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## Environmental Refugee: Understanding the Phenomenon through Sociological lenses

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**Abstract:** *Human migration is a global phenomenon. People migrate one place to another for various reasons like economic, political and environmental. The phenomenon of migration is not always voluntary in fact, it could also be involuntary or forced in nature. The forced migration could be broadly categories into two categories, for example, conflict-induced migration and environmental migration. Conflict induced migration is directly related to the social-political milieu of a society/ country which may lead to the problem of the refugee, an accelerating problem at the global level.*

*Human being possesses a very close relationship with nature and it's a known fact that s/he is directly or indirectly dependent upon nature to meet various needs. But, the matter of the fact is that the human-nature relationship is not always harmonious. Environmental change and environmental hazards are affecting adversely to the life of the people. Environmental degradation is an emerging threat which is playing a pushing factor for the relatively new emerging discourse of Environmental Refugee or Climate refugee.*

*In this backdrop, on the basis of secondary literature, this paper tries to investigate the historical roots of the environmental refugee. Which kind of relationship exists between the refugee in general and environmental refugee, particular? How sociology incorporates this multifaceted issue of the environmental refugee or climate refugee in its inter-disciplinary boundary?*

**Key Words:** : Environmental Degradation, Refugee, Climate Refugee and Internally Displaced People.

**1. Introduction-** Nature played pivotal role in the flourishing of human civilization. Human have always been dependent and on nature directly for instance subsistence society or indirectly, modern capitalistic society. Nothing is static, in fact every entity of the social world change in course of time. The relationship between human and nature has also been changing. Mastery over technical knowledge and so-called modern science accelerated to the control of human over nature. For instance, the effect of climate change and its impact on human population is clearly visible. Climate change itself is the outcome of the human control and exploitation of the nature. Climate Change and natural cycle of the nature etc make significant change in equilibrium of the nature. These natural changes weather its man- made or natural, affect people adversely. At global level, there is a new kind of forced displacement and migration happening as a new category named, Environmental Refugees, Climate Refugees, Environmentally Induced refugees, Internally Displaced People (IDP's) etc. These migrations are directly associate with environmental change and environmental degradation. Millions of people forced to abandon their habitant because of environmental changes. The Unite Nations recognises Environmental Refugees, but not given any legal protection to such group of people. This non legitimate recognition like refugee unlike the Refugees, make situation worse of the Environmental Refugees. The problem of environmental refugees is multifaceted and multidimensional which produces social, psychological, economic, identity political and deviance etc kinds of problem with it. On the basis of secondary literature, this article tries to investigate to unfold this manifold problem.

**2. The Refugees-** Human migrates one geographic location to another for various reasons. There are various pulling and pushing factors to come to play for the phenomenon of migration. For example, under pushing, factors are economic well- being, a better quality of life, social security and better job opportunities etc. In 2019, according to this report, India was stood on the first rank which sent almost a million people to other countries. But, the matter of the fact is this migration is not always as rosy as it seems.

The process of migration may be voluntary or non-voluntary. Where first stands for the flow of people one place to another in the pursuit of well being not because of any external threat or insecurity. In the other hand non-



voluntarist migration occurs because of some sense of threat, insecurity or dangerous situations in existing social order in a particular community or society. For example, because of Syrian civil unrest, since the war started in 2011, six million people internally displaced and five million crossed the borders to get safe habitat (OCHA, 2019).

According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), forced migration is "a migratory movement which, although the drivers can be diverse, involves force, compulsion, or coercion." The definition includes a note which clarifies that "While not an international legal concept, this term has been used to describe the movements of refugees, displaced persons (including those displaced by disasters or development projects), and, in some instances, victims of trafficking. At the international level, the use of this term is debated because of the widespread recognition that a continuum of agency exists rather than a voluntary/forced dichotomy and that it might undermine the existing legal international protection regime." (IOM, 2019).

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), globally, more than 25.9 billion people are forced to live in the category of refugees (UNHCR, 2017). These substantive group of the people are facing serious risk and challenges and dependent directly or indirectly to the different host communities. Currently, South Asia hosts a substantially large part of the worlds refugee population (Jolly & Ahmad, 2019). When it comes to global recognition of the refugees, the roots are connected to the United Nations 1951 Refugee Convention, refugee, A person who, owing to a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it (IOM, 2019).

At the global level, the magnitude of refugees' problem getting cumulative day by day and it may reach to be 250 million by the end of this century (Marshall, 2016). There are various factors associated with it. Terminski (2012), classified very nature of the forced displacement into three categories that are, Conflict induced displacement, Environmental Induced Displacement and Development Induced Displacement. In this pipeline Rueckert (2017), recognises five causes for the problem of the refugees-

- \* **Religious/National/Social/Racial/Political Persecution**
- \* **War**
- \* **Gender/Sexual Orientation**
- \* **Hunger**
- \* **Climate Change**

Climate is changing and the kind of impact over ecology is also getting serious threat. In the whole discourse of the refugees, a new dimension came up as environmental refugee or climate refugees. The next section of this paper tries to investigate the problem of Climate change and how it induced migration.

**3. Climate Refugee: Concept, Definition and Magnitude-** Climate patterns have affected human migration throughout history. Yet, there are two particular features which make environmentally-driven migration different today from what it has been in the past. First, large-scale environmental migration has never before been so directly coupled with anthropogenic global climate change. Today's accelerated processes of climate change are not only more widespread (both numerically and geographically) and more severe than they have been historically, but the function of human participation in creating this period of accelerated climate change foregrounds ethical issues of responsibility for mitigating its negative effects. The second key difference is that massive human displacement on a global scale, including the likely extinction of entire states (particularly, the island nations of Tuvalu, Kiribati, the Republic of the Marshall Islands and the Maldives), is now a real possibility within the next half-century (Marshall, 2016).

The discourse emerged gets public attention when Essam El Hinnawi, in his monograph which starts with



the topic of environmental refugees in 1985 for Stockholm conference, provides extended dimensions of the term environmental refugees per se. Hinnawi defined Environmental refugees as those people who have been forced to leave their traditional habitat, temporarily or permanently, because of marked environmental disruption ( natural or triggered by people) that jeopardizes their existence and/ or seriously affected the quality of their life.

The movement of persons or groups of persons who, predominantly for reasons of sudden or progressive changes in the environment that adversely affect their lives or living conditions, are forced to leave their places of habitual residence, or choose to do so, either temporarily or permanently, and who move within or outside their country of origin or habitual residence. As White (2011), states that the environmental degradation does not always produce environmental refugees, in fact, it may also come up with environmentally forced migration.

Refugees are forced to cross the international boundary to get a safer place for livelihood but the possibilities of the crossing international boundary in environmental migration are very less. Because, unlike political refugees, climate refugees get support from their states. The matter of the fact is in the phase of environmental refugees, people migrate within the country and became Internally Displaced Persons currently, also known as IDP's. Internally displaced persons (IDPs) are people or groups of individuals who have been forced to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of, or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalised violence, violations of human rights, or natural or man-made disasters, and who have not crossed an international border. For the purposes of UNHCR's statistics, this population only includes conflict-generated IDPs to whom the Office extends protection and/or assistance (UNHCR, 2017). Terminski (2012), categories various nomenclature on this as- Environmental Refugees, Environmental Migrants, Environmental induced displaced community, People displaced due to disaster, Displacement due to environmental degradation etc.

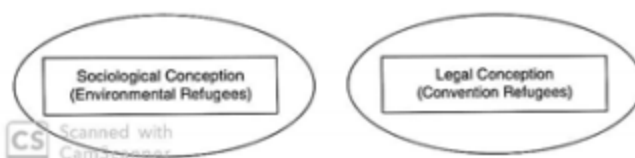
**Magnitude of the Issue-** The relations of the environmental changes especially in the form of environmental degradations and its impacts on human society is getting worse. There are several empirically-based literatures clearly show that the impact of environmental change manifested in the form of migration (voluntary a non- voluntary both), vulnerability, exclusions and different kind of social, cultural, political and economic problems for the affected societies.

For instance, Migration data portal (MDP), clearly indicating the size of the problem when it states that, in 2018, 17.2 million people in 144 countries and territories were newly displaced in the context of disasters within their own country. The first half of 2019 saw 7 million new internal displacements due to disaster. The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) records that worldwide, over a period of eleven years (2008-2018), about 265.3 million people were displaced internally as a response to disasters. South and East Asia, and the Pacific were the most affected regions. In particular, the Philippines, China and India recorded the highest numbers of disaster displacements in 2018. Small island developing states (SIDS) continued to be disproportionately affected by natural hazards. In 2018, displacement has been caused primarily by extreme weather events, especially storms (9.3 million) and cyclones, hurricanes and typhoons (7.9 million). Particularly devastating were the southwest monsoons in India and Typhoon Mangkhut in China and the Philippines. While the majority of mobility in the context of environmental and climate change more generally, including disaster displacement, occurs within the borders of countries, some people are forced to move abroad (MDP, 2019).

The problem of the environmentally induced migration is quite visible and as researches speak that it is a hidden crisis which world need to take into recognition at a global and substantive level.

**4. Why the Problem of Environmental Refugee is Sociological?-** The relation between environment and society has always been robust per se. From the very beginning of human civilization, human has always been dependent on nature. Subsistence economy to modern capitalistic, marketing-driven economy, nature played a very crucial role in flourishing human civilization. The problem of climate change, environmental degradation and geographical and morphological nature of the 'nature' itself affect environment and ecology. The impact of climate

change and its manifestations in the form of various slow one set like (for example river erosion, coastal erosion, deforestation) and sudden disaster, for example, hurricane, cyclone, earthquake etc. is quite visible in today's world. Forcibly displaced people are those made to leave little or no choice in the matter. They leave in order to avoid acute physical danger such as those posed by war, floods, hurricane or famine or their home or land to be destroyed by large scale development projects such as dams, roads or platforms (Christian Aid Report, 2007)) Because human has always been closely intervened, associated and dependent to the nature so it affects and get affect nature vice versa.

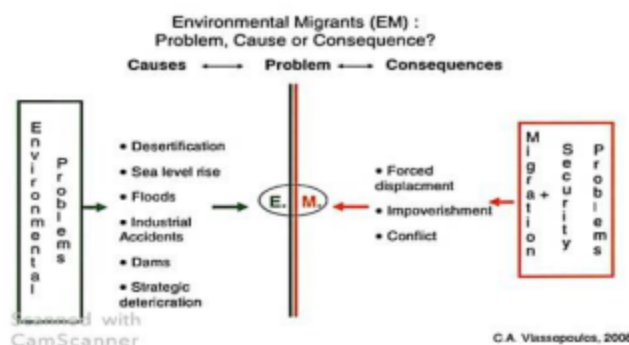


**Fig:2. The Divide between Legal and Sociological Conception if Refugees**

(Source: Burson, 2010)

Stressing the wholistic approach for the recognition of the problem of Environmental refugee, Burson (2010), pointing that he difficulty with this view of the relationship is that it underemphasises thefact that environmentally induced migration does not occur in a vacuum. Ittakes place within a particular societal setting - a setting which may havefeatures which can create a pathway into the Convention. To understandwhat those features are, we need to look at literature on environmental degradation,conflict, and migration.

Environmental Refugees are the group of people who live in most vulnerable situations socially, economically, culturally, politically and there is always threat and risks. When forced displacement occurs because of force, it came up with different kinds of problems and issues itself.Environmental Refugees and Environmental Induced Migrated people face severe problems encompassing social, psychological, political, economic and cultural as well (ADB 2012, Westra 2009, Asthana, 2012 & Christian Aid, 2007).



**Fig-3 Environmental Migration: problems, cause or consequences (Source: Vlassopoulos, 2010)**

As Vlassopoulos states that, different cause of environmental refugees are sea level rise, floods, industrial accidents, dams, strategic deterioration manifest in the form of impoverishment, conflict, forced displacement ultimately laid migration and security problems.

**1. Non-Legally Validation by United Nations-** Environmental Refugees are the subset of the big umbrella of the refugees. Still, Environmental refugees have not given proper recognition and environmental refugees do not fit into the wider legal framework of refugees given by the United Nations. The matter of climate refugees is a multifaceted and complex reality. Because there is no legitimate category and recognition by the United Nations, it negatively affects environmental refugees. Although the situations of environmental refugees and refugees share similar kinds of experiences and problems the matter of the fact is climate refugees do not get 'proper' and 'substantive' assistance from the international body like United Nations.



2. Complexity of the Problem: Who actually are ER?
3. Environmental Migration and Citizenship
4. Problem of Multiple Displacement
5. The issue of Public Health
6. Adaptation & Vulnerability
7. The Matter of Identity
8. Issues with Women
9. Crime and ER
10. The depletion of the Social Structure

#### 5. How to Tackle This Problem?

- \* Increasing Awareness: Need to Make Public Discourse
- \* Requirement of Strong Scientific base
- \* Improving Legislation
- \* Giving the Means to Adequate Humanitarian Aid
- \* A wholistic view of the problem

**7. Conclusion-** The problem of the environmental refugees is not a new but the scale of migration at global level is increasing. The problem of environmental refugees is manifold per se. At global level, environment is changing unexpected ways and the scale of environmental refugees getting widened and intense. So, to tackle of such global issue, there is a need to make wholistic effort to reduce and check the problem in wholistic way not in isolations.

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