



**Report**  
**DIALOGUE ON DEVELOPMENT,  
CLIMATE, GENDER  
&  
NEW GEOGRAPHIES OF MIGRATION**

Organised by

**Calcutta Research Group**

in collaboration with

**Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung-South Asia**

&

**Centre for Urban Economic Studies, University of Calcutta**

This workshop is a part of CRG's ongoing research on migration and forced migration studies supported by Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung and the Institute for Human Sciences, and several other institutions and universities in India.

**Dialogue on Development, Climate, Gender and New Geographies of Migration**

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**14 July 2023 Hotel the Sojourn, Kolkata**

**Rapporteur's Report**

**Session I: Mediagraphy of Climate Change: The Challenges of “Getting the Message Across”**

**Banhi Sarkar** in her elaborate talk, discussed about the challenges that journalists face while reporting about climate change. She focused on talking about how certain narratives that sensationalise the events of climate change influence the psyche of the viewers and readers that they come to see it in the light of the “saviour versus the guilty”. To put her point in context, she cited the example of how the global north countries like the USA, Canada, UK, etc., despite having less population than most of the Global South countries emit more greenhouse gases than the latter and yet put the blame of global warming on these less developed countries who have hardly any other option but to engage in developmental activities the pre-requisite of which is emissions. Such a narrative hinders the chances of arriving at a solution based approach and polarises the narrative as well by creating an “us versus them binary”. She also talked about the importance of language usage and the importance of framing a question in a way so that it facilitates policy discussions. It is important to rightly identify and call for action on the disproportionate cause-and-effect syndrome of climate change as well as to strike a balance—one where individual stories can be contextualised as both locally urgent and globally relevant, without losing the critical lens of analysing the narrative building. She ended her presentation by highlighting that the barrier to reporting climate change is has more to do with politics rather than technical glitches.

**Dipanjan Sinha** spoke about his experiences of reporting on climate change from the Sunderbans. His discussion focused on how climate change has significantly increased the cases

of human-trafficking in the region. He pointed out that even though there is a direct cause and effect relationship between these two events, but it is difficult to get this message across to the general readers as because the mass media has turned the event of climate change into a general frenzied entertainment of sorts. Close studies of cases reveal the extent of the problem but the problem of making such news acceptable to the general viewers is a problem that can be met and dealt with only when the average coverage on climate change would meet the terms of unbiased, non-sensationalised reportage.

**Priyankar Dey** talked about the exigencies of reporting about climate change and climate related migration in an atmosphere of technology and data driven reporting. He spoke of how the humungous number of news pieces published by online media portals creates a short-lived effect on the reader's/viewer's mind. He tried to find answer to the pertinent question of how to make the effect of a certain news piece pertaining to a danger as grave as climate change, last long in the readers mind.

**Mohammad Reyaz** spoke about a study that he undertook a while back — of analysing the number of news piece published in leading Bengali Newspapers like *AnandaBazar Patrika*, *Ei Samay* and *Bartaman*. Even though the study revealed that there has been a good number of reportage on climate change on a daily basis, a close reading of the news pieces revealed a lack of substantial articles covering the core issue. The number of editorials were really less which is not a good news given the graveness of the situation. Most of the pieces were short and had objective reporting of events lacking in substantial analysis while most other reports were inconsequential—like celebrities planting trees or mentioning about climate change in a passing interview. Reyaz concluded by highlighting the need for the big media houses to take up the cause of climate change in all earnest.

The chair, **Sabyasachi Basu Ray Chaudhury** summed up the discussion and stressed on the importance of responsible media reportage on climate change.

## **Session II: Genders of Climate**

**Ruchira Goswami** summed up the discussion by saying that climate is not gender-neutral. Women suffer the most to fight against the evil consequences that happened due to climate change. Climate change is a threat multiplier which made the sense of space more fragile,

especially for women and is one of the significant causes of trafficking and domestic violence. Goswami also commented that the policy-level intervention by local women should be significant in terms of any positive interventions regarding climate change and development.

**Joya Mitra** began the discussion by speaking on the river erosion in Malda district of West Bengal and its impact on the people living on the river. She picked up cases from her field visits to the area and noted how people clung to their houses till the last moments of their homes being washed away by the river currents. She spoke of the mental trauma that the inhabitants, mostly women underwent as they lost the agency that kept them alive. As usual, women suffered the most in this process of alienation. Linking from the earlier panel on media responses to climate change, Mitra defined the indifferent attitude of media during the earlier phase of this issue. She said that the pains of the displaced persons due to climate change did not reflect in the media then. She then veered her discussion towards the massive developmental projects undertaken by the government like the Tehri Dam Project and how such projects have taken away from the women not only their home and hearth but also the means by which they contributed to the finances of their households not to mention the trauma that came with the displacement. Mitra touched down upon other events like the Narmada Bachao Andolan, the recent Covid-19 pandemic, etc., and delineated on how women have been the worst sufferers in all such cases.

**Shubha Srishti** started the discussion with the lives of non-migrant wives of the migrant labours in the Kosi River basin. She told about an old lady living in the Kosi riverbanks involved in the Mahila Samakhya, or Social Development Programme run by women in Bihar. While the women were critical about the new development policies (like making new dams and others) in the Kosi riverbank on the one hand, she was happy with the newly built Kosi River Bridge (Kosi Mahasetu) on the other. A small shop outside their house surrounds her sense of home and belongingness. The women were happy because of the construction of the Kosi River bridge, which connected one part of Bihar with the other. According to Shubha Srishti, these women had a close relationship with the Kosi River. But recent changes due to the development in their everyday work has affected their livelihood activities as well as their rituals. Migration and floods become important issues herein their day-to-day life. These struggles are reflected in the local literature, poems and songs by these left-behind women. Since flood was one of the key causes behind the outmigration of male members of the families in the Kosi Riverbanks, the

struggles of the left behind women were also divided into three phases. That was pre-flood, flood and post- flood. According to Shubha Srishti, left-behind women in Kosi Riverbanks knew how to fight against adverse conditions and co-opting themselves with the changing climate. However, the recent dam projects in China, Nepal and India considerably changed the condition. She criticised the idea of a unilinear approach to flood management operations and the use of dams, making the social condition of those living in that area more vulnerable.

**Swati Bhattacharjee** began the discussion concerning the first-panel discussion on media and climate, where panelists emphasised connecting every piece of information to get a complete scenario or report on climate change. In her discussion, Bhattacharjee pointed out three major points that directly reflected the challenges of studying the gendered aspect of climate change. These were: a) Climate-Related Extreme Weather Events; b) Its impact on Women's health; c) Lack of data, d) Lack of Response, and e) Lack of privacy. Bhattacharjee referred the women in the Sundarbans area of West Bengal, the most climate disaster-prone area where women suffered the most from the past few incidents. Most of the villages in the Sundarbans have been devastated due to several storms since 2008, and the women who lived there suffered the most. The major crisis that Bhattacharjee pointed out during the discussion was the crisis of fresh drinking water. The unplanned embankments in the river and repeated storms and floods destroyed the sources of drinking water, and women went far from their homes for drinking water. Soils became salty and came to the agricultural lands due to the storm and overflow of water. The men of those villages were bound to migrate for better opportunities. As a result, left-behind women get the responsibilities for their families. Most of them were appointed by the local traders and moneylenders to collect prawn seeds, for which they had to come down to the river and stay there for hours. As a result, several health problems occurred, including a high rate of reproductive tract inflammation, heavy bleeding etc. Bhattacharjee herself visited several medical camps in the Sundarbans, which were incredibly organised after the disasters. She heard from the doctors of those camps that most women (especially left behind women) were suffering from vaginal infection due to the high exposure to saline water and heavy bleeding. However, no one could be blamed because nothing could prove that the women became infected. After all, they have no alternative methods to earn. She also added that most women were involved in illegal prawn cultivation with the help of local political leaders and moneylenders. Therefore, they wanted to hide that they were suffering from reproductive organ infections due to exposure

to saline water. Many agricultural lands had been destroyed because prawn cultivation would give more profit than agricultural lands. The women involved in this practice mostly went to private clinics where doctors told them they had uterine tumors and needed to operate. According to Bhattacharjee, the government was not ready to provide data because they did not face the exact cause and its effect. However, the Sundarbans part of Bangladesh had almost the same thing where the government provided some of the data from where one can understand the seriousness of the situation. Bhattacharjee ended her discussion by noting that ignorance at the government level created a severe public health issue among women.

### **Session III: Policies of Practices and the Lore of Development**

**Gorky Chakraborty** spoke about how the narrative of development crosscuts the undercurrents of religion and gender by taking in as an example the Char area of the Brahmaputra in Assam. As a researcher with extensive field experience of working across Assam, he discussed how the narratives of development are often polarised with religious colours which in turn make it difficult for the general public who depend on the media for information to assess the reality of an event as grave as climate change. In his discussion, he mentioned how the inhabitants of the Char area suffer regularly as a result of the yearly floods that inundate the plains of the Brahmaputra and as a result of which, these people suffer tragic losses which not only dent their income and livelihood but also levy blows like loss of identity cards and certificates which are crucial to living in a politically volatile state as Assam. Chakraborty focused on how uneven development with projects like a certain bridge or dam construction often worsens the situation of communities that live on the fringes of ecologically fragile zones and how their vulnerability is increased by leaps and bounds for their being religious or ethnic minorities.

**Pushymitra** spoke on similar lines as he highlighted the plight of the people living on the banks of the Kosi River in Bihar. He brought to focus how the construction a bridge over the river led to the displacement of lakhs of people and how they suffer through the yearly floods that inundate the banks of the Kosi. Citing examples from his field visits to the region as a journalist, Pushymitra shed light on how developmental activities ignore the cause of underprivileged communities.

**Sudakshina Gupta** spoke about her research on electric vehicles and how the introduction of the same can lead to positive changes in cities that are otherwise polluted heavily. She cited statistical data of how the introduction of such vehicles in metro cities has contributed, albeit not so significantly, to the cutting down of emissions. Speaking on a positive note, she mentioned that such proactive measures by governments could actually significantly add to the cause of sustainable development.

**Mahalaya Chatterjee**, the chair of the session in her concluding remarks expatiated on the need of sustainable development but also highlighted the complexities of attaining the same in underdeveloping and developing countries which are hard pressed on making the lives of the citizens better.

#### **Session IV: The Geographies of Migration and the Whispers of Weather**

Sarani Khatua focused on the aspects of weather within the realm of climate change — climate being studied over longer years (spanning over at least three decades), compared to weather which is a daily phenomenon. In the recent years, climate change has found place in day-to-day-conversations, despite being an occurrence that spans over decades; while reports show that climate change is a phenomenon that is currently occurring at a much faster pace than before, with glacial melt, receding snow lines, rising temperatures and ozone depletion. Climate emergencies are moving away from the climate hotspots, that are ecologically sensitive, to other areas. Climate is the average of every day weather conditions over a period of time, though, in the present scenario of climate catastrophes, every day weather anomalies have become more prominent. It becomes important to understand the changes in the patterns of daily weather that add upto the climate vagaries, in ecologically sensitive areas where people are more vulnerable to climate changes like the Himalayan region, the Sundarbans. In the last five to six years, weather disruptions have ceased to be more common in the climate hotspots, rather is now not limited to specific geographical locations, but is affecting masses of people throughout the country. Five years back, while discussing about weather in Kolkata, a few aspects formed the major part of conversations such as rains during festivals, low temperatures in winter, and rising cases of heat stress; however, 2015 onwards, climate change started affecting the ordinary, everyday life of people. In addition to mountains and coastal regions, urban areas, especially small and medium-sized towns close to metropolitan regions, are the worst affected due to

climate events as these areas lack infrastructural planning that is required to safeguard an urban settlement against waterlogging, floods, waste management, to help prevent diseases and deteriorating health condition. The difficulties in fathoming the gaps between indoor cooling mechanisms and high temperatures outdoors and the ways in which lower income groups battle the complexities of climate calamities in trying to make every day means meet.

**Mridul Das** brought up the question whether climate change is a new phenomenon or a new term in deliberations these days, with 'climate' seen as a complex process that has detrimental effects on human lives (ignoring the fact that climate deviations are to a large extent triggered by human activities). There are evidences of climate change in the earth's history as a natural phenomenon; since the eighteenth century due to rising levels of emissions from economic practices, the effects of climate events have been amplified. Migration from Sundarbans is not a result of only climate change. The continuous dependence on fresh water and ground water acting as a major source of fresh water that is recharged by surface runoff with its quality depending on discharge is massively affected by concretisation of surface. Concretisation results into greater discharge into the seas with the least use of the runoff water to mankind. Neither is there sufficient seepage underground that helps to replenish ground water. The current patterns of rainfall has changed into heavy rainfall for a very short duration concentrated over a small area. Lack of availability of fresh water for family consumption and agricultural practices pushes people to migrate out from rural areas as it is difficult to cultivate with diminishing fresh, surface water sources and dropping levels of ground water, as well as high costs of cultivation. Ground water usage has intensified instead with low levels of aquifer recharge, fuelling the vicious cycle of poverty. Lack of education and skills only adds to problems and despite policies being in place, environmental damages and complications of climate change create mismatches that are difficult for people with access to fewer civic amenities to overcome.

**Nur Alam** discussed climate-induced displacement in Malda district of West Bengal. Floods, droughts, storms, cyclones, are some major disasters that have occurred in the last few decades; with the rising frequency of natural disasters, settlements are likely to face more severe storms, waterlogging, higher temperatures, droughts. Settlements in riverine areas are more prone to floods and river bank erosion that have affected the means of living of people engaged in agriculture, forcing them to either leave or relocate elsewhere. Climate catastrophes will



probably raise the number of hazards, triggering human migration and displacement. Environment-related displacement accounts for a significant proportion of cases of displacement in West Bengal, often escaping media and mainstream attention, particularly if it occurs as a single event. Shifting of course of river Ganga and river bank erosion in Malda district of West Bengal affects the lives of people living along the banks or on 'chars', making survival a routine challenge and risky. Research on the impacts of dam construction on the upstream and downstream stretches of river is crucial because of the multiple ways in which river discharge affects geomorphic processes and the resultant displacement of population.

**Debashree Chakraborty** briefly spoke about her experiences with studying literature as a subject, with texts mostly dealing with one common aspect of climate change related disturbances and displacement, i.e., loss. She reflected on the cases of representation of climate change in media debates, mostly addressed as 'loss'; women being the worst affected in many ways. Cultural changes as a result of climate events and the transforming concepts of 'waste', and often times the consequences of people's lack of understanding of the weather departures and erratic climate found mention in the discussion.

The chair for the session **Sudakshina Gupta**, pointed out that both sensitive and practical issues were raised in the session and the ways in which policies and ground realities differ, along with the challenges that dearth of resource accessibility, economic backwardness and lack of financial feasibility to receiving services pose. Collaborations between academicians, journalists and researchers plays a significant role in addressing climate change issues, and addressing the rights of local communities who lose their rights to access natural resources, whenever developmental projects lead to deforestation and change of landscape.