

Trapped or resettled: coastal communities in the Sundarbans Delta, India

Shaberi Das and Sugata Hazra

When local communities face the brunt of the impacts of climate change, how able are they to make choices in their response? And whose responsibility is it to provide support?

Forced migration due to environmental stressors must be differentiated from voluntary migration. Blurred and contradictory definitions abound, leading to inadequate or an absence of regulations regarding the provision of support and compensation. Culpability – and responsibility – can be established relatively easily in instances of development-induced displacement. In cases of forced migration triggered by climatic factors, however, no single party or parties (whether the displaced individual, the government or an international agency) can be held unquestionably accountable and therefore responsible for alleviating related hardship. The human costs are borne by local communities in locations rendered inhospitable by the interplay of different forces – climate change and sea level rise being key among them. Glimpses from communities in the islands of Ghoramara and Sagar in the Indian Sundarbans Delta convey the stark realities of forced migration for these communities.

Ghoramara: a highly vulnerable island

With lush green fields, abundant freshwater, nutrient-rich soil and a breathtaking view of the river Hooghly, Ghoramara Island is picturesque – but is rapidly being submerged. Located in the south-western edge of the Hooghly estuary, Ghoramara has experienced high rates of coastal erosion since the 1970s, and from the 1970s to the 1990s there was sustained government action to resettle displaced households to nearby Sagar Island. With 34% of the population in the Indian Sundarbans living below the poverty line¹ and 47% unable to afford two proper meals a day throughout the year,² the population in vulnerable islands like Ghoramara has

limited capacity to adapt to and cope with adverse environmental changes. Electricity on the island is powered by solar panels which the government and NGOs have installed in almost every household, and drinking water is obtained from tubewells. Infrastructure investment remains low, however, because of the high rate of coastal erosion; within the last 40 years, the island has been reduced to less than half of its original size, displacing thousands.³ The first storm shelter is currently under construction, while the school building serves as a makeshift refuge.

Respondents to semi-structured interviews revealed that health care and education remain inadequate, with children often travelling to or boarding on the mainland in order to attend high school. Loss of livelihoods or inadequate returns from more traditional rural livelihoods forces at least one male member of most households to migrate seasonally to the far-away states of Kerala or Tamil Nadu for construction work. Over the last two decades, seasonal migration has become a coping mechanism for a large proportion of the population in the Sundarbans. Recently, the households of these seasonal migrants have been taking the decision to migrate permanently to safer places where wage labour is in demand, thereby turning a temporary coping mechanism into a means of long-term adaptation to environmental degradation and climate change. However, the absence of support and compensation for the land that has been lost to erosion (or soon will be) not only makes such adaptation measures extremely challenging in terms of people's finances and mental health but also raises concerns about the State's refusal to acknowledge this migration as forced rather than voluntary.

Displaced families who have the means to purchase land further inland tend to choose to rebuild their houses in comparatively safer locations rather than to migrate permanently elsewhere, either because they lack the means required for more distant, permanent migration or because they are unable to bear the notion of being separated from their land. Although they know that the present rate of erosion means that Ghoramara will be completely submerged within the next 30 to 40 years and that they will inevitably be displaced again, their deep attachment to place keeps them rooted on the island. Those who lack the means to move are increasingly demanding government assistance to enable their migration to and resettlement in a safer zone.

Until the 1990s, the Government of West Bengal gave out land tenures and financial aid to displaced households, acknowledging the challenges faced by households forced to move because of environmental factors, and thereby setting a precedent. This is particularly significant in a country where policy and regulations – such as the National Policy on Resettlement and Rehabilitation – recognise development-induced displacement but no other type of displacement as a legitimate cause for financial aid and rehabilitation support. Legislation and policies targeted at disaster risk management overlook displacement resulting from slow-onset events and are limited to immediate post-disaster relief.

In the 1990s, as assisted resettlement of people from Ghoramara continued, the Government of West Bengal began to run out of land to give to those seeking resettlement in Sagar.⁴ Smaller landholdings were awarded, until the scheme ceased altogether. Those who cannot afford to move are trapped; they continue to live in misery and despair, receiving no additional support from the government apart from what is available from existing national- and state-level rural poverty alleviation programmes.

The inordinate burden on women

Women in Ghoramara from households where some male members are seasonal migrants

bear disproportionate burdens. They shoulder responsibility for heading the household, caring for children and the elderly, disabled and sick members of the family, growing crops for household consumption, and tending to domestic chores and the family's betel vine sheds. Their socio-economic position within a rural society also severely limits their mobility and their access to finance, health care, and participation in decision making; while awaiting the return of their husbands every four or six months, they live in constant fear of climate hazards and face intense deprivation. Women respondents emphasised the need for a gender-sensitive analysis of the impacts of seasonal migration and forced displacement. As one of them noted:

"It gets very hard for me sometimes to manage everything here without my husband. Extreme poverty forces us to take on additional work like weaving nets."

The role of the community and local women's informal support networks features prominently in the narratives of all women respondents in Ghoramara. However, responses also reveal the reluctance of families from other islands and the mainland to marry their daughters into families in Ghoramara. Even impoverished families in Ghoramara who have sons must offer a high bride price for the son's marriage.

Sagar: a 'safe' island?

Although not connected to the mainland, Sagar – the largest island in the Sundarbans – has better infrastructure than all others in the region. The island has a lower rate of erosion than nearby Ghoramara, and benefits from the proximity of the Haldia Dock Complex (a major port on the opposite bank of the Hooghly) and from the presence of the Kapil Muni Temple on Sagar. Every January, the Gangasagar fair at the temple site attracts millions, and in recent years this alternative source of income has brought asphalt roads, electricity and 17 storm shelters to the island.

Despite the obvious benefits expected from migration to Sagar, the decision to migrate is by no means an easy one, especially due to the unavailability of assistance for

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resettlement. Accounts from the Ghoramara respondents show that consultations with and support from displaced members of the community who have resettled in Sagar greatly influence the decision of other households to relocate. It is in hope of improved access to rights, resources and protection that families take a leap of faith and leave for a new life in Sagar. Thus, interaction between communities in different localities promotes the sharing of knowledge and experiences of forced relocation.

Interviews with migrants in the villages of Gangasagar and Bankim Nagar indicate a higher sense of well-being among the resettled households than among the displaced or soon-to-be displaced households in Ghoramara. However, seasonal migration continues even after resettlement, not only to supplement the family income but also because it has become a systemic practice within many islands of the Indian Sundarbans due to higher returns than from agriculture or fishing (despite loans available to farmers). While the wives of seasonal migrants continue to be overburdened, their condition is by no means as miserable as that of those still living in Ghoramara.

Improvement of life and livelihoods does not, however, prevent memories of lost homes from resurfacing. While every visit home to Ghoramara brings news of friends and relatives suffering land loss and displacement, respondents report frequently experiencing a yearning for the past. When asked whom they hold responsible for their loss, respondents variously lay the blame on the river Hooghly, sea level rise, unsustainable development, water displaced by ships, natural geomorphological processes and even the wrath of God. While this reveals a human tendency to understand phenomena in terms of culpability and cause and effect, it also shows islanders' attempts to reconcile themselves to the trauma of displacement and climate-related distress by reminding themselves that they only abandoned their home when there was no other choice. However, respondents are also well aware that they might again suffer displacement and destitution due to erosion in Sagar.

Looking ahead

Cases of forced migration such as these in the Sundarbans throw up questions about culpability and responsibility. It is worth our while, as thinkers and practitioners, to search for answers to some of the questions raised. Who pays the price for unsustainable collective human development which manifests itself in the form of environmental shocks and climate change phenomena: the affected individuals, the community or the State? Whose responsibility is it then to compensate for losses resulting from such disasters and to protect affected communities? Insights from academic institutions, State agencies, civil society and local practitioners within affected communities must be pooled to gain a broader understanding of the highly complex processes involved. This will not only promote interaction and sharing of expertise but also better planning and implementation of grassroots action by communities on the frontline of climate change.

Shaberi Das shaberi.das@gmail.com

Master's student, Department of English

Sugata Hazra

sugata.hazra@jadavpuruniversity.in

Professor, School of Oceanographic Studies

Jadavpur University www.jaduniv.edu.in

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3. See video <https://youtu.be/OvvYypOUCLU>
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