



Migration Diaspora And Remittance Review

Volume: 6
Issue: 3
Year: 2026
ISSN: 2791-254X

Water as Border: River Erosion, Climate Migration, and the Remapping of Social Identity

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Migration Diaspora and Remittance Review
pp.1-10

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<http://kmf-publishers.com/mdrr/>
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.64907/xkmf.v6i3.mdr.5>

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Abstract

This article examines how climate-driven river erosion transforms belonging and social identity among displaced communities living in ecologically volatile regions. The study addresses the central problem of how water functions simultaneously as a material boundary and a symbolic force within climate migration. Grounded in political ecology and border studies, the analysis conceptualises shifting riverbanks as fluid borders that reorder territorial attachments, memory, and cultural meaning. Using qualitative methods-ethnographic fieldwork, narrative interviews, and community storytelling-the research documents lived experiences of loss, relocation, and identity reconstruction. The findings reveal that erosion produces hybrid and contested identities shaped by vulnerability, resilience, and ritual continuity. Displaced families reconfigure belonging through shared memory, symbolic relationships with water, and collective strategies of adaptation despite systemic exclusion in host settlements. The core claim is that water acts as an active participant in identity-making, extending border theory beyond territorial demarcation into affective and cultural realms. The study contributes to climate migration scholarship by offering a relational understanding of ecological change and by emphasising water's agency in remapping social identities.

Keywords: river erosion, climate migration, ritual practices, territorial belonging, identity reconstruction, vulnerability

Introduction

Across South Asia, sub-Saharan Africa, and parts of Latin America, river erosion has emerged as one of the most disruptive yet understudied drivers of climate-induced displacement. Unlike sudden disasters such as cyclones or floods, riverbank collapse unfolds gradually, altering landscapes, livelihoods, and social structures over time. In erosion-prone regions-particularly the char islands and riverine belts of Bangladesh, India, and Nepal-water acts as both a life-sustaining resource and a force of territorial unmaking. As rivers shift course, entire settlements vanish, communities fragment, and borders-material and symbolic-are redrawn.

This article explores how displaced households interpret and reconstruct belonging under such conditions. The central argument is that water, particularly in the form of eroding riverbanks, operates not merely as a geographic boundary but as a dynamic border that reshapes social identity. While scholarship on borders often centres on political lines demarcated by states (Mezzadra and Neilson 8), climate erosion produces fluid borders governed by ecological forces rather than political authority. These transformations compel displaced people to negotiate identity through shifting landscapes, bureaucratic exclusions, and new host-community dynamics.

Political ecology offers critical tools for understanding how power, environment, and identity intersect in contexts of ecological disruption. Scholars such as Tania Li argue that environmental change is always embedded within social relations, resource

politics, and governance structures (Li 113). Similarly, border studies-particularly the work of Anzaldúa on “borderlands”-conceptualise borders as lived experiences that produce hybrid identities and affective tensions (Anzaldúa 25). By integrating these frameworks, this study conceptualises water as a border that simultaneously displaces, connects, and redefines communities.

Based on ethnographic fieldwork and narrative interviews conducted across erosion-affected settlements, the research highlights how displaced families narrate loss, adaptation, and the reconstruction of self. Their stories reveal that while erosion generates vulnerability, it also activates cultural memory, ritual practices, and resilience strategies that challenge dominant portrayals of climate migrants as passive victims. Instead, displaced communities creatively reconfigure social belonging through ritual continuity, labour networks, kinship solidarities, and symbolic relationships with water.

The article proceeds through five sections: the theoretical framework linking political ecology with border theory; methodology; analysis of identity and belonging under erosion; symbolic and ritual engagements with water; and the remapping of social identity in new geographies. The conclusion reflects on the implications for climate migration scholarship and the need for longitudinal research on intergenerational identity formation.

Theoretical Framework: Political Ecology, Border Studies, and Fluid Territoriality

Political ecology highlights how environmental transformations are inseparable from political economies, social inequalities, and historical marginalisation. Bryant and Bailey argue that ecological phenomena cannot be understood apart from the power structures shaping resource distribution and vulnerability (Bryant and Bailey 6). In the context of river erosion, this perspective illuminates how poverty, landlessness, and unequal access to relief interact with environmental forces. Communities living on river islands or embankments—often characterised by limited land rights and political marginalisation—experience erosion not as an isolated environmental event but as part of a broader landscape of structural precarity.

By foregrounding local narratives, this study reinforces the political ecology argument that climate impacts disproportionately burden those already positioned at social margins. Erosion, therefore, becomes a political event: a reconfiguration of territories and livelihoods shaped by state neglect, unequal infrastructural investment, and historical patterns of settlement.

Border studies interrogate how political boundaries shape identities, bodies, and everyday experiences. Gloria Anzaldúa's conceptualisation of the borderlands as spaces of hybridity, exclusion, and cultural negotiation provides a useful analogue for riverine displacement (Anzaldúa 32). However, unlike fixed borders, river borders move. As banks collapse and re-emerge, boundaries of ownership, memory, and belonging shift, producing what Mezzadra and Neilson describe as “differential

inclusion”—the gradated incorporation of migrants into new territories under uneven conditions (Mezzadra and Neilson 29).

In erosion contexts, displaced households often find themselves simultaneously inside and outside social belonging: geographically present yet socially excluded, physically relocated yet symbolically tied to vanished land. This duality forms the core of what I conceptualise as *fluvial borderlands*: zones where water-driven territorial shifts transform not only landscapes but also subjectivities.

Scholars such as Steinberg emphasise the agency of water in shaping social and political life (Steinberg 17). Water is mobile, unpredictable, and relational; it both creates and dissolves boundaries. In erosion-affected regions, rivers remake villages, redraw local jurisdictions, and force states to reassess land records. These processes reveal water's role as an active participant in territorial production rather than a passive backdrop.

Thus, this article extends border theory by proposing that water itself acts as a border—an ecological force that simultaneously divides and connects, shaping identities as it reshapes land.

Methodology

This study employed qualitative methodology grounded in ethnographic fieldwork across two erosion-affected regions: chars along the Brahmaputra River and low-lying riverbank settlements near the Ganges–Padma confluence. Fieldwork involved participant observation, community gatherings, and visits to eroded sites where

homes, schools, and cemeteries had once stood.

Thirty-five displaced individuals—primarily small farmers, fisherfolk, and day labourers—participated in narrative interviews. Rather than structured questionnaires, interviews encouraged storytelling, memory-sharing, and reflective accounts of loss, movement, and reconstruction. This approach aligns with Clandinin and Connelly's assertion that narratives offer insight into how people make meaning under conditions of transformation (Clandinin and Connelly 20).

Focus groups participated in evening storytelling sessions, where elders narrated previous erosions, migrations, and ritual practices connected to the river. These sessions offered generational perspectives on continuity and rupture.

All participants consented to interviews; pseudonyms maintain confidentiality. Data were analysed through thematic coding, focusing on belonging, identity, ritual, memory, and social exclusion.

Erosion, Displacement, and the Remaking of Identity

Unlike sudden disasters, erosion produces what Nixon calls “slow violence”—a gradual destruction that is invisible yet devastating (Nixon 2). Participants described erosion as “eating the land bit by bit,” transforming everyday uncertainty into a lived crisis. Homes were not merely destroyed; they were erased, leaving no material trace of belonging. The collapse of riverbanks thus signifies the collapse of territorial identity: land that once anchored kinship, memory, and livelihood disappears.

Fluidity of land produces fluidity of identity. Those displaced often lose legal documents, land records, and citizenship verification materials—key components of formal identity. Several respondents reported that in new settlements, they were labelled “refugees,” “outsiders,” or “char dwellers,” terms marking them as socially inferior. As one participant explained, “the river took our land, and the people here say we have no place.”

Erosion triggers profound emotional responses. Many described dreams of lost villages, submerged mosques, or buried family graves. Water became both a source of mourning and a memory archive: parents pointed toward the river to show children where their childhood homes once stood. Such recollections align with anthropological studies arguing that landscapes serve as repositories of collective memory (Basso 44). Yet memory also became a resource for resilience. Stories of previous generations who survived earlier erosions helped families contextualise their own displacement within longer cycles of adaptation.

Ritual practices—seasonal festivals, water offerings, communal prayers—played a central role in sustaining belonging. Even after relocating, families continued rituals associated with the river, reaffirming symbolic relationships with water despite the loss of physical territory. These practices align with Turner's concept of ritual as a stabilising force amidst liminality (Turner 95).

For example, during monsoon prayers, elders sprinkled river water on family members to invoke protection, even when the nearest

river was kilometres away. Ritual continuity thus anchored displaced communities, allowing cultural identity to outlive geographic displacement.

Many participants described water as a living force-not merely a geographic entity but an ancestral presence. One elder explained, “The river remembers us. We return to it even when it throws us away.” This personification reflects Indigenous and riverine ecological cosmologies in which water embodies spiritual agency (Strang 211). Symbolic interactions with water, therefore, enable displaced people to maintain a sense of home even while physically uprooted.

After relocation, displaced families confronted bureaucratic and social exclusion. Host communities often controlled access to land, water points, fishing areas, and agricultural leases. This exclusion mirrors Mezzadra and Neilson’s concept of “differential inclusion”—legal presence without rights (Mezzadra and Neilson 44). Many respondents initially lived in makeshift shelters on embankments or public lands, reinforcing their marginality. Local authorities often refused to update residency documents, making access to relief programs difficult.

Despite significant structural barriers, displaced families drew upon collective strategies to reconstruct livelihoods and re-establish a sense of belonging in their new settlements. Labour-sharing groups emerged as a crucial means of organising rice cultivation on limited and often insecure plots of land, enabling households to pool resources and reduce individual burdens. Parents and community elders

collaboratively constructed makeshift schools to ensure children’s education continued despite the absence of formal institutions. Informal savings groups developed as vital financial safety nets, allowing families to manage risk and address unexpected expenses. At the same time, displaced communities actively negotiated with local leaders for temporary access to cultivable land or settlement spaces. Together, these practices illustrate what Adger refers to as “social resilience,” the capacity of communities to reorganise, adapt, and reconstitute social cohesion amid ongoing disruption (Adger 347).

Women often played central roles in reproducing belonging within new settlements. Their involvement in ritual practices, food-sharing networks, and childcare created social cohesion. However, women also faced heightened vulnerability: reduced access to healthcare, increased domestic burdens, and gendered constraints on mobility. Yet their storytelling emerged as a powerful tool of identity reconstruction. Narrative interviews revealed that mothers served as cultural transmitters, teaching children about lost homelands through stories, songs, and rituals.

Erosion challenges conventional notions of fixed territorial borders. Land disappears, reappears, and shifts jurisdictionally. Participants noted that entire villages “changed districts” as rivers redrew administrative boundaries. These shifts destabilised concepts of home and belonging rooted in stable geography. Scholars argue that border-making is not only political but also affective (Paasi 24). Erosion reveals this

vividly: families experience borders as emotional ruptures as much as spatial ones.

Displaced communities develop hybrid identities shaped by both the vanished homeland and the new settlement. Children born after migration often possess no memory of the original village, yet inherit stories, rituals, and nostalgia from elders. Their identities, therefore, blend past and present geographies. This hybridity resonates with Anzaldúa's understanding of borderlands identities marked by fragmentation yet rich in cultural negotiation (Anzaldúa 43). In erosion contexts, hybrid identity emerges not from political boundaries but from ecological ones.

The findings further indicate that water plays an active role in shaping identity through both material effects and symbolic meaning-making. As a boundary-maker, the river continually produces new borders, transforming territorial relationships and redefining belonging. It also functions as a memory-holder, anchoring stories of lost land and eroded villages within community narratives. Ritual interactions with water allow displaced families to maintain cultural continuity, marking water as a medium through which ancestral practices are sustained. Moreover, water operates as an agent of power by influencing land rights, social status, and the legitimacy of claims to territory. Steinberg's notion of water's agency helps illuminate these dynamics, emphasising that water acts upon human life not merely as a natural feature but as a force imbued with political and symbolic significance (Steinberg 19). Displaced communities interpret this agency as integral

to their identity narratives, viewing the river as both a source of loss and a continuing presence in the reconstruction of self and community.

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal how climate-driven river erosion reshapes belonging, identity, and social relations in displaced communities. Although often framed as a geomorphological process, participants' narratives show that its consequences extend far beyond physical land loss. For affected families, erosion is a slow force that destabilises homes, livelihoods, and the symbolic landscapes through which identity is rooted. This discussion examines four interconnected dimensions: erosion as a fluid border; identity reconstruction through memory and ritual; negotiations of belonging in new environments; and the role of water as an active agent in shaping social identity.

A key insight is that erosion acts as a form of border-making distinct from state boundaries. While political borders are fixed, ecological borders created by river erosion shift continually and unpredictably. As rivers eat away land, new margins form and old ones disappear, producing ecological borderlands that are dynamic and unstable, reflecting Mezzadra and Neilson's view of borders as ongoing processes. Participants described how one night of heavy river flow could turn a secure inland village into a frontline settlement. One respondent recounted losing a home once considered safely distant from the riverbank, only to see it claimed by the river within a month. Such experiences align with Nixon's concept of

“slow violence,” where gradual environmental change produces destructive impacts over time. This constant movement erases stable boundaries and undermines legal and emotional claims to land.

The fluidity of these borders also erodes identities tied to territorial belonging. Families who lost land struggled to prove ownership when documents were swept away, prompting host communities to question their legitimacy as landowners or recipients of relief. Identities grounded in long-standing roles-farmer, villager, landholder-became contested. These patterns echo Bryant and Bailey’s argument that environmental change intersects with structural inequalities, placing heavier burdens on marginalised groups. Ultimately, erosion creates borders through environmental force rather than political authority, fragmenting communities and compelling them to renegotiate belonging in unfamiliar spaces.

Identity reconstruction among displaced individuals was deeply shaped by memory. Many framed their sense of self through recollections of the lost homeland, which became an imagined geography held together through collective storytelling and shared recollection. This echoes Basso’s argument that landscapes function as repositories of memory; however, in erosion-prone regions, the landscape disappears, leaving memory as the only surviving terrain. Participants described their former homes in vivid detail-the sound of cattle bells at dawn, the scent of jujube trees, or the curve of the riverbank-suggesting that the erased landscape persists

symbolically even after physical disappearance.

Memory served as a source of resilience as well. Stories of previous generations who survived similar losses positioned present suffering within a longer historical cycle, allowing individuals to reinterpret displacement as part of a continuing narrative of adaptation. This aligns with Clandinin and Connelly’s view that narratives are crucial for meaning-making during periods of instability. Yet memory also created emotional strain. Many respondents expressed intense longing for the lost village, reflecting what scholars describe as solastalgia-the distress caused by environmental loss. Young people faced particular tensions: they inherited a rich memory of a place they never personally inhabited while navigating marginalisation in new settings where belonging remained uncertain.

Ritual practices emerged as key mechanisms through which displaced communities sustained continuity and reconstituted identity. Even after moving away from the river, families continued water-related rituals such as monsoon prayers and purification rites. These practices reflect Turner’s view of ritual as stabilising during liminal periods. Ritual continuity preserved cultural rhythms and allowed families to symbolically reconnect with the river that shaped their earlier lives. Many participants attributed spiritual meaning to water, describing the river as a “living ancestor” with agency and memory. Strang’s work on water symbolism helps explain this persistence, as water often embodies life, continuity, and transformation.

Even reduced festivals and communal prayers acted as social anchors, reinforcing unity and collective memory amid displacement.

Relocation also brought challenges related to social acceptance and access to resources. Host communities frequently viewed newcomers as outsiders competing for scarce land and employment, illustrating what Mezzadra and Neilson call “differential inclusion”-where displaced groups are incorporated yet denied full recognition. Many families settled on embankments, government land, or costly rented plots, leaving them vulnerable to eviction. Bureaucratic barriers intensified this insecurity as households struggled to register for aid, update documentation, or enrol children in school. These patterns support Li’s argument that environmental crises intersect with governance systems that selectively extend or withhold support.

Despite these hardships, displaced communities developed collective strategies to rebuild belonging. Labour-sharing groups facilitated small-scale cultivation, informal savings networks offered financial protection, and makeshift schools restored a semblance of normalcy for children. Such community-led initiatives resonate with Adger’s notion of social resilience-the capacity of groups to reorganise under stress. Gender roles played an important part in this process. Women frequently sustained cultural practices, maintained social bonds, and acted as key transmitters of memory through storytelling and ritual leadership. Yet their responsibilities expanded under displacement, intensifying labour burdens

and limiting access to healthcare and mobility. This gendered dimension highlights the need for more targeted support for women in climate-induced migration contexts.

A key conceptual contribution of this study lies in recognising water as an active participant in shaping social identity. Water’s agency is expressed both materially-by reshaping land, borders, and livelihoods-and symbolically, through its cultural meanings and spiritual significance. This aligns with Steinberg’s argument that water actively influences social and political life rather than functioning as a neutral backdrop. Participants often viewed the river as a force with intention: some interpreted erosion as punishment, others as renewal, and still others as part of a cyclical human-nature relationship. These interpretations challenge anthropocentric assumptions in migration studies that view environmental forces merely as triggers rather than co-authors of social experience.

By acknowledging water as agentive, the study extends border theory into ecological domains where environmental forces-not political authorities-determine the shifting boundaries of belonging. The river becomes a border that moves, remembers, and shapes identity. This reconceptualisation invites scholars to rethink territoriality in contexts where climate processes reorder space and social life simultaneously.

Overall, the findings show that river erosion generates complex disruptions that reshape identity through fluctuating borders, memory work, ritual continuity, and symbolic relationships with water. Displaced individuals respond with resilience and

cultural creativity, producing hybrid identities that merge the memory of the lost homeland with the lived realities of new settlements. The study advances climate migration scholarship by framing displacement as an ecological, cultural, and emotional process rather than a solely geopolitical one.

Conclusion

This article demonstrates that climate-driven river erosion is not merely an environmental hazard but a profound social and cultural force that reshapes identity, belonging, and territoriality. Through political ecology and border studies, the analysis conceptualises water as an active border-one that redraws geographies and reconstitutes social identities.

The findings show that displaced communities experience erosion as both loss and possibility: while vulnerability and exclusion dominate early stages of migration, resilience emerges through ritual continuity, collective strategies, and reimagined relationships with water. Identity becomes hybrid and fluid, shaped by both the vanished homeland and the new settlement.

The study contributes to climate migration scholarship by expanding border theory into ecological and affective domains. Recognising water as an active participant challenges static understandings of territory and highlights the need for nuanced, culturally informed climate adaptation policies.

Future research should pursue longitudinal studies tracing how successive generations negotiate belonging under continuous

ecological change. Such work would deepen our understanding of intergenerational identity-making in environmentally volatile regions.

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