Migration, Identity, and Livelihood in South Asia: A Review with Special Reference to North-East India

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ABSTRACT

Migration in South Asia is a complex and multidimensional phenomenon shaped by economic, social, political, environmental, and cultural forces. In this research, using the existing body of literature can help analyse migration patterns, cause and consequence with gender issue, intolerance to environment calamity, access to education and identity politics. The results indicate that migration is frequently a survival or coping mechanism rather than an effective path towards sustained economic emplacement, particularly for women and excluded populations concentrated in precarious and informal work. Mobility is additionally potentially heightened by environmental conditions such as floods, land degradation and natural disasters, but education is often more of a status symbol than an indicator of employment success. Another aspect, that the review discusses is the interplay between migration and ethnicity; politics or conflicts and historical changes, particularly in Northeast India as well as in Sri Lanka. Overall, the study underscores the importance of context-specific and inclusive policies addressing structural inequalities to protect migrant livelihoods and contribute to sustainable development.

Keywords: Migration, Gender, Livelihood, Identity Politics.

I. Introduction

Migration has played a crucial role in shaping the historical, cultural, and political landscape of North-East India. Since ancient time, the area now known as Myanmar has been situated on the geographical crossroads of South Asia and South-East Asia and thus has been subjected to a broad range of population migration which had led to diverse ethnic groups, language and culture that we see today [1]. Migration by Tibeto-Burman and Austro-Asiatic groups in ancient times established the

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[1] Lusome, R., & Bhagat, R. B. (2020). Migration in Northeast India: Inflows, outflows and reverse flows during pandemic. *The Indian Journal of Labour Economics*, *63*(4), 1125-1141.

bases of indigenous tribal territories; these earlier settlers were followed during the medieval period by migrations of certain Tai and other peoples, including that of the Ahoms who arrived in Assam. The colonial era ushered in massive inflows of labour, administrators, and cultivators under British economic policies from the rest of India to the region especially into Assam to work on tea plantations and fertile river valleys. The demographic balance was shifted and lasting social complications were established by these red colonial period migrations [2].

After India's independence, migration patterns in North-East India became closely linked with political upheavals and geopolitical developments, including the Partition of 1947, cross-border movements from East Pakistan and later Bangladesh, and internal migration driven by economic opportunities and urbanisation. Whilst migration has been beneficial to the economy and cultural interchange; it has also posed serious socio-political problems. Identity, citizenship, landownership, and political representation have become core issues, stirring ethnic discontent, mass protests, and autonomy demand. For this reason, the issue of migration in North-East India is not just a numerical phenomenon but a highly emotive socio-political topic that affects regional stability, governance, and inter-community relationships even today [3].

II.   Related Literature Study

Mistri (2023) analysed migration from North-East India since the 1990s and highlighted how prolonged ethnopolitical unrest, unemployment, and uneven economic development had significantly shaped interstate migration patterns. The study showed that while overall migration from the region to mainland India declined during 2001–2011, there was a notable spatial shift towards southern states. The author argued that non-inclusive income growth, weak employment generation, and deficiencies in the education system intensified both labour and student migration. The analysis further revealed that long-standing conflict conditions and the enforcement of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA), 1958, adversely affected economic opportunities, social well-being, and investment inflows. Consequently, migration emerged not merely as an economic choice but as a structural response to political instability and developmental neglect. The study concluded that sustainable peace, inclusive growth, and institutional reforms were essential to reduce distress-driven migration from the region.

Das (2022) examined international migration in North-East India and underscored the role of porous borders, difficult terrain, and inadequate border management in facilitating uncontrolled cross-border migration. The study noted that while such migration supplied cheap labour and supported informal economic sectors, it simultaneously generated political marginalisation of indigenous communities, social tensions, and security concerns. The author highlighted links between illegal migration and internal

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[2] Mistri, A. (2023). Migration from North-East India since the 1990s: Ethnopolitical issues and economic development perspectives. In *Migration, Regional Autonomy, and Conflicts in Eastern South Asia: Searching for a Home (land)* (pp. 55-87). Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland.

[3] Das, S. N. (2022). International Migration and Social Change in India: The North-East Evidence.

displacement, human trafficking, and insurgency-related activities. Das argued that migration debates in the region were inseparable from national security discourses and ethnic identity politics. The study emphasised the limitations of existing policy responses that focused narrowly on securitisation without addressing humanitarian and developmental dimensions. It concluded that effective governance required a balanced approach combining border regulation, migrant rights protection, and inclusive development strategies to mitigate the adverse socio-political consequences of cross-border migration.

Mistri (2022) investigated migration from North-East India during 1991–2011 and found that persistent ethnopolitical conflict, limited employment growth, and weak industrial development had compelled both workers and students to migrate to mainland India. Using census-based evidence, the study demonstrated that prolonged unrest discouraged private investment and constrained public-sector employment, thereby intensifying out-migration. The author argued that the continued enforcement of AFSPA contributed to economic stagnation and social insecurity, reinforcing migration as a survival strategy rather than a voluntary opportunity. The research highlighted that educated youth migration was particularly significant, leading to long-term human capital loss for the region. Mistri concluded that migration patterns were deeply embedded in structural political conditions and could not be addressed through employment schemes alone. Sustainable peace-building, institutional reform, and inclusive economic policies were identified as critical prerequisites for reducing out-migration pressures.

Lusome and Bhagat (2020) analysed internal and international migration flows in North-East India using Census 2011 data and identified substantial inter-state variation. The study found that Manipur experienced higher out-migration than in-migration, whereas Assam maintained a relatively balanced migration pattern due to compensatory international inflows. The authors emphasised that migration dynamics in the region were shaped by both economic opportunities and political instability. The research also drew attention to reverse migration trends observed during crisis periods such as the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighting the fluid and responsive nature of mobility. By examining both inflow and outflow processes, the study challenged simplistic narratives that framed the North-East solely as a migrant-sending region. The authors concluded that nuanced, state-specific migration analysis was essential for effective policy-making, particularly in designing employment, social protection, and regional development strategies.

Sengupta and Purkayastha (2019) examined migration politics in North-East India within the framework of India's Look East Policy and argued that economic integration and border deregulation had intensified local–outsider conflicts. The study highlighted the paradoxical relationship between capital inflows and labour outflows, where regional development initiatives coexisted with growing migration anxieties. The authors demonstrated that migration debates were deeply entangled with historical grievances, ethnic identity, and political mobilisation. Rather than viewing migration as a purely economic phenomenon, the study framed it as a contested political process shaped by state policies and global economic forces. The research concluded that migration governance in the region required greater sensitivity to historical contexts and local perceptions. Failure to address identity-based concerns, the authors warned, risked exacerbating social tensions and undermining regional integration objectives.

Reimeingam (2018) analysed migration from North-East India to Bangalore using census data and identified a steady increase in migration to major urban centres. The study found that employment and educational opportunities were the primary drivers of migration, with Bangalore emerging as a preferred destination due to its expanding service and technology sectors. The author noted that migrants were predominantly young and educated, reflecting a selective migration pattern that contributed to regional brain drain. The research also highlighted migrants' adaptation strategies in urban labour markets, including occupational mobility and network-based job access. However, challenges such as cultural alienation and discrimination were also acknowledged. The study concluded that urban-centric growth models continued to pull human capital from peripheral regions, reinforcing spatial inequalities. Addressing regional disparities, the author suggested, was critical to moderating long-distance migration flows.

Mukherjee and Dutta (2017) examined the migration of North-East women to Delhi and highlighted how political instability, security concerns, and limited employment opportunities intensified female migration to metropolitan cities. The study identified a distinct pattern of young, single, and educated women migrating primarily for education and employment rather than marriage. While migration offered economic independence and social mobility, the authors also documented heightened vulnerability to discrimination, harassment, and cultural stereotyping in destination cities. The research underscored the gendered dimensions of migration, showing how women's experiences differed significantly from those of male migrants. The study concluded that urban labour markets both empowered and marginalised migrant women, depending on institutional support and social inclusion. The authors called for gender-sensitive migration policies and urban safety measures to ensure equitable outcomes for women migrants.

Arya (2016) examined migration from North-East India in the context of globalisation and observed a substantial increase in movement towards Indian metropolitan centres over two decades. The study argued that economic liberalisation and urban labour demand created new opportunities for skilled migrants from the region. Arya highlighted the emergence of a migrant intellectual class that possessed significant potential to contribute to national development. However, the study also noted that inadequate political socialisation and persistent stereotypes limited migrants' integration into mainstream society. The author concluded that migration outcomes depended not only on economic factors but also on institutional inclusivity and political recognition. Arya emphasised the need for policy frameworks that harnessed migrant skills while addressing discrimination and marginalisation. Migration, the study suggested, could become a positive force for nation-building if supported by inclusive governance structures.

Sengupta (2015) analysed migrant narratives of the Reang community in Tripura and challenged homogeneous representations of tribal communities produced through state-led development discourse. The study demonstrated that migration exposed internal social divisions within the community and revealed differentiated access to resources and opportunities. Sengupta argued that despite development interventions, tribal migrants continued to be stereotyped as backward, both in origin and destination areas. Migration was shown to disrupt traditional identities while simultaneously reinforcing marginalisation. The research highlighted how mobility complicated

simplistic notions of tribal development and cultural continuity. Sengupta concluded that migration narratives offered critical insights into the lived experiences of tribal communities, underscoring the need for more nuanced and participatory development approaches that recognised internal diversity and migrant agency.

Nandy (2005) highlighted migration as a complex phenomenon shaped by social, political, economic, environmental, and climatic factors. The study argued that migration often resulted from inequality, unemployment, political instability, and environmental degradation, with globalisation intensifying labour mobility. Nandy distinguished between reciprocal migration among developed economies and unidirectional flows from poorer countries to wealthier ones, driven by push–pull dynamics. While migration generated remittances and met labour shortages in destination areas, it also produced challenges such as brain drain, social integration issues, and demographic imbalances. The author concluded that migration was inseparable from global development processes and required comprehensive policy coordination. Rather than viewing migration as a problem, Nandy framed it as a structural necessity that demanded informed management to maximise benefits and minimise social costs.

III.   Key Finding from Related Literature Study

Year	Author(s)	Focus of the Study	Methodology	Key Findings
1995	Malhotra et al.	Patriarchy and fertility in India	Multilevel analysis of 1981 Census & secondary data	Strong macro-level relationship between patriarchal structures and fertility; southern India showed lower fertility due to women-favourable kinship systems.
1995	Bass	Social Impact Assessment (SIA)	Conceptual & policy analysis	SIA is a valid, ethical, and feasible policy tool, though underused unless legally mandated; useful for anticipating and preventing negative social impacts.
1995	Thrupp	School social mix and academic performance	Historical review & case study	School social composition influences student performance; calls for fine-grained, context-specific research beyond statistical correlations.
1997	Gohain	Ethnic unrest in North-East India	Historical–political analysis	Ethnic conflicts are rooted in post-colonial transitions, incomplete democratization, and neo-colonial interventions rather than spontaneous identity eruptions.

1997	Samaranayake	Political violence in Sri Lanka (JVP & LTTE)	Political–economic analysis	Youth-led insurgencies stem from limited development; enduring conflict reflects need for structural political change.
1997	Eaton	Conversion of Naga communities to Christianity	Comparative historical analysis	Religious change must be understood through broader cross-cultural and global historical processes rather than local explanations alone.
1998	Lingam	Gendered dimensions of migration	Field-based socio-economic analysis	Women's labour participation, autonomy, and mobility are shaped by migration type and life-cycle position, highlighting gender as a central analytical category.
1998	McGilvray et al.	Muslim identity in Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict	Ethnographic & historical study	Muslim communities occupied a precarious position due to constructed Arab-Islamic identity amid Tamil–Sinhalese conflict.
2000	Srikanth	Militancy in Assam	Political–sociological analysis	Militancy reflects deep social and ideological crises; peace requires addressing material and ideological roots of radicalisation.
2000	Lein	Disaster, poverty, and migration in Bangladesh	Household surveys (rural chars & urban slums)	Migration decisions are influenced by complex socio-economic factors, not solely by environmental displacement assumptions.
2005	Nandy	Globalisation and migration	Conceptual & macro-level analysis	Migration is a complex, necessary global phenomenon driven by push–pull factors; brings remittances but also brain drain and policy challenges.
2005	Sundari	Female migration in Tamil Nadu	Field study of women migrants	Women's migration acts mainly as a survival strategy; most remain in informal sectors with job insecurity and limited social protection.
2005	Nanda	Bangladesh–India migration	Census data (1981, 1991, 2001)	Large undocumented cross-border flows; settlement-oriented migration concentrated in East and North-East India; census data has limitations.

2005	Shrivastava et al.	Migration and land use in Assam	Household surveys & ecological analysis	Immigrant households achieved higher productivity despite insecure land tenure; home gardens emerged as adaptive livelihood strategies.
2005	Jeffrey et al.	Education and Dalit youth aspirations	Ethnographic study (Uttar Pradesh)	Education symbolised modernity and cultural assertion despite poor employment outcomes; youth experienced disillusionment yet valued schooling.
2015	Sengupta	Reang migration narratives in Tripura	Qualitative narrative analysis	Migration challenged homogeneous tribal identities and exposed internal community divisions despite development interventions.
2016	Arya	Migration from North-East India	Policy and globalisation analysis	Increased migration to metropolises; migrant intellectuals hold nation-building potential if supported by inclusive policies.
2017	Mukherjee & Dutta	North-East women migrants in Delhi	Qualitative urban migration study	Migration driven by conflict and limited opportunities; young educated women migrants faced discrimination and urban vulnerabilities.
2017	Nandy et al.	Labour mobility and globalisation	Comparative migration analysis	Migration among developed nations is reciprocal, while movement from poorer countries is largely unidirectional due to economic asymmetries.
2018	Reimeingam	North-East migration to Bangalore	Census-based urban analysis	Employment and education were primary drivers; Bangalore emerged as a major destination city.
2019	Sengupta & Purkayastha	Migration politics in North-East India	Political–economic analysis	Economic integration intensified insider–outsider conflicts; migration debates are deeply historical and identity-driven.
2020	Lusome & Bhagat	Migration flows in North-East India	Census 2011 analysis	Significant inter-state variation; Assam balanced outflows through international inflows; pandemic reverse migration noted.

2022	Das	International migration in North-East India	Policy and border analysis	Porous borders facilitated illegal migration, creating security and social challenges alongside economic benefits.
2022	Mistri	Migration from North-East India (1991–2011)	Census-based longitudinal analysis	Prolonged conflict and AFSPA hindered development, intensifying labour and student out-migration.
2023	Mistri	North-East migration since the 1990s	Historical & empirical analysis	Ethnopolitical unrest, unemployment, and uneven growth reshaped migration towards southern India.

IV. Findings

Based on the reviewed studies, the following key findings emerge:

Migration as a Multi-Dimensional Process: Migration is shaped by an interlinked set of economic, social, political, environmental, and climatic factors rather than a single cause. Globalization has intensified both internal and international migration by expanding labour markets and mobility opportunities, while also creating new challenges such as brain drain, social integration, and policy coordination [4] *(Nandy, 2005).*

Gendered Nature of Migration: Women's migration often functions as a household survival strategy rather than a pathway to sustained economic empowerment. Although migration may improve employment participation for women, the majority remain concentrated in informal-sector jobs characterized by insecurity, low wages, and lack of social protection, limiting long-term economic upliftment [5] *(Sundari, 2005; Lingam, 1998).*

Regional Concentration and Settlement Patterns of Migration: Cross-border migration, particularly from Bangladesh to India, shows strong regional concentration in eastern and northeastern states due to geographic proximity and socio-cultural linkages. Migrants tend to settle for long durations, indicating permanent or semi-permanent settlement rather than temporary migration [6] *(Nanda, 2005).*

Environmental Vulnerability and Adaptive Livelihood Strategies: Migration in environmentally fragile regions such as the Brahmaputra valley is closely linked to floods, land insecurity, and wildlife-related risks. Migrant households often compensate for vulnerability by adopting intensive and economically optimized land-use strategies, demonstrating resilience and adaptive capacity [7] *(Shrivastava et al., 2005; Lein, 2000).*

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[4] Nandy, C. (2005). Illegal immigration from Bangladesh to India: The emerging conflicts.

[5] Sundari, S. (2005). Migration as a livelihood strategy: A gender perspective. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 2295-2303.

[6] Nanda, A. K. (2005). Immigration from Bangladesh to India based on census data. *Asian and Pacific migration journal*, *14*(4), 487-499.

[7] Shrivastava, R. J., & Heinen, J. T. (2005). Migration and home gardens in the Brahmaputra Valley, Assam, India. *Journal of Ecological Anthropology*, *9*(1), 20-34.

Education, Aspiration, and Social Mobility: Increased access to education among marginalized groups has not necessarily translated into improved employment outcomes. While education remains a source of cultural capital and social distinction, unmet expectations have led to frustration, political mobilization, and a sense of being "trapped" by education among educated rural youth [8] *(Jeffrey et al., 2005).*

Ethnicity, Identity, and Conflict: Ethnic identity formation and migration are deeply entangled with historical, political, and economic transformations in South Asia. Identity-based conflicts in Northeast India and Sri Lanka are rooted in structural inequalities, post-colonial transitions, and uneven development rather than merely ethnic or ideological differences [9] *(Gohain, 1997; Srikanth, 2000; Samaranayake, 1997).*

Migration, Minority Positioning, and Social Vulnerability: Minority communities, such as Muslim Moors in Sri Lanka, occupy complex social positions shaped by identity politics and territorial conflicts. Their experiences highlight how migration, identity, and everyday coexistence intersect to produce both vulnerability and negotiated survival [10] *(McGilvray et al., 1998).*

Role of Social Structures in Demographic Outcomes: Patriarchal social structures significantly influence demographic patterns such as fertility. Regions with more favourable cultural and economic positions for women show lower fertility rates, reinforcing the importance of gender equity and social development in population outcomes [11]*(Malhotra et al., 1995).*

Need for Context-Sensitive Policy and Research Approaches: Across studies, there is strong evidence that migration, education, conflict, and social outcomes cannot be addressed through one-size-fits-all policies. Nuanced, context-specific interventions supported by social impact assessments and micro-level analyses are essential for effective governance and sustainable development [12] *(Bass, 1995; Thrupp, 1995).*

V.   Conclusion

The review of literature clearly demonstrates that migration and related social processes in South Asia are deeply embedded in broader structural, historical, and developmental contexts. Migration is characterized less as a voluntary move in search of better opportunities, but more as a reaction to economic disparities, environmental degradation, political instability and lack of livelihood options. Globalization has liberated the movement of labour, but also deepened asymmetrical dynamics -

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[8] Jeffrey, C., Jeffery, P., & Jeffery, R. (2005). When schooling fails: Young men, education and low–caste politics in rural north India. *Contributions to Indian sociology*, *39*(1), 1-38.

[9] Gohain, H. (1997). Ethnic unrest in the north-east. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 389-391.

[10] McGilvray, D. B. (1998). Arabs, moors, and Muslims: Sri Lankan Muslim ethnicity in regional perspective. *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, *32*(2), 433-483.

[11] Malhotra, A., Vanneman, R., & Kishor, S. (1995). Fertility, dimensions of patriarchy, and development in India. *Population and development review*, 281-305.

[12] Bass, J. (1995). *The transformation of southern politics: Social change and political consequence since 1945*. University of Georgia Press.

increasing flows and trajectories from developing areas to (the more) advanced countries in a way that perpetuates inequalities both regionally and globally. The research also indicates that migration is primarily a strategy of coping or survival, rather than a certain means to economic development. Nowhere is this more apparent than with women migrants who, despite participating in the labour market as never before, are locked into insecure and informal forms of work. At the same time, environmentally-induced migration in fragile environments showcases both vulnerability and resilience where migrant households develop adaptive livelihood strategies to support themselves under uncertain conditions.

Migration is closely linked to education, identity and political mobilization determining the aspirations and social achievements. Education still remains as a symbol and cultural resource for the subordinated, but the fact that it is not significant in regards to access to secure employment has led to frustration and other forms of social and political mobilization. In addition, the ethnic and identity-related unrest in Northeast India and Sri Lanka suggests that historical antecedents, limited or lopsided development trends for states, and poor governance have had a profound influence on social unrest. The literature as a whole highlight the importance of context-specific, integrated policies that tackle the fundamental causes of distress migration, enhance both rural and urban livelihoods, provide social protection for migrants and foster gender equity and social justice. In the absence of such all-inclusive measures, migration will probably continue to be a negative feature that offers little more than temporary escape from a situation where there is no other way out.

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