



## Climate Change and the Complexities of Migration and Immobility in India

Apr 22, 2025 — written by Guest Author in Miscellaneous

 Views: 19

In the wake of climate change, there is an increase in the use of the term “trapped population” and could be used as a policy tool.<sup>[i]</sup> However, the scholars also underscore the limitations and challenges of using this

concept as a tool in the climate change policy discourse.<sup>[ii]</sup> The term “trapped” itself suggests that there is a need to migrate for the communities or individuals which are trapped,<sup>[iii]</sup> but, this need for migration does not materialize due to certain factors. While environmental migration can be voluntary, where people would prefer to move to regions with comparatively better environmental conditions, involuntary or forced environmental migration emanates from situations of extreme climate crisis leaving the population with no choice but to migrate.

In the Indian context, it is more complex owing to the multiple additional factors that play a part in influencing the “aspiration” to move. The reality of climate relocation is already present for millions of people worldwide. Extreme weather and natural disasters, particularly those related to the climate, displaced more than 10.3 million people between September 2020 and March 2021, making climate crisis the world’s most pivotal cause of displacement.<sup>[iv]</sup> Other reasons of relocation, such as poverty, food insecurity, and water shortages, are being aggravated by climate change. Many displaced people relocate within or between nations in the Global South than move towards the Global North, or they remain immobile in regions where climate change is making life more insecure. Yet, in comparison to mobility, relatively little is known about immobility in the context of climate change because, until recently, not many academics were interested in the subject. According to Caroline Zickgraf, “Climate mobility and immobility are not separate things; they are two sides of the same coin.”<sup>[v]</sup>

Richard Black and Michael Collyer conceptualize the definition of “trapped population” as “people who not only aspire but also need to move for their own protection, but who nevertheless lack the ability”.<sup>[vi]</sup> For e.g., in India, people living in Dharavi, constitute a trapped population because they cannot move out of that place due to continuing poverty and they cannot sell the land they live in due to its high value for them.<sup>[vii]</sup> These are people who have lost control to decide to move away from danger and therefore, continue living in unsafe situations. These trapped individuals do not only lack the ability to move but also do not feel the need to move, as they have normalized living dangerously.

Black & Collyer suggest that to protect trapped populations, it is important to distinguish between population trapped due to their inability to move and the population trapped because they choose to remain. [viii] Environmental migration can be voluntary or involuntary. The term “voluntary non-migrants” refers to those who have the means to migrate but do not have the will to do so. One can wonder if persons who are unable to move owing to capacity limitations would consider their immobility to be choice in the same manner as those who have the means to move. What frequently occurs is that those who lack the ability to migrate—typically poorer individuals from poorer nations—are tacitly classified as being involuntarily immobile. It is critical to include this fourth category in order to challenge widespread misconceptions about the desires for mobility among the underprivileged in developing nations. However, from an ontological perspective, movement and immobility are not always mutually exclusive. An individual’s migration may be a part of livelihood strategy of those “left behind”, particularly at the level of the household.[ix] In the Indian context, this could be seen reflected in the movement of migrant workers in search of livelihood and daily wages. This could also be understood from a lens of migration from one work area to other in search of better wages.

According to the “aspirations-ability paradigm”, there are two possible explanations for immobility in this situation: either people are unable to leave, or staying is their preferred (or acquiescent) course of action. The first reason, as previously indicated, is well known and has got appropriate attention; this work examines the second reason. Three types of factors—*retaining* factors, *repelling* factors and *internal limitations* on decision-making—are presented in the migration literature as explanations for the inclination to not migrate. Retaining factors are those desirable domestic circumstances that affect the decision to remain, whereas repelling factors are those undesirable international circumstances that discourage people from aspiring to migrate. Economic or non-economic factors can both operate as attractor and repellent forces, and they frequently interact. The third group focuses on more complex psychological factors that affect decision-making at the individual level. These factors typically explain why people prefer to stay by pointing to a deficiency in knowledge, information, or even an “aspirational disposition.”[x]

Stockdale et al., note that understanding immobility preferences and decisions requires a grasp of place attachment.<sup>[xi]</sup> Place attachment is the term used to describe the emotional and physical ties people have to their homes.<sup>[xii]</sup> As a result, it promotes a sense of belonging or community based on affections, cognitions, and behaviours,<sup>[xiii]</sup> and it is frequently linked to social aspects, memories, and perceived as well as actual environmental amenities.<sup>[xiv]</sup> Flood-prone areas in North India, such as North Bihar and Assam, could be another similar example. These examples show instances of voluntarily immobility and depict the necessity of further in-depth qualitative critical research of the reasons why populations choose to stay. In order to understand why people continue to live in areas with challenging and deteriorating environmental conditions, we draw on the idea of place-belongingness, which is defined as “a feeling of affiliation with a place, a social bond where people feel as though they are connected and hold membership with an environment”.<sup>[xv]</sup> People’s ties to and attachments to particular locations are and will continue to be disrupted in a variety of ways by the effects of climate change.<sup>[xvi]</sup>

Studies on forced migration note a preference to stay among the migrants who lack resources.<sup>[xvii]</sup> According to this methodology, people will migrate if the benefits surpass the expenses, and vice versa if the costs outweigh the advantages. In India, workers migrate to places where they could get better daily wages. However, non-conducive and discriminatory work environment plays a major role in decision-making. Speaking of North India, caste system is a major inhibitor, leading to migrant workers to prefer lesser wages and staying in their hometown. “Location-specific advantages” are what, according to scholars, help bind people to specific locations over time.<sup>[xviii]</sup> They acquire “insider advantages,” such as opportunities, job opportunities, and leisure assets that would be lost by migrating, through developing information, skills, and relationships that are unique to a certain place or company. <sup>[xix]</sup> Older people are less likely to desire to migrate or carry out their mobility plans, but this is due to social embeddedness as much as it is for economic reasons.<sup>[xx]</sup> In general, the longer someone lives somewhere, the more economically embedded they become.

The impact of religion in influencing migration decisions is another less-talked of factor. Religious convictions have a big impact on how people live their lives and make decisions. A growing amount of work examines the

influence religion has on potential migrants" decisions to immigrate or not.  
[xxi]

Joseph Kofi Teye claims that international organisations and scholars are flawed in believing that people who do not migrate have successfully adopted adaptation strategies.[xxii] According to Ober, as the study of climate immobility is still in its early stages, no particular regulations have been put in place to address it.[xxiii] She notes that climate immobility is covered by existing policies for disaster risk reduction, climate change adaptation and mitigation, and resilience-building, but they do not specifically address it as a separate issue. The author suggests that governments and civil societies should be responsible for jointly creating programmes and policies that can assist people and communities who opt not to migrate. This will help them in achieving a respectable standard of living through adaptation measures, till the time they acquire an aspiration to migrate. Supporting policies could include physical risk reduction techniques like installing sea walls, planting mangroves, etc., however, these are probable solutions for flood-hit regions. The country should be mapped as per the climate hazards most prevalent in each region and policies should be made addressing the region-specific needs. Policymaking also emphasises decision-making processes that involve community consultation. For instance, in Fiji, coastal communities receive equal government support whether they decide to relocate or stay, with the communities having the final say over whether to move or not and when to move.

Carey notes that planned relocations can also be successful in specific circumstances when all options for in-place adaptation have been explored or when people lack the resources but have the desire to leave.[xxiv] However, planned relocation is seen as a last choice that since governments could potentially utilize it as a tool to seize control over areas and populations. More focused immigration policies could help find solutions for those who want to migrate but lack the means to do so by enabling them to do so safely and legally in order to find alternative sources of income as opposed to being stuck in high-risk areas or being forced to take the risk of irregular migration. For instance, fishermen from Guet Nadar in Senegal, were given special fishing licenses in Mauritania, where they migrated to escape rising sea levels. This arrangement was made specifically for Senegalese immigrants so that they can sustain themselves

in an agrarian country. They were also allowed to build homes near the sea-shore so that the location could help them retain place-belongingness with shores and sea waves around.

Gendered norms that emphasise the assumed immobility of women also came into play. Gaibazzi discovered, when examining immobility among the Soninke people, that migrants too need people who stay behind to look after their children and their parents, or simply to preside over the social and cultural institutions that make their investments relevant.<sup>[xxv]</sup> In majority of the situations, Gaibazzi found that such people who stayed back were women. Hence, in many cases, mobility and immobility are two sides of the same coin that mutually contribute to and reinforce one another. All forms of immobility, however, are not a component of a household livelihood plan that includes migration. The policy-making, thus, should also be gender-sensitive realising the different needs of different migrants. In order to formulate relevant and effective policies, it is pertinent to start with the conceptualisation of a region-specific framework assessing the aspirations to stay among people in India. Such regions could be categorised on the basis of intensity and frequency of climate crisis faced, with the identifications being sensitive, moderate and safe zones. This classification would help prioritise policy making for the sensitive areas first so as to ensure best response and safeguard. A phase-wise conceptualisation and policy-making would best suit the demands of Indian jurisdiction because of the wide land span and increasing population.

Climate change-related disasters are becoming more frequent, and this has led to more ominous predictions of approaching mass emigration of the displaced. This propensity to emphasise movement has largely, though unintentionally, buried a subject that is equally crucial: why do people not move? Immobility is an important dimension of migration studies since it is equally important to theorise non-migrants and conceptualise both voluntary and involuntary non-migration. Voluntary immobility, the decision to remain in one's country of origin, is a topic that has received very little examination. This paper focused on clarifying the reasons that account for the preference to stay as a result. The paper examines several non-economic factors that could be investigated in the Indian context, in order to build a conceptual framework for relocation and safeguard of voluntarily immobile population.

---

## Endnotes

[i] Bishwajit Mallick & Jochen Schanze, *Trapped or Voluntary? Non-Migration Despite Climate Risks* (2020).

[ii] Sonja Ayeb-Karlsson et al., *The conceptual birth of trapped populations and the danger of using it as a policy tool* IEHS (27 Mar., 2018), <https://ehs.unu.edu/news/news/the-conceptual-birth-of-trapped-populations-and-the-danger-of-using-it-as-a-policy-tool.html>.

[iii] Richard Black & Michael Collyer, *Populations 'trapped' at times of crisis*, 45 *Forced Migration Review* 52, 53 (2014).

[iv] *Over 10 million displaced by climate disasters in six months: Report*, Reuters (Mar. 17, 2021, 2:19 PM), <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-climate-change-displacement-idUSKBN2B90Z8>.

[v] Kira Walker, *Immobility: The neglected flipside of the climate displacement crisis*, *The New Humanitarian* (Apr. 26, 2021), <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/analysis/2021/4/26/the-climate-displacement-crisis-has-a-neglected-flipside>

[vi] Richard Black & Michael Collyer, *Trapped Populations in, Humanitarian crises and migration: Causes, consequences and responses* 287, 294 (2014).

[vii] Kennedy Saldanha, *Many realities, one world: Dharavi, stranded migrants, and the lockdown in India*, 20 (1) *Qualitative Social Work* 20.1-2 289 (2021).

[viii] *Supra* note 8.

[ix] Oded Stark, *The Migration of Labor*(1991).

[x] Mathias Czaika & Mark Vothknecht, *Migration and aspirations - are migrants trapped on a hedonic treadmill?*, 3(1) *IZA J. Migration*, 1-21 (2014).

[xi] Aileen Stockdale & Tialda Haartsen, *Editorial Introduction: Putting Rural Stayers in the Spotlight*, 24(4) *Population, Space & Place* 1 (2018).

[xii] Leila Scannell & Robert Gifford, *Defining place attachment: A tripartite organizing framework*, 30 (1), *J. E nvt. Pscy.* 1 (2010).

[xiii] Per Gustafson, *Place attachment and mobility, in Multiple dwelling and tourism: Negotiating place, home and identity*, 17-31 (2006).

[xiv] *Supra* note 40.

[xv] William E. Hammitt et al., *Comparison of Place Bonding Models in Recreation Resource Management*, 41 *J. Leis. Res.* 57, 61 (2009).

[xvi] Julian Agyeman et al., *Close to the Edge, down by the River? Joining up Managed Retreat and Place Attachment in a Climate Changed World*, 41 *Environ. Plan: A Econ. Space* 509 (2009).

[xvii] Nicholas Van Hear, *New Diasporas: The Mass Exodus, Disperal and Regrouping of Migrant Communities* (1998).

[xviii] Thomas Straubhaar, *On the Economics of International Labor Migration* (1988);

[xix] Schewel, *supra* note 34, at 339.

[xx] Neli Esipova et al., *The World's Potential Migrants: Who They Are, Where They Want to Go, and Why It Matters* (2011).

[xxi] Jacqueline M. Hagan, *Migration Miracle: Faith and Meaning on the Undocumented Journey*(2008).

[xxii] *Supra* note 6.

[xxiii] Carol Farbotko & Celia McMichael, *Voluntary immobility and existential security in a changing climate in the Pacific*, 60 *Asia Pacific Viewpoint* 148 (2019).

[xxiv] John Carey, *Managed retreat increasingly seen as necessary in response to climate change's fury* 117 *Proc. Nat. Acad. Sci.* 182 (2020).

[xxv] Paolo Gaibazzi, *Migration, Soninke Young Men and the Dynamics of Staying Behind, the Gambia* 18 (2010) (PhD Thesis, University of Milano-Bicocca).

# Author



## Sanya Darakhshan Kishwar

Sanya Darakhshan Kishwar is an Assistant Professor, Jindal Global Law School & Doctoral Candidate, National Law University, Delhi.

[View all posts](#) 

[climate](#) [climate change](#) [environmental law](#) [Fundamental Rights](#) [Migration](#) [pollution](#)

*The views expressed are personal and do not represent the views of Virtuosity Legal or its editors.*

# Comments

## Leave a Reply

Your email address will not be published. Required fields are marked \*

Comment \*

Name \*

Email \*

Website

Save my name, email, and website in this browser for the next time I comment.

Post Comment

← [Previous: AI in Court: When Legal Tech Goes Rogue - Lessons from Mata v. Avianca](#)

[Next: Crossing the Line: Legal Challenges and Solutions for Transboundary Environmental Harm](#) →

---

Popular Categories

[Case Comments](#) (2)

[Constitution](#) (8)

[Criminal law](#) (3)

[International law](#) (1)

[IPR](#) (3)

[Jurisprudence](#) (1)

[Law and Tech](#) (6)

[Miscellaneous](#) (5)

---

---

Search the website

Search

---

[Contact Us](#)

[Terms and Conditions](#)

[Privacy Policy](#)



©Estd. 2025