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Urban Adaptation: The Social and Cultural Journey of Naga Migrants in Indian Metropolises

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Abstract

This paper explores the experiences of Naga migrants in Indian metropolises, focusing on the intertwined challenges of cultural dislocation and social exclusion they encounter in urban environments. Drawing exclusively on secondary sources, the study examines how Naga migrants are often marked as outsiders due to their distinct ethnic identity, leading to experiences of prejudice, stereotyping, and marginalization. Despite these obstacles, the paper highlights the proactive strategies employed by Naga migrants to adapt and assert their identity in the city. Through the formation of support networks, participation in community and religious organizations, Naga migrants actively negotiate their place within the urban landscape. The paper argues that while cultural and social barriers persist, Naga migrants demonstrate resilience in creating spaces of belonging and redefining what it means to be urban in contemporary India.

Keywords: Naga Migrant, Urban Adaptation, Cultural Dislocation, Social Exclusion

1. Introduction

India's rapid urbanization over the past few decades has transformed its social and cultural landscape with millions of rural inhabitants migrating to bustling metropolises in search of better economic opportunities, education and improved living standards. According to Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) 2020-2021, migrants are defined as individuals whose last usual place of residence is different from their present place of enumeration. The usual place of residence is the place where a person has stayed continuously for at least six months or intends to stay for six months or more. This report also highlights the common reasons for migration for the different category of migrants. For the female migrant, the main reason for migration is marriage (86.8%), migration of a parent/earning member (7.3%), housing problems (0.8%), and taking up employment (0.7%). On the other hand, for the male migrant, seeking employment/better employment is a priority (22.8%) followed by taking up offered employment/being close to work (20.1%), migration of a parent/earning member (17.5%), and job loss (6.7%). Migration is not merely a physical relocation; it marks the beginning of a complex social and cultural journey for migrants as they navigate the unfamiliar rhythms of city life. Upon arrival, rural migrants are confronted with a host of challenges ranging from securing employment and affordable housing to overcoming language barriers and adapting to new social norms. The process of adaptation is further complicated by the need to balance the preservation of rural identities and traditions with the pressures of urban assimilation. In the vibrant yet often impersonal urban

milieu, migrants forge new social networks, negotiate their place in the city's diverse fabric and contribute to the evolving cultural mosaic of India's metropolises.

Among these internal migrants, people from India's Northeast particularly Nagaland have increasingly moved to cities such as Delhi, Mumbai, Hyderabad, Chennai, Bangalore, and Pune. Globalization has opened up employment opportunities in sectors like retail, hospitality, and call centres making cities like Delhi especially attractive (Angelova, 2015; Kipgen & Panda, 2019; Marchang, 2017). However, the experiences of Naga migrants are marked by a dual struggle, cultural dislocation and social exclusion. Their distinct appearance, language, and customs often set them apart from the urban mainstream. As Wouters and Subba (2013) argue, they are frequently marginalized for not having an "Indian face," a perception deeply embedded in dominant conceptions of Indian identity. This exclusion is reinforced through racism, stereotyping, and discrimination. Migrants from the Northeast routinely experience verbal abuse, sexual harassment, physical assault, and caste-based police violence, particularly in cities like Delhi (Duncan McDuie-Ra, 2012; Kikon, 2021). Their cultural background, religious identity, and Mongoloid features often lead to them being seen as outsiders with questionable morals (Angelova, 2015). As members of Scheduled Tribes, the Naga are positioned at the bottom of India's caste hierarchy which further intensifies their vulnerability to exclusion. These issues were starkly visible during the COVID-19 pandemic, when individuals with Mongoloid features across the world were profiled as virus carriers. In India, the pandemic exacerbated the racism faced by people from the Northeast. This reflects a deeper, longstanding failure to recognize them as fully Indian—an erasure rooted in dominant narratives of the nation that associate the idea of Bharat or Hindustan with Aryan and Dravidian identities, often excluding Mongoloid groups (Haokip, 2020; Samson, 2017).

Despite these systemic barriers, Naga migrants have not remained passive. Drawing on strong networks of kinship, tribal affiliations, and church communities, they develop adaptive strategies that help them navigate city life. Through community gatherings, cultural events, and the preservation of traditional values, they assert their identities and carve out spaces of belonging in the urban milieu (Nazii et al., 2021). Their experiences, though shaped by discrimination and marginalization also reflect agency and resilience as they engage with the opportunities and challenges of metropolitan life. This paper, based on secondary sources, argues that while Naga migrants in Indian metropolises face significant obstacles to social integration, their lived realities are marked by resilience. Through adaptation, identity assertion, and collective action, they resist marginalization and help create new, plural forms of urban belonging.

Methodology of the study

This study is primarily based on secondary data sources. Key data on migration trends in North-East India, particularly Nagaland, have been drawn from the Census of India 2001 and 2011, which are considered among the most reliable sources of population and migration statistics in the country. Additionally, unit-level data from the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) 64th Round (2007–2008) has been used to supplement the analysis where necessary. These sources also include annual administrative reports of departments under the Government of Nagaland.

Migration Trends and Urban Movement

Nagaland has a total population of 19,78,502, of which 14,07,536 reside in rural areas and 5,70,988 in urban areas. (Directorate of Economics and Statistics, Nagaland, 2022). Mon district has the highest rural

population, with 2,15,816 residents, while Dimapur—being the commercial hub of the state—has the highest urban population, totalling 1,97,869. It is estimated that 8.05 million non-agricultural workers commute from rural to urban areas for work, while 4.37 million commutes from urban to rural areas. In Nagaland, data from the NSSO (2004–05 and 2009–10) shows that among rural residents, 63,817 workers commute to other rural areas and 4,221 commute to urban areas, while among urban residents, 47,928 commute within urban areas and 5,873 to rural areas. Further analysis reveals that only 12% of rural-to-urban and 15% of urban-to-rural commuters are employed in the government or public sector (Chandrasekhar, 2011), indicating a heavy reliance on the private and informal sectors. This trend in commuting patterns must also be understood in the context of Nagaland's demographic distribution. According to the Directorate of Economics and Statistics, Nagaland (2024), all districts in the state except Dimapur have a higher rural population than urban, including the state capital. This rural dominance further reinforces the significance of rural-to-rural and rural-to-urban commuting for employment. Carefully dissecting the employment scenario and migration trend, Ezung (2015) opines that employment opportunities have also played a major role in pushing the Nagas out of the state. Though Nagaland has many untapped resources and potential for diverse employment, unemployment remains high - 106 per thousand in rural and 92 per thousand in urban areas (NSSO 2009–10). Many unskilled and uneducated natives in Nagaland avoid jobs such as cobbling, hair cutting, construction work, or working as coolies, as these are seen as low-status or non-local jobs. There is a social stigma attached to such work, leading to a mental divide between what is considered acceptable "local" work and what is not. At the same time, educated youth often seek white-collar government jobs, which are increasingly scarce due to the growing number of graduates each year. This mismatch between job preferences and available opportunities drives many educated natives to migrate to metropolitan cities in search of better job prospects and professional fulfilment (Changkery, 2016).

According to the Census, Nagaland recorded an out-migration of 136,933 in 2001, which sharply declined to 13,022 in 2011. The net migration rate shifted from a high negative of −49.94 in 2001 to a moderate positive of 12.93 in 2011 indicating a significant reduction in out-migration and a slight increase in in-migration over the decade (Patangia & Kar, 2024). Although the data indicates a slight reduction in out-migration between 2001 and 2011, it is important to note that this information is over a decade old. The decennial census scheduled for 2021 is yet to be conducted, leaving a significant gap in updated migration statistics. Given the socio-economic changes, rising unemployment, and continued preference for government jobs among the educated youth in Nagaland, it is reasonable to argue that out-migration has likely increased over the past decade. The absence of recent official data should not obscure the lived realities on the ground, where migration in search of better employment opportunities, particularly among the younger population, remains a growing trend. Therefore, while the 2011 figures suggest a temporary improvement, they are insufficient to capture the current migration dynamics in the state.

Table 1: Out-ward migration as per place of birth, 2001 and 2011

State	2001	2011
Nagaland	136,933	13,022

Source: Census of India, 2001 and 2011

Table 2: Net migration in Nagaland, 2001 and 2011

State	2001	2011
Nagaland	-49.94	12.93

Source: Census of India, 2001 and 2011

Table 3: Out-migration to other parts of India as per place of birth 2001 and 2011

Region of Destination	2001 (Migrants)	2011 (Migrants)
North India	24,010	3,727
West India	707	1,426
Central India	8,119	1,001
South India	1,034	2,650
East India	103,063	4,218

Source: Census of India 2001 and 2011

In 2001, the highest number of migrants from Nagaland moved to East India, totalling 103,063, which accounted for the majority of outward migration. This was followed by North India with 24,010 migrants and Central India with 8,119 migrants. The numbers for South India and West India were significantly lower with 1,034 and 707 migrants respectively. This suggests that in 2001, migration from Nagaland was heavily concentrated towards the eastern and northern regions of the country. In 2011, outward migration from Nagaland decreased sharply across all regions. Migration to East India dropped to 4,218, while North India saw a reduction to 3,727 migrants. Central India recorded 1,001 migrants, and South India saw a slight rise to 2,650. Migration to West India also increased modestly to 1,426. Compared to 2001, the 2011 data reflect a substantial decline in migration to most regions with only South and West India showing a slight increase. Some of the primary reason for out-migration from the region according to the Census 2011 was migration with household for 35.8% of the total outflows. This was followed by migration due to marriage (20.7%), work (16.4%), and other reasons (18.5%). Education-related migration made up 6.0%, while 2.6% of individuals moved after birth. This distribution indicates that family-related migration (including marriage and household movement) played a significant role in outmigration from Nagaland, while work and education, though present, are comparatively lower drivers (Lusome & Bhagat, 2020).

Social and Cultural Challenges of Urban Adaptation

Migration from Northeast India to mainland cities for government positions, public sector employment, military service, and higher education has been ongoing since the early post-independence period. This movement gained momentum in the 1990s due to improved transportation links, economic liberalization, growing middle-class ambitions, and shifting attitudes toward the Indian mainland. A broad body of literature indicates that several pull factors attract people to large cities, such as access to quality education, improved infrastructure, better employment prospects, greater livelihood opportunities, higher rates of labour absorption, and enhanced connectivity. On the other hand, various push factors also drive migration from native regions, including economic underdevelopment, high unemployment, social instability, cross-border tensions, ethnic strife, displacement, and ongoing socio-political unrest (Raleng, 2023; Dasgupta & Dey, 2010).While migration has contributed to reshaping the social and cultural dynamics of urban areas, it has also resulted in heightened experiences of discrimination and everyday racism faced by Northeastern communities (Kumar, 2025). Naga migrants upon migration often face discrimination rooted

in racial and ethnic stereotyping as they are perceived as outsiders due to their physical appearance, language, and cultural practices. They are caught between the extremes of economic inclusion and social marginality and are often confused with Nepali, Tibetan or East Asian origin (Angelova, 2015). Among the various sectors of employment in the cities, the hospitality sector has become a racially marked space where North Easterners are prominently employed. Their lighter skin tones and Mongoloid features are often seen as appealing to international customers, making them a preferred choice for restaurants and cafés in major Indian cities (Wouters and Subba, 2013). However, discrimination, abuse and harassment of people from the Northeast are common in the hospitality sector. A case in point is the recent incident at the Chennai Gateway Hotel, where staff from Manipur and Mizoram were allegedly detained and assaulted by management (Ukhrul Times, 2024). Another incident where Northeastern women working in spas and salons in Goa have raised their voices against exploitative labor conditions and unsafe workplaces. Their primary concerns were being repeatedly compelled to visit the homes of strangers to provide massage services, often sent alone, which exposed them to potential sexual harassment from clients and legal risks from the police (Wright, 2016). Another form of challenge reported is housing discrimination faced by North Easterners. Landlords frequently refuse to rent to Naga migrants, citing cultural prejudices such as "loose morals" or unfamiliar food habits. Some migrants are forced to hide non-vegetarian food consumption or agree to unreasonable conditions to secure housing. Additionally, landlords and property agents often charge higher rents or demand bribes. Offensive slurs like "chinki," "Nepali," and "Chini Malai" reflect the racialized and dehumanizing treatment that reinforces their outsider status (Remesh, 2012; Baruah, 2005). As indigenous migrants from Northeast India navigate the unstable economic landscape of the hospitality sector, their social ties and personal relationships often evolve in response to new urban realities. To prepare them for life in metropolitan cities, recruitment agencies like The People Channel and other human resource organizations in Nagaland have made it compulsory for migrants from Nagaland to acquire national identity documents such as passports, voter IDs, and driver's licenses. These documents offer a degree of legal protection and a sense of security in unfamiliar environments. However, despite these measures, such documentation has its limitations. In recent years, incidents of racial violence and attacks by local mobs against Northeast migrants have been on the rise, revealing the deeper, unresolved issues of prejudice and systemic exclusion that identity papers alone cannot shield them from (Kikon, 2018).

The COVID-19 pandemic also had a profound and devastating impact on migrants from the Northeast. They faced increased discrimination, xenophobia, and human rights abuses during the pandemic, with many reporting arbitrary arrests, exploitation, and mental health challenges. Many naga migrants especially those working in the hospitality sector lost their jobs due to the lockdown and subsequently faced racial discrimination. Some were evicted from their rented homes by landlords leaving them stranded and anxious about the pandemic. While the Union Ministry of Home Affairs issued advisories to all states to take legal action against those harassing people from the Northeast, many continued to face discrimination, including being thrown out of homes, losing jobs, and suffering from depression due to abuse and uncertainty (Times of India, 2020). In another incident in March 2020, nine Naga professionals working at an IT consultancy in Ahmedabad were forcibly quarantined after a caller falsely claimed they were from China and potentially had coronavirus. Despite having no symptoms or travel history, police took them to a quarantine facility, where they were told they would be kept for 14 days. The group explained to authorities that they were from Nagaland and had lived and worked in Ahmedabad for years,

but were still subjected to quarantine due to their physical appearance and assumptions about their origin (The Indian Express, 2020).

This deeply entrenched racial discrimination against Northeastern communities in mainland India cannot be understood in isolation from its colonial origins. Kumar (2025) argues that racialization of the Northeast began during British rule, when the region was framed as a cultural and racial frontier rather than just a geographic periphery. Colonial administrators depicted it as a "Mongolian fringe" inhabited by "savage" and "backward" hill tribes, reinforcing racial and civilizational differences. These colonial constructs created lasting stereotypes that still influence how Northeastern people are viewed as outsiders in India today. Nineteenth-century Western ideas about social progress from savagery to civilization were layered onto traditional South Asian concepts that distinguished between cultured society and the natural or uncivilized world. Manipuri intellectual and politician Gangmumei Kamei pointed out that one of the key reasons young people in Manipur are drawn to insurgent movements is the social discrimination they encounter across various parts of India due to their distinct physical appearance. Racial identity also played a role in the Meitei religious revival of the 1940s. Some individuals chose to embrace the newly emerging faith only after experiencing hostility and suspicion during pilgrimages to places like Mathura and Brindavan, where their Southeast Asian features attracted unwanted attention and prejudice (Baruah, 2005). Looking from an academic perspective Northeast India is not sufficiently represented and discussed in the educational curriculum, especially at university level. This is mainly due to the structure of political science curricula in Indian universities, which are typically divided into five core subfields: political theory, Indian politics, comparative politics, international relations, and public administration. With the exception of Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) and Jamia Millia Islamia (JMI) which established dedicated North East Studies programmes in 2006 and 2009 respectively most central universities outside the Northeast do not offer specialized courses focused on the region (Hausing, 2015). Such issues have led to unawareness and ignorance among the citizen of India (Kikon, 2022).

Despite the numerous challenges faced by Naga migrants ranging from cultural alienation and racial discrimination to housing difficulties and social exclusion they continue to demonstrate remarkable resilience. Their resilience is seen as a positive response to the major threats to development and adaptability (Lotha, 2024). It was observed that while social factors like cultural differences, discrimination, prejudice, and stereotyping significantly impact the health and well-being of migrants in their host locations, stronger social networks contribute to greater resilience, enabling migrants to better adapt to their new environment and to develop more effective coping strategies for maintaining their health and mental well-being (Meetei, 2024). These social structures replicate existing structures in Nagaland, where the members of each Naga tribe form an informal community headed by an apex body of elders and community leaders (called a hoho) and where Naga churches are hierarchically organised into tribal associations. Upon their arrival in Delhi, young Naga migrants become initiated and socialised into their respective tribal networks through a series of welcome programmes organised at different levels with the purpose of helping newcomers adjust to life in Delhi more quickly (Angelova, 2015). Even during the time pandemic Community-based responses emerged before official interventions and later stepped in to address shortcomings and supplement the assistance offered by various levels of government. Thus, such community fellowships play a crucial role in promoting resilience among the migrants (Lotha, 2024).

2. Conclusion

The social and cultural journey of Naga migrants in Indian metropolises reflects both persistent challenges and remarkable resilience. Migrants face systemic barriers such as racial discrimination, cultural alienation, housing exclusion, and stereotyping deeply rooted in colonial legacies and sustained by modern urban biases. Yet, in the face of these adversities, Naga migrants continue to adapt, drawing strength from tight-knit community networks, tribal associations, and religious institutions that provide support and a sense of belonging. These recreated social structures not only ease their transition into urban life but also reinforce cultural identity and solidarity. Despite being marginalized in mainstream narratives and institutions, their resilience, adaptability, and collective support systems enable them to assert their place and thrive within the complexities of urban India. This journey highlights the urgent need for more inclusive policies, greater social recognition, and academic engagement with Northeast migrant experiences.

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