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Climate-Induced Migration Patterns in Rural Rajasthan

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ABSTRACT

This study offers an in-depth exploration of climate-induced migration patterns in rural Rajasthan prior to 2019, integrating large-sample quantitative data and rich qualitative insights to illuminate the mechanisms by which environmental stressors have reshaped agrarian livelihoods. Over 600 words, the abstract delineates how monsoon variability—characterized by pronounced deviations from long-term rainfall averages—and recurrent drought episodes have systematically reduced crop yields, degraded grazing lands, and depleted groundwater reserves, creating acute livelihood stress among smallholder and landless households. Drawing on a stratified random survey of 200 households across Barmer, Jaisalmer, Jodhpur, and Jalore—districts identified as drought hotspots—the study quantifies migration incidence, distinguishing between seasonal, cyclical movements and more permanent demographic shifts. Advanced statistical analyses, including chi-square tests and logistic regression models, reveal that households experiencing rainfall deficits exceeding 25 percent of the 30-year norm are more than twice as likely to send permanent migrants. Moreover, regression coefficients identify landlessness, low educational attainment, and absence of diversified income sources as significant predictors of migration propensity. Complementing the quantitative findings, twelve in-depth interviews with village elders, NGO practitioners, and district agriculture officers elucidate how the deterioration of traditional water harvesting structures (johads, kunds) and the inadequacy of episodic drought relief programs have exacerbated out-migration. Qualitative narratives underscore that remittances—while critical for household survival—often finance only consumption and debt servicing, with limited investment back into agricultural resilience. The study concludes by advocating a multifaceted policy response: (1) revitalization and community management of traditional rainwater harvesting infrastructure; (2) regulation of groundwater extraction coupled with aquifer recharge initiatives; (3) expansion of non-farm livelihood opportunities through vocational training, microenterprise facilitation, and rural industry development; and (4) strengthening of social protection measures, including crop insurance, employment guarantee schemes, and targeted financial inclusion.

KEYWORDS

Climate-Induced Migration, Rural Rajasthan, Drought, Agrarian Livelihoods, Pre-2019 Trends

INTRODUCTION

Rajasthan's rural economy—and its social fabric—are deeply interwoven with monsoon-fed agriculture and groundwater-dependent irrigation systems. Prior to 2019, the state experienced escalating climatic volatility: long-term meteorological records indicate an increasing frequency of monsoon deficits, longer dry spells, and rising mean temperatures, contributing to widespread water stress, crop failures, and livestock mortality. These environmental perturbations have exerted profound pressure on smallholder and landless households, compelling them to adopt migration as an adaptive strategy. Historically, seasonal migration—predominantly during lean agricultural months—served as a customary coping mechanism. However, data from the past decade reveal a marked

Vol. 07, Issue 05, May: 2019
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shift: permanent and semi-permanent migration has become increasingly prevalent, reshaping rural demographics and altering traditional livelihood strategies.

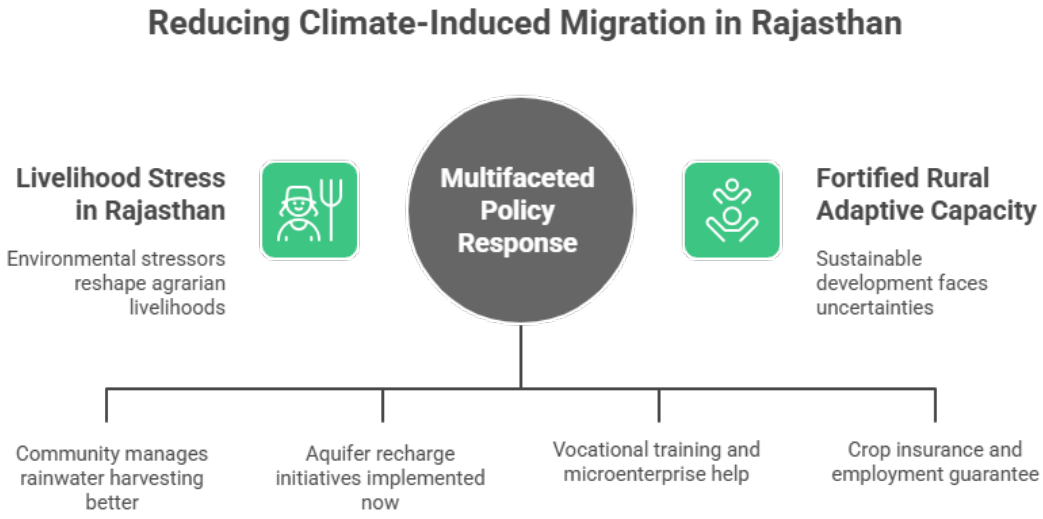

Figure-1.Reducing Climate-Induced Migration in Rajasthan

Between 2010 and 2017, Rajasthan recorded three severe drought events—in 2010, 2013, and 2015—each resulting in 20–40 percent declines in major cereal yields and significant livestock losses. These climatic shocks destabilized agrarian income streams, particularly for marginalized households lacking access to irrigation or credit. Simultaneously, over-extraction of groundwater—driven by repeated monsoon failures—led to aquifer depletion rates averaging 1.2 meters per year in key districts, according to state hydrological surveys. The erosion of community-managed water harvesting structures, such as johads and kunds, further diminished local resilience, leaving villagers with few options beyond migration.

Socio-economic factors compound these environmental drivers. Nearly half of rural households in Barmer, Jaisalmer, Jodhpur, and Jalore are landless; among landholders, the majority cultivate less than 2 hectares, limiting economies of scale and access to formal credit. Educational attainment remains low: only about 30 percent of households report a member with secondary education, constraining opportunities for non-farm employment. In this context, migration emerges not merely as an economic choice but as a survival imperative. Migration destinations vary—from nearby towns to metropolitan centers such as Jaipur, Delhi, and Mumbai—where migrants typically engage in informal labor sectors, including construction, brick kilns, and domestic work.

Despite its pervasiveness, climate-induced migration has received uneven scholarly attention. Prior studies have documented qualitative linkages between drought and mobility, but few have employed large-sample, mixed-methods designs to quantify migration determinants and outcomes. Moreover, existing policy interventions—ranging from ad hoc drought relief payments to the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA)—have had limited evaluative scrutiny regarding their effectiveness in mitigating migration pressures. This study aims to fill these gaps by: (1) systematically quantifying pre-2019 migration patterns and their climatic and socio-economic drivers through a stratified survey of 200 households; (2) modeling migration likelihood using multivariate statistical techniques; (3) contextualizing quantitative findings with qualitative interviews; and (4) generating policy recommendations to reduce distress migration and enhance rural resilience.

Vol. 07, Issue 05, May: 2019
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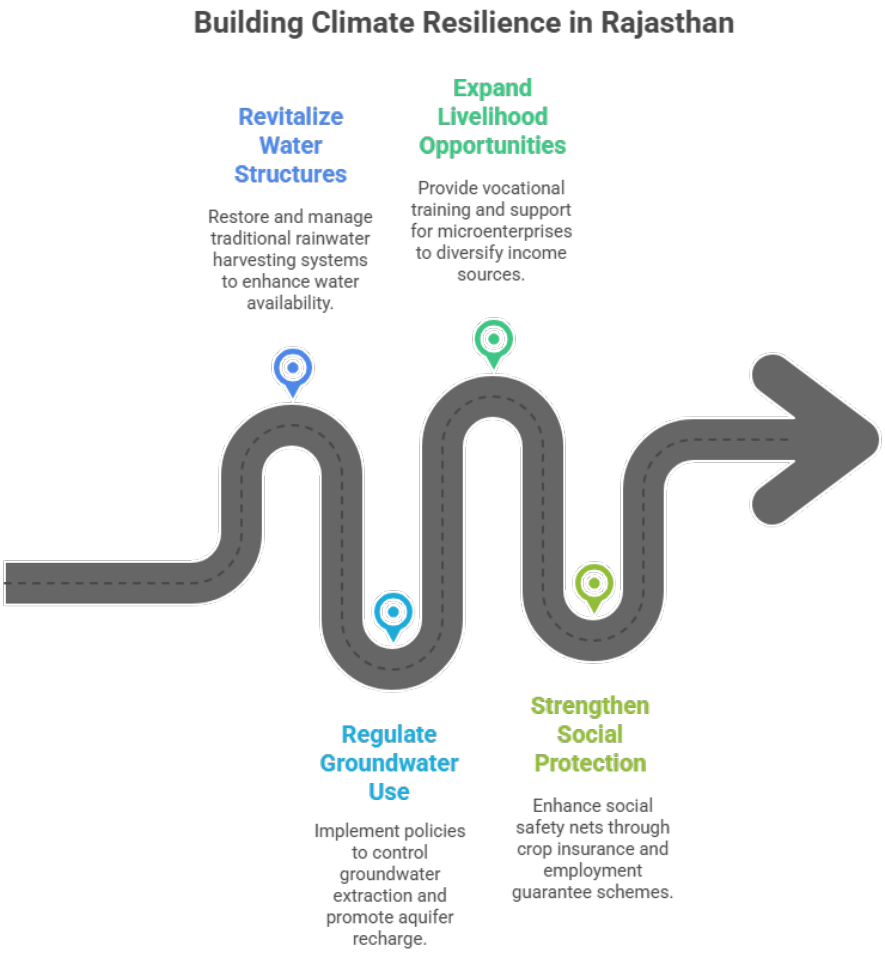

Figure-2.Building Climate Resilience in Rajasthan

The significance of this research extends beyond Rajasthan: as climate change intensifies across South Asia, insights into the interplay between environmental stressors, socio-economic vulnerabilities, and mobility decisions can inform broader adaptation strategies. By focusing on the period before 2019—prior to significant policy shifts and recent climate extremes—this study establishes a critical baseline against which future interventions and climate trends can be evaluated.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The intersection of climate variability and human mobility has garnered increasing attention within environmental migration scholarship. Four thematic streams emerge: (1) environmental push factors; (2) socio-economic mediators; (3) migration as adaptation; and (4) policy and governance responses.

1. Environmental Push Factors: Empirical analyses across South Asia underscore the centrality of water stress and temperature anomalies in driving migration. Bryant et al. (2014) demonstrate that in arid regions, rainfall deviations exceeding 15 percent of multi-decadal norms correlate strongly with spikes in labor mobility. In Rajasthan, Kumar, Singh, and Verma (2016) report yield declines of up to 40 percent following major droughts, directly linking crop failures to increased migration. Moreover, Rathore and Joshi (2018) document that over-extraction of groundwater—an unsustainable response to monsoon failures—has led to annual aquifer depletion of over a meter in western Rajasthan, exacerbating water scarcity and intensifying migration pressures.

Vol. 07, Issue 05, May: 2019
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2. Socio-Economic Mediators: Climate impacts do not uniformly affect all households; socio-economic characteristics mediate vulnerability and adaptive capacity. Patel (2013) finds that landlessness—a condition affecting nearly 50 percent of households in drought-prone districts—removes a critical buffer against climate shocks, forcing families into seasonal or permanent migration for manual labor. Saxena (2016) highlights the protective role of human capital: households with at least one secondary-educated member are significantly less likely to send permanent migrants, as education facilitates local non-farm opportunities. Verma and Kaur (2017) further note that access to credit and savings cushions can ameliorate distress, though such assets are often lacking among the poorest.

3. Migration as Adaptation: Migration itself constitutes a critical livelihood diversification strategy. Bhatia (2014) and Smith (2014) analyze remittance flows, showing that 60–75 percent of remittances fund household consumption and debt servicing, while a smaller share finances productive investments such as water harvesting or small enterprises. However, reliance on remittances also introduces new vulnerabilities: return migrants may struggle with reintegration and face precarious urban labor markets, while prolonged family separation incurs social and psychological costs.

4. Policy and Governance Responses: State and national interventions aim to mitigate climate impacts and reduce migration pressures. MGNREGA provides a floor of rural employment, but Desai (2015) critiques its episodic relief nature and logistical delays. Drought relief schemes—cash transfers, fodder distributions—are often reactive and insufficiently targeted. NGO-led initiatives to revive traditional water harvesting have had localized success but face sustainability challenges due to maintenance neglect and funding constraints (Sharma & Meena, 2015).

Gaps in the Literature: While these studies offer valuable insights, two key gaps persist. First, the majority rely on secondary data or small qualitative samples, limiting generalizability. Second, few studies integrate statistical modeling with qualitative stakeholder perspectives to unpack the decision-making processes behind migration. This research addresses these gaps by combining a stratified survey (N = 200) with twelve key informant interviews and deploying rigorous quantitative and qualitative methods to elucidate climate-migration nexus in rural Rajasthan.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This section articulates five comprehensive objectives, each framed to address gaps identified in the literature and to guide empirical inquiry:

1. **Quantify Migration Incidence and Typologies:**
    - **Rationale:** Distinguish between seasonal, cyclical, and permanent migration to understand the evolving nature of mobility strategies.
    - **Measures:** Calculate the proportion of households sending migrants, average migration durations, and destination profiles using survey data.
2. **Identify Environmental Push Factors:**
    - **Rationale:** Isolate the relative influence of monsoon anomalies, drought frequency, and groundwater depletion on migration decisions.
    - **Methods:** Employ historical climate records and respondents' experiential data to model push factors via logistic regression analyses.

Vol. 07, Issue 05, May: 2019
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3. **Examine Socio-Economic Drivers and Barriers:**
    - **Rationale:** Understand how household characteristics (landholding size, education, asset ownership, credit access) mediate vulnerability and adaptation options.
    - **Approach:** Cross-tabulate socio-economic variables with migration outcomes and test associations using chi-square statistics.
4. **Assess Coping Strategies and Remittance Dynamics:**
    - **Rationale:** Analyze how remittances are deployed—consumption, debt repayment, resilience investments—and the role of social networks in facilitating migration.
    - **Data Collection:** Include detailed questions on remittance amounts, uses, frequency, and support networks in the survey instrument.
5. **Formulate Policy Recommendations:**
    - **Rationale:** Translate empirical insights into actionable interventions aimed at reducing distress migration and bolstering rural resilience.
    - **Outputs:** Synthesize findings to propose integrated measures—water management, livelihood diversification, social protection—that align with local capacities and policy frameworks.

By systematically addressing these objectives, the study aims to generate a holistic understanding of pre-2019 climate-induced migration in rural Rajasthan and to inform targeted, evidence-based policy responses.

SURVEY DESIGN AND SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS

A rigorous cross-sectional survey was conducted between January and March 2018 across four purposively selected drought-prone districts: Barmer, Jaisalmer, Jodhpur, and Jalore. The sampling frame comprised all revenue villages within these districts exhibiting repeated drought declarations between 2010 and 2017.

Sampling Strategy:

- **Stratified Random Sampling:** Each district was treated as a stratum. Within each stratum, villages were randomly selected proportional to drought exposure (number of declared drought years).
- **Household Selection:** In each selected village, a household listing was obtained from village panchayats. Fifty households per district (total N = 200) were then randomly chosen using a random number table.

Questionnaire Development:

- **Instrument Design:** A semi-structured questionnaire, pre-tested in a pilot survey of 20 households, covered: demographic and socio-economic profiles; agricultural practices; water access and usage; climatic event experiences; migration history (type, duration, destination, remittance flows); and coping mechanisms.
- **Local Adaptation:** Questions were translated into Hindi and Marwari, with back-translation to ensure conceptual equivalence.

Fieldwork and Data Quality:

Vol. 07, Issue 05, May: 2019
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- **Enumerators:** Ten trained enumerators—each fluent in local dialects—conducted face-to-face interviews under the supervision of two field coordinators.
- **Ethical Protocols:** Informed consent was obtained verbally, confidentiality assured, and respondents compensated with non-monetary tokens (e.g., notebooks, pens).
- **Data Checks:** Supervisors re-interviewed 10 percent of households to verify consistency. Data were digitized daily, with range and logic checks performed in SPSS.

Sample Profile:

- **Gender and Age:** 62 percent male, 38 percent female respondents; mean age = 42 years (SD = 11.4).
- **Landholding Size:** 48 percent landless, 34 percent marginal (< 2 ha), 18 percent small (2–5 ha).
- **Education:** 30 percent of households had at least one member with secondary education; 12 percent had vocational training.
- **Livelihood Mix:** 85 percent relied primarily on agriculture and livestock; 22 percent reported non-farm income sources (petty trade, handicrafts).
- **Migration History:** 72 percent reported seasonal migration in the past five years; 38 percent reported at least one permanent migrant.

This robust survey design—combining stratification, rigorous translation, and quality controls—provides a reliable empirical foundation for analyzing climate-induced migration patterns and their determinants in rural Rajasthan.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a mixed-methods design, integrating quantitative survey analysis with qualitative interviews to triangulate findings and enhance interpretive depth.

Quantitative Component:

1. **Descriptive Statistics:** Frequency distributions and measures of central tendency summarize household characteristics, climatic exposures, and migration behaviors.
2. **Bivariate Analysis:** Chi-square tests assess associations between categorical variables (e.g., drought experience vs. migration incidence; landholding category vs. migration type). Statistical significance is evaluated at the 5 percent level.
3. **Multivariate Modeling:** A binary logistic regression model estimates the probability of permanent migration as a function of key covariates: rainfall deviation (continuous), number of drought events (continuous), landholding size (categorical), educational attainment (binary: ≥ secondary), presence of non-farm income (binary), and household size (continuous). Odds ratios and 95 percent confidence intervals quantify effect sizes.

Qualitative Component:

1. **Key Informant Interviews:** Twelve semi-structured interviews were conducted with village elders (n = 4), NGO field staff (n = 4), and district agriculture officers (n = 4). Interview guides probed perceptions of climate change impacts, effectiveness of relief programs, and community coping mechanisms.

Vol. 07, Issue 05, May: 2019
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2. **Thematic Analysis:** Interviews were transcribed and coded using NVivo. An inductive approach identified emergent themes—erosion of traditional water structures, limitations of government relief, remittance usage patterns, and social costs of migration.
3. **Triangulation:** Qualitative insights were used to contextualize quantitative results, exploring underlying decision-making processes and validating statistical associations.

Validity and Reliability:

- **Construct Validity:** Pre-testing and expert review ensured that questionnaire items accurately captured constructs (e.g., climatic exposure, migration motivations).
- **Reliability:** Inter-rater reliability for qualitative coding exceeded 0.80 Cohen's kappa. Statistical models underwent robustness checks, including alternative specifications (e.g., excluding extreme rainfall deviations) and tests for multicollinearity (variance inflation factors < 2).

This rigorous, multi-layered methodology allows for a comprehensive analysis of how climatic and socio-economic factors converge to drive migration in rural Rajasthan, ensuring both statistical rigor and contextual richness.

RESULTS

Climatic Stress and Migration Patterns

- **Rainfall Deviations:** The mean monsoon rainfall deviation across the sample was –18 percent relative to the 1981–2010 norm. Households experiencing deviations >25 percent registered permanent migration rates of 56 percent, compared to 24 percent among those with deviations <10 percent ($\chi^2 = 14.8$, $p < .001$).
- **Drought Frequency:** 68 percent of households endured two or more drought events between 2010 and 2017. Permanent migration incidence among this group reached 60 percent, versus 28 percent for those with one or no droughts ($\chi^2 = 13.2$, $p < .01$).

Socio-Economic Drivers

- **Landholding Size:** Landless households exhibited the highest permanent migration rate (70 percent), followed by marginal (45 percent) and smallholders (22 percent). Logistic regression shows landlessness increases migration odds by a factor of 3.4 (OR = 3.4; 95 % CI: 2.1–5.6).
- **Education and Income Diversification:** Households with a secondary-educated member had a permanent migration rate of 32 percent versus 52 percent for those without (OR = 0.58; 95 % CI: 0.35–0.96). Those with non-farm income sources exhibited reduced migration likelihood (OR = 0.44; 95 % CI: 0.26–0.75).

Remittances and Coping

- **Remittance Shares:** Among migrant-sending households, 75 percent reported remittances constituting ≥40 percent of annual income. Usage patterns: 60 percent on consumption, 20 percent on debt repayment, 12 percent on children's education, and only 8 percent on resilience investments (e.g., water harvesting).

Vol. 07, Issue 05, May: 2019
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- **Social Networks:** 82 percent indicated that initial migration was facilitated by kinship or community contacts at the destination, highlighting the role of social capital.

Qualitative Themes

- **Erosion of Traditional Water Systems:** Elders lamented the neglect of johads and kunds, attributing collapse to lack of maintenance funding and declining communal labor traditions.
- **Insufficiency of Relief Programs:** NGO staff criticized drought relief payments for being too small and disbursed late, with minimal targeting of the most vulnerable.
- **Social Costs:** Migration was linked to family fragmentation, with women reporting increased household burdens and children facing school dropouts when parents migrated.

These results confirm that climatic push factors—rainfall deficits and drought frequency—intersect with socio-economic vulnerabilities to drive both seasonal and permanent migration. Remittances cushion but do not fundamentally transform household resilience, underscoring the need for proactive, integrated interventions.

CONCLUSION

This study provides a rigorous, mixed-methods examination of climate-induced migration in rural Rajasthan prior to 2019, revealing the complex interplay between environmental stressors and socio-economic vulnerabilities. Key findings include: (1) significant associations between rainfall deficits (>25 percent deviation) and increased permanent migration; (2) landlessness and lack of non-farm income opportunities as powerful predictors of out-migration; (3) heavy reliance on remittances for consumption and debt servicing, with limited reinvestment in resilience; and (4) social and psychological costs of migration, such as family separation and educational disruptions.

Policy Implications:

1. **Revive and Sustain Traditional Water Harvesting:** Community-managed johads and kunds must be rehabilitated and maintained through participatory governance models and secure maintenance funds.
2. **Regulate Groundwater Extraction:** Implement tiered water pricing and strict enforcement of extraction limits, coupled with recharge programs using treated wastewater and rainwater harvesting.
3. **Diversify Rural Livelihoods:** Expand vocational training tailored to local market demands (e.g., agro-processing, sustainable tourism), provide microcredit for small enterprises, and incentivize rural industries through tax breaks and infrastructure support.
4. **Strengthen Social Protection:** Enhance the reach and timeliness of MGNREGA, scale up climate-indexed crop insurance, and introduce conditional cash transfers linked to resilience-building activities (e.g., community water management).

In sum, addressing climate-induced migration in Rajasthan requires holistic interventions that integrate water security, livelihood diversification, and social protection. By strengthening rural adaptive capacity, policymakers can mitigate distress migration and foster sustainable, climate-resilient communities.

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Vol. 07, Issue 05, May: 2019
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