

# Exploring the Environment and Migration Nexus in the Brahmaputra Valley

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## Abstract

For the longest time, the Brahmaputra has been the source of inspiration for many poets and story tellers from Assam. Like the inhabitants along its banks, the Brahmaputra embraces a heterogeneous identity. This paper is a retelling of the narrative of the banks of the river, incorporating its dynamic elements and weaving together stories of the people displaced due to environmental factors. Anil Roychoudhury, in his book, *The Social Structure of Lower Assam* describes how the narrative of the socio-economic fabric of many districts lying in the lower course of Brahmaputra experienced a structural change after the alteration of the course of the river and its tributaries.

The 1970s saw researchers venture into a new kind of academic discourse that made linkages between environmental degradation and migration. Despite these attempts, the international community has failed to come to a consensual understanding of terms like “environment migrants” and “climate refugees”. The United Nations High Commissioner of Refugees (UNHCR) has no mandate for so-called “climate displacement” as it falls beyond the scope of its Statute and the Refugee Convention. (McAdam, 2010) This lack of universal recognition of the problem is a cause of concern, especially in the eastern parts of India. The districts of Assam located in the lower course of the Brahmaputra like Dhubri, Goalpara and Barpeta feature in the world map as “hotspots” for climate change. The people living in these areas are particularly vulnerable to effects of climate change which manifest in the form of frequent floods, steady erosion of the banks due to change in the volume of water and lack of availability of fresh water. This paper will focus solely on the nature of forced internal migration as a result of displacement due to the above reasons. Migration in these circumstances is unavoidable and permanent.

Assam has a long and varied history of external migration right from the colonial times. People from present day Bangladesh streamed into Assam to cater to the labour requirements of the East India Company as they set up sprawling tea gardens. The partition of India and East Pakistan in 1947 saw another phase of migration and the third phase was seen during the 1971 genocide that took place before the liberation of Bangladesh. The reason I mention the above is because, the

effects of external migration have been tumultuous in Assam. History has shown that integration of these new communities into the social and economic structures of Assam have been far from harmonious. With the onset of an increasing pace and scale of internal migration, especially from the low lands in the banks of Brahmaputra to urban areas like Guwahati and Nagaon, one needs to assess the efforts of the state and the civil society to ensure a non-antagonistic integration of the migrants into the social, political and economic structures of the towns and cities.

This study is an inter-disciplinary approach to comprehend climate-change induced 'internal migration' using qualitative research. Lack of universally recognized definitions that differentiate 'environment migrant' from others constrains the study to secondary sources like journals, relevant books and government reports. It also examines various indices like the Environment Vulnerability Index throughout the discussion.

To conclude, this paper tries to establish the fact that environment degradation and effects of climate change on the river Brahmaputra are a significant cause of internal migration from areas close to the river in lower Assam to the urban centers. There is a pressing need to establish universalized definitions in order to recognize environment migrants in the global sphere. The state policies should not just focus on rehabilitating environment migrants and mitigating effects of climate change, appropriate measures should be taken towards creating sustainable infrastructure within the hotspots so that migration does not remain as the only feasible alternative for displaced people.

Key words- environment migrants, internal migration, displacement, rehabilitation