

Out-Migration Of Youth From North-East India: A Youth Development Perspective

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ABSTRACT

The demographic significance of the youth in India has drawn much attention in academic and political discourses in recent years, knowing that the potential of a country's future lies in its young population. As the north-eastern states of India are still struggling to overcome several socio-economic and political disadvantages resulting from decades of being isolated from rest of the country, catering to the needs and emerging aspirations of their young population play significant role in determining their power and status in contemporary India. Therefore, to understand the challenges and needs of the youth has become an important field of study. This paper attempts to identify some key issues of concern for the youth belonging to different north-eastern states, using secondary research.

Keywords- Youth study, North East India, education and employment, skill development, Positive Youth Development.

INTRODUCTION

Significance of the young population in India for offering a demographic dividend to the economy, has brought much attention in political and academic discourses in recent years towards the development of youth. According to the 2011 census, 28 per cent of India's population is that of the youth and according to 2014 United Nations Population Fund's (UNFPA) State of World's Population Report, India has world's largest youth population. Despite the high potential of the promised demographic dividend, existing scenario of large-scale unemployment poses a serious challenge to economic development. The unemployment rate in India for 2017-2018, before the pandemic further aggravated the situationⁱ, stood at 6.1 per cent (NSSO)ⁱⁱ.

Youth population (15-29), as per the Census 2011, comprises about 29 per cent of the population of India's North East Region (NER) (Marchang, 2019). Large-scale out-migration of young people from the different north-eastern states to the bigger cities of India in pursuit of better education and employment opportunities reflects the disparities between emerging youth aspirations and existing developmental paradigms in the region (Remesh, 2012; Marchang, 2017). For a region that has been struggling to overcome various socio-economic and political disadvantages resulting from a historical isolation from the rest of the country, occurrence of the Covid 19 pandemic has added new layers to the challenges of development. When the pandemic struck in 2020, like most other states in the country, states in NER saw floods of in-coming people, mostly students and casual or informal workers returning to home for safety. While many of these people who were seen as 'return migrants' travelled back to their work destinations as the nation-wide lockdown eased and the economy gradually reopened, livelihoods for a lot of these people remain insecure and unstable and several others have stayed back in their home-states looking for new ways to earn their livelihoods. In this context it has become ever more important for the NER to realise the urgency of creating efficient systems of education and employment for its young generation.

For a long time, academic and political discourses on north-east India have been looking at the young population of the region through lenses of conflict and violence owing to their dominant presence in the life-worlds of the people living in this part of the country, be it in the form of inter-tribe or inter-community conflicts, movements for autonomy, military activities by the state against insurgency, etc. However, the more recent works on young population of the region have brought the focus on social changes and development through studies on educational aspirations, employment, skill development, out-migration, etc. (McDuie-Ra, 2012; Nongbri and Shimreiwung, 2017; Marchang, 2017 and 2019, Karlsson & Kikon, 2017; Baruah, 2022).

This study aims to understand the youth development scenario of North-East India. The study tries to identify some key issues and challenges experienced by the youth in NER and to understand some of the developmental needs and expectations of the contemporary youth vis-à-vis the existing infrastructural capacities in the region.

CONCEPTUALISING YOUTH AND YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

The definition of youth varies globally, with UNESCO defining it as individuals aged 15-24, while in India, the Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports extends the age range to 15-29. This discrepancy is due to diverse criteria used to determine youth across different societies and periods. Youth is generally seen as a transitional stage from childhood to adulthood, with boundaries shifting based on socio-cultural, economic, and political factors. In some regions, like Africa, the transition of boys to adulthood may extend into the late twenties and mid-thirties, emphasizing the economic and social stability gained through steady employment (Second National Youth Policy Document of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2009). Societies in North-East India may categorize youth based on factors other than age, such as belonging to a specific generation, often, denoting unmarried individuals with fewer domestic and social responsibilities and high physical strength (Nongkynrih, 2009). This shows that for some societies, understanding of what constitutes the category of youth varies not just in terms of age sets, but the meanings and implications may also differ with regard to gender.

In contemporary India, marked by neoliberalism, the education and employment sectors have expanded significantly. However, this growth has led to increased competition and complexity in the job market. Young people spend more time acquiring skills and upgrading their education, delaying their entry into the workforce, this change in the domain of education, combined with the rise of flexible work arrangements, including casual, temporary, freelance, and part-time jobs, adds to the challenge of defining a clear entry point into independent adulthood. Psychologist Arnett coined the term 'emerging adulthood' to describe the unique challenges faced by individuals aged 18-25 in the modern era (Arnett 2014)ⁱⁱⁱ. Factors such as prolonged education, broader opportunities for women, and delayed marriage and parenthood contribute to this distinct life stage.

The global youth development discourse encompasses two main approaches: deficit-based and asset-based. In a deficit based approach, youth are seen as problems to be addressed, victims who are in danger or as source of danger and in an asset-based approach, youth are perceived as key agents for social change and development (Charles and Jameson-Charles, 2014). Contrary to early youth studies which focused on the problematic aspects of youth, a relatively recent engagement in the field of youth studies has been towards positive youth development (PYD), which focuses on capacity building aspects of youth which is perceived as a period of high potential for skill development and making positive contribution to society (Robinson et al., 2012). Taking a PYD approach does not, however, mean ignoring the problems and adversities affecting the youth, instead, its emphasis is on engaging children (and youth) into productive activities and enabling them to gain competence and make positive contribution rather than just correcting maladaptive tendencies (Damon, 2004). Under this approach, the 5Cs model (competence, character, connections, confidence and caring/contribution) has gained popularity as indicators of PYD (Hamilton & Hamilton, 2004; Robinson et al, 2012).

In India, the Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports has formulated three youth policies, reflecting an asset-based perspective by emphasizing holistic youth development. The National Youth Policy 2014 underscores the importance of skill development and entrepreneurship. However, challenges persist in the North Eastern Region (NER), where limited market accessibility and poor digital connectivity hinder the reach of these policies. Investigating the actual impact and reach of these programs across states is crucial for evaluating their effectiveness.

YOUTH-RELATED ISSUES IN NORTH-EAST INDIA

Youth population comprises about 19-22 per cent of the total population in the North-eastern states, where, a larger sum of the youth population are from rural regions (NEC, 2015). While recent achievements by some in fields like sports, music, cinema, and television are gaining attention, the region has historically been recognized for challenges such as militancy, insurgency, underdevelopment, economic backwardness, political instability, and cultural 'otherness.' Each of the eight states in the North-East Region (NER) possesses unique cultural, topographical, social, and economic features. Common factors binding them include a shared geographical location, historical isolation, and neglect from the rest of the country, coupled with prolonged experiences of militancy and violence.

For the young population in this part of the country, direct experiences of political conflicts either as victims or participants or witnesses, or hearing about them in the daily discussions among adults at home, has been inseparable part of their growing up. Scholars and activists from the region have extensively voiced and projected upon how decades of political chaos have affected economy and social life in the region. Frequent bands or strikes called by different political groups, a general state of political tension, slow governance and corruption have caused serious impediments to the developmental potential of the region and its people. However, surprisingly not enough literature can be found about the effects of this perpetual state of conflict and violence on children and young adults, who apart from facing disturbances in their education also experience a host of other related disadvantages in terms of their extra-curricular activities, inter-cultural interactions (since these states have frequently experienced multiple inter-ethnic conflicts) and the over-all sense of personal safety, which are bound to affect their personal development and outlook.

A study conducted by The Northeast Research and Social Work Networking, Kokrajhar (NERSWN) titled 'Impact of Conflict on Children in Assam and Manipur States of India' finds that children from numerous families have been 'forced/lured/motivated' to join armed groups using family's poor economic condition or a fight for the community as reasons. The multiple case studies presented in this work offer telling instances of how various causes like broken families, lack of interest in studies, poverty in family, pressure from certain individuals or groups or even simple boredom from living monotonous lives push children, adolescents and youths towards joining insurgent groups. On the other hand, there are also several young people who become victims of clashes between insurgent groups and state armed forces.

Unemployment, particularly youth unemployment, is a pressing concern in the NER. Educated unemployment and underemployment have risen with an increase in youth education levels. Urban areas face more severe challenges due to higher demand for non-agricultural jobs, and gender biases disadvantage women. Limited opportunities and corruption in government services worsen the employment situation. The shift in employment aspirations from traditional to non-agricultural sectors adds pressure to the demand-supply situation for formal jobs in the region (Nongkynrih, 2009; Marchang, 2019).

A study conducted among youth in the region found that "infrastructural development" is an issue of top priority and about 74.5 per cent prefer to get settled outside the region or their respective States for better career and job prospects (Deka 2019). Deka's study finds that in the entire NER there are 93 training centres for skill development working with skill partners. However, how efficient and effective these initiatives have been and how accessible they are to different social groups that characterise these societies, are some of the questions that require further investigation.

Some studies point towards under-utilisation of existing resources, in terms of manpower as well as physical infrastructures, in ITIs in the region with very low level of participation and poor placement records (Sarkar, 2020). An online survey launched by the Government of Meghalaya to assess youth (15-29yrs) found that 65 per cent of 500 participants claimed that they do not have any Skill development institutes in their vicinity, 82 per cent do not have any career counselling centres in their vicinity, only about 39 per cent admit to having attended career-counselling and only 29 per cent are beneficiaries of any government schemes (Meghalaya Youth Policy draft 2021). Thus, from the above sets of data, it can be seen that in the State of Meghalaya, despite the existence of 10 training centres and eight skill partners (Deka, 2019), a large number of youths in the State do not find any such institute in their vicinity.

Unemployment correlates with social problems like engagement in unlawful activities and substance abuse. Consumption of substances is found to be considerably high among male adults in north-east India than elsewhere in the country (Saikia & Debbarma, 2020). The shift from traditional to individualistic forms of leisure is seen as contributing to contemporary youth problems.

Scholarly works on out-migration from North-East India provides narratives of relative disadvantages perceived and experienced by the Northeasterners, in relation to the host society and other migrants, when they move to other parts of the country for educational or employment purposes ((Mcduie-Ra, 2012; Nongbri and shimreiwung, 2016; Baruah, 2022).

In summary, North-East India faces complex challenges related to youth, including the lingering impact of political conflicts, unemployment issues, and social problems. While efforts are being made through skill development initiatives, further research and targeted policies are necessary to address the multifaceted issues affecting the youth in this region.

CONCLUSION

Therefore, youth development in the north-east requires a context-specific and need-based approach which addresses not only its historical complexities but also contemporary realities. Existing youth-based initiatives in the region are largely focused on increasing employability through skill development programs and vocational courses but if these initiatives do not address the emerging aspirations of the youngsters and followed with a suitable policy for employment generation, there will be no significant impact on the existing situation.

Taking into consideration the unique historical, socio-cultural and political context of north-east India, youth developmental efforts need to be designed and practised in a holistic way that caters to some of the crucial needs of the young people at social, economic as well as psychological levels. The 5Cs model of PYD can prove to be a useful tool to evaluate this process. Career counselling, co-curricular activities, personality and communication development workshops in schools and colleges, and skill trainings for school dropouts and for those looking for jobs will help in the build-up of competence and confidence. Increasing interactions among students beyond territorial and ethnic boundaries can help in fostering a sense of connectedness. Encouraging social work activities or community-based programs in colleges could help in instilling social and moral responsibilities in youth, which would address the last two indicators of the 5Cs model, i.e., character and contribution. Co-ordinated efforts among Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) which play a significant role in reaching out to the more backward and remote locations in the hills need to be strengthened to help the young people there avail such facilities for development, for which the state governments should extend their support and also encourage educated youngsters to participate in these initiatives.

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Notes

ⁱ India's unemployment rate for December 2021 is 7.91% (CMIE).

ⁱⁱ Estimated Unemployment Rate on Usual Status (ps+ss) Basis for all Ages as per results of Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) conducted by National Sample Survey Office (NSSO).

ⁱⁱⁱ In Herzog (2016).