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CLIMATE-INDUCED MIGRANTS AND THEIR HUMAN RIGHTS: LIFE DISCOURSES IN THE CITY OF MUMBAI

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Abstract

Climate migration has been emerging as a serious concern worldwide. India, a land of immense diversity and a rapidly growing economy, is facing the harsh realities of the climate change crisis. The sub-continent, being a tropical country, is very much vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. Various physiographic regions and states are affected in varying degrees and responding to the events like erratic rainfall, the changes in rainfall patterns, including delayed monsoons, more intense rainfall events, and prolonged dry spells in their own capacities (Express, 2022). There has been a lot of literature on climate migration, but a very limited understanding of ‘what’ happens to them when they migrate to the new area. With cities mostly at the receiving end, there are reciprocating consequences on cities as well as climate migrants. This paper aims at exploring the life discourse of the climate migrants in terms of their vulnerabilities, coping mechanisms and survival strategies in the cities where they migrate.

The city of Mumbai has been selected as the area of study where a constant pool of migrations, specifically climate migrants, has been documented for the past decade. The climate migrants are mostly from the rain shadow regions and drought-prone areas of Maharashtra, like Marathwada, Satara, and Ahmednagar. The research tries to cut across the different socio-economic, cultural and ethnic backgrounds to record how people(s) in the city face challenges regarding exercising their fundamental human rights.

Keywords: Climate Migration, Climate Change Crisis, Climate Migrants, Human Rights.

INTRODUCTION

India, a land of immense diversity and a rapidly growing economy, is facing the harsh realities of Climate change. With its vast coastline, varied topography, and a large population dependent on Agriculture, India is particularly vulnerable to the impacts of a warming planet. Maharashtra has also been affected by the burning issue of climate change. Climate migration is often framed within the larger context of “environmentally induced migration”, but what distinguishes climate migration specifically is the anthropogenic acceleration of climate change, which acts as a primary or compounding driver of displacement. Climate migrants, individuals forced to relocate due to climate change impacts, face significant human rights challenges. These challenges arise from the lack of a specific international legal framework addressing their unique circumstances, leaving them vulnerable to rights violations. Existing frameworks, such as the 1951 Refugee Convention, do not adequately cover climate migrants, as they do not fit the traditional refugee criteria. This gap in protection underscores the need for new legal instruments or adaptations of current frameworks to ensure the rights and dignity of climate migrants are upheld. The push factors (from various parts of India, like Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Chhattisgarh and West Bengal) include recurring droughts, agrarian distress and limited opportunities, whereas the pull factors (to Mumbai suburbs) are employment opportunities, accessibility, and the aim for a better standard of living.

OBJECTIVES OF STUDY

The objectives of the research are:

- To understand the factors and situations responsible for climate migration;
- To map the movement of climate migrants and understand the source and destination regions;
- To understand the impact of climate migration on cities; and



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To analyse the coping mechanisms, vulnerabilities, and life choices that the climate migrants have after relocating themselves to cities.

This topic has intrigued and encouraged to search upon the vulnerabilities faced by cities as the climate change induced migration takes place which further brings in increased diversity and cultural changes.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Climate-induced migration disproportionately affects communities in vulnerable regions, particularly in low-lying island states, coastal zones, arid regions, and areas with weak governance infrastructure. The Pacific Islands, South Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, and coastal regions of Pakistan and Bangladesh are often cited as climate hotspots. In such areas, communities are often economically marginalised, politically underrepresented, and ecologically exposed, making adaptive strategies limited and migration increasingly seen as a survival mechanism. (Abdulaziz L Almulhim, G. n. (n.d.).

The postcolonial moment further intensified the mobility of populations. The violent vivisection of the Indian subcontinent in 1947, which resulted in one of the most extensive and traumatic displacements in recorded history, and due to rapid globalisation and urbanisation over the years, regions like Kerala and Odisha experience severe flooding and cyclones, while areas in Bihar and West Bengal face desertification and salinity, prompting migration.(Sarkar, A. 2024) Drought frequency in origin states significantly increases inter-state migration in India, particularly in agricultural states, with the strongest effect observed in rural–rural migration, indicating a clear link between climate variability and migration patterns. (Dallmann, I. &. 2017). The reluctance to formally recognize climate migrants stems not from ignorance but from a deliberate political calculus. Acknowledging the phenomenon would entail legal obligations, resettlement quotas, financial reparations, and the restructuring of national sovereignty.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Surveys are conducted for collecting as much as primary data needed. The preparation of questionnaires are done in Kobo and I have used statistical methods, framing hypothesis and generalising findings to a larger population to be more accurate in the data collection methods. Exploring complex social phenomena through in-depth understanding of experiences, perspectives, and meanings and interviewing focus groups, observations and textual analysis. There are also some key informant interviews that give us a better picture of the disparities that the new and old migrants face and how life has changed over time and decades. The data collection is done by primary as well as secondary data as the area surveyed are regions of Mumbai like the Ambojwadi Slum, Rafique Nagar, Bainganwadi etc. where the population dynamics mostly constitute Climate migrants. Secondary data has been collected through news articles, journals, reports and other publications. As there has been a significant dearth of secondary data, emphasis has been placed on collecting primary data. A questionnaire was designed to collect responses from various social groups, predominantly from lower-income groups, as they are the most vulnerable. KOBO tool kit has been used to collect the responses and geo-tagged data. An empirical investigation was operationalised through a series of field-based surveys conducted in four peripheralised habitations, Ambojwadi (Malvani), Rafique Nagar (Shivaji Nagar), Bainganwadi (Govandi), and Panchasheel Nagar (Kurla). These have been the residential spaces where most of the poorer migrants seek shelter.

From my survey at various locations, Ambojwadi, Rafique Nagar and Bainganwadi, my respondents were from various genders and thus showing a good distribution of male and female respondents. The percentage of male is 65.38 and the percentage of women is 34.62 respectively, clearly illustrating that the male population represents a significantly larger portion than the female population.

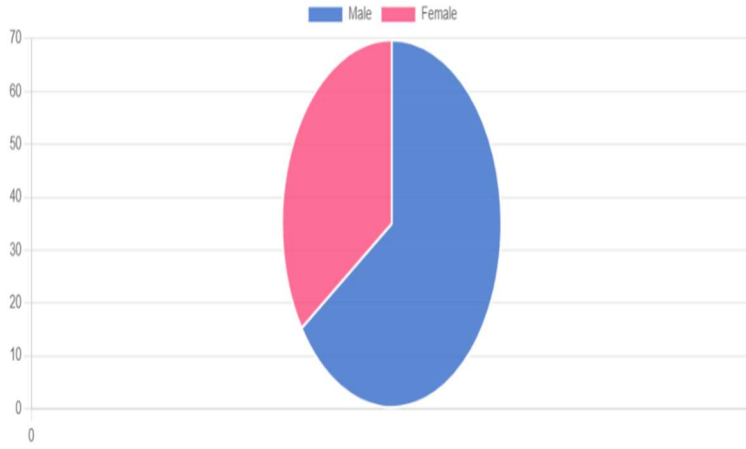


Fig. 1: Gender (Source: Questionnaire Survey)

The native place of stay from where the migration was seen was Uttar Pradesh, succeeded by Bihar, West Bengal and Maharashtra, belonging mostly from the Marathwada region, mainly ranging from 1970 till 2021 and had around two generations staying in Mumbai and the sub-urban region. But there are instances seen where people have moved from the slums of Ambojwadi to Rafique Nagar as they had gotten better place to stay or even shifted from Dharavi to the surveyed slums in search of better employment opportunities and mainly better standards of living as almost 85% people have been staying in the place they first ever migrated to and the rest 15% have shifted.

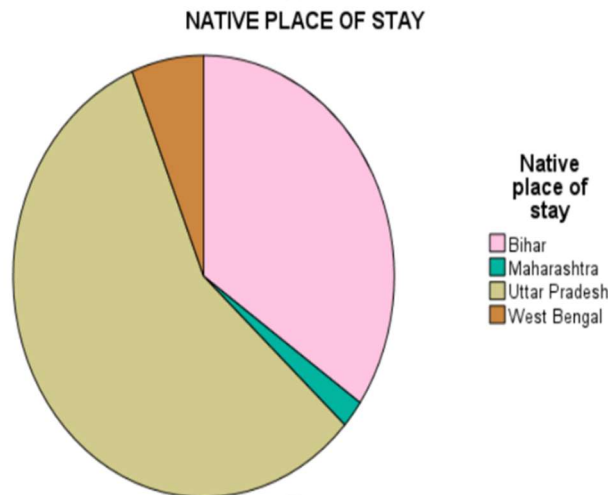


Fig 2: Native Place of Stay (Source: Questionnaire Survey)

TRADITIONAL OCCUPATION

The Agricultural Labourers account for over 60% followed by Mill Worker who has lost their jobs over the years due to climate change, Weavers and lastly Contractual Labourer which is almost less than 5%. The number of working and earning members in each family ranges from one to four but mostly two members are seen to work at an average.

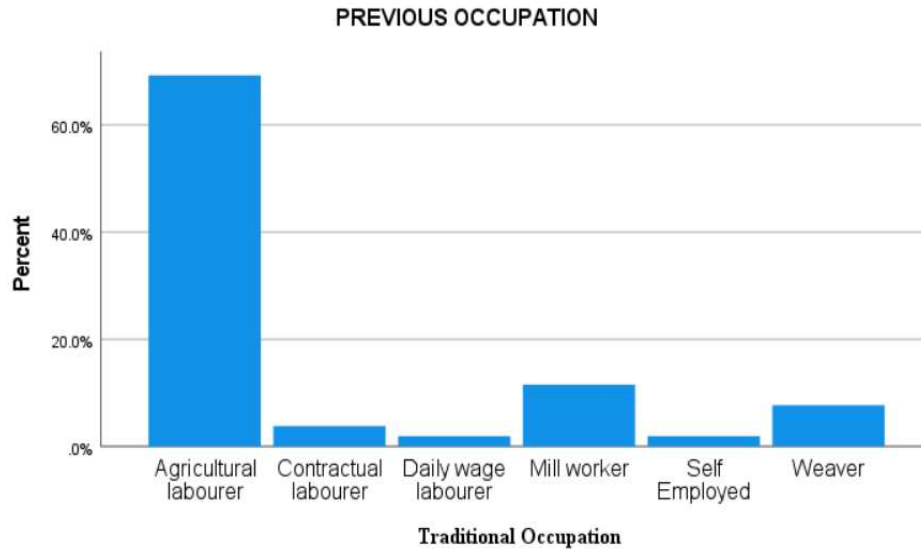


Fig 3: Previous Occupation (Source: Questionnaire Survey)

CURRENT OCCUPATION

Daily Wage Labourers was the most prevalent occupation indicating that the majority of the group surveyed is engaged in daily wage work, succeeded by the Self Employed persons and finally the people who work on Contract Basis/ Project Basis/Tenure based Employment and Public/Government Job.

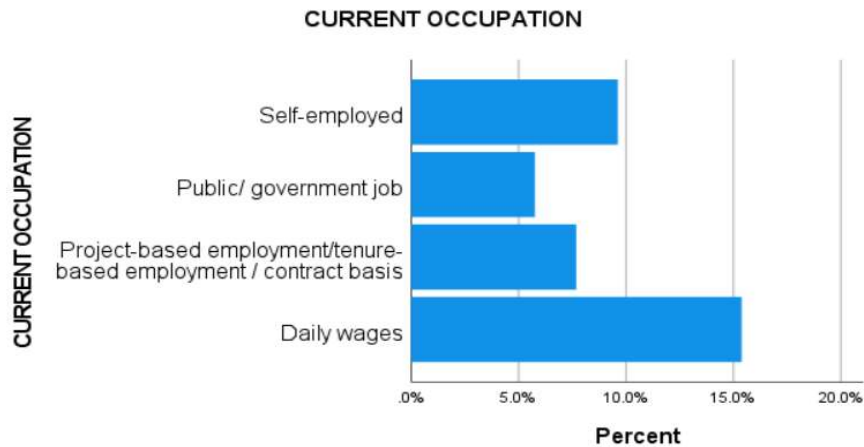


Fig 4: Current Occupation (Source: Questionnaire Survey)

SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONDITIONS AND MIGRATION

The migrant slum populations face socio-economic challenges that include low income, limited access to bare minimum facilities and poor substandard living standards. These have negative impacts on health, mental well being and high levels of poverty. On being asked about the social status of their previous native place people choose not to respond or few of the people had been linked with influential families that used to be a part of the decision making sabhas back in the times when they were staying in their place of origin.

Moreover, the bureaucratic invisibility of migrants, often lacking formal identification documents or ration cards in the host city, precludes their access to subsidised public services and welfare entitlements. This structural exclusion further compounds their vulnerability, particularly in times of economic shocks, such as illness, eviction, or monsoonal displacements. Female migrants and single-income households reported facing additional layers of hardship, including unsafe living environments, gendered labour segmentation, and social discrimination within both host and origin communities.

CHANGES OF CLIMATE IN THE NATIVE PLACE

Erratic trends of rainfall sometimes leading to the heavier downpours and other times drier spells along with a stable trend of warmer temperatures have been affecting the soil moisture retention and the fertility of soil is depleting over the decades leading to improper yield and soil productivity. The pie chart robustly suggests that the survey respondents perceive many of such significant climate change in their native place with a major domination of rising temperatures, rapidly changing patterns of rainfall and scarcity of water.

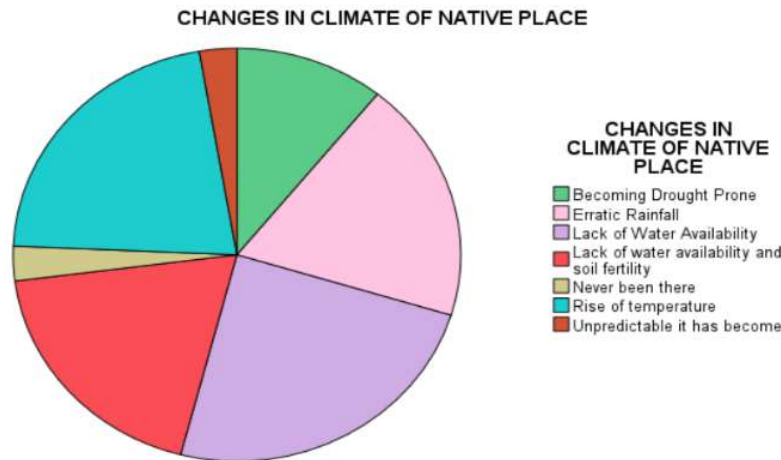


Fig 5: Changes in Climate of Native Place (Source: Questionnaire Survey)

HOW HAD THE CHANGES AFFECTED

The resource limitations in the native places mainly engulfs the scarcity of water and the water quality has degraded over the years due to the levels of salinisation and thus the water leaches into the agricultural areas rendering land infertile and affecting drinking water supply. The presence of small and fragmented landholdings causes a break in the flow of work and irrigation as well as adding to the farmers' plight. After interacting with the respondents, it came to light that the consequences of climate change has been varied and has been widely leading to crop failure of the farmers that in turn leads to the lack of proper yield and income generated in the hands of the people are way lesser than expected. Thus this proved us that climate change was an evident factor for their migration to the Mumbai sub-urban region and encouraged almost 80% of the people to permanently migrate to Mumbai whereas the rest 20% are still skeptical of whether to stay here till the end of their life.

PROBLEMS FACED BY MIGRANTS IN MUMBAI

Mumbai has a significant array of problems and vulnerabilities like Economic problems as the informal sectors are often paid below than average pay along with deductions for leaves taken on a single day and Mumbai's high cost of living just



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adds fuel to the fire making it difficult for migrants to making ends meet. The temporary or seasonal basis of jobs without any security, benefits and protection causes more financial distress and putting them in a vicious debt cycle. The slums lack proper healthcare facilities, understaffed health centers in making them inaccessible to the people and the high cost of private hospitals making it unaffordable for most people. The unhygienic conditions of the slums and informal settlements have made life for the migrants' worse causing various infectious diseases and respiratory problems.

The migrants are debarred from the recognition as the recent respondents hadn't received any assistance from the government like that of Ration Cards, and were not registered neither were they considered as climate migrants. There are no enlistments initiatives that take place in Mumbai for the migrants in general and are never updated over the years. The so called "migrant" status has excluded them sometimes and some people keep their stupid prejudices and stereotypes intact causing disconnect among the migrants and non-migrants. There is a pre-existing linguistic barrier that creeps in every now and then thus creating a huge disparity in terms of even opportunities received by them. Not all of the migrants land up in jobs thus leading to challenges, extreme stress and frustration which leads to the commencement of criminal offences like that of stealing, chain snatching, pickpocketing etc.

DISCRIMINATIONS FACED AFTER MIGRATION

The respondents reported that they face a lot of discrimination as the "sons of soil" movements have often fought for the rights of Marathi speaking people which leads to a disparity between the intra-migration within the state of Maharashtra like from the regions of Vidharbha, Marathwada and other places and the inter-state migrated people from Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and others causing employment barriers and even social exclusion. Migrants have felt the differences between the class of the people in Mumbai and them as they were seldom being included in the community; the class status affects the access to quality education, healthcare and the basic amenities. Urban areas are known to be liberated in their thoughts but still some caste based discrimination exists on the end of the migrants like the migrants from Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribes are still facing limited economic and spatial mobility.

STRATEGIES OF SURVIVAL

Most people do not have separate survival strategies; they have accepted life as it is and are content with the fact that 'Adaptation is the key'. They have started to rely more on the existing social networks that are there and nurture them so that the new migrants can connect with the earlier ones and find jobs in the informal sectors. They also receive information as to how to navigate the city and find cheaper accommodation and fooding places. Migrants have undergone changes after arriving in Mumbai, as they have adapted to the population pressure and now practice cost-cutting and utilise the last available resources. It is striking to see how they survive in such a space crunch and these strategies are born out of necessity and systemic vulnerabilities.

EFFECTS OF CLIMATE CHANGE ON MIGRANTS

The accelerated frequency, intensity of extreme rainfall, urban flooding, rising sea levels and patterns of coastal erosion can lead to the loss of homes, ability to work leading to significant loss of income; rise of temperatures causes various impacts on the migrants as they work in poorly ventilated rooms and workshops which reduced productivity further affecting the income. The low lying areas of Mumbai are exposed to the urban flooding caused by the blockage of drainage systems and forces temporary displacement sometimes. Migrants in Mumbai are not just facing environmental issues but also socio-economic issues as a whole and thus increasing to the visibly invisible burdens that threatens their whole existence and throws them into the vicious cycle.



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CONCLUSION

Mumbai's urban milieu is home to migrants from the 1970's and, having navigated decades of survival in the city's relentless grind, their experiential repository offers potent and nuanced suggestions for recalibrating urban life. Earlier migrants have lived their life and they advocate for decentralised primary health nodes within informal settlements, manned by culturally sensitive caregivers and equipped with chronic disease management protocols. Moreover, they underscore the necessity for linguistic and administrative accommodations in government hospitals that presently alienate non-Marathi-speaking aged citizens. The new modalities of suffering, etched not in inundated fields but in precarious rooftops, not in eroded shorelines but in undignified labor and spatial marginalisation. Their positionality within cities is often hyper visible in terms of economic extraction, yet systematically rendered invisible in policymaking, formal employment, and legal recognition. The concept of climatically induced mobility needed to be upheld and portrayed, and how are the migrants are vulnerable to social discrimination and to the hierarchical system.

SUGGESTIONS ON PROVIDING BETTER LIFE FOR THE NEWER MIGRANTS

The conceptual challenge, therefore, lies in resisting the humanitarianism with which climate migration is often addressed. To speak of the "plight" of climate migrants is not to invoke passive suffering but to illuminate active exclusions. Moreover, the bureaucratic invisibility of migrants, often lacking formal identification documents or ration cards in the host city, precludes their access to subsidized public services and welfare entitlements.

Migrants advocate for a planned resettlement from the highly vulnerable informal settlements which would be highly beneficial to accommodate a huge proportion of the population in a structural manner with the space for setting up healthcare centers, fair price medicinal shops and other basic amenities under a portion of the area.

Give them proper social safety so that they can have protection schemes under the government like that of Food Security, Healthcare, and Unemployment benefits to the Climate Migrants.

Proper education facilities for children as often the children of the Migrants are not given admission due to the absence of proper documents and status. Giving them good quality of education regardless of their parents' migratory status or location of their stay. Children are often discriminated and excluded in the schools thus, school should take initiative to create a state of equality amongst all.

Giving formal recognition as "Climate Migrants" and also legal frameworks to have a strong base in the area where they migrate to. They should be registered on the demographics and data collection on behalf of the people, which should be done to analyse the migration patterns and vulnerabilities to inform evidence-based policymaking.

Sustainable Urban Planning is required to promote and incorporate various aspects such as green infrastructure, efficient waste management, improved means of connectivity and transport and improve the quality of living of the people, including the climate migrants.

Having proper roads and drainage patterns in the slums to prevent rapid flooding after a short spell of rainfall and causes the spread of infectious diseases.

This research highlights how the effects of Climate Change are inducing migration, either permanent or temporary, and that it is an ever-growing concern. Mumbai, being one of the most important metropolitan cities of India with already a huge existing population, is becoming susceptible to high disaster risks. The migrants thus face the aftermath and are living in compromised environments.



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