutions. First, Afghanistan must be reintegrated into international climate dialogues and platforms through adaptive diplomatic mechanisms. Research suggests that targeted engagement with non-recognised entities through multilateral frameworks is both feasible and effective, as evidenced by limited cooperation with de facto governments in Syria and Myanmar on health and humanitarian issues.[56]Allowing Afghan stakeholders, particularly civil society organisations and subnational authorities, to access climate funds and contribute to COP negotiations can facilitate accountability without endorsing the Taliban regime.[57] Second, bilateral and multilateral donors should establish flexible funding mechanisms that enable direct-to-community adaptation finance. A growing body of literature supports this model, emphasising the value of locally led adaptation (LLA) in building community resilience.[58] In Kenya and Bangladesh, donor supported LLA models have yielded higher retention of project outcomes and enhanced participation. Applying similar models to Afghanistan by routing funds through credible NGOs, international consortia, or pooled funds managed by trusted multilateral agencies would empower communities while circumventing central governance issues. Such a model is urgently needed to support the informal, community led adaptation already occurring in places like Herat, ensuring efforts are equitable and technically sound rather than dependent on personal wealth. Third, investment in decentralised infrastructure and community based adaptation should be scaled up. Programs such as rainwater harvesting, agroecological farming, and flood resistant housing have demonstrated success in fragile contexts. The Aga Khan Development Network, active in Afghanistan's central highlands, has piloted watershed restoration and solar irrigation projects that reduced seasonal migration and improved agricultural yields.[59] These programs should be replicated in other vulnerable provinces using locally available materials, community labour, and culturally relevant design. Fourth, international actors must embed gender sensitive approaches in all climate and migration related programming. Research shows that climate displacement disproportionately affects women, yet women remain underrepresented in climate policy at all levels.[60] Integrating gender disaggregated data and supporting female leadership in community adaptation planning—such as women-led water management groups in Nepal and northern Kenya—have proven both efficient and transformative.[61] In Afghanistan, such initiatives should be coupled with protection mechanisms to prevent gender based violence in displacement settings. Fifth, regional cooperation must be fostered to address shared ecological challenges, particularly transboundary water management. The disputes over the Helmand and Kabul River basins demonstrate that the current ad hoc approach is a

source of tension. A formal, technical dialogue facilitated by a neutral third party (e.g., UNEP, IOM) is needed to move from conflict over shared resources to cooperation, focusing on data sharing, joint early warning systems for floods and droughts, and coordinated water resource management. Finally, data infrastructure and policy research on climate-induced mobility must be strengthened. Afghanistan's data environment remains sparse and outdated. Scholars have emphasised the need for longitudinal, disaggregated data on migration and climate exposure to inform effective interventions.[62] Donors should invest in long-term partnerships between Afghan universities, international think tanks, and local NGOs to produce actionable, context-sensitive Knowledge using participatory and interdisciplinary methods.

Conclusion

Afghanistan's experience with climate induced displacement exemplifies the multidimensional crisis arising from the intersection of environmental fragility, political instability, and systemic governance failure. As this research has demonstrated, climate hazards such as droughts, floods, and glacial melt have escalated to become primary drivers of internal and cross border migration often surpassing the impacts of armed conflict. With millions residing in high risk zones and dependent on natural resources for survival, the Afghan population faces compounding vulnerabilities exacerbated by decades of war and institutional erosion. This study's dual application of climate justice and policy analysis has underscored both the ethical urgency and the structural barriers facing climate migration governance in fragile states like Afghanistan. While climate justice highlights the disproportionate burden borne by a country that contributes minimally to global emissions, policy analysis reveals the internal dysfunctions that prevent effective adaptation and protection measures. Together, these frameworks expose how Afghanistan's governance collapse—coupled with its exclusion from global climate finance and diplomacy—creates a policy vacuum that endangers already at-risk communities. Before 2021, national frameworks such as the CMP 2019 and the ANPDF II 2021–2025 signalled a growing awareness of the interlinkages between climate change and displacement. Yet, these initiatives remained undercut by weak institutional capacity, inconsistent donor engagement, and limited local implementation. Following the 2021 regime change and the Taliban's return to power, Afghanistan's formal governance structures effectively collapsed. This transition severed international aid, restricted access to global climate finance, and excluded the country from major forums like COP27 and COP28, leaving Afghan communities without a coordinated national adaptation strategy.

Despite this institutional vacuum, community led and subnational adaptation initiatives have emerged as beacons of resilience. These efforts, often supported by local councils, NGOs, and diaspora networks, highlight the capacity for grassroots innovation in the absence of state-led responses. As the case of Herat illustrates, this innovation is a necessity, not a choice. However,

it also reveals a stark landscape of inequality where adaptive capacity is determined by personal wealth, underscoring that localised strategies, while vital, cannot achieve equitable resilience without external support and coordination. Nevertheless, such localised strategies cannot fully substitute for structured national frameworks or coordinated international engagement. The exclusion of Afghanistan from multilateral climate platforms undermines the fundamental principles of climate justice and exposes the inadequacy of existing global governance structures in addressing the needs of non-recognised or fragile states. Synthesising these insights, it becomes evident that Afghanistan's climate mobility crisis is not merely an environmental issue but a deeply institutional and political challenge. The collapse of centralised governance post-2021 has critically impaired the nation's ability to address climate risks, while the international community's geopolitical hesitations have left a vacuum in support. This vacuum is filled not only by internal fragility but also by external regional pressures, as water disputes and uncoordinated migration policies with neighbours further isolate Afghanistan and complicate any path toward a cohesive climate response. These developments call attention to the urgent need for alternative governance models that empower local actors, prioritise inclusion, and address the structural inequalities inherent in both national and global responses.

This study contributes to a growing body of literature advocating for inclusive, flexible, and ethically grounded approaches to climate governance in fragile contexts. In particular, research from Southeast Asia has highlighted the importance of integrated climate and displacement policies that are contextually adaptive and locally responsive.[63] The recommendations advanced in this study—emphasising decentralised adaptation, engagement with non-state actors, gender responsive programming, and regional cooperation—are not only contextually relevant but also globally instructive. As climate change accelerates, such approaches will be critical in ensuring that the most vulnerable populations are not left behind. The call to action is therefore unequivocal, international organisations, donors, and regional partners must develop mechanisms to work directly with Afghan communities, circumventing political constraints where necessary. Strategies grounded in flexible financing, participatory policy making, and transboundary collaboration are essential for creating sustainable adaptation pathways. Ignoring Afghanistan due to its complex political status is not a neutral stance, it is a political choice with ethical consequences. A resilient future for Afghanistan, and for similarly situated nations, depends on innovation, global solidarity, and a reinvigorated commitment to climate justice.

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Understanding River Flows and Displacement in Haripur Village, Malda, West Bengal

By

Nur Alam *

A significant part of geographical scholarship considers physical entities like land and water to be stable and unchanging. Such conceptualisation has been critiqued by scholars like Kuntala Lahiri-Dutt questioning this assumed stability and therefore the binary between land and water that follows from there. Through the lived experience of people in a village in Malda, this article too builds on this understanding to portray these lives in the intersection of water-sediment-society. Embedded in these constantly interacting and ever-changing equations these are lives of great fragility and uncertainty. The continuation of colonial hydrology where rivers as other aspects of environment came to be viewed as entities controlled for revenue generation and profit meant that the South Asian countries are speeding up various projects, continuing to create large dams, remove forests, develop more highways, factories and clearing slum areas to give new shape to cities chasing the aspiration of becoming self-sufficient.[1] As a result, millions of individuals are evicted. Natural disasters and development projects have displaced a greater number of people. The number of internally displaced people (IDPs) in South Asia greatly outnumbers the number of refugees (around 25 million) the region has produced.[2] South Asian countries are deeply concerned about environmental issues, climate change, floods and droughts, water scarcity, monsoon variability and other extreme weather occurrences. There are roughly 130 million IDPs living in coastal areas in India, Bangladesh and Pakistan that are less than 10 metres above mean sea level.[3]

The combined effect of these two phenomena, i.e., the site where water and land flow into each other and the disregard for environmental costs of developmental projects can be seen in the lived experience of people dwelling in the *char* lands in the Ganga-Brahmaputra delta. The Ganga-Brahmaputra delta is a constant source of struggle and negotiation since it sustains life and livelihood for a large population. In the lower course of the deltaic plains Ganga

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shows a tendency to change course carrying with it a great quantity of sediments in the form of silt, sand or clay.[4] In this oscillation it erodes one bank while we see chars and sand bars reappearing on the other side and middle of the river in course of time. This behaviour of the river automatically constructs these regions and the life of the inhabitants here as one of uncertainty and vulnerability. People in this region face numerous challenges on a daily basis, while coping with nature and navigating the politics of resource extraction, looting, relief and patronage.

While the effect of flooding has been explored, the role of sediments in human life remains understudied.[5] Through an ethnographic study of Haripur, a village in Manikchak block of Malda, this article explores lives in shifting land-waterscapes and shows how both sediment and flooding (appearance and disappearance) construct these lives.[6] The article thus speaks about how flows which is an interplay of water and sediment increasingly shape the dynamics of river-society interactions. The objective of this article is to examine the ways in which environmental events like the floods and erosion of the Ganges affect the lives of people living in the char land. It reflects on questions of environment induced displacement, constant instability, land loss and land conflict. And how flows shape the constant motion, instability and therefore poses difficulty in the lives of the people of the village. The paper is based on the study of Haripur village for a period of 12 months from November 2018 to November 2019. It builds on narratives of people in all its 22 *tolas* (unit of locality) and their experience of floods and erosions. Interviews were conducted with ex-Panchayat members, elected headman (*Pradhan*), teachers who served in high school of the village and was an eyewitness to the devastating of the village, local land assessor (*amin*). The research participants are from various age group from teenagers to elderly men and women. Given ethical considerations and to maintain anonymity and confidentiality, pseudonyms have been used for all the respondents and village. The narratives are contextualised through secondary data such as government reports and census data.

Environmental Change and Displacement: The Hybrid Hydrosocial

Environmental issues and related displacements are among the most pressing concerns in today's development debate. Forced migration as a result of resource shortages brought on by climate change and environmental degradation is a major hurdle to meeting the basic normative objectives of equity, growth and prosperity. Environment led human movement will continue to be voluminous due to change of climate.[7] The major deltas of the world such as the Ganges, Mekong and Nile will be very severely affected by climate change. The Inter-Governmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) estimated that extreme weather conditions will severely impact in the future and mass flow of human will occur in low lying deltas of Asia and Africa.[8] Myers estimated the number of IDPs in China 73 million, Bangladesh 26 million, India

20 million and Egypt 12 million.[9] People who are reliant on natural resources like forest, rivers and lakes for their livelihood are highly vulnerable.

This paper deals with people who are reliant on local resources and now face multiple displacement and various life threating survival difficulties due to the river course change causing displacement within the framework of hydrosocial and hybridity.[10] A large number of studies in physical geography show that sediments are a key part of fluvial geomorphology, river ecology, erosion and flood risks.[11] Even though the study of sediment transport by rivers has gained momentum since the 1950s, yet many approaches still put more emphasis on flow regime than sediment regime. In the same way, both the state and academics often do not know enough about the lives and ways of life that are connected to sediments.[12] Displacement is caused in the *Diara* region of Malda over the Ganges River, not only by floods but also by erosion. While floods cause a temporary inundation of a specific region, displacing people from their houses, erosion permanently displaces people from their land.

The pre-colonial river-society relation was completely transformed by the British colonisers who considered environment as an externality to be controlled. Using a framework of land/water divide modern hydraulic techniques were applied then to convert precarious waterscapes to durable landscapes.[13] These changes in the ecological regime changed the social dynamics in deltas, altered relations between state and local actors, led to the birth of new intermediary classes. Extraction of water resources, unplanned building of dams and embankments, overuse of water for commercial purposes, floods, erosion of riverbanks and mass displacement and migration are a result of the continuation of colonial ideology of treating rivers as units to be controlled for financial gains making life dangerous in the chars of this deltaic region. Floods, riverbank erosion, building dams, uncontrolled boring, digging, sand mining and other development projects done for the capitalist interest have all made life in the char land unstable and full of instability. Government politics and policies have only made the situation worse and migration is often seen as the only way to deal with life's ups and downs.[14] The idea that rivers represent how uncertain life is now important all over the world. The relationship between human beings and environmental influences and shapes the social structures forming hydraulic societies.[15]

Managing environmental displacement requires state intervention to improve the anticipated living conditions and should take into consideration the ground realities as well as the everyday lived-in-experiences of the people, hailing from many communities and relying on the natural environment in Diara for their life and livelihood. Even though floods happen every year, the government do not deal with the floods seriously in the Diara region.[16] Datta studied the identity crisis of char people who are trapped in char land in between Malda district of West Bengal and Jharkhand state. Despite having legal documents these char people were not recognise by the then Left Front government in West Bengal.[17] They lived in precarious conditions without state's help. Their deprivation is not yet over, and they live hoping to get back their lands through re-emergence and recognition as West Bengal citizen.

The article positions itself in the scholarship around political ecology of water, in analysing the relation between water and society and demonstrating the intrinsic connection between the two. The idea of land as a stable entity has been contested in the recent past. The conceptual framework of hybridity of Lahiri-Dutt highlights the importance of the constant negotiation between land and water to understand the non-concrete and ever-changing realities outside the concreteness of categories of land and water. This fluid materiality shapes the lives of the most marginalised and ecosystem dependent communities.[18] These non-solid, yet liveable, usable river islands allow us to question the idea of distinct entities of land and water, of people's view of risk and stability in their livelihoods which as we will see below can only be achieved through an adaptation to an uncertain and changing environment. Char, therefore, becomes a symbol of destabilsation breaking the concepts like river as carrier of only sediment, human habitation and land as permanent and stable creating a hybrid environment which is part land and part water. The low-lying lands in riverbeds and along rivers, people use both legal and illegal ways to make a living and stay alive.[19] The emergence, submergence, re-emergence and re-submergence of chars results in multiple displacements in the lives of the people living there and correspond to SDRR syndrome (settlement-displacement-resettlement and re-displacement).[20] Chars are a symbol of uncertainties, volatilities, risks and vulnerabilities are also "zones of interaction, transformation, transgression and possibility".[21] Following this notion The hydrosocial approach also include meanings and interpretations of land and water in governance and power relations, resource use and exchange patterns, physical and biological processes, partly mediated and/or affected by technology.[22]

Contradicting the centrality of spatiality in this scholarship Krause argues that lived and experienced temporality should be emphasised in such scenarios. The lens of rhythmicity becomes important to study the shifting temporalities of living in the delta in tandem with the rhythms of the tide, seasons, development projects as well as the non-repetitive changes such as globalisation and climate change.[23] It is necessary to view this hydrosocial change through the historical lens to understand the situation in postcolonial contexts in South Asia. Flood, tides, erosion or seasons here are not just events but metaphors around which multiple movements are shaped. According to Micheaux the Lower Ganges basin as part of the Indian Bengal basin, from its past to the way it works now, is a perfect example of the idea of a hydrosocial cycle.[24] Human interactions with sediments are critical in the context of chars. The silt islands, sandy shoals and bars that frequently appear and disappear within the basin's riverine channels. For some marginal human communities, these places are still attractive possibilities because they are fertile despite their fragility and risk of disappearance. Char residents, known as *chornas*, work tirelessly to sustain their way of life on these stratified silt/sandy areas which during the monsoon season turn into muddyscapes or are completely submerged. These chars, which develop as composite muddyscapes rather than

landscapes or waterscapes, represent examples of dynamic water-sediment-society relations.

Although people are getting displacement due to environmental change, only a few scholars accept the linkages between environmental variations and human movement.[25] West Bengal is a particularly acute case of this. A 2009 editorial reported that about 70,000 people out of the 4.1 million residing in the Indian part of the Sundarbans may be displaced by 2020.[26] The understanding of river systems will be insufficient if traditions, cultures and social perceptions at the grassroots level, as well as worldviews are disregarded. Communities have created their own systems for comprehending, interpreting and valuing natural resources, which are interrelated to varied degrees.[27] Keeping this framework in mind this paper will investigate the riverbank erosion induced displacement and instability and successive migration linkages at a micro level. This article follows this theoretical framework trying to illustrate how flows, following Lahiri-Dutt's conception of hybridity, help us conceptualise the lives of people in these liminal spaces. This does not look at two distinct entities of land and water, rather it understands how uncertainty, presence-absence in the physical elements shape and are shaped by people's lives. While there has been much work on environmental refugees and on hydrosocial cycles, this article tries to bring these two scholarships in conversation with each other to show how displacement (in this case within the country) of livelihood and place is shaped by the complex interaction of water, land and society.

Diara, Malda and the Changing Course of the Ganges

Due to the high rate of riverbank erosion, deposition and changing river courses, the Ganges River system is thought to be the most dynamic river system.[28] Upstream of the Ganga-Brahmaputra delta, the active Ganges channel is very winding and makes big loops in a 20–30 km wide valley.[29] Two water related things are most important. First, the flow discharge changes from seasonally because of the monsoon regimes. Monsoon flows (July–September) are 10–100 times higher than non-monsoon flows.[30] Second, the river carries a lot of sediment to the delta area (600 to 1200 million tonnes per year bedload). Most of this sediment comes from the upper Himalayan slopes that erodes easily.[31] About half of the sediment that flows into the world's oceans comes from southeast Asia.[32] This is because of how the Himalayan range has changed over time. About 90 per cent of the annual sediment load in the delta region comes in with the monsoon flows.[33] As a consequence, in monsoon period, "bankfull discharges result in an enormous spontaneous transportation of sediments to the Bay of Bengal along with changes in the river channel morphology."[34]

Malda district is the gateway to the north of West Bengal. Lack of industries, political instability and an environmental fragility makes Malda one of the most backward districts of the state.[35] The Human Poverty Index shows that among the districts in West Bengal, Malda, Murshidabad and North

Dinajpur show high derivation index. In the case of Murshidabad, poverty along with natural hazards like flood and riverbank erosion spells many difficulties for people living in these regions.[36] The char dwellers are the worst hit. Physiographically Malda is divided into three sub-regions namely Taal, Barind and Diara.[37] Diara sub-region consists of flat low land forming the local catchment of the Mahananda and the Ganges and it is the most vulnerable zone of the district. It consists of Manikchak, Kaliachak-I, Kaliachak-II, Kaliachak-III and English Bazar blocks. This sub-region is formed of fluvial deposition of newer alluvium in the transitional zone between the Barind and the Taal. This sub-region is prone to floods and erosion. In 1926, Diara covered 109029.00 hectares. Through subsequent years of erosion, the area decreased to 88079.148 hectares in 2016.[38] The village, Haripur once located in the middle of Ganga River and now located along the left bank of the river of Manikchak block is the study site of this empirical study.

Diara is one of the most vulnerable parts of the district because the flow of the Ganga changes so often.[39] Between Malda and Rajmahal Hill in Jharkhand, the river flows into the plains for about 72 km until it reaches Farakka Barrage. From the end of the eighteenth century until the middle of the nineteenth century, neither the maps of Rennell (1764-1767) nor the maps of the Revenue Survey (1847-1849) showed that the river's flow had changed.[40] Till 1940s, the Ganga flowed steadily in a south-easterly direction between Rajmahal and Farakka. Since then, it has moved to the east.[41] Banerjee and Chakrabarty looked at maps and aerial photos from different time periods to figure out how far east the Ganga had moved. They observed that along a fixed line, the distance between the Ganga and Pagla rivers (which flow into the Ganga) was 8.53 km in 1923, 2.05 km in 1966, and 0.95 km in 1975. It went down even more to 300 metres in 1998.[42] In August 2001, Ganga took over the narrow spots where two rivers met.[43] In July 2003, the elevated embankment (Bund No. 8) was built along the Ganga and across the Pagla outflow broke.[44]

Haripur village is located at north-western edge in the Manikchak block of Malda district. It has an area of 19.12sq km (Census 2011) but it lacks a definite shape as it is fragmented into different *tolas* (unit of locality). Some tolas (Artiktola, Mandirtola, Jonobondhutola) are located just 500 metres away from the Ganga. In 1960s and 1970s, the village was in middle of the Ganga as char in the north-west at a distance of about 5-7 kms away from the mainland of Manikchak. In fact, the village was one of the few human settlements in chars situated in the middle, between Sahebganj district of Jharkhand and Malda district of West Bengal. At that time, it was a large village with tolas located in cluster. But with years of flood and erosion, the village has now fragmented into as many as 22 tolas scattered over a distance. Being cut off from the mainland, the char dwellers' ways of survival and coping strategies in response of natural disaster and economic activities was distinctly different from the people of mainland. Lahiri-Dutt and Samanta termed such way of life as distinct sub-culture.[45]

Prone to natural disaster prone, the region had faced frequent floods varying from middle to high intensity (Table 1). Between 1850 to 1870 three

destructive floods occurred which affected in all parts of the district. After 1870, severe floods reported in 1875, 1885 and 1906. Massive floods also occurred in the years of 1918, 1922, 1935 and 1948. In 1980s and 1990s, flooded years were 1987, 1988 and 1991. During the last 30 years, the heavy floods occurred in the years 1995, 1996, 1997, 1998, 1999, 2003, 2004, 2005, 2007 and 2008, 2017 and 2019. Continuing for three months the 1998 flood was the most furious.[46] The flood caused massive structural damages, loss of human being and cattle lives. The total agricultural loss amounted to ₹26,212 lakhs. Overall total loss of all departments was reported to be ₹900 crores.[47] This flood was an important marker in the SDRR phenomena in the lives of the char dwellers, some of whom already had histories of displacement.

Table 1: Flooded Years and Intensity

Year	Intensity
1850, 1870,	Destructive
1875, 1885, 1906	Severe
1918, 1922, 1935, 1948	Massive
1980, 1987, 1988, 1991, 1995, 1996, 1997, 1998, 1999, 2003, 2004, 2005, 2007, 2008, 2017, 2019	Heavy

Source: Disaster Management Plan Malda District 2020-2021

In 2017, the district witnessed a massive flood due to breach of a bundh (an elevated land) over Fulohar river along Bihar-West Bengal border. The flash flood spanned over more than 20 days causing a havoc in the lives of people. The flood affected 40,000 people of Manikchak block.[48] The literature on political ecology of water have tried to understand rivers simultaneously as material, relational and symbolic. Since rivers are both social and natural, their behaviour too then has consequences both social and natural. The lives of the respondents for this study were also affected by these floods. They narrated how the char once consisted of more than 500 hectares of lands. There were big land holders owning land of more than 30 hectares as well as small farmers and landless daily wage labourers. But as the village faced devastating floods and land erosion during the rainy season almost every year, many relocated to the relatively nearby higher lands for survival and sustenance. Thus, they adapted to the risk by moving, which often was the only way for people stuck in the society-water interface.

Few of the respondents took the risk of remaining in the chars to save their property. They made high platforms of bamboo, locally called *manchal* inside their home and stored all the important articles there. They cooked and slept on the manchal during floods. They used rafts made of banana to communicate if needed. While they managed despite the difficulties during the flood, but erosion made their survival impossible there. Post 2008, due to

erosion the entire village had to shift to the mainland gradually. They all did not come at once. The displacement has begun phase by phase as the villagers thought it was not safe for living and took shelter in the mainland. It was the flood of 1998-99, 2001 and 2008 that pushed the remaining char dwellers to leave. The loss of cultivable land resulted in loss of livelihood. The entire village depended on wage earning by migrating urban as well as other rural areas for work.

Physical and Human Costs of Environmental Vulnerability

Advancing Appadurai and Breckenridge's theory of hybridity and wetness, the critical literature on fluidscapes explores the interactions among water, sediments and societies.[49] People's lives are shaped by these negotiations between the fluid physical elements, a negotiation of which they are most important component. About 14,335 hectares of fertile land of Malda district was submerged by the river in between 1931 to 1978. From 1979 to 2004 the river engulfed another 4247 hectares of land.[50] Rudra has shown that the Ganga eroded 64 *mouzas* (smallest revenue unit) having an area of about 267sq. km. in Malda.[51] More than 200sq.km. of fertile land had gone into the river till 2004 and at the same time an equal area emerged as chars in the middle and opposite bank, making land a flowing category, rather than stable entity.[52]

Despite being situated in a fertile region, Diara has limited contribution in agricultural production due to frequency of floods and river erosion every year, making it the most backward region in the district. Due to these natural calamities, loss of livestock and human lives frequently recur in Diara. Nearly all rivers that pass through the district are prone to seasonal flood. Flood and river erosion in the Diara are part of a complex fluvial process. Malda lost nearly 103sq. miles of land in the Panchanandapur, Manikchak and Kaliachak areas due to the erosion of Ganga's banks.[53]

Table 2: Estimated Impact of River Erosion in Diara Sub-region of Malda District in 1998-99 Floods

CD Blocks	Total Mouzas Affected	Total Area Eroded (Acres)	Total Land Losing Families
Manikchak	15	13204.02	3330
Kaliachak-II	20	25114.67	7378
Total	35	38318.69	10708

Source: District Human Development Report Malda 2007

Table 2 indicates the magnitude of losses due to natural disaster. As a result of devastating flood and land erosion, the inhabitants of 236 riverine villages lost their holdings of arable land, and an estimated 5,043 hectare of prime cropland has been swallowed by the Ganga. About 10,708 families of

two blocks lost their lands. The affected families resettled in several sites of Manikchak and Kaliachak-II blocks mainly occupying the PWD lands that border the major district roads. Their economic situation is very desperate. The people who live in the riverine chars are more vulnerable. As a result of such natural disasters, land dispute is another major problem in Malda district. Several new char lands re-emerged on western part of the Ganga which was claimed by the Jharkhand government. About 6000 displaced people of KB-Jhowbana and Panchanandapur GP of Malda district has settled in this newly risen char land. They have no access to state provided services.

Land is important in terms of stability, identity, territorial boundaries, policies and practices of the state. In analysing the notion of the unfixed land Sud spoke about land as a co-product of human-nature.[54] She further argued that the shape, uses and ownership of lands are changed by the government as well by non-state actors also under the shadow of the government. While Sud too talks about the non-fixity of land, contrasting her context with that of the char dwellers we see how in some places the notion of the land was not stable, not solid in the first place. Land at Haripur is sometimes located in the mainland but at other times mineral gains, it is determined then by the topography, the magnitude of flows and in some sense (absence of) government polices of rehabilitation and resettlement. Here, the very existence of the land is being changed by nature through frequent floods and severe erosion. The furious floods and erosion took the entire char land and forced the char dwellers to evacuate. The affected say that their greatest loss is the vanishing of land. The burden of land loss further leads towards the dearth of livelihood options. The region offers no possibility of developing any kind of industry, tourism or other kinds of markets.

The liminality and diffuseness of the land make it a precious commodity. While materially indefinite, the notion of ownership in the minds of the villagers remain very much concrete. Accounts of conflict regarding land ownership and settling at *khas* land (government wasteland) and other's lands were collected from interaction with the villagers. Initially the landholders would resist giving shelter to the char dwellers, fearing that the char dwellers might not leave the land. This led to forceful possession of the land. Many people promised to pay the owner some money. Sometimes such informal payments have raised the issue of land contestation when both parties are dead. The next generation thus continues to suffer from uncertainties regarding land ownership among other things.

At Haripur, many wealthy cultivators became landless overnight. Every respondent reported of losing their land including their homestead. Rabanjit Mondal (82-years-old) once resided at Haripur char land. His father was one of the wealthiest men in the village having more than 25 hectares of landed property. This village was not only vulnerable to floods and erosion but also to the threat of mafias and dacoits (known as members of Thiya Party), who might also be products of the scarcity circle that regulated the lives in the region. His father was attacked by gangsters. They locked up other family members in a room and demanded huge amount of money from his father but his father

refused to give the money. So, the gangsters shot him. This incident traumatised the family. Moreover, all their lands were submerged due to the floods of 1980s. As recounted by Rabanjit's daughter-in-law this trauma caused mental health issues. As he was the only son, it fell on him to manage the earnings thus doubling his stress. He presently stays at a house 500 metres away from his son's residence which was originally built by him after he came here at Rohendratola. But this homestead land was claimed by the son of the original owner who died a few years ago. So, Rabanjit's son lived there to claim ownership of the land. The uncertainty around land claims and ownership shows that for people like Rabanjit, instability of home was a permanent feature. Rabanjit first settled at that plot by paying some money to the owner, but to retain the claim his son had to physically occupy the land. His daughter-in-law said, "if we leave this land and go to our own land, then we will not be recognised as claimants of this land as we have no legal documents. My father-in-law bought this land and so we do not want to leave it. We stay in a tiny hut with thatch and polythene (*kureghar*) here. We do not stay all days of the week, only 500 metres away we have built a semi-pucca house on a land we bought. We stay there more."

In the absence of documentary evidence, the physical presence becomes the sole strategy through which the family can keep their claim of the land. Now the case is sub-judice in district court. Kishan Mondal and Dhiram Mondal from the same localities also faced similar kinds of land ownership related problems. This shows the contested nature of land in this village. In a context where land and land ownership were anyway ever changing due to the behaviour of the river, these issues of documentation and legality added a further complexity to the lived experience of landless people. Arriving at the mainland and settling there was not an easy task for the char dwellers. They had to struggle in making space in the main land. Challenging situations were part of the everyday life at the initial stage.

Multiple Displacements

The villagers shared experiences of floods from the 1970s to the more recent ones of 2019, the varying intensities of which has shaped their lives. While floods along with the erosion has spelt many difficulties to a section of people along the river side, rise of new chars in the mid channel of the river provided refuge to some who lost their land. These new chars were disputed since there was no way to establish a land replacement pattern. People who live in the char land constantly relocate and change their adaptation strategies to make lives habitable to the mood of the local environment.[55] Displacement is the ultimate result of flood and land erosion. At Haripur almost all the informants relocated their homestead land multiple times within small 5 km. periphery, such even as high as ten times. Flood and land erosion occurred almost every year in this village. Relocation is a feature in the lives of char land dwellers as is also evident in Basu's work on Murshidabad. The life of the villagers was mobile by its very nature and multiple transitions of their home and relocation of the village. Being

land losers, they started to settle over vested land and lands of other people to survive. Ashupal (73-years-old) recounts how he had to change his home thrice because of river erosion. His first home was at Hitentola from where he shifted to Bankiramtola, after that at Hitutola and now he has been living in Artiktola since 1980 because of flood and erosion. He lost about 3.5 hectares land to the river. According to him, the severity and frequency of flood and erosion was very high after 1975 due to the construction of Farakka barrage. His view is resonated in Rudra's analysis of flood and erosion causing of building of Farakka barrage and the costs of postcolonial development planning.

Summarising their misery one of the respondents Kajen Mondal (58-years-old) said, "brother nothing to say about the Ganga, it has devastated our life." The river took everything from them. Now they live a nomadic life. Arun Mondal (35-years-old) of Briztola said that although he was born at this tola, but his parents were from Gopalpur. At one point some people of the village lived at Khasmahal near Panchanandapur about 15-20 km away from the present location. Some people also came from old Gopalpur area due to land erosion about 20-25 years ago. Ajit Mondal (32-years-old) narrated that although he was born Rohendratola, his father once lived at Khasmahal and came here about 40 years ago. His father lost about 2 hectares of land to the river. Even the homestead land was not left to live at Khasmahal. So, he along with family migrated to Rohendratola as their relatives lived in this village. These areas were not the part of original Haripur char. People did not come all together. Families arrived when they were affected by river erosion and lost their lands. They made temporary shelter at road side and other's land. Some of them purchased lands from landowners of neighbouring villages like Mathurapur, Kamalpur and Nazirpur for establishing settlements. The constant erosion took away the fertility of the land making it hard for them to cultivate, thus posing difficulties for livelihood. The risks remain unchanged in terms of healthy lifestyle.

Kajen Mondal relocated his home as many as seven times. He recounted his painful childhood, "I went to school in the morning without eating anything. During the summer I would eat few mangoes from the gardens on the way to school. My father could not pay my tuition fees. I collected and sold firewood and paid for my tuition. At the age of 13, I left my studies. After that I started earning money by ferrying passengers on boat. After some time, I leased a land and cultivated it. My difficulties never went away. I am 58-years-old now and cannot work as hard as before. My sons do not help me as they have their own families. I have a daughter and arranging her marriage is a big burden for me. That is why I say, there is no end of hardship in my life." Kajen Mondal's life like others reflects how environmental disruption causes social problems. Kajen's life story shows a continuity of instability and resultant deprivation. He said that the Ganga may be regarded as sacred and holy in the country but it acts as curse to the people of Haripur.

Bindu Mondal (46-years-old), a widow, also spoke of her hardship. Before coming to this new site at Hitutola, her husband died, and the flood of 1998 took her home. The flood devastated their entire land and compelled her

to work as wage labourer. She has two daughters. She said, "those who have no male members in the household they have lives full of sorrow. I have faced many difficulties, be it in terms of managing livelihoods, economic condition or during natural calamities." She remembered that when her younger daughter was seven months old, a flood occurred and while she was desperately trying to save whatever was left at the home, her baby drowned in flood. Luckily another man saved her baby. Unfortunately, two people of the village drowned. After the death of her husband, she worked as agricultural labourer, harvesting rice in different places. When she would go to work, she kept her daughters with the relatives in the village. She had to pay from her meagre earnings for this. By working alone in the family, she still managed to marry off both her daughters though with much difficulty.

Prem Pal (63-years-old) recounts that about 40 years ago many people from Khasmahal area under Kaliachak-II block came here and lived in the vested land (government land) along village roads. His father also lost 1.5 hectare lands, his only asset to the river. At that time, he was ten years old. They were three brothers. His father shifted twice to nearby areas but the extent of flood was very high. So finally, they had to leave everything and come at Rohendratola of Haripur with two buffalos and their few remaining belongings. They came to this place as his grandfather lived there and his father hoped that he would get some help there. After reaching Rohendratola, they made a tarpaulin tent and stayed the night on the roadside. Land is not only regarded as physical asset but also its presence is the real identity of one's citizenship. For a poor population dependent on their land for cultivation, what did this instability, this forceful flow mean? It meant loss of dwelling, land loss, loss of livelihood. This population has no any definite space for their habitation. The economy of the village was highly impeded by environmental events. Many people still live on a land which does not yet have *patta* (land generally distributed by government). Parveen shows the fluidity due to riverbank erosion faced by char dwellers of Assam resulted in losing their legal personality as citizen. The lack of physical presence at one's own land has categorised many char dwellers into D or Doubtful Voter List.[56] Many char dwellers of mid channel of the adjoining Diara region became the resident of Jharkhand despite having voter cards issued by West Bengal Government due to multiple relocations. These people once belonged to West Bengal.[57] In this case, people remained on the Bengal side.

The idea of flows provides us with an analytical lens here where the unpredictable flows of the river force the people to move flowing endlessly from one land to another, further losing resources as they keep moving. It further allows us to see how the river and the land (which in this case is the sediment) are uncertain with the one flowing into the other, causing the disappearance (and often reappearance) of the temporary solid and spelling displacement in the lives of the people residing there. Underlying this was a sense of a constant loss or threat of loss of a home due to vulnerable environment. The narratives show that their displacement and instability do not end with a new location but has the real possibility to continue endlessly. The

feeling of being refugees here too comes from the loss of a homeland, although a homeland less concrete and more liminal, but a loss which is constantly reproduced in every displacement that they faced. Further, they often had to migrate to different urban areas for work opportunities. The villagers reported the symptoms of anxiety, depression and traumatic disorder. Interestingly though we see how the villagers also constantly fight this instability, this flux of their home by carrying forward the name wherever they go. The practice of naming the place/places they move to as Haripur points towards resistance to the impermanence of the homeland by trying to make the name of the home independent or unattached to the land.

In this study, it has also been seen that respondents preferred to live on the mainland which has a close proximity to their original homes, near char. This proximity provided them with a sense of internal satisfaction. Fulaboti Mondal (65-years-old) from Baghutola was unwilling to leave her home at Jonobondutola for more interior locations like Manikchak and Mathurapur. "We were displaced by the God and also was provided shelter by God to a location close to our char land. So, I will not leave this land till my death. I told my son that you may shift at Mathurapur after my demise." She expressed her determination to stay in her current location, stating that she wished to die there. This suggests that their connection to the land was more significant than living in any other safe place and had a strong attachment to their homeland. Overall, it reflects the strong emotional connection that individuals had with their homeland, even in the face of frequent environmental changes.

Conflict at Argiltola over Occupying Land

The land where some of the respondents have been living since 1998-99 floods at Argiltola, belonged to Kalin Choudhury, a landlord of Mathurapur village located about 3-4 kms from the site. He did not cultivate that land but leased it to people of Mathurapur village who cultivated it. The land was joined with a portion of khas land. Erosion affected char dwellers first started to live on the adjoining khas land. Gradually as the number of char dwellers increased, they tried to occupy Kailn's land. At this conflict escalated between the char dwellers and the leasing cultivators tension led to fighting between the two groups and firing but there was no death reported apart from a few injured. In the end, the char dwellers were able to capture around 1 hectare land and since then they live there. The villagers named to the new settlement as Argiltola. Argiltola is used as symbol of their identity and their fight for survival. It illustrates environmental disruption can lead to conflict between the new entrants and the possessor.

During my fieldwork, many people shared the experience of flood and erosion of char lands referring to a particular tola that had submerged. Even after resettling in a new piece of land they used the name of the earlier tola to designate their new land. It is evident that they do not want to lose the identity of their original homestead and therefore a part of their identity. In the absence of ability to hold onto material belonging like land, it is their memory which

becomes the site to hold onto ancestors and a past. Their old name of the tola somehow recreates lost memory of their past life and creates a sense of belonging. It may also be argued that if the government in the future wants to provide special scheme for their vulnerability, they can claim continuity in terms of name and may access such benefits more easily. Their struggles symbolise the destabilisation of char at a new site. The movement of such marginal people can be categorised as internally displaced people induced by natural disaster accelerated by man-made dam construction.[58] For a proper policy implementation, it is important to have a balanced view of the situation or facts. An overemphasis on scientific findings like reports and test analyses needs to be balanced with the voices of the people who are affected.

Declining Work Opportunities

There was lack of earning opportunities at the village with a decline in workforce participation from 44.6 per cent in 2001 to 35.25 per cent in 2011. In 2001, there were 23.52 per cent main workers which decreased to 21.80 per cent in 2011. Between 2001 and 2011, the number of marginal workers decreased in absolute numbers (from 864 to 745) and in percentages too (from 21.8 per cent to 13.44 per cent). Without a corresponding similarly high rise in main workers this might point towards migration as a coping strategy. The Census reports shows that main agricultural labourers of the village have increased from 60.17 per cent in 2001 to 63.19 per cent in 2011. Male agricultural labourers increased from 64.83 per cent in 2001 to 87.43 per cent according to 2011 Census. At the same time the proportion of female agricultural labourers has drastically declined to 12.57 per cent in 2011 from 35.17 per cent in 2001. The village level data helps to understand the livelihood pattern in the village and also the ways in which social characteristics like gender influenced labour market for work opportunities. One way to understand this is to read this in relation to how women's labour is understood as supplementary. It is possible that the lack of other work opportunities for men created a labour pool which they replaced the women in agricultural work which were available to them before 2001. The proportion of household industry workers was very low with respect to male but in case of female it was very high (95.12 per cent). The experiences of people of Haripur village reflects the precarity regarding the working opportunities in riverine villages of Diara region. Enarson and Morrow argued that women suffer more severe consequences during any disaster due to several factors such as a lack of power and ownership in their work, educational restrictions, limited occupational mobility and economic disadvantages.[59] Despite these challenges, women demonstrate remarkable strength and resilience when men leave for work during the emergency period. Despite hunger and illness, women show firm determination and exhibit a remarkable ability to care for family members. Haripur village managed to sustain itself on the same land till the situation became more difficult with the barrage and made sustainable local subsistence

difficult. Rajen Mondal, a respondent stated the Ganga River as curse for the residents of Haripur for the last five decades.

Floods damaged lands, crops, homes and other infrastructure, leading to financial losses and displacement of people. The erosion caused by the river also led to change in the landscape, which affected the availability of resources for local livelihoods. It was in this context that the villagers had to strategise to create livelihood opportunities in this situation of scarcity. We see that rather than long term sustainability they aimed more for immediate sustenance. Through innovative ways, char people create new forms of livelihood, often combining two or more forms, to create livelihood opportunities for themselves—creating, in the process, new forms of economic citizenship, often beyond the understanding and control of the state. Lacking access to sustainable resources it is the women who show most diversification, combining different ways of using natural resources with their limited means to somehow sustain themselves and their families.

Photo 1: Women crossing the Ganga River to cut Grass at Char land, © Author

During my multiple visits, I often witnessed young boys and women would take small boats and travel to the char lands. The boats were small in size, easy to make and carry. The villagers regularly used these to access the char lands for various activities like fishing and grass cutting. Komola Mondal (33-years-old) and Parul Mondal (35-years-old) regularly used the boat to cross the river and to cut grass. Grass was more available in the char land compared to the mainland. The grass served a dual purpose: it acted as fodder for household cattle and was also sold in the daily bazar at Mathurapur. In an environment with scarce vegetation and a demand for livestock raising, there was a high market demand for such grass in the local market at Mathurapur. Consequently, Komola, Parul and others were able to generate income by selling grass. In addition, they told me about a different variety of grass called *kans* grass (locally

known as *kasai* grass) largely used by the people to build fences and roofing for houses on agricultural lands. However, because these grasses were longer and heavier to handle, they often picked kans grass for their own household use rather than for sale.

Conclusion

Living in the chars become crucial ways of understanding both resilience and vulnerability. The stories of the villagers are stories of hydrosocial linkage of flood land erosion, land loss and displacement of affected local people from generation to generation. The stories show that the people have been continuously displaced due to river encroachment. These people are ignored by the government because they are socially and economically weaker and live in isolated remote areas. These environmentally vulnerable people live a nomadic life but not by choice.[60] These people live a life to constant threat, displacement, building and rebuilding their houses and neighbourhoods. They face conflict in the new settlements. Their lived experiences are directly related to their land which is flowing continuously. Continuous displacement and instability of the lands result into livelihood crisis. Seasonal migration to urban areas as well as other rural areas was the only resilience and coping strategy to manage livelihood. Thus, the environmental disaster cause displacement and in later stage forced labour migration for sustenance. One of the main arguments that the paper tries to make is to explain how displacement of the villagers a product of the fluidity of the land sometimes as sediment and sometimes as land under water. Deprived of what is considered a basic unit of stability in modern capitalist society—the lives of the people, as their homes is one of flows—the fluidity of the land leading to displacement connects to the fluidity of the constantly moving people. This article thus adds to the scholarship challenging the materiality of land in these marginal locations showing how it materially disappears (and reappears) due to floods and erosions and how it experientially disappears through people moving and reappears through naming. The char lands shapes people's lives in flux. These ethnographic studies of human-nature interaction provide us with new ways of thinking about rivers, people, livelihood as well as governance.

Notes

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Fleeing the Floods: Examining the Complex Realities of Climate Displacement in Thailand

By

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Internal migration in Thailand is a prevalent phenomenon, with education and employment opportunities often driving movement among the working-age population. Traditionally, migration typically involved temporary relocation for work, particularly in the agricultural sector, such as after the rice harvest. This was especially common among workers from the Northeast and North, who frequently migrated to larger cities within their regions or to Bangkok and its surroundings, fuelled by urban expansion and development. Recently, a shift has been observed in these migration patterns. Although many young workers continue to migrate to urban areas, they often do not permanently return to their rural homes. Instead, their returns tend to be seasonal, aligning with agricultural tasks such as planting and harvesting, or with significant holidays, including Songkran (Thai New Year), the New Year, and other extended holiday periods. This marks a departure from previous patterns, where rural workers returned more frequently. A 2020 study by the Bank of Thailand's Puey Ungphakorn Institute for Economic Research revealed that approximately 9.58 million individuals from farming households work outside the agricultural

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sector, with nearly 7 million originating from the Northeast.[1] The study found that 76 per cent of farming households are forced to rely on income from non-agricultural sectors and emphasised that migration serves as a means of income diversification for agricultural households. According to Tandon climate change is a key driver of displacement, with extreme weather events such as droughts and floods forcing individuals to leave rural areas. [2] These events cause significant damage to crop, infrastructure, and livelihoods, compelling families to seek opportunities elsewhere.

Migration is generally characterised as a voluntary movement, where individuals choose to relocate for various reasons, such as seeking better living conditions, employment, or education. In contrast, displacement involves involuntary removal of individuals from their usual or rightful place, often as a result of external forces. This process frequently entails uprooting people from their homes or communities due to factors such as conflict, natural disasters, or environmental changes. Displacement extends beyond the physical removal of individuals; it also imposes significant psychological effects. It disrupts individuals' and communities' sense of belonging and security, leading to profound emotional and social impacts. Therefore, it is essential to distinguish between displacement and migration. Displacement typically occurs under duress, driven by circumstances such as conflict or catastrophe that are beyond individuals' control, whereas migration is usually a voluntary movement prompted by aspirations for improved opportunities. While both displacement and migration involve movement, displacement is marked by urgency and compulsion due to crises, whereas migration is generally motivated by personal choice.

This study investigates internal displacement, a form of forced migration in which individuals or communities are compelled to flee their residences while remaining within national borders, driven by environmental disruptions linked to anthropogenic climate change. Although Thailand lacks nationally consolidated data on individuals displaced by natural disasters, the Global Internal Displacement Database (GIDD)—an authoritative global repository of internal displacement data, operational since 2008—has systematically compiled multi-source datasets to quantify disaster induced internal displacement within the country. The highest number of internal displacements occurred in 2011 (Figure1). This surge in displacement was primarily attributed to the severe flooding that affected extensive areas in the central region of Thailand, including Bangkok, Ayutthaya, and Pathum Thani provinces. The widespread inundation during this period led to significant disruptions, forcing a large population to relocate temporarily. The database indicates that the total accumulated number of disaster induced displacements across all types of disasters from 2008 to 2023 is 3.2 million. This study addresses the significant deficiency in official data from relevant Thai government agencies regarding disaster displacement in Thailand. Consequently, a literature review was conducted to explore academic works related to this issue. A pivotal study highlighted is the thesis by Nitsch (2020)[3], which meticulously analysed four key Thai laws and plans concerning disaster

displacement. These include the Disaster Prevention and Mitigation Act 2007 (DPM Act), which serves as the foundational national law for disaster management in Thailand. Alongside this, the Disaster Risk Management Plan of Thailand 2015 (DRMP) complements the DPM Act by providing a more detailed framework for managing disaster risks. The Strategic National Action Plan on Disaster Risk Reduction (SNAP), spanning 2010–2019, focuses on reducing disaster risks and emphasises the impact of climate change in exacerbating these risks. The analysis also reveals several critical gaps in Thailand's disaster policies.

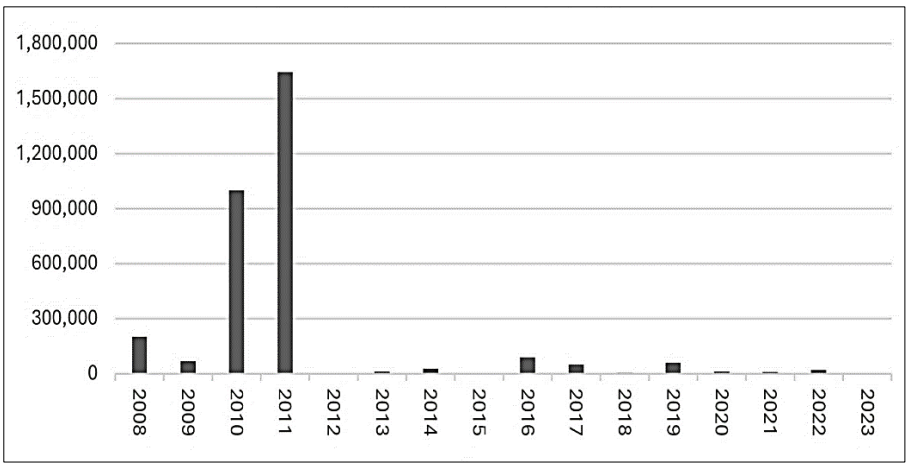

Figure.1: Thailand's Internal Displacement due to Disasters from 2008–2023.
Source: Internal Displacements Total by Disasters, 2008 to 2023, Thailand. Internal Displacement Monitoring Center. n.d. "Internal Displacements Total by Disasters," https://www.internal-displacement.org/database/displacement-data/.

Firstly, there is a significant categorisation gap, as existing policies do not clearly or comprehensively define environmentally displaced persons (EDPs). These individuals face various challenges, including the loss of material assets such as land and livelihoods, inadequate government support, limited access to infrastructure, and a lack of engagement in decision making processes. Furthermore, government support for EDPs remains limited, often proving insufficient, particularly for those experiencing permanent displacement. Consequently, affected communities have largely relied on community based initiatives, such as the homestay project, to mitigate vulnerabilities and seek practical solutions. Overall, it stresses the urgent need for comprehensive policies and enhanced government support tailored to the unique needs of those facing environmental displacement in Thailand. A recent report, *Thailand National Law and Policy Report Consultation Draft 2020: Displacement in the Context of Disasters and Climate Change*, further reinforces the findings by examining Thailand's legal and policy framework concerning displacement due to disasters and climate change.[4] It underscores Thailand's high vulnerability to natural

hazards such as floods, droughts, and storms, as evidenced by its high ranking on the Climate Risk Index and the significant number of people affected by recent disasters. The report calls for a human rights based approach to addressing disaster displacement, advocating for gender equality and the inclusion of marginalised groups in disaster preparedness and response.

In addition to addressing gaps in Thailand's policy landscape, this study seeks to contribute to the existing literature by examining community perceptions in the immediate aftermath of a disaster. While the literature has established a clear link between climate induced disasters and displacement, this study operates under the premise that the reality of displacement is more complex. It challenges the assumption that disasters alone are the primary drivers of displacement, suggesting instead that multiple socio-economic, infrastructural, and policy related factors may shape affected communities' decisions to relocate. This research focuses on climate induced displacement following the severe flooding that impacted Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai between September and October 2024. The severe flooding resulted in significant casualties, displacement, and widespread damage across multiple sectors. According to Dr. Opart Karnkawinpong, Permanent Secretary of Public Health, Chiang Rai suffered the highest number of casualties, with10 fatalities, 133 injuries, and more than 24,000 households affected in Mae Sai, Mae Chan, Mueang, and Mae Fah Luang districts.[5] Five local hospitals were temporarily disrupted but have since resumed operations. In Chiang Mai, the floods impacted 2,978 households in Mae Ai and Fang districts, leading to 6 deaths and 3 injuries, with one hospital in Ban Tha Makaeng remaining closed. Overall, the floods claimed at least 36 lives in Chiang Rai and 6 in Chiang Mai, affecting approximately 9,000 households nationwide and damaging over 34,000 homes, including 10,499 in Chiang Mai and 2,928 in Chiang Rai. The floods also severely disrupted infrastructure and economic activities. In Chiang Rai's Mae Sai district, floodwaters inundated residential and commercial areas, causing damage estimated at ฿4billion. The closure of Chiang Rai International Airport due to flooded access roads further exacerbated the economic impact by limiting transportation and commercial activities. The agricultural sector suffered extensively, with damages estimated at ฿43.4billion.[6] Large tracts of farmland were submerged, leading to significant crop losses and severely impacting the livelihoods of farmers in both provinces. Beyond economic and infrastructural damage, the floods also had severe environmental consequences. In Chiang Mai's Mae Taeng District, the Elephant Nature Park was inundated, necessitating the evacuation of over 100 elephants and other animals to higher ground. The extensive flooding also posed long-term risks to local biodiversity and ecosystem stability.[7] In response to the disaster, the Thai Government approved a rehabilitation budget of nearly ฿20billion to support recovery efforts in Chiang Rai and Chiang Mai. These funds were intended to restore critical infrastructure, assist affected communities, and implement long-term resilience strategies to mitigate the impact of future climate-induced disasters.

A fundamental premise of this study is that individuals affected by severe flooding will perceive their homes as unsafe and exhibit an inclination to

relocate. Moreover, vulnerable groups—including the elderly, persons with disabilities, non-citizens, and youth—may require targeted assistance both during and after disaster events. The primary objective of this research is to examine the perceptions of affected communities regarding their relocation decisions following the disaster. Specifically, the study investigates whether residents feel compelled to relocate due to safety concerns or whether they prefer to remain in their original locations despite experiencing severe flooding. Additionally, it identifies the key factors influencing their decisions. To ensure timely and accurate insights, data collection was conducted in November 2024, immediately after the floodwaters receded. A mixed method approach, combining household surveys and in-depth interviews, was employed to capture residents' experiences and perspectives while still fresh in their memories. However, the findings suggest a more complex reality. Contrary to expectations, a majority of respondents expressed a preference to remain in their homes rather than relocate, illustrating the multifaceted nature of displacement decision making. This study underscores that climate induced disasters do not result in straightforward patterns of displacement; rather, a range of interrelated socio-economic, cultural, and policy related factors influence individual and community responses to disaster events. Therefore, the study provides a nuanced understanding of the complex interplay between environmental hazards, policy responses, and socio-economic resilience. It aims to inform more effective disaster response and resettlement strategies, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of climate-induced displacement in Thailand.

To structure this investigation, the study focuses on three key research questions: What are the key factors influencing the decision to stay or relocate among displaced farmers and urban dwellers in Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai, Thailand? How do environmental, social, economic, and policy related factors shape migration decisions following disaster events? What are the primary vulnerabilities faced by different population groups (e.g., elderly individuals, persons with disabilities, non-citizens, and youth) during and after disaster-induced displacement? Based on these questions, the study establishes the three research objectives: analyse the key determinants influencing the decision to stay or migrate following a disaster, including economic opportunities, land ownership, infrastructure availability, and government policies; examine the demographic, social, economic, and environmental characteristics of populations at risk of displacement, as well as those who choose to remain in place, in Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai provinces; and assess the vulnerabilities of different at-risk groups—including children, the elderly, persons with disabilities, bedridden patients, and non-citizens—within the context of disaster-induced displacement. This study examines populations affected by severe natural disasters, particularly flooding, in Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai provinces during September–October 2024. The research focuses on four primary areas: communities along the Mae Kha Canal and Saraphi District in Chiang Mai Province, and communities in Mae Sai District (*Wat Tham Pha-Chom*

community) and Wiang Pa Pao District (*Ban Huai Hin Lat Nai* and *Ban Huai Sai Khao* communities) in Chiang Rai Province.

Photo 1: Traces of flood levels can be observed from the soil stains on the wall in Mae Kha community area.
(Photo from the research site)

Photo 2: Logs and wood debris carried by floods and landslides in Wiang Pa Pao community area. (Photo from the research site)

Photo 3: The relocation of bedridden patients during the flooding event in Saraphi community. (Photo from the research site)

Photo 4: Damage from mud carried by floodwater, which has accumulated inside the houses of respondents in Mae Sai community. (Photo from the research site)

The study categorises participants into two main groups: household representatives, totalling 217 individuals, and vulnerable populations, with a total of 40 individuals. A mixed methods research design is employed, integrating both quantitative and qualitative approaches. For the quantitative component, data is collected from household representatives using structured questionnaires. The analysis employs descriptive statistics, chi-square analysis,

binary logistic regression analysis, and reliability analysis. For the qualitative component, data is gathered through in-depth interviews using a structured set of questions, focusing on the experiences of vulnerable populations. Qualitative data is then subjected to thematic analysis to gain deeper insights into the challenges faced by these communities. The vulnerable populations in this research are categorised into five groups: youths (aged 13–18), elderly people (aged 60 and above), persons with disabilities, bedridden patients, non-Thai citizens (ethnic groups or individuals without a Thai ID card). Additionally, a vulnerable individual may belong to multiple groups. For example, all bedridden patients are classified as persons with disabilities, and some older individuals are non-citizens without a Thai ID card. The selection of the sample was carefully conducted to ensure the highest possible level of diversity. The interview questions were specifically designed to provide a deeper understanding of the obstacles, impacts, and needs faced by vulnerable groups when confronted with disasters. These questions aim not only to gather information on the challenges these individuals encounter but also to explore the underlying factors influencing their decision to either remain in their current location or migrate. Additionally, the questions seek to identify the support mechanisms required by these individuals should they choose to relocate, including the types of assistance and resources necessary to facilitate their migration process and ensure their well-being during and after relocation. The overall goal is to gain insights into both the motivations for migration and the barriers that might prevent individuals from taking such a step.

Disasters and Climate Induced Migrants: An Explorative Category

Migration or displacement caused by climate change and its consequences has been a subject of ongoing and long standing debate. Disasters are a major cause of what is known as forced displacement, which occurs out of necessity rather than as a voluntary choice of those affected. Since natural disasters are inextricably linked to climate change, people displaced by such disasters are often classified as climate refugees, and their migration is referred to as climate induced displacement. This phenomenon is complex and influenced by various factors, including socioeconomic status of those affected, their ability to adapt and coexist with disasters, government policies and management, and legal perspectives that remain unclear and lack universal consensus These challenges contribute to the ongoing academic debate over climate induced displacement, with no widely accepted conclusion. Studying disaster related displacement must therefore include an examination of these interconnected factors. The push and pull factors influencing migration decisions are numerous and cannot be oversimplified to suggest that all individuals affected by climate change will inevitably be forced to migrate.[8] Additionally, even the term displacement itself lacks a universally agreed definition.[9] Therefore, it is crucial to reassess and clearly categorise how individuals in different situations respond to climate change and its impact on their lives. When considering the scenarios leading to displacement or migration due to climate change, Walter Kälin[10] categorises

them into five types: 1) Sudden-onset disasters: Events such as floods, hurricanes, typhoons, cyclones, and landslides caused by heavy rainfall can trigger mass displacement and significant economic losses. Displacement from these disasters is not necessarily permanent; once affected areas are restored, people may return. Some disasters, such as earthquakes and volcanic eruptions, are not directly linked to climate change. 2) Slow-onset environmental degradation: This includes rising sea levels, increasing soil and groundwater salinity, recurrent flooding, permafrost thawing, droughts, desertification, and water scarcity. Affected individuals may temporarily migrate for economic opportunities or relocate permanently if environmental deterioration reaches an irreversible stage, making habitation impossible. 3) Sinking islands: A specific case of slow-onset disasters caused by rising sea levels, where parts of small island nations become uninhabitable. In extreme cases, entire islands may be submerged, leading to unavoidable displacement. 4) High-risk zones: Government-designated areas identified as being at high risk of life threatening disasters. Authorities may mandate permanent evacuation and relocation of residents from these areas. 5.Conflict and instability: Climate change can exacerbate resource scarcity (e.g., water, arable land, or grazing areas), potentially fuelling violence and armed conflict. This is particularly common in regions suffering from water shortages, where resource depletion leads to prolonged conflicts, forcing people to flee. Beyond these five scenarios, Armelle Gouritin identifies an additional case specific to Mexico where displacement caused by development projects related to renewable energy.[11] As part of efforts to combat climate change, projects such as hydropower dam construction can have unintended consequences, leading to the displacement of affected communities. It is evident that different scenarios lead to varying patterns of human migration and present distinct challenges. For instance, internal displacement within a country may pose fewer legal issues concerning citizenship rights compared to cross border displacement. Additionally, when small island states become submerged, their citizens could instantly become stateless, further complicating legal and humanitarian responses. At present, there is no clear legal framework to support those affected by such issues.

Renaud classifies climate induced migrants into three groups. The Environmental Emergency Migrants (EEM) are individuals forced to migrate temporarily due to sudden and severe disasters (rapid-onset disasters), comparable to Kälin's (2010) sudden-onset disasters. They often have a high likelihood of returning to their original homes once conditions stabilise. The Environmentally Forced Migrants (EFM) are people compelled to leave their homes due to severe environmental degradation that makes continued habitation impossible. This category aligns with Kälin's (2010) slow-onset environmental degradation. Unlike EEMs, EFMs are often unable to return because their land has become uninhabitable. The Environmentally Motivated Migrants (EMM) are individuals who migrate proactively in response to gradual environmental degradation. Their migration is not a last resort but rather a strategic decision to avoid worsening conditions that could threaten their

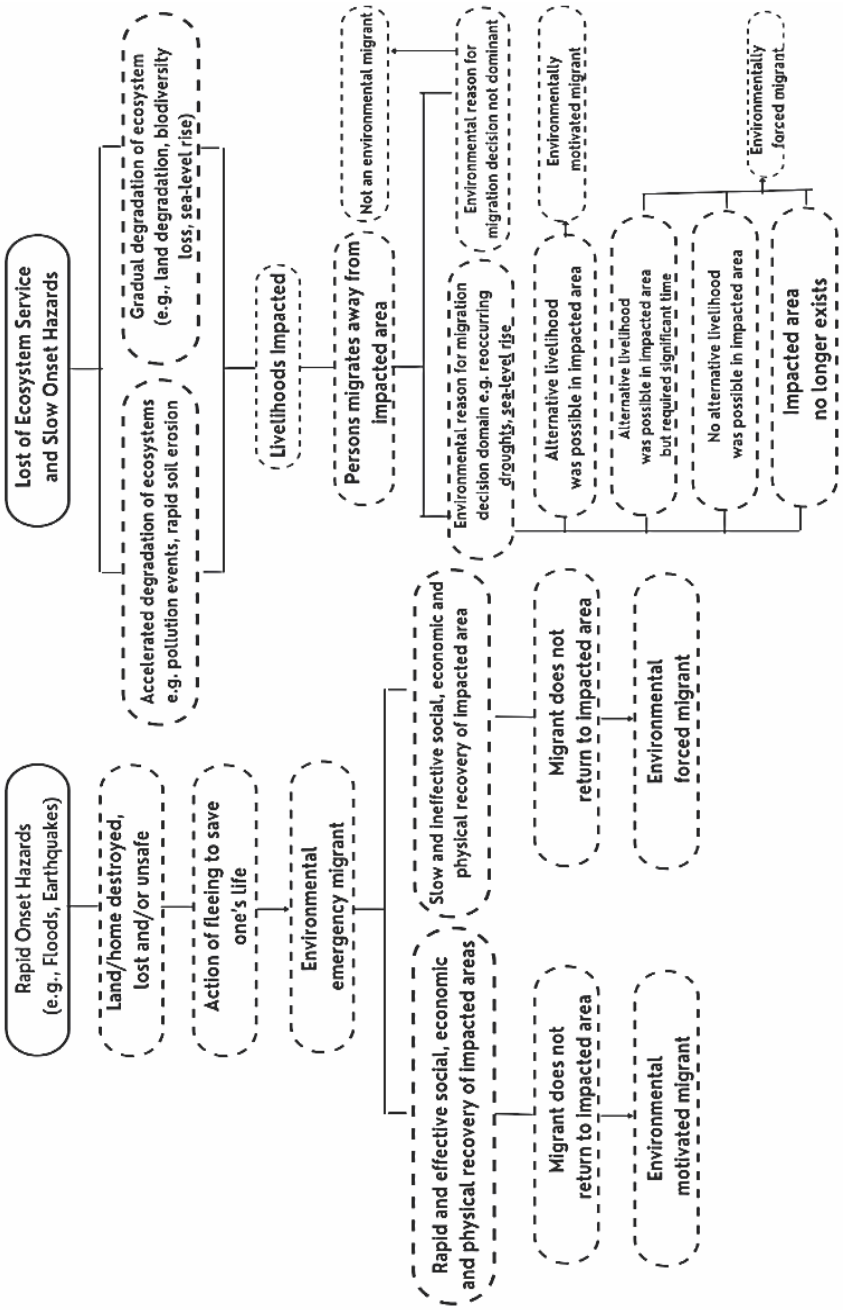

Figure 2: Renaud's conceptual framework to categorise and explain three types of climate induced migration. Source: Fabrice G.Renaud, Olivia Dun, Koko Warner, and Janos Bogardi, "A Decision Framework for Environmentally Induced Migration," *International Migration* 49, S1 (2011), https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2435.2010.00678.x.

livelihoods.[12] Renaud propose a conceptual framework to categorise and explain these three types of climate-induced migration.[13]

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From the Figure.2, it is evident that the starting point is the classification of natural events into two main categories: rapid-onset hazards (sudden-onset disasters) and loss of ecosystem services and slow-onset hazards. These classifications influence the way individuals and communities respond and adapt to climate-related challenges. First, considering rapid-onset hazards that lead to urgent migration (left side of the diagram), migrants can ultimately be divided into two groups: if they can return to their original location, they fall into the category of Environmentally Motivated Migrants (EMM). Although they may still be able to live in the same place, the disaster itself serves as a "trigger" prompting them to consider migration for a better and safer future; and if they cannot return to their original location, they are classified as Environmentally Forced Migrants (EFM), as they are left with no other option but to relocate permanently. On the other hand, loss of ecosystem services and slow-onset hazards (right side of the diagram) present a more complex scenario, as several factors must be taken into account. For example, if migration is not primarily driven by climate change (i.e., it plays only a minor or no role), the individuals are not classified as climate induced migrants. However, if climate change is the primary factor behind their migration, then the next consideration is whether the original location remains habitable, i.e., if it is still liveable, individuals fall into the EMM category, meaning they start planning for migration as a precautionary measure, and if environmental degradation has rendered the area uninhabitable, they are classified as EFM, where migration is no longer a choice but a necessity. It is important to note that the three categories of climate induced migrants often overlap. However, clearly distinguishing between displaced persons and climate migrants helps policymakers take action before large-scale displacement occurs. Identifying affected or at-risk populations allows for better targeted interventions, such as designing specific assistance programmes and developing legal frameworks to protect them.[16]

Migration as an Adaptation Strategy

The framework outlined above provides an analytical perspective on how humans adapt to climate change. However, some scholars argue that focusing on climate induced migration might overemphasise migration as an inevitable solution to climate related problems. This perspective, often referred to as alarmist, warns of mass displacement due to climate change, but critics contend that such extreme projections do not fully reflect reality. For instance, some people may choose to stay and adapt rather than migrate, and cultural perceptions of climate change vary across societies, influencing their adaptation strategies.[17] Moreover, migration is not always a viable option for everyone. High financial costs, emotional attachment to their homeland, vulnerability during migration, and restrictive legal frameworks often trap individuals in climate affected areas.[18] The irony is that those most affected by climate change—the poor, the marginalised, and the powerless—are often the least capable of migrating. As a result, migration should be seen as just one of many adaptation strategies, such as temporary migration for economic opportunities or seasonal work that provides financial support for those who remain in their home regions.[19] Despite the ongoing debates and lack of a clear consensus regarding climate induced displacement, it is undeniable that climate change continues to displace people worldwide. As mentioned earlier, areas previously unaffected by climate disasters are now becoming more vulnerable, while high-risk areas face even greater threats. Expanding knowledge on climate-induced migration is therefore critical, especially in "new disaster zones"—areas where people never expected to be affected by climate-related hazards until it happens unexpectedly.

Research Findings

Quantitative Results

This data set had 217 cases in total with one missing value who was indecisive whether to stay or relocate. The data were collected from four research sites in two provinces: Chiang Mai (Saraphi and Mae Kha) and Chiang Rai (Wiang Pa Pao and Mae Sai). The research team collected the data from November 17, 2024, to December 21, 2024. Important demographic information was reported together with chi-square: Test of independence results below to see which variables had a statistically significant impact on the decision to relocate (Table 1). The results showed that two variables were statistically significant: Ethnicity and Insurance. Gender, Education, Land Ownership, Nature of Area, and Age were not statistically significant. To elaborate, those who would relocate are non-Thai (67 per cent), while 33 per cent of Thais would relocate, $\chi^2(1, n = 216)$

Table 1: Results of Chi-Square: Test of Independence (*n* = 216)

Variables	Levels	Stay	Relocate		*df*	*P*	ϕ
		n (%)	*n* (%)	χ^2			
Gender	Female	115 (59%)	12 (57%)	0.026	1	.871	.011
	Male	80 (41%)	9 (43%)				
Ethnicity	Thai	114 (58%)	7 (33%)	4.859	1	.028	.150
	Others*	81 (42%)	14 (67%)				
Education	Uneducated	38 (20%)	7 (33%)	4.234	3	.237	.141
	Primary School	61 (32%)	6 (29%)				
	Elementary School	70 (36%)	8 (38%)				
	Higher Education±	23 (12%)	0 (0%)				
	Unconventional	*N/A*	*N/A*				
Land Ownership	No	123 (63%)	17 (81%)	2.656	1	.103	.111
	Yes	72 (37%)	4 (19%)				
Insurance	No	160 (82%)	21(100%)	4.498	1	.034	.144
	Yes	35 (18%)	0 (0%)				
Nature of Area	Agricultural≠	96 (49%)	12 (57%)	.475	1	.491	.047
	Urban※	99 (51%)	9 (43%)				
Age	≤ 25	7 (4%)	3 (14%)	5.806	3	.121	.164
	26–50	76 (39%)	9 (43%)				
	51–75	107 (55%)	9 (43%)				
	76–80	5 (3%)	0 (0%)				
Total		217	100				

[**Note.** The percentage is calculated by column;
* Others for example: Tai Khün, Chinese, Hmong, Akha, Not Specified Ethnicity.
±Higher Education, for example, Associate Degree/Higher Vocational Certificate, Bachelor's Degree, Higher than Bachelor's Degree;
≠Agricultural, refers to Wiang Pa Pao and Saraphi;
※Urban refers to Mae Sai and Mae Kha.]

Table 2: Demographic Information in Wiang Pa Pao, Mae Sai, Saraphi, and Mae Kha by Decision of Relocation

Variable	Levels	Wiang Pa Pao		Mae Sai		Saraphi		Mae Kha	
		Stay	Relocate	Stay	Relocate	Stay	Relocate	Stay	Relocate
		n (%)	*n* (%)	*n* (%)	*n* (%)	*n* (%)	*n* (%)	*n* (%)	*n* (%)
Gender	Female	23 (52%)	7 (70%)	36 (75%)	4 (67%)	27(52%)	1 (50%)	29 (57%)	0 (0%)
	Male	21 (48%)	3 (30%)	12 (25%)	2 (33%)	25 (48%)	1 (50%)	22 (43%)	3 (100%)
		$\chi^2 = 1.037$	$df = 1$	$\chi^2 = .193$	$df = 1$	$\chi^2 = .003$	$df = 1$	$\chi^2 = 3.685$	$df = 1$
		$p = .309$	$\phi = .139$	$p = .661$	$\phi = .060$	$p = .957$	$\phi = .007$	$p = .055$	$\phi = .261$
Ethnicity	Thai	2 (5%)	0 (0%)	25 (52%)	4 (67%)	52 (100%)	2 (100%)	35 (69%)	1 (33%)
	Others (Tai Khün, Chinese, Hmong, Akha, Not Specified Ethnicity)	42 (95%)	10 (100%)	23 (48%)	2 (33%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	16 (31%)	2 (67%)
		$\chi^2 = .472$	$df = 1$	$\chi^2 = .456$	$df = 1$	$\chi^2 = N/A$	$df = N/A$	$\chi^2 = 1.588$	$df = 1$
		$p = .492$	$\phi = .093$	$p = .499$	$\phi = .092$	$p = N/A$	$\phi = N/A$	$p = .208$	$\phi = .171$
Education	Uneducated	16 (36%)	5 (50%)	15 (31%)	1 (17%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	7 (14%)	1 (33%)
	Primary School	5 (11%)	2 (20%)	15 (31%)	2 (33%)	24 (46%)	1 (50%)	17 (33%)	1 (33%)
	Elementary School	21 (48%)	3 (30%)	10 (21%)	3 (50%)	19 (37%)	1 (50%)	20 (39%)	1 (33%)
	Higher Education±	2 (5%)	0 (0%)	5 (10%)	0 (0%)	9 (17%)	0 (0%)	7 (14%)	0 (0%)
	Unconventional	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	3 (6%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
		$\chi^2 = 1.889$	$df = 3$	$\chi^2 = 3.275$	$df = 4$	$\chi^2 = .447$	$df = 2$	$\chi^2 = 1.172$	$df = 3$
		$p = .596$	$\phi = .187$	$p = .513$	$\phi = .246$	$p = .800$	$\phi = .091$	$p = .760$	$\phi = .147$
Land Ownership	No	44 (100%)	10 (100%)	25 (52%)	4 (67%)	6 (12%)	1 (50%)	48 (94%)	2 (67%)
	Yes	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	23 (48%)	2 (33%)	46 (88%)	1 (50%)	3 (6%)	1 (33%)
		$\chi^2 = N/A$	$df = N/A$	$\chi^2 = .456$	$df = 1$	$\chi^2 = 2.525$	$df = 1$	$\chi^2 = 3.113$	$df = 1$
		$p = N/A$	$\phi = N/A$	$p = .499$	$\phi = .092$	$p = .112$	$\phi = -.216$	$p = .078$	$\phi = .240$
Insurance	No	38 (86%)	10 (100%)	36 (75%)	6 (100%)	43 (83%)	2 (100%)	43 (84%)	3 (100%)
	Yes	6 (14%)	0 (0%)	12 (25%)	0 (0%)	9 (17%)	0 (0%)	8 (16%)	0 (0%)
		$\chi^2 = 1.534$	$df = 1$	$\chi^2 = 1.929$	$df = 1$	$\chi^2 = .415$	$df = 1$	$\chi^2 = .552$	$df = 1$
		$p = .215$	$\phi = .169$	$p = .165$	$\phi = .189$	$p = .519$	$\phi = .088$	$p = .457$	$\phi = .101$
Age	≤ 25	3 (7%)	1 (10%)	0 (0%)	1 (17%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	4 (8%)	1 (33%)
	26–50	24 (55%)	6 (60%)	20 (42%)	3 (50%)	8 (15%)	0 (0%)	24 (47%)	0 (0%)
	51–75	17 (39%)	3 (30%)	26 (54%)	2 (33%)	42 (81%)	2 (100%)	22 (43%)	2 (67%)
	76–100	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	2 (4%)	0 (0%)	2 (4%)	0 (0%)	1 (2%)	0 (0%)
		$\chi^2 = 0.319$	$df = 2$	$\chi^2 = 8.783$	$df = 3$	$\chi^2 = 0.472$	$df = 2$	$\chi^2 = 3.812$	$df = 3$
		$p = .853$	$\phi = .077$	$p = .032$	$\phi = .403$	$p = .790$	$\phi = .093$	$p = .283$	$\phi = .266$
Total		54 (100%)		55 (100%)		54 (100%)		54 (100%)	

[**Note.** The percentage is calculated by column; ±Higher Education: Associate Degree/Higher Vocational Certificate, Bachelor's Degree]

Table 3: Results of Reliability Analysis for Pull Factors (*n*=217)

Factors	Items	Min	Max	*M*	*SD*
Economics	5 items (α = .796)	0.00	5.00	4.18	0.98
	1. Income or occupation is based in the current residence.	0.00	5.00	4.39	1.17
	2. The household has other occupations or sources of income in the same area.	0.00	5.00	3.71	1.70
	3. Income sustainability and stability.	0.00	5.00	4.05	1.30
	4. Convenience of continuing the same occupation without needing to adjust in a new area.	0.00	5.00	4.45	1.13
	5. Ownership of agricultural land and residential property.	0.00	5.00	4.29	1.23
Social and quality of life	4 items (α = .636)	1.75	5.00	4.34	0.68
	1. Sense of attachment to the community and people in the original area.	1.00	5.00	4.64	0.72
	2. Safety of life and property in the current living situation.	0.00	5.00	4.09	1.14
	3. Convenience in accessing amenities and services in the current area.	1.00	5.00	4.43	0.87
	4. Concerns about adjusting to or starting a new life in a new location.	0.00	5.00	4.22	1.16
Environment	5 items (α = .918)	0.00	5.00	4.08	1.15
	1. Abundance of water resources.	0.00	5.00	4.07	1.40
	2. Abundance of soil resources.	0.00	5.00	4.00	1.46
	3. Good air quality and safety.	0.00	5.00	4.18	1.09
	4. Biodiversity and ecosystems.	0.00	5.00	4.08	1.29
	5. Natural resources in the current area are sufficient and accessible.	0.00	5.00	4.05	1.34
Technology, infrastructure and systems	4 items (α = .751)	0.25	5.00	4.01	0.97
	1. Having a disaster alert system in place.	0.00	5.00	3.70	1.43
	2. Strengthening the house structure and ensuring an efficient drainage system.	0.00	5.00	4.33	0.95
	3. Having tools and technology for managing flood disasters in the community.	0.00	5.00	4.14	1.14
	4. Having tools and technology for managing flood disasters in the household.	0.00	5.00	3.85	1.54
Government policies and measures	4 items (α = .826)	0.25	5.00	4.02	0.97
	1. The government/local authorities provide prompt and adequate disaster relief.	0.00	5.00	4.21	1.04
	2. The government/local authorities have ongoing recovery plans for communities and housing post-flood.	0.00	5.00	4.06	1.22
	3. The government/local authorities provide financial or resource support to enhance housing safety.	0.00	5.00	4.24	1.10
	4. The government/local authorities offer guidance and training on disaster risk management.	0.00	5.00	3.59	1.42
Overall Pull Factor	22 items (α = .860)	1.45	5.00	4.13	0.63

Table 4: Results of Reliability Analysis for Push Factors (*n*=217)

Factors	Items
Economics	4 items (α = .844)
	1. Financial debt burden. 2. Loss of production/income. 3. The family has sufficient funds for relocation. 4. Job opportunities in the new area.
Social and quality of life	4 items (α = .883)
	1. Health impacts on the respondent and family during the flooding. 2. Acquaintances, relatives, or groups with similar identity and culture from the original area in the new location. 3. Convenience of accessing healthcare services and amenities in the new area. 4. The new area offers a safe environment for physical and mental well-being.
Environment	5 items (α = .958)
	1. The community faces frequent and worsening flooding. 2. The new area has abundant water. 3. The new area has abundant soil. 4. Disaster safety in the new area. 5. Accessible abundant natural resources.
Technology, infrastructure, and systems	4 items (α = .978)
	1. Access to infrastructure in the new area, including roads, transport, and utilities. 2. Having an effective disaster warning system. 3. The community has flood management tools and technology. 4. The household has flood management tools and technology.
Government policies and measures	4 items (α = .898)
	1. Government orders or measures mandating relocation. 2. The government/local authorities protect relocation rights during flood situations. 3. The government/local authorities provide financial or resource support for relocation. 4. The government/local authorities have measures to provide safe new housing.
Overall Push Factor	21 items (α = .968)

4.859, $p = .028$, $\phi = .150$. Interestingly, those who would relocate did not have insurance (100%), $\chi^2(1, n = 216) = 4.498$, $p = .034$, $\phi = .144$. Based on the interpretation of phi or Cramer's *V*, effects of .150 and .144 are considered in between small (.10) and medium (.30) effect.[20]

Next, we explore the results for each community to see which factors had an impact on the decision to relocate as each site had unique characteristics (Table 2). The results showed that only Age in Mae Sai was statistically significant, $\chi^2(3, n = 216) = 8.783$, $p = .032$, $\phi = .403$. The effect of .403 is

considered in between medium (.30) and large (.50) effect.[21] The other variables were not statistically significant. Furthermore, the research team also collected data related to pull and push factors. The research assumed these factors play an important role on their decision whether to relocate. There were five pull factors and five push factors. Each of which consisted of items in each sub-factor elaborated in Tables 3 and 4. The study examined the impact of each pull and push factor on the decision to stay and relocate. The binary logistic regression was performed on pull factors as one model and another regression model on push factors.

Table.5: Results of Binary Logistic Regression Analysis for Predicting the Decision to Stay based on Pull Factors (*n*=216)

1.

Variables	*B*[a]	*SE B*		*p*	*OR*
Economics	**-0.408**	**0.221**	**3.423**	**.064**	**0.665**
Social	**-1.417**	**0.370**	**14.701**	**.000**	**0.242**
Environment	**0.308**	**0.252**	**1.502**	**.220**	**1.361**
Technology	**0.533**	**0.362**	**2.172**	**.141**	**1.704**
Government	**-.037**	**0.353**	**0.011**	**.916**	**0.963**

Table.6: Results of Binary Logistic Regression Analysis for Predicting the Decision to Relocate based on Push Factors (*n*=216)

Variables	*B*[a]	*SE B*		*p*	*OR*
Economics	**-0.419**	**0.204**	**4.215**	**.040**	**0.658**
Social	**1.186**	**0.407**	**8.506**	**.004**	**3.275**
Environment	**-0.042**	**0.387**	**0.012**	**.913**	**0.959**
Technology	**0.119**	**0.413**	**0.083**	**.774**	**1.126**
Government	**0.324**	**0.336**	**0.926**	**.336**	**1.382**

The regression results were reported in Table 5 and 6. The binary logistic regression model was statistically significant, χ^2 (5, n = 216) = 19.800, p = .001, *Nagelkerke's* R^2 = .186. The model explained 18.6% of the variance in the decision to stay and correctly classified 90.7% of cases. After controlling the other predictors in the model, Social Pull Factor was statistically significant (p < .001, *OR* = 0.242). The odds that a person would relocate are 0.242 times as great as that the odds that a person with one fewer score on Social Pull Factor would stay. Please note that Economics Pull Factor was marginally significant (p = .064, *OR* = 0.665). The odds that a person would stay are 0.665 times as great as that the odds that a person with one fewer score on Economics Pull Factor.

The binary logistic regression model was statistically significant, χ^2 (5, n = 216) = 32.301, p < .001, *Nagelkerke's* R^2 = .295. The model explained 29.5% of the variance in the decision to relocate and correctly classified 89.8% of cases. After controlling the other predictors in the model, Social Push Factor was statistically significant (p = .004, *OR* = 3.275). The odds that a person would relocate are 3.275 times greater than the odds that a person with one fewer score on Social Push Factor would relocate. Social Pull Factor was statistically

significant, but the direction was opposite. Economic Push Factor was statistically significant (p = .040, OR = 0.658). The odds that a person would relocate are 0.658 times as great as that the odds that a person with one fewer score on Economics Push Factor. The direction was similar to Economics Pull Factor.

Qualitative Results

The flood disaster that occurred between September and October 2024 in certain areas of Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai provinces, Thailand, was unprecedented in its severity. As a result, a portion of the population has experienced a sense of insecurity about continuing to live in their current locations. This has led to a growing tendency toward displacement or migration, driven by the impacts of natural disasters and climate change. Among those affected by disasters, certain groups are particularly vulnerable because they already face pre-existing difficulties and limitations in their daily lives. When disasters strike, these individuals experience compounded hardships, making their situations even more precarious. These vulnerable groups include the poor, persons with disabilities, the elderly, non-citizen individuals, and children and youth who may not yet have full autonomy in decision-making. In this study, the researcher refers to these populations as Vulnerable Groups.

When providing relief and support to vulnerable groups, it is crucial to consider their distinct needs, which differ from those of the general population, and to implement measures that prevent further negative impacts should disasters occur again. The objective of this research is to gain a deeper understanding of the challenges, needs, and coping strategies of vulnerable groups in disaster situations, the types of support that would be beneficial to them in the future, and their specific needs if they are required to permanently migrate due to climate change. The study focuses on the following vulnerable populations: children and youth (ages 13-18), elderly individuals with frail health, persons with disabilities, bedridden patients, and stateless persons. Each of these groups faces distinct challenges and has unique needs.

For children and youth, their primary difficulty is a lack of understanding of disasters, especially among younger children. They also suffer from disruptions in education, as disasters often lead to prolonged school closures and damage to educational materials. Older youth may begin to consider migration as an option due to concerns about the risks of future disasters and uncertainty about their long-term prospects. However, they often cannot make these decisions independently and must follow the choices made by their parents or guardians.

Elderly individuals often struggle with evacuation and flood response. Those living alone may face difficulties escaping in time if no one is available to assist them. Additionally, they often require regular medication for chronic illnesses, and an insufficient supply can lead to serious health complications. In terms of migration, most elderly individuals prefer to remain in their communities due to their deep-rooted connections with the people and places

around them. If they own land and a home, their reluctance to relocate is even stronger. Therefore, providing support for elderly individuals is best achieved by helping them adapt in place rather than encouraging migration. If relocation becomes necessary, it should be to areas with similar environmental and social conditions to minimize disruption to their lives.

People with disabilities and bedridden patients face some of the greatest difficulties during disasters. They are often unable to evacuate on their own, and relocation is significantly more challenging due to mobility limitations. Some require wheelchairs, while others remain bedridden at all times. A major issue is that emergency response systems are often ill prepared to provide adequate evacuation assistance due to limited personnel and specialized equipment. This is understandable, as many communities have never encountered such situations before. However, improving disaster preparedness and response strategies for people with disabilities should be a top priority. Another key factor is early warning systems, which must be highly effective. If vulnerable individuals can evacuate before floodwater rises, the process becomes significantly easier for both the affected individuals and their caregivers.

Regarding migration, individuals with disabilities often prefer to remain in their communities if they have access to strong local support systems. For example, in Chom Phoo Subdistrict, Saraphi District, Chiang Mai, a local disability service center provides ongoing assistance, including daily living support and access to mobility aids. As a result, many people with disabilities in this community feel confident in staying, despite disaster risks. However, in communities without such support systems, individuals with disabilities may consider migrating to areas where they can receive better assistance. Nevertheless, many remain hesitant due to their deep ties to their communities.

Lastly, non-Thai citizen individuals face significant legal and social barriers during disasters. They often struggle with issues related to accessing financial aid, healthcare, and the right to relocate, all of which are linked to their legal status. Many are deeply concerned about their ability to earn a living and secure land tenure due to unclear government policies. Since disaster-induced displacement is still a relatively new issue for this group of populations, there remains considerable uncertainty regarding their rights and available support mechanisms. Each of these vulnerable groups experiences disasters in unique ways, requiring tailored support strategies. While some individuals may choose to migrate to seek a safer and more stable future, others may prefer to stay due to personal, economic, or legal constraints. Therefore, disaster response and adaptation policies must account for these diverse needs, ensuring that no one is left behind.

Discussion

The findings from this study highlight the complex and multifaceted nature of disaster induced displacement among communities in Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai. While quantitative analysis provides statistical evidence of key factors

influencing relocation decisions, the qualitative findings offer a deeper understanding of how different social groups experience displacement, revealing critical vulnerabilities and policy gaps that require urgent attention.

Demographic Factors and Their Relationship to Migration

Ethnicity and Migration

Ethnicity emerged as a statistically significant determinant of migration decisions. The results indicate that non-Thai individuals were significantly more likely to relocate compared to Thai respondents, $\chi^2(1, n = 216) = 4.859$, $p = .028$, $\phi = .150$. Specifically, 67 per cent of those who chose to migrate were Thai respondents, whereas 33 per cent were non-Thai. This suggests that non-Thai populations, potentially including migrant workers or ethnic minority groups, may experience greater vulnerability and less capacity to remain in disaster-affected areas due to economic, legal, or social constraints.

Insurance Status and Migration

Insurance coverage was another significant factor influencing migration. The study found that 100% of those who migrated did not have insurance coverage, $\chi^2(1, n = 216) = 4.498$, $p = .034$, $\phi = .144$. This suggests that individuals without financial protection against disaster related losses were more likely to seek relocation as a coping strategy, possibly due to an inability to recover from damages incurred during the flooding.

Gender and Migration

The results showed no statistically significant relationship between gender and migration decisions, $\chi^2(1, n = 216) = 0.026$, $p = .871$, $\phi = .011$. This indicates that men and women were equally likely to stay or migrate, suggesting that other factors, such as economic opportunities and social networks, may have a stronger influence on decision making than gender alone.

Education and Migration

Education level did not show a statistically significant impact on migration decisions, $\chi^2(3, n = 216) = 4.234$, $p = .237$, $\phi = .141$). Although individuals with lower educational attainment might face greater economic challenges, their migration choices were not significantly different from those with higher education levels. This suggests that disaster response strategies should consider other socio-economic and structural factors beyond education in shaping migration patterns.

Land Ownership and Migration

Land ownership was not found to be a statistically significant determinant of migration, $\chi^2(1, n = 216) = 2.656, p = .103, \phi = .111$). While those without land ownership (81 per cent) were more likely to relocate than those who owned land (19 per cent), the association did not reach statistical significance. This suggests that land tenure alone may not be a primary factor in migration decisions, and other factors, such as economic stability and social networks, may play a more dominant role.

Age and Migration

Age was generally not a significant factor in migration decisions across the study sample. However, in Mae Sai, age was found to be statistically significant in predicting relocation decisions, $\chi^2(3, n = 216) = 8.783, p = .032, \phi = .403$), indicating a moderate to large effect. Individuals, particularly those aged 26 to 75 years old, were more likely to migrate than older individuals. This finding aligns with existing research suggesting that younger populations are generally more mobile and adaptable to relocation, whereas older individuals may have stronger attachments to their communities and established livelihoods.

Factors Influencing the Decision to Stay or Relocate

The decision to stay or migrate following a disaster is shaped by a combination of economic, social, environmental, technological, and governmental factors. This study, based on survey data from 217 respondents across four sites in Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai, utilized chi-square tests and logistic regression analysis to identify the statistically significant determinants influencing relocation decisions.

Economic Factors

Economic considerations played a crucial role in both staying and relocating. Ownership of agricultural land and stable income sources in the affected area were strong pull factors encouraging residents to stay. Survey results showed that economic stability ($M = 4.05$, $SD = 1.30$) and the convenience of maintaining current occupations ($M = 4.45$, $SD = 1.13$) were highly rated among those choosing to stay. Conversely, economic hardships, such as financial debt and income loss, were identified as push factors influencing migration decisions ($p = .040$, $OR = 0.658$), though the effect size was modest.

Social and Quality of Life Factors

Social factors emerged as the strongest determinant in the decision-making process. Attachment to the community ($M = 4.64$, $SD = 0.72$) and concerns about adjusting to a new environment ($M = 4.22$, $SD = 1.16$) significantly

influenced the decision to remain. The binary logistic regression analysis found that social pull factors were statistically significant ($p < .001$, $OR = 0.242$), indicating that strong community ties reduce the likelihood of relocation. However, social push factors, such as access to healthcare and safety concerns in a new location, increased the likelihood of migration ($p = .004$, $OR = 3.275$).

Land Ownership and Infrastructure

Contrary to expectations, land ownership was not a statistically significant determinant of relocation decisions ($p = .103$). However, infrastructure considerations, such as flood management systems and disaster preparedness, influenced decisions. Strengthening house structures ($M = 4.33$, $SD = 0.95$) and access to flood management technology ($M = 4.14$, $SD = 1.14$) were identified as important factors supporting decisions to stay. The presence of infrastructure in potential relocation sites, such as roads and utilities, also played a role in migration considerations ($M = 3.18$, $SD = 1.87$).

Government Policies and Support

Government intervention, including financial aid and relocation policies, played a moderate role in influencing decisions. The availability of disaster relief ($M = 4.21$, $SD = 1.04$) and housing safety support ($M = 4.24$, $SD = 1.10$) were noted as relevant pull factors. However, mandatory relocation policies ($M = 3.22$, $SD = 1.61$) and support for safe housing in new locations ($M = 3.37$, $SD = 1.78$) were also significant push factors in migration decisions. This study highlights that disaster-induced displacement is not solely driven by environmental hazards but is instead shaped by a complex interplay of economic stability, social cohesion, infrastructure availability, and government policies. The findings underscore the importance of community-based resilience strategies and targeted policy interventions to support vulnerable populations in disaster-prone regions.

Vulnerabilities Across Different Social Groups

The qualitative analysis reveals that different groups experience disaster induced displacement unequally, with pre-existing vulnerabilities intensifying the effects of natural disasters. Elderly individuals face mobility constraints and greater attachment to their homes and communities, making relocation a less desirable option. However, limited access to healthcare, inadequate disaster preparedness, and weak support systems leaves them highly vulnerable if they remain in disaster prone areas. People with disabilities and bedridden patients experience severe challenges during evacuation and resettlement. Many emergency response systems are not equipped to handle their needs, leading to increased dependence on family members or caregivers. Children and youth face disruptions in education and social instability, with older youth considering migration due to uncertain future prospects. However, their decisions are often

dictated by family circumstances rather than personal choice. Non-citizens and ethnic minorities face significant legal and social barriers that limit their access to financial aid, healthcare, and relocation support. Their uncertain legal status further exacerbates their vulnerability, making them more susceptible to forced displacement without adequate government protection. These findings underscore the need for targeted policy interventions that address the specific challenges of vulnerable populations, ensuring that adaptation and relocation strategies are inclusive and equitable.

Migration as an Adaptive Strategy vs. Forced Displacement

The results demonstrate that not all migration is forced, and for some individuals, relocation is a strategic response to environmental degradation rather than an immediate reaction to disaster. This aligns with Renaud's classification of Environmentally Motivated Migrants (EMM)—those who pre-emptively move due to gradual environmental degradation. However, for others, especially those with limited resources and social capital, migration is not a proactive choice but rather a necessity imposed by worsening living conditions (Environmentally Forced Migrants, EFM). While some scholars argue that climate change narratives often overemphasize displacement, the study's findings indicate that for many, migration remains one of the few viable adaptation strategies. However, barriers such as economic costs, legal constraints, and social ties prevent many from relocating, leading to a situation where the most vulnerable populations are also the most immobile.[22] The irony is that those most affected by climate change often have the least capacity to move, reinforcing the need for stronger governmental support, legal protections, and economic incentives for relocation.

The Role of Policy and Governance in Managing Disaster Displacement

The findings highlight critical gaps in Thailand's disaster response and migration policies. Existing legal frameworks, including the Disaster Prevention and Mitigation Act (2007) and the Disaster Risk Management Plan (2015), primarily focus on short-term relief rather than long-term displacement solutions. Additionally, Thailand lacks a clear definition and legal recognition of environmentally displaced persons (EDPs), leaving many communities without adequate protection and resettlement assistance. The government's role in providing infrastructure, financial support, and relocation guidance was also identified as a key factor influencing migration decisions. The logistic regression results showed that government policies as a push factor were not statistically significant, suggesting that existing measures may be insufficient or ineffective in addressing long-term displacement needs. The lack of well structured relocation programs means that many affected communities must rely on informal social networks or community based initiatives, such as homestay projects, to mitigate their vulnerabilities. To enhance climate resilience and

disaster response, policy reforms should focus on: establishing legal recognition of climate-displaced people to ensure access to compensation and resettlement support; strengthening disaster early warning systems and ensuring that they are accessible to vulnerable populations (e.g., people with disabilities and elderly individuals); improving financial and insurance mechanisms to reduce economic burdens on displaced individuals; developing community led adaptation strategies that empower local residents to participate in decision-making processes regarding relocation and disaster preparedness.

Conclusion and Future Research Directions

This study demonstrates that disaster induced displacement in Thailand is shaped by a combination of social, economic, and environmental factors. While some groups can make voluntary migration choices, others are trapped in high-risk areas due to legal, financial, or social constraints. The evidence suggests that current policies are inadequate in addressing the complexities of disaster-induced migration, particularly for marginalized and vulnerable populations. Future research should explore the long-term social and economic impacts of displacement on affected communities; the role of climate resilient urban planning in mitigating migration pressures; and development of innovative policy frameworks to support displaced populations. Ultimately, ensuring a just and equitable approach to climate induced displacement will require integrated, multi-sectoral responses that prioritize both adaptation and resilience building strategies.

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Water Resilience, Ecological Diplomacy, and Human Security: A Transnational Governance Assessment on the Mekong River

By

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Water as an ecological element progressively occupies a prominent position in the global political configuration, not merely as a biological prerequisite, but equally as a resource which is negotiated, contested, and instrumentalised in the power relations among countries.[1] In the contemporary context, water has emerged as a uniquely sensitive geopolitical commodity, particularly in the setting of developing nations with complex transboundary governance regimes.[2] The Mekong River, one of the most important and longest transboundary waterways in Southeast Asia stretches over 4,800 kms. through Cambodia, China, Laos, Thailand, Myanmar, and Vietnam with competing interests in its water utilisation.[3] Water infrastructure development such as large dams exposes the Mekong basin to pivotal obstacles: biodiversity reduction, ecosystem degradation, and conflicts between downstream and upstream countries that reveal the disparity in access and power distribution.[4] In the midst of these trends, water security can no further be narrowly conceived as supply reliability, but rather as a political space where various stakeholders negotiate in a context characterised by institutional, ecological and historical disparity.[5]

Discussions on management of the Mekong focuses on conflicts of interest across state borders,[6] resource diplomacy,[7] influence of Chinese dominance on downstream regions[8] within a formal institutional framework, while approaches that consider water in the context of ecological diplomacy and human security are still relatively insufficient.[9] In fact, ecological dislocation, climate change, and unsustainable resource exploitation have had a profound impact on local communities, especially vulnerable groups and indigenous peoples whose livelihoods depend entirely on river ecosystems.[10] There has been no comprehensive study incorporating ecological diplomacy,

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water security, and human security into a single analytical and conceptual framework.[11] Previous studies have focused on the significance of multi-actor collaboration in transnational river governance, but failed to systematically examine how human security narratives and ecological forces can reshape regional diplomacy as well as the governance legitimacy itself.[12] This study aims to bridge this empirical and conceptual gaps. In particular, it endeavors to critically assess the transnational stewardship of the Mekong River in the justice-based water security paradigm; evaluating the limits and potential of ecological diplomacy as an alternative mechanism for addressing resource disputes; and exploring the governance impacts on human security with a spotlight on vulnerable communities affected by structural interventions and development policies.

This study takes an integrative analytical approach that synthesses geopolitical, humanistic, and ecological perspectives on transboundary river governance. In the absence of conventional models that tend to privilege institutional and technocratic considerations, this research brings a critical lens to the structural inequalities and complex power relations that underpin international water regimes. With a policy analysis method based on transnational case studies and multidisciplinary conceptual approach, this study advances academic discourse on international river governance and provides substantive insights for regional organisations, local communities, and policymakers in their endeavors to achieve inclusive, ethical, and sustainable water security.

Theoretical Framework

Understanding the transnational governance complexity of the Mekong River mandates the adoption of a theoretical framework that is more than merely multidisciplinary. It must incorporate conceptual instruments that reflect epistemological diversity, ontological depth and reflective acuity about institutional structures, power relations, ecological crises, and the affected communities' concerns. In this instance, this study develops a conceptual framework that encompasses three primary perspectives, namely ecological diplomacy theory, water security theory, and the human security approach. These three perspectives establish a conceptual foundation that mutually reinforces and constitutes an analytical platform for grasping the water resource management dynamics in the Mekong River Basin, which is characterised by asymmetrical interests, conflict, and global ecological challenges.

Water security theory offers a preliminary insight into how water resources involve more than technical problems of demand and supply; they instead shape a contestation of interests shaped by institutional, unequal geopolitical, and legal frameworks.[13] In cross border landscapes such as the Mekong, water security must be interpreted as a socio-political phenomenon involving distribution of, access to, and control over water as a basis of life, as well as the ability of ecological and social structures to withstand the repercussions of exploitative development, climate change, and policy inequality.[14] This approach is

grounded in the premise that equitable water allocation is a reflection of inclusive political legitimacy and ethical governance.[15] Water security in relation to the Mekong is inextricably linked to the structural tension between upstream states such as China, which has control over dam infrastructure, and downstream ones such as Cambodia and Vietnam, which depend on the water supply.[16] This disparity portrays an unbalanced water political landscape and generates access discrepancy to essential resources that touch the fundamental element of human right to live.[17]

However, understanding the issue merely from the water security angle is unsatisfactory without considering how the interests are negotiated. This is where the pertinence of ecological diplomacy emerges as a perspective that expands the diplomacy arena from the elitist-state realm to a collaborative realm engaging local communities, non-state actors, activist networks, and epistemic groups that serve a pivotal role in formulating environmental values, knowledge, and discourse.[18] In this paradigm, diplomacy is not limited to formal state representation, but rather a deliberative process that facilitates the value transition towards more democratic ecological governance.[19] In the Mekong setting, this approach is paramount because formal mechanisms including the Mekong River Commission are frequently limited in terms of authority and mandate, particularly in dealing with the unilateral dam projects by Laos and China that have considerable social and ecological ramifications.[20] Ecological diplomacy frames the cross border articulation of ecological priorities, introducing environmental norms as a new pillar of regional negotiations, and uniting cross border community solidarity.[21]

The human security concept emphasises the normative and ethical dimensions of security, complementing the former two approaches by concentrating on the impact of policies on personal lives, especially those of vulnerable communities often disregarded in development and interstate diplomacy discourses.[22] This idea, which was elaborated as a critique of the militaristic and elitist traditional security rhetoric, situates humans at the nucleus of all policies, and thus asserts that security is indissociable from access to a healthy environment, clean water, sustainable food, and a worthwhile life.[23] In the Mekong setting, this insight opens up avenues for scrutinising how traditional fishers, indigenous communities, women, and smallholder farmers experience ecological insecurity due to policy interventions insensitive to local circumstances.[24] Human security is concerned equally with the empowerment of communities and protection of individuals to determine their own environmental destiny through participatory and inclusive practices.[25]

By synthesising ecological diplomacy, water security, and human security, this study formulates a conceptual framework that can be termed as transnational socio-ecological governance. This enables the analysis of institutional mechanisms, policy structures, and socio-ecological repercussions of multinational water development projects within a reflexive and holistic thinking system. This model also establishes a basis for measuring the participation of actors, policy legitimacy, and the fair allocation of effects. It also facilitates the transformation of governance from a technocratic and

hierarchical system to a more dialogic, adaptive, and environmentally sustainable structure. With this approach, theory is transformed from merely an analytical instrument into an intellectual project for envisioning regional arrangements based on greater ethics, humanity, and justice.

Research Methodology

This study is conducted utilising a qualitative-critical methodological frame with a reflective-transformative orientation, to capture the geopolitical and socio-ecological complexities surrounding the Mekong River system. The investigation goes beyond the mere objective of describing reality and explores the structural and relational dimensions of cooperation as well as conflict in cross border water regimes. This necessitates a methodological orientation that does not rely on pseudo-neutrality but instead asserts the research position as part of a praxeological endeavor that favors social sustainability, ecological justice, and respect for human rights.[26]

Paradigm and Approach

This case builds on the critical constructivism paradigm, which postulates that social reality (including natural resource tenure) is configured by dominant narratives, power relations, and discursive structures that pervade international diplomacy and policy making.[27] Thus, the approach utilised is a multilevel embedded case study, which enables the elucidation of the relationship between macro actors (regional entities such as MRC and China), meso actors (national policy makers), and micro actors (local communities). This model aligns with the multi-scalar governance model, which accentuates the interconnectedness between analytical levels that are traditionally treated separately.[28]

Data Collection Design

To ensure the richness and depth of the data, this survey uses a data acquisition strategy incorporating semi-structured in-depth interviews, analysis of strategic documents, and triangulation with secondary data from credible empirical and scientific literature. These three streams were selected not only for the purposes of validation, but in order to encompass the complexity of the experiences and narratives that comprise the contested terrain of inter-state water administration.

Analysis of Regional Policies and Strategic Documents

The documents reviewed consist of dam development reports (such as Xayaburi and Don Sahong), interstate treaties (including the 1995 Mekong Agreement), regional diplomatic documents (MRC communiqués, ASEAN statements), and national regulations concerning water resources in the Mekong region's five leading countries. The analysis concentrated on a critical reading

of development rationalisation logic, policy framing, and the representation of water security in the institutional structure.[29]

Semi-Structured Interviews (SSI)

Interviews were completed with 25 key respondents selected stratificationally and purposively, representing five categories: (1) officials from government agencies concerned with the environment and water management; (2) members of the regional organisations and MRC; (3) academics and researchers specialising on the Mekong; (4) representatives of environmental organisations and civil society; together with (5) community figures from relevant localities. The objective of the interviews is to explore the actors' perceptions, understanding, as well as strategic or ethical positions on ecological justice issues including water security.[30]

Strengthening Contextual Empirical Evidence and Secondary Data

Secondary data was compiled from reports published by multilateral institutions (UNDP Mekong Institute, UNESCO), reputable international scientific journals, water vulnerability databases, human development reports (HDI), and satellite imagery related to river sedimentation and flow fluctuations. This data is employed to generate a solid contextual framework, augment the ecological and spatial analysis, also as a triangulation mechanism for the often-elusive policy narratives.[31]

Data Analysis Techniques

The analysis procedure is executed through two complementary approaches. First, Critical Discourse Analysis is adopted to evaluate how the narratives of cooperation, resilience, and peace diplomacy are valorized, formulated, as well as disseminated in media reports, policy texts, along with formal documents. The focal points of the analysis incorporate ideological structure, intertextuality, and the configuration of power relations that are interpreted in the narrative structure of the policy.[32] Secondly, Frame Analysis is incorporated to discover how important stakeholders conceptualize the Mekong River issue: whether it is a security dilemma, a humanitarian crisis, a development issue, or an ecological injustice.[33]

Epistemic Formula and Justification

The analytical model in this examination is manifested in the following formula:

$$TGS(Mekong) = f[WS \times ED \times HS \times AP]$$

[TGS = Socio-Ecological Governance; AP = Actor Positioning; HS = Human Security; ED = Ecological Diplomacy; WS = Water Security]

This equation is not a predictive model, but more of a logical representation of the interplay between the conceptual elements delineated in the theoretical framework. It illustrates that the intricacies of river governance cannot be understood without unpacking the unraveling of the dominant narratives, position of actors, and the tension between sustainable development and sustainability.

Ethics, Validity, and Researcher Position

The data validity is maintained through the source and method triangulation, as well as verification strategies in the context of member checking to key respondents. In ethical aspects, this study upholds the values of informed consent, non-maleficence, informant anonymity, and guarantees that the data is applied for justice advocacy scientific purposes, not to reproduce narrative domination. The researcher affirms a reflective position as an entity that supports the principles of human security and ecological sustainability, without jeopardising methodological logic and academic integrity.

Result

Power Over Flow: Hegemony Water Security and Epistemic Deformation in the Mekong River Transnational Governance

In contemporary geopolitical construction water security ceases to be inclusive and neutral ecological protection system. It has materialised as an enunciation of power formulated through discursive distortion, infrastructure, and mechanisms for the expulsion of powerless actors from the governance sphere. In the Mekong River case, the concept of water security (WS) has witnessed a fundamental evolution: from the premise of collective survival to a strategic device for dominant countries to legitimize their dominance over the regional ecological regime. China, as an upstream player, has structured water hegemony through a sequence of mega dam projects (such as Nuozhadu and Xiaowan) with a cumulative storage capacity of over 36 billion cubic meters. These dams go beyond controlling water flow to reconstruct the discourses of stability and development through the spectacles of energy nationalism and technocracy. The Mekong River Commission (2022) reported that fluctuations in water discharge resulting from upstream dam operations caused flow deviations of up to 48 per cent during the monsoon season, fish spawning, disrupting cropping cycles, and natural sedimentation downstream. A technical official from a provincial water authority declared explicitly: "The water endurance that China contemplates is the durability of storage, not the endurance of supply. It is regulated endurance, not collaborative survival."[34] This reiterates that the WS idea in Mekong context is not founded on the principle of regional cooperation, but on the model of measured exclusion, which is guided by the logic of absolute sovereignty and geopolitical calculations. This entirely validates the hydro-hegemony model where control over water is executed through the

power of ideas (development narratives), physical force (dams) and diplomatic force (the absence of multilateral consultation).[35]

This epistemic dislocation produces a narrative construction that equates reliability of supply with robustness, while disregarding the dimensions of ecological security and spatial justice for local residents. Water security becomes "security for the state" not for the community. According to an analyst from a Thai environmental NGO, "information is a device of authority. If water is the lifeblood, then data is its heartbeat. Without access to data, downstream societies are merely patients awaiting their destiny."[36] This assertion echoes what is labeled as an epistemic monopoly, where technical literacy is leveraged to silence the community's ecological experience. The upstream state not solely monopolises dams, but additionally the prestigious dialogue about the determining rights to regulate streams, definition of hydrological resilience, and time frames for rivers to be classified as safe or hazardous. In this respect, WS is no longer a distributed function, but a concentrated function that serves to reinforce dominant attitudes in the governance formula as stipulated in the methodology segment. In addition, WS should positively interact with Human Security and Ecological Diplomacy to shape a fair as well as sustainable Socio-Ecological Governance (TGS). However, in practice, the Actor Positioning (AP) is severely unbalanced. WS is unilaterally manipulated, while HS and ED are simply rhetorical without any institutional capacity. The effects are very tangible at the local scale. In An Giang Province, a female farmer interviewed described a situation that exemplifies ecological desynchronisation: "This river has turned into a tap that only other countries can turn on. We can only wait, not knowing when we can plant or harvest."[37]

This crisis is neither only ecological nor existential. When the hydrological regime can no further be predicted by the affected communities because the control is inaccessible to them, the loss suffered is the deprivation of control over the environmental time. This is the finest form of structural colonization of the agrarian society's daily life. Strengthened by data from International Rivers (2021), this destruction is systemic: a reduction in fish population of up to 80 per cent in a decade, the deterioration of the reproductive cycle in endemic species, and the disappearance of natural sedimentation in floodplains. An environmental campaigner in Phnom Penh presented a more philosophical interpretation: "Water security means squat if it simply preserves water in reservoirs and enables human life to evaporate."[38] This assertion squarely confronts the sustainability rhetoric hypocrisy in regional diplomacy. Resilience unanchored by distribution and justice is not robustness, but domination. Genuine resilience is not purely flowing maintenance, but life assurance for communities that have for centuries fashioned their identities from the streams themselves.

Ecological Diplomacy in the Mekong River: The Representational Architecture of No Substantive Legitimacy

In the management of transverse resources, ecological diplomacy tends to be idealised as a moral-political instrument that unites the interests of the community, the state, and the ecosystem. However, in reality, particularly in the Mekong River estuary, this diplomacy generally operates as a collaboration simulacrum: representative in structure, but vacuous in substance. Instead of serving as an arena for balanced negotiation of ecological entitlements, Mekong diplomacy has evolved into an institutional artifice that produces discursive collaboration while perpetuating long institutionalised hierarchies of inequality. Normatively, the essence of the Mekong River Commission (MRC) is to facilitate cooperation between countries in achieving the sustainable development of the river in a cooperative and equitable manner. However, the institutional framework fails to have the authority to dictate strategic development projects such as dams or river canalisation. The MRC is nothing beyond a data regulator, not a decision authority. A specialised diplomat delineating the boundaries of the MRC's jurisdiction said that "we participate in forums, exchange data, and formulate reports. But the major decisions remain outside our negotiating table."[39] This revelation does not solely convey the tenuousness of the MRC system but also demonstrates the decision making procedure of the regional public body. Key decisions such as the construction of the Don Sahong and Xayaburi dams, which have an exceptionally large ecological repercussion, do not go through sufficient consultative measures. Meanwhile, diplomacy continues to be expressed in reassuringly inclusive rhetoric.

This predicament is entrenched in the epistemic supremacy of the technological state and its bureaucrats. The diplomatic discourse is relegated to a "mechanism for information exchange," rather than a deliberative process of politicising the ecological scope. Official statements such as the Joint Declaration on Sustainable Hydropower Development (2020) underline terminology such as "equitable cooperation," and "inclusive growth" but do not furnish a single representative model for incorporating local groups into the policy procedure. An ecologist from Chiang Rai said that "this water diplomacy is overly pristine, exceedingly sterile. But the fact is that it is completely chaotic. There is no mechanism to represent the community's concerns."[40] Here we are confronted with a paradox: diplomacy that textually promotes inclusivity encourages institutional segregation. The farmers, fishing community, women water managers, and indigenous peoples, those who are the intended subjects of river flow changes, are not only excluded from decision making processes, but are not even acknowledged as having ecological standing. In a representative interview, the chair of a fishing society in Kratie, Cambodia, said that "we are never included. There is no platform for people like us to participate. Decisions are imposed from high places, and the waters change where we reside."[41] This phrase is the apotheosis of critiques against systematically institutionalised epistemic foreclosure. When citizens not only

relinquish control over the water flow but also forfeit their position in the decision making arena, the diplomacy that prevails is one without legitimacy, without justice, without roots. The ecological diplomacy rhetoric in the Mekong issue, if not rectified, risks degenerating into a semantic maneuver: a symbolic commemoration of the technocratic and regional state involvement, while the afflicted parties remain in a situation of ecological defenselessness. Behind forums replete with formal diplomacy and meticulously written reports, the Mekong River endures fragmented ecosystems, a crumbling hydro-cultural unity, and disrupted species migration. In a discussion, a prominent scholar in Hanoi, reflected on the intellectual unease over this praxis of diplomacy said, "ecological diplomacy without public participation is an absurdity. It is attractive on paper, but meaningless in actual practice."[42] This analysis reiterates that diplomacy focuses solely on amplifying the state's representation and silencing community is merely a perpetuation of disparity in a more disguised version. In this logic, diplomacy functions not as an instrument for conflict settlement, but as a vehicle for the entrenchment of power. It sacrifices its ethical potential, abandons its anchors in social practice, and relinquishes its ecological validity. Consequently, in a critical scientific setting, the ecological diplomacy transition is absolutely indispensable: not only at the formal and technical stages, but also in the way of conceiving who has the prerogative to delineate the future of rivers. Veritable diplomacy should commence from the acknowledgment that local populations are not only victims, but also have ecological legitimacy, bearers of knowledge sovereignty, and full right to delineate their relationship towards rivers.

Neglected Human Security: Life Crisis, Ecological Dislocation, and Water Rights Injustice

In the transnational governance of Mekong River, the terminology of security has been dominated by the state logic for too long that commonly understood as the protection of infrastructure, stability of flow, and the national development progression. However, if security is considered only from the top down, without considering the reality of coastal communities, then what happens is not protection, but abandonment. And of all the most disenfranchised in this ecosystem, human security is the quietest, yet most paramount. For downstream societies who live along the Mekong River, water emergencies are not a theoretical dilemma, but a real calamity, silent and incessant. In villages across South Vietnam, Cambodia, and the Mekong delta, altered flows, degraded environmental quality, and fluctuating sedimentation have destabilised essential life loops: fishing, farming, drinking water, and household hygiene. The chair of a farmers' association in Kandal Province, Cambodia, made a poignant point: "We don't suffer from a scarcity of water because of the seasonal dry season. We suffer from a deficiency of water because the government has diverted the river in the wrong riverbed."[43] This claim not only uncovers an ecological misalignment but also alludes to a sovereignty misalignment. Villages are no longer the custodians or stakeholders

of the water infrastructure that sustains their existence. They are remodeled into targets of another state's strategic design, which relinquishes water not for general usage, but for the logics of sovereignty and unilateral investment.

These communities are even more vulnerable when it reaches the basic health and living standards. A report from International Rivers (2022) claims that up to 40 per cent of floodplain and coastal residents in the Mekong's lower basin have lost stable access to potable water, causing an upswing in waterborne ailments such as skin infections, chronic diarrhea, and malnutrition in children. In an interview with a Stung Treng community midwife, she poignantly lamented: "The kids in our hamlet can no longer drink safely from the Mekong. The river was once healing. And now it is a plague."[44] This revelation points to ecological demise as moral bankruptcy. When a water regime that was once a metaphor for life becomes a persistent menace, governance that does not prioritise human security has abandoned its ethical moorings. These people have forfeited not only their water, but more specifically their right to a healthy, fulfilled life, and decent. The economic angle is also alarming. The depletion of fish stocks following the derailment of the river sedimentation and spawning cycle has sparked a livelihood predicament among small-scale fishermen. As a conventional fisherwoman in Cần Thơ said that "the river resembles a loving mother. Now, she is unrecognisable. We do not know how to engage with her."[45] This excerpt represents ecological alienation when local knowledge gained over generations are rendered irrelevant by externally instigated ecosystem modification. For these peoples, the river's loss is much more than a resource, it is a memory, a temporal direction, and an interdependence with their environment. This is a kind of epistemic erosion that cannot be quantified by statistics or graphs. Human security in this instance extends to the right to define one's own vital cycle. When communities relinquish control over when to fish, when to plant, and when to evacuate due to artificial drought or flooding, the essential architecture of sovereign life disintegrates. They become denizens of rivers that no longer embrace them. What appears in policy frameworks as sustainable development has never genuinely involved the concerns of those hardest hit. They hardly ever consulted, scarcely solicited, and only tangentially mentioned in environmental reports. An indigenous woman from southern Laos puts it this eloquently: "We know how to coexist with the river. But no one questioned us. Our river was confiscated without a sentence."[46] This expression encapsulates the core realisation of this installment that human security is not a secondary statistic of development but rather the nucleus of ecological legitimacy. If water governance is constructed without reverence for the lives of susceptible constituencies, then every convention, treaty, and policy will be but an insubstantial structure which beautiful on parchment, inhumane in the trenches.

Narrative Inequality and Power Regimes: Reframing Actors in the Mekong River Socio-Ecological Governance

In the inter-boundary policy and diplomacy ecosystem, the role of actors is not restricted to being entities in an institutional hierarchy but also constitutes a power configuration that manifests through symbolic authority, access, and the aptitude to frame actuality. The structural asymmetry of administration of the Mekong River is unavoidable where the supremacy of the players is not only geographically oriented from the headwaters to the lower reaches but equally from the hub to the periphery in view of jurisdiction and discourse. Upstream regions, particularly China, have asserted themselves as hegemonic participants not strictly through the muscle of massive dam infrastructure, but more insidiously through their skill in shaping narratives. They not only purely regulate water volume but additionally control how water is calculated, perceived, and designated in policy structures. This is where power does not exercise direct coercion but rather uses the construction of technocratic verities to eliminate the plurality of river meanings. As a water resources scholar explained that "strong countries do not limit themselves to dams; they also have histories. And this is more decisive than numbers."[47] This phrase sheds light on the realisation that in the governance sector, narrative is the locus of power per se. Those who can formulate the interpretation of sustainable development, resilience or even crisis are those in the uppermost epistemic echelon. Upstream countries are not content owners, but the voices that are audible in the most regional discussions and credible diplomatic. The asymmetrical position of stakeholders is additionally reflected in dysfunctional negotiation mechanisms. Downstream countries, despite shouldering the greatest burden of ecological fluctuations, do not have comparable bargaining leverage. The MRC, which institutionally should be a counterbalancing structure, has only moral, in lieu of juridical standing. When the grievances of downstream riparians are presented, they are relegated to the status of social concerns in an addendum, not in the decision. An MRC official candidly admitted that "water negotiations here are not primarily about who is smartest. It is about who has control over data and timing."[48] Control over information is not just limited to technical details but extends to the authority over when data is disseminated, by whom, and in what format. Powerful countries delay the disclosure of data not because of limitations but because of their discretion to decide the political context of information sharing. In this regard, diplomacy does not operate as a negotiation, but as a performative stage where dominance is exhibited in the disguise of neutrality.

The main victims of this pattern are obviously not the elite nations but the peripheral peoples who are adversely affected by any decision but have no access to the policy making forum. In an encounter with a young indigenous man in Southern Laos, it emerged clearly how this hierarchical structure suffocates local intelligence: "*We realize that the river alters its course. But what is regarded as authentic is the report, not our experience."*[49] Local knowledge is not only disrespected but also delegitimised. They are not granted the platform to

become epistemic subjects. What happens is a double exclusion. They are excluded from the decision making space and also discredited in the knowledge domain. This builds a narrative lock-in where only the predominant actors are allowed to name the river, designate the problem, and recommend the remedies. This circumstance also generates a policy timing distortion. Local communities function within very tangible ecological patterns, i.e., growing seasons, tidal rhythms, and fish migrations. Meanwhile, dominant parties navigate bureaucratic and project time horizons like annual periods, quarterly evaluation, and development reports. When these two time systems are not synchronised, the result is not simple inefficiency, but a catastrophic breakdown of life's interconnections. Thus, the agency's standing in Mekong governance is not merely a representational challenge, but an existential one: who is heard, who has the right to speak, and who determines meaning. Repositioning the agency is a prerequisite, not to overturn the hierarchy, but to dismantle the presumptions of who is considered 'rational' and who is constructed as 'limited'. The immediate task is more than boosting involvement; it is reordering the epistemic cornerstones of governance, so that society is not only the affected party but the decisive party (not exclusively in rhetoric, but in decision making, in discourse, and in the concrete repartition of influence).

Table 1: Stakeholder Analysis

Levels	Actors/Entities	Level of Power / Influence	Key Functions and Roles in Mekong Governance
Downstream Countries	Vietnam (Ministry of Environment & Agriculture, Mekong Delta Province)	Moderate	The main affected countries; vocal in international forums; Encourage formal diplomacy and downstream mitigation
	Cambodia (Ministry of Water & Agriculture)	Moderate	Weak national government in terms of bargaining power; many overseas projects; depends on technical diplomacy
	Laos (with affiliation to a large dam project)	High ambiguous	Both as a downstream country and upstream electricity producer; often serves as a bridge between China and ASEAN
	Thailand (Ministry of Energy, EGAT)	Moderate	Energy consumers from Laos; a counterweight in diplomacy, but less consistent in ecological security positions
Upstream Countries	Government of China (Ministry of Natural Resources, National Energy Commission)	Very high	Control over the main dam; the owner of the development narrative; not MRC bound; has full control over the time and volume of water release
	Myanmar government (builder of the dam in Salween)	Moderate	Regional actors that are often overlooked but have cross-border resource linkages
Multilateral Institutions	ADB, World Bank, Mekong Institute	Height (in terms of capital and project direction)	Project donors, holders of the logic of the green economy; often ambiguous in funding DAM projects while driving sustainability
Regional Institutions	Mekong River Commission (MRC)	Low (technical, not political authority)	The production of technical data facilitates dialogue between countries, but is not binding on strategic projects

International NGOs	International Rivers, WWF, Oxfam Mekong	Moderate	Advocacy of ecological justice; counter-narrative development; Mediating between communities and diplomacy
United Nations Organisation	UNDP, UNEP, UNESCO	Moderate	Advocacy of SDGs principles; strengthening of vulnerability indicators; playing a role in research, but not intervening in the project
Military and Defense	River military command (Vietnam), strategic project protection (China, Laos)	Hidden but significant	Physical custodians of strategic infrastructure; strengthening territorial control over water; At times, it is a matter of "national security."
Local NGOs	PanNature (Vietnam), TERRA (Thailand), NTFP (Cambodia)	Medium–Low	Grassroots actors; important in raising community voices, but limited access to strategic forums
Local Media	Bangkok Post, Vientiane Times, Tuoi Tre News	Low	Voice local concerns; often constrained by the narrative framework of the state or the sponsor of the project
International Media	Reuters, Al Jazeera, The Diplomat (environment & development section)	Moderate	Build global framing; influential in raising or closing the Mekong issue in international perception
Global Academics	Peneliti lembaga think tank (Stimson Center, Stockholm Resilience Centre)	Moderate	Prepare policy briefs; play a role in international conferences; shaping the global elite's perception of the Mekong
Regional Academics	Universitas Vietnam National University, RUPP, NUS, Chulalongkorn	Medium–High (depending on position and access)	Critical knowledge production; may affect policy; often acting as an independent consultant or researcher
Local Community	Coastal farmers, traditional fishermen, women heads of families	Very low	Directly affected; have traditional ecological knowledge; not involved in the policy process
	Traditional leaders, village chiefs, water spiritual leaders (Laos, Vietnam)	Very low	Custodians of ecological-spiritual knowledge; often lost in scientific and policy narratives
Private Sector	Energy consortium (Hydro Laos, PowerChina, EGAT)	Very high (capital and project control)	Direct implementers of dam construction and electricity transmission; The most concrete actor in the ecological transformation of rivers
Diaspora of Scientists	Scientists from the Mekong who have worked at western universities (Cornell, Melbourne, etc.)	Medium (if given space)	Epistemic bridges between local communities and global academic forums; sometimes considered "too critical" in the home country

Note: The Table is developed by the authors adopting the framework developed by UNICEF. United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE). *Stakeholder Analysis: How to Map, Analyse, and Engage Stakeholders in the Development of a Strategic Framework for Mainstreaming Ageing*. UNECE Mainstreaming Ageing Toolkit. Geneva: United Nations, 2023

Discussion

Mekong as a Coalition Arena Actors: Not Simply a River, But Infrastructure of Authority

Mekong River's transnational governance is not purely a technical administrative process between countries but has become a contestable political venue occupied by actors with diverse interests, legitimacy, and influence. Reflecting on the theory of actor network theory[50] and networked governance[51] the river here is not only an object that is maintained but instead a political body that mediates the balance of power between civil society, state, epistemic institutions, the private sector, financial institutions, and underprivileged communities. Upstream powers such as Laos and China occupy the leading role in the development legitimisation process, where their hydro-diplomacy is veiled by green energy development rhetoric and technocratic narratives. However, these parties do not stand alone.[52] They are bolstered by other latent capacities such as environmental consultants like ERM, sovereign wealth funds, and project audit agencies like DNV that served as technical signatories for controversial projects like the Pak Beng and Xayaburi dams. Meanwhile, actors such as International Rivers, Global Forest Watch, Stimson Center, and even the Mekong diaspora scholars form a counter-narrative network that attempts to seize legitimacy through evidence, testimonies, and international scrutiny. Their existence testifies that the Mekong is not only contested at the level of formal diplomacy, but also in the epistemology of worldwide discourse.

Fragmentation of Power: Between Symbolic Legitimacy and Structural Influence

The highly pluralistic coexistence of agents creates a polarisation of influences that is not only vertical (between the community and the state) but also transversal and horizontal, between local and global scientists, between alternative environmental media and mainstream journalists, and between spiritual leaders and regional technocrats. This phenomenon epitomises a reality that Bäckstrand famously labeled as post-Westphalian environmental governance, where states' boundaries are permeable, and legitimacy is less about formal sovereignty and greater about technical capacity, moral credibility, and access to datasets.[53] One of the fascinating dynamics is the appearance of community based non-state parties such as the Tonle Sap Customary Community, Sungai Women's Coalition, and the Mekong Diaspora Digital Forum, which capitalise on online platforms to disseminate evidence of environmental damage and exclusion. They shape grassroots legitimacy which, despite lacking structural control, is increasingly securing a place in global bodies that espouse procedural environmental justice.[54] However, this power continues to be locked in a marginal stance when dealing with actors such as the project security providers (Hikvision), energy conglomerates (EGAT,

SinoHydro), and meagre regional institutions such as the Mekong River Commission, which has no compelling juridical authority.[55]

Representational Dislocation and Epistemic Justice: Who Defines the River?

This analysis demonstrates that the foremost contestation in Mekong governance is over the nature of the river itself. Who has the right to define: What is sustainable development? What water security is? and Who is considered an expert? As argued by Jasanoff, science in the field of water management is not a neutral entity, but a socio-political construct that can be politicised and exploited to perpetuate certain power arrangements.[56] Field discoveries prove that traditional leaders, local communities, and female activists often have intergenerational and profound ecological insights, yet they are not acknowledged in the official environmental impact assessment (EIA) schemes, which are drafted by hired technical consultants. This leads to what is called epistemic injustice, which is when a person's opinion is deemed invalid because of their social identity, not because of content authenticity.[57] Most ironically, in many projects, it is the project auditors and environmental consultants who originate from outside the region that are given the predominant role in drafting reports, despite having no cultural-ecological awareness of the community and its river.

Virtual Surveillance Regimes and Proliferation of Digital Stakeholders

A new feature of Mekong governance is the appearance of digital actors like crowdsourced mapping (Open Development Mekong), satellite monitoring platforms (Google Earth Engine, Sentinel Hub) and project security cyber units that oversee online narratives. This surveillance regime engenders a new dichotomy: on the one extreme, it opens up a space of transparency based on visual records, but on the opposite side, it produces digital censorship of resistance. The "smart dam" narrative now propagated by several parties actually magnifies the influence of the surveillance technology producers and cybersecurity sector such as Huawei and ZTE, which position rivers not strictly as ecological zones, but as strategic geo-information territories. This is a new iteration of the "digital securitisation of water governance" which alienates local societies from the actual negotiation procedures.

Conclusions and Transformative Orientations

Mekong River is much more than a geographical artery traversing six Southeast Asian countries. It is a complex terrain reflecting the intertwining of identity, power, and knowledge in a constantly mutating ecological landscape. This investigation emphasises that water governance in this region is not a neutral technocratic procedure, but rather a political arrangement that is executed by a system of actors that is structurally asymmetrical and hyper-fragmentary. The

relationship between entities (both informal and formal, marginal and dominant) is not only dependent on institutional hierarchy but rather on the capacity to contextualise reality and establish a potential policy spectrum. In this constellation, power is distributed across a network of stakeholders, including transnational project consultants and energy companies, Mekong diaspora scientists, dam cyber intelligence units, citizen-based monitoring communities, environmental journalists, traditional and spiritual leaders, and independent audit authorities that serve as a last line of resistance against disguised ecological manipulation. The strength of this study is in its ability to reposition the centers of legitimacy in river stewardship. If, until present, the policy's credibility has been dependent on formal diplomacy and technocracy, we propose the diversification of the authority space through the principles of ecological sustainability, epistemic justice, and the acknowledgment of the plurality of local narratives that have been suppressed by massive infrastructure development. This is where the proposed paradigm shift exists: the governance legitimacy does not emanate from the development speed, but from the openness of participation and depth of representation in composing a collective future. A river is not simply a physical stream, but an epistemic battleground where the negotiation of rights, existence, and identity is fought where the Champasak spiritual leader, the Tonle Sap farming community, the investigative journalist from Phnom Penh, the diaspora researcher in Melbourne, and the policy analyst in Tokyo all share a place in designing the form of justice that should be enshrined.

This transformation mandates a complete repositioning of policy strategy. Institutions such as the Mekong River Commission must evolve from a channel for technical data exchange to a deliberative platform that facilitates the cognitive elaboration of minority communities, grassroots actors, and non-state entities with equivalent cognitive capacity. Participatory processes should not be constrained to formal consultations but should move towards the recreation of epistemic rights where local communities are not just testifiers but also legitimisers. Similarly, key actors, such as EGAT, SinoHydro, CIC, Temasek Holdings, as well as donor bodies such as the World Bank and the ADB, must adhere to the principles of just hydropolitics grounded in long-term impact and not mere financial feasibility reviews. Ecological justice in the scope of the Mekong can only be established if the power structure is opened up and the players who have been invisible until recently (digital community monitors, local academics from small institutions, the spiritual guardians of the river, and indigenous youth who capture data with their cell phones) are considered as policy architects. The Mekong is not just a river that traverses borders, but a locus of civilizational contestation that will predetermine whether we commit to a future driven by collective sustainability or perpetuate a form of domination that masquerades as advancement.

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Mapping Vulnerabilities: The Narratives of Structural Violence

By

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The term vulnerability is multi-dimensional, and its narrative usage unveils a palimpsest of meaning. For an advanced search, Google offers nearly ten dimensions of the term 'vulnerability': assessment, analysis, detection, index, model, management, theory, factors, resilience and scanning. Each of these dimensions had around 4.5 to 6 million hits which clearly indicates that a huge volume of research exists on vulnerability itself. When narrowed down the search to 'mapping vulnerability,' it gives nine new dimensions and around 3.7 to 4 million hits. This vast range of existing research on dimensions of vulnerability indicates the exclusivity of different 'situations' related to and generating vulnerabilities. While perusing the titles under 'mapping vulnerabilities' in web based search engines, it is starkly noticeable that most scholars talk about methods and indices on how to capture the nature and intensity of vulnerabilities in many different parts of the world, and a majority of these studies focus on climate-related crises, such as changes in the sea level and other catastrophic threats, exploring the incidence of threats and the impacts of those threats in terms of risk or possibility of loss. Therefore, it is important to understand how these vulnerabilities are created worldwide by corporate capital in a nexus with international power houses and organisations in this globalised world. Vulnerabilities are rooted in certain geographies and in certain economies, mostly in Asia, Africa, and in Latin America, where the scale of poverty and associated problems are already significant. Research reflects the concern and care about the vulnerable people around the world, and researcher takes upon the ethical responsibility of remedification with the belief and hope of changing the direction of discourses towards a better, liveable world. Faith in urban planning creates a vision of ecologically sustainable, socially inclusive and socially just cities. This optimistic outlook motivates developmental infrastructure in rescuing the reality. However, with the grim empirical reality it is difficult to perceive the idea of a better future where we would be able to stop creating vulnerable situations and stop pushing a chunk of people, especially the poor or disadvantaged, into vulnerable situations across the globe

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irrespective of the countries' geopolitical and economic conditions. The ways in which human endeavour is changing the earth piece by piece, the future is not encouraging at all; rather they are very depressing.

The term vulnerability raises more questions than giving answers while mapping the socio-politico-economic impact of vulnerabilities. There is no dearth of literature on the procedures and strategies of mapping vulnerabilities. The contextuality of vulnerability like heat islands or water scarcity in cities to floods in the river basin areas gives useful insights into how to map the differential impacts of these threats on different community groups across class and gender through the lens of intersectionality. Thus, it is important to question the process of creating vulnerabilities, otherwise, one may get lost in the process of measuring vulnerabilities rather than looking into the structural processes vis-à-vis structural violence, which create these situations. Structural violence define the processes which create vulnerable situations, as they are rooted in the political and economic structure of the national as well as global economies and lead to an unjust world. There are not many remedial solutions available and even if it does, such solutions would be ignored in favour of technology, capital-driven development and material progress. The markers of planetary crisis have already crossed the tipping point in the context of biodiversity loss, ecosystem alteration, global warming and rise in sea level. As researchers, the priority is to critically look into the ground reality and understand how practices of managing both natural and manmade environments can marginalise people and push them into more vulnerable situations. It is important to analyse and explain how inequality works at every scale to make some people vulnerable for the benefit of others, especially those having power and the means to consume more ruthlessly and carelessly. We do not even engage ourselves much in discussions about the vulnerabilities of non-human species in the anthropocentric world, although this aspect is equally important for the survival of human life on this earth. Neo-liberal economy has created new narratives of development by prioritising visible infrastructural development such as building roads and flyovers, national highways, airports, dams, residential apartments and brand new smart cities, leaving out human development. Development in the true sense of the term is all about realising human potential and capacity building. However, the social development necessary for such progress has now taken a back seat and has become coterminous with material development, although such accomplishment does not add much to the quality of life; rather it increases inequality and violence, and creates disorganised societies where community, in the true sense of the term, is lost.

It is necessary to understand how people who are facing vulnerabilities created by us perceive these threats and how they decide to cope with these extreme events. In study on the *chars* of River Damodar, conducted with Kuntala Lahiri-Dutt which finally became the book *Dancing with the River*, we opted to understand how people of this area see these fluid and ever-changing hybrid spaces called *chars*; their coping mechanisms with the threats posed by the river; and ways of maximising their benefits from the experience of living

in those spaces. *Dancing with the River* metaphorises the act of synchronisation like performativity of dancing, either in a group or even just two people together, needs a lot of co-ordination, they have to know each other's body movements very well, and each of them has to predict the other's next step to be in full co-ordination. Similarly, the book traced the intimate relationship of these *char* people with the river and their understanding of the river, its moods and its uncertain behaviours especially during the monsoon season. All micro adjustments that they make with the river essentially develop out of their lived experiences. Geographers prefer to call this as the "experiencescape". The term adjustment has been deliberately used instead of adaptation in the way it is often used by planners and policy makers. Adaptation is a long-term phenomenon whereas adjustment is the bundle of short-term strategies to cope with vulnerabilities, which take place very quickly, sometimes without much prediction. On the contrary, adaptation takes place over generations and in a much more organised way, to adjust on a daily basis with vulnerabilities to gain a longer stability through practices of mutual coexistence. For example, adaptation developed by the indigenous communities. The deltas of the world, especially those located in Africa and Asia, were settled and flourished since ages because of the long-term adaptation to the cycle of floods faced over centuries. These people adapted with the help of technology like canal networks and small dams, but very slowly, with a holistic view of the entire river system and with sound geopolitical negotiations on the sharing of water, as the river often passes through many countries. The countries had to develop geopolitical stability to make those hydraulic systems sustainable over longer periods of time. Now, the systems of many rivers are compromised at different segments for the communities living in the upper and the middle catchments. As a result, deltas are now facing unprecedented problems, making it increasingly difficult for delta people to adjust with the changing river system and altered river ecology in the upper reaches of the river. In these encroached and disturbed river systems, the onset of disasters is often unpredictable and very quick, like the Glacial Lake Outburst Floods (GLOF) that happened in Uttarakhand and Sikkim in the Indian Himalayan region. Because of the indiscriminate interference in the natural system of the rivers, it has become far more difficult for riverine and delta communities to develop long-term adaptation strategies all by themselves.

Another example of adaptation can be observed through our lived experience and its juxtaposition to planning of the cities. Planners set out to change cities as per their prepared vision plans. They work on certain predicted growth patterns and their changes, and prepare the plan to adapt to those changes. However, the ground situations completely change within twenty- or thirty-years' time. Therefore, city planning is often bound to fail. For instance, the long-term planning for cities set at the turn of the twenty-first century could not anticipate the Covid pandemic situation especially the deplorable conditions of migrant workers working in different cities of India during the first phase of the Covid-19 lockdown in March–June 2020. Most of them could not stay back in the cities as they ran out of money to buy food and pay rent. They could not

benefit from free rations provided under the Public Distribution System (PDS) as they were migrants. They walked back or cycled to their native places thousands of kilometres away, sometimes paid hefty amounts of money to get back home, and lost everything they had earned in the city. No city plans in India had given much thought to the migrant workers, who number in the millions, and without whom, no city in India can survive. Migrant workers continue to remain vulnerable in our cities as urban planning hardly takes into account the needs of the migrants. When we talk about vulnerabilities in cities, we must talk about migrant workers and their vulnerabilities as well. One should question the benefits of long-term planning and adaptation policies as top-down strategies made by the state and its bureaucrat planners as possible solutions to vulnerabilities. We have interfered so much in the natural ecosystem that we really do not know how any further action is going to bounce back on us. People living in such vulnerable situations always have to adjust to unanticipated change. As a researcher, it is interesting to explore the narratives of these pathways—how people adjust and exactly what kinds of help they need from the state to make their adjustments easier. Research on these fronts can probably inform policies which are temporary, flexible and adjustable according to the local context. Grounded research can better inform the policies. That is why the prime responsibility as researchers is to understand the ground reality through participatory research, rather than just collecting a bunch of data which are sometimes not even completely accurate.

There was a time when researchers used to think of finding a permanent solution to all the problems created by nature, but over time it has become apparent that the more we think of permanent solutions, the more we create vulnerabilities, solving problem creates another. After Independence, it was in the economic design of developing the nation that improvement of the financial condition of the household would benefit all members of the family. However, by the end of the 1960s gender disparity in access to all kinds of resources within the family was observed increasing over time. By the beginning of the 1970s poverty was the main problem and the state went on formulating poverty-alleviation programs, i.e., generation of livelihood opportunities and employment creation would help people come out of poverty. In neoliberal India, however, even after gaining employment and working hard, people remain poor because the income is decreasing for a massive proportion of people engaged in the petty informal economy, and the price level is increasing. This has resulted in the phenomenon called the "Working Poor"—they work and yet remain poor. India currently has millions of such "Working Poor". The Indian labour market has gradually reached a precarious situation, giving rise to a host of non-standard employments over the last three decades of liberalisation, privatisation, and globalisation. Extreme vulnerabilities faced by gig and platform workers in the shining cities of India dotted with skyscrapers, flyovers, shopping malls, and gated communities, is the newest addition to that list. In the heated cities of changed climate, with low pay, exposure to heat and water scarcity, these gig and platform workers are like foot soldiers of the city economy. How are we going to save these extremely vulnerable groups of

people from the forthcoming climate catastrophe? When we talk about heated cities, we need to bring in these intersectional class dimensions into the dialogue on mapping vulnerabilities.

We live in a consumerist society and to battle with the climate crisis we make frequent international trips to participate in the United Nations Conference of the Parties (UNCOP) and other such meetings, leaving a huge carbon footprint. Sometimes, the sponsors of international research grants such as the World Bank and European Union spend twenty to thirty per cent of their total grants on international travel for the collaborative teams scattered across the continents to attend two or three meetings in a year while the research project is supposed to focus on mitigating climate change and search for its permanent solution. That hefty amount of money could be better spent on easing the lives of people suffering from climate change. A research grant working on the sinking islands or deltaic ecosystem could not provide bio toilets as requested by the community groups to ease their lives. However, they chose to spend huge amounts of money on meetings and knowledge dissemination workshops for the travels of researchers and experts from all around the world. Are funding agencies really looking for solutions or do they just like to spend money under the aegis of their corporate social responsibility? The strategies devised by the United Nations and World Bank to 'save the earth' is really problematic. Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) add more questions than answers on what to do. When we talk about the future, whose future are we really talking about—the future of those people who already enjoy a big chunk of the world's resources? What about the present? Can we even pretend that at present every person has access to minimum basic needs? In India, a huge segment of the population earns less than US$2/day which is considered the minimum amount a person should get to meet his/her bare minimum needs. In contrast, the richest one per cent owns a huge share of national wealth, leading to an inherently unequal society. The SDGs are nothing new or something that we do not know. Nations have been grappling with these issues for a long time. The reason why these SDGs seem to be inadequate is because they do not clarify how to stop the global corporate capital from overexploiting the earth's natural resources and how to disconnect its channels of negotiations with the governments in power across different countries.

Before we think of the United Nations as the saviour of this earth, we have to check who the sponsors of the United Nations are. The maximum share of funds comes from the United States of America and other powerful economies of Europe. These countries together have created and are still creating vulnerabilities in all countries of the Middle East for the sake of control over petroleum, and other minerals in the countries of Asia and Africa. How can the United Nations talk about poverty alleviation when their funders are engaged in creating more and more poverty amongst low income people in many developing countries of the world through pauperisation of resources? These are just some fancy terms and lip service offered by international organisations, as they largely depend on these countries' financial contributions. How can we expect that an international organisation that continues to create

new vulnerable conditions in their member countries would be able to recommend strategies on how to rescue people from vulnerabilities? When we talk about local knowledge, what do we mean by that? In today's world nothing exists as purely local. There is a term to define this condition called "glocal" meaning every local is now connected to the global in some way or the other. Therefore, searching for pure local and indigenous knowledge is problematic for us. But one should not discard the importance of experience based knowledge of the local communities in many different contexts. However, even if local people can explain to us where the problem lies and how we are creating more vulnerabilities, who is going to listen to them? Can we protect anything from being destroyed unless our research feeds activism? The local people often feel helpless because the global capital of the neoliberal economy is taking over every inch of the earth, and we are all big facilitators of those expansions. We need roads for tourism even in the highly vulnerable mountainous areas like those of the young mountain called the Himalaya. We need more power for growing towns and other densely settled tourist spots dotted with resorts and hotels, and for that reason we do not want to leave a single river of the Himalayan mountains un-dammed. These processes have already destabilised the entire Himalayan ecosystem, created enormous vulnerabilities, and pushed people further into the crisis of getting access to natural resources. But who cares? We need to build physical infrastructure at the cost of livelihood resources of poor communities developed slowly over generations on the hilly terrain. Glaciers are melting fast, and springs and rivers are getting dried up because of the changing climate. Climate crisis is deepening the level of vulnerabilities already created by the process of structural violence in the name of development.

Neoliberal economic practices demand the capital to move to places that offer cheap labour. Countries of the Global South compete with each other in showcasing themselves as cheap labour destinations. It is more like inviting foreign direct investors to come and exploit our labour. No labour laws, no minimum salary comes under consideration. Bangladesh and Vietnam did this in the recent past and became successful garment exporting countries, but at the same time they created a terrible situation for a huge number of garment workers toiling day-in and day-out in subhuman conditions without any kind of occupational safety at their workspace. In India too, the wage share has shrunk while profit share has risen sharply during the last decade. Livelihood vulnerabilities are quite explicit in the countries of the Global South. Every time I go to Delhi, the lush green lawns that line both sides of the roads in the city's elite neighbourhoods drive home this painful point. How do we spend so much water in a dry, parched city like Delhi on the maintenance of green lawns, while thousands of people fight every day to fill two or three buckets when the tanker comes? Delhi brings water from the *Bhakra* reservoir through canal networks and spends a huge amount of this water on the maintenance of lawns, fountains and swimming pools in the city. The 'Water Story of Delhi' should be written from the point of view of water justice. Similarly, in the resorts of Jaipur located in the extremely dry region, they maintain swimming pools for their high-end

customers. This gross injustice prevails in every city of this country. We misuse enormous amounts of water on a daily basis, while some people literally die for water. When basic urban services like water become scarce, it increases the vulnerability of the poor people who have neither bargaining power over municipal supply, nor the money to access these resources in the market economy.

The mapping of vulnerabilities is also not free of bloodshed and death. In the war situation, Russia destroyed the reservoir which used to supply water to a large part of Ukraine. Israel has destroyed the water supply system of Palestine. In Pakistan, the farmers from Punjab province and the people of Karachi have taken all the water of the River Sindhu and the entire delta of the river has dried up because not enough water flows up to that point to join the sea. The erstwhile rich farming community of this delta has given up farming because of the lack of irrigable water. Transgression of salt water is destroying the land, and the river is retreating due to lack of enough flow to the sea. Flood itself is not a disaster. It was rather a blessing for many different parts of the world historically. Floods deposit silt that make the land fertile. The earliest civilizations opted to live in flood plain areas so that they could easily grow crops. They believed that if there is no flood, there is no fresh silt. They used to pray for the flood. They did not build their empires on the riverbanks, because they knew it could get inundated and the river could erode the bank. Now, we have built big dams to control the rivers the way we want. As a result, we are facing man-made floods, when those reservoirs cannot hold so much water during heavy monsoon rains due to siltation. The silted reservoirs release water to protect the dam and create floods for the entire downstream areas. The images of the tsunami of 2004 have perhaps disappeared from our memory, whereas the fact is that such a big event could happen again anytime in the future. Traditional communities left the areas closer to the river and the sea uninhabited. They used to pay attention to natural events and organise their communities accordingly. However, with advanced technology, we disregarded local wisdom and thought we could build anything anywhere. We could bring water from the aquifer located hundreds of kilometres away to the middle of a desert to create a city like Dubai. The city of Dubai is now turning to depend on big desalinisation plants to create a sustained supply of potable water, as the distant regional aquifers have already been exhausted.

If we talk about the extractive economy, how could we neglect the ruthless exploitation of minerals in India, mostly from areas covered by forests and settled by powerless tribal people? We have given a fancy name for it—the 'greater common good'. Flood does not affect the rich, heat island does not affect the rich; mining does not affect the rich. Rather they benefit from all these activities which create vulnerabilities for others. The most mineral rich areas of our country are the poorest in terms of per capita income, as well as other human indicators. Therefore, we need to question from a holistic point of view to understand—who benefits, and at whose cost. The time has come that we focus more on the processes that lead to the creation of these vulnerabilities rather than just measuring them. Mapping these processes is

extremely important. Mapping vulnerabilities means mapping of the processes which create vulnerabilities. The stories of mapping vulnerabilities are stories of inequality and injustice too. Livelihood vulnerability is now not only a case of the Global South. In the developed countries of the Global North, the proportion of poor, unemployed, and homeless people is also increasing at a fast rate. But its proportion is undoubtedly more in countries of the Global South, and we cannot deny that fact. The narratives of vulnerabilities are narratives of structural violence. The structural violence creates all kinds of injustice which marginalises the poor and helpless people and pushes them more and more into abject poverty and to deplorable situations. We must start talking about the structural violence and the resultant processes in the political economy which create vulnerabilities for certain groups of people and benefit the others. Lastly, Mapping vulnerabilities need multiscalar perspectives to understand vulnerability differentials at each scale, space, and time. Further, the contexts are significantly important to understand vulnerabilities. The 'one-size-fits-all' kind of idea does not help much to solve localised problems which are different from each other in many ways. We have to discard the idea of using a universal model for mapping vulnerabilities put forward by some international organisations; rather develop our own contextual models.

"Invisible Workers, Visible Stereotypes": Analysing the Complex Realities of Migrant Women in Kerala, India

By

Anjana Menon *

Migration has long been a defining characteristic of India's labour economy, shaping demographic patterns, economic structures, and social hierarchies. Kerala, a state in the southern tip of India with its positive social indicators often compared to European Nations, has been witnessing the influx of migrant population at least since the 1980s, initially from the neighbouring state of Tamil Nadu and later from states far north such as West Bengal, Odisha, Jharkhand, Bihar and Assam.[1] To precisely historicise the migration waves to Kerala might almost be an impossible task as labour migration from Tamil Nadu dates to the ancient period with both Kerala and Tamil Nadu forming the part early *Tamizhakam* culture.[2] With a long, shared boundary between these two states, it is a common sight to see Tamil workers in Kerala even today. Nor did they have much cultural and linguistic barriers like those who came later from the north, as Tamil and Malayalam had many similarities and it was easier for the Malayalees to understand Tamil and Tamilians to process Malayalam. Many of these early migrants today have expanded their businesses and have purchased land and sometimes employ other migrants in their shops. The Tamil migrants, however, did not expand and monopolise all aspects of the unorganised sector like their successors. Though they were prominent in construction and cleaning, many of their engagements were entrepreneurial in nature. Tea Shops, laundry and ironing, sewage or septic tank cleaning etc. remain almost their monopoly at least in some of the cities in Kerala.[3]

The succeeding phase of migration that began in post-liberalisation period from the North India states to Kerala and continuous till date.[4] The current paper shall focus on this wave with special focus on the district of Ernakulam, which is often considered as the commercial capital of the state. Often opined to begin since the late 1990s this influx of thousands of workers from diverse regions,[5] including Odisha, West Bengal, Jharkhand, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Assam, Manipur, Nepal, and Bangladesh became an integral part

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of the city's labour market predominantly marked by their presence in construction and plywood industry to now being spread to almost all the manufacturing, agriculture, and service sectors.[6] While their presence as employees spans different nooks and corners their lives is concentrated around certain spots such as Kadavanthra, parts of Goshree area, and West Kochi in the city limit and in small regions like Perumbavoor, Muvattpuzha, Kalady, and Kodanad being home to a large number who are ready to travel to the city and elsewhere almost daily. Perumbavoor today has even been nicknamed as "Mini North"[7] with the migrant population almost outnumbering the native population.[8] This region best exemplifies the case of group migration along with families to Kerala.[9] Erstwhile little known to the city's development this suburban region buzzes with the news of the migrants, both good and stereotypical on a frequent basis.[10] This demographic shift has brought forth a significant cultural, social, and economic shift to the town.[11] The current paper attempts to understand this trend and tendencies in Ernakulam by analysing popular representations, news reports, and non-participant observation.

Making and Breaking the Stereotype of the "Bengali"

Kerala has a long tradition of migration both internal and external as well as inward and outward shaped by economic imperatives, social mobility, and historical contingencies. Ceylon (Sri Lanka), Burma (Myanmar) in the early twentieth century and the Gulf in later decades have seen Malayalis searching for their own rags to riches. Cinematic and literary imaginings such as *Aadujeevitham* (2024), *Varavelppu* (1989), *Pathemari* (2015), *Arabikatha* (2007), *Swapnasanchari* (2011), Khaddama (2011), and *Jacobinte Swargarajyam* (2016) have eulogised the plight, aspirations, and alienation of the migrant Malayali in Gulf. The real experience coupled with such tales have weaved an empathetic public consciousness for the Malayali migrant experience. However quite contradictorily the general perceptions about and attitude towards migrants arriving in Kerala from Northern and Eastern states of India are often reduced to a homogenised and stereotypical identity of the "Bengali" irrespective of their state of origin.[12] The term Bengali literally denotes the population that inhabits Bengal or speaks the language by the same name.[13] However, in the colloquial sense of Kerala today the linguistic transformation of the term Bengali as a "catch all term" reflects deeper socio-cultural anxieties of the Malayali community. While one can draw striking parallels to the experience of Malayali Gulf Migrants and the migrants from North and Northeastern states in Kerala, endearment of the experiences of the former over the alienation of the later has been the dominant norm. Although Keralites have realised that, these migrants, today, are essential part of their workforce, the Malayali consciousness have systematically refused to accept the fact that these migrants' culture have slowly diffused in to the cultural making of Kerala and now influence the anxieties and perceptions of everyday.[14] This reconfiguration of the term "Bengali" extends beyond mere identification and carries pejorative connotations. In everyday conversation "Bengali" denotes "valueless

worker".[15] The term is frequently used to mock individuals who work diligently, accept lower wages, or perform tasks without financial compensation. This exemplifies how these internal migrations while protected by the *Constitution of India* is excluded and diminished through informal barriers restricting complete integration.

Public discourse, media representations, and policy frameworks further reinforce this homogenised image of the migrant worker, disregarding their diverse backgrounds in terms of caste, class, gender, and regional identity. Shaped by economic or structural inequalities the decision to voluntarily migrate have been shaped by hopes of upward mobility. While the conditions of the migrated population have often historically been second grade in most of the settled spaces, despite these antecedents the aspirations for migration are shaped by the dream of a better future that are determined in tune to the necessity of the movement and the place of settlement. In this context the concept of invisibility is introduced not in the conventional sense of an illegal immigrant as conceptualised by Benson[16] but to indicate the form of invisibility of that erases the identity of the migrant workers in to homologous category in Kerala, despite being legal citizens with the right to work anywhere in India, experience a form of invisibility that erases their individual identities and reduces them to the singular category of 'migrant' with recurrent representations and narratives stereotyping them into rigid social perception.

The Case of Ernakulam

The district of Ernakulam now shows a preference to migrant labourers from other states primarily due to the non-availability of Malayali workers to perform works in the unorganised sector and their availability to work at lower wages, willingness to work for larger hours, comparable lack of bargaining power and lack of unionising capacity in comparison to their native nation counterparts.[17] These workers now fill critical gaps by filling up the demand for labour in industries such as construction, manufacturing, textiles, hospitality among others and are now integral part of the district's economy.[18] These population like any other migrant population have also been contributing to the cultural exchange with the most visible example being the makeshift *Chaat* shops selling savoury snacks run by the migrants almost occupying every second street of the cityscape and those food items achieving much familiarity with the local populace.

Apart from the minimal self-employed occupations such as roadside vending, the conditions in which these workers continue to live, and work are far from ideal. From long working hours amounting to almost nine hours per day to earn an average monthly income of ₹15,000 ($175.32) and must survive the high cost of living in the urban spaces that they occupy with their employers neither considering a guarantee through the promise of a permanent occupation nor providing them with the basic safety measures especially in the context of industrial labour. Almost unaware of their rights and inaccessibility to the schemes that intend to protect them these labourers remain vulnerable to

accidents and fatalities. These risks seem to be a willing chance that they are taking in their quest for "fortune". With work life being the primary priority for the migrant population, the living conditions often practically become an adjustment. Dozens of individuals who come in flocks to Kerala cram together either in the employer provided in the most minimalist living space while many live under the shade and security provided by bridges or metro pillars, while some others opt to live inside small tents often made of torn cloths or disposed of advertisement boards. Some who can afford, do live in rented spaces. But as reported by one of the *Bhais* in a casual conversation, the options that are offered to them are extremely minimal forcing them to live inside almost collapsing buildings. Irrespective of where they live, the access to basic sanitation facilities or safety, security and privacy is almost impossible for them to attain.

With the magnitude of migration to Kerala becoming hard to miss in the present decade, the call for better facilities have been heard from various quarters. While initiatives such as Project Roshini for improving the academic performance of migrant children and to address language barriers have been executed,[19] their scope, however, has been limited. There have been attempts to bring the migrant populations to already existing projects such as Kudumbasree and Kerala Literacy Mission have also been headway.[20] Every citizen's constitutional right to live and work at any place of their choice in the country has often been cited as a reason for the impossibility of either successfully implementing a registry for the migrant labourers and for the largely successful implementation of any policy or scheme aimed at improving the migrant workers' work-life conditions.

Reports suggest that over 57 per cent of the migrant population belong to socially and economically disadvantaged classes of the country who find themselves restricted to low paying job positions that the natives are often not ready to occupy.[21] Most often than not these migrant labourers are employed in agriculture and allied industries in their lands of origin but have to take up manual labour in Kerala. While some of the migrants have managed to snatch rare opportunities of being the security personal or peon of reputed academic institution of the state and earn a steady income as well as command respect, more than 95 per cent of these workers lack the power to unionise, ironically in a state with a rich history and tradition of labour right movements and unionisation.[22] While call for better working conditions, wages and living arrangements are frequently being raised from various quarters, these "fortune seekers" have not been able to access the same protection and rights as their Malayali counterparts and continues to remain excluded from the promises of betterment. The economic dependency of Ernakulam especially in industries such as construction, textiles, manufacturing, hospitality to meet its increasing demand for labour forces are sustained by the incoming flocks of migrants are rarely acknowledged and the dominant picture is often the reverse. Migrant populations from the Northeastern states have now become a prominent presence in the beauty and hospitality industries. Today Nagaon–Ernakulam and Murshidabad–Ernakulam are marked as the major labour corridors in the

country with the actual numbers of the migrant labourers gradually increasing. The limited possibility and expense that could be incurred to acquire access with limited access to education, healthcare, or social services and the knowledge of the precariousness of the life does not prevent this influx. The growing resentment and stereotyping faced by migrant workers from the host population further complicate their situation.

Observing Perumbavoor

Perumbavoor, a municipality in the Ernakulam district that has over time evolved into a significant hub for migrant labourers in the state. Situated approximately 24km north of the district collectorate in Thrikkakara, Perumbavoor is part of the Kochi metropolitan area and lies 32km northeast of Kochi's city centre. Recent estimates indicate that the migrant population in the Perumbavoor region alone approaches 200,000 contributing to a total of approximately 2.5 million domestic migrant labourers in Kerala. The local economy of Perumbavoor is heavily reliant on these migrant workers, particularly in the plywood industry. With over 1,200 plywood units operating in and around the area, employing more than 100,000 migrant workers, these labourers are integral to sustaining the industry. They are involved in various stages of production, from veneer processing to block board manufacturing, with skilled workers primarily hailing from Assam. Beyond the plywood sector, migrant workers have influenced the socio-cultural landscape of Perumbavoor. The Sunday market, colloquially known as "Bhai Bazaar," exemplifies this transformation.[23] Catering predominantly to the migrant community, the market offers necessities such as vegetables and clothing. Electronic gadgets are in high demand, serving as vital links for migrants to stay connected with their families and cultures back home.

Religious institutions have adapted to this demographic shift. Local mosques now conduct prayers in multiple languages, including Bengali and Oriya, to accommodate the diverse linguistic backgrounds of the congregation. Cinemas that once faced declining attendance have found resurgence by screening films in languages such as Bengali, Oriya, and Assamese, aligning their offerings with the preferences of the migrant populace. The educational sector reflects this demographic change as well, with local schools witnessing increased enrolment of migrant children. To address the unique challenges these students face, initiatives like Project Roshni have been implemented to improve academic performance and bridge language barriers. Numerous small enterprises have emerged, offering services such as travel bookings and assistance with government schemes, tailored to the needs of the migrant community. Culinary preferences have also shifted, with markets now stocking vegetables and ingredients uncommon in traditional Kerala cuisine but essential to the diets of the migrant population. This diversification highlights the bidirectional influence between the migrants and the local community. However, despite the economic benefits derived from this influx, some local shop owners express ambivalence. While they profit from the patronage of

migrant labourers, there are underlying tensions, with complaints about cleanliness and cultural differences surfacing in casual conversations. This dichotomy underscores the complex dynamics of integration and acceptance within the community.

As a researcher navigating the streets of Perumbavoor, particularly areas densely populated by migrants, it becomes evident that many labourers exhibit a palpable sense of apprehension. Their cautious demeanour reflects underlying fears and uncertainties, possibly stemming from experiences of discrimination or marginalization. This observation highlights the need for more inclusive policies and community engagement initiatives to foster a harmonious coexistence. As Kerala continues to rely on migrant labour to fill gaps in its workforce, Perumbavoor serves as a microcosm of the larger tensions between economic necessity and social acceptance. The town's evolving landscape raises pressing questions: Will economic reliance eventually foster social inclusivity? Or will migrants continue to exist in a space of economic utility but social exclusion?

Penning the Narratives

The persistent representation of the migrant workforce in Kerala is informed by a residual colonial ethos, an enduring framework of culture and development shaped by historical processes of subjugation and exoticisation. Kerala's unique cultural mosaic, moulded over centuries by the Jews, Arabs, Portuguese, Dutch, and English, among others, offers a lens through which the present-day portrayal of migrants can be critically interrogated. This historical pluralism contrasts sharply with the contemporary narratives that reduce migrant identities to monolithic categories. Recent migratory waves from North and North-East India are not simply constituted by lone male travellers. In plain sight, women and children form a significant part of this demographic. However, while existing records may suggest a dominance of male labour migration, there is a systematic underrepresentation of migrant women in official statistics, a discrepancy that calls for a nuanced understanding of gendered migration dynamics. The movement of these migrants often originates from regions fraught with caste and religious rivalries, which further complicates their identity formation.[24] Paradoxically, the label "migrant" in Kerala is sometimes perceived as less toxic than the entrenched social tags rooted in caste and religion that they carry from their places of origin. This recontextualisation, however, does not eliminate the problematic dynamics at play. The arrival of migrant women has predominantly been framed through a male lens, a fact exemplified by popular media practices such as makeover videos circulating on social media platforms. In these videos it could be observed that a migrant labourer randomly chosen from everyday walks of life, given a makeover, and celebrated visually in trending Instagram reels and YouTube shorts.[25] While some online debates offer a counter-narrative to this objectification, the practice undeniably places these women within a framework of commodification and sexualised representation. Such portrayals reinforce a

dangerous stereotype that labels migrant women as morally loose, a trope that not only undermines their agency but also perpetuates their vulnerability in public and private spheres.

A particularly disturbing case that encapsulates these trends is that of Moni Bhosle, popularly known as Mona Lisa, a 16-year-old girl from Indore. Her viral rise began with a video of her selling garlands at the Mahakumbh Mela in Prayagraj, which was subsequently marred by incidents of harassment and physical assault.[26] Despite these experiences, an industrialist, accused of sexual harassment and undergoing investigation, while on bail chose her as the 'perfect candidate' to inaugurate a new shop of his jewellery chain[27] and made overtly sexist remarks during a press meet, framing her as a new sensation[28] while simultaneously demeaning the actress who had complained regarding sexual harassment she had to face.[29] The press meet with Bhosle and the entrepreneur was aired with high clickbait value.[30] This incident not only underscores the extent of objectification and sexual exploitation but also highlights the precarious position of migrant women in contemporary society, where their bodies become sites for both commercial gain and cultural degradation. These intersecting trends rooted in historical colonial influences, skewed gender representations, and the socio-economic pressures of migration complicate the narrative of migrant labour in Kerala. Colonial narratives constructed Indian women as both hyper-visible and voiceless, figures of exotic desire and moral suspicion.[31] These representations cast female bodies as objects of spectacle and control, legitimizing gendered hierarchies that persist in contemporary media and labour relations. In today's digital economy, such colonial tropes resurface in the commodification of migrant women like Moni Bhosle, whose visibility is mediated through viral culture and male patronage. The framing of her story that fetishizes her poverty while silencing her exploitation reflects how colonial patterns of sexualized display and moral judgment have adapted to neoliberal contexts, turning precarity into marketable entertainment. Such constructs demand a critical interrogation of the multiple layers through which identity, labour, and power converge.

Manufacturing Superiority

The multifaceted representations of migrant labour in Kerala reveal an enduring sense of superiority among the local Malayali population, a sentiment that continues to shape and constrain the discourse around migration. Historically, as the unorganized labour force in Kerala transitioned from being dominated by workers from Tamil Nadu, identified by the label "Annachi," to today's predominantly "Bengali" workforce, the underlying dynamics of class and cultural hierarchy have remained remarkably consistent. Despite the relative absence of the hyperemotional rhetoric associated with Gulf migration, the everyday portrayal of migrants here continues to be steeped in notions of cultural purity and hygiene, terminology reminiscent of the colonial lexicon employed by British administrators. This evolving narrative, framed within the context of a "fortune-seeking" mentality, not only reflects the pragmatic

realities of economic migration but also signals a gradual decay of the rigid social hierarchies that Malayalis have long upheld. The ostensibly benign use of labels like "Bengali" belies a deeper moral economy that perpetuates new forms of exploitation and demeaning representation. Fieldwork conducted in Perumbavoor demonstrates how the label "Bengali," though seemingly neutral, operates as a category of social distancing that legitimises unequal relations within the local labour economy. In everyday speech, employers, contractors, and even local residents employ the term to refer to all migrant labourers from eastern and northern India, disregarding their distinct linguistic and regional identities. Within this usage, "Bengali" connotes not simply a place of origin but a moral and cultural position which is often hints at a situation that is associated with low cost, manual efficiency, and limited social refinement. Such representations, reinforced by popular media and public discourse, convert the label into a convenient shorthand for an entire class of expendable workers. This everyday normalisation of the term enables a quiet rationalisation of substandard wages, poor housing, and restricted mobility, all framed as inevitable outcomes of the migrants' supposed temperament or background. What appears as an ordinary identifier thus becomes an instrument through which hierarchy is reproduced, allowing the local community to maintain a sense of moral superiority while continuing to rely on the labour it marginalises. These dynamics underscore that Kerala's economic landscape, despite its robust labour movements, remains inextricably linked to external influences and collaborative ventures. While the state's future economic independence is unlikely, as it continues to depend on intricate networks of migration and inter-regional exchange the representations of migrant workers in Kerala must be critically re-examined, not merely as reflections of economic necessity, but as complex cultural artifacts that reveal the interplay between historical prejudices and contemporary labour practices. This study calls for a more nuanced understanding of migration, one that acknowledges both the exploitative tendencies inherent in these representations and the potential for transformative change in the socio-cultural fabric of Kerala.

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Cross-Cultural Dynamics and Legal Rights of LGBTQ Individuals in Thailand and India: A Comparative Study on Migration and Inclusivity

By

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Migration studies have long centered on cisgender, heterosexual men, typically depicting them as economic migrants driven by the pursuit of better livelihoods abroad. This narrow focus overlooked the diverse realities of migration shaped by gender and sexuality. Over the past three decades, however, the field has undergone a significant transformation, embracing more inclusive and intersectional perspectives that acknowledge how sexuality influences every stage of migration — from the decision to move, through the journey itself, to settlement and integration in host societies. The recognition of sexuality as an analytical lens has greatly enriched migration scholarship. Researchers have shown that sexual identity not only shapes personal migration trajectories but also affects the social, cultural, and political dynamics of both sending and receiving communities. This evolution has given rise to *queer migration studies*, a subfield that investigates the distinctive challenges faced by LGBTQ+ migrants — including persecution in their home countries, restrictive asylum policies, and the heteronormative assumptions embedded within immigration systems. Many LGBTQ+ individuals migrate not solely for economic reasons but to seek safety, legal recognition, and social acceptance in more inclusive environments. Beyond queer migration, scholarship has expanded to encompass the experiences of sex workers, survivors of sex trafficking, and the ways in which heterosexuality and masculinities structure migration patterns. The movement of sex workers across borders raises vital questions about agency, labour rights, exploitation, and state regulation. Similarly, studies on masculinity reveal how gender norms influence men's migration decisions, economic ambitions, and participation in gendered labour markets. Together, these perspectives challenge the traditional, economy-focused narratives of migration, exposing the deeper social and cultural forces at work. Indeed,

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sexuality itself often operates as both a *push* and *pull* factor in shaping migration flows.

For some individuals, migration is a means of escaping restrictive social norms, repressive legal frameworks, or familial rejection. Others migrate in search of communities where they can freely express their gender identity and sexual orientation. However, sexual identity can also create new barriers in host countries, where racial, cultural, and economic factors intersect with gender and sexual norms, affecting the level of acceptance and opportunities available to migrants. As migration scholarship continues to evolve, integrating sexuality as a central lens provides a deeper understanding of power, marginalisation, and resilience in global migration flows. By moving beyond heteronormative assumptions and recognising the diversity of migrant experiences, scholars contribute to a more inclusive and equitable analysis of human mobility in an increasingly interconnected world.

Migration patterns across different regions are shaped by a variety of historical, economic, political, and social factors. In Asia, migration from countries like China and the Philippines has played a crucial role in shaping transnational labour markets, remittance economies, and diaspora communities. The historical movement of labourers, particularly domestic workers, seafarers, and construction workers, has made the region a focal point for studying global labour migration. The Philippines, for instance, has developed one of the world's most extensive labour export programs, institutionalising migration as a key economic strategy. Meanwhile, Chinese migration, historically driven by trade, investment, and political shifts, has contributed to the formation of vibrant overseas Chinese communities across Southeast Asia, North America, and Europe. Africa, on the other hand, presents a different migration landscape, with intra-regional movement being as significant as international migration. While Africa is often portrayed in terms of outmigration to Europe and North America, majority of the migration within the continent occurs between neighbouring countries. Economic opportunities, political instability, environmental factors, and conflicts have been key drivers of migration. Countries such as South Africa, Kenya, and Nigeria have become major hubs for regional migrants seeking employment in sectors such as mining, agriculture, and services. Additionally, forced migration due to political upheaval and violence has been a defining characteristic of African migration patterns, with countries like Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Somalia producing large refugee populations.

Traditionally, migration studies have focused on South–North movement, particularly the flow of migrants from developing regions to wealthier countries in Europe and North America. However, recent research highlights the increasing significance of South–South migration. The Global South is highly heterogeneous in terms of economic conditions, governance, and legal frameworks, leading to distinct migration patterns across regions. While some countries serve as points of origin due to economic hardship or political instability, others have emerged as regional destinations due to their relative economic prosperity and stability. One key distinction among regions

is the legal framework governing migration. Many developing countries have restrictive immigration policies that complicate the movement of people, while others have more open borders that facilitate regional mobility. For instance, the African Union's free movement protocols aim to enhance intra-African migration, yet implementation remains uneven due to national security concerns and economic disparities. Similarly, migration policies in Asia vary widely, with some countries like Singapore and Malaysia relying on large numbers of migrant workers while maintaining strict immigration controls. The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region presents another distinct migration pattern, characterised by both labour migration and displacement due to conflict. The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, including Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar, host millions of migrant workers from South and Southeast Asia, who often face legal and social challenges due to restrictive labour laws. Meanwhile, countries such as Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey have become major destinations for refugees fleeing conflicts in Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan. Migration from MENA to Europe has also intensified in recent years, leading to policy debates on asylum, border control, and integration in host countries such as Germany, Greece, and the UK. South–South migration has also been an area of growing academic interest, particularly in regions like Latin America, Africa, and Asia, where people move across borders for economic opportunities, trade, or political refuge. Turkey, for example, serves as a key transit country for migrants from the Middle East and Central Asia aiming to reach Europe. However, many migrants remain in Turkey due to restrictive border policies, creating new demographic and economic challenges. Similarly, countries such as Kenya and Egypt have emerged as migration hubs within Africa, hosting large numbers of regional migrants while also experiencing significant outmigration. South Africa is particularly notable in migration studies due to its historical and contemporary significance as a destination for migrants from across the continent. From the colonial and apartheid eras to the present, migration has been deeply intertwined with economic development, labour markets, and social dynamics. Although South Africa has progressive policies regarding refugee protection, the country has also witnessed xenophobic violence and tensions between local and migrant populations, highlighting the complex nature of migration governance in the region. Another important dimension of migration studies in Africa is the impact of health and disease on migration patterns. With the continent being the most affected by diseases such as HIV/AIDS and malaria, research has examined how migration influences public health outcomes. Seasonal labour migration, for instance, has been linked to the spread of infectious diseases, as migrants move between urban and rural areas or across borders with limited access to healthcare services. Similarly, the role of migration in shaping healthcare systems and access to medical resources has been a critical area of policy discussion. While South–North migration has historically dominated the discourse, increasing attention is being paid to regional migration trends within the Global South. Economic disparities, political conditions, environmental factors, and policy frameworks all shape migration patterns in distinct ways

across regions. As migration flows continue to be redistributed due to geopolitical and economic changes, research must account for these complex and varied experiences to provide a more comprehensive understanding of human mobility.

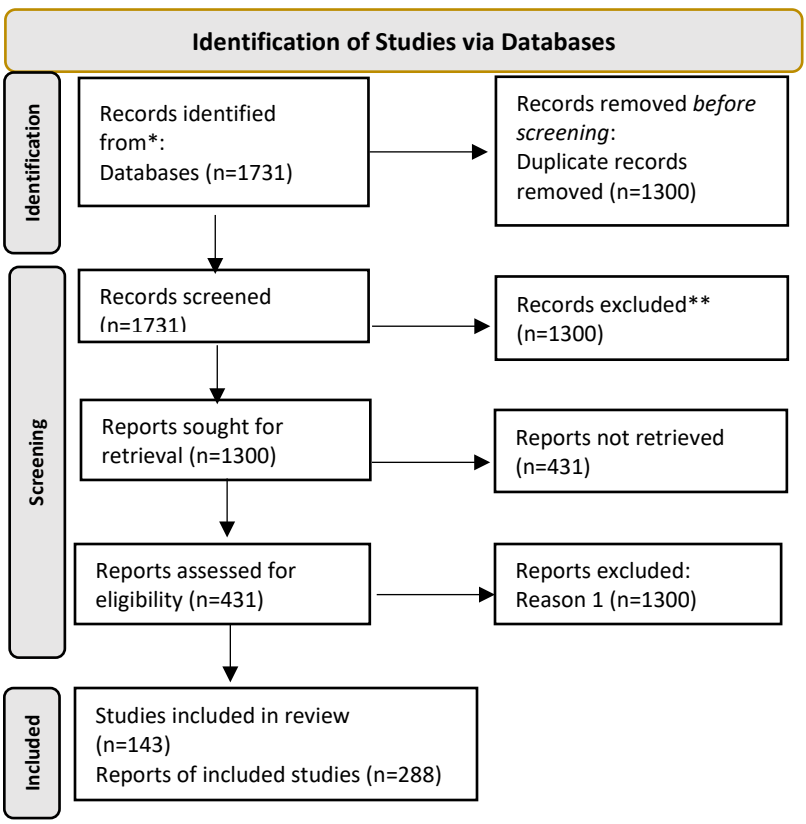
Global Migration Statistics and Trends

The World Migration Report 2022, published by the International Organization for Migration (IOM), estimated that 281 million people were living outside their country of birth in 2020, representing approximately 3.6 per cent of the global population.[1] Among these, 135 million were women, accounting for 48 per cent of total international migration.[2] While gender disaggregated data is increasingly recognised as essential for migration research, significant gaps remain in the availability of comprehensive information, particularly regarding marginalised migrant groups. The collection and analysis of migration statistics are often constrained by legal, political, and social challenges. Many governments lack standardised frameworks for recording migration data, particularly when it comes to undocumented migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers. Additionally, countries with restrictive immigration policies may underreport figures or fail to account for irregular migration. Despite these challenges, global trends indicate that migration flows continue to be shaped by economic disparities, political instability, armed conflicts, and climate change. High-income countries in North America, Europe, and the Gulf region remain the primary destinations for international migrants, driven by economic opportunities, labour shortages, and established migrant networks. According to recent estimates, the United States hosts the largest number of international migrants, followed by Germany, Saudi Arabia, and Russia. The European Union (EU) has also experienced significant migration, with arrivals from Africa, the Middle East, and Asia contributing to demographic shifts in the region. At the same time, South-South migration has gained increasing attention, as movement between developing nations accounts for a substantial share of global migration flows. Countries such as Turkey, South Africa, Kenya, Mexico, and Argentina have emerged as key migration hubs, often serving as both transit and destination countries. Migration across Asia, Africa, and Latin America is frequently driven by regional economic integration, historical migration ties, and employment opportunities in sectors such as agriculture, construction, and domestic work. Forced displacement remains one of the most pressing challenges in global migration. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), more than 100 million people were forcibly displaced by the end of 2022, with conflicts in Syria, Afghanistan, Ukraine, Venezuela, and Myanmar producing some of the largest refugee populations. Many asylum seekers seek protection in neighbouring countries before attempting to resettle in regions such as Europe or North America. However, access to asylum remains uneven and highly politicised. Countries such as the United States and Canada receive significant numbers of asylum seekers, with legal frameworks in place to process claims based on political persecution, war, and human rights violations.

In contrast, EU policies on asylum have been subject to debates over burden sharing, border controls, and integration challenges. Some reports highlight disparities in asylum outcomes, with certain nationalities facing higher rejection rates than others. In the Global South, countries such as Mexico, Argentina, Turkey, Kenya, South Africa, and Thailand have also become significant hosts for asylum seekers and refugees. Despite their own economic and political challenges, these nations have provided shelter to migrants fleeing violence and instability in neighbouring regions. Nevertheless, legal protections, social acceptance, and access to services vary widely, and many refugees continue to experience precarious living conditions.

PRISMA Model for Data Selection

PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) flow was used to track the literature selection process. The study followed these steps: **Identification**: Relevant literature was searched across databases, government reports, and NGO publications; **Screening**: Duplicates were removed, and abstracts were reviewed based on inclusion criteria; **Eligibility**: Full-text assessments were conducted to ensure relevance to LGBTQ rights, migration, and legal protections; **Inclusion**: Final selection of studies included qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-method research.



Tabulation of Key Findings

Category	Thailand	India
Same-Sex Marriage	Legalised in 2025	Not recognised, pending parliamentary action
Anti-Discrimination Laws	Lacks comprehensive legal protections	No specific protections for LGBTQ individuals
Transgender Rights	No legal gender recognition	Bureaucratic verification required for ID changes
Political Representation	Growing LGBTQ presence in activism and policy	Increased LGBTQ political appointments
Migration Trends	Regional hub for LGBTQ migrants	High LGBTQ emigration due to legal barriers
Workplace Protections	Lacks anti-discrimination policies in employment	Limited corporate inclusivity policies

The comparative study of cross-cultural dynamics and legal rights of LGBTQ individuals in Thailand and India reveals significant disparities in inclusivity and legal recognition. In India, the recent Supreme Court ruling against same-sex marriage underscores ongoing systemic discrimination, despite some legal protections against discrimination based on sexual orientation. Conversely, Thailand has made strides with the 2015 Gender Equality Act and a proposed Civil Partnership Bill, yet critiques highlight that these measures may perpetuate new forms of inequality rather than achieving true marriage equality. Both countries face challenges rooted in cultural stigma and transphobia, impacting access to healthcare and social acceptance for LGBTQ individuals. Furthermore, the intersectionality of migration and SOGIESC rights complicates the experiences of LGBTQ migrants, who often encounter heightened vulnerabilities in both legal and social contexts. Thus, while both nations exhibit progress, substantial barriers remain, necessitating comprehensive reforms to ensure genuine inclusivity and protection for LGBTQ communities.

Societal Attitudes and the Effectiveness of Legal Protections for LGBTQ+ Individuals in Thailand and India

The effectiveness of legal protections for LGBTQ individuals in Thailand and India is significantly shaped by societal attitudes, which continue to present barriers to full equality and inclusivity. While both countries have taken steps

toward legal recognition and protection, the persistence of stigma, cultural norms, religious influences, and historical legacies continues to hinder the implementation of these laws. The societal landscape in both nations reflects a complex interaction between legal advancements, public perception, and deep-rooted socio-cultural beliefs that ultimately impact the daily lives and rights of LGBTQ individuals.

Thailand: Progressive Image but Lacking Comprehensive Protections:

Thailand is often perceived as one of the most LGBTQ friendly nations in Asia due to its vibrant queer culture, visible LGBTQ community, and active advocacy movements. However, despite this image, legal protections remain inadequate, and societal discrimination persists. The absence of comprehensive anti-discrimination laws means that LGBTQ individuals, particularly transgender persons, face significant barriers in areas such as education, employment, and healthcare. LGBTQ students in Thailand often experience bullying and exclusion in schools, with little institutional support for gender diverse individuals. Employment discrimination is widespread, with many LGBTQ individuals reporting workplace bias, limited career opportunities, and wage disparities. Transgender persons face even greater challenges, as the inability to legally change their gender identity often results in mismatches between their legal documents and their lived identities, leading to obstacles in securing formal employment and accessing essential services. Despite growing public support for LGBTQ rights, deep-seated cultural stigmas and societal biases remain. Same-sex relationships are visible in entertainment and media, but traditional views on gender roles persist, affecting public perceptions of LGBTQ individuals. Many LGBTQ individuals in rural areas and conservative communities still face family rejection, social obligations, and violence**.** While Thailand legalised same-sex marriage in 2025, the lack of broader protections, such as explicit workplace protections, gender recognition laws for transgender individuals, and anti-discrimination statutes, continues to limit true equality.

India: Legal Progress but Deep-Rooted Social Stigma

India has witnessed notable legal advancements in LGBTQ rights, with landmark rulings such as the 2014 Supreme Court recognition of gender identity rights and the 2018 decriminalisation of homosexuality. However, these legal gains have not necessarily translated into widespread societal acceptance, and significant obstacles remain in achieving full inclusivity. LGBTQ rights in India are increasingly influenced by political and religious narratives**.** Majoritarian Hindu nationalism**,** while selectively embracing some aspects of LGBTQ identity, often marginalises non-conforming narratives, especially those intersecting with Muslim, Dalit, and tribal identities within the queer community. The selective recognition of LGBTQ issues within certain political movements may exclude gender non-conforming individuals, non-binary identities, and queer people from minority communities**,** exacerbating social

divisions. The colonial era sodomy laws, such as Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, which was in effect for over 150 years, played a major role in shaping societal attitudes toward same-sex relationships. While the Supreme Court decriminalised homosexuality in 2018, the legacy of colonial morality laws continues to fuel societal prejudice, reinforcing heteronormative and patriarchal structures that marginalize LGBTQ individuals. The lingering impact of colonial era legal systems manifests in law enforcement biases, judicial inconsistencies, and inadequate legal literacy among the general public regarding LGBTQ rights. Despite urban activism and increasing corporate inclusivity, many LGBTQ individuals continue to face familial rejection, conversion therapy, and social ostracization**.** Arranged marriage culture often forces queer individuals into heterosexual unions**,** leading to mental health challenges, forced migration, or underground LGBTQ communities.

Societal attitudes in Thailand and India significantly impact the effectiveness of existing legal protections for LGBTQ individuals, as deep-rooted stigma, cultural norms, and historical legacies continue to shape public perceptions and hinder full inclusivity. In Thailand, despite its reputation as an LGBTQ-friendly nation and the recent legalisation of same-sex marriage in 2025, the absence of comprehensive anti-discrimination laws leaves LGBTQ individuals, particularly transgender persons, vulnerable to workplace bias, educational exclusion, and healthcare disparities. While same-sex relationships are visible in media, traditional gender roles persist, leading to societal discrimination, especially in rural areas. In India, legal progress such as the decriminalisation of homosexuality in 2018 and the 2014 Supreme Court ruling affirming gender identity rights has been met with continued social resistance. Majoritarian Hindu nationalism influences LGBTQ rights, selectively acknowledging certain queer identities while marginalising non-conforming narratives, particularly among Muslim, Dalit, and tribal LGBTQ individuals. Additionally, the historical impact of colonial era sodomy laws, particularly Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, has left a lasting stigma, reinforcing heteronormative structures and institutional biases. Many LGBTQ individuals in India still face familial rejection, forced heterosexual marriages, and social obligations, further complicating their access to rights and opportunities. Thus, while legal frameworks exist in both countries, societal perceptions, political influences, and historical legacies continue to undermine their effectiveness in safeguarding LGBTQ rights.

LGBTQ Migration Trends in Thailand

Thailand has emerged as a regional hub for LGBTQ individuals seeking safety, employment, and social integration. The country's Gender Equality Act (2015) prohibits discrimination based on gender identity and sexual orientation, making it one of the most LGBTQ-friendly legal environments in Asia. A 2023 survey by Pew Research Center revealed that 85 per cent of Thai citizens support LGBTQ rights, making Thailand the most accepting country in Asia for LGBTQ individuals. Additionally, the country ranks second globally in

LGBTQ tourism, attracting over 4.5 million LGBTQ tourists annually, contributing approximately $5 billion to the Thai economy. Thailand has also seen a steady rise in LGBTQ migration, particularly from neighbouring countries where LGBTQ rights are heavily restricted. Individuals from countries like Malaysia, Indonesia, and Myanmar have migrated to Thailand in search of greater legal protection and social acceptance. Malaysia and Indonesia continue to criminalise same-sex relationships, with penalties ranging from imprisonment to corporal punishment under Sharia law. Similarly, in Myanmar, LGBTQ individuals face systemic discrimination, with reports indicating that over 60 per cent of LGBTQ individuals in Myanmar have been victims of police violence. Cities such as Bangkok, Pattaya, and Chiang Mai have become LGBTQ-friendly hubs, with inclusive policies in housing, employment, and healthcare. The country's Civil Partnership Bill, introduced in 2020, would grant same-sex couples limited legal rights but has not yet been passed into law. The absence of full marriage equality and adoption rights poses challenges for LGBTQ migrants seeking long-term settlement, family security, and legal recognition of their relationships.

LGBTQ Migration Trends in India

India, with its diverse socio-cultural landscape, has witnessed significant legal progress in LGBTQ rights, but social acceptance remains uneven, leading to high levels of internal migration among LGBTQ individuals. The historic Navtej Singh Johar vs. Union of India (2018) ruling by the Supreme Court decriminalised homosexuality by striking down Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, a colonial era law that criminalised same-sex relationships. However, despite this legal breakthrough, India does not have comprehensive anti-discrimination laws to protect LGBTQ individuals in workplaces, housing, or healthcare. In search of safety, economic opportunities, and community support. The top destinations for LGBTQ migrants in India include Mumbai, Delhi, Bengaluru, Chennai, and Hyderabad, where organisations and NGOs provide social and legal support. A survey by the International Labour Organization in 2023 found that 74 per cent of LGBTQ individuals in India experience workplace discrimination, with only 27 per cent being open about their identity at work due to fear of harassment or job loss.[3] This discrimination is a key driver of migration, as LGBTQ individuals seek employment in more inclusive companies, often in multinational corporations that have diversity policies. For transgender individuals, migration is even more critical due to social exclusion and lack of economic opportunities. Despite the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2019, which provides legal recognition for transgender individuals, its implementation has been inadequate. In India are unable to secure formal employment, leading many to migrate to metropolitan areas where informal work opportunities and NGO assistance are more accessible. Additionally, over 60 per cent of transgender individuals in India face family rejection, forcing them to relocate to urban centers for community support.

Legal Protection in India and Thailand

LGBTQ individuals in both Thailand and India continue to face significant legal and social challenges, particularly in areas of marriage, workplace inclusion, healthcare, and asylum rights. Thailand has yet to recognise same-sex marriage, and its proposed Civil Partnership Bill offers only limited legal protections, failing to grant full spousal rights. Similarly, in India, the Supreme Court ruled against same-sex marriage legalisation in 2023, asserting that the matter falls under parliamentary jurisdiction, leaving LGBTQ couples without legal recognition or adoption rights. In the workplace, only 4 per cent of companies in India have formal LGBTQ inclusive policies, compared to 78 per cent in Thailand, reflecting the stark disparity in corporate inclusivity.[4] Securing housing remains another challenge, as 45 per cent of LGBTQ individuals in India report discrimination from landlords, compared to 21 per cent in Thailand, forcing many LGBTQ migrants to seek alternative or informal housing arrangements. Moreover, while Thailand is a preferred destination for LGBTQ asylum seekers fleeing persecution in countries such as Malaysia and Myanmar, the country lacks a formal asylum policy, leading to years long waits for legal residency. India, on the other hand, has no formal asylum protections for LGBTQ refugees, leaving those escaping criminalisation and violence in neighbouring countries without any legal safeguards. These legal and structural barriers highlight the urgent need for policy reforms in both Thailand and India to create more inclusive and protective environments for LGBTQ individuals, particularly migrants and refugees. Thailand has made significant progress in LGBTQ rights, becoming the first Southeast Asian nation to legalise same-sex marriage. The law, signed by King Maha Vajiralongkorn on September 24, 2024, and enacted on January 23, 2025, grants same-sex couples equal rights in marriage, adoption, healthcare consent, and inheritance. However, despite this milestone, Thailand lacks anti-discrimination laws explicitly protecting LGBTQ individuals in employment, healthcare, housing, and education. Additionally, transgender individuals are still unable to legally change their gender on official documents, limiting their access to essential services and increasing their vulnerability to discrimination. India, on the other hand, has seen incremental progress in LGBTQ rights, particularly in political representation. However, same-sex marriage remains unrecognised. The Indian Supreme Court, while decriminalising homosexuality in 2018, left the decision on same-sex marriage to the Parliament, which has yet to enact any legislation on the matter. Furthermore, the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2019, though intended to safeguard transgender rights, has been criticised for its bureaucratic gender verification process and inadequate employment protections, leaving many transgender individuals vulnerable to discrimination.

Discussion

Despite both countries making progress in recognising and protecting LGBTQ rights, significant disparities persist between policy implementation and societal

acceptance. While Thailand enjoys a global reputation for LGBTQ tolerance, the lived experiences of LGBTQ individuals reveal numerous obstacles, including the lack of comprehensive anti-discrimination laws, employment challenges, and rigid gender norms in education. Similarly, India, having made historic legal progress with the decriminalisation of Section 377 and the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, still struggles with deeply ingrained societal prejudices and inconsistent enforcement of protective measures. A key theme emerging from this analysis is the role of cultural and religious traditions in shaping public perceptions of LGBTQ identities. In India, conservative family structures and religious ideologies continue to exert pressure on LGBTQ individuals, often resulting in forced marriages, social obligations, and mental health challenges. Many LGBTQ individuals face honour-based violence or coercion into heterosexual marriages to uphold family reputation. The lack of legal recognition of same-sex marriages and adoption rights further exacerbates their struggles. Thailand, despite being more open in some aspects still lacks full legal recognition of LGBTQ rights, with transgender individuals particularly vulnerable to systemic discrimination. While the country is known for its visible transgender community, social barriers remain that prevent full acceptance in all sectors of life. Economic exclusion remains a critical barrier to LGBTQ inclusion in both nations. Discrimination in hiring practices, workplace harassment, and wage disparities limit career prospects for LGBTQ individuals, particularly transgender persons, who often find themselves confined to informal or high-risk employment sectors. In India, transgender individuals frequently engage in begging or sex work due to societal exclusion and a lack of economic opportunities. Even in more progressive cities, LGBTQ individuals report experiencing biases in hiring and promotions, leading to job insecurity and financial instability. In Thailand, transgender individuals often find employment in beauty, entertainment, or hospitality industries, reinforcing occupational stereotypes and limiting career mobility. Without robust legal frameworks protecting against discrimination, economic stability remains elusive for many LGBTQ individuals in both countries.

The healthcare sector also demonstrates significant gaps in LGBTQ inclusivity. Both India and Thailand have strong HIV/AIDS intervention programs, yet access to general healthcare services remains problematic due to stigma and lack of medical training in LGBTQ-specific health concerns. Medical professionals in both nations often lack cultural competence regarding LGBTQ health issues, leading to misdiagnoses or discriminatory treatment. The persistence of conversion therapy in certain regions further highlights the need for policy intervention and public awareness campaigns to address mental health disparities. In India, mental health services remain largely inaccessible to many LGBTQ individuals due to affordability and the shortage of sensitised professionals. Thailand, despite having a more advanced healthcare infrastructure, still lacks widespread integration of LGBTQ healthcare services, particularly for gender-affirming treatments and mental health support. Additionally, media representation and advocacy efforts play a crucial role in

shaping public attitudes toward LGBTQ rights. While both countries have seen increased LGBTQ visibility in mainstream media, representation often remains stereotypical or tokenistic. In India, recent films and web series have started portraying LGBTQ characters in more nuanced ways, but deep-rooted societal taboos continue to hinder widespread acceptance. In Thailand, the popularity of LGBTQ narratives in entertainment does not necessarily translate into legal or social equality, highlighting the gap between representation and real-world change.

Limitations

The present findings should be understood within the framework of certain limitations. First, due to the multisectoral nature of this review, the inclusion of a wide array of sources may have influenced the overall findings. Although substantial efforts were made to include literature explicitly addressing LGBTQ+ discrimination, social exclusion, and inequalities, some pertinent studies might have been excluded because of the pre-defined inclusion criteria. The selection process sought to strike a balance between breadth and depth while upholding methodological rigor. Nonetheless, some qualitative studies offering valuable insights may not have met the inclusion parameters, potentially limiting the overall comprehensiveness of the review. Second, the integration of grey literature enhanced the scope and inclusivity of the analysis but also introduced potential concerns regarding source quality and reliability. Grey literature—such as reports from non-governmental organizations and policy documents—often lacks the formal peer-review process typical of academic publications. To address this issue, all grey literature sources were systematically assessed for credibility and methodological robustness. Many of these sources provided rich, large-scale mixed-methods data that complemented and reinforced findings from peer-reviewed studies. The convergence between grey literature and academic research thus strengthens the validity of the conclusions presented. Third, language posed an additional limitation. Although both Thai and English language publications were included to ensure a more comprehensive perspective, certain constraints persisted. A number of Thai domestic journals are not indexed in major international databases, which restricted access to potentially relevant national studies and may have resulted in the omission of some locally significant research. The reliance on available databases may have led to an underrepresentation of research conducted by Thai scholars, particularly those published in less globally accessible outlets. To address this limitation, bilingual Thai-English co-authors and experts were involved in the review process to ensure the inclusion of relevant Thai language studies and contextual expertise. Additionally, variations in research methodologies across different studies posed challenges in synthesising findings. The diverse methodological approaches—including qualitative interviews, ethnographic studies, large-scale surveys, and policy analyses—complicated direct comparisons between sources. While this diversity enriches the review, it also necessitates careful

interpretation of findings within their respective methodological frameworks. Finally, the evolving nature of LGBTQ rights and inclusion in both India and Thailand means that new developments may have emerged since the completion of this review. Policy changes, legal reforms, and shifts in societal attitudes could impact the applicability of some findings over time. Continuous research and updates to this body of literature are essential to maintain an accurate and relevant understanding of LGBTQ inclusion and challenges in both countries. Despite these limitations, the review provides a valuable synthesis of existing knowledge, offering insights into the structural, cultural, and legal barriers faced by LGBTQ individuals in India and Thailand. Future research should aim to address these gaps by incorporating more diverse perspectives, expanding access to underrepresented sources, and employing longitudinal studies to track evolving trends in LGBTQ inclusion.

Conclusion

Although both India and Thailand have made notable progress toward LGBTQ inclusion, significant systemic barriers continue to impede full social and legal acceptance. Legal reforms alone cannot guarantee equality; they must be accompanied by shifts in societal attitudes, equitable economic opportunities, and accessible healthcare systems to ensure genuine inclusion. The contrast between formal tolerance and lived experiences highlights the urgent need for policies that close the gap between legal rights and everyday realities for LGBTQ individuals. Future initiatives should focus on enacting comprehensive anti-discrimination legislation, strengthening legal recognition of same-sex partnerships, and implementing inclusive economic policies that promote workforce participation and equality. Policymakers in both countries should advance reforms granting equal rights in marriage, adoption, and inheritance to LGBTQ individuals. In parallel, enhanced media representation, inclusive educational reforms, and community-led advocacy are vital to transforming public perceptions and fostering acceptance. Healthcare systems must also evolve through LGBTQ-inclusive medical training and the expansion of accessible, affirming mental health services. Addressing economic inequalities via affirmative workplace measures and corporate diversity programs will be key to sustainable inclusion. Governments must further act to prohibit harmful practices such as conversion therapy and ensure the availability of safe, supportive environments for LGBTQ individuals across both rural and urban contexts. Adopting an intersectional approach that integrates legal, social, cultural, and economic dimensions can guide both India and Thailand toward deeper inclusivity. Realizing dignity, equality, and opportunity for LGBTQ individuals demands sustained government commitment, active community participation, and broad societal transformation. Standing at a pivotal moment, both nations have the opportunity to combine progressive policy action with grassroots movements to create societies where LGBTQ individuals are not only legally safeguarded but also socially celebrated.

Notes

[1] M. McAuliffe and A. Triandafyllidou, eds. *World Migration Report 2022* (International Organization for Migration, Geneva, 2021) , p. xii.
[2] (McAuliffe and Triandafyllidou, *World Migration*, 3.
[3] J. Enteen, 2007. "Lesbian Studies in Thailand," *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 11, no. 3/4 (2007): 255–63, https://doi.org/10.1300/J155v11n03_08
[4] Enteen, "Lesbian Studies."

Facing The Gulf Cooperation Council Countries' Illiberal Migration Regime: Making Sense of Kafala System and its Impacts on Migrant Workers

By

Negera Gudeta Adula *

Migration governance regimes play a significant role not only in expediting orderly mobility but also in ensuring the dignity of the migrant workers in their new homes.[1] Studies on migration governance framework focus on the Global North neglecting the Global South perspectives and experiences. Gulf countries stand at the epicenter of the South-South migration attracting a significant number of migrants from Southeast Asia, South Asia, and Sub-Saharan Africa.[2] Against this backdrop, the South-South migration and its governance regimes received scant scholarly attention and have remained untheorised in relative terms.[3] The conventional migration governance theories, for instance, liberal paradox neglected the migration governance regime of authoritarian immigrant-receiving states.[4] The liberal paradox is an analytical framework that unpacks how liberal developed states in the Global North experience a dilemma regarding migration governance facing a stark stand-off between economic incentives of liberalising migration governance regimes and the security concern of tightening immigration restrictions.[5]

[6]contends that Western Europe and North America trapped a liberal paradox, experiencing difficulties to reconcile the economic benefits and security risks of migration regimes liberalisation. To maintain a competitive advantage, governments must keep their economies and societies open to trade, investment, and migration. The liberal paradox is a Western centric theory, and its application is narrowly confined to liberal Western nations and democratic regimes neglecting the circumstances of non-democratic regimes, migrant-receiving nations and their immigration governance practices. However, the non-democratic regimes especially Arab Gulf rentier states standout as the third largest recipient of migrants only next to Northern America and the European Union following the discovery of oil which resulted in the boom in economic

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and infrastructural growth of the Gulf region and precipitated the sharp demand for foreign labour.[7] Migrant workers played a pivotal role in the rapid transformation of the infrastructural and economic development in the Gulf countries[8] who came to work attracted by oil-induced economic growth in the region. Religion-induced migration and mobility in the Gulf countries can be dated back centuries. The religious pilgrimages to Mecca known as Hajj and Umrah played a phenomenal role in attracting Muslims from across the world into the region.[9]

Following the discovery of oil which altered the economic landscape of the Gulf countries, the demand for labour force exponentially increased resulting in large-scale and substantial migration of foreign workers into the region.[10] The oil-induced economic boom in the 1970s further led to an influx of foreign migrant workers from Southeast Asia, South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa into the region which further consolidated with economic diversification in multiple sectors such as real estate, construction industry, tourism, finance, and technology which created job opportunities and attracted numerous foreign migrants.[11] Today, migrants make up a significant proportion of the population in most of the Gulf countries. For instance, in Qatar, UAE, and Kuwait, the percentage of foreign-born workers often exceeds 80-90 per cent of the total population.[12] Yet, unlike in the case of Global North, where asylees, refugees, and economic migrants are accommodated, Gulf countries accept only economic migrants who often work on temporary contracts which is often criticised as a setback to permanent settlement and integration into the host society.[13] To ensure the better governance of steadily growing labour migration into the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries of Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Jordan, and Lebanon, the kafala system introduced in the 1950s as a migration governance regime.[14]

Since the mid twentieth century kafala system has been a regulatory regime that defined the relationship between migrant workers and their employers in the Gulf countries[15] creating a surplus of cheap labour by attracting millions of migrant workers from South Asia, Southeast Asia, and Sub-Saharan Africa which played a phenomenal role in the economic and infrastructural growth of the countries in the region.[16] The migrant workers are drawn into the region by promising economic opportunities in the Gulf region but often face unexpected challenges regarding their working conditions, human rights issues, legal protection, and payments generated by kafala sponsorship system. Kafala migration governance regime attracted the attention of human rights organisations, academia, and experts and became the subject of intense scrutiny over the years due to the concerns about the gross abuse of human and labour rights of migrant workers in the countries where the employers have unlimited power over the migrant workers curtailing their freedom of movement, confiscating passports, withholding wages, and confining them in unsafe working conditions.[17]

This paper studies the kafala system and its socio-economic and human rights implications in the Gulf countries' socio-economic and political governance architecture and its impacts on the migrant workers in the region.[18]

Methodologically and theoretically this paper is based on intersectionality theory[19] to draw a nuanced understanding of how migrant workers in the Gulf region are exposed to layers of marginalities including gender, race, and class under the kafala migration governance regime. The paper also draws insights from Foucault's analytical framework **of** biopolitics to offer a comprehensive account of how the authoritarian Gulf countries utilised kafala regime to regulate the migrant workers' bodies and labour to protect the social order and exercise control. This paper explains the genesis of the kafala regime, and its rationalities that gradually evolved into illiberal migration governance regime affecting the migrant workers as the kafala becomes a regime of frontier production and consolidation of divides that are exclusionary and discriminatory migration governance regime.

Kafala Migration Governance System: Genesis and Rationalities

Kafala migration governance framework has been widely practiced in the Gulf countries since the mid twentieth century to regulate unskilled and low-skilled domestic workers.[20] The kafala system does not allow long-term stay, permanent settlement, or naturalisation of migrant workers since they usually migrate to Gulf region with short-term contracts.[21] The kafala system is an extensive and institutionalised migration governance framework that is designed to attract millions of people in the form of a cheap labour into booming economies of the Gulf countries and generate billions of dollars for sending countries in the form of remittances. The kafala system remains a critical tool of the Gulf countries' capacity to ensure political control and social order by managing the migrant workers who constitute a substantial proportion of the population in comparison to national citizen.[22] The introduction of kafala migration governance was prompted by national security concerns including the need to preserve national identity amidst steadily growing labour migration in the region without compromising the significant economy of cheap labour and maintain a safe and stable society anchored in the rule of law.[23] The kafala system managed to meet the demand for labour with migrant workers in the region while ensuring that these workers are only temporary residents in the country maintaining the status quo of national identity and security.[24] The term kafala originates from Islamic tradition and the Arab root Ka-fa-la which refers to feeding, supporting, or vouching foreigners and strangers without expecting financial gain in return.[25] However, the application of kafala into labour system reversed the original concept and created an institutionalised exploitative and oppressive migration governance system where employers are given excessive power to control workers, including limiting their ability to change jobs or leave the country leading to forced labour and gross human rights abuses.[26]

With the discovery of oil in the Gulf region during the twentieth century, countries like Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, and the UAE experienced an economic boom that created a high demand for labour forces, especially in construction, domestic work, and other manual sectors. The local population was too small to fill the labour gaps. The population of these countries was

small, and their citizens were often not interested in working in the manual labour sectors. The kafala system was introduced to fill these gaps and labour shortage by organising migration based on the temporary scheme.[27] The kafala system became a way to regulate the influx of foreign workers while also providing an organised structure that allowed for temporary employment contracts, mainly in sectors that required low-skilled labour. The system was designed to ensure that labourers could stay only for the duration of the contract, which was typically tied to the employment relationship.[28] This allowed governments of the Gulf countries to manage migration flows in a way that avoided permanent settlement and kept foreign workers as a transient labour force. The kafala system allowed the Gulf states to retain significant control over foreign workers' movements, ensuring that workers could not easily change jobs or leave the country through outsourcing the migration governance system to private citizens, sponsors, and agencies. Kafala migration governance was configured to maintain social order and avoid a potential surge in unemployment or labour unrest in the region which is a threat to Gulf monarchies' authoritarian grip.[29]

Kafala Regime as Frontier Production and Exclusionary Practices

The kafala system symbolises how authoritarianism regulates bodies, borders, space, and labour of migrant workers by institutionalised control and dependency.[30] The kafala regime offered unrestricted power to kafeels (sponsors) which stripped migrant workers of autonomy, agency, dignity, and rights, reducing them to a vulnerable labour force that is bound by the whims of their sponsors who has a mandate to control their legal status, mobility, and employment conditions.[31] The kafala system also exemplifies how authoritarian systems leverage on law, race, and class to maintain tight control over migrants' bodies and labour to ensure control, and social order and keep any threats to its authoritarian grips at bay. The kafala system is the most decentralised illiberal migration regime where the states outsourced the migration governance system to private employers, agencies, and companies empowering the multiple actors to exploit the structural loopholes and legal flaws of the kafala system for their benefits and resulting in the inconsistencies and irregularities in its implementation.[32] Kafala migration regime also entails temporalities and embodies racial and gender differentiation against migrant workers. The system was designed to attract cheap labour during the period of economic growth and return them when the economic progress weakened which is a long-standing barrier to immigrants' integration into the host society making the system oppressive and exploitative which is also a testament to the temporalities of kafala regime.[33] The kafeel migrants hierarchical and racial power imbalance left the migrant workers without agency and autonomy over their destiny, identity, and legal status. The employers withhold the passports of employees and determine the legal status which leaves them with uncertainties regarding the next step in their lives.[34]

The labourer's rights to mobility, living conditions, and privacy are at the mercy of their sponsors making the kafala migration regime something that resonates a modern-day slavery which sparked concerns and drew criticism from international human rights and labour organisations.[35] The kafala system consolidates the structural asymmetries and configurates frontiers between domestic workers and their employers keeping the migrant labourers in a peripheral and fringe position, socially, legally, and politically[36] also configuring divides based on race, class, legal and ethnic, embodying spatial and differential exclusion which is concurrent with the intersectionality theory. The kafala system had detrimental impacts on migrant workers since it resulted in unpaid wages, trapping migrant workers in the precarious conditions, and leave them with the inability to change jobs or leave the country without their sponsor's permission tying migrant workers legal status to their sponsors which rooted in the historical colonial practices.[37]

Under the kafala system, migrant workers face exploitation and abuse (both physical, sexual, and emotional) from their sponsors (kafeel), agencies, and private employers, and are excluded from national labour regulating laws and norms of Gulf countries which stipulate maximum working hours, minimum wages, overtime, vacation and other relevant benefits.[38] Since migrant workers employment and residency visas are tied to sponsors who has the mandate to renew or terminate their work permits and visa, the kafala regime grants unchecked power to private citizens and agencies rather than the state to control migrant workers legal status creating a power asymmetry that favours sponsors.[39] In many cases employers often have complete control over migrant workers ability to stay in the country, and secure work permits, and visas. This unchecked mandate given to the sponsor (kafeel) exposes the labourers to multiple challenges including poor working conditions, experiencing delayed wage payments, or no payment and traps the migrant workers in a condition where they are unable to change jobs or leave the country without their employer's consent.[40]

Kafala System as an Illiberal Migration Governance Regime and Its Impacts on the Migrant Workers

The kafala system is regarded as an illiberal migration governance regime due to several reasons. First, the system resulted in the erosion of human rights and violation of fundamental freedom of migrant workers since it grants unchecked power to the sponsors over migrant workers.[41] The migrant workers are stripped off their agency and rights leaving them powerless to make decisions about their employment, visas, and work permits, and left without legal protections making them vulnerable to multiple abuses. The system curtails migrant workers autonomy, agency, and erodes their dignity, which are typically valued in liberal democratic systems, such as freedom of movement, equal protection under the law, and the right to work in conditions of dignity.[42] The kafala system is also a decentralised abusive[43] and exploitative migration governance scheme that enable multiple non-state actors including private

citizens, pseudo agencies, and companies to exercise migration governance power. The kafala regime resulted in the delegation of state responsibility regarding the migration governance to the private employer, individuals, and agencies to oversee both a migrant worker's immigration and employment status.[44] Kafala regime also systematically limits freedoms, increases their vulnerability to abuse, and perpetuates a deeply unequal power dynamic between migrant workers and their employers which also includes racial and gender based discriminations.[45]

The involvement of multiple actors in the regulation of the migration process not only resulted in inconsistencies and fragmentation in its practical applications but also exposed labourers to multiple stigmatisation and discrimination by different actors, creating a fertile condition for traffickers and smugglers to easily intervene and exploit the precarious condition of the migrant workers with little to no legal protection from the state institutions.[46] Second, the structural flaws and legal loopholes of the kafala system generated an institutionalised exploitative and oppressive system tying the migrants legal residency, work permits, and visas to their employer or sponsor (*kafeel*) which makes the migrant workers dependent on their sponsor.[47] The migrant workers receive no protection from national labour laws and law enforcement agencies when they face multiple cases of abuses from their employers. Migrant workers have no say regarding safety of their jobs, they are compelled to stay in confined spaces, subjected to multiple abuses by employers where they face deportation threats if they attempt to speak out about their conditions.[48] In multiple cases, migrant workers are not given days off, starves for food and deprived of water, physically abused, restricted access to movement and communication, and not provided with proper living conditions. Their passports get confiscated by their sponsors, and freedom, and basic human dignity are disregarded by the kafeel who invested money into their acquired worker in the process of the migration.[49] Third, the kafala system is incompatible and inconsistent with the international migration governance regime and international refugee law including the 1951 Refugee Convention. The 1951 Refugee Convention is designed to protect the rights of refugees and asylum seekers, ensuring that they are not forcibly returned to situations of danger or persecution.[50] The temporalities ingrained in the kafala system thwarts long-term integration of migrants in the host society which is stark evidence of kafala system's contradiction to the refugee convention and international migration laws.

The kafala system also does not align with this idea of protection or rights migrants enshrined in the international human rights laws and migration law, instead, it is rooted in a system of control and exploitation that undermines the freedom and security of migrant workers.[51] One of the central principles of international migration law is the idea of freedom of movement**,** the protection of migrant workers' rights, and fair treatment for workers, including migrants.[52] The kafala system, however, restricts migrant workers ability to change employers or leave the country without their employer's consent, often trapping them in exploitative and precarious situations. The international refugee regime ensures that refugees are granted basic rights such as the right to work,

movement, the right to have access services, and remain in the host country. Under the kafala system, migrant workers often do not have the same rights as citizen, and in some cases, they may not have access to legal protection and resources if their rights are being violated. This lack of legal protection can be seen as a fundamental incompatibility of kafala system with international migration regimes and human rights law.[53] Unlike the international liberal migration governance and international human rights instruments such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) which regulate the movement of people in ways that respect human rights, dignity, and the rule of law, kafala system limits the mobility of workers and placing them under the control of employers, operates outside the principles of fair labour practices and equitable governance.[54]

The refugee conventions and other international instruments provide protections not just for economic migrants but also for people fleeing conflict, persecution, or human rights violations which are entitled to protections such as asylum and non-refoulement (the principle that a person cannot be returned to a country where they face danger). However, kafala system does not provide such protections for refugees and asylum seekers, who may be subjected to deportation or forced return to unsafe situations if they attempt to escape abusive employers or difficult circumstances. This is a testimony to kafala regime's stark contrast to the international migration governance efforts to govern migration in a way that respects the human dignity and rights of all migrants, whether they are refugees, asylum seekers, or labour migrants. Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries are not signatories to the 1951 Refugee Convention or its 1967 Protocol which are the foundation of the international refugee regime.[55] This is a key reason why kafala migration governance system is substantially incompatible with international migration regime and provisions of international refugee laws including those established under the 1951 Refugee Convention. The kafala migration governance framework is primarily structured to accommodate temporary labour migration to the Gulf region with the objective of securing a much-demanded surplus of cheap labour for a booming oil economy excluding refugees and asylum seekers.[56].Most migrants are temporary workers who migrated to the Gulf region to work in construction, domestic, and service sectors often in the temporary bases. This has created a significant gap in their approach to international migration governance. While they are major recipients of labour migrants, they do not offer the same protections for refugees as countries that have signed the 1951 Convention and its protocols. Hence, the kafala migration governance framework is categorically illiberal due to its restrictive, hierarchical, and human rights depriving structure which is incompatible with the contemporary international refugee governance regime.[57]

Kafala Regime: Mirror of the Gulf Countries' Socio-Political Governance Architecture

The Kafala system reflects the broader socio-political structures and governance architecture of the Gulf monarchies where citizens rely on the ruling family for privileges, subsidies, and economic benefits with little political agency.[58] The political structure in the Arabian Gulf functions on the patron-client relationship and rentier state dynamics where the royal families act as the protector and provider of their citizen offering economic benefits, subsidies, and privileges in return for political loyalty.[59] In the political governance model of the Gulf countries, citizens rely on states, and ruling families for welfare, social benefits, and jobs[60] and royal families use citizenship as a tool to gain and consolidate loyalty from citizen where revocation of citizenship applied in the case of disloyalty.[61] Congruently, in the kafala migration governance regime, migrant workers depend on their sponsors' mercy to secure employment, residence permits, switch jobs, and exit visas.[62] The kafala system in the Gulf states extends the region's broader patronage-base hierarchical governance model into the labour system, reinforced and perpetuated power dynamics rooted in control, dependency, and exclusion. The Gulf's political systems and governance model is based on an asymmetrical governance architecture, where authority, loyalty, and access to resources are heavily influenced by relationship of dependency and patron-client relationship.[63] The hierarchical nature of this system ensures that power remains concentrated in the hands of a few, while the broader population, particularly foreign workers, remains in subordinate roles and status.

Political power is often concentrated within the ruling families and elites who control the state apparatus and its resources. These elites extend their influence through patronage networks, offering resources and protection to those loyal to them, while others are excluded from the decision-making process. This patronage structure maintains a rigid class divide with the objective of ensuring a social order where citizens receive privileges based on their loyalty to the ruling family or state, while non-citizens or migrants remain marginalised and occupy lower social, economic, and legal status. The kafala system extends this hierarchical and asymmetrical model of governance into the labour market by creating a system where migrant workers are relying on their employers (sponsors) for their legal status, residency, and ability to work.[64] The power dynamics is further entrenching and embedded in the existing power architecture in Gulf countries. In the kafala system, the employer or sponsor assumes the role of a patron, the worker's ability to stay in the country, change jobs, or even leave the country depends entirely on the sponsor's consent. The worker, therefore, is bound by the patronage relationship and has limited autonomy. This creates a power imbalance like the broader political patronage system where citizens hold power while migrants (the clients) are dependent on their sponsors.[65]

Similar to the patron-client relationships in political spheres that establish power imbalance and dependency, the kafala system fosters an

environment where workers have little control over their lives. Employers control not only the workers' employment but often their living conditions, wages, and mobility.[66] After their arrival through the kafala sponsorship system, the migrant workers become the property of their sponsor, they are not allowed to leave the country nor change jobs since their passports are confiscated by the agents and sponsor leaving migrants without agency and bargaining power regarding their wages, working conditions, and visas. This dynamic perpetuates the sense of inferiority and subordination of migrant workers, reflecting the social hierarchies of the Gulf's broader political governance architecture. Kafala system not only extended the Gulf's hierarchical, patronage-based model of governance architecture into the migration management system but also exacerbated the exclusionary approach of governance by preventing migrant workers from exercising rights, accessing legal protection, health facilities and economic benefits accessible for citizens. The hierarchical and asymmetric nature of the kafala system is deeply embedded and ingrained in the political systems of the Gulf countries which is reinforced in the labour sector for the purposes of ensuring the social order and social control by ensuring that migrant workers remain within a controlled and subordinated environment. Migrant workers who defy their sponsors or attempt to leave the country without permission are often punished, further entrenching the social stratification that is characteristic of Gulf society.[67]

Kafala system symbolises how authoritarianism regulates the bodies, borders, space, and labour by leveraging on law, race, and class[68] which is congruent with Michel Foucault's analytical framework of biopolitics. Biopolitics help us to comprehend how modern state operates to discipline bodies, border, and labour to ensure social order and national security. Foucault's biopolitcs unpacks how states extend the neoliberal governance into modern life and manage it not through punishment but by *fostering, optimising, and regulating populations.*[69] Kafala system exemplifies how Gulf countries regulate life through biopolitical differentiations between citizen and migrant workers where citizen is fostered and migrants are regulated, often made disposable.[70] Gulf countries treat migrant workers as *human capital* valuable when productive, expendable when not, where their bodies are tightly governed to optimise productivity and minimise risks to the host society which aligned with neoliberal paradigm of governance. Kafala migration governance regime epitomises a two-tier biopolitical regime **of** citizen which nurtured as a population to be preserved, protected, and expanded and migrants which optimised as a temporary workforce, but excluded from long-term care, political rights, and reproductive belonging.[71]

Kafala Migration Governance Regime: Layers of Vulnerabilities, Systematic Exclusion and Discriminatory Practices

Kafala system in the Gulf countries entails a model of deferential exclusion that intersects with both race and gender**,** reinforcing societal hierarchies and perpetuating marginalisation along multiple aspects where migrants occupy the

lowest inferior social and legal status.[72] The system is not only a mechanism of labour control but also a structure that institutionalises discrimination based on race, nationality, and gender, generating intersectional hierarchies in gender, race, and nationalities.[73] Kafala perpetuates racialised exclusion**,** where migrant workers, primarily from Asia and Africa are placed in subordinate roles, often defined by their nationality and race. This creates a racialised labour market where a worker's opportunities are largely determined by their ethnicity and nationality.[74] It also perpetuates and institutionalises gendered and racial exclusion**,** where women are disproportionately affected by its exploitative practices which is concurrent with intersectionality theory a framework that offers a nuanced understanding of how the intersect and overlap of gender, race, class, and sexuality creates layers marginalities.[75] Female migrant workers, particularly those engaged in domestic works like cleaning, childcare, and caregiving faces a double layer of marginalisation since these positions are often undervalued and poorly compensated, with long working hours, isolation, and abuses in different forms including physical, verbal, emotional, and sexual.

Women employed as domestic workers are often confined to the homes of their employers with limited freedom of movement without the consent of their employers.[76] Their daily lives are tightly controlled by their employers who manage not only their physical labour but also their movement and leisure time. This physical confinement extends beyond the home itself as some employers may limit or control access to the outside world, preventing workers from socialising, accessing healthcare and legal protection were leaving the premises for personal matters without their employer's consent. Women working in the domestic sector have little to no legal protection, access to justice, and legal recourse amidst issues like wage theft, mistreatment, or sexual harassment. Female migrant workers from Southeast Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, and South Asia often face more significant barriers than their female counterparties from other Arab countries and male counterparts intertwining race, class, and gender vulnerabilities.[77] The kafala system is a clear example of how labour systems can be organised to embody deferential exclusion, where workers are forced to be trapped in the subordinate and inferior status both socially and legally that is justified by racial and gender hierarchies. Migrant workers under the kafala system, particularly women of colour, are subjected to exploitation and exclusion in ways that reflect broader societal and structural inequalities. These migrant workers are kept in deferential positions by a system that not only controls their labour but also limits their mobility, legal protections, and social status.[78]

Conclusion

Kafala migration governance system was structured to balance labour demands with national security and cultural preservation and ensure national economic growth by securing cheap labour without compromising national identity and social fabric. The kafala migration governance regime was introduced to regulate the supply of cheap labour into construction, caregiving, cleaning, or

domestic work sectors. Kafala allowed Gulf countries to quickly supply large numbers of cheap labours that fuelled their rapid development without the need to create extensive labour laws or provide workers full rights for foreign workers, enabled the regulated migration process where the migration governance regime decentralised and outsourced into private citizens, agents, and companies which granted extensive power to determine the wages, visas, work permits, and legal status of the migrant workers. Kafala system ingrained in the Gulf countries broader socio-political governance model is characterised by a patron-client and asymmetric system where citizens rely on the ruling elites and royal families for economic benefits, access to welfare, and other privileges with little to no political agency. The kafala system extended this governance architecture into the labour system and gave unchecked power to the sponsors over migrants which resulted in the gross human rights abuses and the erosion of fundamental freedoms of migrants enshrined in the refugee law and international human rights law. Kafala system resulted in wage theft, sexual, verbal, and physical abuses, confiscation of passports, and violation of freedom of movement of the migrant workers where female domestic workers face layers of marginality due to the intersection of gender, race, and class vulnerabilities. The kafala system embodies hierarchical, racial, and gender exclusion that creates multiple frontiers and institutionalizes social and legal divides among migrant workers and citizens which are incompatible with international refugee norms and human rights standards. The hierarchical and asymmetric nature of the Kafala system is deeply embedded and ingrained in the political systems of the gulf countries which extended and reinforced in the labour sector to ensure the cheap labour supply to un-skilled and low-skilled job sectors by ensuring that migrant workers remain within a controlled and subordinated environment during their temporary stay in the region. Kafala system symbolises how an authoritarian regime regulates bodies, space, and labour of migrant workers in the age of global migration by institutionalsing control and dependency that tied migrant workers to their sponsors (kafeel) which is inconsistent with international migration governance regime like the 1951 Refugee Convention, and international human rights standards. It is suggested that the kafala system needs to be abolished or reformed to embrace the existing liberal international refugee norms, human rights standards, and values to protect the rights and dignity of migrant workers in the Gulf region. Human rights groups, international labour organisations, media, and other concerned stakeholders should reiterate their calls on the Gulf Cooperation Council countries to reform or abolish the kafala system and protect the rights and dignities of migrant workers in the region.

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Rights and Reality: A Mixed Methods Inquiry into Public Perception and Understanding of Human Rights Among the People of Assam

By

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Human rights is a critical component of governance as it concerns respect, freedom, and equality of all people. International instruments like the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and several national constitutions incorporate basic tents of human rights forms as the core principles for structuring a given society that seeks to pursue justice and social equity.[1] Yet the popular understanding of human rights is divergent due to varying application of the same notion that is shaped by variables linked to its promotion, and scope of applicability linked to factors like culture, socio-economic status, level of education, and the media. The convergence of these aspects presents the challenge of overcoming the difference between the existing definitions of human rights and the perception to promote inclusiveness, justice, and empowerment.[2] Human rights concepts tend to have different levels of societal consciousness throughout the world.[3] A global assessment conducted by Amnesty International in 2022 found that only 37 per cent of people from low-income countries could comprehend what fundamental human rights mean, whereas 72 per cent of people from high-income countries understood the meaning.[4] In India although the constitutional provisions such as Article 14 ensures that all Indians are equal under the law, and Article 15 prohibits discrimination, the National Human Rights Commission in 2023 found that less than 50 per cent of the urban populace and about 70 per cent of rural dwellers barely knew anything about their basic rights.[5] This ignorance creates conducive environments for human rights abuse as observed in caste or gender inequalities, and laws on access to justice and resources.

Recent socio-economic and technological developments have led to an increase in human rights consciousness.[6] Social campaigns like the #MeToo

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and the #BlackLivesMatter used social media to expose injustices and systemic racism.[7] Cultural particularism makes application of human rights, in situations like these, more difficult because there are section of population who prefer to ignore the responsibility that comes with universality of human rights and instead create a pure form that is more about their way of doing things than what the international laws dictate. This highlight the necessity of human rights education, which considers context specific characteristics of the population that is being targeted, devoid of the stratagems that claim to be universal. This research considers ways and methods to transform public perception of human rights and effective legal protection against their violations. Scholarly discussions focus on issues such as legal dominance over the local populations, or justice implementation—structural and operational isolation of egregious crimes from their prevailing contexts, or even non-integration of anticolonial strategies into the legal framework, but very few look into the other side, i.e., how people view human rights and society's development towards obtaining and securing such human rights? Role of education in empowering individuals with rights awareness has received much emphasis leaving attention on the roles of other factors such as ethnicity, class stratification, and media as anecdotal. There is little information on the relationship between how and whether the notions of human rights intercede with the actual rights provided for in international law in conjecture to national legislation. If these connections are not studied, then it is very likely that efforts to promote human rights in the policy arena will be futile or even harmful in effect. This study assess the level of the Assam population's knowledge and awareness of human rights, paying attention to the differences brought by the age, sex, education, and socio-economic status of the respondents by investigating the determinants of cultural perceptions and attitudes towards human rights within the population, and seeks to determine the extent to which the public understanding of issues and literature conforms to the regulations regarding human rights at global levels and how such reservations strategise the possible challenges at local level. The study provide suggestions on how human rights education campaigns, materials, and information strategies can be tailored to meet the different groups in society.

Theoretical Framework

This study is based on the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) developed by Ajzen which states that behaviour is a function of attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control. From the perspective of human rights, this theory can be used to understand how different internal factors (like one's belief in the importance of human rights), external factors (like the cultures and the media that one has been exposed to), and how one can act (for instance the education and social class one has) or affect one's understanding and perceptions of human rights. The theory points out that these behaviours (e.g., activism or taking part in human rights causes) are consequences of interaction of factors. This study analyses the social, cultural, and educational factors that

affect the perception of human rights. Within this model, perceived relevance is considered a mediating factor, which is pertinent to the external influences (for example, the education people receive or the media they are exposed to) and the public knowledge of human rights as an end variable. Given the intersection of societal norms, media ideology, and resource inequality explains the variation in understanding, the relevance of exploring TPB for enhancing rights education and practice is emphasised. According to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), human rights is essential to safeguard the dignity and liberty of people everywhere (UN General Assembly, 1948). Nevertheless, the perception of the public regarding such rights bears some differences from the definition in practice. Olser and Starkey is of the opinion that in truth all such advocacy—in culture—human rights as context or cultural relativism is hardly applicable in practice.[8] Critical engagement with rights by individuals is also a function of education, media, and socialisation which promote attitudes and ways of thinking about rights.

One of the main factors affecting the perception and understanding of human rights is education. Higher education leads to a better understanding of international human rights norms with a higher likelihood of involvement in the advocacy of those rights.[9] Education level is directly related to the skills of applying and critically assessing the principles of human rights in real life. These results serve to prove the view that education is an important factor determining the level of public understanding of these principles, as also enunciated by TPB which stresses the aspect of agency among individuals through education and skills. Cultural and economic contexts play a vital role in shaping an individual's attitude and perception about rights. The notion of universality of human rights has been challenged as cultural relativism clashes with imperialism.[10] For instance, in societies that espouse collectivism, rights are understood primarily as the group's welfare instead of individual rights which can create a challenge in the application of human rights in practice. In addition, one's socio-economic status enhances knowledge access as well as available resources that determine existing perceptions. Persons of higher socio-economic background are more likely to encounter human rights education and media population advocacy. In contrast, people from disadvantaged communities encounter problems of such exposure thus maintaining the level of understanding.[11] This conforms to the TPB which postulates that perceived control which in this case is resource accessibility influences behaviour.

The interaction and consumption of media by public is crucial in to see how human rights is interpreted and understood. Media actively works to subvert different processes and develop discursive strategies. Often the media influences the public opinion by reporting only selected aspects of an issue.[12] Continued media coverage of a particular issue could bring about changes in the attitudes of the people depending on what was presented as a priority and its evaluation.[13] In dealing with human rights issues, media may be regarded as an instrument of empowerment or as a source of distortions. The representation of human rights abuses in the media is focused more on the entertaining features and less on the detailed illustration of the distinct

scrutiny.[14] The positive correlation advanced by Diedrichs between media literacy programs and understanding of rights by the members of the society shows that media, if used, can help in understanding as well as incorporating. This suggests that other than media exposure, the understanding of the public is enhanced by media literacy education to a greater extent. The role of education is considerable in the promotion and appropriation of the knowledge of human rights. Human Rights Education (HRE) is conceived as the education that helps people to be aware of their rights and to avail the same without violating the rights of other persons. Tibbitts formulated the triptych HRE model based on human rights and communication values designed to promote change, and vocational training assisting in the formation of attitude, skills, noesis which are components of behavioural intent in TPB.[15] Over the years, several critiques have stressed the irreversible character of the processes of transformation HRE. Bajaj argues that HRE is beneficial cognitively but also motivates as it creates a call to action for individuals to stand up and fight for human rights.[16] This also supports the hypothesis of the current study, i.e., the more an individual is exposed to human rights education the better the public understanding of such education. Thus, it is important to provide education that is affordable and equitable. The importance that individuals assign to any particular issue is one of the attitudinal aspects that determine the extent to which they accept and use their knowledge of human rights. TPB asserts that attitudes that are influenced by individual beliefs and social values are the most potent predictors of behaviour. Regarding human rights, the value ascribed to these principles governs the extent to which individuals elevate them in individual and group selections.

According to a study conducted by Saris and Gallhofer, the higher the relevance of human rights for the individual, the more likely that individual is to exhibit rights based behaviour, such as engagement in social rights campaigns.[17] This mediating function is consistent with evidence indicating that perceived importance magnifies the impact of media and educational exposure on comprehension, given that people tend to understand and utilise information that they regard as important. Although there is a wealth of information on education and awareness about human rights, there is still more research needed to understand how a variety of factors work together to influence the public perception of human rights issues. Most of the current research examines only single factor variables like education or media exposure, which hardly look into variables of their interaction or effects of other factors such as perceived importance. Additionally, there is scanty literature on the cultural and economic inequalities which are even more important in shaping people's attitudes and agency. A mixed methods research approach overcomes these challenges by recognising, analysing, and presenting both qualitative and quantitative data by proving the hypothesis. In this case, quantitative analysis explains the statistical relationship between the variables, whereas the interviews offer rich information regarding the relevant contexts and experiences that inform people's perceptions. Public opinion about human

rights is captured in three dimensions allowing practical suggestions in messaging and outreach strategies:

H1: As a person's education level increases, so does their knowledge of human rights.
H2: A higher level of media presence enhances the comprehension of human rights issues among the general population.
H3: There exists a direct relationship between the level of exposure to human rights education and the level of public understanding of human rights.
H4: The understanding of human rights amongst the public, about media exposure, is affected by the perception of importance attached to human rights.

Research Methodology

To evaluate the level of public awareness and perception of human rights issues in Assam, India, the current study used a mixed methods research design comprising both quantitative and qualitative approaches. The quantitative approach used a stratified random sampling strategy that guaranteed uniformity and representation across the main demographic categories—age, sex, educational level, social status, and areas of residence (urban, semi-urban, and rural). This random sampling method let marginalised groups, such as Dalits and tribals, to be represented in adequate numbers enabling a comprehensive understanding of differences in rights awareness among different social layers. The target population included Assamese adults who were 18 years old and above, and a final sample of 500 respondents was drawn, which was a size large enough to ensure sufficient statistical power and diversity for analysis. The quantitative tool was a structured questionnaire that was modified from UNESCO's Human Rights Education Manual, and that was also based on previous validated studies on rights awareness. The questionnaire contained two parts: socio-demographic information, and 25 items using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) to measure human rights awareness, perception, and valuation among the respondents. The major variables were operationalised with great care. Cultural factors were gauged through items measuring respondents' attitudes toward traditional norms, gender roles, caste practices, and social conformity, whereas media exposure was determined by the frequency and variety of engagement with news media, which included television, print, radio, and social media platforms.

The qualitative part included semi-structured interviews with a purposively chosen sub-sample of participants to explore the lived experiences and sociocultural understanding of human rights. The researchers guaranteed that the measurement was robust when they confirmed the reliability of the instrument through the Cronbach's alpha values that were higher than 0.80 for all the main constructs, which means there was strong internal consistency. Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was made to check the validity of the construct and to show that the indices of the model fits were acceptable

($\chi^2/df<3$, CFI=0.93, TLI=0.91, RMSEA=0.05). All these methodological refinements were applied work together to make the sampling coherent, the operationalisation transparent, and the statistical assessment of public awareness and perceptions of human rights within Assam's diversified sociocultural landscape.

The quantitative data were coded and analysed using SPSS and AMOS. Descriptive statistics such as frequencies and percentages were derived to describe the levels of demographic variables while the Chi-square test and regression analysis were carried out to assess associations between independent variables, such as education and mass media use, and dependent variables, such as public knowledge and public opinion ratings. The constructs were tested by Confirmatory Factor Analysis, which confirmed that the dimensions targeted by the questionnaire were measured by the same. Structural Equation Modelling exhibited the relationship of the variables, direct effects or indirect effects, with a focus on the mediation of perceived importance. The qualitative segment consisted of thirty in-depth interviews with respondents who were purposively sampled to ensure variability in the cultural, educational, and media backgrounds of the targets. Semi-structured interview guides were developed in accordance with the major themes that were obtained from the quantitative findings. These interviews were transcribed and analysed thematically using NVivo software to find recurrent patterns and themes. Thematic Analysis considered how education, cultural perceptions, and structural aspects have influenced human rights attitudes as well as provided participants' stories. Throughout the research process, ethical issues were rigorously considered. All potential subjects gave their consent before study participation with guarantees of confidentiality and anonymity. Clearance to conduct the research was also granted by the ethical committee that approved the research protocol.

Results

Demographics

The distribution of participants emphasises the heterogeneity of the sample. The sample consisted of equal numbers of men and women, gender-wise showing an equal ratio. The Chi-Square ($\chi^2=3.42$, $p=0.064$) was not, however, significant, meaning that there was no appreciable difference in the perceptions of the respondents based on gender, but certain categories showed differences. It was among the variables in which there was a significant association ($p=0.017$) as younger participants aged between 18–29 (30 per cent) and participants aged between 30–49 who were the most active (44 per cent) compared to older participants 50 years and above (26 per cent) who were less active. It could also be possible that this is due to the factor of age, the level of education and even exposure to these issues. The educational level of the participants was another significant predictor of their understanding of human rights ($\chi^2=15.67$, $p<0.001$). The respondents who had a postgraduate education (32 per cent) proved to be the most aware and understanding as compared to

those with incomplete education (44 per cent) and high school leavers (24 per cent). This calls for appreciation of the impact of education in enhancing human rights attention among people. Socio-economic status (SES) of the participants also had an influence which was statistically significant (p=0.002). Participants from the middle income range (60 per cent) were more engaged and aware when compared to low income (20 per cent) and high income (20 per cent) participants. This might be due to the appreciation that most middle-class individuals can access a wide range of media and campaigns. It was also found that media exposure (χ^2=8.45, p=0.015) was a factor, with participants self-reporting high and medium exposure levels of 28 per cent and 56 per cent respectively having a higher understanding of human rights than those with low exposure levels at 16 per cent. This makes the media more important not only in informing people but also in moulding their views.

Table 1: Sample Characteristics and Statistical Significance

Variable	Category	Percentage	Chi-Square (χ^2)	p-value
Gender	Male	50	χ^2 = 3.42	p=0.064
	Female	50		
Age Group	18–29	30	χ^2 = 9.12	p=0.017
	30–49	44		
	50 and above	26		
Educational Level	High School	24	χ^2 = 15.67	p<0.001
	Undergraduate	44		
	Postgraduate	32		
Socio-Economic Status	Low Income	20	χ^2 = 12.34	p=0.002
	Middle Income	60		
	High Income	20		
Media Exposure	Low	16	χ^2 = 8.45	p=0.015
	Medium	56		
	High	28		

Source: Primary data collected by author

Public Understanding and Perceived Importance

The Mean scores indicating the average ratings of different factors also shed light on the level of societal comprehension towards, and appreciation of, the concept of human rights. Public knowledge of human rights was rated slightly above the average (M=4.12, SD=0.85), indicating that participants had a fair level of knowledge. The highest score was attributed to the self-evaluation of the importance of human rights (M=4.28, SD=0.72), implying that the participants understood that rights were important in their lives, though they had a limited understanding of how to put them in practice.

Table 2: Mean Scores of Factors

Factor	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)
Public Understanding of Human Rights	4.12	0.85
Perceived Importance of Rights	4.28	0.72

Source: Primary data collected by author

Internal consistency was reviewed and confirmed through Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) on two constructs: public understanding of and perceived importance of human rights. For public understanding, the concept of human rights (λ=0.82, R^2=0.67) and awareness of relative international systems (λ=0.78, R^2=0.61) loaded very well showing that these are the base components of the construct. Everyday life application had the highest loading (λ=0.85, R^2=0.72), which suggested that human rights is not just a concept but requires one to put it into practice. Participation in rights advocacy (λ=0.80, R^2=0.64) was another notable factor, indicating that understanding increases with active participation. The most prominent indicator for perceived importance emerged to be the relevance of human rights (λ=0.88, R^2=0.77), followed by human right's advantage to society (λ=0.86, R^2=0.74) and individual predisposition towards rights (λ=0.83, R^2=0.69). This indicates that participants appreciate the importance of human rights not only for personal reasons but also for the good of society.

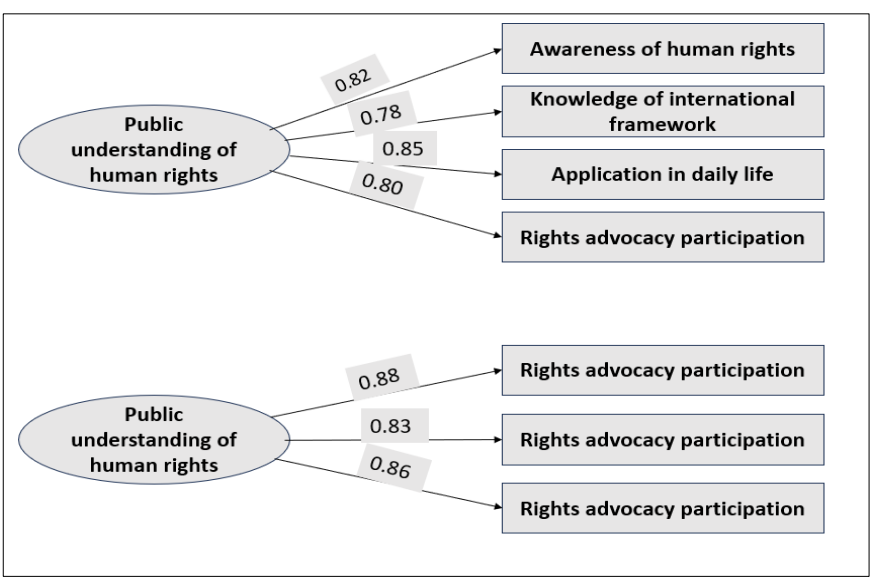

Figure 1: CFA of Both Constructs

Table 3: CFA Results for Public Understanding and Perceived Importance of Human Rights

Latent Construct	Indicator	Standardised Loading (λ)	Standard Error (SE)	Critical Ratio (CR)	Variance Explained (R^2)
Public Understanding	Awareness of Human Rights	0.82	0.04	20.50	0.67
	Knowledge of International Framework	0.78	0.05	15.60	0.61
	Application in Daily Life	0.85	0.03	28.33	0.72
	Rights Advocacy Participation	0.80	0.04	20.00	0.64
Perceived Importance	Human Rights Relevance	0.88	0.03	29.33	0.77
	Personal Belief in Rights	0.83	0.04	20.75	0.69
	Societal Benefit of Human Rights	0.86	0.03	28.67	0.74

Source: Primary data collected by author

Predictors of Human Rights Perception

Education level was rated as the strongest predictor of public knowledge of human rights ($\beta=0.45$, $p<0.001$). This indicates that the provision of education helps in increasing awareness and understanding of human rights systems and principles. Also, cultural factors ($\beta=0.32$, $p<0.001$) and socio-economic status ($\beta=0.27$, $p<0.001$) played significant roles, indicating the relation between every social structure and the social awareness of the rights of people. Moderately significant was media exposure ($\beta=0.22$, $p<0.001$), which further substantiates the importance of the media in raising awareness. Human rights education ($\beta=0.39$, $p<0.001$) was essential, pointing out the importance of formal education in the improvement of the public understanding of those issues. Age ($\beta=0.18$, $p<0.001$) had the least influence but was still notable, showing that people in younger age groups will have an easier time understanding human rights issues. Concerning the mediation model, the construct of public understanding of human rights and the mediating variable, the perceived importance of human rights have a very strong positive correlation ($\beta=0.41$, $p<0.001$). This affirms that those who appreciate human rights as pertinent to self and society have higher chances of knowing and even crusading for them. Moreover, media exposure impacted perceived importance significantly ($\beta=0.35$, $p<0.001$), media portrayals do not only create awareness but also bestow importance on rights. These results strongly substantiate the research

H1, H2, H3 and H4. It can be deduced that education level (H1) probably improves members understanding, as there is a great level of exposure to sins' related education and comprehension as well as application tends to be high. In the same way, H2 is valid, in that the involvement of the media is fundamental in creating awareness and encouraging engagement. One can also clearly illustrate the hypothesis on the direct link between human rights education and public awareness (H3), due to the high factor loadings and explained variances. Lastly, H4 is supported by the fact that perceived importance was found to have a mediating effect because the more people cherish human rights, the more they understand and advocate for them.

Table 4: AMOS Regression Table

Dependent Variable	Independent Variable	Estimate (β)	Standard Error(SE)	Critical Ratio(CR)	p-value
Public Understanding of Human Rights	Educational Level	0.45	0.05	9.00	p<0.001
	Cultural Background	0.32	0.06	5.33	p<0.001
	Socio-Economic Status	0.27	0.07	3.86	p<0.001
	Media Exposure	0.22	0.05	4.40	p<0.001
	Human Rights Education	0.39	0.04	9.75	p<0.001
	Age	0.18	0.03	6.00	p<0.001
Perceived Importance of Human Rights	Media Exposure	0.35	0.06	5.83	p<0.001
Public Understanding of Human Rights	Perceived Importance of Human Rights	0.41	0.05	8.20	p<0.001

Source: Primary data collected by author

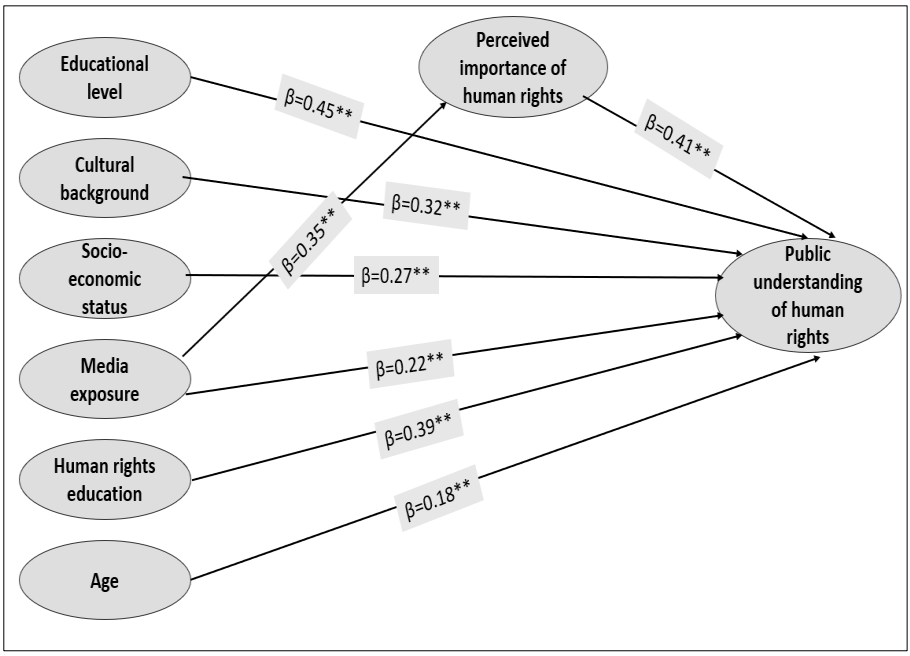

Figure 2: Pathway Diagram

Thematic Analysis

A thematic analysis of the qualitative interview data identified four key themes reflecting the public understanding and perception of human rights in Assam: awareness and education, cultural dimension, structural constraints, and understanding of human rights and related issues and activism. This discussion is based on 30 in-depth interviews with participants about their experiences and perspectives on human rights. Participants awareness of human rights issues differed determined by their status of education. Individuals with adequate education had an informed perspective, especially on the basic human rights principles as guaranteed by the Constitution of India and other international documents. One of the respondents said: "As a matter of fact, I remember in school we were taught lessons on Fundamental Rights, but the practical scenario is very different as many of my peers do not even comprehend their basic rights. Education carries a big weight in ensuring that people know what they are else entitled to." Most of the participants also pointed out that human rights education in Assam has remained confined to textbooks and hardly made any practical sense. One of the respondents said: "Back in the university we learned about the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, but it was not explained how those rights concern each of us in our daily lives or even in the society." Majority of the participants pointed out that the absence of appropriate human rights education in the curricula with practical relevance that forms the basis of day-to-day activities of the public contributes to the wrong notion the public has about human rights. Another participant shared: "Most people think human rights is something international, not something they can

claim in India especially in Assam. The education system does not address these rights in a real, engaging way and this is the reason."

Cultural and socio-political factors shape how people regard human rights issues. Some respondents said that traditional cultural values affect attitudes towards universal principles of human rights, such as men and women being equal, conflict. One woman respondent stated: "In our culture, women are supposed to play certain roles within the society. If we ask for equal treatment, then it becomes cultural terrorism." Within same region caste based discrimination was expressed by many as an impediment to the realisation of human rights in the country. As one respondent put it: "The entire society would laugh when anyone uttered the word equality in a state like Assam because the caste structure decides one's opportunities, one's rights, and even the basic respect one is given." The analysis pointed out that cultural backlash most times occurs where there is ignorance about what human rights entail. A participant said: "People do not object to unreasonable acts because they have a belief that they are part of their culture. In my opinion, human rights education should counteract such a culture."

In Assam, participants noted that corruption, denial of justice, and discrimination are some of the factors that hinder the achievement of human rights. One participant remarked: "Even if people are aware of their rights, the justice system is so delayed and rotten that it appears futile to even think of standing up for one's rights." Most of the respondents added that certain groups, such as Dalits and tribal communities, are the worst affected due to violation of their rights." As one of the participants said: "It is like belonging to a system which is designed for your powerlessness if you are in a minority. Even the most basic of amenities like education and health care services are beyond reach." Another widely held belief was that government programs and initiatives usually do not address the problem of human rights as they ought to. A respondent said in this regard: "The government has so much to say about human rights and the policies and programs in place to promote such rights. However, nothing happens in practice. The enforcement is rather ineffective as it always is." The participants were also of the view that law enforcement agencies played a negative role. One of the participants said: "The police ought to defend our rights but in states like Assam in India, they are often the very people who breach those rights. People do not want to approach the police as they have the dread of being victimised."

Despite the difficulties, several participants accepted the fact that human rights hold much significance and so does the aspect of advocating for it. In particular, the younger participants were more hopeful for transformation due to activism and social networks. One participant stated: "I think it is a good thing that there is social media as it raises a lot of issues that people have about human rights. Especially issues that are not covered by the normal media." Furthermore, respondents pointed out the importance of NGOs and other civil society organisations in the protection of human rights. One of the respondents stated: "There are NGOs that are doing good work in making people know their rights, especially in the rural parts of the country. I just wish that there was

more funding from the government and the people." Nonetheless, some participants remained unconvinced that advocacy efforts were likely to yield positive results. One observed: "Advocacy is vital. Yet, it is like trying to convince people who already agree with you. The hard part is ensuring that the powerful are held to account." Several participants showed an interest in the development of more effective local programs for the advancement of human rights. As one respondent reflected: "Grassroots movements are important as they push for action from the relevant authorities. Unless the change begins from within the community, it will be difficult to implement the change."

Discussion

The research offers a thorough exploration of the elements that shape the public's awareness and significance of human rights in Assam, India, unraveling the complex relationship between the demographic, structural as well as cultural aspects. The role of education appears crucial in the deciding the level of awareness and understanding of human rights. Highly educated participants were found to be more informed and involved, which emphasises the importance of education as a basic aspect in promoting an understanding of human rights. Nevertheless, the outcomes also show some disparities in the practical application of these rights within education where most interviewees noted that there is a need for better, more applicable ways of teaching these issues. When it comes to cultural norms, they are both in support of as well as against the concepts of human rights, i.e., some promote human rights, but some inhibit such rights such as gender and caste issues. Traditional attitudes and practices in a society impede the realisation of rights—respondents cited culture as a major hindrance due to attitudes that accept certain degrees of inequality. Respectability politics informs gender and caste relations within society – these limitations curtail fully-dimensioned rights' enjoyment by those who are oppressed. This provides a rationale for the case for positive action to counter the culturally inclined women's rights oppositional stance.

Structural challenges, including systemic inequalities, lack of access to justice, and corruption, were often mentioned as factors that impede the effective enforcement of human rights. There is a need for specific targeted policies because certain classes, like Dalits or tribal populations, are more vulnerable. If the government agencies try to humanitarian policies in practice, the incapacity of the policy enforcement agencies and absence of coercive measures against the lawbreakers themselves become reason for the failure. There is a common inclination towards considering justice apparatus as slow and corrupt which deepens the problem because it discourages people from pursuing remedies for violations of their rights. Mass media is a prominent factor in shaping society's knowledge concerning human rights and defining the status of these rights in society. Participants noted that the opinion of the media is important because it creates awareness. Social media covers social issues which at times the traditional media do not address. Nonetheless, there was a degree of variation in media exposure which suggests that incorporating other

means of communication is necessary for promoting human rights education and activities to reach more members of the target population.

Moreover, the results show that the socio-economic status of the respondents is not a linear factor in the awareness of human rights issues. More active participation was noticed in middle-income respondents however the low and high-income respondents faced different sets of issues. The information and resources are limited in the context of low-income groups while high-income group members may have a feeling of being aloof from the local issues. This analysis reveals that there are socio-economic factors that will hinder the effectiveness of human rights work and interventions in the country. The thematic analysis further illustrates the quantitative findings by presenting the lived experiences and perceptions of the participants. Awareness and Education were presented as critical themes, with all respondents insisting on the unworthiness of human rights education in Assam. Considering this, some participants mentioned that in practice, the knowledge of rights they have been taught in the books which calls for educational approaches that are more practical with real-life experiences. Influence of culture is seen both as a challenge and possibility in enhancing human rights. Respondents acknowledged that although many traditional practices may go against the ideals of human rights, there is a way to work around it via culturally acceptable means of advocacy.

Structural constraints especially within the systems of governance and law enforcement were prominent within discussions. Participants were aware that there was a need for systemic change to prevent the violation of human rights and promote its enforcement. Advocacy through the NGOs, grassroots activists, and social networking sites were noticeable means of change. There were concerns regarding the prospects of advocacy in achieving changes due to the absence of support from the system, which reinforces the need for civil society to work hand in hand with the government. The results of the study emphasise the dynamic to understand and promote human rights in India especially in Assam in terms of individuals, culture, and institutions. Henceforth it is important to focus on the integration of human rights education within both formal and informal education systems, addressing and remedying the cultural attitudes that foster discrimination and/or inequality. It is important to build a society that respects and recognises the rights of individuals.

The research findings can be better interpreted through the lens of the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB), which asserts that human behaviour is determined by a triad of factors, namely attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control. In Assam, the three aspects of the theory are vividly illustrated regarding the rights of individuals. The participants' responses on the matter of human rights—mostly swayed by their educational background and different cultures around them—determine their probability of agreeing with and taking part in the advocacy of such rights. Knowledge gained through higher education contributed to more favorable attitudes and informed participation, thus supporting TPB's claim that cognitive awareness and positive evaluations are together the source of behavioural intention.

Norms set by society, through the influence of Assam's great cultural diversity, social classes, and women's and men's roles, are often perceived to be restricting. Some of the respondents assumed the community's feelings and the politics of respectability to be barriers to practicing equal rights, especially for women and marginalised groups, thus showing that societal norms influence the extent to which awareness translates into action. Besides, the very belief in personal power to act in accordance with human rights principles—the perceived behavioural control—was weakened by the structural and institutional barriers caused by corruption, ineffective enforcement, and the inability to access justice. These results have made a slight adjustment to the TPB model in that they point out the fact that in situations like Assam, perceived behavioural control can no longer be viewed as mere psychology but rather as something that is deeply rooted in the structure. Assam's intricate socio-political situation characterised by migration, displacement, and citizenship conflicts has a significant impact on the TPB application. The host community's limited awareness of human rights contributes to the marginalisation and social exclusion of refugee or stateless people, especially in areas where NRC is being implemented and border tensions exist. Ignorance of rights not only affects people's collective attitudes but also reduces their moral responsibility towards the distressed ones, thus making cycles of exclusion stronger. The integration of education and specially planned communication campaigns could result in the transformation of public attitudes and subjective norms towards inclusion. Therefore, the combination of TPB's behaviour components and Assam's context brings out the interaction between individual thinking, societal pressures, and institutional structures in the formation of human rights practices. The study thus not only reaffirms TPB's relevance but also expands its scope by incorporating socio-cultural and political contingencies that uniquely characterise rights behaviour in conflict affected, multicultural societies such as Assam.

Notes

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Pink Tickets to Saheli Smart Cards: Gendered Mobility and Debates on Fare-Free Travel

By

Procheta Mukherjee *

Several cities and regions across the world have adapted the policy of abolishing fares in public transport, popularly referred to as the Fare-Free Public Transport (FFPT).[1] FFPT was first implemented in 1962 in suburbs of Los Angeles and continued throughout 1970's, 1980's and 1990's and currently continues to exist for specific groups, such as Los Angeles Community College students. FFPT scheme was implemented in Europe between 1970s and 1990s, beginning in Coloniers, in the suburbs of Toulouse, France in 1971, soon followed by Rome. While European cities like Tallin, Estonia has recently embraced free public transport scheme. In cities like Hasselt in Belgium and Templin in Germany, free public transport for all was introduced as early as 1997.[2] Amongst the recent additions to the landscape of FFPT are Brazil and China.[3] It is often the local context of a particular space (for instance: country, city, region), its socio-political dynamics (the type of government in power and their ideological positioning) plays a pivotal role in shaping FFPT policies. In some countries in the Global North the increasing utility of FFPT policies have often been promoted as an alternative for shifting individual modal pattern from car use to public transportation as a sustainable strategy to counter pollution. Across much of the western world, it is increasingly believed that urban traffic levels and private car's market share are not sustainable. Economically it leads to soaring congestion costs and inefficiencies in terms of external costs of transport. On an environmental level, problem of traffic are also associated with greenhouse gas emissions and local pollution. Socially, heavy traffic and car dependence can reduce people's mobility and overall quality of life[4]. Although FFPT receives criticisms from transport engineers and economists on the grounds of utility, efficiency and economic growth; it currently exists in more than 300 localities worldwide.[5] FFPT is a form of transportation policy that focuses on reduction of ticketing prices of public transportation to 'Zero'.[6] FFPT is also associated with government sanctioned subsidised transport

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policy. However, there also exists similar free travel services that are arranged by private agencies for their employees/officials.[7] FFPT is conditioned by factors like where the fare programmes occur, who obtains free rides, as well as when and how long fares are suspended.[8] Its practical implementation varies depending upon the "social, temporal, spatial and modal context".[9] Geographically confined FFPTs can offer fare-free access to public transport either throughout the entire country (Luxemburg, Malta); in relatively large cities (Kansas City, Tallinn); or very small localities. Temporally bounded FFPTs remain available for particular hours (e.g., off-peak hours), particular days (e.g., every first day of the month, or limited to weekends). Based on the nature of the FFPT, it may embrace all passengers or cater to only specific passenger groups such as local residents, taxpayers, the unemployed or welfare recipients, people with disabilities, elderly and children, students or a combination of such criteria. Furthermore, FFPTs are implemented either in complex public transport networks that relies on multiple modes or simple transport systems where only a few routes operate. And finally, fares are lifted as a temporary measure or as a long-term policy.[10]

In India, FFPT transport schemes have a gendered dimension like Delhi's Pink Pass/Ticket Scheme, Karnataka's Shakti Scheme and Tamil Nadu's Zero Ticket Scheme. In Delhi, the pink ticket scheme was one of the first gender specific transport subsidy scheme introduced in India. The rationales given to introduce such scheme were two folds: safety for women travelling in buses and promotion of female labour force participation.[11] When it comes to mobility outside home, men and women's mobility patterns reveal a high level of gender inequality especially in developing countries. Indian women, on average, spend a mere twenty-four minutes daily on travel for various purposes including employment, unpaid domestic services for household members, learning and socialising, self-care, leisure etc., compared to men's fifty-nine minutes.[12] Studies focusing on travelling pattern of women, especially in South and Southeast Asian countries points out that women faces numerous barriers in terms of mobility, transportation, infrastructure and built environment, when travelling in formal and informal public transport modes.[13] India is known for having one of the highest gender inequality (ranking 102 in the Gender Inequality Index in 2023) in the world.[14] Lack of autonomy among women to go outside home and access the public space due to norms of seclusion plays an important role in shaping women's mobility patterns and "something as basic as visiting a grocery store, or a friend's or relative's place, or to travel short distances by bus or train, requires her to take permission, often from a male member of the household. Thus, leading to a greater number of immobility amongst women than men."[15] Additionally, factors such as age, marital status, employment status can influence a woman's mobility patterns. According to Maciejewska, urban and transport policies have remained gender blind and gender biased throughout most of the twentieth century.[16] Recently there is a shift in urban planning with greater awareness of gender differentiated needs in urban and transport policy design.[17]

This paper traces the evolution of FFPT scheme in Delhi since 2019 as a way to promote women's mobility throughout the city and how policy revisions of the scheme, that became classificatory and exclusionary in nature and in contradiction to the transportation and mobility justice framework that takes into account the unequal nature of mobility as well as its impact on people, have affected the urban poor and migrant women disproportionately through an ethnographic study of bus route DTC523 that connects the working class neighbourhood and labour colonies (Bhatti Mines) to one of the centres of South Delhi (Dhaula Kuan) to understand the role of public bus as an essential transportation means for mobility and access to public place, safety and security needs during journey and experience of bus journeys as gendered bodies in public transportation system.[18] The pink tickets are perceived as safety infrastructures by women commuters more than CCTVs.

FFPT in Delhi: History of the Pink Pass Scheme

In 2019, the Government of National Capital Territory of Delhi completely subsidised fares for women travelling on public buses in Delhi NCR[19]and thus began the pin ticket/pink pass scheme.[20] The scheme was officially launched by Aam Admi Party and was functional from October 29, 2019. "It was the same day as Bhai Dooj, a Hindu festival focusing on brother sister relations. And in his message before launch, the then Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal, had addressed women's importance in diverse roles, including as sisters, and that the scheme was a gift from a 'brother' rather than an initiative for women citizens."[21] Under the scheme, women travelling in these buses were issued paper pink tickets free of cost, and the government owned bus corporations were later reimbursed ₹10 per ticket proportionate to the pink tickets issued.[22] In a span of six years, on another Bhai Dooj, smart cards were introduced as pink passes will be phased out due to charges of corruption. FFPT was introduced to increase female labour force participation by introducing significant changes in public safety including public transport.

Delhi became the first state to offer free public transport for women across all age groups and social classes, as a step towards gender and environmental justice.[23] In the following several states including Punjab, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra adapted similar measures in their respective cities to increase the female bus ridership. There are significant differences in terms of the scheme operations in various state. Maharashtra offers partial subsidy while Delhi and Karnataka completely subsidise bus rides for women.[24] Tamil Nadu limits the scheme to women who are permanent residents of the state and the subsidy is available for travel up to 30kms in state owned buses.[25] In Delhi, since its implementation, approximately 100 million pink tickets were issued between October 2019–January 2023 substantially increasing women's bus ridership from 25 per cent in 2020–21 to 33 per cent in 2022–23.[26] The scheme despite attracting new users especially women from economically marginalised groups, who often chose to walk to their destination instead of availing any public transport to save money and helped women to

access better employment opportunities, earn better wages, and travel longer distances yet women continued to face discrimination and sexism while using public buses in Delhi.[27] Problems like buses not halting for women, subject to derogatory comments and discrimination from bus drivers, conductors, and male bus users, often denoting women as freebies have worked as a counter force to keep women away from public buses in Delhi. In Punjab and Tamil Nadu, the impact FFPT on women's labour outcomes indicated that "alleviating commuting costs alone does not uniformly boost women's labour participation as gender roles and societal norms continue to shape outcomes."[28] The scheme helped women reduce overall expenditure spent on travel. The pink slip programme had contrasting effect on travel time and time spent on household chores between employed and unemployed women. Skill level and marital status were significant factors influencing time allocation. "Skilled employed women leverage commuting time savings to increase labour hours, while unmarried unemployed women intensify their job searches…In contrast, low skill workers redirect commuting time towards household chores and reduce their labour hours."[29] Thus, it was argued that the potential redistributive merit of the pink slip scheme, did not necessarily help improve the labour market outcomes of all women.[30]

Equality in gender mobility by implementing subsidised bus fare rates alone cannot address structural barriers which are deeply rooted in patriarchy and traditional gender norms.[31] While cost is just one component, it would require addressing spatial, social and safety related challenges that shapes gendered mobilities in order to achieve women's equal access to urban transportation and enhancing women's participation in the public life.[32] The biggest problem women face across India is the lack of autonomy and mobility.[33] The idea that women do not belong to the public is deeply entrenched within our societal norms and values.[34] A major reason behind low ridership of women as compared to men in buses has to do with traditional social norms of work and leisure, where women's mobility is seen as non-essential and an additional burden on household, especially when women are non-earning members. Under this context, providing fare free bus travel to women is a promising policy instrument to further their access to public transport.[35]

Since its implementation, Delhi's pledge to make public transport free for women has faced difference in opinion. The supporters of the scheme celebrated this decision as revolutionary and a way forward towards advancing women's standing in society. However, those who stood on the opposite end of the spectrum, called this step a political gimmick of vote bank politics before the 2020 polls.[36] "The term freebie often carries a negative connotation, implying a wasteful use of public resources to win political favour. However, when applied to essential public goods such as transport, such schemes can have far-reaching and universal benefits."[37] The debate over freebies in public transport policy is often centred around their perceived role as vote bank and as tools for political appeasement rather than as an instrument that can potentially bring substantive social change. Delhi's fare free travel scheme for

women, however, offers a compelling counterpoint. The assessment of the potential of fare free bus services for women should not be only based on or seen as something that eases financial barriers on women's mobility, instead, its real impact lies in empowering women through better access to the city.[38] Visibility of women in public transport, in this context, public buses, can be one such ground to understand the impact of such measure. In case of Delhi, studies have clearly shown that women ridership in public buses increased post the launch of pink tickets. Free ride initiative for women in Delhi was introduced as a universal scheme with no restrictions based on occupation, income or residence.[39] The recently introduced smart cards will restrict far free travel to those who can provide a residence proof. On March 26, 2025, Chief Minister of Delhi, Rekha Gupta announced the introduction of these smart cards. In 2024, when the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) took over they criticised this move accusing that the pink passes (which is mandatory for women travellers on buses) "were a source of corruption" and this new smart card would be made available to women travellers who can provide valid proof of Delhi residence, register on the official DTC bus portal, select a bank to issue the card and fulfil Know Your Customer (KYC) verification form at the selected branch. What is important is that the bank will verify the documents instead of the state and issue the smart card to the applicant's address. Unlike the paper pink ticket scheme which did not require an individual to share documentation around their address, the current scheme requires women to provide identification documents. Initiatives like Saheli Smart Card Scheme is an extension of newly introduced digital infrastructures. This gender infrastructure disguised as a women's empowerment scheme in reality end up excluding migrant women workers without identity documents from right to free travel in Delhi. The Saheli Smart Card Scheme reveals the complementary nature of the gendered aspects of citizenship and the right to fare free travel.

Contextualising Route 523: Women Migrants of Delhi

In her maiden budget speech in the Delhi Assembly, Delhi Chief Minister Rekha Gupta called the pink ticket/pink pass scheme "pink corruption" and the government will "launch a vigorous verification campaign so benefits only reach genuine Delhiites. And people who are not residents of Delhi, especially Rohingya and Bangladeshis, will not be able to avail of the schemes."[40] This probe us to question, who are these genuine Delhiites vs Non-Delhiites (whom the CM refers in her speech as Rohingya and Bangladeshis)? Historically Delhi has been a city of migrants and refugees. Since Delhi became the administrative capital of the newly formed Indian Union, the city faced massive transfer of population following India's Partition, when Delhi, whose population was about 9,00,000 at the time, received 4,70,000 refugees from western Punjab and Sindh, while 3,20,000 Muslims left the capital and migrated to Pakistan.[41] "Within a short span of time after Partition and Independence, Delhi had become a city of refugees."[42] Even today Delhi attracts migrant population from various neighbouring states like Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Bihar,

Orissa and West Bengal[43] who migrate to the city in search of livelihood and job opportunities. The process of urbanisation and economic development in cities have been a major reason that accentuated migration labour movement from rural India to urban and Delhi is one of the key destination states of migration along with Maharashtra, Gujarat, Haryana and Karnataka places.[44] "Despite the harsh living conditions and deplorable working conditions, migration continues to persist in Delhi, as the place of origin is even more appalling where even survival is not secured."[45]

Women migrants constitute an integral part of the India's internal migrant workforce.[46] Delhi's migrant women workers join care work, domestic work, construction work, as well as several other jobs in unorganised sectors. The migrant populations live in unrecognised settlements or resettlement colonies which are more often than not located in the cities' peripheries. Therefore, seeking work requires them to travel longer distances to the central areas of the cities which is also the hub for economic activities. This however cannot take place without the support of adequate transportation facilities. In Delhi, like many other cities across India, buses form the backbone of the state's transport infrastructure with more than two-third of the city's population depending on it.[47] Affordability forms as a key reason that makes buses a popular choice of transit for thousands of people, especially those from economically marginalised groups. In 2021 in Delhi more than 2 million passengers took buses while another 900,000 used metros everyday.[48] Urban transport mainly comes under the responsibility of the state government. In Delhi, the main agencies involved in managing the transport sector includes: State Transport Authority (STA), Public Works Department (PWD), Municipal Corporations of Delhi (MCD), Delhi Transport Corporation (DTC), Delhi Development Authority (DDA), National Highways Authority of India (NHAI), and Delhi Metro Rail Corporations (DMRC).[49] The city relies on Metro and Delhi Transport Corporation (DTC) buses as key modes of public transportation.[50] Bus services in Delhi are provided by Private Stage Carriage Operators (PSCs), DTC and DMRC**,** which provides connecting bus services to the metro rail system. DTC runs various types of buses, which are colour coded (Red, Blue, Green, Orange) with each colour representing features of buses, such as High-floor, Low-floor, Ac and Non-Ac.[51]

Route 523 has largely orange and a few red buses. One of the main depots from which this bus fleet operates is in Hari Nagar Depot with twenty-five buses dedicated for this route. The bus route connects the working class neighbourhood/labour colonies (Bhati Mines) to one of the centres of South Delhi (Dhaula Kuan) forming a mobile bridge connecting people of Delhi who lives in the city's periphery to some of the most important parts of the city, such as Munirka, Hauz Khas, R.K Puram, Moti Bagh, and Dhaula Kuan which also functions as urban centers of the city. With a total number of forty-five stops, the DTC523 covers 25.9kms on road and covers for thirty-eight trips daily. For many passengers bus route 523 remains a popular choice of transit since the bus service helps connects a total of 12kms of road from Bhati Mines to Delhi metro's Yellow Line via Chhatarpur metro, which

attracts a daily footfall of approximately 58,000 people, making it a major transportation hub. The entire trip from the starting point till the end takes approximately one hour and nine minutes. For the up route (Dhaula Kuan to Bhati Mines) the first bus starts at 5:30AM and the last bus runs at 9:00PM with frequency varying during peak and off-peak hours. For the down route (Bhati Mines to Dhaula Kuan) the first bus runs at 7:00AM and the last bus runs at 10:00PM and departs thirty-seven times daily.[52] Barring a few, most of the route 523 buses are non-ac orange buses. The newly implemented PPP (Public Private Partnership) model for Delhi's public bus transportation system has led to a privatisation of the DTC bus services. Instead of purchasing their own buses for public road transport services, the Government of Delhi rents out route based bus services to private operators (TATA being one of them), who runs these services on behalf of the DTC. Such transformations emerged as one of the reasons behind the unequal distribution of ac and non-ac buses that run in different areas of the city (Conversation with DTC bus conductor, field notes, 2024). Given that route 523 operates in several poor and informal localities, most people are likely to board a non-ac bus for a lesser priced ticket.[53]

DTC buses have dedicated entry and exit doors for passengers. In a non-ac orange colored bus, the passenger is expected to enter from the second door and exit from the front door next to the driver to deboard. As soon as any passenger boards an orange line bus it will be difficult for them to miss the conductor, a uniformed man, seating with an electronic ticketing machine, and sometimes carrying log sheets like driver memo[54] or *Marg Patrak*/waybill.[55] The conductor uses the adjacent seat to place the bag carrying essential items, which includes an electronic ticketing machine that prints bus tickets, the log sheet to jot down journey related details, printed pink passes, and cash for ticket distribution among other things. The passenger is expected to inform the conductor about the destination and accordingly the conductor quotes the price of the journey and issues a ticket. There are many other ways to get the ticket. Tickets can be purchased well in advance via WhatsApp,[56] or Charter app or One Delhi app with QR codes attached to the windows near the passenger seating area.[57] There also exists a system of bus passes, offering a cost-effective and convenient way to commute for the daily commuter as well as passengers who access the bus frequently.[58] DTC bus passes can be obtained by visiting the Delhi Government's website or by applying at designated DTC pass counters or pass sections located at major DTC bus stops, such as Kashmere Gate ISBT.

Women and transgenders are issued a separate kind of ticket. Once they announce their gender identity, the conductor hands out a pink colored ticket. There are a total number of thirty-eight seats (including the driver's seat) out of which eight seats have been reserved for women. The number of seats may vary in buses; however, every public bus in Delhi is supposed to have 25 per cent of its seats reserved for women.[59] Equipped with high tech modern technologies, these buses have automated mechanical doors (managed by the bus drivers), GPS system allowing real-time monitoring of buses as well as

CCTV technologies and Panic Buttons. Initially DTC523 bus route had fourteen bus stops. Over time several bus stops have been added to route 523 following the requests of passengers. These bus stands are also known to be 'by-request' bus stand. As per a DTC conductor, when a group of people, belonging to a certain colony or *Kasba* that falls on the route a particular bus ply, they may request for a bus stop to be built so that they can access the bus service. So, at their request, the state constructs bus stops known as 'by-request' stop.[60] As of now route 523 constitutes forty-five bus stops (Table 3).

When a passenger purchases a ticket, the conductor hands over the ticket to him/her after tearing a small portion from it. This act of tearing is not random, but a ticket punching mechanism. The tickets are marked with numbers on both the sides. These numbers represent the number of bus stops. The pricing of the ticket is determined on the basis of total number of bus stops the passenger is travelling. So, for instance, travelling the first three stops in an AC bus would cost ₹10 for an adult, while it would cost ₹5 in a non-AC bus (Table 1 and 2). During fieldwork from February 2024 till March 2025, I have taken multiple trips in bus route 523 and due to my own gendered positionality, I travelled as one of the beneficiaries of the pink pass scheme. Being able to ride the bus, free of cost, at any given point of the day, have played a significant role in shaping my research. Since it not only allowed me to have an unlimited access to my research field, but also conduct my fieldwork without having to worry about the financial burden of travelling that are associated with fieldwork, in this context which included riding the bus multiple times a day, weeks or months as a participant observer as well as to conduct interviews of bus passengers, conductors and drivers.

Table 1: Ticket Price Determination for AC Buses

Number of Stops	Fare for Adults (₹)	Fare for Child (₹)
1–3	10	5
1–5	15	8
1–7	20	10
Any stop after 7 stops	25	13

Source: DTC Bus Conductor, Field Notes, 2024

Table 2: Ticket Price Determination for Non-AC buses

Number of Stops	Fare for Adults (₹)	Fare for Child (₹)
1–3	5	3
1–6	10	5
Any stop after 6 stops	15	8

Source: DTC Bus Conductor, Field Notes, 2024

Table 3: DTC 523 Bus Routes and Stops (Up Route)

Stop Number	Bus Stand Name	Stop Number	Bus Stand Name
1-23	Dhaula Kuan	24.	P.T.S
	Satya Niketan	25.	D.D.A Flats Lado Sarai
	Moti Bagh Gurudwara Nanakpura	26.	Lado Sarai Crossing
	South Moti Bagh	27.	Ahinsa Sthal
	R.K Puram Sector 12	28.	Qutub Minar Metro Station
	Sangam Cinema	29.	Andheriya Crossing
	R.K Puram Sector 10	30.	Chhatarpur Crossing
	Mohan Singh Market	31.	Chhatarpur Mandir
	R.K Puram Sector 1 & 2	32.	Chhatarpur Village
	R.K Puram Sector 1	33.	Nanda Hospital
	R.K. Puram / NAB	34.	Rajpur Extension
	Munirka	35.	Satbari
	Munirka/Family Planning Association of India	36.	Mallu Farm
	DDA Flats Munirka	37.	Chandan Hola
	I.S.T.M	38.	Shani Dham Mandir Raj Vidya Kendra
	Ber Sarai	39	Fatehpur Beri
	School of Physics Science	40.	Harswaroop Colony
	F.A.I	41.	Dera More
	Sanskrit Vidyapeeth	42.	R.S Satsang
	Katwaria Sarai	43.	Sawan Public School
	Qutub Hotel	44.	Indra Nagar
	NCERT	45.	Bhati Mines
	M.M.T.C.		

Source: "523 DTC Bus Route – Timings: Dhaula Kuan – Bhati Mines," DTC Bus, accessed August 28, 2025, https://dtcbus.co.in/523-dtc-bus-route-timings/

Journey to Bhatti Mines

Located on the periphery of city, at Delhi-Faridabad border, around 25kms east of Gurgaon, Bhatti Mines is home to nearly 50,000 people spread across in eleven villages, a large section of whom were refugees from Pakistan. More than 20,000 who came as refugees during the Partition of India and Pakistan in 1947 officially settled in 1976 in village Bhagirath Nagar in Bhatti Mines, a huge complex of quarries that for 25 years (1965–90) yielded red sand (also called Badarpur or Bajri), silica, and stone for Delhi's construction industry.[61] An overwhelming majority of original settlers in Bhagirath Nagar are members of the Od tribe, the traditional earth diggers and masons. For the past three decades they had mined the Bhatti area of the Aravalli hills. The Od community is a large ethnic group spread over vast regions with important concentrations in Gujarat, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Haryana. "Ods, believed to be descendants of Odang, a king of Odisha, are known for their

skill in constructing ponds, canals and embankments and regarded as indigenous civil engineers…They have been leading a nomadic life since the Mughals ruled South Asia, and were the main workforce behind the construction of major dams and canals in the country during the Nehruvian era. They then migrated to Rajasthan and then to Sindh, Punjab and Pakistan. When Bhatti mines started in 1959, in what is today known as Delhi's Southern Ridge, thousands of Od families migrated from Rajasthan, Haryana and Punjab to work with private quarrying companies."[62]

The mines classified by the Directorate of Mines Safety as the "most dangerous" in the northern India division were owned not by individuals but by the state, or, more precisely, the Delhi Administration's Delhi State Industrial Development Corporation (DSIDC). Though it was declared unsafe since 1970 under Section 22(3) of the Mines Act, "the Bhatti mines continued to be ruthlessly exploited by its greed mad owners who brought in migrant labour from neighbouring states despite repeated admonitions from the Labour Ministry."[63] These migrant labourers worked in abysmal conditions and faced barbaric treatments. They were forced to pay ₹5 per drum of drinking water and double of that amount during summer months. Forcing the workers to dig for Badarpur and Silica at the bottom of the steep pits without any safety precautions, leading to several macabre events. Furthermore, the mines operated under a blatant system of bonded labour. "The contractors provide advance payments to the workers to buy mules for transporting the extract, then arbitrarily deduct amounts from the Rs 70 per truckload that is paid to the workers. Which resulted to the labourers being indebted to the contractors."[64] It was only after the death of seven laborers in a pit-side collapse on May 31, 1990, the Union Ministry of Labour closed Bhatti Mines for rectification. The lock out ordered due to the revelation of the violation of safety norms by the Delhi State Mineral Development Corporation Limited (DSMDC) management in collusion with the private contractors. Approximately 4,000 quarry workers were laid off without any compensation, and in April 1991, the closure of Bhatti Mines was finalised by a notification from the Lieutenant Governor of Delhi, declaring the area as a wildlife sanctuary under the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972.[65] Since the declaration of the Delhi administration which extended the adjoining Asola Wildlife Sanctuary to include the Bhatti mines area and the common land of nearby villages, more than 3,000 families became encroachers on the forestland, as well as lost their source of income.[66] Bhati Mines or Bhagirath Nagar Village enjoyed state support until 1990. However, since the 1991 notification, state support for infrastructure development of the area was suspended. As of now Bhatti Mines is one of the poorest localities in the capital.[67]

On a very hot summer of May, 2024, I boarded a route 523 bus from Dera More around 3:50PM, and travelled till the last stop of this route, Bhatti Mines. Moving along the road, one can see dense forests guarded by walls and wires, followed by farmhouses, small temples, and open grounds with heaps of waste dumped on them. Wild cows could be seen roaming around the streets, looking for food sources while hogging the traffic, until they are shooed away

with traffic horns. As the bus nears towards Sanjay Colony, you can spot an establishment named 132 INF BN (TA) ECO RAJUPUT DELHI WARRIORS. Also known as the ECO Task Force, the department has undertaken a project for ECO-rehabilitation of 2100 acres of degraded and abandoned Bhatti Mines in the southern ridge (Bhatti Wildlife Sanctuary) through 132 Infantry Battalion (TA) ECO Rajput (ECO Task Force) consisting of ex-army persons amongst others. One of their duties consists of protecting the forest land from encroachment and illegal mining in the area.[68] The roads become narrower after the ECO Rajput area. Here if two buses are adjacent to each other the branches of trees might find their way through the window increasing the possibility of injuries. With no walls or wires surrounding the forest area, the demarcation between the urban and the rural almost seems to vanish. Upon reaching Bhatti Mines, the bus is emptied as this is the last stop of route 523. There is no bus depot in this area. Right after reaching Bhatti Mines, the bus driver takes a U-turn and places the bus near the bus stop, ready for the next journey. One can see several buses lined up one after another in the area. The passengers form a queue in front of these buses, waiting for the bus driver to open the door so that they can board the bus and claim a seat. Bhati Mines bus stop displayed three bus routes—508, 523 and 947A. I travelled the same route during evening. After the sunset, the entire road after the ECO Task Force establishment, remains pitch dark without any presence of streetlights or any other source of light. On both sides of the road is a stretch of jungle. As you continue the journey at some given point you will feel like you are not in the city anymore, but rather somewhere else, away from the commotion of cities. Not only the road is pitch dark but also silent. Apart from the sound of bus engine, you can clearly hear the sounds of birds and insects coming from the jungle. Next time we encounter light is when we enter Bhati Mines.

On September 24, 2024, I travelled to Bhati Mines in an auto, reaching my destination around 7:55PM. I glanced at a faded hoarding reading Police Post Sanjay Colony, Thana Maidangarhi, South District. The Police Chowki's gate was partly open, with a chain holding the two doors together. From outside I could see a police jeep inside and police personnel standing next to it. Inside the station, the lawn area had two broken tables and a bench where two women were sitting. The Sanjay Colony police chowki is an old single storied building. I noticed that there were 3-4 rooms, two of which were Investigating Officer's and Duty officer's room. After a brief encounter with the Assistant Sub-Inspector standing near the police jeep, a person in plain clothes who was sitting in the Investing Officer's room called me inside and asked my purpose of visit. It was later revealed that he was a Sub-Inspector. Upon telling him that I am a researcher and have come to do my fieldwork, which includes getting to know about the area, he began narrating me the history of this area: "Pakistani minorities settled here to work in mines.

Photo 1: A Locality in Bhati Mines, ©Author

Gradually, their families and relatives as well as acquaintances had also migrated to Delhi after learning about the work opportunities. However, after the mining activity came to a total halt, many of these labourers who were uneducated and unskilled —including women—had to search for other work opportunities and thus began working as labourers at construction sites, as domestic helpers or they took any other irregular unskilled job. For several of the residents living here, bus is the only affordable transport that can help them move from one place to another within a particular stretch of time. These individuals usually commute in buses as well as in private vans belonging to the contractors of a construction site."[69] From Bhati Mines, route 523 crosses areas such as Fatehpur Beri, Dera More and Chandan Hola, where a significant population of migrant labourers resides. Chandan Hola for instance has a labour market. From 8:00AM till noon, the labourers wait in the main road in search of work, many of whom use this route to travel to their destination.

Participant interviews with women beneficiaries, bus drivers, conductors and Assistant Traffic Inspectors helped to understand public bus ecosystem. I interviewed four women bus riders, all of whom had migrated to Delhi from Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Haryana and Jharkhand. These women migrated to the city because of their changing marital status. While they had not migrated to the city intending to join the workforce, three out of these four women have entered the workforce, over a period of years. These women depended on bus for transit. For them buses are not merely a means to access the workforce. Instead, buses also become a site of leisure and exploration as a way to become a part of the city. During my bus journeys, women interlocutors have time and again shared how buses are critical to their movements. However their experiences show a varied range of effective associations, they associate a range of affective ties with bus, two predominant parallels and contradictory emotions run parallel in their narrative—fear and freedom.

Gendering Mobility: Experiencing Fear and Freedom

It's hard to overestimate the effect of daily fear. Even when fear isn't actively present, the burden of a set of routinised precautions is always there, although they're so naturalised that we barely notice them. What's amazing and typically overlooked is the fact that women constantly defy their fears and act in ways that are brave, empowered, and liberating in cities

Leslie Kern, Feminist City: Claiming Space in a Man-Made World

Chanda lives in Bhati Mines and works as a *Mistri* (daily wage labourer). She earns around ₹600 for day's work; however, she receives her wages only once a week. Every day she takes the bus route 523 along with her husband, changing to metro route in between, to travel to her place of work in Janpath. She has been living in Delhi for more than twenty years, but has recently joined the workforce, not more than four/five years. However, Chanda has been using the bus since she had moved to Delhi from Madya Pradesh. For Chanda, a bus journey is connected not only to places but also to people. Apart from employment, she takes the bus for leisure activities and loitering, as well as for inter and intra city travels, often to visit her native place as well as for site seeing, visiting historic monuments. As she stated, *"Maine bus me sab jagah ghuma hai, Laal Quilla, Qutub Minar, Jama Masjid. Mai Maike aur Sasural bhi gayi hu bus me*" (I have roamed around everywhere in Delhi including Laal Quilla, Qutub Minar, Jama Masjid, by travelling in the bus. I have visited my family and in-laws' homes by travelling in buses). Why do you prefer travelling by bus? I asked her. She replied it is the cheapest mode of transportation, "*Roz ka 50 rupay save ho jata hai*" (I can save ₹50 daily). However, I do not travel in buses all the time. I might even take autos or metro occasionally. But I only travel in auto's when accompanied by someone else." Why do you not travel alone in autos? I asked her. She replied with a hesitation, "*Kiski niyat kaisi kya pata? Auto kaha le jaye pata nahi*" (I don't know whose intentions might be what. I don't know if the auto will take me to my destination or take me elsewhere). The trust she had for bus as public transportation, she did not have for autos. Why could she trust the bus driver but not an auto driver? I asked her. *"Bus bahut safe hai"* (Buses are very safe) she replied. Fear affects women's mobility in many ways as it "is connected not only to the crime rate but also to the degree to which people feel they have control over their live."[70] What Chanda expresses in her statement are "feelings of uncertainty, helplessness and vulnerability" and in many ways are similar to the anxieties the upper class and middle-class women experiences when travelling in cabs for instance.[71] The fear of untrustworthy cab drivers, "who does not behave with women properly," "has vulgar mentality," makes women often resort to certain "taxi tactics" to feel safer in cabs.[72] Chanda's trust towards the bus comes from the state sanctioned legitimacy of the drivers, conveyed through their uniforms and the presence of other officials such as the conductors, that can produce feelings of safety and security.

For women travelers, both the fear of isolated and an overcrowded transport is an important determinant behind their travel choices. During my

fieldwork, many women travelers expressed how they avoided taking the bus at night, as drunk men could occupy that space. At the same time, they would also avoid an overcrowded bus during peak hours in the morning and evening, given that such spaces become a host for sexual harassments, especially inappropriate touching. Alongside buses, in Delhi, a large segment of population depends on Intermediate Public Transport (IPT), or informal transport such as rickshaws, not only for travel but also to make livelihood. The unorganised and neglected IPT or paratransit, make up for at least 11.5 per cent of total daily trips, almost three times to that of Delhi Metro.[73] As these Phat-Phat's (Gramin Sewa Paribahan) passed on the roads, I saw some of them were in absolute dire state, with roofs missing from the transport's head. Yet it was crowded with so many people. Instead of taking a phat-phat or an e-rickshaw, Seema waits for the bus daily when she comes to Chandan Hola to drop her son to school. *"Khali ek stop (Fatehpur) jane ke liye faltu me 10 rupaiya le lega yeh toto wale, Isilye bus ka intezaar kar rahi hu"* (Just for going one stop will charge me ₹10, that's why I am waiting for the bus). Seema is a housewife and had migrated from Uttar Pradesh to Delhi some fifteen years back. Her husband works as a security guard and earns around ₹15,000 a month: "*15,000 kaafi nahi hota hai ghar chalane eke liye, isiliye 10-20 rupaiya bachana bhi zaroori hai*" (₹15,000 a month is not enough to run a household, that's why saving ₹10–20 is also necessary) she told me as we both waited for the bus. I asked her if the pink pass scheme has helped her save money and whether the scheme is important for women bus riders. Even if we are required to pay ₹5 ticket price for a stop it is still more reasonable than the fare of Phat-Phats or e-rickshaws, prompted Seema. More than free tickets, people need frequent bus services, she continued. We had been waiting for the bus for 30 mins, and I could see that she was growing impatient. And even after 45 mins there was no sign of a bus, she ultimately gave up and boarded an e-rickshaw, taking out a ₹10 note from her purse and giving it to the driver.

Several studies and reports on Delhi's pink pass scheme reveal the true importance of such universal schemes is the ability to empower women across the barriers of class and caste. But the question still remains to what extent can women enjoy such advantages which are fought by many as nothing but a gimmick to win political favour. The lack of adequate number of buses for the people lead to issues like overcrowding and breakdowns which have become synonymous with Delhi's public bus services. Almost every woman perceives an overcrowded bus as an unsafe space, because in such spaces it becomes easier to harass a woman while maintaining anonymity. During weekends and non-peak hours, a person can end up waiting for 45 minutes to an hour for a bus. Instead of a ride to freedom, a bus ride then becomes the reason for exhaustion. Sometimes the hesitancy with which women, especially middle class, young college/university students, approach bus rides often stem from the fact that whether a free ride is worth so much hassle. The long waiting hour in an unlit-unsafe bus stand, the empty and/or overcrowded bus where you are responsible for not only keeping your body safe from the sexual violations, but also take care of your belongings while also managing to navigate your body

amidst a crowd of people who are all struggling to find a space inside the moving transportation.

"Whenever our extended family visits our place, don't we adjust and make space for them? So, for me this bus journey is a part of my daily routine. People travelling on the bus seem like family to me since I see them everyday. I am taking this bus everyday, that too on the same timetable, so I end up seeing the same faces. It feels like I have known them for a long time now" Savitha replied to me when I asked her if she finds buses to be crowded while travelling. Savitha lives in Dera More and works as a domestic help in Katwaria Sarai. She had migrated from Haryana to Delhi at the age of 24 when she got married. She had been living in the city for the past twenty years but had joined the workforce quite recently, for the past three years. What made you join the workforce? I asked her. She replied, "my husband drink daily. I have two kids, one son, and one daughter. My daughter is 17 years old to be 18 soon, just cleared her 12th boards and my son is very young, only 6 years. I started doing a job for them." She earns around ₹10,000 a month and for her a bus journey means saving at least ₹100–200, that she would otherwise have to pay to travel in an auto. Savitha said that her life is constantly revolving around duties, "*jaise ghar me uthte hai, kaam karte hai bhir bhagte hai. Wahe se kaam karke ghar jaate hai, to ghar jake fir kaam karte hai*" (I get up in the morning, do all the household chores and then run for my job. After coming back from the job, I am again back to household duty).

"*Chandan Hola toh phir bhi sheher hai, Bhatti Mines toh Dehaat hai*" (Chandon Hola can still be considered as a city, but Bhatti Mines is village) stated Manju, after learning that I live in Chandan Hola. Manju had migrated to Delhi from Karnataka almost fifteen years back and has been living in Bhatti Mines since then. She works as a domestic help and earns ₹6,000 a month after working six days a week. She takes the route 523 bus daily around 6:15–6:30AM early in the morning since her duty hours start from 7:00AM till 3:00PM. For Manju there is no other option than taking a bus given other modes of transport are quite expensive. I asked her if fare free initiative has helped her save money. She told me "*ab jhut to nahi bol sakte, kuch to madat kia hi hai, lekin kya fayeda. Mahangai kitni bad chuki hai. Yaha ₹10 bachate hai to kahi aur 20 kharch ho jata hai*" (I can't lie. Of course, free travel in buses have helped to a certain extent but the cost of living has increased as well. I save ten rupees here, but somewhere else I am having to spend twenty). Manju had to join the workforce after husband met with an accident that left his legs paralysed and thus rendering him incapable of working. When I asked if her earning is enough to sustain her family, she told me: "No it's not and that's why my son who is now in school also works to contribute to the family." For Manju, bus journeys entail an integral part of her everyday life. It is the only means through which she can attain economic empowerment. I asked her if she only uses the bus for going to work, "of course not" she replied, "I take the bus for roaming around the city as well." During my fieldwork, women interlocutors had time and again shared how buses are critical to their movements. The interviews show a varied range of affective ties with bus, two predominant parallels and contradictory

emotions run in their narrative—fear and freedom. In many of my interviews, women passengers engaged in stories about buses. Often, such stories are not about what has happened but rather what could happen. For instance, even when women passengers themselves may not have been a victim of harassment and/or violence in a public space such accounts are told, shared and circulated almost as precautionary tales that guide their female mobility choices. Gendering space means taking into consideration how gender can shape one's corporeal experience of a space.[74]

Fear in this light is a survival toolkit. An alarm to safeguard oneself. Beyond just a feeling, it is a bodily experience tied closely to space and time. Their relationship with the city is also tied to insecurities, which are a result of the city's history of violence against women. Besides fear, another feeling dominates women's travelling decisions, which I call the experience of freedom. For many women passengers, a bus ride entails a ride to freedom. One that allows women (especially marginalised women) to get out of their houses and access different parts of their city as per their wishes.[75] Of course, buses, for many women passengers, are a means to an end, a source to attain means of livelihood. Due to limited transportation choices which arise from social, cultural and economic factors, including concerns of safety, high prices of other modes of transportation, as well as their overall inexperience of accessing the public space regularly and for spontaneous reasons, make buses a popular choice of transit for a huge number of women in Delhi. There is constant meaning making that takes place inside a bus, since buses, just like other forms of public space, tend to structure a habitus.

For many women, the bus is a source of security and confidence. Manju tells me that buses are not the only way to connect to the city not as a worker but as someone who belongs to the place.[76] "Sundays are my holidays and sometimes I take the bus to visit places, like Mehrauli Park or Chhatarpur Mandir. I don't go very far though, she continued, because that would mean spending hours on the road in traffic." Now that it has been announced that the paper pink ticket will be replaced with smart cards, will you register for a smart card then? I asked. "Yes, what can we do, we have no other choice" she replied, "the paper pink tickets were created for women to travel hassle free, but now the process of making a smart card adds to the hassle that we were supposed to be freed from." I asked her if she knew what had to be done to get a smart card? Where is she supposed to register for her smart card? Where does she have to submit her documents? She did not have answers to any of these questions and asked me instead if I knew what had to be done. But she did clarify that "I have all my documents".

Right to Free travel and Politics of Belonging

In February 2024, when I started my fieldwork on bus route 523, I boarded the bus and received a paper pink ticket. I was not asked any documentary evidence about my residential status in Delhi. The proposed Saheli Smart Card Scheme will be issued through the banks. "Delhi's new smart pass draws an invisible

line between belonging and exclusion."[77] The promise of modernising the bus ticketing system with smart technology and tighter verification process will leave thousands excluded from the free ridership scheme, especially those who cannot produce any formal proof of residency in Delhi. This change "marks a decisive shift: from a universal benefit, available instantly to any woman in Delhi, to a conditional one, restricted to those who fit the state's eligibility checklist. And for the thousands of women who live, study, or work here without official proof of residency, that shift is not a minor inconvenience—it's a potential loss of independence."[78]

Public Transport Forum (PTF), India is an organisational initiative that works towards highlighting the importance of public transportation in Delhi. In a petition titled "Demand to Save Pink Ticket Scheme for Women in Delhi: Roll Back the Introduction of Saheli Smart Card," the organisation pointed out that paper pink ticket scheme was a pioneering step toward enabling women's equal rights and access to the city and had majorly benefited women in Delhi especially those from lower income groups, in terms of access better economic and educational opportunities. Replacing the paper pink tickets by Saheli Smart Card for which one has to apply online or visit the nearest metro station can create exclusion. Given that not every woman has access to the internet and can visit a metro station. Furthermore, one of the most important groups of beneficiaries of this scheme were the migrant women in Delhi who significantly contribute to the city's economy and thus deserves equal access welfare provisions like the free bus travel scheme for women. Following demands were put forth in the petition: paper pink tickets should not be discontinued; free bus travel for women scheme should be applicable to all women like it was before; if "leakage" is the basis for proposed changes, the government must disclose the scale and definition of the alleged leakage. The smart card if introduced will impact women's mobility specially working class women in Delhi. The recent debates of Saheli Smart Card clearly show how the state is trying to curtail rights of those who cannot provide a proof of residence in Delhi. Proof of residence in Delhi remains a distant dream for scores of migrant workers who work as caregivers, domestic workers, construction workers especially female migrant workers whose identity documents are inherently tied to the documents.

Conclusion

The scholarship on urban transport specially Delhi metros has clearly shown that affordability remains a deterrent factor in women's mobility. The move towards Saheli Smart Cards attached to identification documents and possible collaboration with banks and adopting Know Your Customer clearly shows how the technocratic state is using digitisation as a surveillance mechanism, and control access of public transport to those who can provide identification documents.[79] Public transport should be free to ensure equitable access and the right to free mobility. Arguments supporting the abolition of transportation fares are often framed upon the logics of transport and mobility justice, sustainability, and its potential for sociopolitical transformation. In the case of

Delhi fare free travel scheme through pink passes was a measure towards a just sociopolitical transformation to make mobility within Delhi safe, and a safe public space could potentially increase labour force participation.

Notes

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[46] Ishita Dey, "Journeys and Internal Migrant Workers: An Ethnographic Study of Railway Connectivity," Mahanirbaran Calcutta Research Group, 2023, 4, http://www.mcrg.ac.in/IWM_Migration_2023/Final-Journeys_and_Internal_Migrant_Workers.pdf

[47] Tripti Bhatia and Mugdha Jain, "Bus Transport in Delhi," Working Paper No. 210, Centre for Civil Society, Delhi, 2009; Mitashi Singh, "Mobility in a Mega City: Shaping

of a Mobility Landscape via Informal Transport Practices in Delhi," Politecnico Di Milano, School of Architecture, Urban Planning and Construction Engineering Master of Science in Urban Planning & Policy Design (2015-2016). accessed November 3, 2025, https://www.politesi.polimi.it/bitstream/10589/132169/3/2016_12_Singh.pdf

[48] "Delhi Road Safety: Data to Action," Transport Department, Government of NCT Delhi, accessed November 3, 2025, https://transport.delhi.gov.in/sites/default/files/2023-08/road_safety_data_to_action_report.pdf

[49] S.T.A is responsible for registration of vehicles and routing of public transport services. P.W.D AND M.C.D are responsible for construction and maintenance of roads. D.T.C is responsible for operating public bus transport system. D.D.A for Construction of roads in newly planned areas, N.H.A.I. for construction and maintenance of National Highways and finally D.M.R.C is responsible for Metro Rail. See, Bhatia and Jain, "Bus Transport in Delhi."

[50] Shreya Ganguly and Anusha Kesarkar Gavankar, 2024 "Reimagining Public Transport: Creating a Safe and Inclusive Delhi," *Observer Research Foundation*, July 22, 2024, https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/reimagining-public-transport-creating-a-safe-and-inclusive-delhi

[51] Red Buses/Standard AC Buses are low floor buses and have a higher fare than the other two types of DTC buses, with a minimum fare of ₹10 to maximum fare of ₹25. Green buses or Ordinary buses form the backbone of DTC's fleet. These buses are non-air-conditioned (non-AC). Compared to AC red buses they have lower fare rate, with minimum ticket price set to ₹5 and maximum ₹15. Orange buses are relatively new to Delhi's bus fleet and is run by DTC in collaboration with Delhi Integrated Multi-Modal Transit System (DIMTS). These are no-ac, high floor buses and its ticket price ranges from ₹5 (minimum fare) to ₹15 (maximum fare). Finally, the Blue Electric bus is a new type of bus, introduced by DTC. Unlike the other types of buses which runs on CNG, the Blue buses operate on electric power. These buses were introduced as a step towards eliminating carbon emissions and promoting a cleaner environment in the city. The minimum fare of an electric blue bus is ₹10 and maximum is ₹25. Apart from these types of buses, in recent years the Delhi government have launched DEVI (Delhi Electric Vehicle Interconnector) bus scheme, with a fleet of 400 buses. While these buses are also green in colour, they differ from regular green buses in many aspects. Unlike standard twelve metre DTC buses, DEVI buses are predominantly nine metre long and has been introduced to cover smaller routes connecting the interior streets with arterial roads. See, "Types of Buses in Delhi," DTC Bus, accessed August 15, 2025, https://dtcbus.co.in/types-of-dtc-buses-in-delhi/; Snehil Sinha, "DEVI Bus Service Starts in Delhi," *Hindustan Times*, May 2, 2025, https://www.hindustantimes.com/cities/delhi-news/devi-bus-service-starts-in-delhi-101746122276222.html

[52] "523 DTC Bus Route Timings: Dhaula Kuan-Bhati Mines," DTC Bus, accessed November 3, 2025, https://dtcbus.co.in/523-dtc-bus-route-timings/

[53] Conversation of DTC Bus Conductor with Author, August 2024.

[54] Before the start of their shift, the bus drivers are issued a driver memo, an official document of the DTC, detailing critical operational information such as the driver's and conductors name and badge number, bus number, route number, schedule timings, duty hours and reporting location. It also includes notes on vehicle condition (engine oil, radiator water, tire pressure, oil pressure, breaks, steering, body panel, windows and doors, lights, horn, engine, clutch, wiper, seats, floor carpets, cleaning, battery, and fire extinguisher). The drivers are required to fill out these details once before and once after the trip stating if there were any issues in the above-mentioned vehicle parts. It

may also include instructions from the depot manager, notes on vehicle condition, or notifications regarding traffic diversions or special services. This document essentially serves as a formal deployment order and accountability record for the driver's duty for the day.

[55] The Marg Patrak (translated as waybill in DTC) is issued to the bus conductor. A waybill is a route-specific log sheet that outlines the entire bus route, including designated stops, distances, and scheduled arrival and departure times at each halt. It is carried by the conductor or sometimes the driver and is used to track adherence to the route and schedule, assisting in time management and ensuring service reliability. Additionally, the Marg Patrak is often used to record passenger counts, ticket sales, or any deviations or incidents that occur during the journey, which are later used for auditing and performance evaluation. In Delhi Transport Corporation (DTC) buses, a driver memo and waybill also known as Marg Patrak are essential documents required in the daily operations and monitoring of bus services. Both documents are crucial for maintaining operational transparency, safety, and service quality in public transport management within DTC.

[56] "DTC Bus Ticket Booking made Easy with WhatsApp," DTC Bus, accessed August 23, 2025, https://dtcbus.co.in/dtc-bus-ticket-booking-made-easy-with-whatsapp/

[57] These are common mobility mobile applications. The One Delhi app was launched by the Delhi Government which allows users to plan their journey on the Delhi Metro as well as all state-run-buses. Similarly, the Charter app was launched by the Transport Department of Delhi, called Contactless Ticket booking, for booking digital DTC and DIMTS tickets on smartphones. See, "Contactless Tickets for 3000 Cluster Buses from Today," *The New Indian Express*, March 1, 2021, https://www.newindianexpress.com/cities/delhi/2021/Mar/01/contactless-tickets-for-3k-cluster-buses-from-today-2270290.html; "Govt Launches One Delhi App, Promises Seamless Commuting on Metro, Buses," Hindustan Times, March 6, 2019, https://www.hindustantimes.com/delhi-news/govt-launches-one-delhi-app-promises-seamless-commuting-on-metro-buses/story-slRB7O3pziWsw1jQmWHAoJ.html

[58] "DTC Buss Pass and Fare," DTC Bus, accessed August 20, 2025, https://dtcbus.co.in/dtc-bus-pass-and-fare/

[59] In 2013, the Delhi government released an order titled "Updated Permit Conditions for Public Service Vehicles (stage and contract carriage) which include DTC, cluster, school, private and minibuses/midi buses/RTVs and feeder buses". Under section 39, the government mandated the permit holders of buses to ensure that their bus has at least 25 per cent seats reserved for women, two seats for senior citizens/disabled persons on the conductor's side towards the front gate. Furthermore, it stated that the reserved seats should be marked accordingly. And that the conductor of the bus shall ensure the occupancy of these seats by the above said reserved passengers. In the same order, under Section 30, it was mentioned that in case an incident of indecent behaviour, molestation or eve-teasing etc. against any woman takes place in any bus which tantamount to outraging her modesty, it shall be the duty of the crew of the bus (i.e. driver and conductor as the case may be) to inform the police immediately and take the bus to the nearest police station/police post/PCR van and hand over the culprit to the police. See, "Permit Conditions for Stage Carriage Buses (DTC, Cluster and Private Buses Including Feeder, RTV, Mini, Midi Buses, Updated Upto January 2013," Government of Delhi, 2013, https://transport.delhi.gov.in/sites/default/files/transport_data/permit%2Bconditions%2Bfor%2Bstage%2Bcarriages_02.pdf

[60] Conversation of DTC Bus Conductor with Author, July 2024.
[61] "URGENT ACTION APPEAL: Case IND-FE 300806," Housing and Land Rights Network, accessed August 28, 2025, https://hlrn.org.in/documents/UA_Bhatti_Mines.htm
[62] Kumar Sambhav Shrivastava, "Indigenous Civil Engineers," *Down to Earth*, January 30, 2015, https://www.downtoearth.org.in/environment/indigenous-civil-engineers-48425
[63] Coomi Kapoor, "Despite Being Classified 'Most Dangerous,' Work Continues at Forbidding Bhatti Mines," *India Today*, accessed: August 29, 2025, *https://www.indiatoday.in/magazine/indiascope/story/19830228-despite-being-classified-most-dangerous-work-continues-at-forbidding-bhatti-mines-771288-2013-08-23*
[64] Kapoor, "Despite Being Classified."
[65] "Urgent Action Appeal: Case IND-FE 300806," Housing and Land Rights Network.
[66] Shrivastava, "Indigenous Civil Engineers."
[67] Varsha Singh, "The Forgotten Residents of Delhi's Bhatti Mines Charitable Organisations Step in as the Government Fails," *Media India Group*, June 21, 2020, https://mediaindia.eu/politics/the-forgotten-residents-of-delhis-bhatti-mines/
[68] "ECO Task Force," Forest Department, Government of NCT of Delhi, accessed May 2024, https://forest.delhi.gov.in/forest/eco-task-force
[69] Conversation of Sub Inspector Delhi Police with Author, September 2024.
[70] According to Koskela (1997, 304) Hille Koskela, "'Bold Walk and Breakings': Women's Spatial Confidence versus Fear of Violence," *Gender, Place and Culture* 4, no. 3 (1997): 304.
[71] Sneha Annavarapu, "Risky Choices: Women and Cabs in Hyderabad India," *Public Books*, May 22, 2019, *https://www.publicbooks.org/risky-choices-women-and-cabs-in-hyderabad-india/*
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[73] Singh, "Mobility in a Mega City."
[74] Deepti Adlakha and Diana C. Parra, "Mind the Gap: Gender Differences in Walkability, Transportation and Physical Activity in Urban India*," Journal of Transport & Health* 18 (2020): 100875, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jth.2020.100875
[75] Anvita Anand and Geetam Tiwari, "A Gendered Perspective of the Shelter–Transport–Livelihood Link: The Case of Poor Women in Delhi", Transport Reviews, 26, no. 1 (2006): 63–80.
[76] Sona Sharma, "Housing, Spatial-Mobility and Paid Domestic Work in Millennial Delhi: Narratives of Women Domestic Workers," in *Space, Planning and Everyday Contestation in Delhi*, eds. Surajit Chakravarty and Rohit Negi (Springer, 2016), 201–17.
[77] Masrat Nabi, "Delhi's New Bus Pass Draws a Line Between Belonging and Exclusion," *Feminism in India*, August 20, 2025, https://feminisminindia.com/2025/08/20/delhis-new-bus-pass-draws-a-line-between-belonging-and-exclusion/
[78] Nabi, "Delhi's New Bus Pass."
[79] Alisha Dutta, "Excluded by Address: Migrant Women, Transgender Persons Decry DTC's Saheli Cards," *The Hindu,* August 4, 2025, https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/Delhi/excluded-by-address-migrant-women-transgender-persons-decry-dtcs-saheli-cards/article69890935.ece

The Eye of Cyclone: The Climate Discourse and the Sundarbans Delta

By

Amites Mukhopadhyay *

In an Era of Climate Change

It would certainly not be an exaggeration to suggest that the present century finds itself amid climate change. No other discourse has assumed the magnitude that it has and achieved a status of certainty in the public imaginary than that of climate change. And nowhere has its presence been felt more strongly and vociferously than in the Global South. It is observed that millions of people are migrating and being displaced in South Asia due to disasters brought on by climate change and it is apprehended that South Asia could see 40 million climate migrants by 2030.[1] Global warming has driven 18 million climate refugees[2] from their homes in South Asia in 2020.[3] People living in the coastal regions remain particularly vulnerable. However, a combination of environmentally sensitive livelihood, population growth and urbanisation will make South Asia one of the most active regions in terms of climate induced migration.[4]

In recent years the Germanwatch think tank's Global Climate Risk Index[5] has ranked India and Pakistan among the top ten countries vulnerable to climate change. Additionally, a troubling new study[6] by India's Ministry of Earth Sciences, released in June 2020 and based on extensive climate modelling, predicts that in the coming decades India—South Asia's most populous country by far—will become far dryer and hotter, with average temperatures poised to increase by nearly 4°C by century's 2020 end.[7] A 2018 World Bank study[8] projects nearly 40 million climate migrants in South Asia by 2050 in a worst-case scenario—one in which the region suffers from a dearth of climate-friendly policies. The Bank predicts, under this scenario, that nearly a quarter of all internal migrants in South Asia—and nearly 2 per cent of the overall regional population—would be classifiable as climate migrants. And even in the best-

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case scenario, where climate-friendly policies abound, the Bank projects nearly 20 million climate migrants by 2050.[9]

The climatologists reflecting on the impending climate crisis often fixate on Bangladesh, the low-lying coastal country threatened by cyclones and flooding. However, in reality the nations that inhabit South Asian landscape (such as India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka) are highly vulnerable. Landlocked Afghanistan, Bhutan, and Nepal face rising temperatures, drought, and glacial melt. And the tiny yet densely populated island of Maldives—the lowest-lying country in the world—faces the real prospect of complete submersion in the not-too-distant future.[10] The obvious consequence of this climate crisis felt in these countries at various levels is the forced migration of people. Asian Development Bank research finds that floods and agricultural land losses are increasingly contributing to decisions to migrate to major Indian cities.[11] Growing rural-to-urban migration will place added burdens on already-overcrowded cities to provide food, shelter, and jobs. This has already resulted in resource crunch contributing to poverty, unemployment and unsettling-dwindling informal sector, something that was most brutally manifest during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Among the countries and the regions in South Asia that figure in this emerging climate concerns as being vulnerable and climate threatened the coastal Sundarbans spread across eastern part of India and Bangladesh figure predominantly as one. Time and again attention is being drawn to the Sundarbans where people face losing their homes to rising seas caused by climate change. It is further mentioned that the Sundarbans was the first in the world to record an unfolding climate refugee crisis as people fled an island lost to the sea.[12] Most destructive climate events mentioned in various reports happen to be the one that struck the Sundarbans region. The cyclone Aila that struck the Sundarbans displaced 2.3 million in India and nearly a million in Bangladesh.[13] Aila was followed by a number of cyclones such as Bulbul, Hudhud in the Sundarbans. However, the two major cyclones Amphan and Yaas struck the region in 2020 and 2021 respectively.

It is in the light of the above that the present discussion focuses on the Sundarbans, in particular, the region in the Bengal delta through the decades of cyclones between 2009–2021 when six cyclones had struck the region starting with cyclone Aila of 2009, one of the severest and ending with Yaas of 2021. The Sundarbans, stretched in a northern semi-circle across the mangrove delta north of the Bay of Bengal, is an immense archipelago of islands. The inhabited islands closest to the forest are part of the active delta and have the reputation of "moving".[14] The peculiarity of this region, manifest in its riverine settlements, transient landscape, conglomerate of islands and their proximity to the sea, making it prone to cyclones and tidal waves. The cyclone Aila, had caused people to leave the Sundarbans in search of work in India's big cities. And the cyclone Amphan (of 2020) struck the region at a time when the migrants were forced to return back home in the wake of the pandemic (Covid-19) and sudden lockdown robbing them of their livelihoods in the cities to which they once moved in search of safety and safer livelihoods.[15] This decades from 2009-2021 sets the context for the rise of a climate discourse as it

attributes the increasing incidence of cyclones responsible for causing displacement of people to climate change. The climatologists express concern over the future of the Sundarbans, apprehending that climate change would soon result in the submergence of the Sundarbans islands.

The paper sees in the cyclone discourse and its manifest anxiety about the future of the Sundarbans an opportunity to revisit the region as it keeps traversing its circuitous path both historically and in contemporary times examining the imperatives of conservation hidden in the climate discourse, exploring the issues at stake in the debates concerning heritage and history. Following the history-heritage debate the essay traces the history of the Sundarbans forest back to sixteenth century when under the influence of Sufi *Pirs* and *Fakirs* an agricultural frontier unfolded in the Bengal delta. The objective behind rediscovering this history is to call into question the dominant and much taken-for-granted wisdom that the Sundarbans forests (for that matter any forest) are fast disappearing under human pressure. By revisiting Banjamin's Kingsbury's cyclone history in the Bengal delta, the essay details the colonial interventions instrumental not only in the shaping of the landscape in the deltaic region but contributing to the growth of a solid property market known as Calcutta. The paper, while being attentive to the climatologists' anxiety about the settlements of the Sundarbans, also argues that climate discourse, because of its obsession with a prolem-mitigation approach, not only looks upon nature as being only amenable to natural sciences, thereby offering a straightjacketed understanding of nature, climate and disasters, but also turns its back on a much deeper understanding of nature and climate embedded in the social history of a region. In the end, the paper being attentive to unearthing this social history looks at the voices of the islanders and their shifting and disaggregated livelihood practices expressive of the myriad of ways in which people engage their landscape. Their voices, anxieties and dilemmas warn us against any grandeur climate reductive solution to people's problems in the Sundarbans.

Managed Retreat: The Climate Discourse

The successive cyclones, particularly the frequency of their occurrence in the last decade together with the growing apprehension about the rise in sea levels and the possibility of the submergence of the Sundarbans islands has led some of the environmentalists to argue in favour of the retreat of people from the Sundarbans as an adaptive strategy to counter the threat of climate change and natural disasters.[16] This climatic anxiety is informed by the WWF vision document of 2050 (2007).[17]

> The Indian Sundarbans delta (ISD) being described as one of the most vulnerable delta regions in the world, being prone to extreme events, growing population pressures, and depleting ecosystem services faces a severe climate threat. A site that is ecologically fragile and economically valuable being subject to the severe population and livelihood pressure needs urgent protection and conservation… To counter climate threat to the sustenance of the region what

> is envisaged is WWF's vision for 2050. This vision is about an adaptive management system to not only cope with the onslaught of devastating predicted changes, but also to convert adversity to an opportunity for improving the quality of life of the people and to rehabilitate the ecological health of the ISD to the extent possible in the changed environment.[18]

The principal points of this vision are: encouragement of phased and systematic outmigration from the vulnerable zone (planned retreat), and regeneration of mangrove forests in the vulnerable zone. It is believed that only when a safer habitat is provided to the people of the region along with proper source of livelihood will it be possible to regenerate mangrove forests in the vulnerable zone and thereby bring about partial ecological rehabilitation of the region.[19] This managed retreat of people would unfold in four main phases. The phase one involves a clear-cut identification and demarcation of the area of the ISD as a single administrative unit with restrictions on outsiders from acquiring land and thereby obtaining permanent residence in the area. The phase two focuses on the development of adequate physical infrastructure in the stable zone, away from the high vulnerability zone. It is expected that population from within the vulnerable zone would gradually immigrate to the nearby stable zone. Thus, adequate infrastructure is necessary to absorb these people in the stable zone. The phase three envisages preparing the residents for this change in order to minimise their psychological barrier towards the movement from the vulnerable to the less vulnerable zone. However, the people of the region should have the choice to decide whether they want to relocate or live in their current location. The movement is envisaged as voluntary and "organic". The fourth phase visualises relocation of the population from the high vulnerability zone to the newly developed areas in nearby stable zone. The unused lands are allowed to regenerate as mangrove forests. It is estimated that by 2050, the total regenerated area should be around 1190 sq. km. However, land ownership over vacated land remains with the people who have relocated and will be entitled to benefit flows.[20]

Climatologists argue that while there have been various adaptation and mitigation mechanisms that have been in vogue, lately, planned retreat of the population from a vulnerable region (where in situ adaptation is no longer possible or is exorbitantly expensive), and subsequent regeneration of the ecosystem in that region, have been thought of as a major breakthrough in the domain of adaptation practice.[21] This adaptation strategy, largely an ecological-economic model, is being recommended for the Indian Sundarbans. where climate risk, threat of submergence suggests that moving population from vulnerable zones has been an accepted mode of adaptation and is not an aberration.[22]

Within the range of planned adaptation options, managed retreat from vulnerable is now considered the art of reconfiguring communities to leave room for coastal dynamics, storms surges, and projected sea level rise. In practice, in various parts of the world, it implies moving communities, buildings, and other infrastructure landward, out of harm's way. Vietnam is considering allowing more flooding in the upper reaches of the Mekong Delta,

and the Netherlands is adapting suburbs for controlled flooding, while several counties across maritime states in the United States are offering voluntary property buyout to assist homeowners living in high-risk areas to relocate to lower-risk coastal areas.[23] Attributing the vulnerability of the people largely to governmental inaction, apathy and inattention at various points in time—citing instances of the Left Front's government's failed approaches to Ghoramara and Lohachara islands, of not so encouraging government in-situ adaptation policy with respect to Beguakhali island—the climatologists argue vociferously in favour a comprehensive retreat policy. Their writings demonstrate time and again their little confidence in the long-term viability of the settled islands and sustained governmental initiative in the region.

It is with this aim in view that they present what is known as generic adaptation decision framework (GADF).[24] Drawing on GADF, climate scientists arguing for managed retreat, argue that in locations where non-diminishing socio-economic wellbeing can be ensured, in-situ adaptation is the option. This, however, needs to satisfy the condition that the cost of in-situ adaptation is lower than the value of the business-as-usual economy at that location. In other words, if the cost of protection is higher than the value of what is sought to be protected, state actors will find it hard to justify such investment. On the other hand, if the net value (benefits minus the costs of ex-situ adaptation) of ex-situ adaptation economy is the highest among all options, it creates a case for organic population movement as also state action in that regard.[25] The environmentalists are quick to detail out the financial implications of such a managed retreat,

> In order to activate and internalize this framework in the decision-making, a comprehensive economic valuation framework entailing potential monetary values of economic benefits and costs, as also associated values of ecosystem services or their losses need to be incorporated. The economic analysis therefore entails 'comparative statics,' with all possible scenarios compared in static frameworks, with their current values over time estimated and compared. This will lead to the conclusion on which scenario yields a higher measure of well-being in terms of the costs and the benefits.[26]

Climate scientists ventilate their firm conviction about the higher economic benefits associated with the organic population movement and mangrove regeneration in the context of the ISD. They suggest that the various stakeholders, in particular the people, involved in the process need to be convinced of the same by highlighting the financial gains.[27] The protagonists of managed retreat embarking on a cost benefit analysis present a comparative assessment of people's financial gains during their present time amidst cyclones and climate risk and the Vision 2050 when the managed retreat is achieved and suggest that the net benefit flows in the case of Vision 2050 is almost 12.8 times of the total benefit flows of the BAU ('Business as Usual' is their coinage which basically means people's present living condition before the vision 2050 their safer relocation is actually executed).

Current Values of the Flows of (Net) Benefits (Rs. Billion) Under Various Premium Rate Regime

Premium Rate (%)	BAU Scenario	Vision 2050 Scenario	Ratio (Vision 2050/BAU)
10	172306.27	2202762.59	12.78
8	35426.02	522328.21	14.74
6	7221.87	124404.78	17.23
4	1477.37	29914.30	20.25
12	825276.77	9281089.39	11.25
14	3877755.36	38890171.70	10.03
16	17839818.72	161482303.90	9.05
18	80283922.50	662673270.00	8.25

Source: Nilanjan Ghosh, Anamitra Anurag Danda, Jayanta Bandyopadhyay, and Sugata Hazra, "Away from the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea: Planned Retreat and Ecosystem Regeneration as Adaptation to Climate Change." *Policy Research and Innovation Group*, Issue Brief No. 1, New Delhi: WWF-India, January 2016, 15.

Through recourse to such a meticulous cost-benefit analysis as shown above, the protagonists argue that by all means, it is clear that the vision scenario of "planned retreat and ecosystem regeneration" yields many times higher value than the BAU scenario.[28] Therefore, in line with the Vision document by WWF, climatologists argue that by 2050 a population of about a million would need to relocate from the vulnerable locations of the Indian Sundarbans because with time people's vulnerability to disasters will increase.[29] This means that the settlers need to evacuate the Sundarbans because the problems people face are irresolvable and cannot be addressed keeping settlements intact and in place.

The Imperative of Conservation Lies Hidden: Heritage and History

Climate scientists' anxieties are not unfounded, neither are their insights insignificant, especially when we consider the magnitude of the problems in the Sundarbans. However, one wonders how this retreat or relocation would be achieved and under whose guidance or management. The state that figures in their writings as being unaccountable, inattentive and apathetic towards people's problems in the region is now being urged to achieve something as splendid and spectacular as managed retreat involving relocation of one million by 2050. Climatologists make detailed references to occasions when the state has failed to take care of its people (occasions when the policy of planned retreat concerning Ghoramara and Lohachara islands failed or when the state failed in

providing in-situ infrastructural resources to the vulnerable and displaced people of Beguakhali island). Yet now they seem to repose their confidence in the same state in carrying out the gigantic plan of managed retreat.

One can hardly underestimate the magnitude of the threat climate poses to the people in the Sundarbans. At the same time, one needs to acknowledge that the people's livelihood realities, hardships and desires. are as diverse and heterogeneous as the region's problems are. People as a category is far from being a monolith and people's predicaments and desires can hardly be captured within a succinct framework of cost-benefit analysis. However, to say this is not to deny the importance of such a rigorous assessment of people's current liabilities and future benefits. But people's living and being and their everyday engagement with water and soil of the Sundarbans open up a much larger canvas that is not easily amenable to scientists' rigorously calculated spreadsheets. A quick glance at the state of conservation in India since the country's Independence can tell us a great deal about how people had been treated. A national park, whether in the Sundarbans or elsewhere in India has been an instance of monumental nationalism in India.[30] More often than not such nationalistic aspiration has been sought to be achieved through recourse to a managed or forcible relocation of forested communities away from the conservation sites. As a result of their displacement from the forested lands (their abode) and livelihoods, they had found themselves reduced to the level of wage labourers or errands or migrant odd job seekers. The meticulously calculated benefits or compensation had never reached people who time and again stood deprived of their home and livelihood. The epistemic certainty of science is what informs the climate perspective's knack for factual evidence as the basis for drawing up technocratic blueprint as the solution or mitigation of people's climate induced vulnerabilities. The climate discourse, because of its obsession with a problem-mitigation approach, not only produces a reified understanding of nature as the only key to explaining all disasters occurring within the so-called natural world but also turns its back on a much deeper understanding of nature and climate embedded in the social history of a region.

However, lurking beneath this climate anxiety about the vulnerable is another development imperative that deploys a powerful image of the Sundarbans. The Sundarbans is a world heritage site for its unique ecological properties. In 1973 the region had been declared a World Wildlife Fund Tiger Reserve for it is the only mangrove tiger land to be found anywhere. Over the years there has been increasing concern being expressed over the protection and conservation of this heritage site. In the words of Lowenthal, heritage has burgeoned over the past quarter of a century from a small elite preoccupation into a major popular crusade. Everything from Disneyland to the Holocaust Museum, from the Balkan wars to the Northern Irish Troubles, from Elvis memorabilia to the Elgin Marbles bears the marks of the cult of heritage.[31] Heritage and its intricate relation with history emerges as an intriguing body of research in recent times.[32] Heritage as a way of memorialising the past becomes a significant fulcrum around which urban planning is being reimagined. Such urban planning involves unravelling and valorising landscape resources as sediments of history, sediments that need to be conserved and protected.[33]

Rothman traces the history of wildland fire in grappling with the issues at stake in the conservation and protection of the Yellowstone National Park in north America.[34] The national parks in the US, (whether Olympic or Yellowstone) are the nation's symbolic heritage whose iconic significance lies in their being natural wilderness, sites rich in their wildlife and native populace.[35] Rothman looks upon the wildland fire as igniting insightful debates concerning wilderness, recreation and heritage.

Groot's account revisits the older debates surrounding the contentious relation between history and heritage, the relation that encourages a binary of high (History) versus low (heritage or 'the historical'). Quoting what Lowenthal would call heritage products, Groot presents Lowenthal's anxiety where history is often lost to heritage market. Heritage reshapes a past made easy to embrace. And just as heritage practitioners take pride in creating artifice, the public enjoys consuming it. Departures from history distress only a handful of highbrows. Most neither seek historical veracity nor mind its absence.[36] However, Groot also argues that heritage's reshaping or memorialising of past unleashes a process whereby people participate both as spectators and actors in the making of heritage cult. According to Colavitti, such popular participation in heritage making is of crucial importance when urban planning requires us to consider the preservation and protection landscapes rich in social and cultural biodiversity or settlement landscapes threatened with extinction. It is therefore necessary, for the programs and projects of conservation to become really effective to integrate the recovery of the monuments and the historical building heritage with the protection of the environment and the correlated traditional human activities.[37]

If people's participation remains central to heritage building and conservation, one is tempted to ask why in the case of the Sundarbans the development imperative in its various avatars insists that people be kept out of this process of heritage conservation. If the Sundarbans is a heritage site for its unique wildlife, it is also a place where unique livelihoods of wood cutters, honey collectors, fishers unfold, no matter how dwindling and shrinking those livelihoods might be in the region today. However, in the WWF's managed retreat perspective the guided out-migration of people becomes a precondition for the mangrove regeneration or wilderness conservation. Juxtaposing historical fact against heritage faith, Lowenthal makes an interesting observation on how heritage alters history.[38] Three such modes of alteration or revision stand out: one is to update the past by garbing its scenes and actors in present-day guise. A second is to highlight and enhance aspects of the past now felt admirable. A third is to expunge what seems shameful or harmful by consigning it to ridicule or oblivion.[39] However, when we turn to the Sundarbans not only do we see the expunging of shameful or harmful, the one that poses challenges to the Sundarbans' conservation, but we also see the foregrounding of a heritage project, a project whose sustainability and execution demands that the region be returned back to wildlife and emptied of its all possible histories.

The retreat perspective tends to treat the forests, water, mangrove vegetation, wildlife, tides engulfing land and land surfacing through tidal waves

as naturally given and views human presence in the delta as incidental and a mishap. However, what this perspective ignores is the fact that human settlements—even when they are viewed as being occasioned by specific and planned interventions—are indispensable constituent of the ecology and topography of the Sundarbans. The so called purely natural components of the mangrove delta are constantly and dynamically shaped and configured by human footprints. Similarly, human lives and livelihood practices demonstrate a deeper acknowledgement of the landscape and its whims. The constantly mutating boundaries of land, water and forests are found minutely textured into people's livelihood pursuits. Far from rendering the region as something naturally given, it is this dynamic encounter that assigns a unique character to the Sundarbans and does not make it amenable for an easy comparison with other geographies in the world. Hence what has been achieved elsewhere in the world, whether the so-called developed North or developing South, can hardly be viewed as a precedent to bolster an argument (translated into something of a blueprint of the retreat plan) in favour of the retreat of the population from the Sundarbans delta.

Forest versus People: The Dominant Portrayal Challenged

The objective of the WWF's Vision document 2050 is primarily twofold: one is the planned outmigration of people from the vulnerable zone in the name of their safety, and the other is mangrove regeneration in the vulnerable zone, namely conservation of the Sundarbans forests which is found threatened with depletion because of population pressure. In 1987 at a conference entitled 'The Commons in South Asia: Societal Pressure and Environmental Integrity in the Sundarbans of Bangladesh' held at Smithsonian Institution in Washington DC, Ronald Herring, one of the contributors to the conference, suggested that the central dilemma in the Sundarbans development is that unlike the tribal forests elsewhere in South Asia, where the conflict is between the utilisation of an existing habitat cum common-property resource and a historically novel statist claims to management, the remaining and shrinking mangrove forests have become an object of conflict between social forces seeking a livelihood and a state that seeks to limit that process.[40]

Herring's comment hints at the need for forest conservation. And a conservation process that unfolds around any forest whether in the Sundarbans or elsewhere requires that people's interests be kept at bay. The forested communities' livelihood needs are perceived as coming into conflict with natural well-being of the forest. Mehtta in her review of Camelia Dewan's *Misreading the Delta* (2022) observes that in naming her book Dewan might have been inspired by the research considered a classic in anthropology, namely *Misreading the African Landscape: Society and Ecology in a Forest-Savanna Mosaic* (1996) by James Fairhead and Melissa Leach. Fairhead and Leach in their work challenged the received wisdom that forests were disappearing under human pressure.[41] While working on the Kissidougou forests—the patches of dense semi-deciduous rainforest scattered within the savanna landscape located in West Africa—Fairhead and Leach contend that forests were associated with

humans and, in fact, emerged, flourished, and came and went with human settlements.[42] Fairhead and Leach begin their book with what they call convictions of forest loss in policy and ecological, sciences. Many modern studies which have informed environmental and rural development projects in the region think that this extensive forest cover has been lost within the past 50 years; within the lifetime of the region's present inhabitants.[43] This forest loss is largely attributed to inhabitants' farming methods and land-use practices. Shifting cultivation methods, for farming upland rice and other crops, fell woodland each year. Fire-setting in field clearance and also for hunting, honey collecting, pasture management is seen to prevent forest regeneration and further impoverish woody cover in savannas.[44] Fairhead and Leach on the basis of their research on the mosaic in Kissidougou argue rather emphatically,

> Not all ecologists, foresters and botanists would interpret West Africa's forest-savanna mosaic in terms of the past and ongoing forest loss. But over the past century, all those who have actually examined the mosaic in Kissidougou have interpreted it in this way. Close examination of historical record and local land management practices shows not only an error in this perspective, but also what it has obscured: the creation of forest islands, their dynamics and the enriching of open savannas with more woody vegetation forms. It is within this dynamic that Kissi-and Kuranko-speaking villagers conceive of their relationship with their landscape; a relationship with deep historical roots.[45]

The historical roots of the Sundarbans forests go back in time to the Delhi Sultanate and the Mughals. Richard Eaton's comprehensive account of the Sundarbans from 1200 A.D. onwards does provide an account of the process of land reclamation and human settlement that had taken place before the advent of the British. Although peoples of the delta had been transforming forested lands to rice fields long before the coming of the Muslims, what was new from at least the sixteenth century on was the association of the Muslim holy men (*Pir*), or charismatic persons popularly identified as such, with forest clearing and land reclamation. In popular memory, some of these men swelled into mythico-historical figures, saints who served as metaphors for the expansion of both religion and agriculture.[46] According to Eaton, it was true that forest reclamation and agricultural frontier expanded under the influence of Muslim *Pirs* or holy men who organised the wandering populace—foresters or fishers—into group of agriculturists under their tutelage, but it was equally true that these holy men also had symbiotic relation with the forest. The Gazetteer of Khulna district, compiled in 1908, reports that in the early twentieth century parts of the Sundarbans forests were still identified with the charismatic authority of the Muslim holy men. In 1898 James Wise wrote of Zindah Ghazi, a legendary protector of woodcutters and boatmen all over the eastern delta, who was "believed to reside deep inside the jungle, to ride about on tigers and keep them subservient to his will that they dare not touch any human being without his express commands."[47]

In revisiting this history of people's deeper relations with the Sundarbans forests, Jalais does reiterate the intimate relation between Sufi *Fakirs* and the forest. While these holy men did not take possession of the land

reclaimed and cultivated through their leadership, administrative records inform us that in the popular imagination they were seen as retaining control over the forest because, as pointed out by Wise, they were often the ones to decide the exact limits within which the forest was to be cut.[48] Jalais further states that the earliest reference to the connection between Muslim holy men or their tombs and delta's tigers dates to the seventeenth century. The Englishman John Marshall, travelling from Orissa to Hooghly, recorded on February 14, 1670, "every Thursday at night a Tyger comes out and salams to a Fuckeers Tomb there [in Ramchandpur, near Balasore], and when I was there on Thursday night it was both heard and seen."[49]

The Sundarbans forests, thus, remain a fascinating site witness to history minutely woven into popular chronicles. And it is this interweaving that unfolds in people's everyday narratives, narratives that are expressive of their intimacy with forest. Jalais lays bare the quotidian tales—those of trust, desire, fear, dilemma, curiosity and anxiety—that seem to endow the region with its unique moral ecologies.[50] In writing on the crab collectors and their alleged contribution to environmental degradation in the Sundarbans, Mehtta argues that commercial vessels, trawlers, luxury cruisers, and eroding shoreline went unremarked, hidden in plain sight. Instead, the focus remained on the villainous crab collectors and their venial sins. The impending ecological crisis has generated enormous moral and economic resources, but these are misspent on the most inconsequential environmental threat. We know everything and we are doing something: we are busying ourselves raining moral opprobrium on the poorest and the weakest. We are staring at the trees while the forest drowns.[51] Eaton's historical accounts of the delta and Jalais and Mehtta's reflections on the Sundarbans forest warns us against the straightjacketing of environmental problems and the mitigational design. To harp on a mitigational design such as managed retreat as the only way to returning the forest back to its wildlife would be to empty the forest and the region of its history and moral ecologies, where the people and the forest are co-constitutive of each other. The restoration plans such as the managed retreat are often framed to appear as though they are scientific and technocratic and thereby apolitical. Hidden behind the mask is the plans' will to power, their assumed confidence in occupying a moral high ground to decide what is best for the people, and in the process being oblivious to their own complicity in reproducing hierarchies and asymmetries that they once intended to overcome.

The Delta: Its Unique Climate History

As has been mentioned earlier, the constantly mutating landscape of the Sundarbans is found minutely textured into people's living and livelihood pursuits. Reflecting on the Bengal delta, Dewan argues that climate change is the "amazing spice" that standardises diverse, disparate and heterogeneous vulnerability experiences and development initiatives into a common recipe for development funding and brokerage.[52] Subsequently, in her book *Misreading the Bengal Delta* born out of her fieldwork in the southwest coast of Bangladesh, she argues that the so called invocation of climate crises at the drop of a hat is

informed by certain misreading of the delta. Citing usual consequences of climate crises such as melting of ice caps, rising sea levels, frequency of cyclones and the threat of submergence of coastal regions such as Bangladesh turning settlers into climate refugees, she asks while simplified narratives may help make development interventions seem related to climate change adaptation or resilience in order to attract aid funding, does it accurately capture the causality of floods in complex coastal landscapes?[53] Highlighting the experiences of floods in deltaic Bangladesh, Dewan has shown what Mehtta calls nuances of floods.[54] According to Dewan, not all floods are bad and reveals the productivity of some types of flooding, particularly considering floods' contribution to the Bengal delta's fertility and productive nature. People's encounter with flooding unfolds an ecological knowledge that is lived and therefore needs to be understood from the histories of people's living in the delta.[55]

The silt that rivers carry from the Himalayas down to the Bay of Bengal[56] are land and water both at the same time making it difficult to separate the two.[57] The silt, marsh and riverine sediments that entered the land archive[58] and were instrumental in creating floodplain, and agrarian settlement landscapes only point to the near impossibility of separating nature from history. In other words, the silt and riverine sediments, even when viewed as fleeting or transient and as purely physical constituents of the so-called natural world, have the hint of people's footprints, their struggle, life and livelihoods inscribed into them. Dewan warns against climate reductionism, for it not only attributes all problems to climate change but provides scant attention to them as arising out of structural inequalities or asymmetries that might be unique to a region such as the deltaic Sundarbans. Exploring these asymmetries means unravelling layers of history, layers that might lie hidden underneath a more seductive image of the region as primarily a wildlife reserve and heritage site.

The increasing incidence of cyclone is being attributed to climate change in the delta. It is interesting to note the history of cyclones in the delta. Benjamin Kingsbury's account of the cyclone of 1876 in the Bengal delta challenges the dominant perceptions of cyclones as being purely natural event, but as one that demonstrates the inequalities and hierarchies in the society in Bengal and the political and economic disparities that characterised colonial rule in India. Kingsbury's *An Imperial Disaster* not only documents the cyclone of 1876 but mentions many cyclones and storm waves—those of 1838, 1842 and 1848—that serve as an important lens unearthing richer social and political histories of the Bengal delta. Using the cyclone of 1876 as a case in point, the book explores the circuitous histories of population movement, strategies of survival and livelihood, and of state making in the delta.[59]

For long the ecological implications of colonial rule have remained a significant area of research among historians and anthropologists. Large scale settlements began with colonial interventions when the empire embarked upon the project of land making as being central to its revenue regime unleashed whether in the deltaic Bengal or elsewhere in India. Colonial flood control strategies wedded to western science and capitalism had been instrumental in turning flood dependent agrarian regime into flood vulnerable landscape.[60] The

Bengal delta witnessed countless experiments in search of land and land revenue. In a desperate bid to not only create land, but also to turn a transient and unstable land into a stable source of revenue, the settlement plans were instituted in the Bengal delta. In the words of Hill,

> Peasants were deserting their holdings rather than face prosecution for inability to pay the assessment on inundated lands. If they stayed during times of abundance, they found their plots being sold from under them when the land, which had been so productive the year before, was no longer fit to fulfill the terms of their contracts.[61]

While reflecting on the disastrous consequences of Permanent Settlement and land making in the Bengal delta Hill refers to the *diara* tracts in the Gangetic delta, the tracts that floated on water (tracts that was both land and non-land at the same time).[62] These tracts, when entered into the Company's register for the purposes of land revenue extraction spelt disaster for the poor peasants who could not put these tracts to sustainable agricultural use simply because of their transient and non-permanent nature. Several Acts were passed by the Company and surveyors deployed in vain to ensure that land remained a visible and permanent source of settlement and revenue.

Debjani Bhattacharya links ecology to empire around the question of making the city of Calcutta. She revisits the historical moments that unfolded in the Bengal delta and the Sundarbans, the moments of bringing littoral spaces under the regime of land making, of turning marshes, silts, swamps, riverine sedimentations into solid property that bounded and defined the idea of land through the legal and spatial parameters of a land grant.[63] One could perhaps interpret Bhattacharya's research as providing a new twist to this tale of climate, ecology and vulnerability. Moving away from a conventional perspective that looks upon climate as being an impediment and as something that informs certain infrastructural preparedness (largely being the result of knee-jerk reaction) in recent times, Bhattacharya unearths the history of the propertied infrastructure called Calcutta (once the capital of the empire) as being occasioned by a unique ecology and climate obtaining in the deltaic Bengal. For her, the deltaic and littoral space with its free flow of the riverine slit, marsh, swamps entered the colonial archive contributing to the making of the property market called Calcutta and the legal regime associated with it. The perspective that Bhattacharya builds does not view the story of Calcutta (now Kolkata) as being that of a city to be rescued from climate threat (as climatologists would have us believe), but rather of a city being made possible by a particular climate regime. Revisiting and unearthing of this history, according to her, is important, for it aims to challenge the collective amnesia that surrounds the history and beginning of Calcutta (Kolkata).

People's Voices: Of Diversities and Dilemmas

The above perspectives, when juxtaposed against the technocratic vision of a climate discourse such as managed retreat, complicates our reductionist

understanding about nature, climate, disasters and vulnerability. In the Sundarbans, where boundaries between land and water are never defined, where such boundaries are found to be mutating beyond predictions, people's life and livelihood are only expressions of their immersions into the fluid and hybrid environment. In fact, their activities—whether fishing in the sea or in the middle of rivers, whether working inside the forest or catching crabs or fish in the creeks along the forest—are expressions of their deeper and integral connection with the landscape. The forest remains inundated during high tide and a floating forest tends to blur the boundary that exists between land and water. People's sense of tidal waves and land movements follow them while they catch crabs or fish in the narrow creeks.

As has already been mentioned earlier, cyclone Aila might have forced people to leave the Sundarbans, but the islanders kept coming back to the region even during the period of ten years between Aila and cyclone Amphan. When Amphan struck the region many who returned to the Sundarbans having lost their livelihoods elsewhere in India to the pandemic had suffered the severity of the cyclone. However, a question thus arises is: What is it that drives people to keep coming back to a place where everything looks unsettling, where climate and landscape impose constraints on people's life and livelihood, where people suffer the onslaught of cyclones? It was to find answers to the above question that I had visited the Sundarbans after the cyclone Amphan and met many people including Jogen Mridha who had left the region after Aila. I met Jogen, a month after cyclone Amphan when he was in no mood to talk. He had lost his job and had to leave Chennai because of the economic lockdown declared in India. Amphan struck before he could return and settle back into the Sundarbans. He had his house collapsed and submerged in saline water, yet he was busy trying to look for a livelihood. Cyclone Yaas struck the region again in 2021 and when I travelled to the Sundarbans six months after Yaas, I found Jogen, this time busy trying to rebuild his cyclone torn house.

Amphan nearly razed his mud house to the ground. Before Jogen could barely make his house liveable the cyclone Yaas struck the Sundarbans. Although his house could survive the onslaught of Yaas, yet it left scars on its walls. With the help of his neighbour Ram, Jogen was posting a few bamboo poles into the ground around the four walls of his house. Each of these bamboo poles had wooden planks tied to the top. These poles posted upright as close to the walls of the house as possible with the wooden planks being inserted into the thatched roof as something of a support to the weak mud walls which had already developed cracks and fissures in them. I met Jogen after the cyclone Amphan in 2020 when Jogen's house had collapsed in waist deep saline water that flooded the islands, and he rented a businessman's boat to give the Kolkata based cyclone relief workers a tour of the Amphan affected parts as something of a last resort to eke out a livelihood amidst devastation. After the cyclone Yaas, I came to the Sundarbans and found Jogen at his place on Surkhali island. It was nearly six months after cyclone, yet one could feel the cyclone's presence almost everywhere on the island. The rice fields looked barren, the green fields were laden with marshes, muds and riverine sediments that dried over time. The

ponds looked unclean and the houses that once dotted the landscape bore the brunt of the cyclones' devastation.

Like Jogen, Ram had gone out of the Sundarbans after the cyclone Aila in search of work in Mumbai and had to return home during the pandemic when the lockdown threw him out of his job. While they were at work trying to post the bamboo poles, Jogen and Ram were sharing their experiences of returning home during the lockdown. They both described how crestfallen they were, being stranded in the streets of Chennai and Mumbai; how they fell to prey to the clutches of touts and brokers who squeezed money out of them in exchange for a promise of transport services. Jogen and Ram narrated how these vans and cars with people nearly bulging out played hide seek with the police patrolling highways. The moment the drivers saw the police, they forcibly evacuated people out of their cars, left them in the middle of highways and vanished into thin air. Both Jogen and Ram with their wives and children struggled for nearly a month, exhausted and devastated, before they could reach home.

"And then you came to the Sundarbans and Amphan struck," I intervened. "Yes, in the Sundarbans you are destined to live with cyclones," Ram replied. Jogen was quick to chip in, "but then life was no safer in Mumbai or Chennai. Working in jewellery shops is so gruelling, it tells upon your health. And then lockdown caught you unawares and left you stranded in the streets. The owners closed shops and never bothered to pay you the money they owed you. Was lockdown any less unsettling than the cyclones?" Jogen was sarcastic. Jogen sarcasm was shared by many in the region who left the Sundarbans after cyclone Aila in 2009 and the had to return back amid the adversities of pandemic and lack of employments.

Bhattacharya and Mehtta document people's voices—voices that tell us how the islanders, the rich and the poor, migrants and returnees think differently of the place.[64] In the absence of a consistent and multi-dimensional development plan that addresses people's problems, predicaments and hardships, what we see in the Sundarbans is either a flurry of relief and aid activities when a disaster such as Aila or Amphan strikes on the one hand and an ambitious or grandeur plan like managed retreat on the other. Bhattacharya and Mehtta present us with voices of Piyali Mondal or Bimala Sarkar. Sarkar had weathered four storms including Amphan that had destroyed her mud hut, yet retreating to a higher ground was not her desired future in our climate changed world. The Sundarbans was a place where she was born, and this would be a place where she would like to die.[65] Cyclone Amphan cracked the roof of Piyali Mondol's (Mondol was an unmarried woman who collected crabs for a living in the mangrove creeks) mud hut and would potentially send her into a cycle of debt. She was well aware of the crossroads that lay ahead of her, yet she would never leave her home in the delta because the city with its cars and sound would make her feel nauseous. Mondol felt that forest conservation laws obtaining in the Sundarbans had transformed them from residents and users of forest into encroachers. It is not the tiger that is killing them but the fear of forest department that forces them into the mouth of tiger.[66]

It is not simply cyclones and climate disasters that constrain their ability to survive and live a decent life, but structural inequalities and lack of basic amenities and public services. This is largely the scenario for the vulnerable people in the Indian subcontinent whether they live in the coastal Sundarbans or supposedly the safer grounds where they are retreated to.[67] Jogen and Ram were clueless when the pandemic changed their life overnight. The pandemic caught them unawares and made them wonder if the life they led was ever safer in Chennai or Mumbai. The managed retreat plan, in the words of Bhattacharya and Mehtta, will funnel fishers, foresters and honey-collectors into the dust-laden air of the neighbouring city of Kolkata, to become low-wage workers in the building and construction industry.[68] Such is the reductive logic of climate change that it frames people's diverse predicaments to appear as though they all arise out of a climate dysfunctionality and streamlines diversities in an attempt to assign them the semblance of legibility. In the case of the Sundarbans, the strength and invincibility of a retreat plan (as a variant of climate discourse) derives not simply from its ability to be a panacea for people's problems, but also from its propensity to hurtle towards a conservationist goal, the goal of rescuing the forests from its people.

Summing Up

The climate change and the Sundarbans in the Bengal delta leave us with a sense of uncertainty, the uncertainty surrounding the question of climate change, what is it, does it mean the consequential sea level rise, the melting of glaciers, submergence of islands, thereby inducing a knee-jerk reaction for the climatologists and scientists? Should the increasing incidence of cyclones in the Sundarbans be attributed to and viewed only as the consequence of climate change? There might be a complete unanimity or perhaps a lack of unanimity among the natural scientists on these. However, what seems more significant is the question, why does climate remain the overarching frame to engage the problems of the Sundarbans? Is this, in the words of Camelia Dewan, meant to simplify the task of the policy makers, development professionals or environmentalist-climatologists working on the delta? Engaging a discourse such as managed retreat or an anxiety driven climate concern for the Sundarbans time and again help rediscover the historically rooted inequalities, hierarchies and asymmetries; every instance of a disaster (whether Aila in 2009 or Amphan in 2020) is only a pointer to how deprivation and denial arising out of these deep rooted inequities and hierarchies permeate the process of relief and aid.[69] Addressing and confronting these inequities requires a much more complex understanding of the region, more daunting than merely recommending a managed retreat and people's evacuation out of the Sundarbans.

Notes

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Book Review

Changing Climate and Currents of Human Migration in South Asia

By

Sayan Kandar, Tanisha Chakraborti *

***Environment, Climate Change and Migration in South Asia*, eds. Amit Ranjan, Rajesh Kharat, Pallavi Deka; Routledge, 2023; pp 257; ₹4509; ISBN: 978-1-032-34428-7**

Since the late twentieth century, climate change induced migration has garnered global attention and generated extensive academic inquiry. Some of the prominent issues include debate on drivers of migration, definition and recognition of climate refugees, racialisation of migration, intensified border policing, climate justice question, resettlement and reparation, restructuring of policies, and programmes at local and international level. Although the discussion about the link between climate change induced factors and human mobility have achieved considerable currency in several studies, the debate remains one of the pressing issues of our time. In social sciences, recent discourses around human displacement acknowledge that the impacts of the changing climatic conditions and environmental degradation have varied ramifications in regions like South Asia, which is vastly diverse in terms of its topography and socioeconomic scale. While the West predominantly seems addicted to portray South Asia as an exotic place of theatre for unimaginable devastation and suffering owing to climatic variations, the book under review offers a departure from that perspective. In this book, the editors address this

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point by directing our attention to how the specific realities of the region are intertwined with the particularities of its diverse socioeconomic and ecological aspects, influencing human migration across the region. In doing so, the articles in the book delve deep into the contested, convoluted and multifaceted nature of human migration in South Asia in the wake of growing climate change induced vulnerabilities.

Environment, Climate Change and Migration in South Asia is divided into eleven chapters focusing exclusively on South Asia. Amit Ranjan in 'Climate Change, Environmental Migration and Population Displacement,' briefly traces the trajectory of human migration from a historical point of view and highlights the patterns of environmental displacement from past to contemporary time, commenting on the politics and problematics of defining environmental displacement within wider framework of refugee experiences. In the second chapter, 'The Spectre of Climate Change-Induced Migration in Afghanistan,' Fazlullah Akhtar and Usman Shah examine how climate change and frequent natural disasters intensify loss of livelihood and migration in Afghanistan. The contributors argue that migration is expected to be amplified in future owing to prolonged drought, rapid snowmelt, land degradation, decline in crop productivity, water scarcity and altered precipitation pattern. The chapter also shows how troubled political state and mismanagement of policy for decades have exacerbated these vulnerabilities which eventually force people to migrate. In third chapter, 'Changing Climate and New Migration Crisis in Bangladesh,' Pallavi Deka explores the position of Bangladesh as a lower riparian and cyclone prone country, making it particularly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. People often resort to migration to cope with the environmental challenges as they consider it to be the only feasible option to tackle such calamities. The effects of climate change, namely, cyclone, soil erosion, seasonal and coastal flooding and erratic rainfall have pushed growing number of Bangladeshi people to migrate across border in recent years. The chapter also focuses on the displacement and vulnerabilities in riverine island or *char* regions where people usually live with a shifting geographical environment. Despite predicting the concerning scenario of displacement in near future, the chapter underscores certain governmental initiatives and programs aiming to address climate induced displacement in Bangladesh.

Emma Johnson in 'Climate Change and Refugees in Bhutan: The Future Impacts,' projects the erratic future Bhutan is heading towards owing to climate crisis with a special emphasis on the possibility of emerging climate induced migrants. Despite being an ecologically rich landlocked country cradled in the lap of the Himalayas, Bhutan is exceptionally impuissant to climatic variations accentuated by global warming. People living in the northern region, especially the yak herding communities, are in a precarious position as they completely depend on the natural resources to sustain themselves. Though internal migration (rural to urban) seems to be the most common form of movement, it can have an adverse effect on agricultural production throughout the country. Although climatic changes have not dramatically impacted the population of Bhutan to migrate beyond national

boundaries, its future possibilities are concerning. A proper planning on behalf of the policy makers with adequate amount of granular data is what is required immediately to address and mitigate the future vulnerabilities. In 'Climate Change and Displacement in India: A Gendered Perspective,' Pushpa Singh and Chetna Sharma critically examine climate induced vulnerabilities and displacement that disrupt the very foundation of human survival and the consequences faced by marginal communities especially women accentuating pre-existing inequalities. The article also dedicates a major portion in explaining how women living in *chars* (riverine islands) in rural areas such as Assam and coastal areas of Odissa are not just victims of environmental hazards but are also exposed to human trafficking and sexual violence. It vehemently critiques gender neutral narratives of climate change and urges the policy makers to address the experiences of such hyper-marginalized women to response to the emerging crisis of climate induced migration. 'The Dynamics of Deforestation, Riverbank Erosion and Migration in India with Special Reference to Assam,' draws on primary data collected from the Dhemaji and Dhubri districts of Assam, authors Daisy Das, Dimpal Dekaraja, and Ratul Mahanta provide a detailed analysis of the linkage between deforestation, riverbank erosion and migration, situating the phenomena of deforestation and migration as legacies of colonial enterprise in India. The authors opine that the patterns of migration heavily depend on the intensity of land erosion which induces livelihood disruption and exposes household to a number of vulnerabilities. Mostly people migrate to other states to diversify the risk and smoothen their fluctuating income while some use coping strategies to settle in less erosion prone region of the state. The chapter also depicts that the whole nexus becomes more complex with the onset of climate change induced factors.

In 'Climate Change-Induced Internally Displaced Persons of the Maldives,' Bharati Torane critically reflects on displacement threats and internal migration in the time of climate change in Maldives while drawing attention to the fact that the Maldivian population is hesitant to migrate out of their island nation due to the apprehension of losing their unique ethnocultural aspects. The chapter also focuses on how developing countries like Maldives face sustainable development challenges and are exposed to socioeconomic and ecological vulnerabilities due to its sparse population, reliance on ocean resources, imports, and limited access to finance. Additionally, the chapter shows how different non-State actors such as NGOs, international non-governmental agencies (the International Federation) and private donors, etc., perform critical role to mitigate the threats imposed by climate change. In 'Understanding Climate Change and Its Impact on Myanmar: Perspectives on Migration, Migrants and Legal Framework,' Kaveri and Sumallya Mukhopadhyay shed light on the climate induced migrants in Myanmar who have forcibly been displaced internally and across national borders owing to hostile environment and climatic variations. The authors reflect on the enhanced precarity of people belonging to the informal sector such as daily wage labourers, fishermen, and farmers, due to the lack of resources to sustain themselves in times of crisis, while drawing

our attention to how the lack of any legal framework or international conventions imposed further problems on the displaced communities. Like protracted sociopolitical conflict in Afghanistan, Myanmar's sociopolitical situations also need to be resolved along with redesigning the environmental sustainability that facilitates inclusive community belonging to mitigate the maximum effect of natural calamities on people.

While foregrounding the vulnerable topography and history of frequent natural disasters in 'Climate Change and Human Mobility in Nepal,' Rajesh Kharat and Rishi Gupta explore how Nepal, quite similarly like Bhutan, is threatened with various climatic change induced challenges. Despite taking several initiatives for holistic structural development and having abundance of hydropower potentiality, Nepal is severely suffering from limited institutional capacity, low-income level, restricted irrigation facilities, and all these factors complicate Nepal's human mobility across the country. While its reliance on natural resources increases livelihood vulnerability, people traditionally migrate contemplating it as a coping strategy in response to higher flood risk, soil erosion, earthquake, landslides, etc. An altered climate is making these factors more intense and frequent. Farooq Sulehria in 'Pakistan's Climate Migrants Beyond Mediatized Fictions,' critically engages with Pakistan's environmental crises, climate challenges, and its complex relation with patterns of human displacement. As one of the most vulnerable countries, like the others discussed in the book, climatic change and recurring environmental disasters are damaging its socioeconomic conditions, leaving people distressed and displaced. Despite such an alarming situation, several actors of the Pakistani state still neglect climate change induced displacement as a critical issue and do not prioritize policy renewal and implementation of sustainable development plans. The final chapter, 'Climate-Induced Migration in Sri Lanka: Vulnerability, Mobility, and Resilience,' Dennis Mombauer and Vositha Wijenayake deals with Sri Lanka as a case study of climate induced vulnerabilities in the island nation of the Indian Ocean and attempts an insightful analysis of how the changing climate such as prolonged drought, soil degradation, altered precipitation pattern to name a few incite human migration. The chapter provides an overview of the socioeconomic aspects of vulnerable households and analyses how climate change threatens existing resilience system of the island, intersects with particularly precarious groups such as women and children, and problematises various aspects of equity and social justice.

Drawing on a wide range of empirical evidences, archival research, policy analysis, theoretical approaches the book offers an overarching picture of the multilayered, complex nexus between human migration, environmental challenges and changing climatic conditions combined with other socioeconomic and political factors in South Asian region and presents penetrating analysis on the future developments on the basis of existing conditions. However, the volume's focus on the enmeshment of migration and environmental vulnerabilities may leave readers wishing for broader engagement with the postcolonial frameworks including the history of colonialism, the impacts of imperialism and issues of environmental, and

climate justice in South Asian contexts. While the book is effective in highlighting a decentralised and comprehensive approach to the multifaceted scenario of climate change induced migration in South Asia, the discussion about colonialism and its role in environmental displacement could have enriched the analysis. Additionally, some chapters would benefit from deeper engagement with future policy recommendations and sustainable development plans to mitigate the threats of this complexity. Despite these limitations, the book will be an essential resource for scholars from various disciplines, such as the humanities and social sciences, working on environmental aspects. In a time when the world is stunned with brutal and barbaric treatment of displaced people, the book happens to be an interesting study on the complexity of climate change induced displacement and contribute a unique perspective to a piled-up body of literature that try to address questions of how climate change will intersect with and intensify drivers of flight and migration. As a part of Routledge's series on migration in South Asia, the book intervenes in wider argument of exposing challenges and inadequacies of governments, offering insights to build sustainable policy, and restructuring existing framework to deal with a growing complexity in contemporary times and critiquing state's negligence for an inclusive participation in climate justice discussion around several aspects of vulnerability and resilience of South Asian countries.

Book Review

Beyond the Anthropocentric: Reimagining Our Relationship with the Universe

By

Madhurilata Basu *

***Biopeculiar: Stories of an Uncertain World*, Gigi Ganguly; Westland Books, 2024; pp. 186; ₹399; ISBN 9789360450977**

Since the late twentieth century, climate change induced migration has garnered global attention and generated extensive academic inquiry. Some of the prominent issues include debate on drivers of migration, definition and recognition of climate refugees, racialisation of migration, intensified border policing, climate justice question, resettlement and reparation, restructuring of policies, and programmes at local and international level. Although the discussion about the link between climate change induced factors and human mobility have achieved considerable currency in several studies, the debate remains one of the pressing issues of our time. In social sciences, recent discourses around human displacement acknowledge that the impacts of the changing climatic conditions and environmental degradation have varied ramifications in regions like South Asia, which is vastly diverse in terms of its topography and socioeconomic scale. While the West predominantly seems addicted to portray South Asia as an exotic place of theatre for unimaginable devastation and suffering owing to climatic variations, the book under review offers a departure from that perspective. In this book, the editors address this point by directing our attention to how the specific realities of the region are intertwined with the particularities of its diverse socioeconomic and ecological aspects, influencing human migration across the region. In doing so, the articles in the book delve deep into the contested, convoluted and

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Book Review

Religion, Roots, and Routes: Navigating New India as a Woman Migrant Worker

By

Maariyah Siddique *

***The Many Lives of Syeda X: The Story of an Unknown Indian*, Neha Dixit; New Delhi: Juggernaut, 2024; pp. 320; ₹799; ISBN-13: 978-9353453541**

In the bid to fulfil the Viksit Bharat 2047 vision through Make in India and Digital India, everything in the country is in transition. Frontpage advertisements demonstrating smart cities, standees outside public services endorsing e-governance and billboards displaying unrecognisable facelifts of older structures dot the cityscapes overshadowing the real-life visuals of those who construct this infrastructure. To realise the dream of their masters, the urban poor workforce strives against inflation, layoffs and extended work hours, unallowed to feel a moment of pause. In her debut nonfiction, *The Many Lives of Syeda X*, award winning and independent journalist Neha Dixit pens this journey of the overworked urban poor. Through her accomplished journalistic reportage combined with meticulous research into personal narratives, Dixit weaves the story of Syeda, a faceless migrant worker who is involuntarily coerced (like many others represented using the mathematical 'X') into making the rich richer and the poor, poorer. The narration traces how the lives of the affluent and lesser fortunate are both in constant motion, but in different ways. Both are undergoing a metamorphosis but unlike the rich, the urban poor does not witness transformation through infrastructure but rather through the availability and non-availability of basic amenities,

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validity or invalidity of their existence and approval or disapproval of their ways of living. Their ways of living against the sociopolitical backdrop of emerging New India is navigated through Syeda. Dixit begins the story in Bazardiha neighbourhood of Banaras with Rashid, Syeda's father joining Gulab Bai's theatre troupe. Troubled by his family's growing religiosity, he runs away to do what he loves. In one of his annual visits to his wife Mehreen during monsoon, Syeda, his third child is born. Although Rashid distances himself from the family later in his life, he passes on his love for films to his daughter who is the only one to have been educated up to class 8. Time passes and Syeda grows up learning stitching, cooking and all things a woman must know by societal standards. She is enchanted by Hindi cinema and in the filmy way, is one day married off by her brothers at the right time. Her love for films is evident in how she keeps connecting characters to film stars, viewing her husband Akmal as the angry young man and the release of *Tezaab* as the year she was married. Her new life starts at Chandauli amid elaborate weaving looms and intricate Banarasi sarees as she gets married at sixteen to a star weaver, Akmal. In contrast to Bazardiha, her new home is spacious, better-off. In her initial days of marriage, she has a separate living arrangement that irks her sisters-in-law, is free to cook whatever she likes, spends time in her hobbies like stitching or embroidery and enjoys the seldom expressive yet constant affection of her husband. Not just educated, she is exciting and brave in saying what she feels. She often enjoys watching films and talking about them to Akmal, a desirable trait she had always wished for in her husband. Cinematically, an unprecedented crackdown on Muslim weavers, the calls of *Gumbad gir gaya* (the dome has fallen) and an impending financial crisis leads her to shifting back with her brothers who have no emotional as well as physical space for her. Dixit takes care in detailing how Indian women are made to believe their husband's house is their home, and that a woman who takes charge of the house—no matter how overworked—is something to glorify. Finally, fun-loving typical *Banarasi fursat*-lover Syeda's life turns upside down when 1992 Lohta riots destroy all attempts for renewal in the town. Akmal is regularly pestered by the police for his beard after the Babri demolition and ultimately, they are forced to flee Banaras with three children, boarding the train to Lucknow. After a brief negotiation with the ticketing personnel, they choose moving to New Delhi in the hope for a better future. This future—better or worse—is her entry into the timeline of the making of New India. Charting her struggles to find a home, a job, a place to breathe and something to earn, Dixit unravels a profound tale of the marginalised living in cities which is a central theme in the book. Syeda inherited the love of Hindi films from her father Rashid, and she is able to identify her initial moments in Delhi similar to Banaras' *ghats* or Kashi Vishwanath more than any mosque in Banaras. At Chandni Chowk, she is introduced to Kamla who informs her of *janeudharis* who have been sending bricks for the construction of Ram Mandir. She informs Syeda that could not be employed by them because of her religion. This is the second time her existence is endangered due to her religion. The bigger city has bigger challenges for her as she grapples to make ends meet while Akmal juggles with alcohol addiction and

temporary jobs. In a few months, better prospect at suburban Sabhapur opens yet a fresh chapter in her life at the *namkeen* factory. Dixit dives deeper into the interconnectedness of class, caste, gender and geography in defining Syeda's status as a marginalised migrant labourer. The multifaceted challenges of marriage dynamics, motherhood, societal constructs on working women, resilience and complexities of a womanhood plagued by unimaginable manifestations of patriarchy are further elucidated as Syeda transitions from one job to another. Dixit presents thought provoking questions delving into the interplay of caste, class and gender in influencing the lives of the marginalized: Can a localised riot impact the future of generations? Has history allowed women to flaunt their successes and faults adequately? Is a women's identity only attached to who she serves, marries, or works for? Does geography have a role to play in situating marginalised women's narratives? By bravely addressing these inquires, Dixit immerses her readers into the captivating story of Syeda who is displaced again and again, since the Babri demolition in 1992.

The examination of caste, class and gender in determining the magnitude of difficulties for migrant workers like Syeda is pronounced vividly in the book, like when Jats and Gujjars unite to make trouble for Sabhapur residents (primarily Muslims) who are flourishing in denim and jeans manufacturing factories. Her life shapes, falls and reshapes as the Hindutva hate ecosystem was taking form right from the distribution and screening of video tapes after the Babri, growing economic boycotts, ban on cow slaughter, recruitment of foot soldiers under Sangh Parivar, and other events. After earning optimum for some time, her family is again uprooted and are coerced into finding highly expensive one room quarters on rent that costed a sizeable amount of their monthly gross income. While she is indifferent to religious practices, Akmal's cultural markers like the *topi* and beard make him a regular suspect in police stations as the plans for Hindu Nation spreads. Syeda's younger son Salman is driven out of school for being a Muslim and her elder son Shahzeb is chased away from his family in the accusation of love jihad. While these discuss how a particular community is otherised and boycotted, it also makes one reflect on the magnanimous mental toll on the families of victims of hate crimes. Had these men in Syeda's life not been traumatised with constant state sponsored witch hunt, could their futures have been different? A particularly striking aspect of Dixit's book is the critique of the ugliness of capitalism that alienates those who toil to lay its foundation with their blood and sweat. She juxtaposes insightful numbers and stats with the trajectory of sociopolitical milestones including change in textile policy post-liberalisation, demand for fair wages, launching of satellites, implementation of Aadhar card, among other events. By punctuating ongoing news and political headlines into Syeda's journey from 1992 Lohta communal riot to 2020 Northeast Delhi is illuminated the plight of migrant workforce against rapid urbanisation. Such contextualisation of her life events at the backdrop of historic episodes allows one to introspect development from the eyes of those on the bottom rung. Every time a news headline or an Urdu couplet breaks out, it is as if a timekeeper on the time machine is announcing such events on

the grand stage of life from a vantage point while Dixit is standing down with Syeda X, rapt with indifference. What happens to rising number of unemployed when satellites are launched in space? Can smart cities accommodate the likes of Raziya, Khushboo, Kamla, Lalita, Syeda and many others who toil for 16 to 18 hours for daily grocery and milk? Who celebrates when unorganised labour is recognised as work after seven decades of independence? How alienated, detached and clueless from nation building do the marginalised feel? How does it influence those whose names cannot be printed correctly on Aadhar cards despite running pillar to post for schemes that are promised against votes by local leaders? Amid this noise of rapid industrialisation and privatisation, the sounds of those who build it from scratch—Syeda, Roopmati, Raziya, Khushboo, Kamla, Lalita and all X—hardly every reach the top. In addition to such underrepresentation, the poor are often blamed for polluting the environment or settling inside abandoned factory premises and consuming the most resources despite the fact that even basic amenities find difficulty if not impossibility reaching them.

Through her three decades as a migrant labour in Delhi, Syeda does not own a house. We do not see her celebrating Eid, or Diwali, or enjoying an afternoon siesta. From the fifty fulltime jobs between Chandni Chowk, Sabhapur, to Karawal Nagar and Tronica City in thirty years, she has learnt multiple skills. Working for over sixteen hours for as little as ₹12, and such exploitative piece-based pays— sometimes working in harrowing conditions with no toilets— she has no Sundays. An illness or a day's rest resulting in a job loss and managing the financial as well as emotional health of her home makes Syeda "wooden" in the years to come. Dixit's use of the adjective exemplifies her commitment to journalism to inform and report without adding colours. Many would think Syeda has no time to express or grieve or that she has not been given agency as the two adjectives used for her besides the former are "tiny" or "petite". However, one must read between the lines and live with Syeda as Dixit did, to capture her exhaustion in letting out a smile, or sharing a joke due to the fears she keeps to herself. There are moments when Syeda is happy and soft before she is jolted back to reality by unemployment, homelessness or her favourite child running away. Raziya as her companion and Nisha Radiowali are characters that melt her. She is also seen being taken care of by Akmal who readily warms her food after the troop return from the almond factory workers protest at Jantar Mantar. But "to take care of everything and not to be cared for" is exactly Syeda's sentiments after being the breadwinner, the decision maker, the man of the house. Her painful routine of making *rakhis, bindis*, footballs, prayer rugs, imitation earrings, helmet parts, and scores more reinforce how glorification of women's unpaid labour is commonplace in both urban and rural settings. From her accounts, it is visible that Dixit has focused on her painstaking detailing during reporting and she has tried best to present Syeda as she is—rebellious, interesting and complicated. One must also caution here that expecting Syeda to fit into the binaries of hero and villain is like treating her story as fiction. The spectrum of her emotions is as broad as her life experiences. To expect she would understand that Babli did not do any "black magic" on her son Shahzeb to

elope with him, amounts to misunderstanding the character. Had it been fiction, Dixit would have attempted at graphical descriptions, but the entire point is the turning mechanical of a *Banarasi fursat* Syeda to a *Dilli bahot behudi* Syeda. Despite her own heartbreaks and failures, she dislikes her daughter Reshma's guts, even rebukes her for behaving like a governor after she passes her 12th with third division. She does not approve of Reshma's valuing her education, charging money for lining up at ATMs during monetisation, even getting married to Gazali, who stands by her through thick and thin. But the beautiful and ugly as well the good and bad are the many shades Syeda has acquired in many lives she has lived, and the motive is to empathise with this lived reality of many like her. Empathising with transformation of *Banarasi fursat* to *Dilli bahot behudi* Syeda enables one to fully grasp that innumerable women suffer in the unorganised labour sector due to lack of legal framework and its implementation.

In *The Many Lives of Syeda X*, Dixit delivers a powerful insight into the role of protests sites as public spaces for women that has further scope for exploration in the larger sociopolitical context. Mention of the burqa park, Radiowali's home, and protest sites like almond factory owners' and anti-CAA movement prove how women in ordinary situations become extraordinary if the dialogues on pluralism marry caste and class. Dixit remarks earlier that generally unions and trade associations are male dominated, but it is as if she carefully inserts a solution within the book itself. Earlier women like Roopmati who have no self-identity find agency and honour amid the crowds of Jantar Mantar. Particularly, women from upper castes who view protests sites as *melas* and NGOs as harbingers of trouble for their home based income employing child labourers, are able to find their voices as in the almond factory workers strike. Together they agitate and win. Even Syeda notices a transformation in her bravery after the incident. She is more confident walking up to constables and police stations to bail out her sons who are randomly picked up because of their names. It is almost comic if not tragic that the police come to arrest Bollywood lover Shahzeb when he is watching *Agneepath* where the villain is a Muslim mafia. Later, he is presented with a choice between getting killed or getting arrested as he is seen with Babli (the daughter of Gujjars). He is compelled to relocate elsewhere, leaving his mother Syeda jostling between the home and outside yet again. The book delivers one more hard hitting reality check when Bobby, who is scared of increasing Hindu nationalist activities in the area, relocates to Kuwait for better economic opportunities. This compels one to ponder: The affluent can move but what about the ones who cannot afford to? The writer's power of storytelling gives voice to the voiceless. Given the recent demonisation of Muslims in Bollywood, Dixit could have attempted an in-depth exploration of Muslim men characters in her book. For instance, we do not hear much about Gazali's (alleged Bangladeshi refugee) affection towards Reshma despite his regular clashes with the state regarding his citizenship. Will the New India make space for Muslims like him or just remain mute spectators to the bulldozed debris of dust they cry over? Elaborating on such psychological trauma perpetrated by constant state sponsored witch hunts could have shed

light on the troubled futures of Muslim youths across and despite the different classes they belong to. Syeda is just one of the migrant workers who earn less than peanuts and does not recognise herself as a worker. It is not only the story of Syeda but also of women's unpaid labour, increased marginalisation of the urban poor, and the effects of polarisation in furthering economic crises among India's minorities. It is the tale of many lives in transition (1992–2019) a story of the capital New Delhi, and of New India in-the-making. Through Syeda, countless others have found a voice, outlining how memory operates like a stained glass that fades and decolours if light does not fall on it. Dixit preserves the stories of Syeda X at a time when "documentation requires influence, importance and resources which the poor don't have." It must be noted that she writes this at a time when remembrance is painful, even criminal. To distinguish her work from a political scientist or historian is necessary as she clearly states. When viewed in conjunction to her work as a journalist, one would acknowledge that it is not the first time she has achieved much through factual orderliness that is characteristic of a journalist. The meticulous research and exemplary storytelling in *The Many Lives of Syeda X* is thus an inspiration to encourage memory as an act of resistance.

Book Review

Shifting the Standpoint: The Multiple Journeys through Refugeedom

By

Debasree Sarkar *

***Refugee Voices in Modern Global History: Reckoning with Refugeedom*, Peter Gatrell, Katarzyna Nowak, Lauren Banko, Anindita Ghoshal; Oxford University Press, 2025; pp. 272; £84; ISBN: 9780198937296**

Refugee Voices in Modern Global History: Reckoning with Refugeedom draws on materials in different languages and covers multiple sites of global displacement to excoriate the power disparities inherent in categorising, sanctioning, and even discussing refugeehood by those in authority who formally enjoy a superior status, giving the displaced people a subordinate and precarious identity. The four authors have combined their expertise to analyse the written records of refugees from a historical standpoint to comprehend how their experiences shape their lives, which in turn confers meanings to the category classified as refugees. Mining over twenty archives across three continents, this book situates their testimony in the context of several incarnations of the refugee regime in the "long half-century" from the end of the First World War to the mid-1970s to explore the encounter between refugees and officials and the corresponding traces left behind in the archival record. In recent years there is a growing literature concerning the principles and practices espoused by the extensive apparatus that has come to be known as the refugee regime. This book points out that there is not a single, unchanging, or universal system of refugee regime. By adopting the term refugeedom this book places refugee voices at the centre of the dialogue, redefining the prevailing optics in the literature. It examines the complex

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relationships between refugees and the humanitarian circuit that consists of relief workers and development assistance, advocating for a comprehensive approach that integrates institutions, relationships, and power dynamics. This enables a paradigm shift that incorporates a sociocultural history of the refugees within shifting flows and circuits of power that helps us to see a worldview from the standpoint of the refugees of the world. The book is divided into seven parts: Population Displacement and Refugee Regimes; Looking for Refugees: In and Out of the Archive; Refugee Encounters; Journeys and Destinations; Emotions of Refugeedom; Distinguishing Features; Refugeedom and Political Expression. Keeping in mind the strategic importance of silences, evasions, and avoidances, the compendium of thirty-two subsections investigates the multiplicity of inhabiting refugeehood.

Chapter One outlines the main refugee crises in the long half-century between 1919 and 1975 to introduce the reader to the circumstances and outcomes of mass displacement and the origin and practices of the refugee regimes that operated through government officials and intergovernmental and voluntary organisations. This chapter shows how revolutionary states, right-wing dictatorships, and democratic governments were all implicated at various stages in the history of global population displacement and how refugees engaged with refugee regimes. It signals the ways refugees acted upon the refugee regimes rather than being only objects of its attention by negotiating with the rules and roles they were expected to follow and that were devised on their behalf. Chapter Two explores the processes and prerogatives of archiving refugee voices to point out the ways in which institutional archives—mainly concerned with assembling facts about refugees to consider potential solutions—can be challenged by the testimonials of the refugees contributing to what has been called a counter archive that directs attention to alternative paths taken by those who were otherwise rendered invisible. Chapter Three considers the different contexts in which refugees spoke to understand the dynamics of dialogue between refugees and the officials. This chapter probes into the point of access and accessibility, where geographical remoteness and the aloofness of officials are discussed to illuminate how character and deservingness were the result of various deliberations: a combination of social, psychological, and administrative considerations. Interesting is how the refugees' reactions vary over time and place: some hesitated, some emboldened, some used sarcasm, some projected their frustration, some reproduced the language of the refugee regime, and some even appealed to a tradition of hospitality and justice on the part of a protective host state. The encounters between refugees and the refugee regimes who were in a sense conditioned to expect certain kinds of responses, changed over time. It points towards the fact that the refugees demanded to be taken seriously. Be it gendered assumptions about women's appropriate behaviour, applicants' physical appearance, mental state, or class background, this chapter shows how the impressions made by refugees upon regime officials mattered a great deal in determining the outcome of requests or demands for assistance. Chapter Four focuses on the ordeal and indeterminacy of the refugees' journeys, destinations, and different points of

exchanges between refugees and non-refugees to understand how different locations shaped different modes of self-expression of the refugees. The journeys undertaken by refugees were rarely linear or straightforward. It also points towards the vagueness of reaching a destination as the uncertainties persisted with a complicated process of adjustment in the host society. Drawing from ethnography, this chapter creates a spectrum of experiences and emotions that helped constitute refugeedom by acknowledging singular experiences of the travels and thinking of the journey in terms of transit as propounded by Susan Bibler Coutin. Chapter Five looks at refugees' emotions without reducing emotion to a token word for distress. Signifying the importance of concepts such as Barbara Rosenwein's "emotional community" and William Reddy's "emotional regime," this chapter talks about the emotional dimension of migration and simultaneously historicises the impact of emotions on modern refugee history. These concepts help us to understand under what circumstances self-control prevailed over self-expression and how refugees determined the ways of expressing themselves that would appeal to emotional communities within aid organisations, prospective host states, and the local community at large. For example, Armenian refugees who made their way to France in the 1920s reminded local authorities of their obligations towards refugees by capitalising on a national "emotional community" of French hospitality. It speaks of how displaced persons described the end of war using words evoking a sense of joyfulness, how refugees participated in leisure activities to rest and recuperate, in some cases their sense of collective suffering, to suggest the power relations that operated among the displaced population at large, and to point towards the discourse that arose about the privileged access and control. Chapter Six investigates the ways in which refugees engaged with official categories and vernacular labelling of refugeehood. For interwar refugees, sometimes embracing the readily available definition of stateless persons helped them in securing assistance from the League of Nations; some refused the definition adopted by Geneva to describe them in a more expansive manner; some called themselves the "Nansenists" to affirm their basic legal rights; some, like the interwar Greek and Turkish refugees who were outside the remit of the Nansen Office, had vernacular labels that identified them as *muhacir* (refugee) and *mübadil* (exchangee). By contrast, other displaced groups regarded themselves as political refugees separate from those exchanged *en masse* between Greece and Turkey. Some post-war (post-World War II) European displaced persons adopted the label; some held fast to their ethnic identity; some linked their status to other dimensions of displacement like religion, regional identity, etc. The distinctions of partition refugees in India and Pakistan were marked by multiple modes of intersection—including the chronology and geography of migration and the nature of displacement. Chapter Seven examines how refugeedom manifested itself in ways that were not straightforward nor predictable in terms of political action. In the interwar era, political expression on the part of refugees depended partly on the political context in the host state. In post-war Europe and beyond, refugees and displaced persons not only made their presence known through a range of tactics but also adopted

various performative methods to assert their right to resettlement. Some refugees imagined new political possibilities. Where refugees were formally recognised as "national refugees" with formal citizenship, as in Greece and India, they demanded full social and political rights from the state. Others, such as European displaced persons and Palestinian refugees, mobilised around the notion of a lost homeland to which they retained a close affinity, and which validated their political aspirations. The sense of loss felt by Greek refugees from Asia Minor translated into political radicalism with a leftist affiliation. By contrast, the Armenian refugees stayed out of politics.

This book elucidates refugees from the elusiveness and demonstrates the power and heterogeneity of their voices, often mistaken as feeble and monolithic. By placing the dynamic verbal and epistolary exchanges with officials of refugee regimes, this book helps to create a counter archive that is cautious about the human side of refugeedom. As ordinary people who were subjected to multiple forces, such as the state and the auxiliary systems that on the one hand displaced them from their lands and which worked in tandem with the various organisations to give them protections, the refugees are often cast as voiceless, faceless, dehumanised, de-historised, and de-politicised. This book also challenges the hegemonic assumptions of the knowledge system that disregard refugees as actors taking actions and producing knowledge to subvert structural injustice and institutional constraints. Thus, this alternative reading of refugeedom also enables us to understand how refugees' experiences that include the reasons and moments of displacements relate to the convoluted and interrupted journeys to interactions within and outside the formal structures of refugeedom.

NOTES FOR CONTRIBUTORS

Articles submitted for consideration of publication in REFUGEE WATCH should be around 5,500 -7,500 words. Book reviews can be around 1000 words and review articles can be around 2000 words. Articles will have endnotes and not footnotes. Endnotes should be restricted to the minimum. Please refer to www.mcrg.ac.in for a details style sheet. Round-tables can also be proposed for publication. Enquiries about possible submissions are welcome.

For submission of articles and all other matters, correspondence should be addressed to the Editor, Refugee Watch, Mahanirban Calcutta Research Group, IA-48, Ground Floor, Sector-III, Salt Lake, Kolkata – 700 097 or editor@mcrg.ac.in. For book review and review-articles correspondence to be addressed to Samata Biswas, Review Editor, Refugee Watch, at the same address or at bsamata@gmail.com.

Authors will have to submit articles both hard and soft copies (in MS Word). All articles are peer reviewed and it may take 3 to 4 months before a decision is reached on the proposed publication. Contributors will get 2 copies of the journal.

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*See also "**Refugee Watch Online**" (http://refugeewatchonline.blogspot.com) for brief news, reports, views and comments on issues of forced displacement.*

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