

Climate Migration Governance and the Discourse of Citizenship in India

Ritumbra Manuvie

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*Dedicated to
The footloose people of Assam*

Preface

In 2011, I was a part of the Nansen Conference inaugurated by HRH Princess Matte-Marie of Norway at the Peace Palace in Oslo. The conference chairs and attendees included highly prominent diplomats, policymakers, and academics. The conference was hosted by Jonas Gahr Støre, Minister of Foreign Affairs (Norway), and Erik Solheim, Minister of the Environment and International Development (Norway), and sessions were chaired by prominent policy actors like Kristalina I. Georgieva, European Commissioner for International Cooperation, Humanitarian Aid and Crisis Response, Rajendra K. Pachauri, Chair of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), and António Guterres, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. The gathering was a tribute to the humanitarianism of Fridtjof Nansen—the pioneer of the international surrogate protection for displaced persons. It was a reminder to the international community that managing displacement due to environmental change requires a humanitarian commitment towards migrant communities. The conference resulted in the Nansen Initiative—an intergovernmental consultative process led by Norway—to start a policy dialogue on climate change migration. The purpose of the initiative was to have a long-term protection measure for those displaced because of climate change, similar to functional advice under the United Nations Guiding Principles on Internally Displaced Persons (UNGP IDPs).¹ During the Nansen Conference, it came as a surprise to me that the Indian government had not sent a delegation or local representation despite the nature of the conference. In the years since, the Nansen Initiative has led to several regional consultations involving governments and protection agencies with the United Nations High Commission for Refugees, International Organization of Migrants, and United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change to create a Platform for Disaster Displacement. The Government of India remained absent from the discussions and the process despite the invitation to engage. India's stance at the international climate negotiations under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) has been

¹ Gemenne F, Zickgraf C, Hut E, Castillo Betancourt T (2021) Forced displacement related to the impacts of climate change and disasters. Reference Paper for the 70th Anniversary of the 1951 Refugee Convention, June 2021, UNHCR, p 16.

paradoxical. Officially, India's proclamation that it is guarding its own national interests by not excessively committing to greenhouse gas reduction² is hostile to its own population, whom climatic change is severely affecting. This position does not recognize the huge burden of poverty, underdevelopment, and climate vulnerability of India. As the IPCC working group II on regional impacts has highlighted, while India may not be the 'canaries of climate change' facing an existential threat like small island states, it is, along with other South Asian nations, among the most severely affected regions of the world.³

While much has been said and written about migrations from climate hot spots in South Asia, especially Bangladesh,⁴ we know little about how the Government of India frames and responds to these migrations, especially in India–Bangladesh border states such as Assam where the process of migrant determination, state-making, and citizenship determination is ongoing and contested. To know these answers, I journeyed to Assam in 2016. Much of what is in this book is through what I learnt in the state—on framing, policy, and its implementation.

During the last few years, much has changed around the world—climate migration is no longer a projection in future—it is happening right now. International policy on migration and international borders are becoming increasingly closed; stereotypes against minorities and migrants have escalated globally because of insinuating political propagandas, and the world is moments away from plunging into nuclear war, hunger, and climate catastrophe (in no particular order).

During the last few years, much has also changed in India—the largest democracy in the world. Other than deluges, disasters, and deprivation, there has been a noticeable democratic decline⁵ in India, which is driven by an unprecedented rise of ultra-nationalism.⁶ This ultra-nationalist is reframing not just India's position abroad,⁷ but also the position of Indians within its plural society. There is a reconstruction of the Hindu identity of India in its international relations. There is a simultaneous reconstruction of citizenship and belonging in India's internal politics. State of Assam as a border state has been at the forefront of this politics, and in

² Ghosh P (2012) Climate change debate: the rationale of India's position. In: *Handbook of Climate Change and India*. Routledge, p 159.

³ Hijioka Y, Lin E, Pereira JJ, et al (2014) Asia. In: *Climate Change 2014 Impacts, Adaptation, and Vulnerability Part B: Regional Aspects*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, pp 1327–1360.

⁴ Barkat A, Osman A, Ali Ahmed S (2020) *Bangladesh and Migration Governance Framework*. UN IOM, Dhaka.

⁵ Boese VA, Alizada N, Lundstedt M, et al (2022) *Autocratization Changing Nature? Democracy Report 2022*. V-Dem. University of Gothenburg, Gothenburg.

⁶ Kumbamu A (2021) Saffron Fascism The Conflux of Hindutva Ultra-Nationalism, Neoliberal Extractivism, and the Rise of Authoritarian Populism in Modi's India. In: *The global rise of authoritarianism in the 21st century: crisis of neoliberal globalization and the nationalist response*. Routledge, New York, NY, p 165; Sajjanhar A (2022) The New Experts: Populism, Technocracy and Politics of Expertise in Contemporary India. *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 52:653–677, p 657; Sud N (2022) The Actual Gujarat Model: Authoritarianism, Capitalism, Hindu Nationalism and Populism in the Time of Modi. *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 52:102–126, p 104.

⁷ Huju K (2022) Saffronizing diplomacy: the Indian Foreign Service under Hindu nationalist rule. *International Affairs* 98:423–441, p 423.

2019, it declined citizenship to 1.9 million people living within its boundaries.⁸ The act of exclusion from citizenship through a process of National Register of Citizens (NRC) was in full swing during the time of my visit, and in several ways, it was a continuum of the practice of determining doubtful voters (D-voters) from the polity of India. The process presumed illegality of any person who has moved—due to war, conflict, or climate disaster—and as a result reduced individual migrants to ‘bare life’ (not dynamic human actors adapting and migrating but ‘bare life’ which can survive without an ability to claim rights).

The struggle to belong in a warming world is important as the resources and land will erode. This struggle is recognized in the case of small island and low-lying nations which are threatened by rising sea level. But for land masses and polities as humongous as India, the question of belonging in the context of changing climate is not yet interrogated. There is an assumption that the government of democratic nations are sympathetic to their poor. What I show through this book is rather a story of state stoicism. I argue that the state is neither sympathetic nor oppressive; it is in fact apathetic, and any attempts at invoking the state’s sympathy result in the state’s counter-interrogation of its relation to its people—Who are you? What is the nature of your relation to the state? Why should the state be responsible for you? And why must the state protect you? And while the state keeps asking these endless questions, I want to take a moment to reflect that it has been three years since the publication of the NRC. The people of Assam (including the ones disenfranchised) have witnessed at least three floods and a pandemic while being in limbo, with concerns over potential deportations and growing anxiety about being incarcerated into camps. For these people, several of whom are displaced because of climate disasters, their lands, their nationalities, and their ability to survive is constantly and slowly eroded in a warming world.

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⁸ Sharma C (2022) National Register of Citizens Assam, India: The Tangled Logic of Documentary Evidence. *Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies*, p 1–13; Punathil S (2022) Precarious citizenship: detection, detention and ‘deportability’ in India. *Citizenship Studies* 26:55–72, p 57.

Acknowledgments

How does one tell the story of paradoxes? It has been the single most pertinent question I had to ask myself while writing this book.

This book is a story of people who live on the margins of the largest democracy—margins of its polity, margins of the economic development, margins of the ecosystem, and the margins of being the holder of human rights.

I was however not alone in this journey of storytelling. I was supported by guides, mentors, family, friends, and students. Wilfried Swenden, Elizabeth Bomberg, Jeevan Sharma, and Kristin Jorgenson gave constructive feedbacks during my thesis stage, which provided the fertile soil for this book; Jeanne Mifsud-Bonnici, and Marcel Brus for the inspiration to embark on this journey (once more); Rintcius for taking care of ‘rest of the world’ whenever I am writing; Anne and Maaike for comforting reinforcement that can only come from female friends; Isabella, my child, for being so utterly kind, and my students—Maise Oxalade, Lyliyann McNally, Mariya Nadeem Khan, and Manogna Matam—who thought it an interesting project and provided assistance with updating the source material used. I would also like to thank the Academic Review Copy Editing team for the efficient professional editing services. In the end, I hope I am able to tell a story of the people of Assam, their river, their land, and their resilience.

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