



Climate-Induced Displacement in India: Should Victims of Natural Disasters Be Recognized as Climate Refugees?

¹Lavanya

¹Undergraduate Student

¹Department of Political Science

¹Vivekananda College, University of Delhi, Delhi, India

Abstract: Climate change has exacerbated floods, cyclones, droughts, and coastal and riverbank erosion across India. This has led to repeated displacements that disrupt not only livelihoods but also concepts of home, citizenship, and belonging. This paper examines climate-induced displacement in India from the perspectives of environmental humanities, human rights, and legal studies. It asks a key question: should those affected by “natural” disasters be recognized as climate refugees, and what does this labelling mean politically and conceptually?

Based on recent legal and policy discussions, I argue that climate-displaced individuals in India exist in a state of “legal invisibility.” They don’t fit neatly within disaster relief frameworks, development-induced displacement standards, or the refugee guidelines, which mainly focus on cross-border persecution rather than environmental risks. At the same time, literary and cultural works—from river narratives like Padma Nadir Majhi to modern climate fiction and reporting – provide alternative accounts of dispossession, ongoing violence, and unstable movement. These narratives challenge the technical terms of “resilience” and “adaptation.”

By comparing policy documents and legal analysis with literary and media portrayals of communities affected by erosion, floods, and drought, this paper argues that the term “climate refugee” is both necessary and inadequate. It is necessary because it highlights structural injustice, but it falls short as a specific legal term for India’s largely internal and complex climate-related movements. I suggest using the term “climate-displaced subjects” to emphasize voice, agency, and narrative while also advocating for solid, rights-based protections, rehabilitation, and planned resettlement. This approach contributes to ecocriticism and environmental humanities by demonstrating how law, policy, and literature together influence our understanding of climate migration in today’s India.

Keywords: Climate refugees, Human rights, Environmental justice, Internal migration, Rehabilitation and resettlement

INTRODUCTION

Climate change has become one of the greatest challenges facing India in the twenty-first century. Its impacts extend beyond environmental damage; they are also creating significant social, economic, and legal challenges. Rising sea levels, erosion, recurring floods, cyclones, droughts, and land degradation are forcing people across the country to leave their homes, often multiple times and with minimal help. These movements represent a growing trend of climate-induced displacement that affects livelihoods, housing, food security, education, health, and community life. The situation is particularly pressing in India due to the large population living in areas vulnerable to sea-level rise, riverbank erosion, and drought. Communities in Odisha, Assam, the Sundarbans, and other high-risk regions are already facing the impacts of climate-related stress. Often, those displaced by climate hazards lack the resources to rebuild their lives and are pushed into precarious migration, informal settlements, or cycles of relocation. This makes climate displacement not only a humanitarian issue but also a governance challenge that requires long-term planning and legal safeguards. Currently, India does not have a specific legal framework that acknowledges climate migrants or climate-displaced individuals. Existing laws, like the Disaster Management Act of 2005, are primarily reactive and focus on emergency relief after disasters occur. They do not adequately cover planned relocation, rehabilitation, or the long-term integration of displaced individuals into new communities. Furthermore, current migration and citizenship laws do not create a separate category for those forced to move to a grey area. Consequently, many affected people remain invisible in legal and policy discussions, even as their displacement becomes more predictable and frequent. This paper explores whether victims of natural disasters should be recognized as climate refugees and contends that India needs a more detailed and rights-focused approach. While the term “refugee” holds political weight, it is legally limited and traditionally refers to people fleeing persecution across international borders. Most climate-displaced individuals in India move internally, making the conventional refugee label inadequate for many situations. A more fitting response would be a unique legal and policy system for climate migrants that guarantees access to housing, healthcare, education, livelihood support, and planned relocation when needed. This issue is not merely about naming. How we label people affects their recognition, which affects their rights. If climate-displaced individuals are seen only as temporary disaster victims, their deeper losses and long-term needs are overlooked. This is especially concerning for vulnerable groups like rural poor communities, coastal residents, informal workers, women, children, and marginalized communities, who often bear the brunt of climate change with little access to state support. A legal framework that acknowledges these realities must integrate disaster response, climate adaptation, migration governance, and human rights protections. This paper argues for India to move beyond fragmented and reactive approaches towards a unified framework for climate mobility. Such a framework should implement early warning systems, build resilience in high-risk areas, establish mechanisms for planned relocation, provide rehabilitation safeguards, and offer long-term support for displaced communities. It should also draw on constitutional principles of dignity, equality, and social justice to ensure that those affected by climate impacts receive adequate protection. In this way, the paper aims to contribute to the wider conversation on climate justice and the future of displacement governance in India.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. Should victims of natural disasters in India be recognized as climate refugees or as a separate category of climate-displaced persons?
2. What weaknesses exist in India’s current legal and policy framework for climate-induced displacements?
3. What sort of rights-based rehabilitation procedures are necessary?

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

- i. To examine the causes and trends of climate-induced displacement in India.
- ii. To analyze whether victims of natural disasters should be seen as climate refugees or as a distinct group of climate-displaced persons.
- iii. To assess the effectiveness of India’s current legal and policy framework for protecting displaced communities.
- iv. To identify shortcomings in disaster management, rehabilitation, and resettlement processes.
- v. To explore the human rights implications.
- vi. To evaluate the significance of proposed reforms and policy measures for climate response.

Research methodology

This study uses a qualitative, doctrinal and analytical research approach. It looks at the legal, policy, and conceptual aspects of climate-related displacement in India. This involves a close reading of laws, proposed bills, judicial and policy development, and academic writings on climate migration, internal displacement, and human rights. This research is mainly descriptive and analytical. It first outlines the existing legal situation in India regarding disaster displacement, rehabilitation, and resettlement. Then, it examines the gaps in the current framework, particularly the lack of a clear legal category for climate-displaced persons and the limitations of treating them under general disaster laws or traditional refugee systems. The study also employs a comparative and interdisciplinary approach. It references literature from law, environmental humanities, migration studies, and public policy to explore how climate displacement impacts legal rights, social identity, extend beyond a narrow legal debate and connects it to broader questions of climate justice and human security. Additionally, the paper utilises secondary sources like journal articles, reports, policy papers, government documents, and legislative proposals, including discussions on the Climate Migrants (Protection and Rehabilitation) Bill, 2022. These sources help identify the current debate and evaluate possible reform options for India. Overall, the methodology aims to determine whether India should recognize victims of natural disasters as climate refugees or create a separate rights framework.

Literature Review

Introduction

The research on climate-induced displacement in India has grown rapidly as scholars, policy researchers, and legal experts have begun to understand that climate change is altering migration patterns in ways that current laws do not address fully. What was once considered an environmental issue is no longer recognised as a complex social and governance challenge. In India, where many people live in flood-prone river basins, coastal areas, drought-stricken districts, and erosion-vulnerable settlements, climate displacement has become an urgent issue. The academic debate has shifted from whether climate change causes displacement to how laws and policies should respond fairly and effectively. A central theme in the literature is that climate-induced displacement results not just from climate change but from the interaction of environmental stress with poverty, land insecurity, weak local governance, dependency on natural resources for livelihoods, and historical marginalization. This means that two communities facing the same hazard might have very different experiences depending on their social and economic conditions. Scholars increasingly view climate migration in India as a “multi-causal” phenomenon, where environmental factors prompt movement but underlying vulnerabilities determine the extent, length, and consequences of that movement. This broader perspective is important because it shifts the discussion away from a narrow disaster-response approach and allows for a more nuanced understanding of the issue.

Climate Displacement in India

Much of the literature analyzes the actual patterns and impacts of climate-induced displacement in India. Studies on coastal erosion, riverbank erosion, recurring floods, drought-prone areas, and cyclone-affected regions indicate that displacement is not rare; rather, it is a common reality for many communities. In several cases, families have had to relocate multiple times, losing their homes, land, livestock, and livelihoods with little hope of recovery. What begins as a temporary migration in response to a disaster can turn into permanent displacement when environmental stress is ongoing.

Researchers also emphasize the unequal distribution of displacement risk. Poor households and marginalized communities often face the most exposure, as they are more likely to live in hazard-prone areas and less likely to have savings, insurance, property rights, or political clout. Agricultural workers, fisherfolk, informal labourers, and smallholder farmers are particularly vulnerable because their livelihoods rely directly on climate-sensitive ecosystems. The literature consistently shows that climate displacement is not only about movement; it also involves loss of income, social disruption, and increased vulnerability. Many displaced individuals move to urban or peri-urban areas, where they enter informal labor markets and precarious living situations.

Legal and Policy Gaps

One of the strongest and most consistent findings in the literature is that India lacks a cohesive legal framework for addressing climate displacement. Current laws and policies focus on disaster management, emergency relief, and rehabilitation in general terms but do not specifically acknowledge climate-displaced persons as a separate legal category. This creates a serious gap because the needs of those displaced by climate stress differ from those affected by short-term disasters. Many climate migrants face long-term, repeated, or irreversible displacement that requires a different legal and institutional response.

Scholars point out that existing disaster frameworks are mainly reactive. They provide assistance after floods, cyclones, or other emergencies, but they fail to adequately address planned relocation, permanent resettlement, or long-term recovery of livelihoods. In many cases, displaced individuals must rely on ad hoc decisions by local authorities, temporary shelters, or informal support networks. The literature describes this as a protection gap or legal void, where affected populations fall between various policy categories and are thus not clearly entitled to comprehensive support.

The fragmentation of policy also constitutes a recurring criticism. Disaster management, migration governance, climate adaptation, land administration, and social welfare are often dealt with separately, even though climate displacement affects all these areas. This lack of coordination means no single institution is responsible for protecting displaced communities in the long term. Literature suggests we need an integrated framework that links climate adaptation with rehabilitation, relocation, and social protection.

A key debate in this field revolves around the term “climate refugee.” Some scholars advocate for using this label because it highlights the severity of climate-related displacement and raises awareness in public and policy discussions. These writers see the refugee concept as powerful. It frames displacement as a rights issue, a justice issue, and a matter of government responsibility, rather than just a temporary inconvenience. They believe the moral weight of the term can create political urgency and prompt institutional action.

On the other hand, many scholars warn that “refugee” lacks legal clarity in the Indian context. Refugee law typically applies to those who cross international borders to escape persecution based on specific factors like race, religion, nationality, social group, or political opinion. Most climate-displaced individuals in India, however, move within the country. They are internally displaced persons rather than international refugees, even if their displacement stems from environmental causes. Because of this, the literature cautions that using the refugee label too broadly may lead to confusion.

This has inspired suggestions for alternative terms such as climate migrants, environmentally displaced persons, or climate-displaced persons. These terms are often viewed as more suitable and accurate for the Indian case. They acknowledge the connection between displacement and climate issues without forcing it into a legal category meant for international movement. The choice of terminology is significant; it affects the type of protection available.

Another major area of literature asserts that climate displacement should be viewed through a rights-based lens. This perspective insists that affected individuals should not be treated solely as recipients of aid but as rights-bearing individuals entitled to dignity, security, and long-term rehabilitation. Scholars argue that an equitable response to climate displacement must provide access to housing, healthcare, education, documentation, social welfare, and livelihood support. Without these elements, displacement merely shifts vulnerability instead of reducing it.

The literature also stresses the importance of rehabilitation and compensation. When people lose their land, homes, or livelihoods due to climate-related events, emergency assistance is insufficient. They require sustainable solutions that allow them to live with dignity in new surroundings or under new circumstances. This may include planned relocation, resettlement packages, support for transitioning livelihoods, and ongoing public services. Scholars consistently argue that rehabilitation should involve participation from the community, rather than being imposed from above. If relocation happens without community input, it can lead to further marginalization and loss.

Additionally, the literature highlights the need to recognize the social and cultural aspects of displacement. Losing a home involves more than losing physical shelter; it can also result in losing connections to land, community, heritage, religious spaces, and identity. This is especially pertinent in India, where land and locality are often closely tied to caste, occupation, kinship, and collective memory. Consequently, rights-based protection must extend beyond just material support.

Research on coastal India and other vulnerable regions introduces managed retreat as an essential policy approach. These studies suggest that in some areas, ongoing flooding, erosion, and rising sea levels may make living there unsustainable. In these cases, relocation may need to be part of a long-term strategy, rather than a one-off emergency response. However, the literature clarifies that managed retreat is not a straightforward technical solution. It raises complex issues about land, compensation, consent, identity, and social justice.

Researchers note that vulnerability varies significantly across India. Some districts experience persistent river erosion, while others face drought, salinization, or coastal flooding. Because of this diversity, climate displacement policies cannot be one-size-fits-all. They must rely on local risk assessments, community needs, and regional development trends. The literature advocates for context-specific approaches.

Overall, the literature reaches several key conclusions. Climate-induced displacement is becoming more prevalent in India. Current legal and policy structures are inadequate for addressing the long-term needs of displaced people. The term “climate refugee” is politically useful but lacks legal precision, particularly regarding internal displacement. Most importantly, scholars agree that India needs a thorough, rights-based framework that offers recognition, rehabilitation, relocation support, and livelihood restoration.

At the same time, the literature reveals a lingering tension between moral language and legal exactness. While the term “climate refugee” can highlight injustices, it may not serve as the most appropriate legal term for the Indian context. This gap sets the stage for further investigation. By exploring whether victims of natural disasters should be classified as climate refugees or as a separate legal group of climate-displaced persons, this paper seeks to contribute to the wider conversation about climate justice, internal migration, and future protection in India.

India is experiencing rising climate-induced displacement, yet its legal and policy framework does not clearly recognize or protect climate migrants. Existing disaster management and rehabilitation laws focus mainly on immediate relief after disasters, failing to address long-term issues like planned relocation, livelihood restoration, social security, and permanent resettlement for those repeatedly displaced by floods, cyclones, droughts, erosion, and rising sea levels.

The main research issue is the lack of a complete legal category and protection system for individuals displaced by climate change in India. The term “refugee” is typically associated with those fleeing cross-border persecution, so most climate-displaced individuals within India do not fit neatly into existing legal categories, leaving them in a state of legal blind spot. This situation creates uncertainty about their entitlement to rehabilitation, compensation, relocation assistance, and long-term state responsibility.

Another complication is that India’s current response remains fragmented across disaster management, migration, labor, and climate adaptation frameworks, lacking a unified structure to coordinate efforts. Consequently, vulnerable communities in coastal and river areas continue to face challenges.

This study will ask: Should India acknowledge victims of natural disasters as climate refugees or create a separate legal and policy category for climate-displaced persons? What type of protection framework is needed to ensure their rehabilitation, resettlement, and rights?

This question matters because climate displacement is no longer a distant concern; it impacts migration, livelihoods, and inequality throughout India. Without a clear legal framework, millions of displaced individuals may face further challenges.

Conclusion

Climate-induced displacement in India cannot be treated as a temporary disaster-management issue. The scale and frequency of displacement caused by floods, cyclones, droughts, coastal erosion, and other climate factors show that this is a systemic governance problem that requires a lasting legal solution. People who lose their homes, land, livelihoods, and social security due to climate impacts are not just victims of isolated events; their fundamental rights and chances for a decent life are being continuously threatened.

This paper argues that India's current framework is inadequate as it remains fragmented, reactive, and focused on relief. Emergency aid may ease immediate suffering, but it cannot ensure long-term rehabilitation, planned relocation, or livelihood restoration. The lack of protection for these individuals leaves millions uncertain, with no reliable entitlement to protection, compensation, or resettlement. The real failure is both administrative and normative: the law has not kept pace with the reality of climate-induced mobility.

At the same time, the term “climate refugee” should be used with caution. It carries significant moral and political weight but does not fully apply to the Indian context, where most climate displacement occurs internally rather than across borders. A more effective and fair approach would be to recognize climate-displaced persons under a separate legal and policy framework that reflects the realities of internal displacement while still ensuring meaningful rights. Such a framework should center on dignity, equality, participation, and non-discrimination.

Ultimately, India must transition from a model based on short-term relief to one focused on long-term protection. Climate displacement should not be viewed as a temporary humanitarian inconvenience but as a predictable result of environmental change that the state has a responsibility to address. A rights-based framework for recognition, rehabilitation, and planned relocation is necessary and urgent.

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