

Out-Migration from the North-Eastern States of India : Evidence from Census 2011

Pinak Sarkar

Introduction

The north-eastern (NE) region of India consists of eight states: Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim, and Tripura. These peripheral states are connected with the rest of India, often called ‘mainland’ India in common parlance, by a narrow piece of land only 21 kilometres wide in parts—a corridor popularly known as the Chicken’s Neck or the Siliguri Corridor. According to Census 2011, the region had a total population of around 45.5 million and covered a geographical area of 2,62,179 sq. km. The NE region is very sparsely populated compared to the other states of India. Also, there exists a vast disparity in population density across the states in the region. Assam and Tripura are the most densely populated states with over 350 people per sq. km, while Arunachal Pradesh is the least densely populated with only seventeen people per sq. km (Census 2011). Over 64 per cent of the land area in the region is forested, ranging from over 80 per cent in Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh to 35–45 per cent in Assam and Sikkim. The economic development of the NE region is abysmal, which works as a major ‘push factor’ for migration.

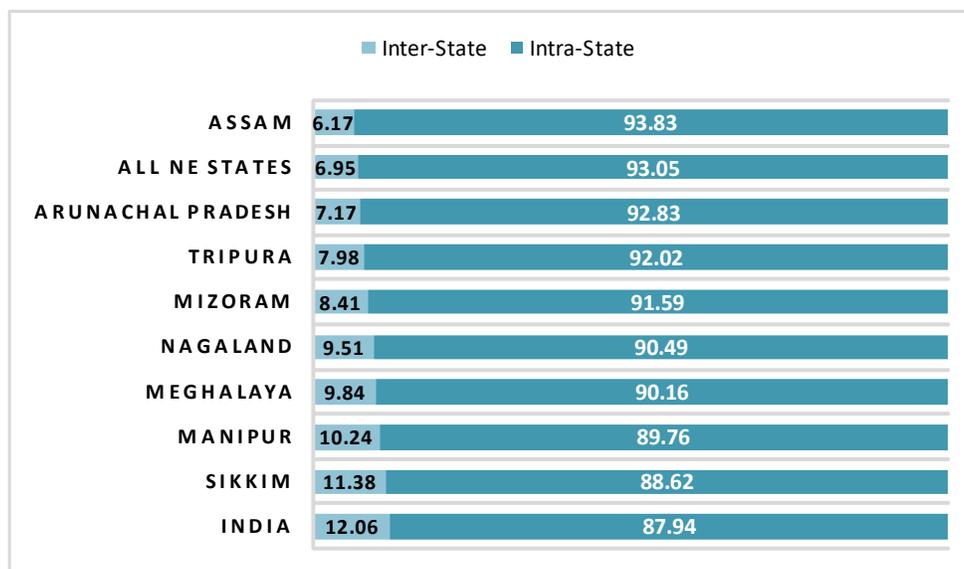
Migration Scenario in the North-Eastern Region

There are around 14.8 million (1,47,75,952) NE migrants in the country in total, out of which 6.95 per cent (10,26,501 persons) are inter-state out-migrants, and 93.05 per cent (1,37,49,451 persons) are intra-state migrants.

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Graph-1: State-wise distribution of inter-state and intra-state migration (in per cent)



Source: Compiled from Census 2011 D-3 series data on migration

Graph-1 shows the proportion of inter-state and intra-state out-migrants in individual NE states, the entire NE region and the same at the all-India level. At the all-India level, around 12 per cent migrate across the state boundary (interstate), whereas about 88 per cent migrate within the state boundary (intra-state). It is interesting to observe here that in the case of NE states, a relatively smaller proportion of migrants move beyond the state boundary. Also, it is found that across NE states, the proportion of inter-state migrants varies considerably, e.g., from 6.17 per cent in Assam to 11.38 per cent in Sikkim. This may be due to state-level differences in socio-economic characteristics. Other reasons for a comparatively lower share of inter-state migrants could be based on geographical factors such as distance and ethnicity, adaptability, cultural factors, and political situation.

However, recent studies have shown that the intensity of inter-state out-migration for economic reasons as well as for education has been increasing in the NE region, with a growing number of people moving to the National Capital Region, Mumbai, and Bangalore. (Marchang 2017; Sarkar 2014a; Chyrmang 2010; Shimray and Ushadevi 2009). Another study by Sarkar (2014b), using the Census-2001 data for ‘durational’ analysis, suggests that migration from the NE states has increased in recent times across the major destination states of Delhi, Maharashtra, and Karnataka.

Factors Facilitating the Migration Process

There are several factors facilitating migration from the NE region. Some of them are discussed as follows:

Economic development

The lack of economic development works as a major ‘push-factor’ for migration from the NE region. Maithani (2006) has commented that the NE region ‘is a development ostrich which has feathers but cannot or does not want to fly’. The region suffers from chronic economic backwardness. Although the NE has considerable amounts of unexploited and untapped natural resources, the region continues to be among the most backward ones in India industrially. Its urbanisation rate is well below the national average, except in Mizoram. In contrast to the rest of India, the population of the NE region is predominantly rural. Agriculture remains a major economic activity. In the absence of requisite economic development, the educated youth find it difficult to get employed. As a result, a considerable proportion of educated people move out of the region searching for employment. The NE states have high development potential because of their natural resources. However, the region’s natural and human resource development has been very limited due to a prolonged lack of attention to the overall development process (Lama 2006; Sachdeva 2006).

Lack of higher education infrastructure

The 1990s and 2000s witnessed an increase in student migration flow from the NE states to big cities like Bangalore, Mumbai, Kolkata and Delhi (Shimray and Ushadevi 2009). This pattern of student mobility reflects a lack of education and employment opportunities in the region. There is also a demand-supply mismatch in education which is evident from the fact that while the literacy rate has increased, there is a lack of avenues for higher education. The ‘push-pull’ factors affecting the decision to migrate, particularly for higher education and employment, apply to a large proportion of migrants from the NE. There is also a mismatch between the job market requirements and the local educational system—the local education system is unable to produce skill-sets required by the job market and professional service sectors (Lyndem and De 2004).

Political unrest

Political unrest and violence also influence the decision of the youth to migrate. Most of the NE’s states have ethnic/religious/communal conflicts and tensions due to infiltration and insurgency. These factors affect the routine life of the people in the NE region. In recent years, the political tension and violence in Manipur, for instance, has badly affected the lives of the local people. With as many as a hundred days of general strikes in a year—with

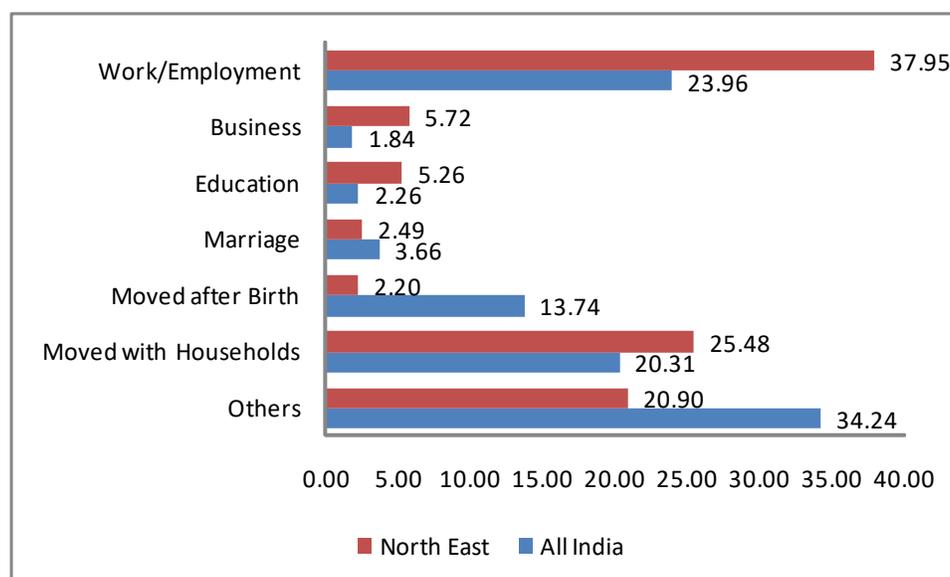
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markets and schools closed and public transportation brought to a halt—the ordinary people find it very difficult to pursue education and livelihood in the state (Remesh 2012). Together with the poor educational infrastructure and bleak employment prospects in the region, such tensions prompt youngsters to try their luck in urban centres in other parts of the country.

Reasons for Out-Migration: North-Eastern States Vs. All India Trends

In this section, the reasons for migration from the NE states are compared with all-India data. The reasons for migration are analysed separately for male and female migrants as male migration is mostly dominated by employment-related reasons, whereas female migration may occur due to employment as well as marriage. The aggregate analysis of males and females together may give biased results.

Graph-2: Reason for migration among male migrants for North-Eastern states and all India



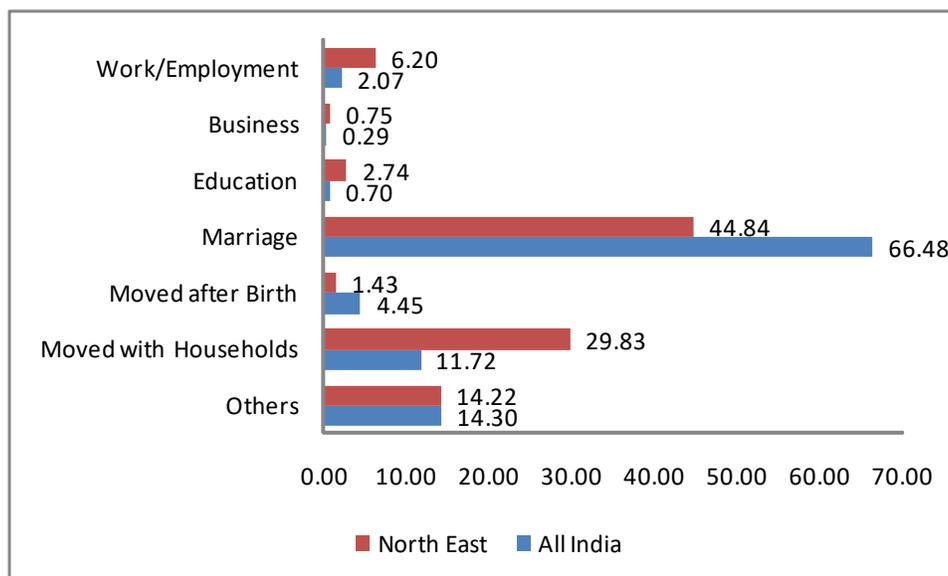
Source: Compiled from Census 2011 D-3 series data on migration

Migration-centric literature concerning NE states suggests that these states' economic development has always been deplorable and, therefore, a major factor driving out-migration, even though the potential to prosper is abundant (Sachdeva 2006; Lama 2006). Graph-2 shows the distribution of reason-specific out-migration patterns for males from the NE states and the rest of India. It shows that for male migrants of the NE, work/employment is the most common reason for migration and constitutes a greater proportion than it does at the

all-India level. It must be noted here, however, that recent state-specific Census 2011-based studies on Bihar and Uttar Pradesh (Sarkar 2019, 2020) suggest that work/employment-related out-migration among males is more than 50 per cent in these states—far higher than that in the NE states. Moreover, when it comes to business-related out-migration, it is 5.72 per cent in the NE states, about five times the national average and higher than the EAG states such as Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. This suggests that while out-migration for economic reasons such as work/employment and business is higher in the low-income states in general, the propensity and magnitude varies across geographical regions.

Another important observation is that out-migration for education from the NE states is almost double the national average at 5.72 per cent. Empirical studies by Shimray and Ushadevi (2009) found that in the last two decades, students’ flow from the NE states to the major metropolitan cities has increased. They also suggested that student mobility pattern reflected a lack of education and employment opportunities in the region. Student migration from the NE states has witnessed a constant rise in recent years. The number of students who migrated from the region increased to about 40,000 in 2011 from about 30,000 in 2001. It was about 26,000 in 1991 and about 18,000 in 1981 (Census 1981; 1991; 2001; 2011). So overall, across decades, student migration from the state has constantly been increasing. The ‘moved with household’ category, suggesting the entire family unit’s movement, is also higher among the NE migrants.

Graph-3: Reason for migration among female migrants for North-Eastern states and all India



Source: Compiled from Census 2011 D-3 series data on migration

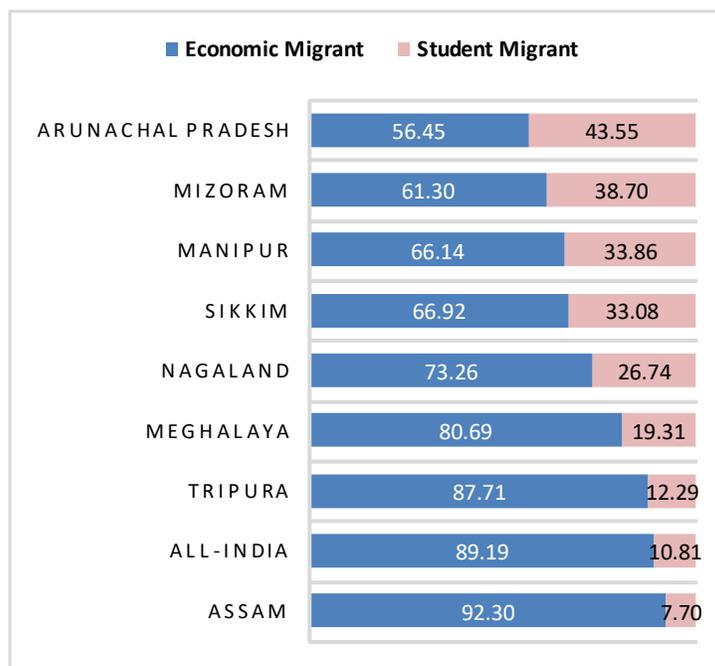
Graph-3 shows that the propensity to migrate for economic reasons such as work/employment and business among female migrants from the NE states is more than double the all-India average. It is observed that in the NE region, 6.20 per cent of female migration happens exclusively for work/employment, compared to 2.07 per cent at the all-India level. It is 0.75 per cent for business-related reasons in the NE states, while the all-India average is 0.29 per cent. These figures suggest a higher level of willingness among female migrants from these states to migrate for economic reasons. Another important observation is that while ‘marriage migration’ is the most dominant category in the female migration stream everywhere, it is substantially lower for the female migrants from NE states at 44.84 per cent than the all-India average of 66.48 per cent. The lower marriage-led migration could be attributed to a higher share in the ‘moved with household’ category, which, at around 29.83 per cent, is considerably higher than the all-India level of 11.72 per cent. This also points to a higher level of family migration from these states.

Education-Employment Divide in Out-Migration from the North-Eastern States

The education-employment divide is assessed by figuring out the share of employment and education within the aggregated value of both taken as 100. It is evident from Graph-4 that the share of employment is much higher compared to education. However, it is important to observe that the share of education-led migration is much higher in the NE states than the same at the all-India level within this pattern. This reflects a measure of desperation among the NE youth population to move out for education. The data brings to the fore the emerging trends in educational migration within India and identifies states that are more prone to educational migration than the others.

Such observations also highlight the educational inequalities between states that accelerate migration from the disadvantaged states to those with advantages in the form of educational infrastructure and facilities. Data provided by the Ministry of Human Resource Development, AISHE: 2010-11, (2013) report¹ shows that there are only 40 universities in the entire NE region compared to a total of 621 universities in the country. Of the total 89 technical universities in the country, the NE states’ share is only eight. Arunachal Pradesh and Mizoram do not have any technical university. Also, in terms of colleges per lakh population, the all-India figure is 23 colleges, whereas, in the case of NE states, except Manipur, all other states have a far lesser number of colleges.

Graph-4: Distribution of education-employment in interstate out-migration stream (in per cent)

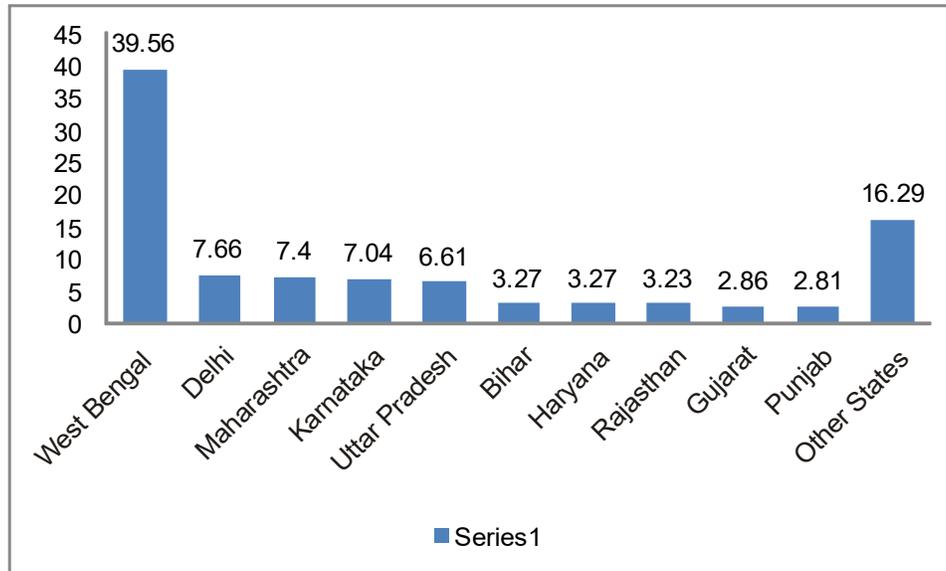


Source: Compiled from Census 2011 D-3 series data on migration

Major Destination States for Migrants from the North-Eastern States

Graph-5 shows major destinations² for migrants from the NE states. It is observed that around 40 per cent of the NE out-migrants migrate to West Bengal. This can be attributed to proximity advantage—West Bengal borders Assam and Sikkim and shares close cultural ties with Tripura. It also offers better economic opportunities compared to the NE region. The other major destinations are Delhi, Maharashtra, Karnataka, etc.

Graph-5: Distribution of migrants from the North-Eastern states across India



Source: Compiled from Census 2011 D-3 series data on migration

North-Eastern Migration Cohort across Major Destination States

Table-1 shows the state-wise distribution of the NE migrant cohorts across the major destination states such as West Bengal, Delhi, Maharashtra, Karnataka and Uttar Pradesh. It is observed that migrants from Assam dominate the NE migrant cohorts across all major destination states—West Bengal (77.71 per cent), Delhi (63.28 per cent), Maharashtra (76.38 per cent), Karnataka (62.06 per cent) and Uttar Pradesh (84.25 per cent). Here, Assam stands out as an outlier among the eight NE states. Therefore, to better assess the distribution pattern of migrant cohorts, Assam (the outlier) is removed in Table-2.

Table-1: Migrant cohorts from the North-Eastern states across major destination states (in per cent)

North-Eastern States	West Bengal	Delhi	Maharashtra	Karnataka	Uttar Pradesh
Sikkim	5.39	2.4	1.37	4.24	1.33
Arunachal Pradesh	1.08	3.39	1.97	6.04	2.6
Nagaland	1.48	4.63	3.5	3.48	2.42
Manipur	1.24	14.87	7.05	12.85	3.52
Mizoram	0.25	1.64	1.2	1.23	0.79
Tripura	9.57	3.59	3.93	4.97	1.95
Meghalaya	3.27	6.2	4.6	5.14	3.14
Assam	77.71	63.28	76.38	62.06	84.25
Total	100	100	100	100	100

Table-2: Migrant cohorts from the North-Eastern states (except Assam) across major destination states (in per cent)

North-Eastern States	West Bengal	Delhi	Maharashtra	Karnataka	Uttar Pradesh
Sikkim	24.18	6.54	5.82	11.17	8.44
Arunachal Pradesh	4.87	9.22	8.35	15.91	16.51
Nagaland	6.64	12.62	14.8	9.16	15.39
Manipur	5.56	40.5	29.84	33.87	22.34
Mizoram	1.14	4.45	5.07	3.24	4.98
Tripura	42.95	9.79	16.66	13.11	12.38
Meghalaya	14.67	16.88	19.46	13.55	19.95
Total	100	100	100	100	100

It is observed in Table-2 that in West Bengal, the dominant migrant cohort (excluding Assam) is Tripura, which can be attributed to the historical and cultural ties between the two states. In the states of Delhi, Maharashtra, Karnataka and Uttar Pradesh, the dominant NE migrant cohort is Manipur. The emergence of Manipur as the dominant cohort could be due to the state's persistent political and social unrest. Studies have suggested that life has become difficult for ordinary people in Manipur in recent years. Amidst rampant unemployment in the region and frequent general strikes (Remesh 2012), Delhi is emerging as an important migration destination (Marchang 2008).

Summary

The eight peripheral NE states comprise one of the most underdeveloped regions in the country. The lack of economic development, infrastructural facilities, employment opportunities and business activity, along with the scarcity of higher educational institutions, are major determinants of out-migration from the region. Migration for economic reasons is common across low-income states, and the NE states are no exception. However, migration for education from the NE states is about double the national average for male migrants and three times the national average for female migrants. This shows a demand-supply mismatch in higher education endowments in the NE region and the NE people's willingness and interest to acquire higher education. The migrant cohort analysis across the major destinations helps us visualise how cultural ties and political unrest/ violence can shape migration patterns, as witnessed in the case of the Tripura cohort in West Bengal and the Manipur cohort in Delhi and Maharashtra.

Notes

1. All India Survey on Higher Education.
2. For calculating major destinations, all North-eastern states are taken as a single source. Therefore, inter-state migration between NE states is not considered here.

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