

New Nomads and Fragmented Families: An examination into migration driven by empire and climate change

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Abstract

This essay examines and compares past historical migration with current and future climate migration. By viewing migration as a dynamic process, the essay uncovers that migration can offer solutions to challenges posed by climate change and concludes that migration, in any context, is a fragmented process.

1. Introduction

Migration is a dynamic and complex concept: challenging to quantify as it fluctuates and evolves. This dynamism is identified in Lee's migration model which accounts for temporally changing intervening obstacles (OCR, 2021). Migration is a vital process for humanity's stability from all angles; social, political, economic, and ecological which weave together to form a tapestry of humanity's progress. The UN (n.d.) defines migrants as those who move either internally or internationally from their homes irrespective of their legal status. It details that such movements are either voluntary or involuntary. Migration's fluidity is further emphasised in the plethora of causes and duration which are undefined, which shape its malleable and changing nature. Migration is a constant process, intertwined with the development of human civilisations, enhancing and challenging society through demographic changes, resource pressures and brain drain. A recent figure uncovered that international migrants comprised 3.5% of the global population in 2020 (UN,2024). As climate change evokes irreversible changes which threaten to displace people, migration is becoming increasingly important. This essay argues that migration has played a critical role in shaping societies of the past and will be key to managing climate threats globally.

My personal interest in migration stems from the movement of family members from India to Kenya and then on to England. Migration is not a finite process, as can be seen through the spread of the Gujarati Indian diaspora out of the subcontinent,

into Eastern Africa, then on to Britain, the US and Western Europe as expressed by Shah (2019), therefore populations can be considered as mobile, rather than static or fixed.

Having never migrated myself, through the lens of my family, I tried to understand their movement from India in the 1900s to Kenya under colonialism and the subsequent established diaspora. Whilst the presence of Indian diasporas in Kenya can be traced back to the 17th century (Roychowdhury, 2017), many Indians, particularly from northern regions of India were encouraged to migrate across the Indian Ocean to Eastern Africa during a period between the late 19th and the early 20th century. To comprehend this movement, I interviewed my grandfather to gain a personal perspective.

2. Migration due to colonialism

The British Empire and its colonial rule influenced the migration of peoples from the 19th century onwards. The creation of employment opportunities acted as a force to push and pull people to and from regions globally. After 1858, India became known as the British Raj with the British government directly ruling India (Roy, 2016). The British East African Company was granted a charter in 1888, paving the way for the colonisation of Kenya (Black History Month, 2022). The link between India and Eastern Africa, in particular Kenya and Uganda, was forged by British powers encouraging the economic migration of both skilled Indian engineers and specialised labourers for the construction of the Kenyan-Uganda Railway (Miller, 1971). Once Britain had secured Kenya as part of its empire, it required construction and labour to control, inhabit and maintain the hinterland of Eastern Africa, which allowed for the exploitation of natural resources unavailable in Britain. Following Slavery Abolition Act of 1833 (Henry, 2023), British polices formed opportunities for specialist workers to travel from India as there was imminent need for workers. Many of those who migrated across the Indian Ocean came from the regional areas of Gujarat, Punjab, and Goa (Shah, 2022). Whilst some intended to come merely for a sojourn, many were encouraged further to settle, and subsequent chain migration occurred as their families joined them to forge a new life. As Shah (2022) highlights, this inter-regional migration of skilled workers was invaluable for the development of trade, commerce, industry, agriculture and basic infrastructure in Eastern Africa, a demand of such scale that could not be met by the local Kenyan populations and their presence developed East African nations significantly.

This economic and political migration played a significant role in the growth of the Indian diaspora in East Africa. The fluidity and ease of this migration leant itself to the origin and host country both being ruled by the British. Moreover, to facilitate

this movement, British passports were granted and unlike other colonial migrations within the empire, no language or civic aptitude tests were required. The passports acted as travel documents and enabled the flow of people into the region. These passports would become highly valuable at a later stage when future pressures occurred triggering the next wave of migration (Shah, 2022).

By 1963 30% of Nairobi's population was of Indian heritage. Though many regions were mixed ethnically, under colonial administration a racial hierarchy evolved. Europeans were granted exclusive access to fertile highlands for agriculture, Indians worked as traders and the Africans were positioned beneath the Indians; thus racial, religious, and ethnic separation segregated society into classes and formed tensions as Indians played an intermediary role in the colonial hierarchy (Castles and Miller, 2009). However, owing to the length of Indian communities' presence in Eastern Africa and their historical establishment, Shah (2019, p.24) writes that 'the Indian immigrant community underwent a transformation into East African Asians' which formed a novel façade of their identity and was shaped by their sense of belonging and attachment to the region.

However, tensions arose during the 1960s as the British East African territories were on the edge of independence. These included the struggle for freedom and the right to self determination. Once Uganda and Kenya gained independence, their governments adopted a firm stance towards East African Asians (Shafi, 2020) especially on the topic of citizenship, providing Asians the chance to renounce their British passports under their Africanisation scheme. This aimed to replace non-citizens with citizens in key economic areas (Minority Rights Group International, 2018). Stricter rules and tougher regulations impinged on their daily lives and the exodus of Indians reached soaring statistics between 1967-69. The turmoil came to a head with the Asian Expulsion in Uganda in 1972 under the dictator Idi Amin. More than 50,000 members of the Asian population emigrated (Brown, 2022), and this sparked other Asians in the neighbouring countries of Tanzania and Kenya to emigrate, fearing the same could happen to them directly in time.

At this stage, a question of identity and nationality arose, and many decided to retain their colonial citizenship granted by the British upon their first migration to Eastern Africa. Those second-generation migrants, who did not give up this British identity to become a Kenyan citizen were granted rights to migrate, for the second time, and thus this provided a passage to Britain during the 1970s. This movement occurred as the politics of Eastern Africa shifted and saw businesspeople, civil servants, teachers, and other professionals, including my father and his family, travel to forge a new life in a novel place, finding themselves as nomads once again.

3. Climate change as a cause for migration

Shifting the lens of human movement to the present, a rapidly changing climate is placing pressure on populations worldwide. The feedback loops between human and physical environments have never been so strong (Khanna 2021). Legislation of the 20th century has made the migratory process significantly more challenging; legal barriers have been drawn up to control entry (Guinness 2002) and polarised politics have crafted the debate into 'us against them', an idea often rooted in racism. Climate migration occurring today is similar to colonial migration discussed above in its fragmented nature. Petersen's migration typology examines the relationship and origin of migration; current and future climate migration under his categorisation is between man and nature (more accurately man's impact on nature), which will cause flight from the land as peoples are pushed and displaced ecologically (Guinness 2002).

Climate change is displacing people from their homes and causing a great upheaval (Vince 2022) forcing them to migrate both within their country or internationally, where they face an onslaught of complex challenges including debates surrounding their rights and legality. In 2022, 32.6 million people were internally displaced due to disaster (IOM, 2022), although not all due to climate disaster. The effects of Anthropogenic climate change are countless; coastal and low-lying regions of the world including Pacific islands such as Tuvalu are affected by floods and sea level rise, and extreme weather catalysing the abandonment of regions over time as droughts and heat waves create an environment that ceases to support human life, ironically caused by human wrought transformations on the environment. People are stripped of choice, and many move from coastal areas inland to urban settlements, attracted by the promise of a perceived better way of life. However, this is hardly ever a reality, with informal settlements emerging due to poverty often alongside rural-urban migration as discussed by Niva, et al. (2019)

However, as we experience greater mobility and the urgency to move, migration can be harnessed and shaped into a solution, as Vince writes in her book 'Nomad Century' (Vince, 2022). The assimilation of diasporas: populations and members of ethnic or religious groups that originated from the same place but dispersed to different locations (Britannica, 2024), are key to developing our modern society into a resilient and long-term entity. Demographic decline in the global north is already underway; Germany is a prime example of this as its population demographics can be categorised under stage 5 of the Demographic Transition Model (DTM). Vince (2022) projects that worldwide population statistics will reach peak humanity in around 2064, however the rate of decline once this figure is reached is unknown. Peak humanity levels are being observed in North America, Europe, and Northeast Asia, where 'sub-replacement fertility levels can be found' (Khanna, 2021 p36).

Here a paradoxical answer to climate induced migration lies, as the nations with rapidly ageing populations and shrinking workforces will be those with the most desirable climates as the planet warms further. Land in Canada and Russia, located at northern latitudes could provide ideal climates and available land could be used to establish towns and human dwellings successfully. Global population redistribution will struggle to encompass everyone due to risk factors such as poverty, age, and a willingness to change. However, many displaced people stay within their own country. (Durand-Delacre, n.d.), so by continuing to establish connections and use diasporic communities now, migrations down the line will be frictionless and more appealing. However, as many migrants move internally, climate reparations for colonial injustices could be a method of funding adaptive solutions such as soft engineering techniques including mangrove planting which reduces coastal erosion and sequesters carbon. Moreover, immigration policies should plan for greater future mobility to reap the benefits of forthcoming migration, such as filling labour market gaps and contributing to the local economy via labour and tax. Displacement can be temporary or permanent and making climate mobility a viable option for those facing significant impacts may help reduce vulnerability and exert greater agency over the decision.

In conclusion, it is paramount that migration is viewed as an incomplete process, one where the destination is often uncertain and unknown, shaping migrants into nomads. Both the Indian diaspora in East Africa and current climate migration support this notion as shown by fragmented multi-step journeys. Migration's constant presence makes it widely topical and political polarisation can mean people lose touch with the human façade of the process, as Miroslav Lajčák, former President of the UN General Assembly stated (UN, 2017), 'migrants are people', highlighting the need to view migrants not as a foreign threat, but as a positive possibility. As António Guterres, General Secretary of the UN notes in a video released by the UN (2017); it is paramount that "human rights of all concerned are properly protected" "As all societies are becoming multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, and multireligious creating diversity and richness, the power of which can only be harnessed by social cohesion" and a willingness and comprehension to collaborate, learn and accept others is of the upmost relevance to today as climate change magnifies migration. Moreover, the long-term effects of colonialism on a country, such as ecological degradation and political instability, can weaken their capacity to cope and increase their vulnerability. Thus, colonial and climatic pressures can be both a cause and consequence of migration.

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