With changing climate forcing people to displace and migrate to other countries, India should seriously consider the upcoming threat of climate refugees. The problem is not just limited to external migration of people from adjacent countries but it is equally of concern in cases of climate-induced internal migration of people within the boundaries of the country.

In addition to this, many developing countries ardently staked their claim on the remaining portion of the carbon space available for their development. These developing countries have demurred the suggestion of the developed world to get into legally binding agreements to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Besides this, there were a few countries that were largely interested in setting 1.5°C as an absolute limit for temperature as they fear that sea level rise due to climate change could wash off their nations from the world map. Pacific nations such as Tuvalu, Marshall Islands and Kiribati raised the concern that extreme weather events due to climate change can also lead to human mobility and displacement within a country or cross border. Furthermore, they believed that drowning of islands and subsequent displacement can destroy cultures and traditions of the countries which is equivalent to genocide.

Realizing the gravity of the situation, certain initiatives have been taken on the international front to address the concern.
To address this concern, an exclusive group was formulated to discuss human mobility during pre-COP21 negotiations. However, the final agreement arrived at the end of the Summit has not included any strong statement with respect to this concern.

Nevertheless, recognizing human displacement and mobility due to environmental disasters is not a recent development in climate change literature. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) time and again has mentioned that climate change has an impact on human livelihood activities and extreme weather events such as sea level rise, desertification and coastal erosion usually trigger large amount of population movements. Recently, the IPCC’s Fifth Assessment Report 2014 also recognized that human mobility is intrinsically linked to climate change which is expected to increase more in the future.

Besides IPCC’s acknowledgement, rise in natural disasters all around the world and subsequent movement of people has established that disasters stimulated by climate change force people to migrate. According to the report from the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC, 2009), the number of natural disasters has doubled, rising from approximately 200 to over 400 per year. In addition to this, it has also been observed that rise in natural disasters has forced 19.3 million people from over 100 countries to migrate to safer and more secure places in 2014.

Further, it has also been estimated that disasters have displaced over 27 million people each year between 2008 and 2013 (IDMC, 2014) wherein International Organization for Migration (IOM) has predicted that over 200 million people will get displaced by 2050 due to climate related disasters.

Human mobility and displacement due to extreme weather events is not just restricted to one part of the world but is spread all over the world. From Mexico’s dry land regions which have displaced 600,000 to 700,000 people due to desertification to Metro Manila which has forced 700,000 people to move to evacuation centers due to tropical storm Ondoy. Also, from Myanmar where Cyclone Nargis has displaced 800,000 people to several Pacific islands where it is predicted that around 665,000 to 1.7 million people would get displaced due to climate change by 2050.

Forecasts have also been made that countries like Bangladesh, Maldives, Kiribati, Papua New Guinea and Tuvalu are at extreme risk and will disappear in the next 30 to 60 years due to rising sea levels. The issue is therefore going to acquire sinister proportions in the coming days.

The issue of concern is not just limited to human mobility but goes further to more complications like forced migration of people to countries not prepared for such intrusion of people. Migrants to other countries due to climate change are informally termed as “Climate Refugees” which has not yet got formal approval from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

People displacing due to extreme weather events and migrating to other countries are not considered as refugees as per the definition given under the 1951 convention related to the status of refugees. Due to this, climate refugees are facing huge problem as the host countries are not willing to accept them. New Zealand has recently won a legal battle on this front and has deported a farmer...
named Ioane Teitiota from Kiribati not recognizing him as a Climate Refugee.

These people are in grave situations where on the one hand extreme weather events have forced them to other nations and on the other hand, these host nations are not willing to give them the same legal rights and the same treatment as their citizens. They will always be referred as “Climate refugees”.

Some experts have also suggested that continuous exposure to climate change variations along with ill-treatment and inequality can give rise to conflicts. They have deduced a link between climate change, migration and political conflicts. The grim situation in Syria due to civil war was preceded by three years of drought. The non-availability of water created a grave situation for farmers of Syria forcing around 1.5 million people to migrate inducing economic stress in the country leading to conflicts and civil war.

Similarly, it has been noted that global warming has increased the risk of civil war in Sudan’s Darfur region. A study conducted by Marshal B. Burke estimated that a 1% increase in temperature leads to a 4.5% increase in civil war and further predicted that armed conflicts may increase by 54% by 2030.

The issue of climate-induced migration is, therefore, highly sensitive where a slight change in climate can force people to migrate. The lack of support from domestic and international authorities can stimulate conflicts disturbing law and order all over the world. Hence, there is a need to address the issue as early as possible through international treaties or conventions.

Realizing the gravity of the situation, certain initiatives have been taken on the international front to address the concern. Prominently, the Conference of Parties (COP) in Poznan in 2008 raised and attracted the attention of relevant parties towards climate change migration and displacement issues. However, only the Cancun agreement at COP16 gave a concrete acceptance to the idea with the formation of an Adaptation Framework acknowledging the need to enhance the understanding, coordination and cooperation related to climate change induced displacement and migration at regional, national and international level.

However, no further decisions were taken to understand the complexity of climate change and the resultant migration. The issue further gained momentum in COP19 at Warsaw under the “Warsaw International Mechanism” while addressing any loss and damage due to climate change induced migration.

In addition to this, recently, the introduction of the “Nansen Initiative” for disaster-induced cross-border displacement strengthened the
significance and relevance of the notion. Here, the protection agenda for climate-induced cross-border displaced persons was endorsed by 114 countries on 14th October 2015 in Geneva.

Besides this, Sustainable Development Goals 2015 realizing that climate-induced migration can reverse the development has also committed to ensure safe and orderly migration by offering respect to the rights of displaced persons, migrants and refugees. Also, the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030 was initiated to ensure rapid and effective response to disasters by offering the affected people access to shelter, food and non-food relief supplies (UNFCCC, 2015).

All these advancements set the pitch for further discussions on climate change and human mobility in Paris during COP21. However, no concrete decisions were taken during COP21 which has essentially downplayed the importance of the relevant and emerging concern of climate change.

Climate Change Migration and India

Conventionally, the concept of climate refugees is a global threat demanding a rigorous discussion on the international front. Asia is said to be the hotspot for climate-induced displacement with 17 out of 20 global disasters in 2008 displacing around 31.4 million people (NRC, 2009).

India with an economic growth rate of approximately 7.3% (World Bank, 2015) and a better standard of living has attracted several refugees. It is a home to refugees from war, domestic conflicts, natural disasters, famines, human trafficking and many more. Being a peninsular country, India is surrounded by several climate-vulnerable countries and is therefore very prone to the threat from climate refugees.

Eventually, it has become difficult to differentiate between conventional refugees and climate refugees. Under the mandate of Global Appeal 2015, UNHCR has raised its concern about an additional 200,000 refugees of various origins to India ranging from Afghanistan, Tibet, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Syria and Bangladesh. Notably, India hosts a large number of refugees in South Asia.

Climate-induced migration to India from several countries occurs due to sudden climatic events like sea level rise, floods, cyclones, earthquakes, glacial lake bursts, etc. in search of food and shelter. India has always welcomed and helped refugees. It has provided basic necessities to refugees and has always tried to offer them the same rights as available to the Indian citizens. However, with the passage of time as population and its related problems are increasing, unwanted intrusion of refugees has raised a serious concern.
The problem of migration is not just limited to external migration of people from adjacent countries but it is equally of concern in cases of climate-induced internal migration of people within the boundaries of the country. There are certain instances where people need to migrate within Indian states due to extreme climatic events such as floods, droughts, sea level rise and other disasters affecting their livelihoods. Sea level rise has not only made certain villages of West Bengal and Orissa uninhabitable due to submergence of homes and agricultural fields but routine flooding has also contributed in salinization of soil and fresh water resources affecting the productivity of their lands forever.

In contrast to this, there are some Indian states which are dealing with continuous droughts for the last three years. It has been estimated that climate change would reduce the productivity of rice and wheat by 25% and 30% respectively by 2050 (ADB, 2011). Untimely rains and non-availability of groundwater has made the life of the people in these areas miserable forcing them to either leave their agricultural land and move to cities for labor work or to commit heinous crimes including suicide.

Recently, Christian Parenti in his article in The Times of India suggested that there is a connection between climate change and Naxalite violence and farmer’s suicide in India. He has concluded that during the years of Naxal violence, drought was also intense in Andhra Pradesh (Parenti, 2015).

Internal migrants as per the 2011 census are enumerated at about 400 million, almost one-third of India’s population. Still, very low priority is accorded in Indian government policies, which have failed to provide proper legal and social protection to these groups. Internal migrants are always considered as ‘outsiders’ which excludes them from accessing legal rights, public services and social welfare programs run for residents. They are always liable to do cheap, dirty and dangerous labor work denting their self-respect and dignity.

Internally, most of the migration is particularly to regional urban centers...
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such as Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata, Ahmedabad, Bangalore, and Chennai. Incessant movement of population creates a pressure on resources of cities where it is not feasible for cities to build more physical infrastructure to keep pace with rising demand.

The need of the hour is to understand that climate-induced disasters are increasing at an alarming rate. Exposed to both land- and water-related disasters, India is expected to experience unprecedented intrusion of refugees which will create pressure on the available resources, stimulating people to fight for them. To deal with the issue, it requires a genuine discourse on the national and international front to restrict or manage refugees in the country.

However, not being a signatory to any of the conventions or protocols related to protecting refugees including the Nansen Initiative has excluded India from seeking any assistance from international forums on the concern.

As the climate is changing and is forcing people to displace and migrate to other countries, India should seriously consider the upcoming threat of climate refugees. Being a strong developing nation, India should not only consider signing and ratifying existing and future conventions of refugees but also voice the concern on the international front. Climate change experts need to understand the gravity and severity of the situation and further discuss measures to handle the problem of climate refugees.

UNFCCC and its subsequent COP’s are the biggest platform to discuss climate change related issues. Recent COP21’s final agreement did not mention about the climate-vulnerable people which has lessened the importance of the threat.

However, COP22 at Marrakech in November 2016 is expected to give a formal structure to the “Warsaw International Mechanism”, the last document that talked about recovering loss and damage to climate-vulnerable people. It may finally address the disremembered concern of climate refugees. Wait for Marrakech!

Ms Aakanksha Sharma is pursuing MPhil (NRM) at the Indian Institute of Forest Management, Bhopal. Address: C-17, NDBB Campus, Sector-17A, NOIDA-201301, Uttar Pradesh; Email: aashirang@gmail.com