



Climate Migration and Mental Health: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Understanding Psychosocial Vulnerabilities of Climate-Displaced Communities

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Abstract

The intersection of climate change and human migration has produced one of the most pressing yet understudied public health and social challenges of the twenty-first century. As climate-related extreme weather events, sea level rise, drought, and ecological degradation increasingly compel populations to relocate, the psychosocial consequences of climate migration have begun to receive sustained scholarly attention. This article examines climate migration through an explicitly interdisciplinary approach, integrating perspectives from climate science, migration studies, public health, social work, sociology, and the political economy of disaster. Drawing on a critical literature review methodology, the study analyses peer-reviewed scholarship and policy documents published between 2015 and 2025, with particular attention to South Asian and Indian climate-vulnerable contexts. The analysis identifies four interlocking domains of psychosocial vulnerability: pre-displacement chronic stress and anticipatory grief; the acute mental health consequences of displacement and resettlement; the longer-term challenges of cultural rupture, identity reconstruction, and intergenerational trauma; and the structural conditions that shape access to mental health support and recovery resources. The study draws on social determinants of health frameworks, the ecological model of trauma, solastalgia and ecological grief literatures, and migration scholarship including the New Economics of Labour Migration. Findings indicate that climate migration produces distinctive mental health vulnerabilities that cannot be adequately addressed through any single disciplinary lens. The article concludes with implications for interdisciplinary research, integrated mental health and climate adaptation policy, and the design of programmes that recognize climate-displaced communities as bearers of both vulnerability and resilience.

Keywords:- Climate Migration, Mental Health, Psychosocial Vulnerability, Climate Displacement, Interdisciplinary Studies, Solastalgia, India, Social Determinants.

Introduction

Climate change is increasingly recognized as a driver of human displacement on a scale and through mechanisms that the international community is only beginning to comprehend. The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre estimates that disasters, the majority of them weather-related, displaced more than thirty million people in 2022 alone, with the figure rising to over forty-five million in subsequent peak years (Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre 2024). The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has projected that climate-related migration will become a defining feature of the coming decades, with hundreds of millions of people likely to be affected through some combination of slow-onset and rapid-onset climate impacts (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change 2022). South Asia, with its dense coastal populations, vulnerability

to cyclones and floods, dependence on monsoonal agriculture, and reliance on glacier-fed water systems, is among the most exposed regions in the world (Ghosh 2016).

Within this larger picture, India occupies a distinctive position. Its long coastline, large agriculture-dependent rural population, dependence on the South Asian summer monsoon, exposure to Himalayan glacial change, and intense urban-rural migratory flows all interact with climate stressors in ways that produce significant displacement. Communities in the Sundarbans, the deltas of the Mahanadi and Krishna-Godavari, the cyclone-prone coast of Odisha and Andhra Pradesh, the drought-affected regions of Marathwada and Bundelkhand, and the climate-stressed Himalayan and trans-Himalayan landscapes all experience climate-related pressures on livelihood and habitat that contribute to migration.

The mental health and psychosocial dimensions of climate migration have received less attention than its demographic, economic, and security implications, but a growing literature is beginning to address this gap (Berry et al. 2018; Hayes et al. 2018). Research from disaster mental health, environmental psychology, migration studies, and global mental health is converging around an understanding that climate displacement produces distinctive psychosocial vulnerabilities that exceed both ordinary migration stress and ordinary disaster impacts (Doherty & Clayton 2011; World Health Organization 2022). The pre-displacement experience of accumulating environmental stress, the acute trauma of displacement events, the longer-term experience of resettlement and cultural rupture, and the structural conditions shaping access to mental health and recovery resources together constitute a complex psychosocial landscape that no single discipline can adequately illuminate.

Against this backdrop, the present article asks:

- What are the mental health and psychosocial vulnerabilities of climate-displaced communities, and how can an interdisciplinary approach inform understanding and response?
- Three subsidiary questions structure the inquiry. First, what theoretical frameworks across disciplines most usefully ground an interdisciplinary analysis of climate migration and mental health?
- Second, what are the major domains of psychosocial vulnerability, and how do they unfold across the climate displacement experience?
- Third, what implications follow for interdisciplinary research, policy, and the design of programmes for climate-displaced communities?

The article makes three contributions. It synthesizes scholarship across multiple disciplines into a coherent interdisciplinary account of the mental health dimensions of climate migration. It identifies four interlocking domains of psychosocial vulnerability that organize the empirical and theoretical landscape. It articulates implications for research methodology, policy integration, and programme design that respond to the interdisciplinary nature of the issue. The remainder of the article is organized as follows:

- Section 2 reviews relevant scholarship across disciplines;
- Section 3 outlines the methodology;
- Section 4 presents the findings; Section 5 discusses implications;
- Section 6 concludes with directions for future research.

Literature Review

Theoretical Foundations Across Disciplines

Several theoretical frameworks across disciplines support an interdisciplinary analysis of climate migration and mental health. From environmental philosophy and human geography, Glenn Albrecht's (2005) concept of solastalgia describes the distress experienced when one's home environment is degraded or transformed beyond recognition while one is still living in it. The related concept of ecological grief, developed by Ashlee Cunsolo and Neville Ellis (Cunsolo & Ellis 2018), captures the grief responses to ecologically inflicted losses including species, ecosystems, and meaningful landscapes. These concepts are particularly relevant to slow-onset climate impacts that erode the habitability of homelands over years and decades.

From disaster mental health, well-developed frameworks describe the acute and post-acute mental health consequences of disasters, including post-traumatic stress, depression, anxiety, and complicated grief (Norris et al. 2002). The ecological model of trauma situates these individual experiences within concentric rings of family, community, and broader social context, recognizing that disaster mental health outcomes are shaped by far more than individual exposure (Doherty & Clayton 2011). From migration studies, the New Economics of Labour Migration and subsequent scholarship offer frameworks for understanding migration as household-level decision-

making under risk (Stark & Bloom 1985), while critical migration studies attend to the structural inequalities that shape who moves, who stays, and on what terms (Black et al., 2011; Hugo 1996).

From global mental health and public health, the social determinants of health framework directs attention to the social, economic, and political conditions that shape mental health outcomes (Patel et al. 2011). The ecological model of public health and the World Health Organization's Mental Health Action Plan have increasingly recognized the importance of climate change as a determinant of mental health (Berry et al., 2018; World Health Organization, 2022). From sociology and political economy of disaster, the work of scholars including Kenneth Hewitt (1997), Anthony Oliver-Smith (1996), and Kathleen Tierney (2014) has emphasized that disasters are not natural but socially produced through differential vulnerabilities and capacities.

Climate Migration: Concepts, Drivers, and Patterns

Climate migration scholarship has developed important conceptual distinctions (Black et al., 2011; Hugo, 1996). Slow-onset climate stressors, including drought, sea level rise, salinization, and ecological degradation, drive migration that may be more gradual, household-led, and difficult to attribute to any single event. Rapid-onset events, including cyclones, floods, and landslides, produce displacement that is more visible, often involves emergency response, and may be more readily acknowledged as climate-related. Internal migration, within national borders, is by far the dominant pattern of climate displacement globally and in India specifically (Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre 2024). International climate migration, although it receives significant policy attention, represents a smaller share of overall climate displacement, although its political and humanitarian implications are substantial (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees 2022).

The forced-voluntary distinction familiar from migration studies is also reconfigured by climate displacement. Households facing accumulating climate stress may make decisions to migrate that are formally voluntary but substantively constrained by the loss of livelihood viability. Some households may be unable to migrate even as conditions deteriorate, producing the phenomenon of trapped populations whose vulnerability can be particularly acute (Black et al. 2011).

Mental Health Consequences of Climate-Related Events

A growing empirical literature documents the mental health consequences of climate-related events. Studies of populations affected by Hurricane Katrina, the 2010 Pakistan floods, the 2013 Uttarakhand flash floods, Cyclone Aila in West Bengal, the Kerala floods of 2018, and many other events consistently find elevated rates of post-traumatic stress, depression, anxiety, and substance use, with effects often persisting for years after the precipitating event (Norris et al. 2002; Padhy et al. 2015). The mental health consequences of slow-onset climate impacts, while less acute and less easily attributed to any single event, are increasingly recognized in research on drought-affected agricultural communities, fishing communities facing collapsing fisheries, and pastoral communities facing range degradation (Cunsolo & Ellis 2018; Vins et al. 2015).

Children and adolescents in climate-displaced families face particular vulnerabilities, including disrupted schooling, family stress, and developmental challenges associated with prolonged uncertainty (Hayes et al., 2018). Older adults face challenges associated with the disruption of routines, loss of place-based identity, and the practical difficulties of resettlement. Women in climate-displaced households often experience compounded challenges including increased gender-based violence in displacement settings, intensified care responsibilities, and barriers to participation in recovery decision-making (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees 2022).

South Asian and Indian Contexts

South Asian scholarship on climate migration and mental health has developed substantially in recent years, while remaining unevenly distributed across the region's diverse climate vulnerabilities. Studies of communities in the Sundarbans have documented chronic stress associated with cyclone exposure, freshwater salinization, and uncertain livelihoods (Joseph & Pathak 2022). Research on farmers in drought-affected regions of Maharashtra and Telangana has explored the mental health consequences of crop failure, indebtedness, and the psychosocial weight of agricultural distress (Mishra et al. 2015; Padhy et al. 2015). Studies of climate-affected coastal communities in Odisha, Andhra Pradesh, and Kerala have begun to examine the psychosocial dimensions of cyclone exposure and displacement. Research on Himalayan communities has explored the psychosocial impact of glacial recession, changing seasonal rhythms, and exposure to glacial lake outburst floods and other climate-related hazards.

Research Gap

Despite expanding scholarship, gaps remain. Much of the literature is disciplinarily siloed, with climate scientists, migration scholars, mental health researchers, and social scientists publishing in distinct journals with

limited cross-disciplinary integration. The mental health dimensions of climate migration receive less attention than the demographic, economic, and security dimensions in policy and academic discussion. South Asian and Indian-specific scholarship on climate migration mental health, while growing, remains thinner than the literature on better-resourced contexts. Methodologically, the field has been dominated by post-event surveys, with less attention to longitudinal studies tracking pre-displacement, displacement, and post-resettlement experience. The present article seeks to contribute by offering an explicitly interdisciplinary synthesis.

Methods

This study employs a critical literature review methodology with thematic synthesis, suitable for an interdisciplinary topic where evidence is dispersed across multiple academic communities. The review proceeded through four stages.

In the first stage, a structured search was conducted in PubMed, PsycINFO, Web of Science, Scopus, JSTOR, ProQuest, the Indian Citation Index, and Google Scholar. Search terms combined climate change, climate migration, environmental displacement, climate-induced migration, mental health, psychosocial, post-traumatic stress, depression, anxiety, solastalgia, ecological grief, India, South Asia, Sundarbans, Bundelkhand, and disaster. The window was January 2015 to August 2025, with selected earlier theoretical and empirical works retained for grounding.

In the second stage, inclusion criteria specified peer-reviewed empirical, theoretical, or review scholarship engaging with the intersection of climate-related events or stressors and mental health or psychosocial outcomes, with priority given to interdisciplinary work and to scholarship focused on India and South Asia. Reports from research and humanitarian institutions including the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, the World Health Organization, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, the Indian Council of Medical Research, and the National Institute of Disaster Management were also reviewed. Exclusion criteria filtered out studies focused exclusively on physical health outcomes without psychosocial framing, and non-peer-reviewed materials except where they offered authoritative epidemiological data not yet covered in academic literature. After title, abstract, and full-text screening, seventy-five publications were retained.

In the third stage, supplementary contextual materials were drawn from public policy documents including India's National Action Plan on Climate Change, state-level climate adaptation plans, the Disaster Management Act, 2005, and the Mental Healthcare Act, 2017. In the fourth stage, thematic synthesis generated four interlocking domains of psychosocial vulnerability that structure the findings reported below. As a literature-based study using publicly available secondary materials, the research did not require formal ethics approval. Standards of accurate citation, transparent reasoning, and balanced engagement with multiple disciplinary traditions were maintained throughout.

Results

Pre-Displacement Chronic Stress and Anticipatory Grief

The first domain of psychosocial vulnerability begins before any migration event takes place. Communities living in climate-stressed environments often experience extended periods of chronic stress associated with deteriorating environmental conditions, repeated extreme weather events, declining livelihoods, and the cumulative awareness that life as it has been known is changing irrevocably. The Albrechtian concept of solastalgia captures this condition of distress experienced while still living in a degrading homeland (Albrecht, 2005). Anticipatory grief, the mourning of losses not yet finalized, is a related and increasingly documented response to the looming prospect of habitat loss, livelihood collapse, or eventual displacement (Cunsolo & Ellis, 2018).

Empirical studies of farmers in drought-affected regions, fisherfolk facing collapsing fisheries, and coastal communities watching incremental land loss have documented elevated rates of chronic stress, depressive symptoms, and pessimism about the future (Vins et al. 2015). The mental health implications of agricultural distress, including suicide risk, have been particularly thoroughly documented in Indian agricultural research (Mishra et al., 2015; Padhy et al. 2015). Pre-displacement vulnerability also includes the stress of decision-making under uncertainty, including whether and when to migrate, which household members might move, and how to preserve assets and relationships in the process (Black et al. 2011).

Acute Mental Health Consequences of Displacement

The second domain involves the acute mental health consequences of displacement and immediate post-displacement resettlement. Disaster mental health research consistently documents elevated rates of post-

traumatic stress, depression, anxiety, and complicated grief in the months following displacement events (Doherty & Clayton, 2011; Norris et al., 2002). Cyclone-affected populations in coastal India, flood-affected populations in Bihar, Assam, and Kerala, and other rapidly displaced communities show consistent patterns (Padhy et al., 2015). The acute phase is also characterized by acute logistical stress including loss of identity documentation, disrupted livelihoods, separation from extended family and support networks, and exposure to relief camp conditions that may themselves produce additional stress (Hayes et al. 2018).

Children, older adults, women, persons with disabilities, members of marginalized castes and tribes, and members of religious or linguistic minorities often experience compounded vulnerabilities in this acute phase (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees 2022). The conditions of relief and resettlement, including the speed of relief response, the design of resettlement sites, the management of compensation processes, and the meaningfulness of community involvement in recovery decisions, all shape the psychosocial trajectory of affected communities. Displacement that is poorly managed at the institutional level produces additional, avoidable layers of psychosocial harm (Tierney 2014).

Longer-Term Cultural Rupture and Identity Reconstruction

The third domain concerns longer-term challenges of cultural rupture, identity reconstruction, and intergenerational trauma. For many climate-displaced communities, the most enduring psychosocial costs are not the acute traumas of the displacement event but the longer-term losses of place-based identity, ancestral landscape, occupational community, and the dense webs of meaning that connect people to particular landscapes and ways of life (Albrecht 2005; Ghosh 2016). Indigenous and traditional fishing, farming, pastoral, and forest-dwelling communities, where occupation, identity, and landscape are deeply intertwined, are particularly vulnerable to these longer-term costs (Joseph & Pathak 2022; Oliver-Smith 1996).

Identity reconstruction in resettlement contexts requires the renegotiation of livelihoods, social networks, and self-understanding, often without the cultural and material resources that anchored identity in the pre-displacement context. Intergenerational dynamics are significant: children who grow up after displacement may develop their identities in resettlement contexts with limited connection to ancestral landscapes, while older generations may experience the cultural distance from grandchildren as a profound loss. Intergenerational trauma transmission, well documented in the broader displacement literature, has begun to be examined in climate-displaced populations as well.

Structural Conditions Shaping Access to Mental Health Support

The fourth domain concerns the structural conditions that shape access to mental health support and broader recovery resources. Climate-displaced populations are often poor, rurally located or peripherally settled in urban areas, members of historically marginalized communities, and operating in administrative and bureaucratic terrains that are not designed with their needs in mind. Mental health services in resettlement contexts are often scarce, underfunded, and culturally distant from the populations they serve. Linguistic, religious, caste, and class barriers may further reduce access. The administrative complexity of disaster compensation and resettlement processes can itself produce significant additional stress.

The Mental Healthcare Act, 2017 provides a legal foundation for the right to mental health care, but its operational reach into climate-displaced communities remains limited. Community-based mental health interventions, designed with attention to the specific contexts of climate displacement, have shown promise but are not yet at scale (Patel et al. 2011). Linkages between disaster management, mental health services, and social protection systems are typically underdeveloped (Government of India, 2005). Addressing the fourth domain therefore requires structural and policy interventions that go far beyond individual mental health care to encompass the social determinants of psychosocial well-being for displaced communities (Tierney, 2014; World Health Organization 2022).

Discussion

The findings carry several important implications. Theoretically, they support an interdisciplinary framework that integrates concepts from environmental philosophy (solastalgia, ecological grief), disaster mental health (post-traumatic stress, complicated grief), migration studies (forced/voluntary continuum, trapped populations), and social determinants frameworks. The four domains of psychosocial vulnerability identified, pre-displacement chronic stress and anticipatory grief, acute mental health consequences of displacement, longer-term cultural rupture, and structural barriers to recovery, are not isolated stages but interlocking dimensions of an extended psychosocial trajectory. Effective theoretical engagement requires holding all four in view simultaneously.

For research, the findings highlight several priorities. Longitudinal studies that follow communities across pre-displacement, displacement, and post-resettlement phases would significantly strengthen the empirical base. Mixed-methods designs that combine epidemiological surveys with ethnographic and oral history methods would capture both the prevalence and meaning of psychosocial impacts. Research that engages affected communities as partners rather than as research subjects, including through participatory and community-based research methods, would address persistent ethical and epistemic gaps. Comparative work across different climate displacement contexts, including different regions of India and across South Asian countries, would clarify how local conditions shape psychosocial trajectories.

For policy, the findings emphasize the need for integration across climate adaptation, disaster management, mental health, and social protection systems. Climate adaptation plans should explicitly incorporate mental health considerations, including pre-displacement support, acute response capacity, and long-term resettlement support (Government of India, 2008; World Health Organization, 2022). Disaster management protocols should integrate trained mental health and psychosocial support personnel and community-based volunteers (Government of India 2005). Mental health systems should develop specific protocols for climate-displaced communities, including outreach to resettlement sites, culturally sensitive care, and linkage with social protection schemes (Patel et al., 2011). Social protection systems including the Public Distribution System, the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme, pensions, and insurance schemes should be designed to remain accessible to displaced populations across migration boundaries.

For programme design, the findings affirm the importance of approaches that recognize climate-displaced communities as bearers of both vulnerability and resilience. Many such communities possess deep local knowledge, social capital, and adaptive capacities that successful programmes can mobilize and reinforce. Strengths-based approaches that center community agency and traditional knowledge alongside formal services are likely to produce stronger outcomes than approaches that treat displaced populations as passive recipients of aid. Caregiver and family-focused interventions, peer support models, and culturally rooted healing traditions all have important roles alongside formal mental health services.

Several limitations of the present analysis warrant acknowledgment. As a literature-based study, it depends on the quality and coverage of available scholarship, which remains uneven across climate displacement contexts and Indian regions. The voices and experiences of climate-displaced communities themselves are mediated through researcher framings, and primary participatory research is essential to enrich the analytical picture. The interdisciplinary character of the topic means that no single review can fully represent the depth of each contributing discipline. The pace of climate-related change means that findings will require ongoing updating as new evidence becomes available.

Conclusion

This article has examined the mental health and psychosocial vulnerabilities of climate-displaced communities through an explicitly interdisciplinary approach. Drawing on environmental philosophy, disaster mental health, migration studies, social determinants frameworks, and Indian climate vulnerability scholarship, the analysis identified four interlocking domains of psychosocial vulnerability: pre-displacement chronic stress and anticipatory grief; acute mental health consequences of displacement; longer-term cultural rupture and identity reconstruction; and structural conditions shaping access to recovery resources. Together, these domains describe an extended psychosocial trajectory that no single disciplinary lens can adequately illuminate.

Three broader conclusions follow. First, climate migration produces distinctive psychosocial vulnerabilities that go beyond either ordinary migration stress or ordinary disaster impacts, requiring interdisciplinary engagement to understand and address. Second, India's diverse climate vulnerabilities and large climate-exposed populations make the country a critical site for both research and policy innovation in this area, with potential lessons for other regions facing similar challenges. Third, effective response requires the integration of climate adaptation, disaster management, mental health, and social protection systems, alongside the meaningful engagement of climate-displaced communities themselves as partners in research, policy, and programme design.

Several directions for future research are warranted. Longitudinal studies tracking psychosocial trajectories across pre-displacement, displacement, and resettlement phases would significantly strengthen the empirical base. Mixed-methods designs combining epidemiological survey instruments with qualitative depth would illuminate both prevalence and meaning. Comparative work across Indian regions, across South Asian countries, and between South Asia and other climate-vulnerable regions would clarify both common and context-specific patterns. Participatory and community-based research approaches that center affected community voices, including those of women, children, older adults, and members of marginalized castes and tribes, are essential. Implementation research evaluating integrated climate, mental health, and social protection programme designs

would inform policy refinement. Theoretical work that further develops the interdisciplinary frameworks needed to engage this topic in its full complexity is also important. By advancing such an agenda, interdisciplinary scholarship can contribute meaningfully to understanding and addressing one of the defining human challenges of our time.

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