

**SHARED IDENTITIES AND BLURRING BORDERS:
THE CASE OF NORTH EAST MIGRANTS IN URBAN CENTRES**

Babu P. Remesh¹

Abstract

The paper discusses the `identity crises experienced by the out-migrants from India's North-East Region (NER) in urban centres. It is explained that the migrants from the region (who differ considerably in terms of ethnic and state-specific identities) usually get identified as a homogenous group in the host destinations. Often, such `ascribed' and `shared identities' lead to `blurring of borders' – both geographical and ethnic. Due to a `cultural gap' between the host and native societies, the migrants often have to delimit their socialisations into certain enclaves (or ghettos) as these migrant-neighbourhoods provide mutual support, common facilities and social networks. In these shared social spaces, even members from communities which are in continuous conflict in their native states are found living harmoniously. Furthermore, many of the ethnic groups are found coming together in urban centres to raise their common concerns. In a way, urban-migration helps merging of diverse groups in the city-space. In this context, the paper argues that, out-migration often leads to blurring of political, geographical, ethnic boundaries and helps in creation of new migrant-identities and boundaries.

Key Words: Migration, North-East India, Identity Crisis, Social Networks

Introduction

During the past two decades, there has been a visible and growing trend of urban-bound, out-migration from the North Eastern Region (NER)² of India. Majority of the migrants are youth, who have moved outside their native states essentially for higher education and employment. Prominence of this new stream of internal migration, its possible determinants and some of the implications are discussed in some of the extant research studies (Chyrmang, 2011, Remesh, 2012 a; 2012 b, NESC & H, 2011; Mc Duie-Ra, 2012a, Lusome& Bhagat, 2020). Unlike many other migration-streams, the youth-migration from North East is unique especially when one considers some of its underlying features. Firstly, this stream of migration is from a region, which was perennially known for lower levels of out-migration

¹Professor & Dean, School of Development Studies and Director, Centre for Research Methods, Ambedkar University Delhi (AUD), Delhi. Email: babu@aud.ac.in.

A draft version of this paper was presented at the National Conference on "On Borders and Borderlands : Negotiating the `Margins' under Globalisation", February 7-8, Institute of Development Studies, Kolkata. The author is grateful to the participants of this conference, for constructive comments. Usual disclaimers apply.

²NER comprises of eight states namely Assam, Meghalaya, Manipur, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Tripura, Mizoram, and Sikkim.

till the beginning of the present century³. Secondly, unlike other major groups of internal migration, the northeasterners are found leaving their native lands not due to resource-scarcity and poverty but to escape conflicts or to pursue more peaceful and secure educational and livelihood options. Thirdly, (contrary to the faulty assumption of Northeasterners as a homogenous group) this set of migrants reflects vast and wide ethnic and social complexities, as North East is home to large number of ethnic and tribal communities. Finally, the Northeasterners also stand out among other internal-migrant groups in India in terms of their unique human resource endowments, especially in terms of education (often better vis-a-vis the people of host-regions). Due to all these specificities, the issues faced by the north-east migrants in host regions (urban centres) are also found distinctly different from the other streams of migrants (from rest of India).

By now, it is widely understood and acknowledged that migrants from the North East region have to negotiate with many instances of social exclusion and discrimination in their day to day lives in far-away cities. A closer examination suggests that a major issue being experienced by the migrants from NER in far away destinations is an 'identity crisis', which eventually lead to reconstruction of identities that often crosses or alters the conventional demarcations/boundaries of states and communities defined geo-politically. In this context, the present paper attempts to discuss the implications of out-migration from North East Region on redefining the political, geographical and ethnic boundaries of the states and the people from this region, based on the author's own field work in the National Capital Region, for the past one decade.

Urban-bound Migration from North-East: A Profile

Out-migration of youth from the NER on a large scale, towards far off cities in other parts of the country is a recent phenomenon. The region is traditionally considered as a receiving pocket of migrants and accordingly most of the scholarship on migration pertaining to the NER, till recently, was confined to issues and dimensions of in-migration. However, there has been an incessant increase in out-migration since 1980s, a trend that got further strengthened in the immediate past.

Available empirical evidences suggests that several thousands of people from various states of NER have by now shifted to urban centres such as Delhi and National Capital Region (NCR), Bengaluru, Mumbai, Chennai, Calcutta, Chandigarh, Hyderabad and Pune. Apart from these metro and big-city destinations, some of the migrates also move to city-outskirts and smaller of far-off states (Remesh, 2012 a). This unprecedented massive move of population (mostly young) can be attributed to both 'push' and 'pull' factors (NESC & H, 2011). Among the former category, the tensed socio-political scenarios and the resultant economic and educational backwardness of the North-eastern states is the most prominent reason. Coming to the 'pull factors' (especially for those who move to cities), the most important considerations are better opportunities for education and employment. For most of the migrants, a move to urban centres provides better scope for acquiring quality education and accessing better jobs. In a period of globalisation and advent of new economy jobs (including those in BPOs, shopping malls and other innumerable service sector occupations), this trend got further momentum as the capacity of the educational system and the local employment scenes strikingly fall behind the aspirations and expectations of the youth in NER. Accordingly, a major pattern of movement of youth from

³Based on Census data, Lusome and Bhagat (2020) points out that, in 2011, there was a little over one million out-migrants from the seven states of Northeast India (except Sikkim), which accounts for 2.2 % of the total population.

NER to the cities has been that of a 'two-step migration', where the migrants initially reach the city for education and eventually continues there for employment (Remesh, 2012a; 2012 b). Despite the availability of reliable secondary data, from various field-based studies and from media reports, it is evident that the above trend of youth migration from North East to the cities, especially for education and employment is going to continue unabated in the coming years.

Social Discrimination and Marginalisation of Migrants in the Cities

Along with the increase in the quantum of migration of Northeasterners to various urban centres in India, there has also been growing and alarming statistics on the violence and atrocities being experienced by the youth from NER in the host-cities. The nature of such insults and atrocities ranges from instances of verbal abuse to shocking cases of suicides, rapes, molestations and lynching.

Verbal abuse and non-violent acts of discrimination are the most commonly experienced social insults by majority of the migrants. Use of derogatory words (like 'chinki') and doubting their nationality (e.g. Are you from Japan?) is a most frequently pointed out verbal abuse. Another major form of discriminations being faced by the Northeasterners in the city can be viewed as 'exploitation/discrimination as consumers. Local landlords charging exorbitant rents, auto-wallahs charging higher rates (which is put as 'skin tax' (!) by one of the respondents (Remesh, 2012 a) are some of the examples for this.

Denial of citizenship rights is another major way of social exclusion. Quite often the migrants are discouraged or practically objected by the local communities while enrolling the former in the voter list. Such resistance towards including the migrants in the electoral rolls is often due to a perceived anxiety of the locals apropos the likely enhancement of bargaining power of the migrant population, if they are given a chance to actively participate in the local politics.

Discriminations also happens in the workplaces which include: higher workloads, extended working hours, non-sanctioning of leaves, discriminatory norms in promotion, withholding of salaries, sexual harassments and so on. While many of the discriminations are experienced by individual-migrants and smaller groups, at times the atrocities and violence can even target larger masses of migrant population, thereby upsetting their right to peacefully live and seek a livelihood in the host-region. The 2012 episode of rumour-mongering and massive return of Northeasterners in Bengaluru is an example for such massive targeting of the migrants in the city.

Mostly, the reason for their ill-treatment of migrants by the local community in the host-land is based on their different 'looks' (physical features) and deviant social behaviours (due to cultural differences). Since many of the migrants are with Mangloid features, they are easily identifiable vis-à-vis the local people. The differences in cultural norms and socialisation patterns between the native communities of the migrants and those of the host communities also leads to the process of 'othering' the migrants from locals.

As appearance (skin tone and physical features) and deviant social behaviour of the migrants (due to cultural differences)⁴ are the basic reasons for biases and maltreatment of the migrants, it is often viewed as case of 'racial abuse' also (NESC & H, 2011). The perpetrators of the violence are found justifying such acts by constructing social and cultural norms on 'self'

⁴For more details on this aspect, see Remesh (2016 a; 2016 b)

and the 'other', drawing upon vague notions of native, race and ethnicity. By way of establishing 'deviant behaviours of migrants vis-à-vis accepted social and cultural values of the host societies, the local communities in the cities often try to authenticate their domination in the urban space and to justify the discriminations and exploitations inflicted on the migrants.

Remesh (2012 b) views that there exists a visible 'cultural gap' between the migrant and host communities. Based on insights from Delhi, it is explained that due to several differences (in terms of food habits, language attires, social interactions and religious/cultural practices) the social behaviour of migrants from NER stands out from the prevalent norms in the northern India. The distinct physical features and personal traits of the migrants add to this gap from 'socially accepted norms. All these cumulatively lead to a situation where the members of the host communities consider the migrants as those who are not confirming to accepted 'social values.

The differences in the patterns of women's role and gender relations in family and society also lead to a situation where the social behaviour of the migrants is misconstrued in the host society. Often the faulty notions about North-easterners acquired by host communities (through flawed portrayal in popular media (e.g typecast images of 'feathers and dances') do not match with the fashionable and westernised appearance of the migrants, thereby adding to the cultural- confusion of the local societies⁵. In such a situation, the friendly and egalitarian social interactions women migrants are often misconceived as lack of 'moral values', which even results in unfair social profiling and ill-treatment of women migrants.

Formation of Migrant Neighbourhoods and the Issue of Ghettoization

As urban destinations are totally different for the migrants (in terms of climate, food habits, cultural and social life) surviving and adjusting in the changed circumstances is the first challenge faced by the migrants, immediately after reaching their destinations. As they normally feel threatened and isolated in the alien lands, mostly the migrants prefer to stay along with their kith and kins in localities which are predominantly occupied from people from North East. Mostly, the migrants feel that any issue related to their day-to-day lives in the city is more understood by those who are with shared-concerns. The emergence of residential colonies exclusively of or with higher presence of Northeasterners in the cities testifies this. Such residential pockets also offer solutions regarding some of the important issues of migrants in terms of faith, food and festivities. Quite often such considerations prompt them to live in 'enclaves of their own'.

In these Northeasternneighbourhoods, even members from communities which are in continuous conflict, back home, in their native states are found living harmoniously. Furthermore, due to shared concerns many of the ethnic groups from the NER are found coming together in same platforms and forums to raise their common concerns. Many of them testify that it is the first place for them to get some solace and redressal and fellow-feelings/support (Remesh, 2012a).

The formation of migrant neighbourhoods can be understood in different ways. On the one hand, it provides opportunities for community-feeling and mutual help for northeasterners and thus allows prospects for 'reconstructing their natives in faraway lands. But it is also a process where the migrants are getting ghettoized and being pushed to the margins of mainstream urban lives. Quite often, it is not only the preference of the migrants to stay

⁵Mc Duie-Ra (2012 b) explains in this dilemma of the local societies in understanding the 'Cosmopolitan tribals'!

together but also the resistance of the local communities in accepting as part of the latter's residential colonies that leads to the formation of migrants' own colonies in the city.

Identity Crisis and Formation of New Identities

By now, it is widely understood that most of the migrants experience an 'identity crisis' after reaching the destination. Back home, their identities are closely attached to a state, locality and within that too with a particular community/tribe. But, in cities these details do not find any significance and they are identified as part of a larger homogenous group.

Multiple reasons facilitate the monolithic treatment of migrants from NER. The official way of seeing North East as an integrated block (despite its wide internal disparities in social history, demography and cultural backgrounds) itself is a factor that help creating a 'Pan-North East Identity'. With common Ministries and Departments (e.g. DoNER, North East Council) catering to North-East as a whole, over time treating North-East and North-Easterners as homogeneous groups has become a norm rather than aberration. Following this, there is a widespread tendency from all stakeholders to pack and present North-East as a 'combo'. Accordingly, it is more common to see North-east film festivals and North-East food festivals and Handicraft Melas from North-East, all of which provides a mixture and glimpse of all, but without close-focus on any⁶.

Along with such official way of homogenisation, the ignorance of host-societies also leads to mistaking North-east migrants as a single group and thus treating all of them alike. For example, during the massive exodus of migrants from Bangalore (now Bengaluru), Chennai, Pune and Mumbai in the wake of rumour mongering (in August 2012), the people from the entire NER had to undergo a shared destiny, due to sheer ignorance of the locals who perpetuated the tension. To quote the words of a victim: "*A group of seven locals confronted me and asked if I was from Assam. When I said I was from Manipur, they told me that **all these states are the same** and I should leave immediately*"⁷

As explained earlier, while the socialisations of many of the migrants at their natives are strictly confined to their communities/tribes, in the city, circumstances force them to stay together, work together, share common spaces and fight for common issues – all of which cumulatively leading to the formation of new, combined identities. Thus, it is reasonable to believe that the social exclusion and marginalisation experienced by the migrants in the city provides them necessary 'social glue' for people forging combined identities and shared-concerns.

Food, Faith and Protests are the other three major reasons for the migrants to come together to create shared-identities. Not all the states and communities from the region are with a considerable number of people to successfully support running of restaurant or to have specific prayer fellowships. Thus, what actually happens is formation of Pan-North East eating

⁶ The latest addition in this regard is the India Premier League Football team representing North East.

⁷ '*Northeast migrants flee Pune, Bangalore, Chennai*', TNN, Aug 17, 2012) (*emphasis mine*).

joints⁸ and common churches⁹ that contain basic elements of many groups but not fully representing any.

Protests are the most common avenues that provide a space for the migrants to come together and there by cocreating their Pan-North East Identity. When it comes to common issues affecting all the migrants (e.g., violence, social exclusion, racism), people from all states/communities/tribes from NE join together, irrespective of their differences back home with each other¹⁰. Viewing in this way, Iron Sharmila or AFSPA are certain connecting topics for the migrants to come together in cities.

As part of negotiating the city lives, the migrants also find it convenient to forge ties with similarly placed individuals and groups and to break ties with those who do not share sameness. For instance, when different looks (Mongloid features) become the reason for the discriminatory practices and violence faced by the migrants, it is concern for several other migrant communities from other parts of India such as Darjeeling, Ladakh, Himachal Pradesh (and even for migrant/refugee communities from Tibet, Burma and Nepal). Similarly, some of the people from North East (especially who do not have Mangloid features (e.g. many from Assam and Tripura) and with surnames which are similar to non-NER states (e.g. Bhattacharya, Dhar) may not necessarily finding it as an issue immediately affecting them. This situation inter alia led to creation cross-community solidarities and identities, which naturally transcend and shift away from the geo-politically demarcated socialisations and collectives.

Social media also provides opportunities for the migrants with shared-concerns to come together. Internet and mobile phones offer many novel ways of socialising and such interaction often help the migrants to arrive at common/ shared identities (Ganda, 2014). A cursory reading of discussions on posts related to social exclusion and racism faced by the North-easters in cities strongly testify the above argument.

At times, as part of their survival strategies in the host society, some of the NE migrants find it convenient to conceal their identities and to attach 'sameness' with the host societies. Accordingly, familiarising with a few words in Hindi and acquainting North Indian attires, cuisine and culture are found essential for "acquiring basic skills for day-to-day life in the city"! (Remesh, 2012a).

The following narration of a reputed Delhi-based woman journalist from Assam about her initial days of struggles to come out of the image of the 'distinct other' and to establish cultural 'sameness' with North Indian society explicates this argument.

⁸ For instance, Rosang a restaurant run by a Manipuri in Munirka (South West Delhi), attracts all North-easterners alike as it provides a mix of food from different parts of North East. Here, food becomes a means of shaping solidarity. Mc Duie-Ra (2012a ; and 2012b) provide several examples to support this argument.

is one of the eating joints which is frequented by people from all parts of North East. The food
⁹ "Those Naga tribes that are numerically well-represented in Delhi have formed tribal churches and fellowships (e.g. Delhi Ao Baptist Church, Sumi Christian Fellowship Delhi, Delhi Lotha Christian Fellowship etc.). People belonging to Naga tribes which are not numerically strong in Delhi, and have therefore not established their own tribe-specific churches, are welcome to attend the services organised by the Naga Christian Fellowship (NCF) in North Delhi" (Angelova, undated).

¹⁰ As a respondent of Mc Duie-Ra, 2012a says: "Northeast people don't bond so much. But if you get a Nishi, a Khasi, and a Mizo in a room, all you have to do is talk about racism. We all experience it every day. It will get us together"

“I cringe now to admit that I often found myself talking about doing what ‘they’ did — typically engaging in small talk with the landlady in Green Park about restrictions back home for girls (yes, there were!) to ‘show’ that I was a ‘good girl’; telling the domestic help that I was actually a vegetarian (an utter lie!); using kajal to make my eyes look big; avoiding bringing friends home who looked ‘Northeast’; never playing western music; remembering to pronounce my name as ‘Sangeeta’ and not ‘Xongeeta’ as it was back home.

I struggled hard to pick up the local lingo; wore saris and salwar-kameez; visited the nearby temple and waited for an opportunity to tell people that there was an almost 100-year-old Shiva temple at home; that my mother fasts every Monday for my father’s well being...”¹¹

Blurring of the Geo-Political and Ethnic Borders

In several ways borders and boundaries assume importance in the case of out-migration from NER to urban centres outside the region. In the first place, this unprecedented and increasing trend of exodus of the youth from NER has led to an expansion of the territorial spaces of people of various states and communities within the region.

Along with this, some of the geo-political borders of the states and ethnic boundaries of the populations within NER have also become more or less redundant at the migrant-destinations. As the migrants are largely identified as members of a region than belonging to a particular state/community, the political borders of the states within the NER becomes hazy and insignificant, at least in their city lives. With the emergence of a Pan-North East Identity, partly ‘ascribed’ and partly ‘acquired’, the regional tag becomes more important for the migrants than their state/community specific details, eventually leading to the blurring of pre-existing geo-political and ethnic boundaries. Migrants’ own enclaves (or ghettos) and other shared social spaces (for food, faith and protests) also help the migrants to cross the borders of their identities prior to migration and to establish new connections with similarly placed migrants, from other states, regions and communities. The dynamics of post-migration lives in the city allows the migrants to continuously interact with novel social norms, cultural and culinary practices and even experiment with new ways of practicing social life and religion.

The identity formation and integration of communities, at times, happen in a different way, where the ‘sameness’ among migrants and their lived experiences are established in terms of their similar physical features and common issues/concerns. Similarly, ‘lack of sameness’ can also become a reason for disintegration of certain individuals/communities from a common-identity. For instance, some of the migrants (without striking Monhgloid features) may not be facing equally intensive discrimination and exclusion in the city, when compared to many others who are distinct in terms of their physical features. These people often find it easy to get assimilated with the host communities¹². At the same time, a large number of people from other regions like Ladhakh, Tibet and Dargeeling are found sharing the same issues and thus find it important to be with similarly placed migrants to fight the discriminations. Discussing this aspect, Mc Duie-Ra (2012a) observes that : *“At times the boundaries of this*

¹¹Sangeeta Barooah Pisharoty, a well-known journalist with the Hindu on how she learnt to handle her North-eastern identity in Delhi, when she came to the city several years ago.

¹²For instance, a large number of people from Assam and Tripura find it easy to attach themselves with the socio-cultural norms of host communities and during this process often get dissociated with the integrated identity of North-Easterners.

community extend to include migrants from across the Himalayas, mostly Ladakhis, Nepalis and Tibetans, and Burmese, especially members of ethnic minority groups sharing lineage and often faith with Northeast communities". Existence of formal and informal collectives of migrants who share similar lineages and faith, irrespective of their state boundaries support this argument, where political boundaries are often forgotten while considering affinities and fellow-feelings in terms of shared lineage, physical features and often faith. Some of the church groups and prayer fellowships, which includes members irrespective of their state boundaries are examples for this. There are also students 'collectives which caters to members based on their shared interests, irrespective of strict statewise borders. For instance, NESDALF (Society of students from North Eastern States, Darjeeling, Ladakh and Foreign Countries) in Lakshmi Bai College of Delhi University, which has been functional since 2012, offers a common platform for students from the above-mentioned regions, to come together to present their unique and shared regional cultures¹³. Thus, what essentially emerges is an ethnically linked and socially glued identity of migrants which goes beyond the borders and demarcations of conventional political geography. In such a situation, it is the shared identities and lived realities of distinct sub-sets of migrants that decide their convergence and divergence vis-a-vis borders.

Conclusion

It is evident from the foregoing discussion that migration and the post-migration experiences provide the required environment and dynamics for the migrants to come together and to address their common issues/concerns. It is to be believed that the hardships, discriminations and social exclusion and so on, cumulatively provide the necessary impetus and conditions for moulding and forging new identities and establishing new borders of socialisation and fraternity among various groups of migrants. In such cases, the pre-existing boundaries created on the basis of geo-political considerations are found getting replaced by new borders based on shared identity, cultures and lived experiences.

References

Angelova, Iliyana. 2015: 'Building a 'Home' away from home: The experiences of young Naga Migrants in Delhi'. <https://www.isca.ox.ac.uk/fileadmin/ISCA/JASO/2015/Angelova.pdf> Accessed on 25 March 2021.

Chyrmang, Rikil (2011) : Magnitude of Migration from North Eastern Region of India in Rajan, S. Irudaya (Ed.) Migration, Identity and Conflict – India Migration Report 2011, Routledge, New Delhi

Ganda, Madison (2014): "Social Media and Self: Influences on the Formation of Identity and Understanding of Self through Social Networking Sites", University Honors Theses. Paper 55, Portland State University, Portland
<http://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1064&context=honorsthesis>
Accessed on 19 December 2020

¹³This collective was Previously known as the North-East Society and it got renamed as NESDALF in 2012, as it was comprised of students from various regions besides North-East India.

Lusome, R.& Bhagat, R.B. (2020) Migration in Northeast India: Inflows, Outflows and Reverse Flows during Pandemic. Indian Journal of Labour Economics, Vol. 63, 1125–1141

Mc Duie-Ra, Duncan (2012a): Northeast Migrants in Delhi: Race, Refuge and Retail, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam.

Mc Duie-Ra, Duncan (2012b): `Cosmopolitan Tribals: Frontier Migrants in Delhi`, South Asia Research, Vol. 32(1).

NESC & H (2011): North East Migration and Challenges in Capital Cities”, Research Report, North East Support Centre and Helpline, New Delhi. http://nehelpline.net/NE_report.pdf, Accessed on 19 December 2016.

Pisharoty, Sangeeta Barooah (2014): Life as the ‘other’, The Hindu/ Sunday Magazine, February 23, <http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-features/tp-sundaymagazine/life-as-the-other/article5717546.ece>, Accessed on 19 December 2016.

Remesh, Babu P.(2012 a), Migration from North East to Urban Centres: A Case study of Delhi Region, NLI Research Studies Series, No. 94, V.V. Giri National Labour Institute, NOIDA

Remesh, Babu P (2012 b), Strangers in Their Own Land: Migrants from the North East in Delhi, Economic and Political Weekly, Vol, XLVII, No. 22

Remesh, Babu P. (2016 a): `Migration and Marginalisation: A Study of North East Migrants in Delhi` in Mishra, Deepak (ed.) `Internal Migration in India`, SAGE Publications, New Delhi.

Remesh, Babu P. (2016 b): `Questions of Ethnicity in the City: The Case of North-East Migrants in Urban Centres`, Paper presented at the International Seminar on `Ethnicity and Development in South Asia: Issues and Challenges`, 21-22 January, IGNOU, New Delhi.