

# Climate Change and the Rights of Marginalised Communities in India

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## Abstract

Climate change represents one of the most serious challenges confronting contemporary society, extending beyond environmental degradation to significantly affect human rights across the globe. Reports of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change consistently highlight the disproportionate burden borne by vulnerable populations as a result of changing climatic conditions. Marginalised communities are often the most severely affected by climate-related disasters, facing heightened threats to fundamental rights such as the right to life, health, food, and adequate shelter. Consequently, climate change cannot be viewed solely as an environmental concern; it also functions as a critical human rights issue that exposes and intensifies existing social, economic, and political inequalities.

## Introduction

Climate change in India represents an unprecedented challenge that negatively affects the marginalized communities, which creates a crisis of environmental injustice. India is ranked as the seventh most climate-vulnerable country globally and has witnessed over 80% of its population living in districts highly vulnerable to extreme hydro-meteorological disasters. Through systematic examination of empirical data and case studies from across Indian states, this study reveals that marginalized communities in India face a heightened exposure to climate hazards, increased sensitivity to environmental changes, and severely limited adaptive capacity. This paper discusses the climate-induced displacement which affects approximately 14 million people annually in India, as well as the systematic exclusion of marginalized groups from climate adaptation programs. This paper also addresses how climate change impacts on India's marginalized communities requires a policy approach that integrates social justice principles, ensures meaningful participation of vulnerable groups, and addresses structural inequalities.

The impacts of climate change are unevenly distributed, reinforcing structural disparities within society. Groups such as indigenous communities, women, older persons, and economically disadvantaged households possess limited adaptive capacity, rendering them particularly vulnerable to climate-induced risks. This intersection between climate change and human rights raises pressing questions of responsibility, accountability, and the urgent need for robust legal and institutional frameworks to safeguard affected populations. Prioritising economic development while sidelining human rights considerations further exacerbates the marginalisation of communities that are already socially and politically excluded.

Climate change in India poses an unprecedented challenge, disproportionately affecting marginalised communities and giving rise to a broader crisis of environmental injustice. Ranked as the seventh most climate-vulnerable country in the world, India has over 80 per cent of its population residing in districts that are highly susceptible to extreme hydro-meteorological events. Drawing on a systematic analysis of

empirical data and case studies from multiple Indian states, this study demonstrates that marginalised communities experience greater exposure to climate hazards, heightened sensitivity to environmental disruptions, and markedly constrained adaptive capacity.

The paper examines climate-induced displacement, which affects an estimated 14 million people annually in India, alongside the persistent exclusion of marginalised groups from climate adaptation and resilience-building initiatives. It argues that addressing the impacts of climate change on vulnerable populations in India requires a policy framework grounded in social justice, one that ensures the meaningful participation of affected communities and directly confronts underlying structural inequalities.

### **Evidence of Climate Impacts on Marginalised Communities in India**

India's tribal communities, who constitute approximately 8.6 per cent of the national population, experience heightened climate vulnerability due to their close dependence on natural resources and relative geographic isolation. Empirical research examining tribal households in the Chhindwara and Dhar districts of Madhya Pradesh reports moderate overall climate vulnerability, with significantly higher levels observed in Dhar. Key factors shaping vulnerability include dependence on primary livelihood sources, exposure to extreme weather events, access to safe drinking water, and the availability of diversified livelihood strategies. More broadly, tribal populations in India are displaced at rates nearly seven times the global average as a consequence of climate change. Such displacement entails not only physical relocation but also profound disruptions to cultural identity, traditional livelihoods, and spiritual relationships with ancestral lands. In the Purulia district of West Bengal, Indigenous communities have reported that climatic variability is altering plant and animal distributions, thereby affecting traditional medicinal practices, rituals, and belief systems.

Scholarly literature has also highlighted the extensive traditional ecological knowledge held by tribal communities, including climate adaptation practices developed over generations. Despite this, these communities remain largely excluded from formal climate adaptation initiatives, with limited institutional recognition of their knowledge systems and insecure land rights constraining their participation in policy processes.

Dalits (Scheduled Castes) represent a substantial proportion of India's climate-vulnerable population, accounting for nearly 81 per cent according to the Arjun Sengupta Committee Report. Despite this, Dalit communities continue to face systematic exclusion from climate adaptation and disaster response mechanisms. Studies conducted by the National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights have documented how caste hierarchies are reproduced during climate-induced disasters, resulting in discriminatory practices in relief distribution, access to shelters, and post-disaster recovery support.

Occupational exposure to climate risks further reflects entrenched caste inequalities. Research on heat stress indicates that Dalits are disproportionately concentrated in outdoor manual labour sectors associated with high thermal exposure. A report by the Centre for Labour Research and Action found that more than half of workers employed in surveyed brick kilns belonged to Dalit communities. The severe heat waves of 2024, which claimed over 200 lives across India, disproportionately affected Dalit construction workers and agricultural labourers. Unlike Indigenous communities, Dalits are not formally recognised as minority or conservation-linked communities, limiting their inclusion in environmental protection and climate resilience programmes and reinforcing caste-based vulnerability.

Women in India also face disproportionate climate impacts due to persistent gender inequalities. In rural regions, nearly 80 per cent of women are engaged in agriculture, where rising temperatures, droughts, and

erratic rainfall increasingly threaten livelihoods. Women's primary responsibility for water collection further increases their exposure to extreme heat, particularly during prolonged droughts that require travel over longer distances to access water.

Research has established strong associations between climate-related disasters and heightened levels of gender-based violence in India. Drought conditions have been linked to increased rates of intimate partner violence, while cyclonic events correlate with higher instances of emotional abuse. The ongoing "feminisation of agriculture," driven by male out-migration, has expanded women's agricultural responsibilities while simultaneously denying them secure land tenure and access to institutional credit. Women's health vulnerabilities are especially pronounced, with more than half of pregnant women in India affected by anaemia—a condition exacerbated by climate-induced food insecurity. Additionally, climate change-intensified air pollution disproportionately affects women, particularly those reliant on solid fuels for household cooking.

India records the third-highest level of disaster-related internal displacement worldwide, following China and the Philippines. In 2020 alone, extreme weather events displaced an estimated 14 million people across the country. Projections by the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre indicate that climate-related disasters could force up to 45 million people in India to migrate internally by 2050.

Patterns of climate-induced migration in India are shaped by entrenched caste, class, and regional inequalities. Migrant labourers residing in informal settlements within major metropolitan areas are among the most severely affected by flooding and other climate hazards. At the same time, climate stressors are increasingly driving rural-to-urban migration, as declining agricultural productivity compels rural households to engage in distress-driven mobility. Despite the growing scale of climate migration, India lacks a comprehensive policy framework to address this challenge. The proposed Climate Migrants (Protection and Rehabilitation) Bill introduced in the Parliament of India in 2022 was not enacted, resulting in a significant policy gap. In the absence of legal recognition, climate migrants remain largely invisible within official data systems and policy responses.

Climate change also poses a serious threat to food security in India. According to estimates by the Food and Agriculture Organization, approximately 14 per cent of India's population—around 189 million people—suffers from undernourishment. Food insecurity is particularly acute in rural areas, where livelihoods depend heavily on smallholder agriculture and are highly sensitive to climate shocks. The FAO's *The Unjust Climate* report highlights how climate change exacerbates income inequalities between poor and non-poor households, with heat stress alone contributing to annual income losses exceeding USD 20 billion.

Approximately 75 per cent of Indian households rely on agriculture for their livelihoods, rendering them highly vulnerable to climate-induced crop failures. Small and marginal farmers face disproportionate risks due to limited access to climate-resilient technologies, institutional credit, and insurance mechanisms. Consequently, agricultural losses resulting from climate variability fall most heavily on marginalised communities with the least capacity to adapt.

### **Right to Health and Climate Change**

The right to health is firmly recognised under international human rights instruments, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. However, climate change poses profound and growing challenges to the realisation of this right. Its health impacts are extensive and multidimensional, ranging from extreme weather events and

deteriorating air quality to shifts in disease patterns, collectively transforming climate change into a pressing global public health crisis.

### **Indigenous Peoples and Environmental Justice**

Indigenous peoples maintain a distinct and deeply rooted relationship with their lands and ecosystems, shaped by cultural, spiritual, and economic ties. Climate change poses an existential threat to these communities, with serious implications for environmental justice, cultural rights, and overall well-being. Rising temperatures, deforestation, and intensified resource extraction increasingly endanger indigenous territories, accelerating biodiversity loss and degrading ecosystems that sustain indigenous livelihoods.

### **Food Security and the Right to Food**

Climate change presents a serious and escalating threat to the right to food, affecting millions of people worldwide. Its impacts on agriculture, fisheries, and livestock systems directly undermine food availability, accessibility, and nutritional utilisation. These challenges are particularly acute in vulnerable regions such as Sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, and Latin America, where livelihoods are closely tied to climate-sensitive food systems.

### **Gendered Effects of Climate Change**

Climate change is not solely an environmental phenomenon but a deeply social issue that reinforces existing gender inequalities. Its impacts extend beyond ecological damage to social, economic, and cultural domains, placing disproportionate burdens on women, particularly those in marginalised and resource-dependent communities. Understanding these gendered dimensions is essential for developing effective climate adaptation and resilience strategies.

Women often bear unequal responsibility for water collection, agriculture, and caregiving, roles that become increasingly burdensome under climate stress. In many developing contexts, women are primarily responsible for securing household water, a task made more arduous by droughts and declining water availability. As water sources become scarce, women are forced to travel longer distances, increasing physical strain, reducing time for education or income-generating activities, and exposing them to heightened risks of violence and exploitation.

### **CONCLUSION**

Climate vulnerability research in India has increasingly foregrounded the role of social identity and structural inequalities in shaping climate-related risks. In contrast to global analytical frameworks that tend to prioritise economic indicators of vulnerability, Indian scholarship highlights how caste-based exclusion, tribal marginalisation, and entrenched gender hierarchies produce uneven patterns of climate exposure and resilience. This perspective offers an important lens for understanding how deeply rooted social hierarchies continue to shape contemporary climate vulnerability in India.

Nevertheless, India's social protection framework requires substantial reform to respond effectively to urban poverty, gendered vulnerabilities, and evolving climate risks. Many existing schemes were designed in the 1970s, reflecting socio-economic conditions that differ markedly from those of today. There is a pressing need for gender-responsive social protection measures that address women's specific climate vulnerabilities and for programmes that encompass both rural and urban populations.

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