

WHEN THE LAND MOVES: CLIMATE-LINKED DISPLACEMENT AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC STRESS IN INDIA

5.4 million internal displacements in 2024 · 181 billion labour hours lost to heat in 2023

5.4 Mn Internal displacements 2024—highest in South Asia (IDMC)	45 Mn Projected climate migrants in India by 2050 (IDMC/IOM)	181 Bn hrs Labour hours lost to heat exposure in 2023 (Lancet 2024)	4.5% GDP At-risk annually by 2030 from heat stress (McKinsey/WB)	USD 180 Bn Cumulative climate losses India 1993–2022 (Germanwatch)
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“Climate migration is no longer a distant threat — it is India’s lived reality, especially for the rural poor. Without adaptive policy and protective social infrastructure, migration will remain forced displacement rather than a choice.”

— *Insights on India, July 2025*

The Scale of Displacement

India recorded 5.4 million internal displacements in 2024 — the highest in South Asia and among the largest in the world — according to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC). The vast majority were triggered by disasters, with floods alone accounting for the dominant share. Assam led state-wise with 28 climate-related incidents, followed by Bihar with 25, while Rajasthan recorded 13 drought-driven events (CSE Climate India 2025 report). Cyclones and storms have historically triggered the largest proportion of new displacements, with coastal Odisha and Andhra Pradesh bearing the heaviest burden.

The displacement picture is deepening structurally. The International Organization for Migration estimates that climate migration now displaces approximately 20 million people inside their own countries every year globally, with India accounting for a disproportionate share. Projections by IDMC and IOM suggest India could face 45 million climate migrants by 2050 — nearly triple current numbers — as river erosion along the Brahmaputra, coastal submersion in the Sundarbans, chronic drought in Bundelkhand and recurring flood events in the Gangetic plains converge on the same populations.

Heat Stress and the Labour Economy

Separate from disaster-driven displacement, the chronic impact of rising ambient temperatures on India’s labour economy constitutes an equally consequential but less visible socio-economic stress. The Lancet Countdown India 2024 estimates that 181 billion potential labour hours were lost to heat exposure in 2023, translating to approximately USD 141 billion in potential income losses, concentrated heaviest in agriculture. India’s exposure is structurally severe: 75% of the labour force — approximately 380 million workers — depend on heat-exposed labour in agriculture, construction and outdoor services (World Bank, 2022). McKinsey Global Institute projects that lost labour from rising heat and humidity could put 2.5–4.5% of India’s GDP at risk by 2030, equivalent to USD 150–250 billion annually. India may account for 34 million of the projected 80 million global job losses from heat stress by 2030, primarily in agriculture and construction (World Bank, 2022).

In 2024, parts of north India experienced temperatures exceeding 50°C. The Lancet has documented a 55% rise in deaths due to extreme heat between 2000–2004 and 2017–2021. During the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, 33 poll workers died from heat-related illness — a stark illustration of how climate stress is entering even the mechanics of democratic participation. Heat exposure is projected to increase 8-fold

between 2021 and 2050 under current emission trajectories (Wikipedia/WHO compilation).

Climate Displacement Hotspots: Region, Hazard & Impact

Region	Primary hazard	Socio-economic impact
Assam / Northeast	Brahmaputra floods	Crop loss; 80% of India’s flood displacements; Assam alone: 28 events (2025)
Sundarbans (WB)	Cyclones, sea-level rise	Saltwater intrusion; loss of rice fields; outmigration to Kerala, TN
Bundelkhand (UP/MP)	Chronic drought	Distress migration; debt bondage in sugarcane belt; male out-migration
Bihar / Gangetic	Floods + lightning	250+ lightning fatalities; 80% of flood farmers migrate to Punjab/Delhi
Rajasthan	Drought, heat	Groundwater depletion; 16.74 bn m ³ extracted annually; farm abandonment
Mumbai / Coastal	Cyclones, flooding	USD 4 bn annual urban flood costs; projected USD 30 bn by 2070 (CSE)
North India plains	Extreme heat	Loss of 101 bn labour hours/yr; 34 mn job losses by 2030 (WB/McKinsey)

The Gendered Dimension Of Climate Stress

Climate displacement in India carries a pronounced gender asymmetry. When men migrate seasonally or permanently from climate-stressed regions, women left behind absorb four additional hours of unpaid work per day on average (Bundelkhand field study, 2019), face increased risk of financial hardship and harassment and bear the burden of children’s education disruptions. In the sugarcane belt of Maharashtra, advance-payment debt bondage (₹50,000–5 lakh) traps migrant couples — the ‘koita’ system — in conditions approximating modern forced labour. The NDMA’s 2024 guidelines acknowledge community vulnerability but field reviews reveal that gender-sensitive planning is rarely embedded in district disaster micro-plans.

Sources: IDMC (2024). CSE Climate India 2025. Lancet Countdown India 2024. McKinsey Global Institute (2020). World Bank Cooling Sector Report (2022). CEED India (2025). IOM. Policy Circle (Oct 2025). Springer Nature / NDMA 2024.

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