

MIGRATION AND DISPLACEMENT IN THE SUNDARBAN: A CASE STUDY OF SAGAR ISLAND

Biswajit Das

Guest Faculty, Dept. of Political Science
Ramakrishna Mission Residential College (Autonomous), Narendrapur

Abstract: Migration and displacement have become a prominent issue in the contemporary world politics. Natural disaster, extreme poverty, unequal development often forces people to leave their habitats in search of safer living conditions and better livelihood. These patterns happened in world wide. Similar patterns can be observed in Sagar Island, Located in West Bengal. Where environmental challenges such as cyclone, coastal erosion flooding, unequal development have significantly influenced human mobility. As a result, many people are migrating of this island. This paper study the phenomenon of migration and displacement in Sagar Island. It explores the major causes and patterns of migration of the region and analysis the policies adopted by the government and non-government organisation. This study also discusses possible policy measures that could help reduce migrations problem and improve the resilience of local communities.

Key Words: Migration, Displacement, Poverty, Habitats, Environment.

Introduction

Migrations and displacement have become an important issue in contemporary world politics. It is as old as the human civilisation, a silent and recursive social phenomenon inherent to the history of human civilisation. Human migration is the movement of people from one place to another with the intentions of settling, permanently or temporarily, at a new place. The process of movement is “either across an international border or within a State. People may migrate as individuals, in family units or in large groups. The movement of people drivers for this mobility may have been for the accrual of food, protection against physical threats such as wild animals, external enemy groups, epidemics or even natural hazards. Contemporarily, the factors oscillate from the hankering for social and economic upliftment, to seeking refuge against political, religious or ethnic conflict and implementation of development projects. Natural hazards, though an age-old factor for population movements, is only now gaining recognition, primarily due to its considerably debated association with the phenomena of global warming and climate change. These population movements are effectuated by an amalgamation of push and pull factors working alongside, in both the sending (outgoing) and receiving (incoming) areas. It involves people moving from one place to another, either voluntarily or involuntarily, a question of employing or denial of one’s own ‘choice’. In recent time there are 83.4 million people are displaced in world (IDMC 2025).

The Independence of India, witnessed the hurried drawing of boundaries and the partition of the nation. This resulted in massive displacement of people and the crisis of refugees. About 14 million people have been assumed to be displaced and nearly 1 million killed, due to the turmoil created by this event. Adding on to this huge number were also international events like the Chinese invasion of Tibet and Tibetan refugees seeking sanctuary in India. The refugee influx continues even post-1983, with the eruption of ethnic and political violence in Sri Lanka and the consequent displacement of people. In most recently India recorded 5.4 million people are displaced (GRID 2025).

Many coastal areas around the world are increasingly vulnerable to environmental pressures often force communities to migrate from their traditional habitats in search of safer and more sustainable livelihood. India’s eastern coastal region Sundarban delta of West Bengal, is one of climate vulnerable areas in the world. Among this region, Sagar Island has experienced significant environment and socio-economic changes over the last few decades. Frequently cyclones, coastal erosion, salinity intrusion and flooding have resulted in the loss of

agricultural land and human settlements. As a result, many people have been forced to migrate temporarily or permanently to other parts of West Bengal and India. Because this island is economically dependent on agriculture and fishing. When environmental disasters affect these sectors, local community face to livelihood crises that lead to displacement. This paper aims to examine the causes and consequences of migration and displacement in Sagar Island and also highlights the socio-economic and environmental factors influencing migration.

Conceptual Framework

Migration: Migration refers to movement of people from one place to another for temporarily or permanently. The Human Development Report of 2009, employs the term ‘migrant’ to refer to “individuals who have changed their place of residence either by crossing an international border [international migration] or by moving within their country of origin to another region, district or municipality [internal migration]” (p.15). An individual is considered as a migrant if he/she remains away from their original place of residence for a period of at least three months. Theoretically, Migration is used as an umbrella term that incorporates two broad types of movement: voluntary migration and involuntary migration. Movement with the utilization of the element of ‘choice’ is regarded as voluntary migration. Involuntary migration is movement that is not out of one’s volition but where ‘force’ is involved. Displacement in numerous literatures is often regarded as an involuntary form of migration. Beddington (2011) categorized five drivers of migration: social, political, economic, demographic and environmental, but which are not exclusive and in certain settings can interact in numerous ways. Migration can occur for various ‘push’ and ‘pull’ factors. Push Factor- Poverty, lack of opportunities, natural and manmade disasters, low agricultural productivity, lack of security, Lack of medical facilities, bad governance, oppression of minorities, population growth, and Human rights violation etc. Pull Factor- Employment facilities, Good Education, Better Infrastructure, good living conditions and basic amenities, labour demand, welfare state benefits, Political stability, rule of law and better environment etc. In India 37% migrate for work and employment, 43.8 % migrate due to marriage, 1.2% migrate for business purpose, 3% for education etc. the impact of the migrations can be both positive and negative. Positive impact is labour demand and supply, economic remittances, skill development, food security etc. Negative impact is population explosion in cities, crumbling of infrastructure in cities, demographic profile changes, brain drain- source state suffers from the loss of human capital.

Displacement: Displacement, on the other hand, occurs when people are forced to leave their homes due to external factors such as natural disasters, conflict, development projects. Displacement, results in a situation where the individuals are forced to move against their will. According to UNESCO, forced displacement is the “Forced movement of people from their locality or environment and occupational activities, with its leading cause being armed conflict”. “The UNHCR defines forced displacement as a result of persecution, conflict generalized violence or human rights violations” (UNHCR Global Trends 2014). This movement could transpire either within the country of origin, referred to as internal displacement or crossing national boundaries - international displacement. Thus, displaced populations are delineated into two contrasting categories of ‘internally displaced persons’ or IDPs and internationally displaced or refugees. The IDPs according to the UN Guiding principles on Internal displacement (2004), are persons or groups that have been forced to leave their place of origin due to fleeing or avoiding armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters but those that have not crossed any internationally recognized state border (UN, 2004). And other hand the movement of IDPs within national borders distinguishes it from refugees (those crossing international boundaries).

Study area: Sagar Island is located in Sundarban Region, South 24 Parganas district of West Bengal. The island covers an area of about 300 square kilometres and consist several villages and gram panchayats. According to 2011 census approximately 200000 people are residing the island. Among this populations 40.03% are worker, 43.72% and 24.46% are agriculture labours and cultivators, fishing man etc. Agriculture and fishing are the most important economic source in this island. The increasing surface temperature of the sea, monsoonal irregularities and higher sea levels are circular threats to their livelihoods. The severe cyclonic storm such as Aila (2009), Bulbul (2019), Amphan (2020), Yaas (2021) rendered millions of people are homeless, and

thousands of acres of farmland perished from the ingress of saline water. This area faced continuous land loss, saline water intrusion, limited access to resources, limited educational facilities, healthcare facilities. So various challenge has forced many people of this region to migrate to others said for work, employment and better opportunities.

Objective of study

- To find out the causes of migration and displacement in Sagar Island.
- To study the patterns and forms of migration in the region.
- To study the type of government and non-government support provided to the migrant people and suggest policy measures for reducing migration problems.
- To assess the socio-economic impact of migration and displacement.

Causes of Migrations and displacement in Sagar Island

Various causes of migrations and displacement in Sagar Island, such as

Environmental causes: Environmental degradation is one of the significant causes of migration in Sagar Island. Coastal erosion, sea level rising, flooding has destroyed many habitats and agricultural land. Another is this region are cyclone prone area. So various cyclone namely, Aila, Bulbul, Amphan, Yaas etc often damage embankments, houses. As a result, many people were homeless. These natural disasters force people to migrate to safer areas.

Economic factors: The economy of Sagar Island is dependent on agriculture and fishing. So, decline agriculture productivity due to natural disaster, saline water has reduced the income opportunities. And another source of income fishing also faces challenges due to changing marine ecosystem. As a result, many families migrate to various cities such as Kolkata, Mumbai, Delhi, Bangalore, Chennai to construction worker, domestic workers or labour in the informal sector.

Social factors: Limited educational institutions, lack of healthcare facilities, no industrialisation and infrastructure development contribute to migration from the island and people are move to urban areas.

Causes	Percentage (Approx.)
Environmental Causes	44%
Economic Factors	36%
Social Issues	14%
Education	6%

Patterns of Migration in Sagar Island

We see different patterns of migration in this region-

Seasonal or temporarily Migration: Many people migrate temporarily or seasonal. During the agricultural of season or few months. Temporarily and seasonal migrants usually work in construction or service sector or labour in the informal sector in urban areas.

Permanent Migration; Some families are permanently relocated for losing land or homes due to natural disaster and batter opportunities such as education, healthcare etc in urban area.

Name of areas	Migrant’s families or people for permanent	Reason
Ghoramara	1100 families (Approx.)	Coastal erosion
Lohachara	6000 people (Approx.)	Island disappearance
Dhablat	950 people (Approx.)	Coastal erosion

Impact of migration and displacement: The movement of people has profound impact on the socio-economic and political spheres. Migration provides financial support through remittances sent by migrant workers. These remittances help families survive economic hardship. But migration also creates labour shortage in agriculture and weakens local economic structures. Another is migration disrupts traditional family structures and also demographical changes. Women and elder people often remain on the island while younger members migrate for work. This separation can lead to social and psychological challenges for families and social sectors. Therefore, migration changes the socio-economic and political structure of this island.

Government and non-governmental policies and initiatives

The Government of India, Government of West Bengal and non-governmental organisation have introduced several initiatives for migrant and displace persons.

Government of India take a policy of ‘Disaster Management Act, 2005’. This act provides a comprehensive institutional framework for disaster preparedness and rehabilitation. Under this act, national, state and district management authorities coordinate relief operations during the natural disasters. In the Sundarban region, disaster management initiatives include cyclone shelters, early warning systems and evacuation planning for reduced the loss of life and property. Another imitative is National Disaster Management Plan. The plan highlights the importance of strengthening coastal embankments, improving emergency communication systems and promoting community- based disaster preparedness.

Employment generation programs also play an important role in reducing migration problem. Government initiative ‘The Viksit Bharat-Guarantee for Rozar and Ajeevika Mission act’,2025 in replace the Mahatma Gandhi National rural Employment Guarantee Act, 2005 provides guaranteed wage employment to rural households (This initiative knows on 100 days’ work). Through this programme, rural residents can access local employment opportunities in activities such as road construction, irrigation project. Another importance policy in The Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana. This policy aims to provide affordable housing for economically weaker sections of society. Government initiative in the ‘One Nation One Ration Card’,2022 ensure food security for migrant workers and their families, regardless of their location within India. The scheme aims to achieve the Sustainable Development Goal-2 of ending hunger by 2030. In addition, under the National Action Plan on Climate Change policy, government focus on sustainable agriculture, water management, coastal protection.

Government of West Bengal initiatives a several policies of migrant people. The government imitated resettlement and rehabilitation programs for displace persons. The department of Sundarban Affairs initiate several development programs such as cyclone resilient housing, strengthening embankment, livelihood development for fishermen and farmers. Another policy is agricultural and fisheries support programs. These policies provide fish seeds, feed, and technical support to small farmers and fisherman in Island. The state government has launched the ‘Samudra Saathi’ scheme to provide financial assistance to fishermen during deep sea fishing ban in West Bengal. Under the scheme, a total of 5000 rupees provided to a member of a registered fishing family. Also, several social schemes taken of the West Bengal Government such as Lakshmir Bhandar, Kanyashree Prakalpa, Swasthya Sathi etc. In recent time government taken a major project is the Gangasagar bridge connecting the island with the mainland.

Many NGOs are now working in the island. Among them, the Tagore Society for the Rural Development is one of the oldest and largest NGOs in the region. The society-initiated Sagar Project in the year 1995. This

organisation actively working and helping the development of livelihood options. World Bank is working on many development projects through Integrated coastal Zone Management (ICZM). But despite several policies and initiatives, the people region still faces various problem such as continued environmental degradation and sea-level rise, limited land availability for resettlement, poverty and lack of economic opportunities etc.

Conclusion

Migration and displacement have become defining features of life in the Sagar Island. Several natural disaster, socio-economic factors affected the livelihood of local communities in the island. This paper addressing the migration and displacement in the Sagar Island requires integrated policies that combine environmental protection, disaster management, and livelihood development. Strengthening coastal infrastructure, promoting sustainable livelihood, and improving social protection systems will be essential for reducing the migration and displacement.

Reference

1. Rajan, S. Irudaya (eds), 2023, Migration in South Asia, Springer. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-34194-6>.
2. Hajra, R and Ghosh, T 2016, A Migration pattern of Ghoramara Island of Indian Sundarban- Identification of push and pull factors. Asian Academic. P:186–195. ISSN: 2278-859X.
3. Hazra S, Ghosh T, DasGupta R, 2002, Sea level and associated changes in the Sundarbans. Science and Culture, p: 309–321.
4. Banerjee, Paula, 2006, IDP protection at the national level in South Asia, Forced Migration Review, University of Oxford.
5. Bandyopadhyay, J. 2017, Climate change and environmental migration in the Sundarban. Economic and Political Weekly, 52(24), pp 45-52.
6. Das, S, 2017 Climate change and disaster management in the Sundarban, New Delhi, Springer.
7. Bera, Aparna, 2020, Review article on climate induce migration; risk assessment and management – a case study of Sagar Island of Indian Sundarban, SGVU J CLIM CHANGE WATER, vol-7 PP 47-55.
8. Bhattacharjee, Asmita and Dhara, Satyajit (2021): “Natural Hazard and Disasters: Management at Sagar Island of South 24 Parganas District”. International Journal of Creative Research Thought, Volume 9; Issue 1,
9. Census Report of India 2011. Government of India
10. International Organization for Migration (IOM 2022): International migration, health and human rights. Geneva: IOM.
11. Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC 2023), Global Report on Internal Displacement 2023.
12. Norwegian Refugee Council – Internally Displaced People: A Global Survey.
13. Inter-governmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC 2014).

Copyright & License:



© Authors retain the copyright of this article. This work is published under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0), permitting unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.