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## MIGRATION, NEO-LIBERALISATION AND ECONOMIC INCLUSION: EMPLOYMENT AND LIVELIHOOD OF NORTH EAST MIGRANT IN DELHI NCR

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### Abstract:

The periphery region of North-east India is known for its exclusion in terms of geography, economy, socially and politically from the rest of India. A few decades ago, a large number of indigenous youths from the far-flung area had migrated looking for a job opportunity and to pursue higher education. Due to globalisation and Neo-liberalisation, the changes in the urban have created a space that brought a new way of opportunity for this group of people in which they are preferred because of their English speaking background, their aesthetic look 'exotic Asian' and is known for being hard-working and loyal. This paper is an account of primary data from preliminary fieldwork collected through telephonic interviews in Delhi NCR and from the available literature. It is argued that these group of people were excluded and were treated differently due to their background region, culture and their ethnicity yet, they have found their way of inclusion in economic through job opportunities, employment and livelihood in the cities. They are found working in the multinational co-operation, hospitality industries, also in private sectors and recently, small businesses and entrepreneurs are mushrooming in and around the city. This paper addresses their nature and patterns of work, the positive impacts of working in the city individually and within their household. Their earnings and income are used for siblings education and sending money home removing their family from poverty, which in turn, lead to social and economic inclusion within the society.

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### 1.0 Introduction:

It was when Ming could not find a job he wanted, he started his own business. He was working with some other companies as a hairdresser after doing a course on Hairdressing in Delhi sponsored by his sister who is also a hairdresser. Ming also wanted to study photography knowing that he has a talent and passion for it but due to lack of financial support, he decided to sell his own 'Old vintage clothes' online. Ming started his business along with just two thousand Rupees given by his brother to invest it at first. Ming started his work as a hobby and his love for shopping, but later it became always to support himself and cover his expenditure living in Delhi. Now, he sells clothes full time and can live the life he wanted and he could help his family back home in

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Manipur. "Easy as it may sound, it is not" he mentioned. His job requires his full attention, time and to have the skill for shopping, networking with the shopkeepers, and good communication with customers with their questions. Ming uses his talent of photography in this business to take pictures of each item clearly and also to look good and upload it for sale. More importantly, he said "I need to do a lot of study and research of luxury brand, International brand and mostly for Vintage clothing as the customers go for it and could sell it for higher price".

Chui is the eldest daughter in her family who also runs an online shop in Delhi, worked as an air hostess and for some reason she had to leave her job during the lock-down. She and her elder brother take care of her siblings in the capital. Now, Chui has continued her distance education and at the same time runs her business. Chui smiled a little and said 'she does not want to depend on her brother or to anybody else since I am used to supporting myself. Bon with his siblings have a Naga restaurant managed by themselves and also supply organic home food items send by his parent from Manipur and supply to the other local shop nearby in Humayunpur, Safdarjung Enclave. Many others own and have started their own business in Delhi NCR, whether it is selling clothes or food items, restaurants with varieties of delicacies from all the states and even international cuisine, varieties of shops and in many ways Northeastern are earning their livelihood in Delhi.

It has been observed by many scholars and has written many on the space the urban city of Delhi has created for these groups of people especially in the service sector and BPOs. They are being known for working at high-ended luxury hotels, restaurants, also at different airlines, salons and spas. Along with these opportunities, the cities have created a smaller hub for smaller businesses at different localities where the Northeastern resides in the city which attracts other people from outside (non-northeastern) and even themselves to hang out and explore 'little Northeast' within the heart of the capital city. Earlier these group was known for their identity, as a group treated differently by others in the metropolitan cities of India but they have found their way of inclusion in economic through job opportunities, employment and livelihood in the city.

This article is an account of my initial stage of fieldwork in Delhi NCR where I examine what motivate people to migrate from their states to the capital. I focus on the employment and the livelihood of the people from this region intending to assess the nature of their employment. A question on the challenges they face within the workforce was asked and importantly, to capture the positive impact of migration. It was before the lock-down, I started reaching out to people who are employed and also self-employed for my Case study and even during the period we had few sessions over the phone. And through the process of snowballing, I was able to interview few others during the lockdown personally and also through telephonic interviews. A semi-structured questionnaire was used for both face to face interviews and telephonic interviews. And the sessions were recorded. For a telephonic interview, the questionnaire was sent through an email for the respondent to understand and be aware of what the sessions were about. The paper comprises primary data collected through case studies and also from the available literature as well.

The paper consists of four main sections. First, the reasons and the motivating factors that made them move out from their origin and begin their search for new opportunities in the city where they are being sunk in by the transformation made in urban Delhi brought by the so-called Neo-Liberalization. In the following section, the brief discussion on the employment and livelihood of those migrants in the city, followed by the challenges they face within their

workforce. Lastly, the economic inclusion in the city through employment and livelihood; and the changes that were brought by earning and having an income with the space and ways the city has created for them which in-turn made the individual and the household find their way of economic and social inclusion within their society.

## **2.0 Migration from North East to Delhi NCR:**

Since time immemorial, humans have been migrating from place to place in search of food and shelter. After the second world war, people migrate for political reasons. Until now, people are constantly moving in search of a better lifestyle and opportunity. Unlike other states of India, Census 1991 and 2001 shows that people from the Northeast states migrate to Delhi for employment followed by marriage and education. Recent studies have shown a huge number of migrations from the region to Delhi within few decades. According to Census 1991, the percentage of migrants to Delhi from the region was 0.05 increased by 0.17 on 2001 Census and even the 2011 Census shows a constant flow of migrants in the city (Marchang, 2017). Comparing with the rest of India, it was found that 48.21 per cent out of the total out-migration from the region within 2005-2011 was in Delhi and the number had increased twelvefold within these five years (NESCH,2011).

Interestingly, in the case of the Northeast migration to Delhi many studies like MacDuie-Ra (2012) and others have shown that most of the migrants already have their siblings, friends and relatives helping to access the opportunity towards pursuing higher education, employment and earnings. North-east migrants in Delhi also have several student and tribal associations, unions, churches and they are known for having a strong supporting system for themselves in the city that help to connect young people from home in bringing them to their aspired jobs and education, thus, creating a chain movement of migration. Even in the case of Ming, his sister came in the early 2000s and later his brother came in 2006 after his twelve standards and he came ten years later after finishing his twelve standards. More than ninety per cent of the respondents had their siblings, friends or relatives already studying or working in Delhi.

There are multi-dimensional factors that influence the movement of Northeastern people that push and attracts them. One of the most interesting comprehensive essays written by Duncan (2012) brought forward a few broad themes that include 'refuge, livelihoods, aspirations, attitudes towards India, labour recruitment and increased connectivity as to why the Northeastern migrate to Delhi.

Some of the push factors: Lack of good higher educational facilities, limited choice of technical and vocational education along with constant social, political activities and conflict making the student distract from their studies; with the rise of unemployment partially push the unemployed youth (Marchang, 2011); lack of good infrastructure like transportation; the presence of political instability, social unrest and violence like insurgency, Armed forces, ethnic conflict (Mac Duie-Ra, 2012); lack of good policies for the people (ibid). On the other hand, there are certain spaces the urban city have created that attract youngsters from the Northeast. Young and indigenous people from the region migrate to Delhi for higher studies and going after aspired jobs; there is a demand in labour from these regions to different workforce like hospitality industries and multinational cooperation; the cheaper connectivity of transportation and communication made it easier to migrate. One of the most important reasons for them to have the confidence to migrate despite the inhospitable Indian cities is the story narrated by those who have migrated earlier about their experiences on how they

manage life in the city; the opportunity to work and save money as well as help their family at the same time (MacDuie-Ra, 2012); lower cost of living expenses comparing to other cities attracts them (ibid); the facilities available in the city like shopping malls, good transportation system and good nightlife (Banati,2015).

Karlsson & Kikon (2017), talked about wayfinding, “a journey without a map or pathway to follow, with no clear destination or endpoint, but rather a form of movement in which the traveller constantly adjusts direction, seeking out new places and possibilities as he or she is moving on”. It is true, in the case of Soy, where she came to Delhi from Manipur in search of work and found a way to move to Dubai for employment stayed there for a while and decided to come back to Delhi to settle in the capital and after years of networking and finding a way, she has found herself a home and own her boutique shop in Humayunpur.

### **3.0 Employment & Neo-Liberalisation, Livelihood:**

Eighty per cent of the total respondent mentioned that, they migrate to Delhi ‘to work’ specifically. At first some they come to Delhi for higher education and later they find their jobs and work but for some, they came for education but decided to work after reaching Delhi since they have connections with their friends and relative who are already working in Delhi through their guidance and sometimes even refer and by introducing them to their Managers. MacDuieRa (2012) in his essay wrote, “People leave the region to pursue livelihood”. There is very little opportunity for employment at home because of the corrupt system and there is very little employment in the private sector. On the other side, in the capital, the Neoliberal transformation of Delhi creates an open space for all peoples outside the country which also connects the North East region to the mainland. Airlines and Hospitality are two important sectors that employ North East people and the desire for North East Labour in the city increases the migration rapidly.

The transformation produces a consumer space in terms of the global market referring to shopping malls minimising using the roads and having all the luxury of shopping, eating at restaurants, watching movies under one roof. This place seeks an aesthetic that made it feel like abroad in India in terms of fashion, food, brand-name consumer goods. This made their mongoloid feature resembling the Southeast Asian made the North Eastern favourable to these jobs without importing foreign labour. Duncan added that some of them are aware and use it as an advantage in a competitive urban labour market but many are uncomfortable with this construction (MacDuie Ra, 2012). Shin from Manipur state works in the Airlines Industry as an Air Hostess based in Delhi. She mentioned in one of our sessions that,

‘her airline industry work together with Asian International airline so whenever they fly, there is at least one person who looks ‘Asian’ within the group’.

The transformation brought into the city gave new experiences to the people of North Eastern as well where they could enjoy the luxury of meeting different kinds of people worldwide. Shin answered the overall experience of her job is good and she enjoys working, as it is her dream job. She mentioned:

“Meeting new people from different types of country, experiencing luxury life, getting a chance to eat varieties of food and witnessing the art of God’s creation”.

She is also a female hostess working in a luxury grand hotel for a long time where she witnessed the President of a country as a guest in her hotel with high-security measures. For her, it was a moment she will never forget in her life she proclaimed. She said:

"I am used to having a national celebrity as a guest but having the President of the powerful country is what excites me".

Another sector that employs this group is the call centres industry of Delhi which according to Duncan, desires is due to the non-Indian accented English spoken especially from the hill states as they attended English Medium School and the literacy level is very high. The North-East migrants are unmarried and in their early twenties which made them able to work shifts time to serve the western business hours making them more desirable as flexible and well-qualified workforce for the industry (MacDuié Ra, 2012). Boi who has been working in a call centre for a long time in Delhi mentioned that now it is so normal to have a conversation with people especially from the West every day since it was his job but he said:

"it is a challenge for me as well to speak to my customer and understand them especially when they use slang words and it more difficult to understand Scottish and British accent but in times I get it".

Neo-liberalism has created a space for Northeastern for job opportunities, new experiences created by the job environment and economic inclusion through earnings.

#### **4.0 Self-employment:**

There is a number of small business that have come up within the city by the Northeastern. They have created a small hub "little North East" especially in Safdarjung Enclave. A number of restaurants and shops have opened in all the corners of each locality where these groups are settled. With the increasing number of migrants in the city, the demand for their own food (delicacies) and vegies that are not available in the capital have started selling in the shop opened by them. A variety of food items raw or processed food from their own state sent from home through the air cargo which takes less time and in cheaper rates that makes the raw veggies more fresh and possible to sell it at a fair price. There are also many clothing shops own by Northeastern people. Soy is also one of them. After doing a lot of networking and connections, she has her own Boutique (import and export) that sells western clothing. Many years back she was working as a Sales accountant, later as a Consultant (Skin treatment) at a Clinic but after she decided to open her own second-hand shop in Safdarjung Enclave. Now, from time to time, she goes to Bangkok for shopping and also has a connection with people from China to send clothes in bulk. She managed her family expense in Delhi with the earning that she received from her shop. And she employed another Northeastern woman to look after the shop while she goes out for buying clothes and also take care of her daughter who goes to school. It is been six years that she owns her shop. Now, she earns two lakh every month and she could save every month and manage it well with her income.

Many big and small restaurants with varieties of cuisine and delicacies have opened in places where these groups of people are settled in. Starting from selling streets foods, to having good food at a reasonable price, to having a tribal cousin, to International Cousin like Italian or Korean food and many more. Bon with the help of his siblings, they have managed to open a restaurant that serves a mixture of Manipuri and Naga Cuisine. Some of his siblings are studying and working as well but they manage the restaurant by themselves without employing people. He also supplies home food items send by his parent from home and he

supplies it to other shops. During the lock-down, since they could not open their restaurant, Bon supply pork to the other Northeastern who are not able to get it in their locality which he gets it from a shop to which he had a connection. With the help of church leaders, Bon was able to take a pass and could go to other nearby localities and supply pork and earn money. Since their restaurant was closed for a long time and was not able to have much income, his parent asked the sibling to come back home but used up all their savings to pay their rent and survive during those days. They were very determined to continue staying and reopened their business in fact he mentioned that they will renovate their restaurant to make it bigger and modern.

Recently, one of the most interesting businesses that have come up among the youngsters in the capital is online thrift stores using online applications like Instagram. They handpicked any kinds of clothes from Sarojini market which is very near to Safdarjung Enclave, some go to Sunday market during seasons, and to other markets where they can find their choice of clothing. Ming used to work for few other hair companies but he was not happy with the earning comparing with the work he does. He was unemployed when he started his online business. Now, he mentioned "he is more independent due to flexible working hours, could attend his customers any time of the day through my phone and even in terms of earnings being Self-employed, I get all the profits I made with the amount of time and energy I spend". Ming after having a connection with many shopkeepers, they have exchanged their numbers to let him know when to come for new arrivals before taking it to the market. He plans to open a Vintage Store in Delhi and home too. He could earn much more compared to the earlier job of hairdressing. Chui also have an online shop earlier she was an Airhostess. She has a business partnership with her friend but she said the online thrift is for a time being as she has other plans for her future. It is just for supporting herself for a period of time.

### **5.0 Challenges of the migrants within their workforce:**

Northeastern is known for its 'Asian exotic' look in the city. There is a similarity of physical features of the North East people with the neighbouring countries like Thailand, China and Myanmar. They are misunderstood wrongly in terms of political and social, being looked at as anti-national, immoral, sexual, a Chinese national, backward jungles and privilege group who only benefit from the government reservations. The nature of their employment and their lifestyles such as working at night at BPOs, working with high profile people within the hotels, salons and spas have contributed a lot of factors in misleading and creating stereotypes and prejudice that cause differential treatment followed by harassment and violence. Many studies and reports have shown that there is an experience of racism, language barrier, sexual harassment, overcharged, traditional food underestimation and according to a study by Jamia Milia Islamia (2014 & 2018) all kinds of discrimination are related to physical traits, food habits, lifestyle, dressing, language problem and gender at large.

Some of the other challenges they face in their workforce include; low self-esteem within their team and not being able to share their opinions and suggestions; usually, there is a conflict and misunderstanding within the teammates because of different views, opinions, culture and background; the employee working in BPO finds it very hard to negotiate their salary comparing to others and the employee cannot question the Employer; being excluded; most of the respondent face language barrier especially in speaking Hindi; and taking advantage of empathy.

Many people have the feeling of being the victim just because they are from the northeast of India. Chui who is an Airhostess mentioned other non-northeastern in their teams take advantage because “Sometimes we are not confident enough to share my opinions and suggestions because most of us are not smart like the mainlanders”. Thus who is also an Airhostess said that people within our workforce take advantage sometimes “ because we are from North East and thinking that we will always say Yes”. Most of the respondents who work with non-northeast people said that they have a language barrier.

#### **6.0 Economic and Social inclusion:**

In this section, I will be discussing two types of inclusion that is caused by the spaces the urban changes created by the so-called Neo-liberalisation. Firstly, economic inclusion of the North Eastern through their employments and earning in the city and Secondly, the social inclusion caused by the positive impact of migration through helping their own siblings in education and sending money home to their families.

#### **7.0 Economic inclusion:**

MacDuie-Ra (2012) in his book and few other articles had discussed that Northeastern is included in the city in two ways. The first is the rapid consumer spaces for the middle and the upper classes the neoliberal transformations have brought expanding global spaces like shopping malls where they could experience outside India within the malls. There is a controlled climate, restricted entry, dropping the customer at the door by vehicles, the cinemas and restaurants inside unlike the regular bazaars of Delhi. The North-East people are also seen working as masseurs, waiters, receptionists, salespersons in big retail stores and in high ended luxury hotels and restaurants (Nikon, 2018). All this have opened a space for the Northeastern to get employed at this kind of job which is considered a luxury. The reason is unique and distinct because of the indigenous background of subsistence agriculture and experiences from the highlands of the northeast with their un-Indian & exotic Asian look and their English language skill (ibid). Another service sector that recruits a lot of North Eastern are Call centres in Delhi and have stretch to Noida and Gurgaon the National capital region because the Northeastern from the hill areas attended English medium school and the English language is also the lingua franca in that region. In addition to that, most of the migrants in Delhi from these states are mostly unmarried and are in their early 20s which made it very suitable and well qualified for the job which is very flexible in working time (MacDuie Ra, 2012).

Another new way of doing a business and being self-employed is the online thrift store own by this group of people in Delhi. They are being followed by thousands of followers or customers on their Instagram. They have created their customers virtually by showcasing their items on their online pages. Due to the increasing use of media and technology, people have found a new way of online shopping just being at home browsing their phone and buying their own choice of clothes. Most of the people who own this online are unmarried and young. They go shopping almost every day because they have to handpick every item carefully. During the lockdown, people mostly go for online shopping said Ming and they take this chance to sell their items as much as they can. A number of other small businesses like food and clothing shops and restaurants are opened on a large scale especially those localities where North East people live.

## 8.0 Social Inclusion, a narrative:

In the case study from my initial stage of fieldwork, I was able to gather few narratives on their contribution towards their family & community mostly, the changes that have brought into their lives after having a job and income living in Delhi. Earlier studies by Ramesh (2012) mentioned that the migrant spends their income on rent, personal expenditure and education. Here in this paper, the attitudes and the changes brought in the physical reality of the migrant, their families and their community is discussed.

The migrants in the city send their part of their income to their family in order to even meet their basic needs to buy food, for others to help the parents in buying assets or to invest it in their family business. Ninety per cent of the migrant send money back home from three per cent to twenty-five per cent of their income every month. According to the narratives collected, sending money home have made their families at home to be more stable financially, more modernize lifestyle, effort good food, shelter and buy anything, lent a helping hand to others and pay family debts and loans.

Chui felt that she has to gain more respect by living an independent life even within her family by gaining self-esteem and also being a more responsible daughter living in the city. Boi happily exclaimed that he can make a future plan for his family. Shen has acquired assets that allowed him to fulfil certain challenges which would have been impossible if he was unemployed. Most of them are happy that they could experience helping and supporting their family and others making them feel proud, content and grateful for their earning. Shing after being financially stable she said now she can easily be socialized and spend without any difficulty. Almost all the respondents look after their siblings in education and cover their experiences of staying in Delhi or in different cities of India. Ngam a brother were able to sponsor her sister in training in the Hospitality industry.

Almost all of them contribute to the church, their community and for charity. Since they have a close group of unions and association people in Delhi and in their homes, they often help and contribute to an individual in need and to any community projects or programs. They spend a lot of their income given to a number of programs organized by their own people. Chui is supporting her community in various ways other than financially too which gives her a higher status within the society. It also makes their close group of the community be dependent on her which brings more responsibility within the family and her community. Her parent stays in the village but now they involve them in the decision making in her village. Rin said working or earning have made them more confident and make my parents proud when her parent mingles with others and their parent friends also wanted their children to work like her. Now the community have kept their family at higher position and expectation. Thui have gained more experience in terms of life challenges and now people approached her in a more mature way. Ngam sees the changes in how people tend to give more importance and respect to those family who has a good income expecting them to come forward and help others in times of needs. Shing importantly emphasized her contribution towards her community in terms of her skills, money and ideas too.

From the above narratives and discussion, it can be understood and conclude that the cycle of the economic inclusion of the Northeastern in Delhi has unintentionally yet consequentially have made a positive impact on the lives of the migrants themselves in Delhi and also to their family who has gained a lot of happiness, satisfaction and respect from within and outside the family. Within the family, the migrants have gained much respect, have prospered,



educate their siblings and have grown financially and even to the level of decision making in their community.

## **9.0 Conclusion:**

In this article, I began with the migration movement from Northeastern to the capital with few data to support the statement and also put up the reasons why the young people wanted to migrate and what attracts them to the city making them wanting and wishing to experience the city offers. Secondly, discuss briefly the employment and livelihood of the North East migrants in the city followed by the challenges they face within their workforce. Finally, the positive impact of migration and the space the urban city of Delhi have created for the Northeastern and most importantly the changes that have brought in the lives of those migrants, within their families and to the community level.

Financial stability has made Chui and her family happy and has solved a lot of problems that affect her emotionally, she working have boosted her confidence and her family can live happily within her society. According to their response, if they became unemployed or lost their job, they would be depending on their parent or their siblings, would have a different lifestyle, their siblings would not be able to learn and do what they are doing. Phi answered, if she is not working, she and her family would be working in the paddy field in their home town Manipur. Ming, Soy, Bon, Chui and many others could have been unemployed for several reasons yet they have found a way to earn their own livelihood through self-employment.

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