



# The North East Indian Migrants In Chennai In The Contemporary Context Of Global Migration: Challenges And Prospects

<sup>1</sup>Wapangtoshi

<sup>1</sup>Research Scholar (Ph.D. Student), Department of Christian Studies, University of Madras, Chennai, India.

**Abstract:** This study examines the experiences of North East Indian migrants in Chennai within the broader contemporary context of global migration. Migration has become a universal phenomenon in recent years. Millions of people all over the world move out of their normal place of residence to seek their fortune elsewhere (Joseph, 1988). Industrialization and economic development go side by side with the growth and expansion of the urban areas. Migrants tend to shift from regions of lower economic avenues to those of higher economic avenues (Prabir C. Bhattacharya, 2000). Some of the factors of migration from the context of North East India basically are education, livelihood, job opportunities, and better life. Most of the migrants from the region particularly the uneducated or less educated or skilled ones voluntarily leave their place in search of better economic opportunities and work in various companies, building projects, shopping malls and hospitality industries (Walotemjen, 2018). The state of Tamil Nadu reported 12.39 million migrants in the 2011 Census, while it was only 3.95 million in the 2001 Census. The State added the highest number of migrants (8.47 million) among all states in India, registering a growth rate of 213.7 per cent (Rabiul Ansary, 2018). Therefore, there are large numbers of North East Indian migrants in the state of Tamil Nadu, particularly in Chennai Metropolitan Area. Migration normally leads to higher income, savings and remittances with positive implication for human development and poverty reduction. But some migrants also face hardships in availing basic necessities of life like housing, education and health facilities. Human migration being an international phenomenon has voluminous study both at the international and national levels. Considering these facts, the paper focuses on the study of the North East Indian migrants in Chennai and its challenges as well as prospects.

**Index Terms** - Global Migration, North East Indian Migrants in Chennai Metropolitan Area, Tamil Nadu State Government.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Migration has become a universal phenomenon in recent years. Millions of people all over the world move out of their normal place of residence to seek their fortune elsewhere (Joseph, 1988).

Migration is the temporary or permanent movement of individuals or group (s) of people from one geographical location to another for various reasons. Since the pre-historic times, migration has been an international phenomenon although there might be some differences in the types of migration at different times and in different regions. In the words of Lewis and Thompson, "Three factors probably determined in large measure the pre-historic distribution of the world: (i) the nature of the physical environment; (2) the techniques and tools the group had developed to make use of the resources found in its particular environments; (3) the social organization of the group." It also appears that in the ancient times since the river valleys had better transportation and fertile soil for cultivation the people felt attracted to migrate to the places which are near to the river valleys and lakes. The modern trend of migration has its own characteristics. The trend has changed from just economic gain to building colonies for power. People gradually migrate to new areas provided it is not hindered by political and cultural issues. The volume of migration is influenced by

prevailing socio-economic conditions at the place of destination and the attitude of the host community. Sometimes the social and economic security enjoyed by migrants encouraged them to invite their families, relatives, and friends to avail the same opportunities. The next stage of migration can be of the present day where usually qualified, competent and healthy people migrate in search of jobs and improving their life career.

During the second half of the 20th century, India witnessed a tremendous increase in the level of migration of people from rural to urban areas. The same century also witnessed the huge movement of North East Indians to mega cities of India in search of better prospects in life. The trend continued and peak during the year 2005-2010. Over 414,850 people from Northeast India migrated to other megacities of India during 2005 and 2010. It is twelve (12) times growth from 34,000 populations in 2005 within six (6) years. 66.35% of North East Indian migrants migrated for higher studies while 35% of migrants migrate for employment opportunities (Chandra, 2011). The basic factors that have influenced the mobility of people from one region to another have been the uneven distribution of population, unbalanced utilization of resources, and variation in economic and cultural developments (Gutkar, n.d). Besides these, natural disasters, lack of employment opportunities, financial crisis, the influence of family members, availability of jobs, and easy access to the city's informal economy are few specific factors that induce migration.

## 2. PROFILE OF NORTH EAST INDIA

North-East of India was one political entity named Assam before the rest of the states were carved out of it. The entire North-East of India has been a plot of amalgamation of different cultures and ethnic groups settled here. During the entire British colonial period in India, North East India was ruled as a part of Bengal Province. The state of Assam came into existence in 1874. When India became independent from the United Kingdom in 1947, only three states covered the area. Manipur and Tripura were princely states, while a much larger Assam province was under direct British rule. Four new states were carved out of the original territory of Assam in the decades following independence, in line with the policy of the Indian government of reorganizing the states along ethnic and linguistic lines. Accordingly, Nagaland became a separate state in 1963, followed by Meghalaya in 1972 and Arunachal Pradesh in 1975. Mizoram became a Union Territory in 1972, and achieved statehood - along in 1987. Manipur and Tripura remained as Union Territories of India between 1956 until 1972 when they attained full-fledged statehood. Sikkim was integrated as the eighth North Eastern Council state in 2002. Accordingly, the North East Region (NER) refers collectively to the eight states located in the midst of the East Himalayan region, comprising Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura. The city of Shillong acted as the capital of the Assam province created during the British rule. It remained as the capital of undivided Assam until formation of the state of Meghalaya in 1972. The capital of Assam was then shifted to Dispur, a part of Guwahati, and Shillong became the capital of Meghalaya (Debnath & Avijit, 2016).

The North East India region represents a picture of great ethnic and cultural pluralism because of the presence of vast number of tribal communities having distinct languages and culture. The Government of India, Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment in 2018 said, there are 747 Scheduled Tribes notified under Article 342 of the constitution of India, spread over different States and Union Territories of the country out of which 139 are of North East India. Except some plain communities, all the tribes of the region are predominantly from the Mongoloid stock. The original home of these Mongoloid people is believed to be the upper courses of the Yangtse-kiang and the Hoang-ho in the north-west China. Historically speaking, the Kiratas/Bodo-Kacharis are among the earliest known inhabitants from the Mongoloid stock. Besides, various tribes of Tibeto-Burman race as well as Negroits, the Austro-Asiatics and Dravidians also are believed to be early inhabitants of the region (Government of India. Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, 2018).

As per the Census 2011, the population of the North East India region is about 45 million (4.5 crore), consisting 3.78% of the total population of India (Ministry of Development of North East Region Government of India, Annual Report 2019-2020).

Geographically, North East India region is an unexplored paradise with abundant natural landscapes and beauty, wild life, flora and fauna, historical temples and monuments and its colourful people. Its biodiversity, geography and diversified cultural heritage create the region a plot of recreational sports, cultural, religious and nature travellers but also make it the most beautiful ecotourism destination in south Asia. Topographically, the region is a mixture of hills and plains. While Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Mizoram, and Nagaland are almost entirely hilly, about four-fifths of Assam is plains. Manipur and Tripura have both plain areas and hilly tracts. The hills account for about 70 per cent area and accommodate about 30 percent of the population of the region, and the plains constituting the remaining 30 percent of area holds



about 70 per cent. The North East region is connected to the rest of India by a 22 km wide stretch of land (at Siliguri, West Bengal). It shares 2,000 Km. of international borders with Nepal, Bhutan, China (Tibet), Myanmar and Bangladesh. Flanked by hills and with the mighty Brahmaputra River slashing a central path between its north and south, the North East is bounded by the states of Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura with Assam comprising the heart. Arunachal Pradesh lies to its north and Sikkim a little away in the North West bordering China and Bhutan. Bangladesh and Myanmar lie to its southwest and east. The torrential Brahmaputra deposits its rich alluvial silt along the banks of the plains of Assam. Tropical rain forest, rich in flora and fauna, spread their arms across Arunachal Pradesh into Assam. It is a land where tea is an industry, handicrafts a major occupation and martial arts a favoured sport.

The western side of the North East is connected to the eastern part of the Indian subcontinent by a narrow land corridor, sometimes referred to as the Siliguri Neck or "Chicken's Neck". The eight states that comprise the region reflect ecological and cultural contrasts between the hills and the plains; there are also significant elements of continuity. Available medieval and modern records indicate interdependence and interaction between the hills and plains. The North East is one of the most biodiversity regions in the world. The forest cover varies but average 65 percent is government owned. Village communities, individuals and chiefs own the rest. The area can be divided into three geographical divisions-the Shillong Plateau, the North Eastern hill Basin and the Brahmaputra Valley. The area is characterised by rich bio-diversity, heavy precipitation and high seismicity. It is endowed with forest wealth and is ideally suited to produce a whole range of plantation crops, spices, fruits and vegetables and flowers and herbs. Northeast India has a predominantly humid sub-tropical climate with hot, humid summers, severe monsoons and mild winters. Along with the west coast of India, this region has some of the Indian sub-continent's last remaining rain forests. The states of Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim have a montane climate with cold, snowy winters and mild summers (NER Vision 2020). India is having the largest concentrations of tribal population of the world (8.1%) and North East region occupies 8.55% of the tribal population in India. The region is shared by the tribals and non-tribals. The percentage of non-tribals is 47.22 percent but the land area under the tribals as a whole is more than the area under non-tribal. Among the eight states, four states have tribal population as a majority; specifically, Mizoram (94.5 per cent), Nagaland (89.1 per cent), Meghalaya (85.9 per cent), and Arunachal Pradesh (64.2 per cent) (NER Vision 2020).

The distribution of population according to religion reveals that not only Hinduism, Christianity has also been the predominant religion in north east region. Christians now comprise the majority of the population in Nagaland, Mizoram and Meghalaya. As per 2001 Census report the concentration of the Christian is very high in Nagaland (90%), Mizoram (87%), Meghalaya (70.3%), Manipur (34%) and Arunachal Pradesh (18.7%). Hinduism is predominant in Tripura (85.6%) followed by Assam (64.9%), Sikkim (60.9%), Manipur (46%), and Arunachal Pradesh (34.6%). The concentration of Muslim is highest in Assam (30.9%) followed by Manipur (8.8%) and Tripura (8%). Typically, the Buddhists are largest in Sikkim (28%), followed by Arunachal Pradesh (13%). Though the Christians are the smallest in Tripura (3.2%) and Assam (3.7%) as per as northeast region is concerned yet these States record higher concentration of Christian population than all India (2.3%). Thus, it reveals that though Hindu and Muslim population constitute about 95 per cent of the entire population in the country but this pattern is not followed in northeast India. The region accommodates different communities of people having different religious faiths (Debnath & Avijit, 2016).

### 3. MIGRATION OF NORTH EAST INDIANS TO CHENNAI

The reason for North East Indians' migration to Chennai can be studied under the two factors, the 'push factors' and the 'pull factors'. The push factors that push one out of the region are socio-political unrest in the region, lack of employment and lack of education facilities. The pull factors to the Chennai are employment opportunities both in government and private sectors, a better environment for study with multiple choices of studies and North East people feel safe in Chennai.

"The phenomenon of migration – be it international or internal migration, North East India is not in an exception. Great number from the region is migrating to other regions and cities due to various factors. Some of the factors of migration from the context of North East India basically are education, livelihood, job opportunities, and better life. Most of the migrants from the region particularly the uneducated or less educated or skilled ones voluntarily leave their place in search of better economic opportunities and work in various companies, building projects, shopping malls and hospitality industries feel safe in Chennai" (Walotemjen, 2018).

The state of Tamil Nadu reported 12.39 million migrants in the 2011 Census, while it was only 3.95 million in the 2001 Census. The State added the highest number of migrants (8.47 million) among all states in India, registering a growth rate of 213.7 percent (Rabiul Ansary, 2011). Since 2014, the North East India Welfare Association Chennai (NEIWAC, 2014) has been addressing various issues faced by North East Indian migrants in Chennai and other parts of Tamil Nadu, often in collaboration with different organizations. For instance, during the global COVID-19 pandemic, NEIWAC assisted in the repatriation of over 25,531 stranded people from the Northeast region who were living in Tamil Nadu, working together with the Government of India and the Government of Tamil Nadu. It also organized Government Community Shelters to accommodate more than 7,750 homeless individuals from the Northeast, including five dedicated shelter homes supported by the Greater Chennai Corporation. In addition, NEIWAC provided dry rations to over 5,000 Northeast migrants in collaboration with various Chennai-based NGOs and the Tamil Nadu government, particularly for those severely affected by the economic impact of the pandemic (NEIWAC, 2020).

Moreover, when the Aadhaar Card a biometric identification system was introduced in India, NEIWAC took the initiative to facilitate Aadhaar enrolment for the Northeast community in Chennai. As a result, hundreds of people were able to obtain their Aadhaar Cards locally, without having to travel hundreds of miles back to Northeast India.

### 3. PROSPECTS OF NORTH EAST INDIAN MIGRANTS IN CHENNAI

Over the past few years, the migration of North East Indians have increased and many people attracted towards Chennai because the city offers them with variety of job opportunities across various sectors. And their poor economic situation pushes them out of their states in search of opportunities. Since the conduct of census in 2011, there have been various studies that indicate the shift of Northeast migration from the north to the south. Migration from Northeast to Delhi has declined by 26% (Singh & Gandhiok, 2019). There has been significant flow of Northeast migrants to Kerala (Narayana & Venkiteswaran, 2013), Chennai (Banti Deori, 2016; Samuel Douminthang Baite & Xavier, 2020) and Bangalore (Marchang, 2018). South India has experienced fast industrialization, has higher wage rate and a relatively more tolerant community. This has attracted migrants from the Northeast in recent years.

North East Indians decide to work in Chennai due to many reasons. That includes better infrastructure, improved educational facilities, employment for all levels, good public transportation, and friendly working environment with attractive and lucrative salary. The Northeast Indian migrants have the opportunity to start small businesses in Chennai because they feel that the city is the best place for their survival. Their business includes road side eateries, restaurants, etc. There are many reasons that provoke North East Indians to leave their states. That includes natural calamities like erosion and flood, conflicts over ethnicity, armed forces attack, financial problem and agricultural issues. As in most of the areas only agriculture is practiced the income level is less and it stimulates the Northeast people to look for a change (Kiruthiga & Magesh, 2017).

### 4. CHALLENGES OF THE NORTH EAST INDIANS IN CHENNAI

Adaptation to a new environment is a big challenge for migrants everywhere. In Chennai these challenges appear mostly in the form of language barrier, social and cultural gap for the North East Indians. The financial crisis, the pain of being separated from family, etc., also added to their challenges. In recent times many cities in the country have become unsafe for North East Indians especially for women. Unprepared they come, unprepared they faced and unprepared yet to face them (challenges) (Samuel Douminthang Baite & Gladston Xavier, 2020).

Stereotyping by the host community is a common challenge encountering by the North East Indian migrants which leads to difficulty to find the accommodations such as rental house, paying guests due to different food habits, socio-cultural difference, racial differences, etc. The North East Indian migrants also experienced racial discrimination in different situations in Chennai. For instance, during the initial period of Covid-19 pandemic the host community members in different parts of Chennai racially discriminated the North East Indian migrants by putting the blame for spreading the Covid-19 virus because of their similarities in appearance with Chinese. This serious matter was reported to the Tamil Nadu Police Department by the North East India Welfare Association Chennai during their meeting with senior police officials such as Commissioner of Greater Chennai City Police, Assistant Inspector General of Police and Order) and Assistant Commissioner of Police (Intelligent Section) Greater Chennai City Police on 20th March, 2020 (Prabhakar, 2020).



Many North East Indian unskilled workers in Chennai get into jobs without signing a job contract on their salary and working hours which enable the employers to exploit them. “On August 5th, 2019 when four youth from Northeast were assaulted by their employer in Chennai and their video went viral on social media a Northeast NGO in Chennai rescued them and provided accommodation. Later, assisted them for the proper rehabilitation along with the concern authority” (Nagaland Post, 2019).

Some come even through human trafficking, particularly the women. They come to the cities in search of jobs but end up in trafficking and various other vulnerable situations. Women are perhaps the easy target and the most vulnerable to abuse, exploitation of all sorts. Young girls are more frequently becoming victims of such situation. So, their life is insecure in many ways. Often there are open threat, physical assault, verbal abuse, sexual harassment, etc.

In 2015, the anti-vice squad of the Chennai city police rescued some North East Indian girls during the raids; the police had arrested pimps and rescued the girls from their custody. The girls were lured on the promise of regular jobs in private firms and massage parlours and were eventually pushed into prostitution (The New Indian Express, 2015).

To address these challenges there is no easy answers therefore there is a need for a collective effort from the state authority, civil society, academia and the concern communities. One instance of this is when the COVID-19 pandemic struck in 2020 (Gilon, 2020), and all of the NGOs from the northeast worked together under the North East India Welfare Association Chennai (NEIWAC) to assist the stranded migrants in Chennai (Prabhakar, 2020).

## 5. CONCLUSION

The North East Indians migrates to Chennai due to a mixture of necessity and opportunity. They inhabit the social space of the city and benefit from the economic and opportunities it offers despite of multiple challenges. In a landmark announcement made by the Tamil Nadu State Government on 31st March 2023, an Inter-State Migrant Workers Co-Ordination Cell – Constituted with a State Level Advisory Committee and four Zonal Level Co-ordination Committees in Chennai, Coimbatore, Madurai and Trichy, in order to build the confidence and to sort out issues relating to the migrant workers. As migrant workers are vital for Tamil Nadu economic development it takes a compassionate and social view. In this initiative the Tamil Nadu Government has included the representatives from the North East Indian community in Chennai as well as in other districts of Tamil Nadu which will render guidance and assistance to the people from the India's North East region. Such inclusive efforts in various areas will promote better understanding between the North East Indian migrant community and the host community.

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