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SOCIO-CULTURAL AND RELIGIOUS ENCOUNTERS ON NORTHEAST MIGRANTS IN CHENNAI: A CASE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

The paper entitled "Socio-cultural and Religious Encounters on Northeast Migrants in Chennai: A Case study" is a case study on the sociocultural and religious encounters of Northeast migrants in Chennai. It investigates how a migrant from the northeastern states of India encounters different religious and socio-cultural aspects.

The Northeast Migrants in Chennai, Tamil Nadu, were the subjects of the case study. The studies employed a random sampling study method. After identifying different migrants from various groups like students, employees, and self-employees, the study employed the "method of lottery" to select the samples. The study found significant evidence of socio-cultural and religious interactions between the host population and the northeast migrants.

KEY WORDS: Socio-cultural, Religious, Migrants, Northeast Migrants, Chennai

INTRODUCTION

Northeast Regions of India which was once considered an isolated region from the rest of the country, and marked as disturbed area because of frequent ethnic clashes and violence began to witness more migrations, changes and developments, with the advent of globalization. More people from this region began to go out of their home town for a better job, education, medical care and better living especially in the metro hubs of India, like Delhi, Bangalore, Chennai, Kolkata, Mumbai, Pune and Hyderabad. As a result of migration, people of this region especially the young began to question their identity, culture and religion and faced different issues and challenges in the host cities. Some of these migrants face numerous hardships and even become strangers in their own nation.

METHOD

The case study was conducted among the Northeast Migrants in Chennai, Tamil Nadu. Chennai with the rest of India witnessed a massive exodus of migrants, especially from the metropolitan cities in India due to the COVID-19 lockdown. The study was done after lifting several restrictions on travel due to Covid-19. In this study, the researcher employed a random sampling study method. In a simple random sampling, an unprejudiced portion of a population is chosen. Here, every person in the population has a precisely equal probability of getting chosen using this sampling strategy (Thomas). It is also known as "the purest and the most straightforward probability sampling strategy. It is also the most popular method for choosing a sample among the population for a wide range of purposes. This method is considered to be the most unbiased representation of population" (Gravetter and Forzano).

SAMPLE

In this survey research, a case of five migrants from northeast India has been taken for analysis. The method of lottery was employed for the study. This system is the first and most mechanical instance of random sampling (Gravetter and Forzano). In this study, 60 northeast migrants in Chennai were identified and selected 10 students, 30 employees and 20 selfemployees. Their names were listed and assigned a sequential number to each population, from 1-10 students, 11-40 employed and 41-60 self-employed in a separate piece of paper. Thereafter, the papers were divided into three groups, then folded and mixed in a box separately. Samples were picked randomly from the box for the study.

AREA OF STUDY

This study has been done in Chennai city, among the northeast migrants. Respondents are from various fields and backgrounds namely; students, working people and entrepreneurs from different states of Northeast Indian states.

BRIEF DETAILS OF NORTHEAST MIGRANTS

Northeast India states comprise eight states, namely Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura. The region shares international borders with Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, Myanmar and Nepal. It has diverse religious, cultural, ethnic, linguistic and racial groups (Oinam and Sadokpam). According to the 2011 Census of India, the total population of Northeast India is approximately 45 million, or 45,477,784 to be precise (Singh). The region has less infrastructure and industrial development as compared to other regions in India (Patikar and Deka). It is a complex

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and dynamic region that receives continual attention due to its precarious political environment, which is marked by widespread violence and conflicts (Oinam and Sadokpam). In the past few years, a large number of people from this region migrated to different states in India for better job opportunities, medical facilities, education and better life (McDuie-Ra). Chennai is also an important destination, where people from the region immigrated for better medical facilities, education facilities, infrastructure, transportation, job opportunities, and a local friendly environment.

Case 1

Mr. A, a 30-year-old student hails from the Mizoram state. He hails from the southern part of Mizoram which is lesser developed as compared to the other parts of Mizoram. He is the only boy in the family and practices Christianity. He did his primary and middle school in his village, which is situated in a remote southern part of Mizoram. After schooling in his village, he went to a nearby town, a district headquarters for high school. Soon after he finished high school, he worked in a car wash shop as a cleaner/washer. There, he safe a little amount of money and went to Aizawl which is the capital city of Mizoram for higher education. He enrolled himself in a higher-secondary school in Aizawl. While he was studying in a higher-secondary school, he worked in a shop after his class as a part-time job to pay his fees.

Suddenly on some unremarkable day, he took a very important and tough decision in his life. He saw an advertisement in a newspaper in Aizawl regarding a job in one factory in Odisha, formerly known as Orissa at that time. He contacted the company about the job descriptions and decided to go there without informing his parents, because being the only boy in the family he knew that his parents will not want him to go outside of their state, even going outside of his village in other parts of Mizoram itself is not comfortable for his parents. His parents were heartbroken when they came to know that he went outside of their state for a job, which is far from his home state. It's still fresh in his mind about the words he exchanged with his parents when they came to know about his journey to Odisha. One remarkable in the conversations is that his mom told him that he does not need to worry about his life, they will look after him throughout his life. To this, he replied that "yes, I know very well that you love me a lot, but who will love me when you all died? One day we'll all become old and died, I will become so dependent on your love and that love will kill me."

He made many local friends in Chennai, which made him easily adaptable to the local culture. Later on, he also worked as a chef in a local restaurant in Chennai. Most of his life in Chennai was with local friends and could not get enough time to associate with his people, in terms of cultural, religious and social bounding because of his working condition. But he did not lose his religious belief and cultural practices. During his stay in Chennai, he grew his religious belief, even though he could not involve much in his community's religious worship services in Chennai.

Case 2

Ms. B 28 years of age now working in a company came to Chennai to pursue her higher studies. She cleared Join Entrance Exam and got a seat to study a professional course in Chennai. She practices Christianity and came to Chennai at the age of 17 years and it was her aunty who arranged all the necessary things about coming to Chennai, like choosing the institution and transportation. After graduating from the course, she did her internship in Chennai and continue to work there. Now she has lived in Chennai for about 10 years. During her stay in Chennai, she changed her place four times mainly because of the distance matter to her institution and workplace.

During her student life, she actively joined her community church in Chennai. But when she finished her studies, she changed her place which is quite far from her community worship place, so she could not participate in her community worship regularly. After settling down there for some time she found a northeast fellowship closely by her house. In that fellowship, she found that church leaders give her more importance to her participation in the church. Most of the time she will be asked by the church leaders to engage in several activities in the church. With this rapport relationship with her newfound church and the distance-related issues to her community church, later on, she involved more in her newfound church than the older one until she moved to a new place.

As she has stayed in four different locations in Chennai, she made several local friends from different walks of life. During her college days, she was the only student in the class from her place, so her circle of friends was surrounded by local Tamilians. She found many good friends from the local community, that stood by her during difficult times. One remarkable incident she narrated was that one of her male engineering teachers mistreated her very badly. The subject the male teacher taught was the most difficult, so required a good teacher to guide. This particular teacher taught only in Tamil and she thought that he could not speak English. She was treated like she does not exist in the class and mistreated her all the time. She could not understand the subject and felt very bad. She thought several times to complain to a higher authority, but did not report to higher administration. Because of this issue, she cried literally on four occasions, and all her classmates consult her and taught her about the subject their teacher taught, but that was not enough to understand the subject properly. She was so distressed about the situation she is undergoing and at one occasion, her classmates went and spoke to that teacher to treat her well. After sometimes, she went to the teacher and told him that she does not understand the subject as he is teaching in Tamil language. The teacher replied to her to go and learn from her class leader who is very smart and good at their studies. Then, she told him that her classmate friends are teaching her but could not understand properly. Only at that time, she was surprised to learn that the teacher could speak English very well and much better than many other teachers in the college, but one main problem he was having was about his previous experiences with students from other states. She

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came to know that some of her seniors from other states of Tamil Nadu will just walk out of the class and punk his class when he scolded and mistreated them. After speaking with her teacher, the situation becomes better. In the first semester, her local classmate's friends supported her a lot to deal with the subject and scored 65 % in his subject. She said that in the second semester, the teacher saw her struggle and determination to learn at any cost and taught them in English, to which she scored 85% in his subject in the second semester. Her local classmate friends were jewels to her not just in learning together inside the class. Many of her friends wanted to learn more about her culture and love her a lot.

She became close to many local friends from different faiths, like some of her Hindu friends became too close that when they go home, they will cook beef outside of their home from the different cooking vessels and bring it as a surprise to her even though they do not eat beef. Interestingly, her friends would tell a story about her to their parents and even their parents would also start liking her. So, her friend's' parents would send her home-cooked food and things when her friends come back to the hostel. And when her Hindu friends visit the temple, they would bring sweets and a jasmine garland and make her hair like a local girl.

For her, she did not face any mistreatment or discrimination other than that incident with one of her engineering teachers which later became better. Her circle of friends, hostel-cooks, wardens, teachers and local people in college were very supportive and understanding. Apart from the good and supportive friendship she had, she recollected many incidents like their cook will give her extras food to eat when they like it and the warden would allow her to go on outings whenever she asked, whereas local girls would not get permission to go outing regularly. She and one of her friends from Arunachal Pradesh were treated very special in the hostel, as they are from different places and would have to adjust to the climate, local food, culture and language.

She made friends with the local people very easily. Some of the things that made her acceptable to the local people were understanding them. She is of the view that "when other people think and ask you that are from other countries like China or Japan, then consider that they do not have much exposure about India, so make them understand that you are very much a part of India, and they will be very interested to know more about other cultures and people."

There were not many cultural-shocks she could encounter. One significant thing she encounter was the menstrual celebration among Tamil girls. Celebrating the first menstrual cycle, not taking bath on the first day of the menstrual cycle and not visiting the temple during the menstrual period, which they regarded as impure during that period.

She does not find herself as a stranger in Chennai, for her if someone treats you as a stranger then make them understand. Now, she can speak Tamil quite well and can easily connect it with the local people. In one incident, while she was going to one place from an auto, the auto driver did not charge the taxi fare after learning that she could speak Tamil fluently. She is also found of Tamil food like rasam, meals and dosa, so one of her staff in the workplace would

bring rasam when she makes a home. Occasionally, she even cooks Tamil food at her home. Her adaptation to local Tamil culture is not just limited to the Tamil language, friends and food, but also the way she dresses, and participates in local festivals. With regards to religious life, she was very active in her community worship during her college days but could not involved much when she started working, especially due to the time factor. But for her, she does not reduce her religious belief. She made herself committed that she prays and reads scripture regularly.

Case 3

Mr. C is paramilitary personnel posted in Chennai. He is staying with his family members consisting of four members. He works in a para-military and his wife is a homemaker. They have two children, both of them boys studying in a school, the elder one is in 7th standard and the younger one is in 5th standard. They have been living in Chennai for about five years, but they do not have much contact with their fellow community members from their native state who are staying in Chennai. So, their children have not picked much of their native accent and character. This was also observed during fieldwork when the researcher went with them for an outing in one of the renowned parks in Chennai, there in the park, the children were very comfortable with the children of the host population. On several occasions in the park, they played along with the host children even though they were strangers. They were even ignored several times by other children but they keep playing along with them and try to make friends.

When asked about their stay in Chennai and whether they are looking for a transfer to their native state, the family showed a mixed reaction. The husband said that

"He has applied for transfer but they do not know when their turn will come. They have lived in Chennai for about five years so normally they will get transferred to another place. This time the transfer was delayed due to Covid-19 issues and many of his senior staff from Tamil Nadu state overstayed in Chennai. So, those who have stayed in Chennai for a longer period will get the first transferred."

However, it was noticed that they are less reluctant to leave Chennai. The wife intervened in the talk and said that "they are more concerned about their children's education and life, as their native state does not have good education facilities like Chennai." They fear raising their children in their native state as the environment is not as good as compared to Chennai. They were also concerned about the high tobacco and alcohol intake among the youths in their native state. The wife continues to say that "she is worried if her children pick up those bad habits among the youngsters prevailing in their native state after they went back to their native state," and the husband looked at his wife's eyes and nodded his head.

The wife further states that they are "now familiar with the food items they get in Chennai. We do not or rarely eat those spicy chilly, bamboo shoot and other traditional spices that we get in my native place. When we go to the native place and eat those spicy and traditional food items, during the first

Volume: 8| Issue: 8| August 2022|| Journal DOI: 10.36713/epra2013 || SJIF Impact Factor 2022: 8.205 || ISI Value: 1.188

couple of days we faced difficulties adjusting them." The husband further added that when he reaches his native and eats that spicy traditional food he gets stomach upset for a few days, and slowly began to adapt to it. They said that they have even adapted to the hot climate in Chennai. The wife further said that their children have "pick-up some Tamil language too." On many occasions, their children have interpreted Tamil for them whenever they failed to communicate with some of the host population who cannot understand any other language than Tamil. To this, she narrated one incident, last time one of their nighbours came to their house and said something to them, but she could not understand properly, then one of her sons came and translated what their neighbor was telling her.

While undergoing the interview, suddenly the sky opened and it started raining. As the rain increased, several cats started entering their house. So, out of curiosity, the researcher asked how many cats do you have? They replied that they have "more than 10 cats," of which 7 cats and kittens were around at that time of counting. Pointing to some of the cats sitting nearby, the husband said that "they are third generations cats from their house in Chennai. Their grandmother died due to old age. That cat first came to their house on her own and gave birth to kittens and then they keep on keeping the cats." He also said that "some of the cats are brought to their house later by some local Tamil people in their locality. They have changed their house three times but the cat never run away." Pointing to one of the cats, the husband narrated that "he took the cat to a veterinary center for an injection, while in the center the cat got scared and run away after seeing several people." They thought that the cat cannot make it home, because the center is far from their house, but to a surprise, the same cat returned to their house after a week. When asked why you are keeping so many cats in their house, the husband said that "many people from other states think that we kill and eat cats, dogs and so forth and have negative views on us. So, to show to other people how much we love animals, we keep and take care of the injured cats around." Nowadays when Tamil friends or people in their locality see an injured cat and kitten, they are brought to their house so that they can take care. Interestingly, the husband further added that whenever he goes and buys fish in the locality, the "fish seller gives all the bones, internal fish organs and other remaining for the cats even without asking."

Case 4

Mr D is 35 years of age. He usually dresses simple and works very hard throughout the week and has also started picking up the Tamil language too for day-to-day communication with the host population. He is unmarried and in his early middle age. He has a strong determination to achieve something great in his life. He came to Chennai in search of better opportunities in his life. Now he has been in Chennai for about 15 years. In his first four years, he worked in a Nike store as a Store Manager. Later on, he quit the job and started his own business. Nowadays, he runs a restaurant namely with four employees from the northeast and also sells vegetables and traditional Northeast food.

The restaurant is called "North East Multi Kitchen." It is located in a commercial hub of Choolaimedu, Chennai where a significant of Northeast migrants are staying there. In Chennai, Tamilnadu, India, Choolaimedu is a major residential and business neighbourhood. Kodambakkam, Vadapalani, M.M.D.A. Colony, Aminjikarai, Mahalingapuram, and Nungambakkam are all its boundaries. The locality has close proximity to Loyola College, Meenakshi Engineering College and Panimalar Polytechnic, where dozens of students from Northeast India also come for studying every year, and a locality is also an ideal place even for the working Northeast migrants as it has good transport system. It is also a business centre that connects two of Chennai's major roads, namely Arcot Road and Nelson Manickam Road and Arumbakkam metro rail station, Nungambakkam railway station and Kodambakkam railway station are all close to this locality.

The restaurant opens at 11:30 am and closes at 10:30 pm. It serves Naga, northeast and Chinese food. It serves both vegetarian and non-vegetarian food. Some of the vegetarian foods in the restaurant include, French fries, gobi 65, mushroom 65, mushroom Manchurian, chilly mushroom, chilly paneer, veg fried rice, veg-soup, veg-chow mein and boiled vegetables. Non-veg food includes pork, smoked pork, beef, smoked beef, mutton, duck, chicken (both broiler and country chicken) and fish. When asked, about the most popular food in the restaurant and the restaurant, the owner replied that "pork is the most popular food item and more than 80% of the customers are local Tamil people in Chennai." He added that "most of the food items are sold through an online order through Zomato and Swiggy. Many families do not cook pork in their home, but they order the food online or come to a restaurant and have it. Many local customers after eating different food items of Northeast recommend to their friends and family members." So, while cross-checking his statements, it was found that his statement was accurate. In the online reviews, pork food items like "Pork Fried with Tomato, Chilly, Onion, Pork Fried Rice," "Pork Thukpa" and "Pork Fried Naga King Chilly" are the top recommended and best seller food items in the restaurant (Zomato). In addition, the restaurant menu has 36 chicken food items, 27 beef food items, 4 fish food items, and 3 duck food items. Whereas, it serves 42 different pork dishes that outnumbered different food items it serves at the restaurant. The restaurant is famous for pork dishes.

He also runs a grocery shop. He gets two deliveries in a week, firstly on Tuesday and secondly on Friday. The grocery food items like green leaves and other fresh vegetables, which are found mostly only in the northeast are sourced specially from Manipur and Nagaland. When asked whether the host population is buying the grocery food items, he orders or brings from the northeast, he replied that

"The restaurant business is targeted mostly to the customers of the host population, whereas the grocery food items are mainly for the northeast migrants living in Chennai. The host population also buys some of the food items like green leaves and bamboo shoot, Naga king chilly, but those people are the ones who were once living in the northeastern

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states of India. Because, as we know northeastern Indians eat lots of green leaves, bamboo shoot and spicy food, they might have eaten those stuff while they were once in the northeast and might be missing those food items and memories."

Apart from the day-to-day activities related to his business, he is also very devoted to his religious beliefs. He is also a leader in his community, so in his house, his community has regular Sunday worship.

Case 5

Mr E is about 40 years of age and plays an important role in his community church. He regularly goes to community worship service on Sunday and is actively involved in it. He also runs a restaurant in Chennai. The name of the restaurant is Naga Reju is also another northeast restaurant in Choolaimedu, Chennai. It is also located just opposite the "North East Multi Kitchen" at Nelson Manickam Road Near Choolaimedu Traffic Signal, Chennai. The restaurant is open from 11:30 a.m. until 10:30 p.m. The owner of the restaurant and his brother while studying in Chennai started the restaurant in 2007 to showcase Naga cuisine in south India and provide a taste of home especially to the Naga migrants who are studying and working in Chennai. The name 'NAGA REJU' was christened by the owner's father, which means "an assembly point for the Nagas." Started the restaurant with two brothers, and now the owner has employed ten staff to work in the restaurant.

The entrance of the restaurant is narrow, and several people were waiting on this narrow path wearing colorful T-shirts with the logo of Zomato and Swiggy. Inside, the restaurant was bagged with busy staff running here and there and three tables occupied by customers from the host population. The restaurant serves different Naga cuisines like pork, chicken and beef and other Naga traditional food delicacy. It also serves Chinese cuisine items like momo and chow. Some of the popular dishes in the restaurant, according to the customers reviewed on Zomato are bamboo shoot pork, pork meat, spicy beef and noodle. It has lesser food items as compared to its contending northeast restaurant the "North East Multi Kitchen."

Zomato a technological platform, which was first launched in 2010, links consumers, restaurant partners, and delivery partners to meet their various demands. Customers use the platform to find and book restaurants, read and write reviews, see and upload images, order food delivery, book a table, and pay for meals when eating out (Zomato). So, in the Zomato technological platform, the ratings on the Naga Reju restaurant are quite positive. Interestingly, some northeastern customers rated 1 out of 5 and wrote negative comments about the food items, but many customers from the host population rated 5 out of 5 stars and wrote positive comments in the review section. During the time of the study, 352 customers gave 4.1 stars out of 5 stars about the dining and 4,374 customers gave 4.1 stars out 5 stars about the online delivery of food items, which is quite impressive. In addition, most of the customers who reviewed on Zomato are the from host population (Zomato). In an interview with the head staff of the restaurant who has worked in the same restaurant for about 10

years, said that "most of the customers are from Tamil people and among the northeast migrants, students come more often than the family members... and most of the food items are sold through online order food delivery."

OBSERVATION AND CONCLUSION

People from northeast India come to Chennai looking for better opportunities in their life. When they first come to Chennai, they feel like a stranger. But after some time they become like an emissary to their culture and traditions to the host population. They make friends and introduced their culture, customs and traditions to the host population by showing their cultural values and introducing their cultural food items. The migrants are not just adapting to the local food, culture, language and climate but also try to become a good ambassadors for their socio-cultural and religious beliefs too in their locality in Chennai.

The northeast Indian cuisines, the food items and the style the prepared food are similar to each other. Mostly, people in northeast India do not have a culture of eating out. So, in most of the places in the northeast, the restaurants are located mostly on the highways made for travelers and tourists, as compared to where people are densely settled. As the phrase in Nagamese goes "pahar te bhat khai thaka to, gaori ek – doi Kgs holebi keni kena khor te pakai kena kha hi phal," which translates as "instead of going out for eating in the restaurant, it's better to buy 1 or 2 kgs of pork, than cook and have it at home." So, also the negative comments and low rating about the northeastern restaurant on online ratting platforms by their state customers might have spoken their hearts.

It is interesting to see how northeast restaurants are surviving in a highly competitive food market like Chennai, where the traditional Indian Tamil food is tagged as very healthy by many researchers (Srinivasan) (Akmal and Vuppu). The northeast migrants may not be that fond of eating outside even while they are living in other states of India, but the host population has started liking the northeast traditional food items found in the restaurants. Many customers from the host population also expressed more positively about the food items on an online platform. The northeastern restaurant owner of "North East Multi Kitchen" and the staff of "Naga Riju" also said that most of the food items in the restaurant are sold to local people in Chennai. While visiting the Naga Reju restaurant the researcher also found that the customers sitting at different dining tables in the restaurant were from the host population. In addition to these, one of the restaurant owners gives an example that "during the Covid-19 crisis most of the Northeast migrants left to their native state, but the local Tamil people supported his restaurant a lot by ordering food online, as restaurant were allowed to run their business even during the Covid-19 lockdown." He further states that "local customers come some with their family and some with friends for tasting new traditional food items of northeastern India, after eating the food from the restaurant, they refer to others, and in this way, the local people began to start liking the northeastern food items."

Both the owners of the northeast restaurants, in the beginning, started especially targeting the northeast migrant

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students and working professionals. However, with their introduction of traditional northeast food in Chennai, the host population began to attract more and through the northeast delicacy, it draws closer to understanding the northeastern culture by the host population. It is noticed that out of curiosity or to try new food items, the host population tries to taste different cultural food items from the northeastern Indian restaurant and recommends them to others. There are good pieces of evidence of socio-cultural and religious interactions between the host population and the northeast migrants, when northeast migrant interacts and make friends with the host population, they share their food and tell stories about their culture, traditions, and about their places.

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