

Leaving the Islands: Climate Migration as Adaptation or Failure in the Indian Sundarbans

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Migration as a survival strategy

Driven by climate change and socioeconomic factors, outmigration is a common strategy among the communities living near the Indian Sundarbans. People mostly move to cities like Kolkata and Kerala to earn money due to agricultural losses and adverse climate impacts. The migration is often seasonal rather than permanent, with people moving due to livelihood insecurity and climate change impacts. Climate-related factors, particularly cyclones, for example, *Amphan* and environmental degradation, including salinization, are driving population movements from island areas. Agricultural land degradation due to saline water intrusion and waterlogging is significantly impacting productivity and forcing labour migration to other cities.



Fishing in the paddy field for household consumption. ©Jenia Mukherjee

Migration and Community Perceptions

Local communities have mixed perceptions about migration. Some households migrate for survival, while others do so as a last resort after their homes are destroyed by cyclones. This often leads to negative consequences, such as migrant people being exploited in cities, due to lower wages and extra working hours, leading to security issues and family separation. Furthermore, women left at home experience stress from family separation, particularly when their husbands migrate to urban areas, introducing new vulnerabilities. They shoulder not only the physical labour of household management, local fishing, and agricultural tasks, but also the emotional weight of separation.

What communities actually need

Various NGOs and government organizations support local resilience through supporting adaptation measures to climate change, such as repairing damaged embankments and providing income sources, such as inland fisheries. These efforts are mostly short-term recovery rather than lasting security. Among the ongoing adaptation strategies, embankment repair and construction are the most common, although they raise questions about fairness and environmental impact. The local expert suggests that local communities need year-round income sources, climate-resilient housing, and access to resources to combat agricultural salinization.



Household livestock in a community of the Indian Sundarbans. ©Jenia Mukherjee

Leaving to live

While some people who leave islands find better livelihoods and opportunities for income, others experience mental stress, family separation, and safety concerns. Women who remain in communities are typically engaged in household work, local fishing, and agricultural activities, while men often migrate seasonally to cities for income. The question at the heart of the Sundarbans is whether leaving should be seen as an adaptation or a failure. The answer, these communities suggest, is both. And until staying becomes a truly viable choice, migration will remain what it is today: a desperate, imperfect, and deeply human response to a world in which the ground beneath one's feet no longer offers security.