



Understanding Gender-Gap in Migration Dynamics in North-East India

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Northeast India, a frontier region, faces migration challenges and related conflicts. This study employs a logistic binary regression model to analyze gender-specific migration patterns in India's Northeastern Region (NER), using data from the 2011 Census and the 2020-21 Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS). Intra-district migration greatly affects the demographic landscape of the NER. Male migrants often pursue economic opportunities, primarily through casual labour, due to the limited job options available in their local areas. In contrast, female migrants tend to have lower levels of education, underscoring the education gap between rural and urban settings and highlighting the restricted access to higher education for women. Women's migration patterns in the NER are influenced by life stages and household economic conditions, with older and married women typically migrating due to marriage trends. Non-economic factors, such as marriage, family reunification, and cultural norms, also play significant roles. In economically disadvantaged communities, female migration is often linked to marriage alliances or seasonal work. Traditionally, women migrate primarily for marriage, emphasizing the need to challenge socio-economic norms that influence gendered migration patterns.

Keywords: migration, NER, PLFS, census, gender-gap

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1. Background

The study of migration has always been a reflection of humanity's enduring quest for survival and improvement, driven by the desire to escape hardship, insecurity, and poverty while pursuing new and better opportunities. Economist J.K. Galbraith aptly refers to migration as "the oldest remedy for poverty". In Ravenstein's (1885) "Laws of Migration," people mainly migrate in search of more remunerative work that is not afforded at their place of origin. Migration is often influenced by differences in the level of development across regions. In other words, migration and regional differences are interlinked, highlighting how uneven development shapes the flow of people both within and across borders. Individuals tend to relocate from less developed or underdeveloped areas to more advanced and prosperous regions in search of economic opportunities, and improved quality of life. This trend holds for both international migration and internal migration. Such movements are primarily motivated by the pursuit of employment, education, healthcare, and a higher standard of living in areas with greater resources and infrastructure.

Being the frontier region, Northeast India is notorious for migration challenges and its associated conflicts. Economic opportunities in the Northeastern region of India tend to be concentrated in the valley/plain areas due to better infrastructure, accessibility, and industrial activity, resulting in significant income inequalities between hilly and plain or valley districts. Hilly regions, being geographically isolated, often face challenges such as limited infrastructure, poor connectivity, and restricted access to markets and services, leading to economic stagnation.

Migration is the most dynamic and sensitive aspect of population change, and economic, political, and cultural factors highly influence it. Being border states in the Northeastern region of India, the region has historically faced specific migration dynamics shaped by its unique geographical, cultural, and socio-economic factors. This is often linked to a lack of employment opportunities and better prospects in other parts of India. Migration in Northeastern India is a complex phenomenon shaped by socioeconomic, cultural, and geopolitical factors.

2. Review of Related Literature

The men from poorer households, from larger households, and the "lagging" states have a higher probability of undertaking temporary migration out of rural areas (Kavi & Viswanathan, 2013). The study found that the immigrants had less education and lower incomes, they were more likely to receive public transfers, and they were more likely to have frequent episodes of unemployment (Milewski & Doblhammer, 2015). Muslim migrant families in India show no significant economic disparity compared to others in both rural and urban areas. Scheduled Caste (SC) migrant households are poorer in rural areas but better off in urban settings, while Scheduled Tribe (ST) migrant households are consistently poorer in both rural and urban areas (Sengupta, 2013). Another exemplary work in relation to brain drain is Egypt experiencing a brain drain, primarily driven by the permanent migration of young, highly educated individuals (Nassar, 2005). Egyptian migration, both internal and international, is driven by the need to escape poverty and poor economic development, serving as a survival strategy to reduce risks rather than maximize benefits (Zohry, 2009).

Student migration in Northeast India, a patriarchal society, is mainly urban-centric and male-dominated (Mistri and Sardar, 2022). Borah (2022) states that migrants in Assam maintained strong relationships with their origins and that those with stronger ties are more inclined to return during times of crisis. An analysis of migration reasons indicates that study and employment opportunities play a much larger role in driving migration in the Northeastern states than in the rest of India (Lalrampuii, 2016). Migration from the Northeast is driven by high unemployment, limited access to civil service jobs, and changing aspirations for better livelihoods (McDuie-Ra, 2012). Significant migration from Northeast India to cities like Delhi, Bangalore, and Mumbai for employment and education has altered urban population patterns and contributed to a "brain drain" in the region (Ozah, 2022). Their migration from tribal to non-tribal areas in Northeast India is primarily searching for job and educational opportunities (Mistri, 2022). Small ethnic communities in Northeast India are increasingly concerned about being overwhelmed by large inflows of migrants, leading to calls for stricter migration restrictions and management in the region (Lusome & Bhagat, 2020).

Adults with less than primary education, including illiterates, are more likely to migrate than those with higher education. Higher proportion of women are temporary migrants for employment compared to permanent employment migration in the 2001 Census. However, North Indian states show larger gender disparities in temporary and seasonal migration rates than South Indian states, likely reflecting differences in women's social status levels, with men migrating more often than women in Rural North India (Coffey et al, 2015). A higher proportion of women are temporary migrants for employment compared to permanent employment migration in the 2001 Census. Scheduled tribes in rural areas have higher temporary and seasonal mobility than other caste groups due to their historical, social, and economic disadvantages, often in plateau, hilly, and forested regions of Central India. (Keshri and Bhagat, 2010). Women primarily migrate for marriage, while men migrate due to a lack of job opportunities in villages, reflecting obligatory, non-economic reasons for female migration and voluntary, economic reasons for male migration (Rele, 1969).

3. Study Area and Objectives

The present study focuses on the Northeastern Region of India, commonly referred to as the "Land of Seven Sisters and One Brother." This region is characterized by its hilly and mountainous terrain and shares international borders with Bhutan, China, Myanmar, and Bangladesh. As per the 2011 census, the population density of NER India stands at 176 persons per km², with Assam being the most densely populated state at 398 persons per km². Despite its vast natural and cultural diversity, the region contributed only 2.9% of the national GDP in 2021-2022 at the 2011-12 price. The study aims to:

- examine the migration patterns across the Northeastern states of India
- analyze the gender-specific impacts of socio-economic variables on migration rates, comparing rural and urban areas.

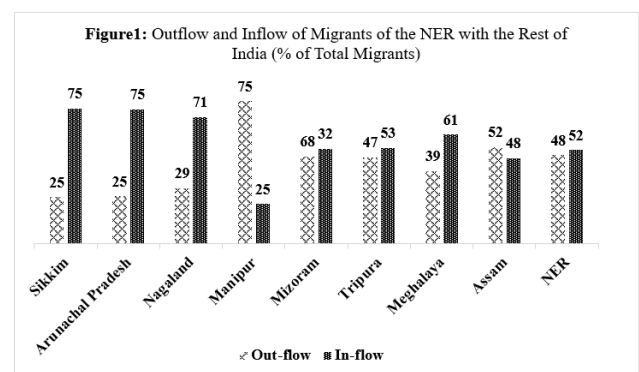
4. Data and Methodology

The present empirical analysis on migration studies is based on both census data of 2011 and PLFS of 2020-21 focussing on the current and last place of residence.

In the 1971 census, an additional question on the place of last residence was introduced in migration data collection. Since then, the census has provided data on migrants based on place of birth (POB) and place of last residence (POLR). If the place of birth or place of last residence is different from the place of enumeration, a person is defined as a migrant. On the other hand, if the place of birth or place of last residence and place of enumeration are the same, the person is a non-migrant. This study employed both the descriptive and the logistic regression model comparing male and female migrants in rural and urban areas.

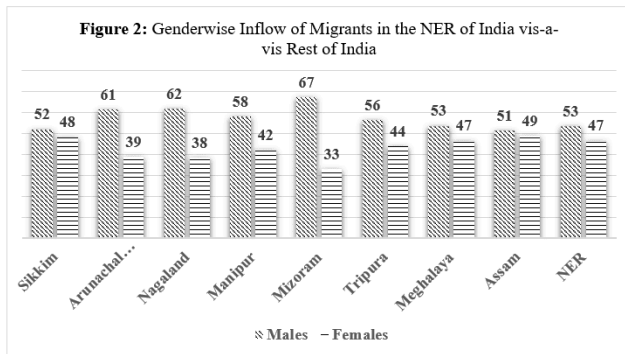
5. Empirical Analysis

The Northeastern Region (NER) of India, strategically located near Bangladesh, Myanmar, and China, is home to a diverse mix of ethnicities and religions. The region experiences a large influx of migrants from other parts of India and neighbouring countries. This population shift has triggered major social and economic challenges disrupting social harmony, disproportionately impacting vulnerable groups, and fostering the growth of organized crime in the region.



Source: Census 2011

Figure 1 illustrates the percentage of migrant inflow and outflow between the NER states of India and the rest of the country. Here, the term inflow represents people migrating into the states from the rest of India and outflow represents people leaving the state to other parts of India. Sikkim, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, and Meghalaya experience higher inflow rates than outflow. Tripura, and Assam have relatively balanced inflow and outflow rates. Manipur and Mizoram have the highest rate of outflow in the region. Outflows constitute 75 and 68 percent while inflow constitute 25 and 32 percent. In overall, the NER has nearly balanced inflow (52%) and outflow (48%) migration rates.



Source: Census 2011

The history of North-East India is closely tied to migration. The region has seen significant movement of people from within India and across its borders. Over time, as socioeconomic conditions have evolved, the patterns of both incoming and outgoing migration in the region have also shifted.

Figure 2 depicts the gender-wise distribution of migrant inflows in different states of the Northeast Region (NER) of India from other parts of the country, alongside the NER average. Male dominance in the migration inflows can be observed across all the states of NER with Mizoram (67 percent) and Nagaland (62 percent) recording the highest male percentages, while the lowest is in Sikkim (52 percent) indicating notable gender disparity in migration inflows. On average, males constitute 53 percent of migrant inflows compared to 47 percent of females in the NER of India.

The migration pattern observed is likely affected by various socioeconomic factors, employment opportunities, and cultural influences. Because of political unrest or border sensitivities, male migration may be higher due to infrastructure and defense employment. Mizoram's high male migration may be linked to employment prospects outside traditional agricultural roles. Meghalaya's matrilineal society might significantly contribute to the higher rate of female migration compared to other states. Assam's geographical position as a gateway to the Northeast makes it an important hub for trade, education, and migration, attracting both genders equally. Assam serves as the gateway to the Northeastern region, acting as a central hub for trade, education, and migration, and attracting a balanced mix of male and female migrants.

State	Intra-District		Inter-District		Inter-State		Inter-National	Total Migrants
	Rural	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural	Urban		
	Sikkim	21.15	16.98	9.93	19.55	16.34	15.06	
Arunachal Pradesh	42.59	11.16	17.64	3.44	19.08	5.96	0.10	100
Manipur	0	0	0	0	0	100	0	100
Mizoram	17.31	7.69	19.23	48.07	7.69	0	0	100
Tripura	48.26	18.24	21.82	4.73	1.03	2.65	3.23	100
Meghalaya	22.61	47.80	9.43	4.90	5.16	9.68	0.38	100
Assam	55.99	8.69	25.24	5.59	2.58	1.76	0.12	100
Overall North-East	46.10	15.03	20.39	5.74	7.73	4.43	0.55	100

Source: PLFS (2020-21)

Table 1 provides insights into state-wise migration patterns in Northeast India characterized by intra-district, inter-district, inter-state, and international migration for rural and urban populations. Assam and Tripura have the highest migration rates within their districts in rural areas with figures of 55.99 percent and 48.26 percent respectively. Meghalaya has a high intra-district migration rate of 47.80 percent in urban areas, indicating that urban residents often move within the same district, possibly due to housing, employment, or education. Meanwhile, Mizoram shows high mobility between urban centers within the state with a rate of 48.07 percent, suggesting that people in urban areas are more likely to move to different districts within the state, potentially due to job opportunities in other urban centers. Manipur stands out with an exceptional case of a 100 percent inter-state urban migration rate, indicating that all migrants in the state from urban areas have reallocated out of their home state.

Across all states, international migration remains quite low, with the highest being in Tripura (3.23 percent) and Sikkim (0.96 percent). This suggests that though international migration does happen, it is not a significant trend in these Northeastern states.

The overall trend in Northeast India shows that intra-district migration is the most common type, especially in rural areas (46.10 percent), followed by inter-district migration (20.39 percent). Interstate and international migrations are less common.

State	Total	Male	Female
Sikkim	67.65	40.73	59.27
Arunachal Pradesh	76.68	45.24	54.76
Nagaland	79.15	49.57	50.43
Manipur	96.66	34.74	65.26
Mizoram	85.34	49.01	50.99
Tripura	76.15	33.82	66.18
Meghalaya	84.76	54.17	45.83
Assam	94.28	33.70	66.30
Total NER	90.43	36.08	63.92

Source: Census 2011

Table 2 shows intra-state migration patterns in India's NER based on the 2011 Census. Manipur records the highest intra-state migration at 96.66 percent indicating significant internal movement within the state. Across the NER, females tend to migrate more within the states than males except Meghalaya with a slightly higher male migration rate.

Nagaland and Mizoram have relatively balanced male and female intra-state migration figures compared to other states in the NER region. This might suggest to have more gender-equitable societies compared to some other states in the region. Women in these states often participate in socio-economic activities and public life, which may balance migration rates. This involvement may indicate a more mobile and engaged female population. These states do not have as strong a tradition of patriarchal social norms that restrict women's mobility after marriage.

State	Rural		Urban		Total	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Sikkim	13.01	2.08	9.54	4.26	10.66	2.84
Arunachal Pradesh	14.61	25.5	28.41	31.35	23.97	27.53
Manipur	0.23	0	0.11	0	0.14	0
Mizoram	1.82	0.21	0.97	1.32	1.25	0.59
Tripura	12.56	11.87	10.52	12.66	11.17	12.15
Meghalaya	37.21	2.05	26.68	14.03	30.07	6.21
Assam	20.55	58.27	23.75	36.35	22.72	50.67
Northeast India	100	100	100	100	100	100
India	12.2	87.7	32.1	67.9	21.8	78.1

PLFS (2020-21)

Notes: Data not available for Nagaland state.

Manipur experiences an unexpectedly low migration rate across all categories among India's Northeastern States (NES) (Table 3). In Meghalaya, a notable disparity can be depicted in migration rates between males and females. The migration rate for rural males is significantly high at 37.21 percent, while for females it is much lower at 2.05 percent. This indicates that men are more inclined to leave, possibly for work or education, while women are more likely to stay. The presence of the matriarchal society in the state could certainly have an impact on this. We know, Meghalaya is known for its matrilineal system, particularly among the Khasi, Jaintia, and Garo tribes where lineage and inheritance are traced through the female line. Assam stands out with a very high migration rate for females, especially in rural areas (58.27 percent). This could be influenced by marriage migration or other socio-cultural influences. More female migrants are evident in Arunachal Pradesh, Tripura, and Assam.

State	Job	Family	Study	Marriage	Social/political Reasons	Others	Total
Sikkim	38.14	12.18	7.05	20.83	2.56	19.23	100
Arunachal Pradesh	11.73	10.34	4.78	70.06	0	3.08	100
Manipur	50	0	0	0	0	50	100
Mizoram	36.54	15.38	1.92	36.54	0	9.61	100
Tripura	7.96	9.01	1.85	70.85	2.42	7.96	100
Meghalaya	9.81	10.21	11.37	31.52	0	37.08	100
Assam	6.57	3.37	0.52	86.52	0.15	2.85	100
Northeast	10.06	7.11	3.27	71.12	0.46	7.95	100

Source: PLFS (2020-21)

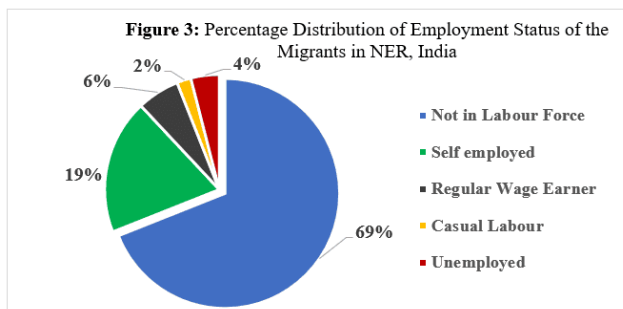
Manipur shows a high percentage of migration for job-related reasons (50 percent), which is the most significant factor in the state (table 4). This suggests that employment opportunities are a major driver of migration in Manipur. Meghalaya has the highest percentage of study-related migration (11.37 percent) among the NES, indicating that education is a significant factor in migration within the state. Assam (86.52 percent), Tripura (70.85 percent), and Arunachal Pradesh (70.06 percent) have very high rates of migration due to marriage. This is typical in many parts of India, where women traditionally move to their husband's home after marriage. Migration for social or political reasons is generally low across the states, with a slight presence in Sikkim (2.56 percent) and Tripura (2.42 percent).

Meghalaya shows 0 percent for this category, indicating minimal migration for these reasons. Marriage (71.12 percent) is the predominant reason for migration across the Northeast, which aligns with broader cultural practices in the region. Job-related migration (10.06 percent) and family-related migration (7.11 percent) are also important.

Reasons	Male	Female	Transgender	Total
Job	42.13	2.64	0.00	10.06
Family	13.09	5.73	0.00	7.12
Study	8.90	1.97	0.00	3.27
Marriage	14.71	84.18	100.00	71.12
Social and Political	1.32	0.27	0.00	0.47
Others	19.85	5.21	0.00	7.96
Total	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00

Source: PLFS (2020-21)

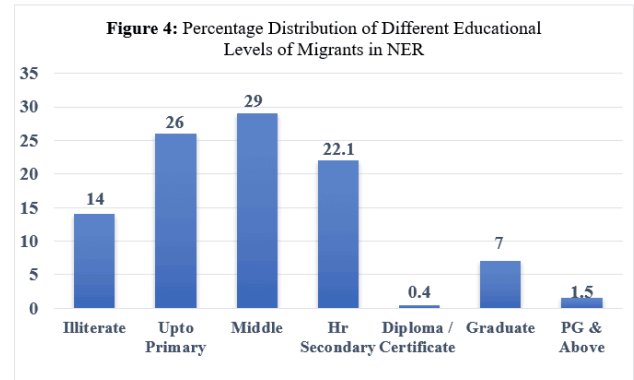
Table 5 highlight the gender wise reasons of migration in NER. Job related (42.13) migration is the primary reason for migration while, marriage (84.18 percent) is the primary driver of migration for female in the NER.



Source: PLFS (2020-21)

The pie chart (Figure 3) presents the percentage distribution of employment status among migrants in the Northeastern Region (NER) of India. The largest segment of 69 percent of migrants indicates that the majority of migrants in the region are not engaged in active employment or job-seeking. This category may include students, homemakers, retirees, or others not participating in the labor market. A significant portion of migrants (19 percent) is engaged in self-employment such as running small businesses, farms, or informal enterprises. The majority of migrants not participating in the labor market could be due to socio-economic factors, migration patterns, or family responsibilities.

The relatively high self-employment rate indicates entrepreneurial activity, while the low percentage of regular wage earners, casual labor, and unemployment suggests limited availability or uptake of temporary employment opportunities.



Source: PLFS (2020-21)

Figure 4 illustrates the educational attainment levels among the migrants in the NER of India. A small but notable segment of migrants lacks formal education. The largest group of migrants has completed middle-level education, representing almost a third of the migrant population in Northeast India. The negligible presence of diploma holders and postgraduates highlights a potential skills gap in the migration dynamics of the region. The high representation of middle and higher secondary education levels suggests that migration may be partly driven by the search for employment or higher studies after completing basic education.

This binary logit regression model (Table 5) examines the likelihood of a migrant being female, as opposed to male, based on various household and individual characteristics. In rural Northeast India, larger households are less likely to have female migrants. Larger households may have more male members migrating for work, leaving behind women to manage the home. This aligns with patterns in patriarchal societies where men often migrate for employment while women manage larger families. In rural households, women are typically expected to stay back to handle domestic responsibilities, especially in larger families. Male members are more likely to migrate for work or education. On the other hand, in more advanced and urbanized regions, women are getting equal opportunities as men in terms of economy or education. This may be one of the reasons behind the higher chance of migration for female individuals in urban Northeast India.

Table 6: Estimates from Logit Regression Analysis				
Dependent variable: Male Migrant (0) Vs Female Migrant (1)				
	Rural		Urban	
Variables	Co-Eff	Std. Error	Co-Eff	Std. Error
HH size	-.112***	.037	.021	.026
HH MPCE	-.0003***	.000	-.0001***	.000
Age	.144***	.018	.124***	.013
Age_squared	-.001***	.000	-.001***	.000
Reference category: Single				
Married	1.192***	.175	.476***	.122
Reference category: Others				
Hindu	1.206***	.237	-.267	.217
Muslim	1.642***	.315	-.542**	.275
Christian	-.218	.229	-.434**	.212
Reference category: Others				
ST	.661***	.221	.059	.151
SC	.028	.281	-.352**	.174
OBC	.323	.211	-.332**	.141
Reference category: Not in the Labour Force				
Self-employed	-1.579***	.155	-1.761***	.141
Regular wage Earner	-2.853***	.218	-2.117***	.147
Casual Labour	-4.278***	.284	-3.504***	.296
Unemployed	-2.543***	.304	-2.586***	.186
Reference category: PG & Above				
Illiterate	2.721***	.587	1.199***	.323
Upto Primary	1.204**	.551	.530*	.271
Middle	1.619***	.553	.465*	.262
Hr Sec	1.025*	.547	.146	.255
Diploma/Certificate	1.064	.896	-.603	.482
Graduate	.418	.585	.118	.265
Constant	-2.053***	.741	-1.112	.445**
No of observation	4277		2960	
Pseudo R2	0.33		0.20	

Source: PLFS (2020-21)

Notes: ***, ** and * indicate statistical significance at 1%, 5% and 10% levels respectively

Higher household expenditure slightly decreases the likelihood of female migration in both rural and urban areas in NER, as wealthier families may provide women with local education or job opportunities, reducing the need for migration. In other words, wealthier families may offer local education or employment opportunities for women or may not rely on female labor migration to supplement income.

Migration of the female population in NER of India is influenced by the various life stages and household economic conditions.

A diminishing effect at higher ages indicates that the probability of being a female migrant decrease at higher ages. While younger age groups are predominantly male likely driven by labor migration or education, females tend to migrate for marriage, often in their 20s or early 30s. Married migrants are predominantly female, as marriage is a key driver of female migration in rural areas, reflecting traditional patriarchal norms where women move to join their husband's families.

Female migration is more common among Hindu and Muslim migrants in rural areas, driven by marriage and family reunification. Muslim migrants show the highest likelihood of being female, while Christian migrants are slightly less likely to be female, reflecting socio-cultural norms favoring male economic migration.

Migrants from Scheduled Tribes are more likely to be female in rural NER of India. Women in tribal communities often migrate for marriage or seasonal work, as gender roles may be more fluid compared to other communities. In tribal communities, gender roles tend to be more egalitarian, allowing women to migrate for work, marriage, or education. Seasonal migration for agricultural labor is also common among tribal women. OBC migrants also show a higher probability of being female, though the effect is smaller compared to STs. Other Backward Classes (OBC) women are more likely to migrate, reflecting social norms where marriage or family responsibilities drive female migration. Migration patterns within SC communities may not exhibit significant gender bias. This neutrality may result from economic necessities that require both men and women to migrate, particularly for labor work.

All the categories under the employment status show negative coefficients, indicating that migrants engaged in any form of employment (self-employed, regular wage earners, casual laborers) are significantly less likely to be female. This underscores the dominance of economic motives in male migration, while female migration is less linked to employment. Female migrants in rural areas are significantly less likely to be employed compared to males. Rural male migration is predominantly work-driven, while female migration is more family or marriage-related. Women migrating from rural areas for employment are rare, especially in male-dominated labor sectors like construction or agricultural seasonal work.

Illiterate migrants are far more likely to be female, reflecting disparities in educational access and opportunities for women in many communities. Lower education levels (up to Middle) are positively associated with being female migrants. Female migrants are more likely to have lower educational attainment and are less likely to be in the labor force. As educational attainment increases, migration becomes less gendered, with both men and women seeking employment or higher education opportunities.

To conclude, migration of the female population in NER of India is influenced by the various life stages and household economic conditions. Older and married migrants are more likely to be female, aligning with common patterns of marriage-driven migration. Female migration is strongly influenced by non-economic factors, such as marriage, family reunification, or cultural norms. Lower education levels are associated with a higher likelihood of being a female migrant, highlighting potential educational disparities in migration patterns. Male migrants dominate in economic migration, particularly in casual labor driven by the lack of local job opportunities. Female migrants from rural areas disproportionately belong to lower educational categories, reflecting the rural-urban education gap and limited opportunities for rural women to pursue higher education. Poorer rural households may rely on female migration as part of marriage alliances or seasonal work contributions. Female migration remains predominantly marriage-driven due to traditional roles, highlighting the need for targeted interventions to address socio-economic norms shaping gendered migration patterns. Female migration likelihood varies by religion, caste, and literacy reflecting socio-cultural norms and socio-economic barriers. This reflects the multifaceted dynamics of migration decisions influenced by socio-economic, demographic, and cultural factors. This analysis illustrates how various socio-economic, cultural, and demographic factors influence gendered migration. However, North Indian states show larger gender disparities in temporary and seasonal migration rates than South Indian states, likely reflecting differences in women's social status (Keshri and Bhagat)

6. Conclusion and Policy Implication

The border regions of the Northeastern states influence migration dynamics, blending socioeconomic aspirations with cultural and security issues. Many people from Northeast India migrate to larger cities in and outside the country for education, employment, and better living conditions due to limited opportunities within the state. The concentration of economic activities in the valley compared to the hilly areas creates uneven development. This drives migration from underdeveloped hill districts to urban centers in the plains. Prolonged periods of insurgency and ethnic conflicts have pushed people, especially from vulnerable sections of society to migrate in search of livelihood, safety and stability.

Intra-district migration holds significant importance in Northeastern India, especially in states like Assam and Tripura, shaping the region's demographic landscape. This trend may indicate a dependence on local resources and opportunities within districts. The spatial pattern of migration in North-East India continues to evolve, influenced by socio-economic changes, political developments, and globalization.

Balancing the benefits of migration with the protection of indigenous rights and culture remains a critical challenge. Policies should promote education for rural women to address early marriage and encourage economic migration, while also strengthening rural employment schemes like MNRREGA to reduce migration driven by economic necessity.

7. Limitation of the Study

Given that the focus is on the Northeastern Region of India, there is a need for a national-level analysis using secondary data to gain valuable insights into the characteristics of migrants. Furthermore, there is a requirement for additional research that integrates both primary and secondary data effectively.

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